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UNICEF EDUCATION

Education Case Study

WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

Assessing early learning

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Deeply concerned by the learning crisis, countries in West and Central Africa are increasingly focusing on improving the foundations of children's educational journey. One key strategy is to expand quality early learning services and integrate the measurement of early learning within national assessment schemes.

Since 2014, UNICEF in Western and Central Africa began working to meet this growing demand for early childhood education, including by providing technical and financial support to develop early learning assessment tools to help countries assess children's cognitive, language, socio-emotional and motor skills that are critical for a smooth transition to primary school. It furthered that work by enhancing capacities on early learning assessment and by leveraging regional partnerships, such as with PASEC – the international learning assessment scheme used in francophone countries – to provide technical assistance to enable countries to offer comparable and harmonised methodologies and tools for early learning assessment.

As of October 2021, a total of 13 countries – Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, The Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, São Tome & Príncipe, Senegal, and Togo have conducted early learning assessments that have evaluated the readiness of children to transition to primary school. Most of them, including Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, São Tome and Príncipe, Mali, Niger and Senegal have gone further and are exploring how to integrate early learning assessment within their own national learning assessment system.

RESULTS

- **Powerful evidence from early learning assessment is helping to prioritise reforms aimed at broadening the provision of quality education in pre-primary and the early grades of primary.** Data from the [2019 PASEC assessment](#) showed that, on average, children who participated early childhood education (ECE) had 12 *per cent* higher scores in language and 8 *per cent* higher scores in math in Grade 2 and also in Grade 6 than those without ECE. Additionally, they were less likely to repeat grades.
- **Even one year of ECE makes a difference.** The results of the early learning assessments showed that after one year of ECE, school readiness increased to 55 *per cent* of children in the 13 countries participating in the UNICEF-supported early learning assessment in West and Central Africa, rising to 87 *per cent* after two years.
- **Measuring early learning places value on it.** Historically, early learning was on the margins rather than at the heart of educational systems. Similarly, many people did not think it important to measure learning among young children. UNICEF-supported early learning assessment marked a major change towards tracking children's progress right from the start of their schooling.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Early learning assessment closes key data gaps.** The results from early learning assessment provide a baseline of children's skills as they enter primary school as well as in the early grades. Gathering this evidence and tracking children's progress at the transition into primary and in the early grades is key to

combating the learning crisis and ensuring that children leave primary school with the foundational skills they need.

- **It is not only necessary to measure early learning, it is wholly possible to do so.**

Initially, critics questioned the value of measuring early learning and cited the cost and difficulty of doing so. The experience from the 13 countries in West and Central Africa shows that it was indeed possible to develop and contextualise tools to measure learning among early learners, including children coming from community-based early learning centers as well as koranic preschools.

- **The language of the early assessment is a critical issue.**

Language of instruction is particularly critical for younger children just learning to read. Consequently, many early learning programmes are offered in the language children speak at home. A key part of the contextualisation process of regional early learning assessment instruments is translation and the match between the language of the assessment with the language used to deliver the early learning curriculum.

NEXT STEPS

UNICEF will leverage its partnerships through the SDG4 regional platform, the African Union, the AfCEN and its work on the global flagship programme, Foundational Literacy and Numeracy, with the aim of empowering all 24 countries in West and Central Africa to improve their national learning assessment systems with contextualised, relevant and user-friendly tools as well as sustainable methodologies to undertake regular early learning assessment.

Cost effectiveness: Experiences from Mali and Senegal show that early learning assessment may be undertaken at an estimated cost of US \$50,000 to US \$75,000, depending on the sample size. Results can feed into evidence, advocacy and reform efforts to expand access to quality ECE and be a powerful contribution to the [ECE Accelerator Toolkit](#).

For more information, please contact: