Are global learning metrics feasible?

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For decades global information on education mainly emphasized comparable date on access to and completion of school instead of what students take away from their schooling experience. Since 2000 there has been a pronounced shift to measuring learning outcomes, with more and more countries (and civil society organizations) assessing student learning in national, regional and international assessments. The desirability and feasibility of developing comparable measures of learning outcomes has thus become a global issue, vigorously debated among policy analysts, donors and researchers.

Proponents of cross-country comparable measures of learning outcomes argue they are long overdue. The plight of millions of poor and marginalized children, who fail to master basic competencies during primary school grades, while recognized, fails to garner sufficient policy attention and threatens the achievement of the ambitious sustainable development agenda. Global measures of learning would help to address this.

Global monitoring of learning outcomes would push governments to prioritize learning and ensure that all children acquire core knowledge and master basic skills. Comparable measures of learning can also promote a culture of transparency, and evidence-oriented policy making. They can contribute to public debates of desired learning outcomes, and improve international partnerships. They can also help countries develop their capacity for analysing results and assessing a wider range of skills and competencies.

Yet many have raised concerns over the nature and value of global measures of learning. The exclusive focus on basic or minimum proficiencies in reading and numeracy, which are more amenable to measurement, risks marginalizing the value of a wider range of subjects and competences and can weaken national curriculum priorities. Moreover, measuring learning only in terms of literacy and numeracy skills gives a slanted portrait of the breadth of outcomes that schooling enables children to acquire.

Cross-country measures of learning, whether intended or not, can lead to country rankings, whose value remains problematic. League tables on learning can discourage country participation in assessments that contribute to effective policy reform over time. Also, learning contexts are diverse, which makes it difficult to develop and interpret comparable measures of learning both in language and mathematics.

The costs of comparative learning assessments, which can be a substantial burden for poorer countries, are likely to result in requests for funding support from international aid agencies.

Finally, while large-scale assessments are useful in tracking system-level performance, evidence is limited on how useful they are in enhancing teacher training and classroom practices and in reducing inequalities in learning over time. The adage ‘don’t value what you measure, measure what you value’ can possibly unite the international education community under the common cause of improving education quality. Student proficiencies in reading and mathematics, which represent key foundational skills, are highly valued. However, measuring proficiency levels in these areas requires
sensitivity to national and linguistic contexts. Monitoring these and other learning outcomes should be an ‘open source’ project developed in a collaborative and transparent manner. Coordination will be needed to efficiently allocate financial resources for improving the comparability of learning measures across diverse contexts. Robust reporting of learning globally depends on reaching maximal consensus on content, quality and process.

The value and purposes of tracking learning over time depend to a considerable extent on whose perspective is involved. For national policy makers the monitoring of learning gains or losses provides an indication of system performance. It can also serve as a marker of on-going reform efforts to improve teacher preparation, broaden the relevance of instructional materials and assess the effectiveness of interventions targeting underachieving students. Keeping tabs on student learning at the local school level can help principals compare the achievements of their students with those of similar backgrounds in the same district, region or province. Such yardsticks of student learning better situate the specific learning challenges that individual schools face.

However, carrying out robust and internationally comparable learning assessments involves an enormous commitment of time, effort and resources. As such, they are most cost effective when they serve multiple purposes, including but not limited to providing a platform for global monitoring. Moreover, if these assessments are meant to track progress over time, rather than serve as a one-off measure of student learning, they require sustainable financing and political commitment, independent of a particular government or minister in power. In many parts of the world, these conditions are difficult to obtain and solutions on the ground are inevitably imperfect.

Clearly the development of global measures of learning is not simply a technical issue, but also a political one. Opposition to learning assessments in some countries has become quite salient among parents, teacher associations and political parties, for example. To address these concerns the GEM Report recommends that governments embrace open and inclusive approaches that prioritize the needs and capacities of their countries based on the criteria of inclusivity, efficiency and feasibility. And they should make concerted efforts to build consensus around the content, quality and process of assessment activity.