



Let Us Learn

Making Education Work
for the Most Vulnerable
in Afghanistan, Bangladesh,
Liberia, Madagascar and Nepal

May 2022



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Executive summary

Learning remains largely out of reach for many of the most vulnerable children around the world. In low- and middle-income countries, an estimated 56 per cent of children cannot read a simple text by the age of 10, and this share is projected to rise to 70 per cent after the pandemic (World Bank et al., 2021). The school closures imposed by the COVID-19 outbreak, coupled with an enduring tendency in low-income countries to allocate a limited share of the national education budget to the most vulnerable, are further widening inequalities in the global learning crisis landscape (UNICEF, 2020a; UNICEF, 2021a).

The Let Us Learn initiative

Founded in 2011 by philanthropists Susan Cummings-Findel and Stefan Findel in partnership with UNICEF, the Let Us Learn (LUL) initiative implements innovative education programmes to improve learning for the most vulnerable children in five countries with high levels of out-of-school children: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Liberia, Madagascar and Nepal. Each LUL-supported UNICEF Country Office works with their respective ministry of education and local partners to design education programmes that fit the particular local challenges of reaching the most vulnerable children and adolescents. LUL-supported education programmes are aligned with UNICEF's global education strategy and support vulnerable children from early childhood education to primary and secondary levels, through to vocational and life-skills training. This holistic approach in supporting multiple learning pathways ensures that marginalized children and adolescents with different needs can learn and get back into education.

The goal of this report is to document the outcomes, lessons learned and recommendations based on the experience of the LUL initiative (2018–2021) across four different types of learning programmes spanning the education lifecycle:

1. pre-primary education
2. accelerated learning pathways
3. programmes to reduce barriers to access and stay in formal school
4. vocational training.

The report draws from qualitative and quantitative evidence generated across the programmes supported by LUL.

Pre-primary education

Pre-primary education (PPE) plays a fundamental role in a child's lifelong learning trajectory. It represents a critical window for investment in children and one that bears substantial returns for society (Heckman, 2006; Muroga et al., 2020). Yet it remains severely underfunded, with 38 per cent of countries investing less than 2 per cent of their education budgets on PPE, against a recommended benchmark of 10 per cent (UNICEF, 2019a). International aid has similarly placed little emphasis on PPE, which receives less than 1 per cent of Official Development Assistance (ODA) on education (UNICEF, 2019b).

LUL brought PPE learning centres to 150 flood-prone communities in Bangladesh, providing schooling for 13,500 children aged 5 and 6 (52 per cent girls) who would otherwise be excluded from early childhood education. Community mobilization, conducted in tandem with local implementing partners, played a key role in persuading caregivers to send young children to the learning centres. Another key factor in the programme's success was to ensure a child-friendly learning environment, with trained facilitators from the community, age-appropriate materials supplied with the help of the Government and adequate access to clean water and sanitation facilities.

Regular teacher-led assessments showed remarkable learning gains for participants of the PPE programme in Bangladesh. The percentage of children in the 2020 cohort rated as “good”, the top grade, increased from 16 per cent at baseline to 73 per cent at endline, with similar results for girls and boys. At the end of the programme, all 9,000 PPE graduates from the 2019 and 2020 cohorts enrolled in primary school for the following academic year. Establishing links between a community and its local primary schools has been pivotal to achieving this 100 per cent mainstreaming rate. Enrolment, however, has remained limited for children with disabilities, with fewer than 1 per cent of PPE participants having a reported disability, compared with a national disability incidence rate of 9 per cent among children under five (Lancet Global Health, 2018).

In Nepal, LUL also works with the Government to strengthen national quality standards for PPE. The rapid expansion of pre-primary coverage has meant uneven implementation and has left gaps in children’s learning, particularly in the country’s poorest regions (UNICEF, 2019a). Ensuring the systematic monitoring of learning and child development is therefore essential to achieve the goal of providing equitable and high-quality early education. Acknowledging this, UNICEF Nepal supported the implementation of early learning development standards (ELDS) for children aged 48–60 months, which reflect what they should know/ be able to do in six areas of child learning and development. LUL supported an inclusive validation process for ELDS. Close collaboration between UNICEF Nepal and public institutions ensured the Government’s ownership of the standards and sustainability. ELDS became part of the mandatory package for early childhood development teachers at national level, with the Government committing resources to fund future trainings. In 2019, the Nepalese Education Review Office began conducting annual sample-based national assessments based on ELDS.

Analysis of the ELDS-based assessments provided important insights for making the PPE system more equitable, through localized policies and the identification of specific domains and vulnerable groups that required additional attention. For instance, while approximately two thirds of children were classified as on track in language, physical and social-emotional domains, more than half were lagging behind in the cognitive domain. Similarly, the assessment found disparities across provinces suggesting that one-size-fits-all policymaking may not be effective. Over-age children and non-native Nepali speakers were vulnerable categories that required additional support.

Recommendations - pre-primary education

- Strengthen the inclusiveness of PPE programmes for children with disabilities by raising household awareness on early detection and mainstreaming into school, reinforcing facilitators’ pedagogical preparedness and making learning materials/spaces accessible for all.
- Build age-appropriate child development assessments into programme and policy decisions, with an emphasis on implementing targeted remedial interventions to prepare struggling children for entering primary school.

Accelerated learning pathways for out-of-school children

Out-of-school children (OOSC) and adolescents face critical barriers in (re-)joining the formal school system. Having dropped out early or having never enrolled, they often do not possess the foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) skills needed to engage in formal learning. Many are over-age for their grade level, meaning they could face stigma when entering classes of younger children. In low-income countries, nearly 30 per cent of pupils enrolled in lower secondary school were at least two years older than the official age for this stage in 2019 (UNESCO UIS data, 2020). Older adolescents are more likely to be married and have children; and they often work to contribute to the family’s income. LUL-supported accelerated programmes, such as the Accelerated Learning Centres (ALCs) in Afghanistan, Ability-Based Accelerated Learning (ABAL) in Bangladesh, Girls’ Access to Education (GATE-N) in Nepal, and Catch-Up Classes (CRAN) in Madagascar – addressed these barriers to cater for OOSC in marginalized areas.

Evidence from these programmes identified some common factors which are successful in promoting enrolment, attendance and learning for OOSC:

- Delivering accelerated and ability-based pedagogy enabled over-age children to catch up more quickly with their peers, based on their actual learning levels.
- Reducing the distance to school improved attendance, particularly for girls, by bringing the learning into the community.
- Engaging the community helped increase enrolment where entrenched social norms discriminate against education for adolescent girls.
- Providing financial support, in the form of cash transfers, for the learners' caregivers helped to relieve economic constraints.
- Offering flexible learning hours for adolescents allowed programmes to be accessed by those who work.

Evidence shows that participation in LUL accelerated programmes contributed to learning gains in FLN. In Bangladesh, competence-based tests showed that participants made remarkable progress in Bangla, mathematics, English and social science. Endline test scores in these subjects increased by 45 to 59 percentage points from the baseline. In Nepal, GATE participants scored 49 to 54 percentage points higher in FLN tests compared with the baseline, across all programme districts. In addition, graduates from different LUL-supported accelerated programmes outperformed students in public schools in terms of foundational skills. In Afghanistan, for instance, a learning assessment found that ALC learners scored higher on all reading tasks compared with formal school students (10–15 percentage points in Pashto provinces; 5–27 percentage points in Dari provinces); while performing marginally but consistently better across all numeracy skills (Kan, Fahez and Valenza, 2022).

Programme participants across the four implementing countries largely returned to formal school immediately after the completion of their accelerated learning programme. Among the girls graduating from GATE, 89 per cent made the transition to formal school; in Madagascar, between 90 and 99 per cent of CRAN graduates returned to secondary school in the academic year following the summer course. Monitoring data for Madagascar and Bangladesh showed that reintegration rates were equal for boys and girls without children.

While programme participants re-entered school immediately after programme completion, retention and progression in the longer run remained an issue. A study in Nepal found that 37 per cent of girls left school again six months after completing the GATE-N programme while, 18 months later, the dropout rate rose to 47 per cent. In Madagascar, 29 per cent of the 2017–2018 cohort and 25 per cent of the 2018–2019 cohort did not remain in school for a second year following CRAN.

A few factors contributed to dropout and repetition after reintegration into formal school. Over-age children faced stigma, lost motivation or felt uncomfortable when joining classrooms of mostly younger children. In addition, older learners were more likely to work, hence having a higher opportunity cost of attending school. Older girls also faced an increased risk of child marriage and pregnancy, with their obligations to family and child-raising hindering their continued learning. In Madagascar, of the 13 per cent of CRAN graduates who were young mothers in 2017, less than half (42 per cent) continued formal schooling for a second year, compared to 79 per cent of girls in the CRAN programme who did not have children.

Other important factors that explained dropout and repetition included poverty, the distance to boarding school and difficulties in keeping up with the formal curriculum. Data on school progression in Madagascar, for instance, showed that CRAN graduates, once reintegrated in lower secondary school, had much higher repetition rates than the national average, particularly in the final year. In this respect, the challenges that led programme participants to be out of school in the first place seemed to re-emerge later on.

Recommendations – accelerated learning pathways

- Prioritize the acquisition of foundational literacy and numeracy skills based on a condensed, age-appropriate curriculum, while strengthening ability-based pedagogy.
- Promote longer-term retention and progression in school, through contextualized measures including:
 - providing economic support to the household;
 - delivering ability-based remedial education to students lagging behind during the regular school year (especially critical for the most condensed catch-up programmes, such as in Madagascar);
 - providing support to adolescent mothers through life skills training/mentorship; community-based sensitization against discriminating norms that impose an unequal distribution of caring responsibilities between women and men; and the delivery of, and referral to, childcare services to further reconcile family obligations and education needs;
 - promoting pathways to formal and non-formal schools, or considering extending the programme's coverage beyond the primary school-level curriculum in underserved areas where learning facilities are not readily available.

Reducing barriers to access and stay in formal school

LUL also delivers a range of programmes for in-school children who are at risk of dropping out, at different levels of instruction. The Girls Access to Teacher Education (GATE-A) programme in Afghanistan aims to reduce the shortage of female teachers in hard-to-reach areas, a key barrier to the enrolment of girls. Between 2015 and 2020, the GATE-A programme offered 2,400 women two-year scholarships at teacher training colleges to achieve the minimum teaching requirements. The women trained were Grade 12 (secondary school) graduates, as well as in-service teachers with less than two years of required training.

Approximately 50 per cent of participants successfully graduated from the TTCs (5 per cent dropout, the remainder still enrolled). Headteachers who were interviewed attributed an increase in girls' enrolment rates in their schools to the presence of GATE graduates. Programme participants and the school management shuras (SMS) indicated that communities viewed the programme positively, showing an increased awareness of the importance of education for girls. Yet, pedagogical training for those delivering the teacher-training and the post-programme placement support required strengthening. Lecturer training had only occurred once, in the form of a three-day workshop, and not all the lecturers received it; mentors, who provided follow-up support to graduates as part of the programme, did not receive any specific training. Graduation from the programme did not automatically translate into finding employment as teachers. Within a year after graduation, 42 per cent of pre-service GATE-A students had become teachers.

In Madagascar, LUL supported the implementation of a conditional cash transfer (CCT) for families with children completing primary school. This scheme aims to ease economic constraints at the key transition point between primary and secondary school, when one in four students drop out. No more than 73 per cent of eligible households in the target areas applied for the CCT, with some of the most vulnerable families not signing up at all. This lower-than-expected uptake has been attributed to low awareness of the programme, and the fact that many parents considered the amount of the transfer (about 2 per cent of monthly income) to be too small to cover the costs of education.

Nevertheless, the CCT resulted in a 7 percentage-point increase in enrolment rates for children aged 11–14, although the impact was found to be statistically significant only for girls (whose enrolment improved by 13 percentage points). In the 15–18 age cohort, the CCT led to a 9 percentage-point increase in enrolment, with the impact here being significant only for boys. Moreover, the CCT seemed to substitute income from children's remunerated work – following differentiated patterns across genders and age cohorts.

