

LEARNING ASSESSMENTS VIRTUAL FUND AND VETTING FUNCTION

Concept Note

RESHAPING THE ECOSYSTEM FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENTS (WEBINAR SERIES ON LEARNING ASSESSMENTS)

I. BACKGROUND

It has become common cause among international organizations that low-income and lower-middle income countries (in particular – but the problem sometimes extends to upper-middle income) do not sufficiently assess their children’s learning levels. This makes it difficult to make progress: if one does not know where one is, it is hard to decide how much effort to make. Since learning levels are now known to be predictive of economic growth, and, much more importantly, human well-being and citizenship skills, the lack of measurement is not just an education problem of concern to measurement institutions such as the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, but is, instead, a serious development issue. Countries themselves, taken individually, might not perceive the need to measure as much as they themselves do when acting collectively, as and with other global actors. This suggests that subsidizing such measurement as both a local merit good and a global public good, might make sense. While countries may not always realize the value of measurement, some do, and UIS constantly receives requests for help and coordination, and other multilateral and bilateral agencies and philanthropies receive such requests.

But assessments continue to be under-funded. More importantly, what funding there is, is often chaotic in many respects. Funding may be tied to a particular assessment X that a country must use, if it is to get funding from donor Y. This deprives countries of choice or drives them into sub-optimal choices if assessment X was not the ideal one for the country. In the past few years there have been several blogs written by UIS staff or UIS associated thought leaders about the inefficient nature of the assessment market. These are available [here](#) and [here](#).

UIS would like to progress in the design of the function to deal with the two problems above: funding and funding coordination on the one hand and vetting of countries' or agencies' submissions of assessments to be considered as reportable for SDG 4.1.1.

In this concept note, we review the inefficiencies in the assessment market, the questions to be addressed in relation to a virtual fund, and specific issues around a process for “vetting” assessments for reporting.

II. Inefficiencies in the assessment market

Upper-middle- and high-income countries self-fund but also shape the assessment programs in which they participate. For instance, they have supported organizations such as OECD and IEA to develop PISA and TIMSS with a governance mechanism and an assessment focus that reflect their preferences. They have also institutionalized the assessment function, which allows data to be used for public policy.

In contrast, low- and lower-middle-income countries are far more constrained in their assessment choices. Programs on offer typically started as an initiative of some external donor. All too often, countries ‘choose’ to participate in assessments for which they can get funding and technical assistance. In many cases, that interest is generated or influenced by funders’ salesmanship and are sometimes uncomfortably related to colonial legacies.

In one case, the UNESCO Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (LLECE), the government of Spain provided the initial funding (even though most Latin American countries have been independent of Spain for 200 years or so) but eventually the program became part of participating countries’ national budgets, and national units/institutes of evaluation took on the assessment coordination.

Other assessments are facing institutionalization and sustainable funding challenges. These include donor funded PASEC (managed by CONFEMEN in francophone Africa) and PILNA (managed by EQAP in the Pacific), but also SEACMEQ (self-managed in anglophone eastern and southern Africa).

Alternative structures include three foundational learning assessments: citizen-led ASER in South Asia and Uwezo in eastern Africa; the foundational learning module under the UNICEF MICS household survey program; and EGRA and EGMA, that were funded by the United States and a variety of other official donors and private philanthropists. Almost no country has institutionalized these assessments, and the agencies and NGOs that sponsor them do not necessarily have a sustainability path or strategy in terms of either funding or country use and receptivity.

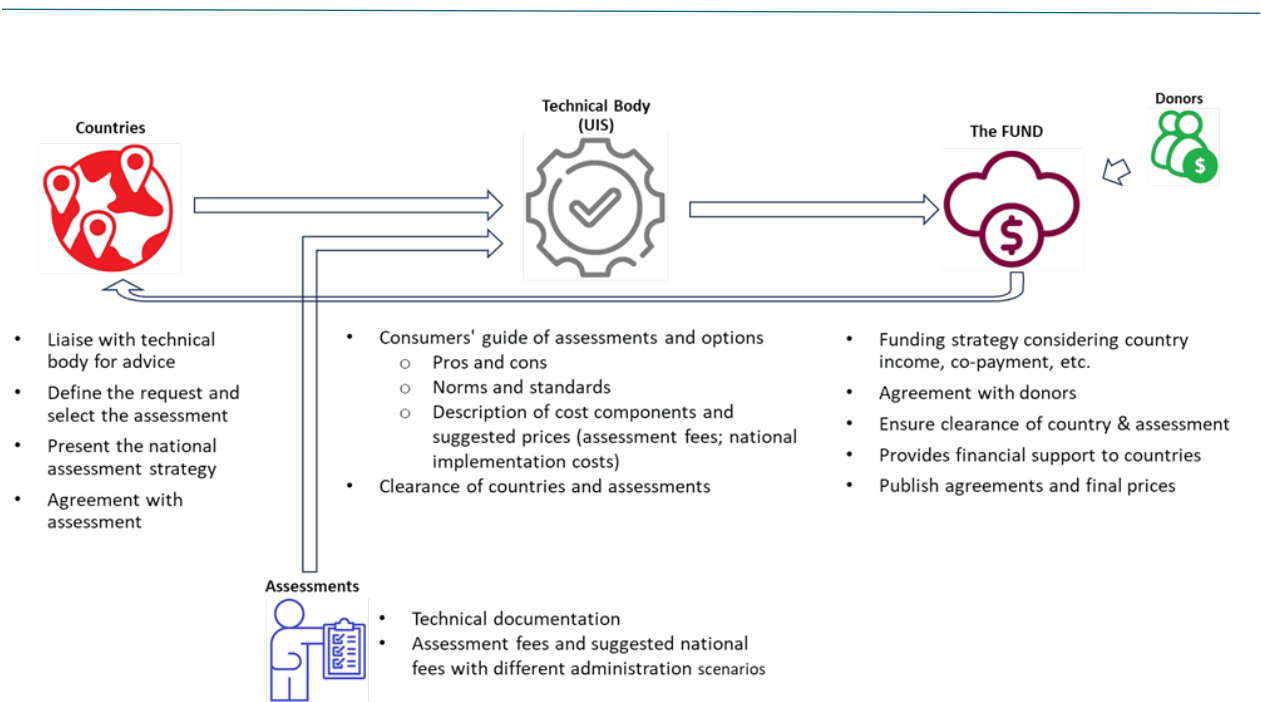
Last but not least, a few low- and lower-middle-income countries run their own national assessments. In some cases, they have achieved institutionalization and fund the assessment from their budget.

