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Using National Education Accounts to Help Address the Global Learning Crisis

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Financial Data as Driving Force Behind Improved Learning

During the past decade, school enrollments have increased dramatically, mostly thanks to UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) movement and the UN Millennium Development Goals. From 1999 to 2008, an additional 52 million children around the world enrolled in primary schools, and the number of out-of-school children fell by 39 million. In Sub-Saharan Africa alone, enrollment rates rose by one-third during that time, even with large population increases in school-age children.[1]

Yet enrollment is not the only indicator of success in education, and does not necessarily translate into learning. Even with these impressive gains in enrollment, many parts of the world, and particularly the poorest areas, now face a severe learning crisis. The latest data in the *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2011* reveal poor literacy and numeracy skills for millions of students around the world. In Malawi and Zambia, more than one-third of sixth-grade students had not achieved the most basic literacy skills. In El Salvador, just 13 percent of third-grade students passed an international mathematics exam. Even in middle-income countries such as South Africa and Morocco, the majority of students had not acquired basic reading skills after four years of primary education.[2] Although the focus on children out of school is fully justified, given that they certainly lack learning opportunities, the failure to focus on learning also does a disservice to the more than 600 million children in the developing world who are already in school but fail to learn very basic skills.

The time is right for improved learning to become the new global education agenda. In fact, new education strategies from the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) specifically target learning outcomes.[3] Furthermore, the education Millennium Development Goals are set to expire in 2015, allowing for new and improved learning-based goals to be set. The momentum is also building among civil society organizations. For example, one of the major goals of the Global Campaign for Education, a civil society movement based on increasing access to education, is to improve the *quality* of education, while citizen-led organizations such as Pratham in India and Uwezo in East Africa have been working to increase attention to learning levels among parents, communities and their governments.

To move this agenda forward, countries and donors must have a very clear picture of the current state of affairs in the education sector—yet this is rarely the case. Governments should know exactly how education resources are linked to learning outcomes to make informed policy decisions toward improving the quality of education. The best way to measure this link is by constructing comprehensive national education accounts (NEAs) to track all financial resources for education and document their end use in detail. Financial resources are by no means the sole input for quality education, yet countries cannot develop their education systems without allocating sufficient funding to providers at the appropriate levels. Access to NEAs connected to learning outcomes and other drivers of learning such as educational equity and efficiency will allow countries to know where to focus their resources to improve school achievement.

What is missing in most countries is complete and accurate information about financial resources for education from all key actors—the government, the private sector and donors. Yet it is perfectly possible to collect and use this information in a comprehensive and consistent way. To cite a close parallel situation, the health sector has already benefited immensely from resource tracking using national health accounts (NHAs), on which NEAs are

based. NHAs are institutionalized in more than 190 countries, and the same can be done for NEAs. Like NHAs, NEAs are built with data collected *by* countries and *for* countries. The resulting ownership of NEAs will allow countries to forge their own sustainable path to improved learning.

NEAs track a country's total resource allocation for education, but they also disaggregate those resources by source and destination. NEAs can answer the following type of questions: what percentage of public education funds go to the Ministry of Education? What share of funds pays for teachers' salaries? How much is transferred to local districts? What shares of public and private resources reach the classroom and contribute directly to learning? NEAs carefully track the flow of funds from sources to intermediate financing agents to providers, and, ultimately, to services that reach beneficiaries.

NEAs need to be tied directly to learning outcomes, and should certainly include data from various learning assessments, such as the international Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) examinations, and nationally sampled learning assessments like the Annual State of Education Report (ASER) in India and Uwezo in East Africa. NEAs need not be limited to expenditure tracking; their real contribution should be in linking education resources to outcomes. Cross-country comparisons of NEAs will be immensely useful in this regard, because they will enable policymakers will be able to correlate resources with results. And NEAs disaggregated by region will inform governments of inequalities in learning outcomes within their countries, and whether those are tied to similar inequalities in funding. Separating learning outcomes and funding by school type (public, private, or sponsored by a nongovernmental organization), by grade level, by gender, and among socioeconomic and ethnic groups can also be valuable in targeting resources to address learning discrepancies.