Recommendations – reducing barriers to access and stay in formal school

- Reinforce the pedagogical capacity of lecturers and mentors within teacher training programmes, including on gender issues.
- Establish fast-track employment pathways for teacher training graduates, to help bridge the demand and supply of female teachers in formal and alternative education settings.
- Strengthen the evidence-backed design of economic support to families to maximize their impact – especially when it comes to setting the monetary amount and reaching the most marginalized families.

Vocational and life skills training

In Bangladesh, the Alternative Learning Pathway (ALP) prepares out-of-school adolescents for entry into the labour market by building vocational skills through a mix of practical on-the-job training and classroom teaching that reinforces FLN skills. The pathway is a six-month programme, where on-the-job training is carried out by a master craft person (MCP) who owns a business in the community. In Liberia, the Be a Change Agent Programme (B-CAP) takes place in two of the most densely populated communities in Monrovia. The programme supports at-risk adolescent girls, including sex workers, HIV/AIDS positive adolescents and former drug users between the ages of 10 and 19, by providing guidance counselling, strengthening FLN and delivering training in livelihoods and life skills.

Participation in LUL vocational training effectively led to employment, particularly when a direct, post-training pathway to employment was systematically embedded in the programme design. Ninety-six per cent of graduates in Bangladesh found employment upon completion of the programme, with MCPs as the main employers (4 per cent obtained a job at an external employer and 2 per cent started their own business, mainly in tailoring).

While participants in vocational training in both countries found employment or engaged in income-generating activities, post-apprenticeship earnings remained modest. The limited earning potential in the informal economy, coupled with low levels of pre-existing skills and work experience among participants, meant that participation had yet to translate into a meaningful increase in income, especially in the disadvantaged areas of Liberia where LUL operates.

Engagement in income-generating activities, counselling guidance and life skills training were associated with positive outcomes for adolescent girls specifically. In Bangladesh, qualitative evidence suggests that girls gaining the ability to earn an income shifted parental views about their daughters' economic and social role, contributing to reduced pressure for early marriage. In Liberia, increased self-confidence among participants was shown to be correlated with a reduction in risky behaviour. For instance, B-CAP participants who reported high levels of self-esteem were found to be less likely to engage in sex work or to abuse drugs and alcohol.



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Recommendations – vocational and life skills training

- Incorporate direct pathways towards employment for programme graduates by developing partnerships with local business people, employment hubs or public bodies.
- Conduct periodic re-assessments of local market conditions to adjust the trades for which training is offered.
- Continue strengthening life skills and decision-making support through walk-in services, dedicated training and referrals – with an emphasis on sexual and reproductive health, women’s empowerment and employability.
- Advocate for the accreditation of graduates within national competency frameworks. Accreditation could contribute to improved remuneration in the job market, as well as open additional learning pathways to programme graduates.

Key conclusions and recommendations

In the last 10 years, LUL has successfully expanded access to high-quality learning opportunities for children in severely marginalized settings, including for younger children, girls, OOSC and adolescents engaging in risky activities. By embedding evidence generation systems within its different programmes, the initiative contributed to the global knowledge base on how best to improve learning for the most vulnerable. The following are key recommendations from the LUL programmes for reaching the most marginalized children with high-quality learning.

Establish child-friendly learning facilities in communities. Key design components included age-appropriate and engaging learning materials, flexible learning hours, adequate infrastructure (access to water and sanitation facilities) and trained facilitators/teachers. Qualitative evidence from local education officials (Afghanistan) highlighted the importance of not only training teachers on pedagogy but also of placing them under enhanced monitoring from education officials. Finally, smaller class sizes allowed more individualized pedagogical support.

For girls, address the shortage of trained female teachers in remote areas, especially where parents are reluctant to have their daughters taught by men, as in Afghanistan. As training female teachers did not automatically translate into employment, additional coordination is necessary to provide direct pathways towards employment in collaboration with formal and non-formal providers.

Engage communities through trusted local partners. Demonstrating the benefits of education was essential to changing caregivers’ perspectives about schooling in settings with high opportunity costs of enrolling children. Their direct participation in the management committees of the learning centres, and their involvement in the identification of programme participants enhanced accountability and allowed for the generation of local solutions to specific education challenges.

Provide evidence-backed economic support to families. Low incomes remain an important reason for absenteeism and dropout from school. Monetary transfers to vulnerable households, as implemented in Bangladesh for ABAL participants and Madagascar (through a CCT scheme), effectively lowered the opportunity costs of schooling but require evidence-backed programming to maximize their impact – especially when it comes to setting the amount of cash given, and reaching the most marginalized families.

Rely on accelerated and adaptive pedagogy that prioritizes FLN. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, re-engaging learners based on their cognitive level will be even more urgent as regular and non-formal classrooms re-open with increasingly mixed levels of knowledge among their students, who have missed formal learning activities for a prolonged time and who have had various levels of access to remote learning. Experiences from LUL confirmed the effectiveness of accelerated and adaptive pedagogy

in generating learning gains in FLN at different instruction levels and within a reduced time-frame. In-school tutoring and remedial education should be strengthened to sustain longer-term retention and the progression in school of vulnerable children and adolescents who exit LUL-type programmes.

Prepare teachers to systematically conduct diagnostic and formative assessments to align learners' skills with teaching content. Similarly, embedding national assessments such as the ELDS-based annual exercise (Nepal) into policymaking is critical to ensure no one is excluded from learning, particularly the most vulnerable.

Governments and education practitioners can draw valuable lessons from the experiences of LUL to make the learning recovery in the wake of COVID-19 more accessible for the most vulnerable. Several LUL programmes effectively contributed to the five action points that are encapsulated in the "RAPID" Framework for learning recovery endorsed by global education partners including UNICEF, the World Bank and UNESCO (UNICEF, 2022): reach every child and retain them in school; assess current learning levels; prioritize teaching the fundamentals; increase catch-up learning; and develop psychosocial health and well-being.



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1. Introduction

While access to education has expanded in the last two decades, learning opportunities remain largely out of reach for many of the most vulnerable children around the world. In 2019, more than 258 million children were out of school and an additional 175 million young children were left out of pre-primary education (UNESCO UIS data, 2019). An estimated 56 per cent of children in low- and middle-income countries cannot read a simple text by age 10, and this share is projected to rise to up to 70 per cent after the pandemic (World Bank et al., 2021). About 24 million learners, from pre-primary to university level, are at risk of dropout following the disruption to education due to COVID-19 (UNESCO, 2020).

Even against this backdrop, the most vulnerable learners are often allocated comparatively lower resources for education, despite robust evidence that more equitable budgeting is strongly associated with increased learning performance for all (UNICEF, 2020a). On average, in low-income countries, 46 per cent of the education public resources went to the top 10 per cent of students with the highest levels of education (UNICEF, 2020a). The COVID-19 outbreak and related school closures have disproportionately affected the most vulnerable, exacerbating the learning crisis for children who could not take advantage of remote learning, while putting marginalized children at higher risk of violence and abuse during school closures (UNICEF, 2021a; Taalo et al., 2020).

The Let Us Learn (LUL) initiative, founded in 2011 by philanthropists Susan Cummings-Findel and Stefan Findel in partnership with UNICEF, implements innovative education programmes to improve learning for the most vulnerable children in five countries with high levels out-of-school children:

- Afghanistan
- Bangladesh
- Liberia
- Madagascar
- Nepal.

Each LUL-supported UNICEF country office works with their respective ministry of education and local partners to design education programmes that fit the local challenges of reaching the most vulnerable children and adolescents. LUL-supported education programmes are aligned with UNICEF's global education strategy and support vulnerable children throughout the education lifecycle, from early childhood education to primary and secondary, through to vocational and life skills training. Table 1 provides an overview of LUL-supported programmes.¹

The purpose of this report is to share lessons learned with education officials and practitioners based on the experiences of LUL programmes. It aims to address two overarching research questions:

1. How do LUL programmes targeting out-of-school and marginalized children, and their specific components in particular, affect educational access and learning outcomes?
2. What are the key implementation steps, processes, and constraints that either facilitate or hinder progress towards equitable access to learning and learning outcomes across LUL programmes?

This report draws from the evidence generated from each programme country during Phase 3 of the LUL initiative (2018–2021).² It uses mixed methods, combining quantitative analysis of monitoring and learning data with qualitative evidence from field staff and local stakeholders. It also draws upon a review of independent studies, including formative and impact evaluations, related to each programme. It highlights outcomes, lessons learned and recommendations for each level of instruction and type of programme:

- pre-primary education (Section 2)
- accelerated learning pathways for out-of-school children and adolescents (Section 3)
- programmes to reduce barriers to access and stay in formal school (Section 4)
- vocational training (Section 5).

1 This report focuses on selected programmes based on data availability and the potential to extrapolate results to similar contexts and projects.

2 Since 2018, each UNICEF country office involved in the LUL programme received technical support from the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti (OoR) and the Education Section Programme Group to strengthen monitoring, evaluation and research. LUL programmes seek to embed monitoring and research into the supported programmes to strengthen evidence-based decision-making in extremely vulnerable education settings.

Table 1. Overview of LUL-supported programmes

Type of programme	Programme name	Country	Age	Key design components for marginalized students
Pre-primary education	Pre-primary education (PPE)	Bangladesh	4–6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment of 150 community-based PPE centres serving 13,500 children in remote villages, 1-year government curriculum and community mobilization Pilot 2-year curriculum for potential scale-up with the government
	Early childhood development (ECD)	Nepal	<5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Validation, implementation and assessment of early learning development standards (ELDS) Training of ECD facilitators and provision of materials for 125 centres
Accelerated learning pathways for out-of-school children	Accelerated learning centres (ALCs)	Afghanistan	10–15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community-based learning centres condensing 6 years of primary education into a 3-year programme (2,800 students) Government engagement and advocacy
	Ability-based accelerated learning (ABAL)	Bangladesh	8–14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 44-month programme in community-based learning centres with flexible hours and ability-based teaching (4,300 children)
	Girls' access to Education (GATE-N ³)	Nepal	8–15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 9-month community-based accelerated programme for foundational and life skills (over 15,000 girls enrolled) Capacity-building of local bodies, facilitators and supervisors
	Catch-up Classes (CRAN)	Madagascar	Up to 20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2-month largely self-learning summer class for lower secondary school students (16,000 in 2021–2022) who recently dropped out
Support to reduce barriers to access and stay in formal school	Conditional cash transfer (CCT)	Madagascar	10–18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CCT top-up for eligible families with children enrolled in the last year of primary school or in secondary school – reached over 9,000 children in 2019–2020
	Girls' Equity in Education Programme (GEEP)	Liberia	7 to 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> After-school remedial lessons and girls' clubs in 245 schools, including life skills and sexual and reproductive health education
	Early grade learning (EGL)	Nepal	5–9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provision of mother-tongue instructional materials for non-Nepali speakers (16,100 children in 2020) and community-based education groups Identification and learning support for children with disabilities (763 students identified across 100 schools)
	Girls' access to teacher education (GATE-A)	Afghanistan	18+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher-training for secondary school girls in underserved areas (over 2,200 trainees)

3 GATE-N denotes the GATE programme in Nepal in order to differentiate it from the GATE programme in Afghanistan, indicated as GATE-A throughout the report.

Type of programme	Programme name	Country	Age	Key design components for marginalized students
Vocational and life skills training	Be a Change Agent Programme (B-CAP)	Liberia	10–19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrated package of support services including vocational, business, life skills, and literacy training for over 5,100 adolescents Training and service delivery on parenting skills, sexual and reproductive health and psychosocial counselling
	Alternative Learning Pathways (ALP)	Bangladesh	14–24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6-month workplace training for 1,000 participants (in 2019) with local business owners, with classroom training to reinforce foundational/life skills

Box 1. Let Us Learn within the “RAPID” Learning Recovery Framework

The COVID-19 pandemic widened deep inequalities in learning and beyond, affecting the delivery of school-provided essential services in health, nutrition, safety and well-being. UNICEF, in partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Bank, developed a holistic strategy to support countries navigating the school re-opening process, with the overarching goal of ensuring that every girl and boy is sufficiently supported to return to education and catch up on missed learning.

