



# Policy Dialogue on Evidence for Learning in Sub-Saharan Africa. Development and Highlights

**28<sup>th</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> March 2023**  
**Nairobi, Kenya**

## Policy Dialogues on Evidence for Learning in Sub-Saharan Africa. Nairobi 28<sup>th</sup> 29<sup>th</sup> March 2023. Development and highlights

### I. BACKGROUND

PAL Network has continuously promoted the salience of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) in the Global South. The Policy Dialogue on Evidence for Learning in Nairobi between March 28-29, 2023 is part of our ongoing attempt of involving multiple stakeholders in discussions and ideation sessions to support children's foundational learning in the SSA region. This project and event were supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF). This intervention has two pillars:

1. Engagement with regional organizations (ECOWAS, EAC and SADC) on the FLN situation in Sub Saharan Africa based on a [policy scan](#) conducted by PAL Network that revealed existing challenges and potential solutions. This pillar also investigates contextual and global views on bridging global, regional, and local policy contexts to improve foundational reading and math of African children
2. Providing evidence for learning about the current state of learning in SSA and evidence on what works to improve learning.

### II. THE EVIDENCE FOR LEARNING POLICY DIALOGUE EVENT

To articulate the mentioned pillars and following months of work engaging in conversations with regional organizations and a significant data collection exercise in three African countries (Kenya, Mozambique, and Nigeria), the PAL network hosted in Nairobi (Hotel Radisson Blu), a policy dialogue titled 'Evidence for learning' that counted with more than 50 participants from regional organizations (EAC and SADC officers), MoE officers from Nigeria, Kenya and Mozambique, representatives of CSOs and national policy influencers, BMGF grantee organizations promoting FLN Hub in the SSA region, continental level organizations such as UNESCO, PAL members from Nigeria, Kenya and Mozambique; and the support of donors engaged in FLN saliency.

#### Objectives

- To understand Citizen-led approaches and use them to inform policy processes,
- To support the development of regional policy on FLN in Africa through regional organizations.
- To develop a route map towards coordinated response to the learning crisis.

### III. STRUCTURE OF THE EVENT

The event included participatory workshops for regional and national stakeholders. Activities around thematic discussions, and best practice exchanges fostered policy dialogues. Participants also got the chance to interact with children, teachers, parents, and community leaders in a field visit where participants got to observe the citizen led assessment and had a first-hand practical experience in assessment of children's FLN, using Citizen Led Assessment tools.

[Click here to access the event program.](#)



## IV. DESCRIPTION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAM

### DAY 1

#### Session 1 Keynote speakers

1. Dr Sara Ruto – What data we need to inform equitable and inclusive responses to education needs in Sub-Sahara Africa.
2. Dr Ben Piper – What works to improve foundational literacy and numeracy at scale.
3. Dr Rukmini Banerji - What worked on scaling solutions to learning in India?
4. H.E. Ms. Graça Machel- How to promote girls' education in Africa.

#### Takeaways from speakers.

1. Dr Sara Ruto



Picture 1 Sara Ruto speaking in the Evidence for Learning PD event in Nairobi

What data we need to inform equitable and inclusive responses to education needs in Sub-Sahara Africa

- *Human-facing data*: Data should acknowledge a child first, then all other aspects of data will follow, i.e., being a learner/pupil/student. The data should be child-centered in a way that the data it dignifies the child, and it promotes their dignity.
- *Data with rights perspective for children*: We need data that informs the right of every child to access quality education – from access, quality, equity, to competencies acquired at the end of a level beyond the averages.

- *Policy-facing data*: With the implementation of Competency Based Curricula (CBC), this data will be very important to inform teaching and learning in early years education. The sector policy review is an area where the data must inform formulation and implementation of policies.
- *Data that spurs citizen agency and action*. This data arms the citizens (including volunteers, local leaders, parents, and teachers) with information, and hence it ignites action.

## 2. Dr Ben Piper



Picture 2 Dr Ben Piper speaking in the Evidence for Learning PD event in Nairobi

What works to improve foundational literacy and numeracy at scale.

- Three solutions have proven to be effective in scaling #FLN at scale: 1. Structured Pedagogy; 2. Teaching at the Right Level; and 3. Remediation efforts to respond to pandemic-related learning losses. However, this impacts the learning at scale and not the reach of assessment.
- We are doing something wrong. The governments have made tremendous efforts in raising budgets and putting resources to improve learning. Increased data and awareness of the learning crisis (at all levels, from parents, government, and school leaders) hasn't translated into improved learning.
- Government prioritization, contextualization, and accountability is key. The contexts of what works should be thought out well. The solutions may or may not work in various contexts. The learning-at-scale solutions or interventions must be localized to have the right impetus for learning at scale.
- Design and test at scale and time. If we need to have learning at scale, we need to design and test at scale. Regularity (time) is also crucial in implying learning at a (good) scale.

