The development of learning assessment systems and the improvement of the use of the data produced are high on the agenda of many governments in sub-Saharan Africa. Although countries have made considerable progress in the development of their learning assessment systems and more learning data are available, this has not led to their effective use in the educational planning cycle. Despite the increasing attention that this topic is receiving, a deeper understanding of what is driving the use of learning data is missing.

The need to address this gap prompted IIEP-UNESCO to launch a qualitative multi-case study to examine how and why countries in sub-Saharan Africa use learning assessment data in the education planning cycle. It also sought to raise awareness about the complex dynamics that are involved in these processes and that have often been overlooked in the literature. The study responded to the following research questions:

- What is the intended use of learning assessment data as defined in regulatory frameworks and how much are different stakeholders aware of it?
- How do countries use learning assessment data in different phases of the planning cycle?
- What factors lead to the observed use of learning data?

For more information about the study and its methodology, please consult a summary of its research proposal.

WEBINAR SERIES

Based on the experience of the six sub-Saharan Africa countries that participated in the study (the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Namibia, Senegal, and Zambia), this three-part series will present the overall findings of the study and explore the main obstacles and lessons learnt for improved use of learning assessment data in educational planning.

This webinar series is for national planners, assessment units and departments working with learning assessment data in sub-Saharan Africa. It also targets international partners involved in the development and support of learning assessment systems in the region.

The study considered national, regional and international large-scale assessments as well as Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA)/Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA) and citizen-led assessments. When relevant, it also explored how they articulated with the use of other data, such as examination results.
The series is organized in three sessions:

Webinar 1. The use of learning data in the education planning cycle: modalities and obstacles: This session will share study findings on the main trends in the use of learning assessment data. Common barriers, which can account for the observed use of assessment data, will also be explored.

Webinar 2. Assessment policies and institutional settings for the use of learning assessment data: This session will offer insights into the importance, strengths and weaknesses of existing assessment policies and conditions for their successful implementation. Different institutional settings for assessment teams will also be compared and discussed.

Webinar 3. Exploring actors’ interactions and the use of learning data: This session will examine interactions between key actors involved in the use of assessment data: international partners and national stakeholders at central and decentralized levels.

WEBINAR 1: 16 March 2021

USE OF LEARNING DATA IN THE EDUCATION PLANNING CYCLE: MODALITIES AND OBSTACLES

IIEP STUDY RESULTS

How do countries in sub-Saharan Africa use assessment data in educational planning?

The study results show that although the use of assessment data in the education planning cycle is real and evidenced, it remains somewhat limited, as assessment data sporadically inform planning processes as well as a narrow range of educational policies. The following findings emerged from each planning cycle phase:

Figure 1 Education planning cycle
• **Education Sector Analysis (ESA).** In ESAs, the discussion based on assessment data often remains general and focuses on illustrating generally low learning levels. The analysis of the causes for poor learning outcomes is often missing or limited.

• **Education Sector Plan (ESP) preparation.** It is difficult to establish a clear link between learning assessment evidence and policy decision. In ESP preparation, learning assessment data guide general orientations in educational planning but their use is currently limited to broad considerations. It is difficult to demonstrate their influence on specific strategies that appear in ESPs.

• **Implementation.** In the implementation phase, learning assessment data are mainly used by decentralized level officials in the monitoring of school performance, target setting, development of school strategies and teacher professional development activities at the decentralized level.

• **Monitoring and Evaluation.** Learning assessment data most often inform the monitoring and evaluation phase. Assessment data are used to set targets and report against them in ESP result frameworks and other monitoring and evaluation documents.

**What factors explain the observed use of assessment data?**

• The literature has identified several factors (e.g. capacities, dissemination, funding issues) that may account for a limited use of learning assessment data. The IIEP study reiterates the importance of these factors and addresses them from a new angle, highlighting the complex dynamics among them, as well as the political economy that underlies learning assessment systems. For the purpose of this webinar, some of the most common barriers to the use of learning data have been selected for presentation: dissemination, the quality of assessment reports and national capacities.