This report will highlight how several LUL components and activities are aligned with the **five action points** encapsulated in the “RAPID” Learning Recovery Framework (UNICEF, 2022):

- 1. Reach every child and retain them in school:** understanding who does not return to school and why is key to developing tailored strategies to help children and their families participate in education, as emerging data from re-opening schools indicate high risks of non-enrolment.
- 2. Assess current learning levels:** measuring learning as schools re-open is fundamental to tailoring instruction to students’ abilities after the prolonged school closures, which has left differing learning gaps and has disproportionately hit the most vulnerable.
- 3. Prioritize teaching the fundamentals:** given the disruptions to the regular delivery of curricula, learning recovery efforts should focus on essential missed content and on prioritizing foundational learning in literacy, numeracy and social-emotional skills.
- 4. Increase catch-up learning:** compensate for the loss in instruction time through ability-based remedial teaching, tutoring and accelerated pathways.
- 5. Develop psychosocial health and well-being:** this is a fundamental prerequisite for learning and a way of mitigating the heightened risks of mental health disorders, violence (particularly gender-based violence) and child labour that the pandemic has caused.

2. Pre-primary education

High-quality pre-primary education (PPE) represents one of the most cost-effective investments for children, the education system and society at large. It sets a strong foundation for learning, enabling children to achieve higher levels of education and develop important life skills such as critical thinking and resilience. As successful PPE graduates are shown to progress more efficiently in school, good quality PPE systems free up resources that would otherwise need to be channelled towards remedial education. At the household level, a well-functioning PPE system expands the opportunities for caregivers, especially mothers, to participate in the workforce, hence serving as a driver of economic growth.

LUL promotes early childhood education in hard-to-reach areas in Bangladesh and Nepal:

- In Bangladesh, pre-primary centres were established at community level in flood-prone areas. Run by trained facilitators, these programmes systematically tracked participants' development and learning, promoting their transfer to primary schools.
- In Nepal, LUL provided system-wide support to develop early learning development standards and to conduct learning assessments aimed to identify children who need extra support in becoming developmentally on track and ready to enter primary school. The initiative also supported 125 centres, which will also serve to pilot the new standards, by delivering teacher training and learning materials.

2.1. PPE is an important investment with lifelong effects and collective returns, but severely underfunded

Multidisciplinary research has widely documented the critical role that PPE plays in a child's lifelong learning trajectory. Research in neuroscience, psychology and cognition has established that learning is easier in early childhood than later in life and that cognitive stimulation, as well as nutrition, early in life are critical for the long-term acquisition of skills (Berlinski, Galiani, and Gertler, 2009; UNICEF, 2019). In economics literature there is a consensus that early childhood years are the most cost-effective period in which to invest, in terms of individual benefits and returns to society (Heckman, 2006). Every dollar spent on PPE is estimated to result in US\$9 of benefits to society (Muroga et al., 2020).

Evidence from low- and middle-income contexts confirms the association between pre-primary school attendance and a range of education outcomes, including school readiness (Aboud, 2006; UNICEF, 2017d), learning achievement in later grades (Berlinski et al., 2009; Taiwo and Tyolo, 2002; UNICEF and CONFEMEN, 2019; UNICEF, 2017c), and dropout (Shafiq, Devercelli and Valerio, 2018; International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, 2016). According to estimates by Muroga et al. (2020), a 10 percentage-point increase in the pre-primary enrolment rate is associated with an increase of 0.14 years of schooling and a 0.55 per cent reduction in primary school repetition, amounting to US\$1,134 of net societal benefits per individual over their lifetime.

Despite these far-reaching implications, PPE remains an underfunded sector. Pre-pandemic levels of spending were low, with 38 per cent of countries investing less than 2 per cent of their education budgets on PPE, against the recommended benchmark of 10 per cent (UNICEF, 2019a; UNICEF, 2017b). International aid has similarly placed little emphasis on PPE, which receives less than 1 per cent of education-targeted Official Development Assistance (ODA) (UNICEF, 2019b). During the school closures imposed by COVID-19, fewer resources were allocated to implementing remote learning solutions for pre-primary learners than for other levels of instruction (Nugroho et al., 2021). Additionally, PPE centres were the last to re-open in low- and middle-income countries, resulting in many new entrants being ill-prepared for entering school (Nugroho et al., 2021).

2.2. Localized centres bring PPE to underserved communities in Bangladesh

In Sylhet, in the northeast of Bangladesh, the region's low-lying plains are flooded for half the year, making access to schools extremely difficult for remote communities already facing poverty. Community members interviewed in one Sylheti village confirmed young children would not receive PPE without the learning centre set up through the LUL initiative, as the nearest Government school was two kilometres away. In Sylhet, 15 per cent of children participate in PPE and only 21 per cent of children aged 3–4 are developmentally on track in literacy and numeracy, against a national average of 29 per cent (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF Bangladesh, 2019). LUL, acknowledging these access barriers, **established 150 community-based PPE centres in the region between 2018 and 2021, providing schooling to 13,500 children aged 5 and 6 (52 per cent girls).** The PPE component in Bangladesh thus contributes to Action Point 1 of the joint RAPID framework (see Box 1), reaching marginalized children who would otherwise be excluded from early childhood education.

Community mobilization was a key factor in promoting access and attendance for girls and boys.

Qualitative evidence from focus groups and case studies showed that caregivers were initially reluctant to enrol their children, who are often considered too young to be ready to learn and go to school. The roll out of awareness campaigns by UNICEF's implementing partners played an important role in building trust and changing parental views. Knowing that their young children are in the hands of a trusted facilitator at an easily accessible learning space within the community helped convince parents to sign up for the programme. The participation of community members in the operation of the learning centres was encouraged through the establishment of management committees. These committees held periodic meetings to monitor learning activities, tracked teacher and student attendance, and took corrective measures based on identified challenges. The establishment of management committees increased the accountability of the centres to caregivers, increasing trust and a more direct exposure to learning activities.

A child-friendly learning environment with trained facilitators, age-appropriate materials and adequate infrastructure contributed to families deciding to send children to PPE centres. The Government played a crucial role in providing PPE participants with free learning materials based on the national curriculum, as well as allocating additional resources for the training, supervision and monitoring of LUL facilitators. All 150 PPE facilitators received a 15-day basic training and a 4-day refresher course on child psychology, early childhood education pedagogy, learning packages and assessment. All the facilitators were women, selected within the community through a competitive recruitment process. All PPE centres also have access to clean water and adequate sanitation facilities.

Access to PPE opportunities, however, remained limited for children with disabilities. According to monitoring data, fewer than 1 per cent of PPE participants had a reported disability. While some forms of disability are inherently difficult to detect, leading to an underreporting of actual cases, the share of children with disabilities participating in the PPE programmes is lower than the national disability incidence rate of 9 per cent among children under five (Lancet Global Health, 2018). Raising awareness among families about disabilities is crucial for school- and community-based early identification and mainstreaming. On the supply side, an assessment on the pedagogical preparedness of facilitators, including their capacity to identify children with disabilities, and on the accessibility of learning spaces and materials could shed light on potential ways to reinforce the delivery of more inclusive learning.

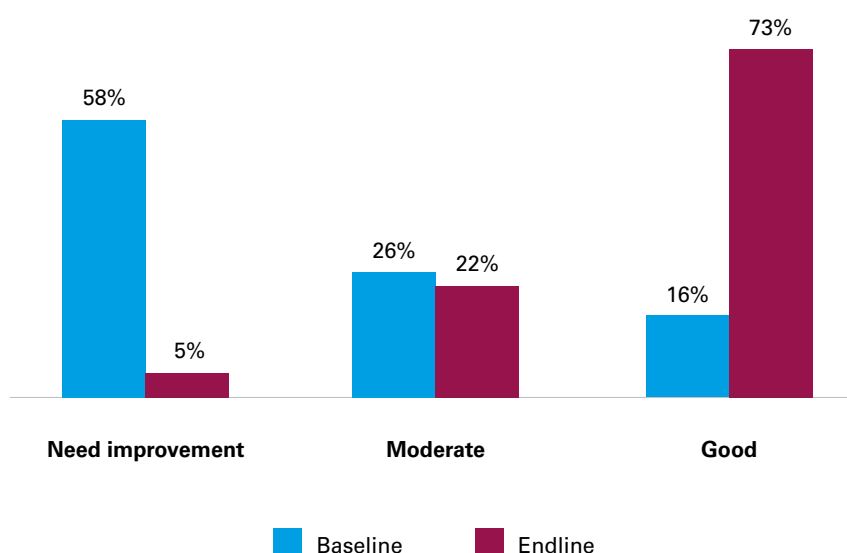


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2.3. Participation in PPE was associated with improved child development and school readiness

In line with Action Point 2 of the RAPID framework, the PPE programme in Bangladesh regularly assessed students' progress across different learning and development domains,⁴ in order to ensure that underperforming students were provided with additional support. **Results from these assessments showed that PPE students made remarkable gains, starting from low baseline scores.** The percentage of children in the 2020 cohort rated as "good", the top grade, increased from 16 per cent at baseline to 73 per cent at endline, 6–12 months later (see Figure 1). Similarly, the share of students who "need improvement" plummeted from 58 per cent at baseline to 5 per cent at endline. Girls and boys showed similar progress.

Figure 1. Evolution of learning and child development ratings of PPE participants at the beginning and 6–12 months after the start of the programme



Source: PPE monitoring data, 2020 cohort. N=4,500

The initial low levels of learning and child development are not surprising given that most children had not previously participated in any early childhood education activities. Children who were identified as struggling through this assessment system also received additional support. This included, for instance, pairing these learners with a high-performing peer, an approach which has shown to yield positive results (see, for example, McMaster et al., 2006). As early childhood education is essential in acquiring the necessary fundamentals to succeed in school, the PPE programme in Bangladesh contributed to the RAPID framework's Action Point 3.

At the end of the programme, all 9,000 PPE graduates from the 2019 and 2020 cohorts enrolled in primary school for the following academic year – an outstanding achievement considering that none of these children had previously participated in early childhood education activities. According to education programme staff, establishing links between the community and local primary school was pivotal to achieving this 100 per cent mainstreaming rate. A joint plan between the learning centre, the community and primary schools in the area was put in place to maximize outreach to vulnerable children and to support families during the transition to primary schools. Ceremonies and meetings between primary school teachers, prospective students and families were organized to build trust and gain the engagement of caregivers and children. Although additional data are needed to analyse LUL learners' progression through primary school and beyond, anecdotal evidence from a Grade 1 teacher in Sylhet suggested that PPE centre graduates were more prepared for primary school than their peers who had not participated.

4 Facilitators regularly tracked children's progress across eight learning and development domains in line with Government standards. These domains are physical and mobility, social and emotional, language and communication, early mathematics, creativity and aesthetics, environment, science and technology, and health and safety. Based on their composite score across these dimensions, children are rated as "needing improvement" (lower end), "moderate" (intermediate) or "good" (upper end).



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2.4. Strengthening national early learning systems is critical to advancing equity and quality in education

In Nepal, the LUL portfolio includes strengthening national quality standards for PPE delivery to ensure that rapid expansion of PPE coverage goes hand in hand with learning for all. In Nepal, the gross enrolment ratio in early childhood education activities has reached a substantial share of children, rising from 12 per cent in 2001 to 87 per cent in 2019 (UNESCO UIS, 2020). However, equity in learning remains a challenge. Over 80 per cent of Nepalese children from the top wealth quintile attend early childhood education programmes against 40 per cent in the lowest quintile (UNICEF, 2019a). Additionally, rapid expansion of pre-primary coverage led to some loss of quality, particularly in the country's poorest regions (UNICEF, 2019a). Ensuring systematic monitoring of learning and child development is therefore essential to achieve the goal of providing equitable and good quality early education.