This policy brief outlines how NEAs are created, and why they are a vast improvement over current financial tracking systems in the education sector. Examples from the health sector illustrate the benefits of national accounts for improving public services, and their ubiquity highlights the poor state of affairs of education sector data. Drawing upon several NEA pilots, this brief demonstrates how NEAs can address funding inequities and identifies the next steps for developing a comprehensive system of NEAs that will link education resources to learning outcomes.

Financial resources are by no means the sole input for quality education, yet countries cannot develop their education systems without allocating sufficient funding to providers at the appropriate levels. Access to NEAs connected to learning outcomes and other drivers of learning such as educational equity and efficiency will allow countries to know where to focus their resources to improve school achievement.

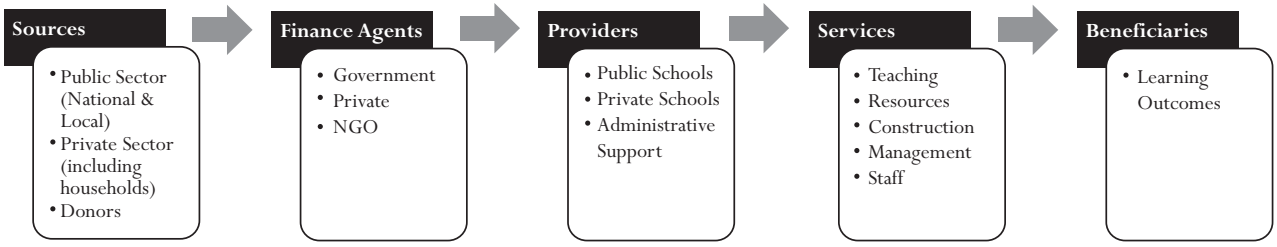
What Are National Education Accounts?

As mentioned above, national education accounts are patterned after national health accounts, which exist for virtually all countries in the world. Thus far, full NEAs have been piloted in only five countries: Guatemala (a precursor to NEAs), Morocco, Turkey, El Salvador and Nigeria (state-level NEAs). NEAs follow the flow of funds from source to service provision using a set of matrices, tables, and charts. Essentially, the NEA aims to take the "financial pulse" of the education sector by answering the following questions:

1. What are the *sources* of education funds?
2. Who are the intermediate financing *agents* and how do they expend and distribute funds?
3. To which education *providers* does the money go?
4. What *goods* are procured, which *services* are produced and *who benefits* from those goods and services?[4]

The NEA carefully tracks the flow of funds from one actor to another, with the capability of disaggregating by education subsector (preschool, primary, secondary, nonformal, etc.) and by characteristics of the beneficiaries (urban versus rural, male versus female, etc.). The financial flows adhere to the general format shown in figure 1.

Figure 1. General Format for Financial Flows as Tracked by an NEA



Source: Adapted from Phyllis Forbes and Raida Baidas, *Morocco National Education Accounts (NEA) Task Order: Final Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Agency for International Development, 2006).

Data Sources and Collection

NEAs use public and private sector data, as well as data from multilateral and bilateral donors, nongovernmental organizations and other charitable organizations. Public sector data include records from local, state, and national governments, and generally come from education and finance ministries at the national level. Private sector data are used to track payments and investments from households and private corporations or organizations. Donor data may include loans and grants from multilateral or bilateral donors, or nongovernmental organizations.

Complete and accurate data collection is the biggest challenge to creating NEAs. To the extent possible, secondary data are used to reduce costs, but many countries have limited pools of data. Initiating an NEA will often require intense data collection through surveys, especially for private sector schools, donors and nonprofit or-

ganizations. Data are also collected from new or existing household surveys as well as from all levels of government (local, state and national). Often, public sector data are located in more than one ministry, or at more than one level of government, which can make collecting those data challenging and time consuming. For instance, Morocco's pilot NEA required 11 primary data studies, and the State Education Accounts in Nigeria used 16 data studies.[5] These data collection efforts required large amounts of initial funding, but once the capacity is established for countries to collect their own data, the process can be institutionalized into routine activities of the Ministry of Education.