• Firstly, findings indicate that dissemination is currently not part of a broader management process of learning data; dissemination modalities are rarely defined strategically. Additionally, high vulnerability to budgetary constraints adversely affects the timely dissemination to a broad range of key education stakeholders (especially at a decentralized level), which in turn decreases the likelihood of their use in planning.

• As such, assessment reports are often the only means through which assessment findings are shared, in addition to dissemination meetings; however, often reports do not provide an adequate analysis of key factors affecting learning, as well as targeted policy inputs, leading to challenges for decision-makers to extract conclusive lessons.

• Producing, relaying, and using assessment data require capacities that are currently not sufficiently developed at all levels of education systems. Although capacity-development activities have been undertaken in all countries, the sustainability of these efforts is threatened by high turnover levels within assessment teams, further exacerbated by the limited pool of candidates with the relevant skills.
This first webinar will provide the opportunity to further share and discuss the IIEP study results. It will address the following questions:

- How do countries in sub-Saharan Africa use assessment results to plan education systems?
- What impedes the effective use of assessment data?
- What new aspects should be considered when examining the role of dissemination and capacity development in the use of student test results?

Presentations from IIEP, national and international experts will provide complementary insights on the topic. Taking a comparative perspective, IIEP will share study findings on how assessment data are used in each phase of the planning cycle in the studied countries. It will then turn to discussing some of the factors that lead to their use, emphasizing new findings on the issue. A presentation from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) will focus on how it supports assessment systems as well as broader issues of the use of learning data in planning and major challenges. The session will also include presentations from Ghana and Namibia on the main barriers observed in these countries to the use of learning data.
Moreover, the research shows that institutional settings for assessment teams also matter for the uptake of the data they produce. Different configurations are possible with varying degrees of closeness to the ministry (i.e. unit within the ministry, semi-autonomous public institution, examination board, university or non-governmental organization) and levels of concentration of assessment-related activities in one or more responsible units. Regardless of institutional settings, lessons from the study underline the importance of collaboration among teams handling assessments and those in charge of curriculum, teacher training, pedagogy, and planning. The research also confirms that trust in assessment teams’ capacities and impartiality are key for actors to take assessments seriously. Finally, while each institutional setting presents advantages and disadvantages, strong institutions and policies alone cannot guarantee the effective production and use of assessment data, as other factors related to political economy are critical to understanding the observed use of assessment data. This theme will be explored in the third webinar of the series.

The literature underlines the fact that assessment policies have a strong potential to improve assessment systems and the use of their data, especially by providing a strategic vision. Currently, learning assessment systems suffer from a lack of, or ineffective, regulatory frameworks to coordinate assessments and clarify their objectives. The study findings indicate that as assessment policies are often missing, learning assessment systems do not offer a strategic vision for student learning measurement but instead we observe a patchwork of assessments. However, since assessments have been introduced gradually and often as part of external projects, this might have delayed the development of a coherent regulatory framework.

Assessment policies should define the intended use of learning data (for the entire system as well as per actor group). They should elaborate on assessment methods; dissemination strategy; complementarity among different assessments; links between assessments, curriculum, and teacher training; and the roles and responsibilities of actors involved in the management of learning data. They should also identify the primary users of the assessment data, specify characteristics of learning assessments, and describe the kind of data assessments will provide, and how data are going to be reported. For an effective implementation of assessment policies, inclusive processes of policy development and its wide dissemination are key.

A patchwork of assessments, which currently characterizes some of the assessment systems in the region, consists of a number of assessment programmes in place with little coherence and articulation between them. Some assessments overlap at certain levels of education, while at others, learning remains undocumented. In addition to the scattering of scarce human and financial resources, repercussions of poorly articulated assessments include the isolated analysis of learning evidence as well as an unclear differentiation between each assessment’s purposes.

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Taking a comparative perspective, IIEP will share the findings of the study related to institutional frameworks for assessments. It will delve into the conditions that are necessary for an effective assessment policy and explore the strengths and weaknesses of different institutional arrangements for assessment teams. The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and the Teaching and Learning: Educators’ Network for Transformation (TALENT) of the Regional Coordination Group on SDG4-Education 2030 in West and Central Africa will also share their work on the theme. The Gambia Assessment Unit will present their Assessment Policy focusing on the process of the policy development, its features, as well as its impact.