Yet, until 2017, the government's adoption of child development and learning standards at PPE level remained limited (Kitamura and Prakash, 2021). Acknowledging this gap, and in line with the RAPID framework's Action Point 2, UNICEF Nepal supported the implementation of national early learning development standards (ELDS). The standards focus on children aged 48–60 months, reflecting what they should know and be able to do with respect to the physical, social, emotional, cognitive, language and cultural dimensions of child learning and development. LUL supported an inclusive validation process for ELDS, as well as annual national-level assessments based on those standards.

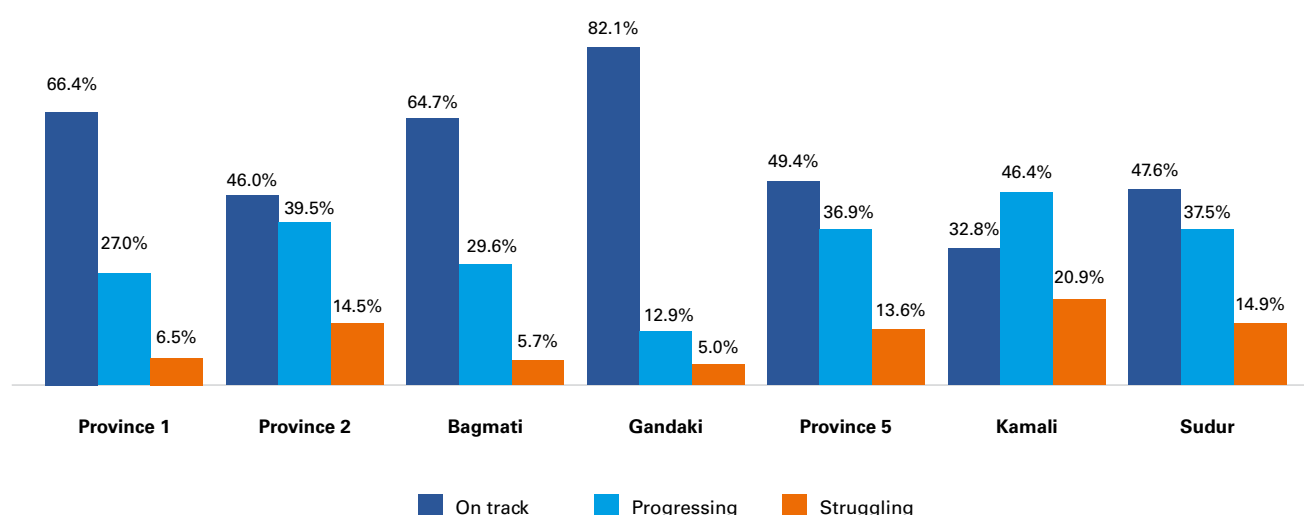
Close collaboration between UNICEF Nepal and public institutions ensured Government ownership of the standards, with important implications for programme sustainability. The ELDS became part of the mandatory training package for PPE teachers at national level, with the Government committing resources to fund future trainings. An ELDS-based monitoring tool package was also approved by governmental stakeholders, who promoted the package to municipalities and Early Childhood Development centres. In 2017, the Nepalese Education Review Office began conducting annual sample-based national assessments based on ELDS.

These ELDS-based assessments provided valuable policy insights on how to create a more equitable early education system for all.⁵ Overall, approximately two thirds of children in 2019 were

classified as on track in language, physical and social-emotional domains, but more than half the sample lagged behind in the cognitive domain.⁶ In the language, physical and socio-emotional domains, where the number of underperforming learners is lower, classroom diagnosis or formative assessments can identify children with such needs and provide additional individualized support (Kitamura and Prakash, 2021). For the cognitive domain, however, where larger cohorts of children were lagging, a large-scale intervention may be more appropriate than individual-level support in the classroom.

The latest ELDS-based assessment also revealed no meaningful difference in learning and development between boys and girls across all subdomains. **Instead, the assessment found disparities across provinces:** for instance, the proportion of on-track children in Gandaki was more than double than that of Karnali (see Figure 2). This finding suggests that a federal one-size fits all approach is not likely to be effective in increasing the proportion of on-track children, making the case for more localized policymaking.

Figure 2. Composite ELDS results across provinces in Nepal



The assessment drew attention onto the heterogenous needs of different subgroups of early learners, including over-age children and non-native Nepali speakers.

While relatively older children were more likely to be on track across all dimensions, there was a non-marginal portion of struggling children even among over-age children. This calls for providing underperforming over-age children with learning support as they transition to primary school. However, studies find that later interventions are more costly than early remediation, so that improving early childhood education programmes, where possible, is a first-best strategy (Heckman, 2006, Kitamura and Prakash, 2021). Although some methodological limitations apply, the latest assessment suggested that non-native Nepali speakers comprise another category of children who need extra support, as they were less likely to be on track relative to native Nepali speakers in language, social-emotional and cultural domains. Implementing early grade learning programmes that specifically target non-Nepali speakers is crucial to achieving the goal of an inclusive PPE system.⁷

5 The assessment sample includes 469 purposely selected early childhood education schools across 15 districts. According to the study authors, this sample covers about 36 per cent of the overall age-relevant child population in Nepal. Results are therefore applicable to the ECE school-based children in the districts. While this is relevant to school-based policymaking, the assessment results should not be extrapolated for the whole population.

6 In the ELDS framework, the cognitive domain includes four sub-dimensions: intellectual development, a child's drive to explore, investigate and reflect on learning; knowledge of basic scientific notions about the human body, nature, everyday objects and technology, and the concepts of time and distance; mathematics; and creativity.

7 As part of a separate LUL-funded programme, 100 primary schools received support to deliver mother-tongue instruction in early grade classes in Province 2 in Nepal, reaching more than 16,000 children. Some 200 teachers were trained in these schools to improve teaching and learning practices.

Conclusions on pre-primary education

LUL brought PPE learning centres to 150 flood-prone communities in Bangladesh, providing schooling to 13,500 children aged 5–6 (52 per cent girls) who would otherwise be excluded from early childhood education. Access to PPE opportunities remained somewhat limited for children with disabilities.

An embedded, classroom-based monitoring system showed remarkable learning gains for PPE participants in Bangladesh. All graduates enrolled in primary school for the following academic year. Establishing links between the community and local government-run primary schools has been pivotal to achieving this.

Close collaboration between UNICEF and public institutions led to the validation and implementation of ELDS, the national quality standards for delivering PPE services in Nepal. Analysis of the annual ELDS-based assessments provided important policy insights for making PPE more equitable through localized policies, as well as through the identification of specific domains and vulnerable groups that required additional attention.

Recommendations for pre-primary education programming

Strengthen the inclusiveness of PPE programmes for children with disabilities by raising household awareness on early detection and mainstreaming into school, reinforcing facilitators' pedagogical preparedness and making learning materials/spaces accessible for all.

Build age-appropriate child development assessments into programme and policy decisions, with an emphasis on implementing targeted remedial interventions to prepare children who are lagging behind for entering primary school.⁸ The ELDS-based system adopted in Nepal represents good practice in this respect. The definition of child development dimensions and related indicators should undergo an inclusive process of validation to reflect the official PPE curriculum; teachers should receive clear guidance on assessment procedures and implementation as part of their formal training; quantitative data on child development from periodic national assessments should be collated to gain a full understanding of quality and equity challenges; and systematically embedded into policymaking with a view to achieve high-quality education for all.

8 For a review of effective remedial programmes for early years, see Nugroho et al., 2021.

3. Accelerated learning pathways for out-of-school children

Out-of-school children (OOSC) and adolescents lack the foundational skills to successfully engage in learning activities, and therefore face challenging barriers in (re-)entering formal school. Community-based accelerated learning pathways have been shown to be an effective means to bridge learning gaps among vulnerable children, allowing them to catch up on Foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) skills in a reduced time frame and based on their actual level of learning. LUL brings such opportunities to marginalized areas in four countries through the following programmes:

Accelerated Learning Centres (ALCs) in Afghanistan. Here, where exclusion rates among primary-school-age children reached 42 per cent in 2015 (UNESCO UIS data, 2015), ALCs offer OOSC aged 10-15, particularly girls who live far from the nearest public school, a chance to complete primary school equivalency in three years, instead of the official six years, in a classroom near their home. Walking long distances is a barrier to schooling for girls, as parents often report concerns about security along the way to school (Zaeem and Shepherd-Johnson, 2017). ALCs also target girls' education by recruiting and training female teachers – who are very scarce in rural areas⁹ – since social norms often prevent girls from being taught by male teachers (Hunte, 2006; Afghanistan Ministry of Education, 2016).

Ability-Based Accelerated Learning (ABAL) in Bangladesh. The ABAL programme helps out-of-school children achieve primary school equivalency in the remote area of Sylhet. Learners aged 8–14 are grouped by their levels in each subject so that they can learn at their own pace. ABAL centres are based in the community and have flexible learning hours to support children who work, live far away from the closest primary school, or face other barriers to access formal schooling. Learners can enrol in primary school at any point along the 44-month programme, or continue the ABAL course to completion, which enables them to take the end-of-primary-cycle examination.

Girl's Access to Education (GATE-N) in Nepal. The GATE-N programme operates in the Terai region, home to 65 per cent of primary and 79 per cent of lower secondary school-aged out-of-school children in Nepal (Nepal Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, UNICEF and UNESCO, 2016). Terai Dalits and other caste/ethnic groups in the region feature at the lower end of the spectrum in terms of economic, social and education indexes (National Institute for Research and Training, 2016). For instance, the adult literacy rate for Terai Dalits stands at 23 per cent against a national average of 60 per cent (National Institute for Research and Training, 2016). Terai Dalit women and women from other Terai castes experience the lowest levels of gender inclusion nationally, while there is a persistently high prevalence of child marriage in the region (National Institute for Research and Training, 2016). GATE-N is a 9-month programme providing out-of-school girls (8–15) with the FLN skills they need to (re-)enter formal schooling. The curriculum includes foundational and life skills as well as topics such as child marriage, gender-based violence and reproductive health.

Catch-Up Classes (CRAN) in Madagascar. The CRAN programme targets children and adolescents aged 11–20 who have dropped out of lower secondary school in the previous two years. The catch-up classes take place during the summer break, typically for two months. The number of hours of instruction depends on the needs of the individual child, as determined through a teacher's assessment before the start of the course. Sessions are mostly conducted in small groups or through a mix of small-group and one-to-one tutoring in community-based facilities. Participants who complete the course receive administrative support to reintegrate into lower secondary school.

⁹ There is an extreme scarcity of female teachers, with no female teachers in almost 80 out of 364 districts (Afghanistan, Ministry of Education, 2016).

3.1. Building foundational skills to help OOSC (re-)enter school

OOSC and adolescents face critical barriers in (re-)entering formal education. Having dropped out early or never having enrolled, they often do not possess the FLN skills needed to engage in day-to-day learning activities. A learning assessment across low- and middle-income countries showed that fewer than 2 per cent of out-of-school young people achieved minimum proficiency levels in reading, compared to more than 27 per cent of those in school (Ward, 2020). Stigma and loss of motivation is frequent among over-age pupils, often leading to a weak learning performance and dropout. In low-income countries, nearly 30 per cent of pupils who enrolled in lower secondary school were over-age by at least two years in 2019 (UNESCO UIS data, 2020).

LUL-supported accelerated learning pathways enable learners to quickly develop FLN skills to (re-)join formal education. To ensure that teaching matches the levels of students, ABAL and CRAN rely on adaptive pedagogy that builds upon assessing a learner's proficiency level – in line with the RAPID framework's Action Points 2 and 4. Tailoring instruction to the learning levels of students has been documented as one of the most effective ways of improving learning (Pershad et al., 2020; J-PAL, 2019). Adaptive teaching has become all the more relevant after the prolonged closure of schools due to the COVID-19 outbreak, which caused a differentiated learning loss with the most adverse impacts felt by vulnerable children who were unable to take advantage of remote learning (Taulo et al., 2020; Maldonado and De Witte, 2020).