Building Blocks for NEAs

NEAs need not start from scratch, nor should they reinvent the wheel. Fortunately, important building blocks for NEAs already exist for many countries in the form of public expenditure reviews (PERs), country status reports (CSRs) and public expenditure tracking surveys (PETS). The coalition of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and Eurostat—known as UOE—also has a detailed financial data collection tool. It is useful to here describe each of these building blocks in more detail.

Public Expenditure Reviews

The World Bank has conducted central government PERs since the early 1980s to track recurrent expenditures in public spending; and since the mid-1980s, sector-specific PERs have provided snapshots of the specific sector budgets, such as health and education.[6] Education PERs measure the size and scope of government budgets, and aim to answer the following questions:

- How much is spent on education, and what share of the government's total expenditure goes to education?
- How do governments finance the education sector, and what do they finance?
- Is there equitable distribution of the public resources?
- Is the spending efficient, adequate and sustainable?[7]

PERs often focus on the distribution of the education budget by analyzing the benefits to various socioeconomic groups. A PER in Bolivia, for example, revealed that spending on primary education was progressive (i.e., the poor received more benefits), while spending on secondary and tertiary education was regressive (i.e., the wealthy benefited more).[8]

In some cases, PERs include data on school achievements, for instance, to compare costs and performance of government schools versus nongovernmental schools. The World Bank has already identified exemplary PERs in the following 12 countries: Albania, Algeria, Armenia, Brazil, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, Maldives, Turkey, Benin and Uganda.[9] PERs are by no means standardized, but in each of these countries, a PER may be a good starting place for designing a comprehensive and standardized NEA.

Country Status Reports

CSRs, produced by the World Bank and UNESCO Pôle de Dakar with financial assistance from the EFA Fast-Track Initiative (FTI), are among the most comprehensive analyses available for the education sector. In addition to education financing, CSRs explore enrollment patterns, internal and external efficiency (dropout and repetition rates, and education's connection to the labor market) and educational equity. CSRs may also focus on certain subsectors in education such as primary education and technical and vocational education. CSRs are much more standardized than PERs, and can thus be compared among countries in similar financial situations.

In terms of finances, CSRs explore recurrent public expenditures by level of schooling, as well as donor financing and household contributions. In Malawi's 2010 CSR, for example, household spending on education is disaggregated by type of spending, level of education, and share of education expenditures by total household income.[10] CSRs are designed to analyze unit costs of education between types of education providers (public and private), among levels of schooling and among countries as a percentage of gross domestic product per capita.[11]

Since they were initiated in 2001, CSRs have been completed in 33 African countries.[12] Although CSRs (and PERs) do not follow the flow of funds from sources to providers, instead providing a snapshot of education finances, they are nevertheless vital building blocks for NEAs.

Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys

PETS are very similar to NEAs in that they track the flow of public resources from national governments to local governments to service providers. PETS generally aim to determine the proportion of government funds to reach each level of financing agents and service providers. Once a specific research objective is identified, PETS undergo an extensive mapping of funds to capture uses and abuses of resources. PETS are often quite narrow in scope, targeting one project or a subset of projects within the education sector, but they are much more detailed than PERs. PETS are best used as a transparency tool to reveal leakages within the education sector, and are often paired with Quantitative Service Delivery Surveys to form a complete picture of public service delivery.

The first systematic PETS was conducted in Uganda in 1996 to support a PER. It analyzed the actual allocation of grants provided to schools for nonsalary expenditures, and discovered a startling amount of leakage. The Ugandan government made this information public, and the next year saw a great reduction in grant leakages. As of 2010, the World Bank had conducted education-specific PETS in 10 different countries: Albania, Cambodia, Chad, Laos, Madagascar, Mongolia, Niger, Uganda, Yemen and Zambia. Civil society organizations have also conducted several education PETS.[13] PETS track only public finances, whereas NEAs aim to capture all sources of education funds; however, PETS, given their level of detail, are a very useful complement to PERs and NEAs.