QUESTIONS THE WEBINAR WILL ADDRESS

This second session will be the opportunity to share and discuss these results. The following questions will guide the discussion:

- What role do assessment policies play in the management of learning assessment data?
- What elements should be considered in the assessment policy and how to ensure its effective implementation?
- What institutional settings exist for the units in charge of the management of learning data and what implications do they have for the use of learning data?

PRESENTATIONS

Taking a comparative perspective, IIEP will share the findings of the study related to institutional frameworks for assessments. It will delve into the conditions that are necessary for an effective assessment policy and explore the strengths and weaknesses of different institutional arrangements for assessment teams. The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and the Teaching and Learning: Educators’ Network for Transformation (TALENT) of the Regional Coordination Group on SDG4-Education 2030 in West and Central Africa will also share their work on the theme. The Gambia Assessment Unit will present their Assessment Policy focusing on the process of the policy development, its features, as well as its impact.
WEBINAR 3: 30 March 2021

EXPLORING ACTORS’ INTERACTIONS AND THE USE OF LEARNING DATA

IIIEP STUDY RESULTS

• In the studied countries, international partners have played a key role in the development of learning assessments through their significant financial and technical support. However, in certain settings, their influence has led to a number of unintended consequences, such as limited national autonomy and ownership of assessment data. In some cases, learning assessments in place do not fully respond to national stakeholders’ information needs whereas in others, national actors perceive assessment data to be primarily intended to inform international partners’ activities. As a result, national stakeholders feel less inclined to use the data.

• National budgets are insufficient to implement all assessment activities and this has created dependence on the external funding. Unintended consequences of this situation include the discontinuity of assessment programmes, as well as limited national power in the assessment-related decisions. In addition, a lack of national technical expertise often leads to outsourcing of one or several tasks in the management of assessment data. This can create situations in which national stakeholders are not sufficiently involved in the process and have difficulties accessing data, leading to limited national ownership of the data produced.

• At central level, collaboration and communication among actors often remain sporadic and inconsistent, and suffer from a lack of institutionalization. In particular, a dichotomy between the political and technical dimensions of assessment results’ management is one important obstacle to the use of assessment data. Actors can sometimes overemphasize the technical roles of assessment teams, disconnecting them from the decision-making processes. This hinders smooth information flows as well as meaningful dialogue on learning results.

• Collaboration is often problematic between central and decentralized levels, as the assessment data management often follows top-down dynamics. Although decentralized level actors often participate in the administration of learning assessments, they are rarely involved in other steps of their management. A feedback loop that would provide them with information about assessment implementation, findings and expected follow-up action is often absent. Consequently, a lack of awareness and use of assessment data at this level was observed. In all countries studied, there are greater capacity needs at the decentralized level. Limited funding further exacerbated poor use of learning data.
Questions the Webinar Will Address

This third session will be the opportunity to further share and discuss these results. The following questions will be addressed:

- How did the support of international partners influence the development of assessment systems and what effect did this have on the current use of learning data?
- How do dynamics among national actors involved in the management of assessment data influence their use?
- How to improve a feedback loop of assessment results throughout the education system?

Presentations

IIEP will share the findings on the role of international partners and the dynamics between education stakeholders at different levels (between actors at the central level, and between actors at central and decentralized levels). Researchers from Senegal and Guinea will share their insights on these themes in their countries. Finally, colleagues from the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and the Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Programme will share their work on the political economy of actors and learning trajectories.
MODALITIES

- All sessions will include interactive presentations, followed by a Q&A session with the audience.
- The series will be supported by an online discussion forum on Slack for participants to exchange and discuss prior to and proceeding the sessions. Complementary resources will be shared with participants before each session.
- The webinars will be held in both English and French with simultaneous interpretation in the other language.
- Recordings of the webinars will be made available through the IIEP Learning Portal.

KEY RESOURCES

IIEP-UNESCO Policy-briefs

The Gambia
Ghana
Guinea
Namibia
Senegal
Zambia

IIEP-UNESCO Information sheet

The Gambia
Ghana
Guinea
Namibia
Senegal
Zambia


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