The next section examines lessons learned in delivering effective accelerated pathways for marginalized children and adolescents, drawing on the experiences of the four LUL-supported programmes, described above.

3.2. Expanding access to learning pathways

Bringing learning facilities directly to the community with improved access to education for children and adolescents who had never been in school. In Nepal, the GATE-N programme reached more than 15,000 girls, of which fewer than 3 per cent had ever attended school (UNICEF 2021b; Chávez et al., 2020). In Bangladesh, 72 per cent of ABAL programme participants had previously dropped out of school, mainly at an early stage (Grade 1 or 2), while 28 per cent had never been to school (Valenza et al., 2021b). Competency-based baseline tests confirmed that new ABAL participants had limited skills and knowledge in Bangla, mathematics, English and social science. Overall, ABAL centres supported 4,300 OOSC, with equal participation of girls and boys (Valenza et al., 2021b). The establishment of ABAL learning centres in communities that did not have nearby schools relieved the problems of children having to travel long distances, while flexible teaching boosted access for learners who were expected to work or otherwise support their household during traditional school hours. Cash transfers, paid via mobile money to learners' mothers, supplemented family incomes and provided an additional incentive to continue learning.

Reducing distance to school was particularly critical for girls in Afghanistan, where security concerns often prompt families to keep their daughters at home. Among public schools, 15 per cent of boys and 15 per cent of girls reported feeling unsafe on their way to school, compared with 6 per cent of boys and 18 per cent of girls enrolled at ALCs (Kan, Fahez and Valenza, 2022). ALC learners generally lived much closer to their classroom than government school students, with an average commute time of less than 30 minutes (Kan, Fahez and Valenza, 2022). Field research also showed how the benefits of being based in the community – knowing the facilitator, being able to visit the learning spaces, perceiving it as a safe space – was important to convince parents to enrol their daughters. LUL has supported 110 ALCs across 41 districts in seven Afghan provinces, collectively enrolling around 2,800 students, of which 64 per cent are girls (UNICEF, 2021b).

In Madagascar, the LUL-supported CRAN programme reached a substantial number of vulnerable adolescents who had been absent from lower secondary school for up to two years. CRAN's cohort size fluctuated based on the availability of resources, ranging from more than 9,000 participants in the 2017–2018 cohort to more than 16,000 in 2021–2022. According to estimates from INSTAT and UNICEF (2019), regions supported by the programme are home to approximately 370,000 OOSC of lower-secondary-

school-age.¹⁰ This means that, in 2019, CRAN reached around 4.5 per cent of the total OOSC population. While the scale-up of the programme is already under way as part of the national education plan, additional investments are needed to cover a larger share of the OOSC population in the target regions. The CRAN's model also became part of the COVID-19 education response, as the Government adapted the programme's learning materials for remote learning purposes.

Existing barriers to schooling in LUL target areas include limited awareness about education and weak education attainment among parents.

In Bishwamvarpur, one of the two target subdistricts in Bangladesh, almost half the participating families said they had not seen the full benefits of schooling and lacked awareness of what educational opportunities were available locally (Valenza et al., 2021b). In Afghanistan, only 54 per cent of fathers and 19 per cent of mothers of ALC learners could read, compared with around 62 per cent of fathers and 27 per cent of mothers of regular school students (Kan, Fahez and Valenza, 2022). Parental education has been shown to be a driver of enrolment and attendance in school in many different contexts (Afghanistan Ministry of Education et al., 2018; UNICEF, 2021c).

Entrenched social norms discriminating against girls still limit their education opportunities.

In the district of Dhanusha, in Nepal, none of the girls in the sample of GATE-N learners had ever previously attended school. In fact, a case study on GATE-N participants showed that no one in the Dhanusha district's Musahar community had completed Grade 10 (Chávez et al., 2020). Multiple case studies of GATE-N participants in 2016–2019 found that girls were engaged only in household work prior to enrolling in the programme (Chávez et al., 2020). Early marriage remains common in LUL programme countries. In Madagascar, more than a third of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 are pregnant or have children (UNICEF Madagascar, 2018). Qualitative evidence from Nepal documented parental concerns that educating girls would raise the value of the dowry that the bridegroom's family demands from the bride's parents, limiting a girl's chances of marrying (Chávez et al., 2020).¹¹ Local leaders also explained that the stigma of menstruation caused girls to miss three to five days of school per month on average, often leading them to eventually drop out of school altogether (Chávez et al., 2020). A key determinant of Afghan girls' limited participation in education is the shortage of female teachers, especially in rural areas where, for cultural and social reasons, parents are reluctant to let their daughters be taught by men. At national level, only 36 per cent of primary and 39 per cent of lower secondary teachers were female in 2019; and the shortage disproportionately affects rural schools. About 40 per cent of LUL-supported ALC teachers in rural Afghanistan were female, which was identified as a fundamental driver to overcome barriers linked with men teaching girls (Kan, Fahez and Valenza, 2022).

Against this backdrop, community engagement was a key component to expand access to learning.

In Madagascar, meetings between heads of schools and OOSC's parents take place during the identification of CRAN participants; these meetings aim to raise awareness on children's right to education, parents' responsibilities and the programme's objectives/implementation. Similarly, case studies from Nepal documented how GATE-N facilitators played a key role in convincing parents and caregivers of the need to send girls to school, despite their initial reluctance (Chávez et al., 2020). In Bangladesh, local community members were encouraged by UNICEF and its partners to create and join management committees; since then, many communities have taken on ownership of ABAL learning centres. In one village, ABAL learners' parents adopted a plan to run the learning centre in case the programme came to an end (Valenza et al., 2021b). However, continued efforts in poverty-stricken areas are inevitably indispensable. Parents interviewed as part of a case study in Nepal, for instance, were hesitant to let their daughters enrol in the programme, as attending school remained uncommon for girls in their village and because they felt their family was too poor to pay for the costs associated with schooling (Chávez et al., 2020).

"When we can hardly feed our daughter, how can we send her to school?"

– Parents of a GATE participant (Nepal)

¹⁰ These estimates include all OOSC and not just those who had abandoned lower secondary school for less than two years, i.e. CRAN's target population. Although it is not clear what share of this broader OOSC population had dropped out within the previous two years, these figures testify to the large cohorts of OOSC in the 11–14 age groups.

¹¹ This occurs even though the dowry system has been outlawed in Nepal since 1976 and despite the heavier penalties imposed in 2017 for those who continue the practice.

The accelerated nature of the curriculum delivered by LUL programmes, coupled with a child-friendly learning environment, have appealed to both learners and parents. Local leaders in Nepal highlighted that over-age girls often felt embarrassed when joining classes of mostly younger students, likely reducing attendance and achievement (Chávez et al., 2020). Accelerated learning allows over-age children to catch up with their peers in a reduced time frame. In one Bangladeshi target district, the second most common reason for being out of school that parents reported was that children did not enjoy school (Valenza et al., 2021b). ABAL addressed this parental concern through training teachers on child-centred pedagogy and adopting engaging learning materials. Children's engagement in the classroom was also promoted through an ability-based model, which groups children based on their proficiency in each subject – thus ensuring more personalized pedagogical support.

While LUL accelerated programmes reached marginalized children and adolescents, inclusiveness for children with disabilities remains limited. As documented by the monitoring data presented in this section, these accelerated programmes successfully expanded access to education, hence contributing to the RAPID framework's Action Point 1 of reaching for OOSC and adolescents. However, at ABAL centres in Bangladesh, learners with a recorded disability accounted for just 1 per cent of the total (Valenza et al., 2021b), while the prevalence of disabilities among 5–17-year-olds in Sylhet is 2.2 per cent (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and UNICEF Bangladesh, 2019).¹² In Nepal, fewer than 1 per cent of GATE-N participants had a recorded disability; and all the girls among them had never attended school, re-emphasizing the compounding sources of vulnerability of this group (Chávez et al., 2020).

3.3. Learning gains in foundational literacy and numeracy

Participants of LUL accelerated programmes exhibited solid attendance and completion rates.

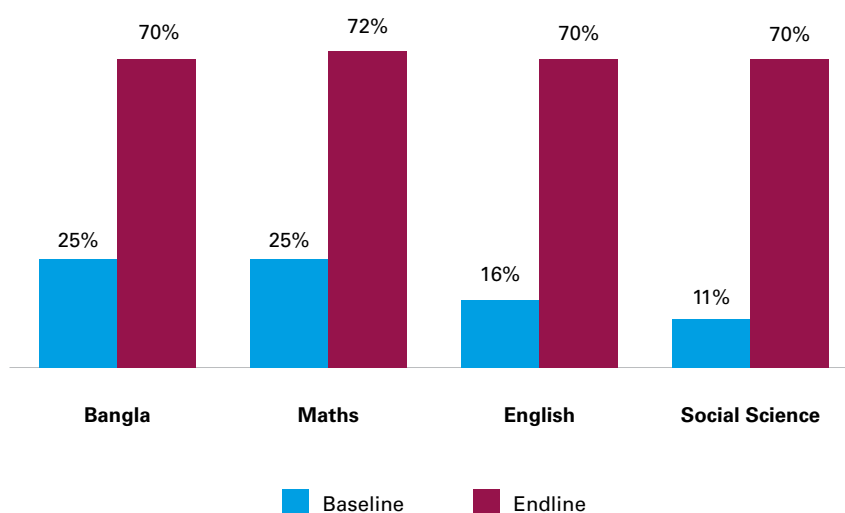
In Bangladesh, all ABAL learners in the cohorts, who enrolled in 2019 or 2020, completed their first year (Valenza et al., 2021b). According to programme staff and qualitative research in the field, flexible learning hours, dedicated teachers, child-friendly spaces in the community and the provision of financial support have strongly supported this achievement. In Nepal, once enrolled, 95 per cent of GATE-N participants completed the programme (Chávez et al., 2020). While some variation in completion rates exist across districts, data show that girls from different marginalized ethnicities consistently completed the programme and that all girls with disabilities graduated.

Some degree of absenteeism persisted in Afghanistan, despite efforts to make education more accessible in communities. A survey of ALC learners found that 31 per cent of children surveyed missed at least one day of class in the seven days prior to the survey, against a slightly higher 35 per cent among public school pupils (Kan, Fahez and Valenza, 2022). Competing priorities linked with domestic work largely affected attendance. Indeed, the most frequent reason for absence at ALC centres was having to do work at home (52 per cent), followed by illness (27 per cent) and emergency situations (7 per cent).

Participation in LUL accelerated programmes led to clear gains in foundational skills (see the RAPID framework's Action Point 3). In Bangladesh, assessments conducted at baseline and at 6–12 months after the start of the ABAL programme showed that participants made remarkable progress in Bangla, maths, English and social science (see Figure 3). At endline, girls achieved comparable results with boys, who had lower scores at baseline. Learning in the GATE-N programme is assessed through the administration of pre- and post-tests covering basic to Grade 3-level competence in Nepali literacy, maths, English literacy and picture identification. All districts saw a substantial increase in the average score from pre- to post-test, ranging from 49 to 54 percentage points, as shown in Figure 4.