UOE Surveys

The UOE coalition's three members undertake several surveys individually and together. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) collects education finance data from two standardized annual surveys. Most national governments provide data on sources and expenditures of education resources through a somewhat limited survey, and about 60 countries (including those that belong to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) provide information for a much more extensive survey by the UOE's members, which does include some components of an NEA. This detailed survey includes more comprehensive data from public and private sources of funding (including households). The survey also allows for expenditure data by providers to be recorded in great detail, for core education expenditures as well as for more peripheral activities.[14] Unfortunately, the number of developing countries to complete this detailed survey is very small, because the necessary data at the country level are unavailable.

NEAs as the Complete Package

Although the tools described above are very useful, each lacks one or more components of the NEA. The detailed UOE survey is closest to the NEA framework in its standardization and tracking of funds, yet the data are collected and analyzed by outsiders, and their use is mainly external. Furthermore, most countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, lack the data (and the capacity to collect the data) to actually complete the surveys; hence the low response rate for the more detailed UOE survey. Furthermore, the UOE survey collects data that countries already *have*, whereas the NEA builds capacity to collect the data that countries *need*.

PERs and PETS are also good building blocks for NEAs, but are limited to public sources of finance. NEAs, conversely, include public, private and donor sources of funds. PETS track funds from source to use as NEAs do, but generally in a very specific and narrow context rather than for the entire education sector. Similarly, the scope of PERs is limited to public expenditure tracking, whereas NEAs can provide a more complete picture of how resources move through the system, which intermediate agents are involved, how their funding decisions relate to overall sector objectives, and, in the end, which resources actually reach the classrooms where learning takes place. CSRs, though more comprehensive than PERs, also mainly focus on the margins of the funding matrix, while shining less light on how funds are actually distributed along the way, inside the system.

NEAs take the strengths of these tools and combine them to create a complete picture of a country's education resources, the flow of funds and their end uses. In countries where one or more of these tools exist, implementing an NEA will be easier and less costly because much of the work has been done already. Where the NEA really differs, however, is in its commitment to capacity building within countries to create ownership of the data. The process of implementing NEAs in countries with weak data collection systems requires a significant amount of initial technical assistance and training, but the end result is a sustainable data collection and analysis framework that can be utilized to update NEAs, and any other financial analyses, year after year. And because the NEA is standardized, it can be compared from country to country, which will not only be useful for national governments to benchmark their progress against other countries in similar situations but also for donors to determine where their funding can achieve the best results.

Although NEAs are standardized, they are flexible in terms of being able to be customized to fit particular countries' needs and data collection capacities. The NEA framework allows for disaggregation of data at the regional, geographic and school levels. NEAs can highlight subsectors such as secondary schooling, special needs education and rural education. In Morocco, for example, where the education system is decentralized, the NEA data were organized by region. In Nigeria, a country with a strong religious education system, a separate NEA subaccount was conducted for nonformal religious schools. NEAs are also particularly useful in measuring the burden of education expenses on households. For example, the few available NEA pilots show that households contribute anywhere from 20 percent of total education expenditures in Nigeria to 33 percent in Morocco to 48 percent in El Salvador.[15]

By highlighting specifically where resources are abundant or lacking in relation to education achievements, NEAs can help education policymakers determine whether a nation's education sector requires more overall funding or subsidization, or whether a redistribution of current resources within the sector might be more effective in improving learning outcomes. NEAs also establish a comprehensive framework for collecting data and conducting technical analyses of an education system's resource allocation practices, which gives policymakers, funders, other stakeholders like parents and civil society, and those in charge of delivering education services basic information that can help improve learning achievements.