- Reinforce high leverage teaching practices. It is important to prioritize what is working in classrooms – the pedagogies and the learning environment.

3. Dr Rukmini Banerji



Picture 3 Dr Rukmini Banerji remotely speaking for the Evidence for Learning PD in Nairobi

What worked on scaling solutions to learning in India?

- There is a need to expound and share the problem of the learning crisis as it requires an immediate solution. What is something that bothers/frustrates you regarding schooling and learning? The right time to act is now.
- In India, despite the availability and access of resources, schooling, and teaching, learning persisted to be a problem among children. This required the Pratham team to understand what is it that the children can do. This began the genesis of Citizen Led Assessments (CLAs) to deeply understand the problem and thus the movement. Then, this helped in trying to find solutions i.e., designing RCTs, and starting intervention programs such as Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL).
- There are three key points to note regarding how this CLA movement began: one, a team to discuss and internalize the problem in detail and suggest ways to get the evidence was set up; two, a design team to come up with an assessment tool that can be used to find out the learning competencies of children in the villages; and third, demonstrate that the evidence or data is making sense in the particular context.
- The scale on which the assessment is done is also important in precipitating the learning agenda that got into the spaces of policy in many states in India.
- There is a need to work together through structured discussions, censuses, and demonstration activities to create practical solutions that promote teaching at the right level.



#### 4. H.E. Mss Graça Machel



*Picture 4 Graça Machel remotely speaking for the Evidence for Learning PD event in Nairobi*

How to promote girls' education in Africa.

- Education is a societal and human capital aspect for economic growth. The schooling of girls contributes to the economic growth of our continent-Africa. Educating girls is more than equipping them with skills; it is a societal investment in human capital. It would save countries billions of dollars if all girls completed twelve years of education.
- There are some factors that pull back access and continual education for girls. These include child pregnancy, child marriages, and mothers' education, and all these factors cumulatively affect the educational attainment of girls.
- Covid-19 negatively affected girls' progress in education through an increase in dropouts, gender-based violence, and forced labor. This resulted in an 8% completion rate among girls who enroll in school.
- The drivers of change to invert this include starting a pan- Africa movement to champion the rights of (adolescent) girls, and empowerment of girls to speak for and about themselves.

### Session 2 Fieldtrip

#### Induction session. Preparation of field work

An induction to the assessment tools (sample seen below) that are used during citizen led assessments, was developed with the event participants before going to field visits. Over the years, PAL Network member organizations have created an innovative, powerful model to assess foundational learning in the Global South that is cost-effective, inclusive, and has the capacity to

mobilize citizens to advocate for foundational learning. This model, now known as Citizen-led Assessments (CLAs), has grown organically from its inception and first innovation in India, and expanded to vast geographies throughout the globe. CLAs are conducted:

- Orally one-on-one with each child to ensure that the skills of children that are still learning to read are captured
- In households so that children that are not attending school (regularly or occasionally) are included in the assessment
- Using tools that are quick and simple to administer and understand, which facilitates engagement from local communities and fosters interest by relevant stakeholders.
- To measure foundational learning of reading and numeracy skills, mostly at the Grade 2 or Grade 3 level according to national curricula, typically on children between 5 and 16 years old.

### Field visit.



Picture 5 Participants using CLAs in the field

The participants travelled to five villages of Machakos county in Kenya where they first met community leaders and then went to different households in villages (divided in groups).

The aim was to obtain ground level knowledge about:

1. The reach and scope of the problem: What the learning status is, what is the extent of the learning crisis, how does not being able to read and do basic math look like.
2. Understanding the process: How household assessments are done, the role of the village, how community engagement takes place (how village leaders, village schools, parents and other local actors discuss assessment outcomes and the needed actions)
3. Understand how assessment inform instructions for remediation and local led solutions to improve learning.

4. Exploring opportunities of using reliable and affordable data on learning outcomes to inform policy and practices in the education space

### Main observations from participants:

Using individual cards that were collated through a Jam Board app, the following key points emerged in the wide group discussion (among groups that conducted the field visit to the five villages of Machakos county in Kenya).



Picture 6 Participants discussing reflections about field visit

- ICAN tool is of high standard and helps in assessment of students.
- Performance of children is better in language of instruction (Swahili); it is important to share the purpose of the assessment with kids.
- Importance of training; Presence of parents is required or not needs to be clarified.
- Background of parents matter in learning; volunteers need to be trained on approach; value of observation is paramount for successful data collection.
- Understanding of FLN by local authority is critical; one-on-one with a child at one time is helpful; identification of volunteers needs to be streamlined.