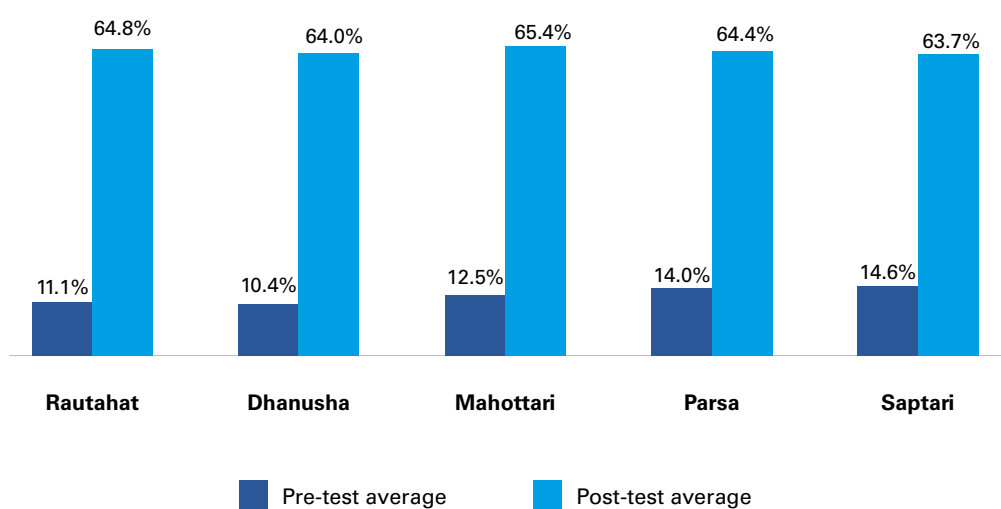
¹² Some of the less visible disabilities or learning disabilities may have passed undetected at ABAL centres, resulting in an underestimate of the actual inclusion of children with disabilities.

Figure 3. Mean baseline and endline results, ABAL (Bangladesh), by subject



Source: ABAL monitoring data, 2019-20. N=3,751. Endline tests were conducted at a different time between 6 and 12 months after the start of the programme.

Figure 4. Pre- and post-test average score, GATE (Nepal), by district



Source: GATE monitoring data

Graduates from different LUL-supported accelerated programmes outperformed students in public schools. These findings are in line with several studies comparing learning outcomes for participants of non-formal education programmes and students enrolled in formal schools (see, for example, Akyaempong et al., 2018; Nath et al., 2007; Education Development Center, 2015). A learning assessment showed that, once reintegrated into formal schools (grades 3 to 5), GATE-N girls outperformed their peers on FLN tasks (Chávez et al., 2020). For instance, 17 per cent of GATE-N graduates could read at a speed of 45 correct words per minute or faster compared with 13 per cent of the non-GATE girls. Similarly, 55 per cent of GATE-N graduates achieved 80–100 per cent comprehension in Nepali, in contrast to 44 per cent of non-GATE students.

In Afghanistan, an early grade reading and mathematics assessment found that ALC learners scored higher on all reading tasks compared with formal school students, while performing marginally but consistently better across all numeracy skills (Kan, Fahez and Valenza, 2022). In terms of basic literacy, ALC students were less likely to get a zero score (not being able to answer a single question correctly) than public school students. Girls, however, were more likely to get a zero score than boys, which is evidence of underlying gender gaps in the education system. The learning assessment in Afghanistan also identified reasons explaining learning performance in FLN, which varied across Pashto and Dari-speaking provinces, and maths. Higher scores in Dari reading were associated with:

- having learning materials, such as a notebook
- reading aloud at home
- receiving feedback from teachers
- income (proxied by household assets)
- having a separate toilet for girls and boys at the learning centre/school.

Key factors influencing performance in Pashto reading were:

- age
- father's literacy
- reading aloud at home
- income.

The most important factors for scores in mathematics were:

- age
- having homework
- receiving feedback from the teacher
- having a teacher who helps rephrase questions
- income.

Qualitative evidence from local education officials also highlighted the role of teacher-training, smaller class sizes and the enhanced monitoring of teachers as critical to the good performance of ALCs.

While confirming that additional educational support is important for both in-school students and non-formal learners, these learning assessments corroborate mounting evidence that rigorously designed accelerated pathways effectively reduce the learning gaps between school goers and OOSC. This also testifies to the successful contribution of LUL accelerated programmes towards the RAPID framework's Action Point 4 of promoting learning catch-up.

3.4. Reintegration and progression in school

Alongside the learning gains exhibited during LUL's accelerated programmes, there is strong evidence that LUL accelerated programmes facilitated participants' reintegration into formal education. However, their longer-term retention and progression once (re-)enrolled in school were not guaranteed.

Participants across the five countries largely returned to formal school immediately after completion of their accelerated programme. Among the girls graduating from GATE-N, 89 per cent made the transition to formal school, mainly to Grade 3 (31 per cent) and Grade 4 (26 per cent) (Chávez et al., 2020). In addition, over 96 per cent (28 out of 29) of the graduates with disabilities entered formal school (Chávez et al., 2020). In Madagascar, between 90 and 99 per cent of CRAN graduates returned to secondary school in the academic year following the summer course, evenly spread across all four lower secondary grades (Valenza et al., 2021a). In Bangladesh, 35 per cent of learners opted for an early transfer from ABAL to a formal primary school (or madrasa), mainly entering Grades 2 and 3.¹³ Virtually all ABAL learners who opted to transfer to a formal school entered a grade level above where they started the accelerated programme. In addition, monitoring data for Madagascar and Bangladesh showed that reintegration rates were substantially equal for boys and girls without children.

However, a significant share dropped out again later on. A study in Nepal found that 37 per cent of GATE-N girls left school six months after completing the programme, with the dropout rate increasing to 47 per cent 18 months after the end of the programme. In Madagascar, according to monitoring data and UNICEF Madagascar (2020), between 25 and 29 per cent of learners did not stay in school for a second year following CRAN.¹⁴

Analysis of qualitative and quantitative evidence highlighted several factors associated with dropout. **Older adolescents, especially young mothers, faced additional barriers to continuing education.** First, qualitative evidence from the field, and existing literature more broadly (see, for example, Save the Children, 2019), confirmed that over-age children faced stigma, lost motivation or felt uncomfortable when joining classrooms largely composed of younger children. In addition, older learners generally had higher earning potential and therefore a higher opportunity cost of attending school. In Nepal, for instance, more than 70 per cent of GATE-N graduates who did not return to school had chosen to engage in paid work (Chávez et al., 2020). Older girls (above the age 15) also had a greater chance of becoming pregnant or marrying. Entrenched social and cultural norms still place an unbalanced burden on women when it comes to child-raising obligations, which hinders continued learning for adolescent mothers. In Madagascar, of the 13 per cent of CRAN graduates who were young mothers in 2017, less than half (42 per cent) continued formal schooling for a second year, compared to 79 per cent of girls in the CRAN programme who did not have children.

Poverty and distance to schools were also binding constraints for continuing education. Programme staff in Madagascar highlighted difficulties in covering school-related expenditures, such as purchasing school supplies, as the main barrier to continuing school. Focus group discussions with a sample of GATE-N graduates revealed that the families of re-enrolled daughters found it difficult to pay for school fees, uniforms and supplies. One child, whose family could not afford to pay for shoes, said that she had been frequently scolded by her teacher for not having appropriate footwear.

Difficulties in keeping up with the formal curriculum also hindered longer-term progression in one context. Data on school progression in Madagascar showed that, once reintegrated in lower secondary school, CRAN graduates had much higher repetition rates than the national average, particularly in the final year. Their repetition rates increased along the lower secondary cycle, rising from 30 per cent in the first year to 44 per cent in the third year, before peaking at 82 per cent in the last grade of lower secondary. As a benchmark, the national repetition rate in the final grade was 20 per cent (UNESCO UIS data, 2018). Regardless of the grade, monitoring data do not show any meaningful differences in progression between boys and girls.

¹³ ABAL learners can transfer to a formal school at any point along the 44-month module, or continue in ABAL centres until completion of the programme, which enables them to take the end-of-primary-cycle examination.

¹⁴ Education programme staff at the UNICEF Madagascar Country Office noted that this rate was comparable to the non-retention for non-CRAN students in lower secondary schools.

Acknowledging these challenges, **LUL accelerated programmes have increasingly emphasized follow-up pedagogical support.** CRAN graduates who go back to school now receive learning support during the regular school year through the delivery of self-learning booklets. Adapted learning support courses are also organized for students identified as struggling with keeping up with the curriculum. Similarly, GATE-N promotes coaching sessions on school premises to ensure learning continuity, although the demand has often exceeded the slots available, mainly due to the geographical dispersion of GATE-N graduates. In Bangladesh and Madagascar, LUL accelerated programmes provided administrative support for registering at school, establishing links between graduates, their families and the school itself.

Conclusions on accelerated learning pathways

Programme graduates outperformed their peers enrolled in formal school (Nepal and Afghanistan).

Programme participants largely returned to formal school immediately after the completion of their accelerated learning programme; but many dropped out again a year later.

Young mothers and older children (age 15 and above) were at a particular disadvantage in terms of retention and progression, due to competing priorities including child-related responsibilities and work, as well as due to stigma/motivation loss for joining classrooms composed of younger children.

Other binding constraints leading to dropout and repetition included poverty, distance to school and difficulties in keeping up with the formal curriculum once back in school. This suggests that some of the underlying causes for exclusion from education re-surfaced later on.

Recommendations for accelerated learning programming

Prioritize the fundamentals, in line with the Action Point 3 of the RAPID framework, within a condensed, age-appropriate curriculum, while strengthening ability-based pedagogy.

Streamlining the curriculum to prioritize foundational learning will be critical to enabling a transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn”, as well as mitigating longer-term, cumulative learning losses.

Promote longer-term retention and progression in school. Tracking learners beyond the programme’s duration to identify the specific hurdles leading to repetition and dropout is a critical prerequisite for the longer-term sustainability of education programmes. Although the specific measures will need to be contextualized and targeted to the specific age cohorts or categories of students (girls, children with a disability, working adolescents, etc.), some overarching measures should include:

- Providing economic support to households to lower the opportunity cost of enrolling children and to make up for any lost income as a result of their schooling.
- Delivering ability-based remedial education to students lagging behind during the regular school year. This is especially critical for the most condensed catch-up programmes (e.g. in Madagascar).
- Providing support to adolescent mothers through life skills training/mentorship; community-based sensitization against discriminating norms that impose an unequal distribution of caring responsibilities between women and men; and delivery of and referral to childcare services to further reconcile family obligations and education needs.
- Promoting pathways to formal and non-formal schools or considering extending the programme’s coverage beyond primary school-level curriculum in underserved areas where learning facilities are not readily available.

4. Reducing barriers to access and stay in formal school

Besides delivering programmes to OOSC, LUL supports in-school children who are at risk of dropping out, at different levels of instruction. Given the broad range of LUL programmes falling under this umbrella (see Table 1) and the heterogeneity of their respective goals, this section presents two snapshot case studies of selected programmes for which solid evidence exists:

- a teacher training programme for young women to expand access to schooling for girls, in Afghanistan (GATE-A)
- a conditional cash transfer (CCT) for at-risk children transitioning from primary to secondary schools in Madagascar.

Case study 1. Training female teachers to boost girls' education in Afghanistan

Context. In Afghanistan, women comprised only 36 per cent of the total teacher workforce in 2018 (UNESCO UIS data, 2018). Social norms, low salary levels and insecurity in remote areas make the profession unattractive for the already small number of qualified female teachers. This shortage raises barriers to girls' education, as many families may decide to keep their daughters at home if they cannot be educated by women (Hunte, 2006; Afghanistan Ministry of Education, 2016). Empirical studies suggest that employing female teachers can increase girls' access to education (Burde et al., 2015; Guimbert, Miwa, and Thanh Nguyen, 2008; Lloyd, Mete, and Sathar, 2005). The Girls' Access to Teacher Education (GATE-A) programme, supported by LUL and the Ministry of Education, was launched in 2014 to increase the number of qualified female teachers across seven provinces.

Between 2015 and 2020, GATE-A offered 2,400 women two-year scholarships at a teacher training college (TTC) to achieve the minimum teaching requirements. Scholarship recipients were selected from provinces with the fewest number of female teachers and low enrolment rates for girls. The recipient pool included both Grade 12 (secondary school) graduates, as well as in-service teachers with less than two years of required training. In addition to standard pedagogy courses, the GATE-A programme also included mentoring and a focus on special topics such as gender issues, professional responsibility and responsive teaching (Marron, 2020).