Education Must Catch Up to Health

The education sector is decades behind the health sector in collecting and analyzing financial data. Only 5 countries have piloted NEAs, yet a total of 193 countries have one or more iterations of a national health account. NHAs are owned and implemented by the countries themselves, and the data are readily available online. Thanks to the efforts of organizations like USAID, the World Bank and the World Health Organization in providing capacity building, technical assistance and funding, national systems are in place for NHA data collection and analysis, following well-established standardized methods. NHAs have proven to be sustainable and incredibly useful tools for designing health sector policies, and NEAs can likewise become the same for education.

Impact of National Health Accounts

The first NHAs were created in 1960, and since then, as mentioned above, 193 countries have constructed and maintain NHAs with the help of the World Health Organization.[16] The information in these accounts has proved very useful, especially in revealing the significant role of the private sector, and households in particular, in funding health care. For example, NHAs show that the private sector's contribution constitutes about 60 percent of overall national health care financing in Sub-Saharan Africa.[17] Those NEAs that have already been commissioned tell a similar story.

NHAs are often catalysts for improvements in health care delivery; an Abt–PHR Plus study found that 90 percent of countries surveyed had used NHA data for health sector reform.[18] In many cases, NHAs highlight the enormous contributions of the private sector in health care funding, and may encourage countries to capitalize

on these contributions and create public–private partnerships in health.[19] For example, in Lesotho, the government is contracting out the management and construction of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital to the private sector.[20] In Tanzania, the Food and Drug Authority, with donor support, trains and licenses small private stores in rural and poor areas to sell essential medicines.[21] NHAs can be disaggregated for specific diseases—such as HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis—to determine whether funding aligns with the burden of disease in a particular country or region. The following are other examples of NHA results used to mobilize specific policy reforms in the health sector:

- *Burkina Faso:* The NHA reported a discrepancy in health funding for the poorest areas versus the wealthier areas, so the government reallocated funds to give priority for spending in the poorer areas. Furthermore, the NHA revealed that households were the largest contributors to health spending. Because of this, policymakers subsidized certain services to lower the burden on households.[22]

- *Egypt:* The NHA showed that households accounted for half of health spending; this realization led to health reforms to lower the financial burden on families.[23]

- *Iran:* NHAs showed a decrease over time in public funds devoted to health care; the Ministry of Health used this information to lobby the national government for more funding for the sector.[24]

- *Jordan:* The NHA contradicted the assumption that most Jordanians were uninsured; instead, the NHA showed that coverage was fairly equitable, so the policy reform agenda was shifted from universal coverage to providing greater efficiency in health care.[25]

- *Lebanon:* The NHA determined that the government was spending 12.5 percent of its gross domestic product on health care because it often reimbursed health services from the private sector—this led to reform of the fee system to reduce utilization and costs.[26]

- *Rwanda:* An HIV/AIDS-specific NHA revealed that households accounted for 93 percent of HIV/AIDS spending, and that donor contributions were lacking. This prompted the donor community to increase funding from $0.5 million to $1.6 million from 1998 to 2000.[27]

- *South Africa:* The NHA was used in policy reforms to redistribute health funds and infrastructure after apartheid ended; NHAs showed that average public health spending was 3.6 times higher in wealthy areas than poor ones, and that wealthy areas had more infrastructure and staff than poor areas. The country instituted a moratorium on building hospitals until districts could prove a need for the new infrastructure.[28]

The Current State of National Education Accounts

As mentioned above, national education accounts have been piloted in just a handful of countries—including Morocco, Turkey, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nigeria—through partnerships between national governments, international organizations and external donors such as USAID and the World Bank. India and the Philippines have completed similar studies that cannot be considered true NEAs but are useful nonetheless. It is constructive to look at the pilot NEA programs in more details.