## Day 2

### Session 1 Presentation of ICAN 2022 Report

In 2022, PAL Network used its [International Common Assessment of Numeracy \(ICAN\)](#) tool to assess numeracy and Citizen Led Assessment tools for reading. Details about these assessments were shared for the first time on March 29<sup>th</sup> at the policy dialogue event 'Evidence for Learning' that took place in Nairobi.



The shared data was collected from 3 districts<sup>1</sup> of Kenya, Nigeria, and Mozambique, from ~500 rural communities, ~11 thousand households surveying ~18 thousand children. Out of the three districts of each country, one was part of the [ICAN 2019](#), giving a data comparison points pre- and post-pandemic for numeracy learning outcomes.

In a nutshell, the data shows that we are very far from assuring that all children acquire foundational skills. In most sampled locations, only 80% of grade 7 learners can do grade 2-3 tasks. In sampled locations in Mozambique, even in grade 6 there is more than 60% of children who cannot read a short paragraph. This is just one specific evidence bit about the learning crisis that SSA is facing.

Preliminary results from the three locations where we collected data in 2019 and 2022 show that during the pandemic, schools were closed for a substantial amount of time, and very few household heads declared that their children had remote learning opportunities. However, the learning loss does not seem very large. While performance improved for some tasks in some countries, it worsened for other tasks. From the data, we see that for a set of grade 3 level tasks, performance seems to have improved for Kenya (Mwala), while it has remained very similar in Mozambique (Larde) and slightly worsened in Nigeria (Ikorodu). The comparison highlights how learning outcomes were already very low and far away from curricular expectations even before the pandemic. While in some context's "recovery" efforts are needed, in many others, particularly in the Global South, recovery is just not enough. We need solutions for system-wide change. More data on learning outcomes and proposals for these kinds of solutions were discussed at the presentation during the event in Nairobi.

[To read the full report click here](#)

#### **Summary of Key takeaways discussed in the event:**

- A very small number of surveyed children can read a grade 2-3 level story. For instance, on average, 1 out of 2 surveyed Nigerian children in grades 4-6 Nigeria can read a grade 2/3 level story.
- Children in our sample have great difficulty performing basic math operations. In grades 4-6, only between 65 and 70% of all surveyed children can do a subtraction of two two-digit numbers with carryover.
- Not only are the learning levels low overall, but additional years of schooling are not providing substantial learning progress. In the best-performing location in our sample, only 60% of children achieve Minimum Proficiency Levels (in Numeracy) at a Grade 2 level when they reach Grade 3.
- Very few children reach Minimum Proficiency Levels (MPL) in grades 2 and 3 when they are expected to acquire them, and many still do not reach these levels in advanced grades.
- ICAN sample shows that poor foundational literacy and numeracy learning is not an outcome of the COVID pandemic. It is a persistent crisis that cannot be solved with business or rather "schooling" as usual approach.

[Click here to read the factsheet about ICAN 2022](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Districts are called sub-counties, Local Government Areas and Districts in Kenya, Mozambique, and Nigeria respectively.

**Session 1 UNESCO GEM report: Presentation of Spotlight report by Manos Antoninis**



Picture 7 Manos Antoninis speaking at the Evidence for Learning PD in Nairobi

- The purpose of the Spotlight is to support policy process with reference to national SDG 4 benchmarks in countries and to increase political priority given to foundational learning in continents.
- The analytical framework includes a holistic approach to foundational learning:
  1. Vision and its communication.
  2. Teaching and learning: curriculum, pedagogy, language, textbooks.
  3. Teacher education and professional development.
  4. School leaders as instructional leaders.
  5. District officers as instructional leaders.
  6. Parents and communities.
  7. Assessment system
- In Africa, out-of-school rate has fallen in past 20 years (from 37% to 20%) and out-of-school number has risen in the past 10 years (from 37 to 39 million)
- Data gaps exist as few data sets from sub-Saharan African countries are available for analysis. Children in Africa are five times less likely to learn than children anywhere else in the world.
- It is critical to make a clear plan to improve learning; develop teacher capacity; and prepare instructional leaders to transform education systems at scale.

**Session 1 Round Table and Panel Discussion**

To understand what the evidence explored in the previous sessions signify for FLN in SSA and how evidence rather than just describing an extremely disheartening scenario, can be used to inform

effective action, 3 PAL member organisations from Nigeria, Kenya and Mozambique -the countries who have participated in the recent assessments using ICAN and adaptations of CLA reading assessments that were discussed in the previous session, from 3 different countries in 3 different regions (ECOWAS, EAC and SADC)- exposed examples of how data can inform accelerated learning interventions that have worked, showing very positive results in improving children's FLN deficits in their communities.

