# Improving children's reading and math at large scale in Côte d'Ivoire

## The story of scaling PEC

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Summary findings

Even before COVID-19 left as many as 1.6 billion students out of school in early 2020, millions of children and youth around the world did not have access to the quality education they needed to lead healthy, safe, and productive lives. Even worse, the poorest and most marginalized children continue to be most affected by this learning crisis, losing out on their right to education. This situation has far-reaching consequences for generations to come, including on poverty, inequality, climate change, and public health. Urgent action must be taken to rapidly and sustainably expand access to high-quality learning opportunities for all children. Of course, the question is "how?" While there exist many innovations that improve children's learning, the vast majority only reach a small fraction of children in need. As a result, there is growing demand for more evidence and guidance on how to identify, adapt, and scale cost-effective policy and practice that lead to millions more children learning.

In response, the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings has been investigating efforts to scale and sustain evidence-based initiatives leading to large-scale improvements in children's learning. CUE has been implementing a series of Real-time Scaling Labs (RTSL), in partnership with local institutions in several countries, to generate evidence and provide practical recommendations around the process of scaling in global education—encouraging a stronger link between research and practice.

These summary findings[1] focus on one of the scaling labs in Côte d'Ivoire—launched in 2019 in collaboration with Transforming Education in Cocoa Communities (TRECC) and the Ministry of National Education and Literacy (MENA). It centers around the government-led process of implementing, adapting, and scaling the Programme d'Enseignement Ciblé (PEC), a remedial education approach to improving early grade reading and math adapted from Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL). While the lab has focused on the experience of PEC to date, it serves as a case study into larger questions of how an evidence-based initiative can achieve progress toward national sustainable scale, with lessons that are transferable beyond PEC and Côte d'Ivoire.

## PEC's scaling journey: A confluence of advantageous factors

In many ways, PEC represents the "ideal scenario" for scaling and sustaining an initiative within a formal education system. PEC benefitted from a confluence of factors in its favor—some of which have been strategically and systematically orchestrated, others which have serendipitously emerged. TRECC's problem-driven approach supported the development of government buy-in for PEC from the beginning and contributed to strong government ownership. The simplicity of the approach, the fact that it resonates with theoretical principles that teachers learn during initial training, its pilot through direct government delivery, its convincing results, and its clear pathway for scaling in the education system also fostered government engagement and facilitated PEC's expansion.

The partnerships forged in the TRECC model were other important factors in generating support for PEC, including the opportunity to experiment with different potential solutions before settling on one, the role of a neutral third party assessing pilot results, technical support from organizations that originally developed and studied the TaRL approach, and the existence of a scaling lab bringing together diverse stakeholders for reflection and peer-learning. PEC has also had success in gaining senior-level support within MENA, with key influential individuals championing it. This critical support has been maintained despite political turnover and shifts in the broader education environment, including a global pandemic. Finally, the availability of financing for PEC beyond an initial pilot phase—including funding for additional adaptation and expansion and potential access to five years of financing through the creation of a public-private pooled fund—has been essential for moving PEC beyond a short-lived project to an approach that the government intends to scale within the system.

Nonetheless, despite the many factors in its favor, scaling and sustaining PEC in Côte d'Ivoire is not guaranteed and critical challenges remain, including limited government capacity to incorporate and deliver the model in existing systems with quality, the persistence of a project mentality among some key actors involved, and insufficient attention to the engagement of education stakeholders at local levels (including teachers and communities). Other potential constraints to future expansion and sustaining of PEC include delays encumbering the launch of the new pooled fund and challenges around identifying and securing sustainable national financing.

## Lessons to strengthen PEC's expansion and inform future scaling efforts

Through accompanying the scaling journey of PEC, lessons emerged from the case centered around four key themes that were consequential to PEC's scaling success to date, and which will continue to play a critical role in future efforts. These themes are: 1) institutionalization as a pathway to sustainable scale; 2) partnerships and champions; 3) costs and financing; and 4) adaptation and continuous learning. Each of these themes offers lessons from the case of PEC and targeted recommendations not only to support ongoing progress to expand and deepen the impact of PEC but also to inform scaling efforts of other evidence-based education initiatives. Below is a brief overview of each of the lessons with targeted recommendations for implementers, policymakers, funders, and researchers that are further detailed in the full report.

## Institutionalization as a path to scaling in education

- *Ensure a relentless focus on who will deliver at large scale from the start*: Piloting an initiative with government takes more time and capacity up front, but also fosters buy-in, determines what is feasible, and demonstrates potential for a solution to work in the system.

- *Focus on the scalability of an innovation in the local context*: While it is tempting to seek innovations that significantly disrupt existing ways of working or test cutting-edge technology, it is critical to focus on the practicality of scaling an innovation in a particular context, including how best to infuse it sustainably and equitably into existing systems. Often, the innovations with the most potential for large-scale impact are those that are most feasible for the system to bear.

- *Create coordinating structures with sufficient capacity and a strong government mandate:* Scaling through institutionalization requires a coordinating structure with a high-level mandate to make decisions, harmonize efforts, and ensure the work of scaling moves forward—particularly once institutionalization progresses beyond any individual's or department's job description.

- *Maintain one foot on the gas, and one foot on the brakes*: Even with significant government buy-in for scaling, it is important that all stakeholders understand the need for a longer-term, phased approach to scaling, with a laser focus on quality and equity issues, balancing inevitable trade-offs during the scaling process.

