

Briefing Note Commitment to Action for Foundational Learning

September 8 2022

SECTION 1: Background information

i) Introduction:

1. Globally, we are experiencing a deep learning crisis. While the world has made significant progress on expanding access to schooling in the past decades, there has been little progress in improving learning. The crisis has been exacerbated by the impacts of COVID-19 on schooling and learning. Simulations suggest that the rate of learning poverty—the share of 10-year-old children who cannot read and understand a simple text— has increased from 57 to 70 percent in low- and middle-income countries between 2019 and 2022¹.
2. Ensuring the acquisition of foundational learning for all is critical. Foundational learning (literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills) provides the fundamental building blocks for all other learning, knowledge, and higher-order skills that children and youth attain through education, and in general, learning throughout life. Yet too many children leave school without having mastered these foundational skills.
3. The World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, FCDO, USAID, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) have come together to promote a shared commitment to improving foundational learning for all on the occasion of the [Transforming Education Summit](#) (TES). As a first step to focus on this important issue, countries and organizations around the world are invited to endorse a [Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning](#) to ensure foundational learning for all. The aim is to build a Global Coalition on Foundational Learning with committed partners working together beyond the TES.
4. This briefing note explains the process of development of the Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning, and answers frequently asked questions. It is intended as a reference for governments, CSOs and other partners who are seeking more background information on this Commitment to Action. The note will:
 - provide detail on the expectations for partners who endorse the Commitment to Action and the actions they could take to achieve this;
 - clarify the indicators and mechanisms for jointly monitoring actions and progress under this Commitment for Action

ii) The Commitment:

5. By endorsing the Commitment to Action, governments and partners commit to:
 - a. Taking urgent and decisive action, where learning levels are low, to ensure all children, including the most marginalized², to realize their full potential.

¹ World Bank (2022) State of Learning Poverty Report Update. Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/state-of-global-learning-poverty>

² Marginalized children include but are not limited to the poorest children, girls, children with disabilities, and children in conflict and crises.

- b. Reducing the global share of children unable to read and understand a simple text by age ten, by half, by 2030. This commitment requires achieving national SDG 4.1.1 targets³ in each country.
- c. Working immediately to enrol all children and keep them in school, particularly marginalized girls; increase access to remedial and catch-up learning and teach children at their current learning levels; support teachers, giving them the tools that they need; and support the health, nutrition and psycho-social well-being of every teacher and child.
- d. Working together to close the education resource gap, and enable the investments, leveraging technologies and other reforms, needed to effectively advance foundational learning.

iii) Rationale for the Commitment to Action:

- 6. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, [Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education](#) was seriously off track. Following the impact of the pandemic, even more work needs to be done, especially for the poor and most marginalized children, who have fallen even further behind. Ensuring every child achieves foundational learning is a critical step to overcome the learning crisis and build resilience in the face of climate change, conflict, and Covid-19. Foundational learning is the essential building block for all skills, including digital skills, that are central to thriving in the 21st century, making it critical to focus policy on securing strong foundational learning outcomes.
- 7. Currently, there is deep inequity between countries, with an estimated nine out of ten children in low-income countries unable to read and understand a simple text by the end of primary school. This stands in stark contrast to the nine out of ten children in high-income countries who can. There are also deep inequities within countries, with the most marginalized children less likely to master the fundamentals. Every child deserves the opportunity, life choices and dignity that foundational learning brings. It is a human right. Where most children are not learning the basics, this not only affects their lives but undermines the public return on investment in education.
- 8. To drive transformation, partners are coming together to call for a global commitment to ensure foundational learning for all children and to stand ready to support countries committed to achieving this. This Commitment to Action represents an effort to convene around this shared vision, to acknowledge countries that make a commitment to transform education, and to illustrate how this can be achieved for all. This Commitment to Action will: draw on lessons learned from those countries already acting and showing leadership; coordinate support for those countries who are committed to do more; and advocate in countries showing limited commitment to invest in foundational learning.

³ This is consistent with, and will enable, achievement of other agreed global and national targets on foundational learning including SDG 4, and the global SDG4 milestone targets on girls' education (40 million more girls in school, and 20 million more girls learning to read by age 10, in LICs and LMICs by 2026). The latest report on the national SDG 4 benchmarks countries have set is available [here](#).

SECTION 2: How to take action to improve foundational learning for all:

9. **First, an essential condition for progress is the political commitment to achieving foundational learning** for every child. Making improved learning outcomes for all children a clear and urgent national political priority usually implies:
 - a. **Reaffirm national commitment to achieving SDG 4.1 and initiate public discussion** on achieving critical education outcomes, including an announcement of the endorsement of the Commitment to Action.
 - b. **Define and launch** a series of actions and policy measures to meet the commitment on foundational learning.
 - c. Develop a **costed plan** for improving foundational learning for all, using evidence-informed strategies and interventions.
 - d. Engage **all of government**, including at sub-national level⁴, on the urgent and decisive actions needed to ensure all children are learning.
 - e. Engage **all partners** involved in education, including parents, in a national movement to achieve SDG 4 benchmarks on foundational learning.