[Click here to watch TEP's presentation \(Nigeria\)](#)

[Click here to watch ZIZI's presentation about their interventions \(Kenya\)](#)

[Click here to watch Facilidade's presentation \(Mozambique\)](#)

## Session 2 Bridging global, regional and national policy

Two parallel sessions with regional bodies, SADC and ECA discussed with participants what the specific needs of each region are and what common challenges they face.

### Key takeaways for making FLN salient in the East African Community (EAC)



Picture 8 Dr James Otieno Jowi remotely speaking about ECA at the Evidence for Learning PD in Nairobi

- Demand for reliable and accurate data and have appropriate methods to utilize them
- Incorporate validation of data and transition them to build clarity of the problem with the right stakeholders
- Synthesis of data into policy briefs that engage policymakers at regional level and spur action at continental level



- Better engagement of right policy windows, engagement structures and delivery platforms such as technical working groups

**SADC:** The representative from SADC shared the vision 2050 SADC and points to areas requiring greater focus:

- Primary and secondary education.
- Inclusive education
- Foundation literacy and numeracy
- Raise the voice of the regional community at the African Union level.

Need to bring these issues to the agenda of next SADC meeting (Secretariat to facilitate the meeting)

Participants bring questions that can be summarized in these

**Key takeaways for making FLN salient in the South African Development Community (SADC) region.**



*Picture 9 Dr Lamboly Kumbonek speaking about SADC at the Evidence for Learning PD in Nairobi*

- Working collaboratively with implementing partners in mutually agreed areas such as conducting large scale assessments and studies (
- Work closely with SADC parliamentarians as they can play an advocacy role
- Support to buttress regional assessments to provide cross country comparison and get visibility at [SEACMEQ](#) (reactivate SEACMEQ)
- Secretariat to facilitate engage with Ministerial Conference, development partners and SADC Parliamentary Forum on FLN
- Strengthen the voice of regional communities and countries on LEARN clusters

## Session 2 Cocreating action points

### What direct actions can we do together, at regional levels, to improve FLN in Sub-Saharan Africa?

- Dr. Moses K. Kiarie (Ministry of Education, Kenya): “Quality has no Finishing line.” Learning outcomes get better with more assessments. Digital tools have been incorporated by the Ministry for monitoring, learning, and teaching. Recommendations in all assessment’s reports are important to spur action.
- Dr. Luis Paulo (Ministry of Education, Mozambique): It is critical to effectively diagnose the problems that cause low learning for children in the community. If we want to strengthen institutional capacity, training of teachers and school leaders is essential. Strengthening the quality and effective implementation of standards also plays a key role in improving FLN outcomes.
- Dr. Garba Dahiru Ganda (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council): Data-driven strategy is the need of the hour to translate data to action. Foundational learning and ICAN is central to ensure better learning outcomes among children. With regards to scale and sustainability, it is pertinent to consolidate the process to be internationally accepted as a common assessment tool.
- Dr. Prasangi Ranaweera (BMGF): Problem identification really matters – data to identify the main problems to FLN. Given the discussions, regional bodies need to focus to make tangible commitments, trickling down to schools and children. There is a dire urgency to establish synergies among the regional bodies, international community, and the broader funding community.

### PAL Network’s reflections about the event’s commitments

ICAN 2022 and UNESCO spotlight report tell us that learning outcomes in SSA are still very poor.

There is an urgent need for more national level data (sufficient robust evidence) and research in the SSA to inform policy.

There is an urgent need for government participation in data collection and government authentication of the data and its deliverables with clear purpose and workable plan (Citizen Led Assessments to be integrated into national data collection).

Regional organizations can play a key role in guiding partner states towards the need to provide children with strong foundational learning: real government prioritization and accountability.

Policy reforms and guidelines should be more contextualized and recognize that more schooling (even with more schools and more teachers) as before will not be enough to improve learning outcomes in SSA for 2030

## V. COMMUNICATIONS

[Click here to see video with event highlights.](#)

## Media presence

Seven education-focused journalists attended the event, and we were able to conduct two interviews with Dr Sara Ruto, former CAS Ministry of Education and mentor of Citizen Led Assessment and Actions in Africa, and Silas Obuhatsa, chairperson of the National Parents Association. One journalist from Xinhua had an opportunity to attend the field tour to get first-hand experience on how community assessments are done. The article written by Xinhua was picked up by China.org, South Africa Times, and CGTN receiving positive coverage.