Key results. Approximately 50 per cent (1,105) of the aggregate participants successfully graduated from the TTCs, with the remainder being still active and a 5 per cent dropout rate. Although official enrolment numbers in target provinces are not readily available, GATE-A graduates who are currently teaching consistently reported there have been more girls in their schools since they started teaching. Additionally, more than half of the headteachers who participated in the study attributed the increased enrolment rates in their schools to the presence of GATE-A graduates. Programme participants and the school management shuras (SMS) consulted during an evaluation all indicated that communities had positive perceptions of the programme, showing increased awareness of the importance of education for girls and the presence of female teachers. More than 90 per cent of scholarship recipients reported that their communities have an active SMS and that the SMS actively supported female students to attend school or college regularly in 78 per cent of cases.

Lessons learned. GATE-A addressed the barriers to girls' access to teacher training by providing scholarships and financial support to trainees, including a transport allowance. In a context characterized by security concerns and poverty, this financial support was regarded as critical by participants (Marron, 2020). It helped minimize dropout rates of trainees (5 per cent) and promoted regular participation, with almost 60 per cent of surveyed students not missing a single day of college in the three months before the evaluation.

Investments in building the pedagogical capacity of teacher trainers are critical when relying on existing TTCs. Within GATE-A, however, the training of trainers only occurred once in the form of a three-day workshop (Marron, 2020). The mentors, who were expected to provide follow-up support to graduates as part of the programme, did not receive any specific training. While GATE-A students

were generally satisfied with their trainers, students in some districts reported that effective teaching approaches were not systematically adopted. For instance, about 30 per cent of students felt that the trainers did not fully address gender-related topics (Marron, 2020).

Finally, participation in teacher training did not automatically lead to employment as teachers. Within a year after graduation, 42 per cent of the pre-service GATE-A students became teachers (Marron, 2020). Both current students and graduates of the programme indicated that they would be willing to serve in their communities including in hard-to-reach areas, but the lack of formal employment opportunities was frequently indicated as a binding constraint (Marron, 2020). Prolonged unemployment may result in GATE-A graduates losing the acquired skills or abandoning the teacher career path altogether. Engaging relevant ministries and alternative education establishments – such as community-based centres – to establish fast-track employment pathways for GATE-A graduates would be pivotal to using their skills, particularly in rural hard-to-reach communities where the shortage of trained teacher is more worrying.



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Case study 2. Promoting education through a conditional cash transfer in Madagascar

Context. In Madagascar, severe economic constraints and high school fees reduce a child's chances of completing basic education. According to World Bank data (World Bank, 2019), three quarters of the Malagasy population live below the international poverty line of US\$1.90 a day. Meanwhile, households pay about 40 per cent of recurrent education costs in Madagascar (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, 2017). School dropout is common at the transition from primary to secondary, when one in four students ends up leaving school (INSTAT and UNICEF, 2019).

LUL supports a conditional cash transfer (CCT) to ease these economic constraints for learners who are at risk of dropping out near the completion of primary school and while moving to or completing secondary school. The LUL transfer is a supplement or "top-up" for which families enrolled in an existing cash transfer programme for younger children are eligible if they also have an older sibling aged 11–18. The LUL supplement is linked to the older sibling's enrolment and attendance in the final

year of primary school or all years of lower secondary school. Households with an eligible sibling in the final year of primary school receive a lump sum of MGA10,000 (US\$2.50) payment per child at the beginning and end of the school year. Households with an eligible sibling attending lower secondary school receive monthly transfers of MGA10,000 per child. The lump sum and the monthly transfers are equivalent to approximately 2 per cent of the monthly income per capita.¹⁵ In the 2019–2020 school year, the LUL supplemental transfer reached almost 9,000 children, of which 70 per cent were in secondary school and 30 per cent were in the last grade of primary (UNICEF Madagascar, 2020).

Lessons learned. Uptake of the LUL CCT was slightly below expectations, not exceeding 73 per cent of eligible households in target areas (Dias et al., 2021).¹⁶ Although these districts were identified based on the prevalence of food insecurity and community-based assessments, an evaluation (Dias et al., 2021) found that the households who registered for the LUL top-up would probably have enrolled their children in school without it. At baseline, eligible families who applied had already shown higher enrolment rates, grade-completion and education-spending compared with eligible families who did not sign up. This means that households who could have benefited the most from CCT did not participate in the programme, making it more difficult to detect the scheme's full benefits.

The lower-than-expected uptake of the CCT has been attributed to limited awareness of the programme and its eligibility criteria. Additionally, parents considered the amount of the transfer to be too small to cover the costs of education. This finding is reflected in the quantitative analysis: no significant impact of the transfer was detected on additional socioeconomic indicators such as education expenditure, consumption, food security, health and female empowerment. Other process-related challenges limited the programme's uptake, including weaknesses in the case management of eligible households' queries, and frequent delays in paying the transfer (although eventually all eligible households received it). Besides natural disasters and the COVID-19 outbreak, delays were also caused by the administrative work that teachers took on to track students' attendance.

What worked. Despite the gaps in its uptake, the CCT increased enrolment rates by 7 percentage points for children aged 11–14, although the impact of the transfer was found to be statistically significant only for girls (whose enrolment improved by 13 percentage points). In the 15–18 age cohort, the CCT resulted in a 9 percentage-point increase in enrolment, this time with the impact accruing only for boys. Moreover, the CCT seemed to substitute income from children's remunerated work, following differentiated patterns across genders and age cohorts. For those aged 11–14, receiving the transfer reduced the chance of engaging in remunerated work only for boys, while the total time spent working over the previous 15 days diminished by 8 hours for girls. In the 15 to 18 age cohort, girls receiving the CCT were less likely to engage in remunerated work (by 16 percentage points) and the overall time spent working fell by 8 hours for both girls and boys. Nonetheless, domestic work such as household chores increased for both age groups, especially for girls aged 11–14.

Way forward. Evidence around the CCT programme confirmed that the amount of the transfer and the targeting strategy are key elements to the success of cash transfer schemes. In the case of the CCT, available resources could be channelled to a more restricted age group of children who are at particular risk of dropping out. This would result in a larger transfer amount per child without requiring additional resources and could boost uptake for the most marginalized learners, improving the overall effectiveness of the programme. Communication efforts around the programme's benefits and its eligibility criteria should also be reinforced to reach the most vulnerable households who stand to benefit the most from the transfer.

15 In 2020, Madagascar GDP per capita in purchasing power parity was US\$1,544.16 (Source: World Bank). Dividing this by 12, the monthly GDP per capita amounts to US\$128.68. At current US dollars, the amount of the monthly transfer/lump sum (US\$2.50) thus represents about 2 per cent of monthly income

16 Unless otherwise indicated, findings from this section are drawn from an impact evaluation conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR), which used a multi-arm randomized controlled trial to determine the causal effects attributable to the CCT (see Dias et al., 2021).

5. Vocational and life skills for vulnerable adolescents

Lacking job-specific skills and training opportunities in underprivileged areas, many young people in LUL target areas were unemployed, stuck in low-paying jobs or exposed to risks of engaging in illegal work. Targeted vocational training plays a key role in equipping out-of-school adolescents with the necessary job-specific and life skills for entering the job market, increasing their earnings and contributing to society at large.

In **Bangladesh**, the **Alternative Learning Pathway (ALP)** prepares out-of-school adolescents for entry into the labour market by building vocational skills through a mix of practical on-the-job training and classroom teaching that reinforces foundational competences. The pathway is a six-month programme, and the on-the-job training is carried out by a master craft person (MCP) who owns a business in the community.

The **Be a Change Agent Programme (B-CAP)**, which started in 2016, takes place in two of the most densely populated communities of Monrovia, where overcrowding and opportunities for education and livelihoods perpetuate poverty and vulnerability. The programme mainly targets at-risk adolescent girls (aged 10–19), including sex workers, adolescents who are HIV/AIDS positive and former drug users, by providing guidance counselling, support to develop foundational literacy and numeracy skills, and training in livelihoods and life skills.

5.1. Expanding access to training for vulnerable adolescents

Adolescents, especially girls, face compounding sources of vulnerability in the LUL target areas of Liberia and Bangladesh. In Liberia, early/unsafe sex as well as sexual and gender-based violence are frequent, resulting in one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy worldwide (31 per cent for girls aged 15–19) (Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services et al., 2014). Some 40 per cent of those aged 15–19 had experienced physical violence by the time they were 15 years old and 13 per cent had experienced sexual violence (Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services et al., 2008). Even schools are not safe spaces: a 2015 mobile phone-based survey across all regions revealed that 86 per cent of respondents (over 13,000) had said that sex for grades was a problem in their schools (UNICEF Liberia, 2017a). HIV prevalence is particularly high (around 10 per cent) among marginalized groups such as sex workers (UNAIDS, 2020). Qualitative evidence gathered in LUL programme areas in Bangladesh documented that early marriage was common practice and the participation of adolescent girls in social and productive spaces remained limited. Employment in the programmes' disadvantaged areas remains mostly confined to low-paying jobs, mainly in the informal economy.

Adolescents, especially the most marginalized, have limited opportunities for accessing vocational training. In Bangladesh, only 1.5 per cent of girls and 4.5 per cent of boys aged 15–24 participated in technical and vocational training in 2019 (UNESCO UIS, 2019). In Liberia, approximately 40 per cent of young people aged 12–17 from the poorest quintile were out of school in 2013, compared to 11 per cent in the wealthiest quintile (Education Policy and Data Center and FHI 360, 2018).

LUL-supported programmes in Liberia and Bangladesh supported highly vulnerable adolescents, with a strong focus on girls. A 2018 survey found that over half of B-CAP's participants in Liberia lived in single-parent households, 24 per cent were sex workers and 20 per cent were drug users (Apland et al., 2019). More than 15 per cent of the participants had dropped out from school and a smaller minority, 4 per cent, had some form of disability. In Bangladesh, ALP supported adolescents aged 14–18 (69 per cent were girls) with low educational achievement. Only 54 per cent had completed part of primary education, a stark contrast to the 83 per cent of Bangladeshi children who complete primary school nationally (Valenza, 2021b; UNESCO UIS data). Most faced poverty and other compounding aspects of marginalization. Over 90 per cent of the ALP participant cohort reported living below the international poverty line of US\$1.90 a day (Valenza, 2021b). Focus group discussions with participants and programme staff have widely documented

that, prior to enrolling in ALP, many participants used to spend their time working in low-paying manual jobs or simply being idle. Around 11 per cent of participants had a disability, most often a physical or visual impairment, while an additional 3 per cent belonged to severely marginalized groups, including the Bihari community,¹⁷ orphans and street children. These efforts in reaching marginalized adolescents align with the RAPID framework's Action Point 1 on getting young people's learning back on track.

In Liberia, even though B-CAP was open to girls aged 10–19, girls below 16 were underrepresented, accounting for less than 7 per cent of participants (Apland et al., 2019). The programme's emphasis on preventing teenage pregnancy appeared to have unintentionally reinforced the stigma faced by pregnant girls and young mothers. Several girls explained that if they became pregnant during the programme, they would not feel comfortable returning to class because of the messaging B-CAP promotes in relation to avoiding early sex and pregnancy (Apland et al., 2019).

5.2. Employment and life skills

In Liberia, 375 adolescents (75 per cent girls) completed vocational skills trainings in pastry making, cosmetology, tailoring, hospitality and hotel management – after being assigned to a specific trade based on their interest, grade level and age (UNICEF, 2020b). **In Bangladesh, of the initial 1,000 ALP participants of the 2019 cohort, 96 per cent successfully completed the programme.**¹⁸ Girls largely opted for training in tailoring, IT support and graphic design, while boys largely engaged in motorcycle servicing, refrigeration/air-conditioning repair and mobile phone servicing. While this breakdown highlights a distinct pattern in trade choices along gender lines, it also shows that girls did not remain solely confined to traditional sectors but also signed up for training in more modern and typically male-dominant trades such as IT support (where 85 per cent of trainees were girls). The selection of the trades in both countries was informed by a preliminary market assessment conducted by UNICEF and its implementing partners.