In *Guatemala*, Management Systems International, with funding from USAID, implemented a precursor to an NEA in 2000–1. The information gathered (funding sources, agents, providers and services) was similar to an NEA in that it used the matrix system, but true NEA methods were not used.[29] The study was not conducted with the involvement of major government stakeholders, and thus did not receive much attention from policymakers. The study did determine, however, that households share the financial burden of national education by almost 50 percent.[30]

Morocco was the first country to implement a full NEA in a 2004–5 pilot with the assistance of Creative Associates International and Abt Associates funded by USAID. The NEA was able to provide a detailed and transparent picture of the flow of funds, determine if education funds were being spent in support of policy objectives, promote better dialogue within the country and between donors and government officials and assist the Government of Morocco to estimate more accurately the costs of educating its population.[31] The Government of Morocco realized from the NEA that households, and especially poor ones, were paying significant out-of-pocket expenses for schooling. In response, the government implemented a social support program with World Bank assistance to increase the amounts of boarding school scholarships; provide more free meals in government and boarding school cafeterias; and to distribute uniforms, books and school supplies to students.[32]

Turkey worked with the World Bank to create a comprehensive NEA for 2002–3 data, although actual data collection commenced in later years. Funds were clearly traced through a web of sources, agents and providers, and clear diagrams made this information transparent. Data on household and public spending were disaggregated by income quintile, allowing Turkey to determine whether the flow of funds was reaching its poorest citizens.

In *El Salvador*, with funding from USAID and leadership from the Academy for Educational Development's Educational Quality Improvement Program (known as EQUIP2), the Research Triangle Institute worked with the Ministry of Education from 2006 to 2009 to create an NEA. The data revealed many actors investing in the education sector, and provided the ministry with the information needed to design strategies to maximize learning. The NEA data indicated that families spent on average $374 per year—more than the government's contribution—to send a child to secondary school.[33] Furthermore, many students were dropping out of secondary school for economic reasons. Because of these NEA results, the Ministry of Education decided to invest in a free secondary education initiative. The ministry allocated $15 million starting in 2009 to cover secondary education expenses that had previously been borne by households, and it budgeted an additional $28 million to pay for infrastructure and teacher wages.[34]

With the support of USAID, *Nigeria* implemented NEAs at the state level in collaboration with Creative Associates International. State education accounts (SEAs) were conducted for Kano State during the period 2005–6 and Zamfara State in 2006–7. The 2008–9 SEA for Bauchi State is almost completed, and Sokoto State will complete its 2009–10 SEA in the fall of 2011. Subaccounts for nonformal education were also conducted in each state.

After the SEA was conducted in Kano State, the Ministry of Education used the data to identify gaps in education funding and organized public–private partnerships to fill those gaps. Particularly noted was a gap in funding for school renovations. As a result, the Ministry of Education reallocated funds to renovate 900 schools instead of building a few new schools. Using data disaggregated by gender, the Kano Ministry of Education also recognized a discrepancy in participation between males and females, and has since been working on establishing conditional cash transfer programs with the U.K. Department for International Development and the World Bank to encourage female participation in education. In Zamfara, the commissioner of education instituted significant reforms noting the inequality in urban and rural education, which led the ministry to reassign teachers from urban to rural areas. The inadequacy of resources to girls' schools and special education led to increased allocations and efforts to hold headmasters more accountable for management and efficient resource use.[35]

In developing NEAs and NHAs, the issue of sustainability is of utmost importance. NHAs and NEAs are only truly useful if they are maintained on a regular basis (NHAs are recommended to be updated every three years), to gauge the effectiveness of policy changes and reform over time. The costs of implementing NHAs—and NEAs—vary across countries, depending on the status of their health and financial information systems, but are generally high in the first year. Significant technical assistance is needed if the initial information base is poor, though this can usually be covered by external funds. If the information on funding sources, agents and providers are easily accessible, however, the costs of implementing NHAs and NEAs can be quite low. Once countries develop internal expertise in implementing NEAs, costs will decrease significantly. Implementation cost for first-year NEAs may range from $500,000 to $1.5 million.[36] Expenses for subsequent NEAs will be much lower and can usually be absorbed by the countries' recurrent budgets for education.