- 10.1 **Implement a comprehensive set of evidence-based policies focused on addressing learning recovery and accelerate learning in the short and the long term.** The RAPID Framework for [Learning Recovery and Acceleration](#) presents a menu of evidence-based policy options for urgently addressing learning losses caused by the pandemic and providing students with the support they immediately need:
 - **Reach every child and keep them in school;**
 - **Assess learning levels regularly;**
 - **Prioritize teaching the fundamentals, as the building blocks of lifelong learning;**
 - **Increase the efficiency of instruction including through catch-up learning; and**
 - **Develop psychosocial health and wellbeing so every child is ready to learn.**

A robust education response built around these approaches can serve as a springboard for tackling the learning crisis and give all children the opportunity to fulfil their potential. The bold policy actions needed to recover learning in the short term, whether due to Covid-19, conflict or climate, will also help spur the critical education system reforms required to transform education in the longer term.

- 10.2 **Reach every child and keep them in school.**
 - a. **Promote returning to the classroom** through back-to-school campaigns, and policies such as conditional cash transfers to poor families.
 - b. Develop and use **early warning systems** to identify **students** at risk of dropping out.
 - c. Use **targeted outreach** to ensure all children return to **school**.

- 10.3 **Assess learning** early and then regularly to understand what children know.

⁴ For example, at district level

- a. **Regularly monitor progress through formative and summative assessments** to be confident that action is having an impact on learning outcomes, and adjust policies and programs accordingly.
 - b. Ensure foundational learning **data** is used by teachers and governments, including sub-nationally, to inform action to improve teaching and learning.
 - c. Establish **links to SDG 4** monitoring on learning globally.
- 10.4 **Prioritize teaching the fundamentals (literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills)** and prioritize what children need to know to make progress.
- a. Reflect the **main priorities in the curriculum** for literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional skills; ensure sufficient time to teach literacy and numeracy; with specific teacher training.
 - b. Ensure that **curricula and teaching plans help all students** to gain foundational learning so they can make progress and complete primary and secondary school.
- 10.5 **Increase the efficiency of instruction**, including through catch-up learning.
- a. **Support teachers** and focus on their critical role in delivering improved foundational learning outcomes for all children.
 - b. Provide teachers with **high-quality educational resources, including student text and reading books, teachers' guides, tools, training**, and coaching, that are all aligned to students needs and pace of learning, so all students acquire foundational learning.
 - c. Enable teachers⁵ to effectively teach from children's current learning levels and **target instruction** to students' learning needs, especially those falling behind.
 - d. Continuously **test, learn and adapt** to find optimal solutions for improving foundational learning at scale.
- 10.6 **Develop the psycho-social health and wellbeing of teachers and students.**
- a. Build teachers' capacity to **support students' wellbeing** and identify students in need of specialized services.
 - b. **Support teacher wellbeing** and resilience.
 - c. Invest in students' **safety, nutrition, and access to water**, sanitation and hygiene facilities.
11. **Finance:** ensure foundational learning is adequately resourced and that evidence is used for policy-making decisions
- a. Prioritize a **dedicated budget allocation** for foundational learning
 - b. Ensure domestic financing on education and donor education ODA goes further, using **cost-effective interventions** and building the evidence of programming impact.
 - c. Generate and disseminate **evidence** on improving learning at scale.

⁵ This includes the education workforce more broadly including the community and not just teachers.

SECTION 3: Frequently Asked Questions:

Q1. *What is the Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning?*

A1: The Commitment to Action is an initiative to convene the global community around a shared vision to ensure foundational learning⁶ for all children globally, particularly the most marginalized.

The Commitment aims to catalyze action to transform education, states how learning can be achieved for every child and publicly expresses support for investment in foundational learning at the highest political levels and between organizations. The Commitment also shows a renewed dedication to achieve targets and national benchmarks under Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Q2: *Why focus on foundational learning when there are other important learning and skills gaps that need to be addressed?*

A2: Foundational learning holds immense value in itself – being able to read, do basic math and have the socio-emotional skills needed to engage with others are all essential for a life with dignity, health and choices. Beyond that, foundational learning for all is an essential first step, so that all children and young people can access more advanced learning and skills. For example, children who cannot read and understand a simple text will struggle to learn anything else in school. They are more likely to repeat a grade and more likely to drop out of school. They are less likely to benefit from further training and skills programmes and develop the skills they need to enter the 21st century workforce, contribute to society and fulfil their potential. Early literacy, therefore, is a signal of the quality of education in a country. At a national level, failing to ensure foundational learning for all will lead to worse health outcomes, greater youth unemployment and deeper levels of poverty. Differences in outcomes emerge early and grow over time. Securing foundational learning for all, early, matters greatly: it is a building block to educational, social, and economic progress.

Q3: *How was the Commitment to Action developed?*

A3: The Commitment to Action articulates the ambition and commitment shared by many governments, multilateral organizations, civil society and other partners to end the learning crisis. The first draft was agreed during the TES pre-summit in Paris in June 2022, building on consultations with government and non-government partners as well as academic experts. The development process was coordinated by the World Bank, UNICEF, USAID, UNESCO, BMGF and FCDO.