The plethora of assessments has created a fragmented market with the following problems:

Type of failure	Issue	Solution
1. Information asymmetry	Countries do not have the information to make an informed choice over the assessment product they need. The cost of participation in cross-national assessments is neither known nor fixed.	Provide a consumer guide through an official body that shares accurate, comprehensive, and up-to-date information on different types of assessment options, covering costs, benefits and fitness for purpose.
2. Lack of transparency	The processes whereby consumers and producers interact is a black box and cannot be replicated.	Create more meeting spaces ('marketplaces') for a discussion of advantages and disadvantages.
3. Technical/cost barriers to entry	Countries do not necessarily have the tools to use their assessments for global reporting.	Develop common framework with standards, tools and methodologies for countries to use.
	Technical barriers prevent data producers (including countries themselves) from entering the assessment market.	Create modules and item banks to help build assessments that can be used for international reporting.
4. Lack of purchasing power	Available resources to take part in assessments and develop national capacities are allocated unequally. Funding is tied to assessment 'choice'.	Transfer purchasing power and technical skills to countries.
5. Failure of collective action	There are resources to participate but there is lack of coordination.	Create a demand-driven fund subject to technical vetting and full transparency of costs and options.

Not all these issues can be addressed using the same solutions. The proposed fund and a buyer's guide for countries can address failures 1-2 and 4-5 (some more thoroughly than others), but not 3. While not a complete solution, a fund would be a substantial improvement on the current situation.

Some initial ideas had been shared and explored in [a blog](#) and summarized in the following diagram. In short, the fund would tackle current market inefficiencies and inequities. It would make it possible for countries to choose assessments based on their needs. It would untie aid funding from the type of assessment a donor would prefer a country to take for reasons other than the country's best interests. It would increase cost transparency, and it would help countries decide what is best for them.



IV. QUESTIONS TO BE ADDRESSED: VIRTUAL FUND

In creating such a virtual fund, the following are reasonable questions to try to answer. UIS is commissioning a scoping study to answer these and other questions. Here we simply telegraph the important and interesting issues that would need to be solved.

- The name of such a function.
- Its legal status or affiliation.
- Its governance and funding (of a small nucleus, funding of the assessments would not be considered directly as that would be the point of making the fund “virtual”).
- Size.
- What would be a good process for countries to “apply” for funding? How formalistic? What is the tradeoff between making it fair and transparent and ensuring good use of the funding versus requiring bureaucratically elaborate plans and reviews by large committees, etc.?
- The range and types of assessments under consideration. Make it clear that the aim of neither the funding or the vetting mechanisms is to pre-select assessments, but to make sure that assessments “pass” the criteria shown (as a work in progress) [here](#).
- How would the funding be targeted so as to help those who truly need it, rather than those who would be perfectly able to afford it on their own, but simply have not done so?

V. SPECIFIC ISSUES AROUND A PROCESS FOR “VETTING” ASSESSMENTS FOR REPORTING

The case of SDG 4.1.1 (learning at the lower primary, upper primary, and lower secondary levels), and especially 4.1.1.a., is a microcosm that can illustrate. Though there has been much measurement by many agencies and NGOs in this area, there has been a lack of a set of consistent criteria as to what assessments meet which standards and could therefore be deemed usable for reporting at the global level in a manner that is comparable across countries and across time. After SDG 4.1.1.a was questioned by the IAEG because of lack of reporting, UIS called a meeting of stakeholders in that regard. One of the conclusions was that there was a lack of documentation of a set of [Criteria for Eligibility](#) for reporting, which are being finalized.

But as soon as these [Criteria for Eligibility](#) are finalized, it is expected that countries and/or agencies will start to submit assessments to be included for reporting on SDG 4.1.1, since in many cases they already have taken place, are planned, are already funded, etc. In fact, as of late August 2024 many questions are arising from countries and the agencies assisting them, that pertain to this precise issue. Thus, this is now becoming an urgent matter.

Many of the same specific issues that apply to the virtual fund will apply to this vetting mechanism, but specifically would include these:

- How to structure it? A small team is needed, but under whose administrative control? It is logical that it be managed administratively by UIS. But, then, under whose governance?
- This vetting mechanism may need to operate sooner than the virtual fund: how does one start it and then put it under the virtual fund? Or should one? And is the governance function then eliminated and subsumed under that of the fund itself?
- Where to find persons that is expert enough to know the issues, but distant enough to not be biased?
- Would they work on a “per-assessment” basis, much as a team of experts are appointed and paid for, by, say, GPE, to review country plans?
- How fast and how much should one formalize, including having a web-based portal for submission and storage of documents?

VI. NEXT STEPS

UIS will welcome a discussion of these and similar issues and suggestions, starting with a set of two webinars in September 2024. Separate documentation will be created for those webinars.