Evidence shows that participation in vocational training led to employment, particularly in Bangladesh, where a direct, post-training placement at the respective MCP's workplace was embedded in the programme. Some 96 per cent of graduates in Bangladesh found employment immediately after completing the programme (Valenza et al., 2021b). MCPs were the main employers, but 4 per cent obtained a job at an external employer and 2 per cent started their own business, mainly in tailoring. Before the COVID-19-induced economic slowdown, virtually all MCPs claimed that there would be job opportunities at their store, offering promising indications on the relevance and sustainability of the training offered (Valenza et al., 2021b). Post-ALP employment results are in line with national employment trends post technical and vocational education and training (TVET), which indicate that 94 per cent of TVET graduates find paid work or engage as self-employed entrepreneurs (Bangladesh Technical Education Board, 2018). Such statistics, however, refer to the broader TVET graduate population, including skilled and high-skilled labour that attended longer and more structured specialized training programmes. ALP instead provides a direct pathway towards employment for the most marginalized young people.

In Liberia, a 2018 evaluation showed that, despite the limited number of placement slots, 39 per cent of B-CAP participants gained formal employment, with an additional 44 per cent reporting having applied the skills acquired during the training for selling goods (Apland et al., 2019). At the time of the evaluation, 17 per cent were still looking for a job (Apland et al., 2019). According to 2020 monitoring data, 72 per cent of the adolescents who completed B-CAP were earning an income after establishing a small business or having gained employment (UNICEF, 2020b). In addition, all 220 adolescents who had received business start-up kits after completing the programme in December 2019 established small businesses (UNICEF, 2020b). About a third of the 155 graduates of hospitality and hotel management who were placed in internships and job placements completed their traineeships and were subsequently formally employed (UNICEF, 2020b). The job placement and the livelihood components have been identified as key aspects of the programme to promote successful employment pathways (Apland, 2019; UNICEF, 2020b). Consequently, the programme has since been striving to expand placement opportunities, working

¹⁷ Non-Bengali Muslims who originally belonged to the Eastern Indian State of Bihar. Many members of the Bihari community have been stranded in Bangladesh for several decades, with many still living in temporary settlements.

¹⁸ Migration and flood-related displacement towards areas outside the ALP catchment zone were the main reasons for dropout, which remains nonetheless limited.

in tandem with local business people. However, the COVID-19 pandemic delayed progress, as some host businesses became unable to take on trainees (Chávez et al., 2021).

In 2019–2020, 5,169 adolescents (4,344 girls, 835 boys) directly benefited from services delivered at the safe spaces. An end-of-programme evaluation and focus group discussions held with beneficiaries, as well as testimonies received from parents, caregivers and community leaders during programme monitoring visits, established that approximately 85 per cent of programme participants showed increased skills in decision-making, conflict resolution, goal-setting, and HIV/AIDS prevention and control. This also led to increased referrals to services including sexual and reproductive health services, psychosocial support and case management (UNICEF, 2020b).

5.3. Earning potential and savings

While vocational training participants found employment, or engaged in income-generating activities, post-apprenticeship earnings remained modest. The limited earning potential in the informal economy, coupled with low levels of pre-existing skills and work experience among participants, meant that participation had yet to translate into a meaningful increase in income, especially in the disadvantaged areas where LUL operates in Liberia.

A majority of B-CAP graduates who participated in livelihood training reported either no change or an overall reduction in their income after completion (Apland et al., 2019). When asked about whether livelihood graduates were self-sufficient, the programme staff explained that while participants may contribute to household income, their revenues remained limited (Apland et al., 2019). Reduced income may stem from stopping previous risky or harmful activities such as prostitution or selling illicit drugs (Apland et al., 2019). Some stakeholders also voiced concerns that B-CAP graduates were selling goods and products below market prices, with adverse effects not just on their own revenues but also on the local market (Apland et al., 2019). This calls for conducting a periodic market assessment to identify the trades for which training is offered.

In Bangladesh, the average monthly salary from post-ALP jobs amounted to BDT2,580 (about US\$30), which is equivalent to 19 per cent of the average household-level monthly income in rural Bangladesh (Valenza et al., 2021b).¹⁹ A salary gap existed across genders, with girls earning 25 per cent less than boys.²⁰ Programme staff said that although post-ALP salaries were modest, they constituted fair entry-level remuneration for graduates, most of whom had limited educational achievement and job-specific experience, and encouraged **participants to save a moderate amount of their income.**²¹

5.4. Promotion of women empowerment and reduction of risky behaviours

Participation in income-generating activities, counselling guidance and life skills training allowed girls to build self-confidence and reduced pressures for early marriage. In Bangladesh, several interviews revealed that girls' participation in ALP had made parents change their minds about their daughters' role in social spaces. One ALP Programme Manager, plus several female participants, said that some parents delayed decisions to marry off their daughters after seeing that their daughters could contribute financially to household revenues through their work.

"ALP saved us from [early] marriage."

—two ALP female participants in the tailoring sector

¹⁹ The average income for rural households was BDT13,353 in 2016 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

²⁰ Earnings appeared to be more equal in modern trades, such as IT support and mobile phone servicing, but the sample size is too low to draw definitive conclusions.

²¹ Monitoring data indicated that 92 per cent of participants were able to save up to US\$4 per month (equivalent to 13 per cent of their monthly salary), while the remaining 8 per cent saved between US\$4–8 per month (Valenza et al., 2021b).

“In life skills I learned how to discover my strengths, and recognize my weakness. And whenever I see my friends doing what we used to do together, whenever I want to go back, I think about some of the things that were taught in this project - it keeps me motivated that I can live without drugs.”

— Interview with B-CAP beneficiary, Monrovia

Increased self-confidence was shown to be correlated with a reduction in risky behaviours in Liberia.

Respondents who reported high levels of self-esteem were found to be significantly less likely to engage in risky sex (Apland et al., 2019). More than 80 per cent of the 29 programme participants who had been engaged in sex work before B-CAP, said that they had stopped at the time of the evaluation. Similarly, 52 per cent of survey respondents who said they were using drugs and alcohol before attending the programme reported to have stopped this after B-CAP (Apland et al., 2019). B-CAP, through its emphasis on life skills and decision-making, actively contributed to the RAPID framework’s Action Point 5 on developing psychosocial health and well-being among vulnerable adolescents.

Conclusions on vocational and life skills training

Participation in LUL vocational training effectively led to employment, particularly when a direct, post-training pathway to employment was systematically embedded in the programme design.

- However, post-apprenticeship earnings remained modest. Limited earning potential in the informal economy, coupled with low levels of pre-existing skills and work experience among participants, meant that participation had yet to translate into a meaningful increase in income.
- Engagement in income-generating activities, counselling guidance and life skills training yielded positive outcomes for adolescents, especially girls. In Bangladesh, girls gaining an income shifted parental views about their daughter’s economic and social role, contributing to a reduction in pressure to marry early. In Liberia, increased self-confidence among participants was shown to be correlated with a reduction in risky behaviours including sex work or abuse of drugs and alcohol.

Recommendations for vocational and life skills programming

- **Incorporate direct pathways towards employment for programme graduates** by developing partnerships with local business people, employment hubs or public bodies (as in the case of teachers).
- **Conduct periodic re-assessments of local market conditions** to adjust the trades for which training is offered. Up-to-date knowledge of local markets is necessary to select trades that can be profitable and sustainable, while avoiding distortions and adverse effects on the supply of goods.
- **Continue strengthening life skills and decision-making support** through walk-in services, dedicated training and referrals. The choice of the specific themes should be relevant locally but key cross-cutting domains should include sexual and reproductive health, women empowerment and employability.
- **Advocate for the accreditation of graduates within national competency frameworks.** Post-training salaries remained modest due to the low earning potential in the informal economy and the low-skill profile of graduates. Accreditation could contribute to improved remuneration in the job market, as well as open additional learning pathways to programme graduates.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

In the last 10 years, LUL has successfully expanded access to high-quality learning opportunities for children in severely marginalized settings, including early learners, girls, OOSC and at-risk adolescents. By embedding robust evidence-generation systems within its different programmes, the initiative has contributed to the global knowledge base on what works for improving learning for the most vulnerable. This report drew from the experiences of the five programme countries to document outcomes and lessons learned across the education lifecycle.

Some of these lessons span levels of instruction and types of programme:

Establish child-friendly learning facilities within the community. Key design components included age-appropriate and engaging learning materials, flexible learning hours, adequate infrastructure (access to water and sanitation facilities) and trained facilitators/teachers. Qualitative evidence from local education officials (Afghanistan) highlighted the importance of not only training teachers on pedagogy but also of placing them under enhanced monitoring from education officials. Finally, smaller class sizes allowed more individualized pedagogical support.

For girls, take action to address the shortage of trained female teachers in remote areas, especially in contexts where parents are reluctant to have their daughters taught by male teachers, as in Afghanistan. As training women did not automatically result in them finding employment as teachers, additional coordination is necessary to provide direct pathways towards employment in collaboration with formal and non-formal providers.

Engage the communities through trusted local partners. Trust was built by enabling caregivers to get to know the implementation partners and teachers. Their direct participation in the management committees of the learning centres and their involvement in the identification of programme participants enhanced accountability and allowed for the generation of local solutions to specific education challenges.

Provide evidence-backed economic support to families. Low incomes remain a significant reason for absenteeism and dropout. Monetary transfers to vulnerable households, as implemented in Bangladesh for ABAL participants and Madagascar (through a CCT scheme), effectively lowered the opportunity costs of schooling but require evidence-backed programming to maximize their impact – especially when it comes to setting the amount of cash offered and reaching the most marginalized.

Rely on accelerated and adaptive pedagogy that prioritizes FLN. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, re-engaging learners based on their cognitive level will be even more urgent as regular and non-formal classrooms re-open with increasingly mixed levels of knowledge among their students, who have missed formal learning activities for a prolonged time and who have had various levels of access to remote learning. Experiences from LUL confirmed the effectiveness of accelerated and adaptive pedagogy in generating learning gains in FLN at different instruction levels and within a reduced time frame. In-school tutoring and remedial education should be strengthened to sustain longer-term retention and progression in school of vulnerable children and adolescents who exit LUL-type programmes.

Prepare teachers to systematically conduct diagnostic and formative assessments to align learners' skills with teaching content. Similarly, embedding national assessments such as the ELDS-based annual exercise (Nepal) into policymaking is critical to ensure no one is excluded from learning, particularly the most vulnerable.

What's Next for LUL? Looking forward towards an equitable education recovery

LUL programmes have entered their fourth phase (2021–2024), and are continuing to adapt their learning activities in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. As governments and education practitioners around the world strive to recover lost learning for all, they can learn key lessons from LUL programmes. Several LUL components have proven to be successful in addressing the five action points of the RAPID's framework (UNICEF, 2022):

1. **Reach every child and retain them in school:** all LUL-supported programmes effectively put in place systems to cater for vulnerable young people of all ages - from the early years through to adolescence – with a view to (re-) engage them on a learning track or keep them in school.
2. **Assess current learning levels,** through a mix of programme-embedded classroom assessments (PPE-Bangladesh, ABAL-Bangladesh, CRAN-Madagascar), independent learning assessments (ALC-Afghanistan) and large-scale evaluations based on validated quality standards (Nepal).
3. **Prioritize teaching the fundamentals:** delivering instruction to children who had been absent from schools or never enrolled, LUL programmes focused on FLN skills at different levels of instruction: from early education (PPE-Bangladesh) to end-of-primary-grade-level skills (ABAL-Bangladesh, GATE-Nepal, ALC-Afghanistan, CRAN-Madagascar) through to job-specific and life skills (ALP-Bangladesh, B-CAP Liberia).
4. **Increase catch-up learning** – LUL programmes focus on ability-based accelerated pathways (ABAL-Bangladesh, GATE-Nepal, ALC-Afghanistan), which enabled learners to catch up on curriculum in a reduced time frame. Increased efforts are being made to also expand in-school support through tutoring and remedial support. This kind of support is particularly useful after the school closures caused by COVID-19.
5. **Develop psychosocial health and well-being:** LUL programmes such as B-CAP also offer services that go beyond learning, such as promoting life skills, positive decision-making and women's empowerment.



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