Q4: *How do governments and partners endorse the commitment and who is expected to sign?*

A4: National Governments are invited to endorse the [Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning](#). Other organisations in the global education community are also invited to sign up as entities.

To endorse the Commitment to Action, national governments and supporting organizations should submit an official letter indicating endorsement to foundational.learning@unicef.org. Endorsement letters should include the contact information for an official representative and may include additional information regarding how the Commitment to Action will be implemented and advanced by the

⁶ Foundational learning is defined here as literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills

endorsing party. Details of how to do this will be published [online](#) with the Commitment to Action. To find out more about the Commitment to Action and to endorse, please contact foundational.learning@unicef.org.

Q5: *What are countries and partners expected to do after they endorse the Commitment to Action?*

A5: By endorsing the Commitment to Action, partners⁷ agree to urgently support every child to acquire foundational learning by age ten and to contribute to halving learning poverty by 2030. How best to achieve this will depend on the context. The global evidence points to a number of effective ways (listed on pages 3-4) to accelerate progress in the classroom and nationally.

Q6: *Why is the commitment to reduce by half the global share of children unable to read and understand a simple text by age ten? Is this too ambitious as learning levels are so low, or not ambitious enough? What about SDG 4 and reaching all children?*

A6: In 2015, SDG 4 set highly ambitious education targets to achieve by 2030 that the global community adopted. They remain the global ambition on education: all children must receive a high-quality education that leads to real learning. However, halfway to 2030, the global learning crisis remains severe, especially for marginalized children. It has been exacerbated by COVID-19, which has widened inequalities even further. To help turn this around, the 2021 G7 endorsed girls' education objectives, demonstrated an ambition to support all children to return to school and learn, including those marginalized girls previously left behind. In 2022, this collective international and national action and ambition continues to build, including with the national benchmarking process, and the targets many countries have set for 2025 and 2030.

To achieve any progress, it is important to set interim targets. Given the learning trajectories, reducing learning poverty by half would require unprecedentedly rapid progress in global learning outcomes, to reduce global learning poverty to the lowest level ever. Achieving this target will require a reaffirmed commitment to foundational learning for all, starting with the most marginalized, and evidenced based action. The achievement of this interim target will enable progress towards achieving the national benchmarks set by national governments⁸ and eventually the ambition set out in SDG 4 to ultimately reach all children.

Q7: *What does this commitment mean in terms of national targets on foundational literacy, and how will progress be reviewed?*

A7: Endorsers of the Commitment to Action will decide how they take the commitment forward, using their own targets, assessments of needs, and best available and relevant evidence. The global target is to halve learning poverty by 2030 and can be achieved if each country works towards their [national target](#) (see Q8). Any mechanism to jointly review progress will be linked to the wider benchmarking process and targets already set by countries, and wider tracking and reporting on SDG 4.1.1 and 4.1.2. There will also be opportunities to benefit from collaboration and learning between national

⁷ Governments, Donors, Foundations, Funds, CSOs and NGOs.

⁸ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and Global Education Monitoring Report (GEMR). 2022. "Setting commitments—Countries' national SDG 4 benchmarks." Paris: UNESCO. July 7th, in press.

governments and partners to support each other in achieving intermediate outcomes and indicators that will ultimately lead to improving foundational learning for all. The details of this progress review process are still being worked through.

Q8: *How does the Commitment to Action align with the SDG commitments which governments have already made?*

A8: The Commitment to Action target is closely aligned with the aggregation of countries' own targets for reducing learning poverty. As part of the SDG 4 monitoring process, the international community has agreed to seven benchmark indicators—including the minimum proficiency level at the end of primary and the percentage of children who read at the end of primary, both indicators are aligned to the Learning Poverty indicator. Through this process, many countries have set their own [national targets](#), which reflects their aspiration for progress toward the global ambition of ensuring that all children learn. When national targets for low and middle income countries are aggregated, their collective goal is aligned with nearly halving learning poverty by 2030⁹.

Q9: *Which partners have endorsed the Commitment to Action so far?*

A9: Partners around the world are invited to endorse the Commitment to Action. Updates on which partners have endorsed the Commitment to Action will be shared as the endorsement process continues. A broad network of countries, donors, multilaterals, CSOs, research partners and foundations have already welcomed the Commitment to Action and indicated support for endorsement. Countries and partners are invited to endorse the Commitment to Action, at any time ahead of, during and in the follow-up to TES in September 2022.

Q10: *Where can interested persons get more information on the Commitment to Action and resources on foundational learning?*

A10: The Commitment to Action is [available online](#). To find out more about the Commitment to Action and to endorse, please contact foundational.learning@unicef.org.

Q11: *Where can I find advice and guidance to convert commitment into action?*

A11: Here:

- a. [The FLN Hub](#) and the available technical support
- b. [How to Guides - Science of Teaching](#) and the available technical support
- c. [Guidance](#) for learning recovery following the [Learning Poverty Report Update 2022](#)

⁹ World Bank (2022) State of Learning Poverty Report Update. Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/state-of-global-learning-poverty>