Regional networks have also been successful in developing sustainable NHAs—and can likewise be for NEAs. There are currently five regional networks for NHAs, which are an important source of support for member countries in developing their accounts.[37] These existing NHA networks and networks of education ministers such as the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) and Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) can be utilized for support in developing NEAs as well. Creating NEAs for the first time may be challenging for countries, so networks can provide expertise and technical assistance from more experienced partners. And these networks can also be useful in standardizing accounts and promoting their usefulness for evidence-based policymaking.

Next Steps

Just as NHAs have clearly been a valuable data source for informing good health policy, NEAs are now poised to do the same for the education sector. Nowadays, development policies are supposed to be evidence based, and results-based financing is becoming the norm for obtaining (external) resources. In light of these developments, the lack of comprehensive information on financial flows within the education sector is glaring. Ongoing large-scale data collection efforts, such as those by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, rely on data that already exist in the country but do little to contribute to a country's ability to collect the relevant information, at all levels of the education sector and from all actors and stakeholders. Such multicountry data collection efforts also do not contribute to a country's ability to improve the quality of its own data or inform its particular education policy.

The major international players in the education field (USAID and other bilateral donors, the World Bank, the EFA Fast Track Initiative, UNESCO, among others) need to start a movement to establish NEAs in the countries that most need them, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. The conceptual tools for NEAs are readily available, and as has been shown in this paper, there are already excellent examples of NEAs in a small number of countries. There have been some successes in building indigenous capacity, but a full NEA effort would require a greater investment than the current pilots to enable countries to build and maintain internal capacity to collect policy-relevant information at the sector level, in a comprehensive, transparent and internationally comparable (standardized) way, like those for NHAs.

Most of the key actors in global education have already played a major role in the development of NHAs, and, based on this experience, they can now also do so for the education sector. The World Bank and USAID are poised to take on a leading role in providing financial and technical assistance for in-country capacity building and for the initial implementation of NEAs in, say, a dozen well-chosen countries. An initial focus on Sub-Saharan Africa seems justified. In that case, ADEA could be invited to provide a regional platform to foster cross-country (South–South) support for data collection and education policy reform. The EFA Fast-Track Initiative is already playing a major role in improving the information base for education through its assistance with CSRs. Finally, and most importantly, each country's government has a crucial role to play in pursuing the development of its own NEAs, following the examples of the governments of Morocco, Turkey, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nigeria, as described above.

In particular, EFA Fast-Track Initiative can serve as a major stepping stone toward NEAs, and in return can greatly benefit from it. Given its on-the-ground presence in many countries, FTI can push the NEA movement by adopting a standardized approach to producing CSRs, and it can base this approach on the conceptual frameworks that already exist for NEAs. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics is currently the leader in collecting global comparable data on education. It can also readily take on the role as the central hub for NEAs, guarding the quality, comprehensiveness and comparability of the data provided and, over time, making the data readily available for comparative education research (a role currently played by the World Health Organization for NHAs). The major education donors can contribute resources for the in-country production of NEAs, by including them in specific education grants or loans, or through general budget support for the sector.

As these various actors engage in all these activities, they should not forget the central goal for improving the information base in the education sector: to vastly improve our understanding of the link between resource use and learning achievements, and to steer resources available in the sector to where they contribute most to learning outcomes. Therefore, it would be extremely useful for the first group of countries that implement NEAs to be already involved in making efforts to systematically collect school achievement data (e.g., Uwezo or ASER), so that the linkage becomes possible between resource use and learning outcomes.

To adequately address the global learning crisis mentioned at the outset of this paper, policymakers and stakeholders at all levels need to have better information on the availability of all resources in the sector, and on their uses. The fact that this type of information has been available for the health sector in virtually all countries during the past two decades has greatly improved our understanding of the performance and problems of that sector and of the quality of evidence-based health care policymaking. In this respect, the education sector has some catching up to do. By fully utilizing NEAs, as described here, the global education community can make great progress in filling this gap, with relatively modest resources, using proven concepts, and in a relatively short period. In fact, if the major players in the sector join forces to make a concerted push for the in-country implementation of NEAs, much could be accomplished in the next two to four years.

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