## Partnerships and collaboration for scaling in education

- *Catalyze collective action, as well as recognize the point of diminishing returns*: Government engagement in the scaling process may be critical for expanding and sustaining an education initiative, but collective action is nonetheless required to bring different perspectives, resources, expertise, and roles. At the same time, sufficient attention must be given to clarify each partner's motivation and incentives, value addition, vision of scaling and success, and risk tolerance.

- *Support intermediaries to foster partnerships and align incentives*: Intermediary or third-party organizations—including funders—can play a critical bridging role in scaling to align disparate incentives, develop innovative approaches to leverage the unique strengths and perspectives of each actor, and gather stakeholders together behind a shared goal.

- *Cultivate an alliance of scaling champions:* Creating conditions for effective solutions to spread requires scaling champions at all levels within and outside government, classrooms, and communities, and deliberately creating space to work together differently—disrupting existing patterns of collaboration and decisionmaking. Leveraging a collaborative learning approach, such as the RTSL, can help to "bring the system into the room" and build a new way of working.

- *Support a mindset shift and behavior change for scaling:* Identifying and building a cadre of scaling leaders and change agents requires more than getting these stakeholders to support scaling a particular initiative—it requires raising awareness of key scaling principles, encouraging application of these principles through concrete action and behavior change, and strengthening the competencies and skills needed to scale impact.

## Costs and financing for scale

- *Shed light on long-term government financing:* For many innovators and implementers, government budgetary processes and pipelines remain opaque, and more clarity is needed on how to align with or integrate into these processes to mobilize long-term resources for sustainable scale.

- *Increase support to make sound cost projections at scale*: There is significant need to build local expertise and capacity to collect, analyze, and use cost data to inform scaling projections. Incentives are needed to support its collection, analysis, and sharing, and encourage greater transparency and opportunities for learning.

- *Leverage the potential of pooled financing to cross the "valley of death":* Donor collaboration and pooled funding can provide important bridge financing for scale, helping initiatives make the challenging transition from pilot to large-scale implementation, but more learning is needed on the benefits and challenges of these mechanisms.

## Adaptation and collaborative learning in the process of scaling

- *Integrate a continuous learning process within government systems*: There are tangible benefits to infusing a continuous learning approach, such as the RTSL, into government systems to support implementation, adaptation, and scaling, with quick feedback loops and opportunities for reflection and course corrections. Government leadership of a lab-like process can confer the necessary authority to develop, test, and refine a scaling strategy with relevant decisionmakers.

- *Strengthen adaptive capacity to respond to rapidly changing environments:* Too often adaptations being tested in the scaling process are not systematically planned for or well documented, and the learning is lost; more systematic approaches to planning for and learning from anticipated and spontaneous changes are needed.

- *Invest time and resources in peer learning and exchange*: Many initiatives in the process of scaling are working in isolation, and in spite of contextual differences, can benefit from greater collaboration to share experiences, reflect on common challenges and opportunities, and problem-solve collectively. Peer learning must go beyond one-off occasions and should be supported as an intrinsic aspect of the work that receives sufficient time, capacity, and resources.

Though still in its early chapters, PEC's scaling story is instructive on many levels. More than anything, the story of PEC has highlighted the tireless and inspiring efforts of so many education stakeholders in Côte d'Ivoire striving to improve learning outcomes for children, especially the most vulnerable.

And yet the case of PEC also underscores that even with this almost "best case" scenario of scalability and opportunity, scaling impact in education remains a challenging and long-term endeavor that cannot be taken for granted. PEC is arguably now entering its most challenging chapter—navigating the tenuous middle phase of scaling—as it pushes beyond a small-scale pilot to become further embedded in government operations and reach significantly more children. This phase will require continued adaptation and experimentation, collecting data, and using them in rapid learning cycles to ensure PEC's efficacy is sustained as it expands. Regardless of what the future holds, the Ivorian government's efforts to scale and sustain PEC—in partnership with various actors—will continue to provide rich insights into scaling and system-wide change for Côte d'Ivoire and many countries around the world.


A PEC lesson in a classroom in Côte d'Ivoire
Photo Credit: TaRL Africa.

# Summary of recommendations

Lessons emerging from PEC's scaling journey to date center around four key themes, which will continue to play a critical role in future efforts, and can also inform the scaling efforts of other evidence-based education initiatives.

### Institutionalization and sustainable scale

- Focus on who will deliver at large scale from the start.
- Concentrate on the scalability of an innovation in the local context.
- Create coordinating structures with sufficient capacity and a strong government mandate.
- Balance scaling momentum with maintaining quality.

### Partnerships and collaboration

- Catalyze collective action but recognize the point of diminishing returns.
- Support intermediaries to foster partnerships and align incentives.
- Cultivate an alliance of scaling champions.
- Support a mindset shift and behavior change for scaling.

### Costs and financing

- Shed light on long-term government financing.
- Increase support to make sound cost projections at scale.
- Leverage the potential of pooled financing to cross the "valley of death."

### Adaptation and continuous learning

- Integrate a continuous learning process within government systems.
- Strengthen adaptive capacity to respond to rapidly changing environments.
- Invest time and resources in peer learning and exchange.

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