VfD Evidence in Resilient and Inclusive Education Outcomes (2022-23) – A Global Synthesis

Acknowledgement

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I.   Background

Inclusive and Resilient Education (IRE) is a major portfolio of VSO covering a plethora of interventions, broadly aimed at ensuring access, learning achievement and education system strengthening.

Portfolio of projects are aimed at creating equal access to education of different levels (ECCE, primary, vocational), access to out of school children, achieving learning age appropriate outcomes, parental motivation, demand creation and participation, quality improvement and advocacy towards systemic and policy reforms.

All IRE interventions are aimed at not only addressing learning outcomes of marginalised girls and boys, but also generate multiplier effect in terms of addressing social norms- child marriage, gender-based violence, child labour and protection, drop out and non-participation, voice and agency of primary actors in education governance and addressing policy gaps.

VSO IRE intervention projects of basic education cover;
- Basic Education (primary education, literacy, numeracy) access.
- Education Systems Strengthening (national planning, teacher training, design/supply learning materials, ICT)
- Inclusive education (equitable, disability, gender)
- Youth engagement (access/transition to secondary education, skills for gainful employment, OOS youth)
- EiE - (ICT, SEL, youth)

IRE projects are operational in 14 countries; Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal, Myanmar, Philippines (Peace Education), Pakistan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Malawi, Mozambique. As of early 2022, a total of 27 projects are being implemented and of them 7 are education in emergencies (EiE) including Covid-19 response.

Learning Exercise

Why Learning Exercise?
One of the gaps identified by KEL and IE teams is that, while learnings are documented in the form of project evaluations, there has been no attempt to build a portfolio level synthesise for enhancing our understanding on working of these operational approaches. The need for evidence informing what works in terms of high impact delivery models for basic education (national to global scale up) is to be generated.

In order to identify learnings from the current practice of IRE projects, KEL team has initiated learning exercises in identified countries. Using a standard and common ToR, these studies attempted to bring out VfD evidence from the implementation process and distil learnings in terms of having patterns, shared principles and approaches that can be applied for strengthening existing projects as well as future projects.

Objective: to develop a global portfolio level understanding of different operational approaches followed so as to arrive at elements of 'a model' implementation approach that can be advocated for replication.

Some learning questions include;

1. What have been theoretical underpinnings that led to adoption of such approaches while locating 'learning and education' of children?
2. What are the contextual conditions that necessitated adoption of such operational approaches?
3. What were the key operational elements of each of these approach and how they relate to VfD pathways and primary actor centric engagement of VSO?
4. How they are able to deliver VfD in terms of social accountability, inclusion, resilience and engagement and leadership?
5. What are the experiences and outcomes of relational volunteering models adopted by these approaches?
6. What is the comparative assessment in terms of value for money, relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of the approaches followed ?

Projects Studied

Projects considered for learning exercise included,
1. Building Learning Foundations (BLF), Rwanda
2. Sahayatra Inclusive Education Project in Nepal
3. Early Childhood Education and Development (ECD) Project in Bidi Bidi Uganda
4. Education for Life project in Kenya
5. EAGLE project – supporting out of school girl child education in Mozambique

This brief write-up brings out the synthesis of learnings from these projects in order to provide a perspective for RIE portfolio to consider in its future program development efforts.

Methodology

The individual country studies were based on the review of project documents as well as primary data collected from various stakeholders. VSO evidence principles have been followed while designing the methodology of the studies. Information has been gathered from the primary actors and implementers on various parameters using participatory tools. The country studies have been broadly qualitative in nature and were based primary actor's perceptions, their experiences and recommendations. FGDs and KIIs formed the core of data collection tools and were complimented by other participatory methods like ranking and scoring, problem tree analysis and participatory mapping. Data quality and objectivity of opinions was maintained through following a uniform protocol for data collection across locations as well as use of experienced field researchers. By focusing on quality and interacting with few but diverse stakeholders, rigor and integrity of data collection has been maintained.

Sampling Framework: Where possible, individual country project evaluations have identified respondents across the primary actor categories targeted, - children, youth, women, men, people with disabilities and others. They belonged different functional categories like learners, ECE volunteers, ECE educators, mothers of young children, community leaders and government education functionaries. All key actors and stakeholders targeted by the intervention were engaged in the exercise including volunteers, partners and project staff.

II.   Findings

Major Trends of interventions

As pointed out earlier, VSOs IRE portfolio has spread across different geographical, political and social contexts. Most marginalized and vulnerable communities, groups of citizens and refugees, girl child form its primary actors. Specific focus on Social Inclusion, especially of CwDs and excluded communities has been a significant element in most VSO projects.

Most of the country interventions are also aimed at addressing critical gaps of access, learning eco system and children's learning achievement. Given the weak institutional structures both of the government and community, VSOs focus has been on system strengthening at various levels viz., School, sub-district, district, province and national. Such a wholistic approach appears to have value transmission.

VSO Educational Interventions - Snapshot

Intervention stream	Focus	Mode
Early Childhood Development (ECD)	Early literacy and numeracy Child development	Support ECD Centre Support Home based learning (mothers and caregiver) Ed-tech based interventions

Foundational (early) literacy and numeracy	School and Home based learning (early grades)	Support to school / centre system Support educators (volunteers, parent /caregiver) for home based learning Ed-tech based
Education Leadership – School and class room	Primary/basic grade support to school and classroom processes	School / centre leadership Subject leadership Ed-tech based
Teacher Continuous Professional Development CPD	School teachers, community volunteers (educators)	Skills and practice improvement Trainings – face to face, online Teacher/educator CoPs Ed-tech based
System strengthening	School Improvement and management plans -Sub-district, district education Planning and management (data &MIS)	Leadership of head teacher Leadership of Education bureaucracy Capacity building proactive accountability practices Ed-tech based
Community strengthening	PTA/SMC leadership Interface with school and system leadership	Awareness and Capacity building, accountability tools and processes PMEL(MILE)
Child Participation	Children clubs	Feedback, school planning, MILE, child leadership
Out of school adolescent girls	Adolescents 12+ age	Literacy and numeracy, lifeskills, livelihood skills
Policy Influencing	Policy makers – Political leadership Administrative leadership Donors	Policy research inputs for Data and evidence-based decision making, MEL strengthening Best practice dissemination

Learning outcomes / Achievements

All the projects have focused on improving age-appropriate learning levels of children through project baseline and endline evaluations. Broadly all projects confirm improvements in learning levels of children in basic literacy and numeracy. At the same time it needs to be underscored that longitudinal assessments of learning levels has not been undertaken that synchronises comparison across all projects as there are differences in project start date and closures. This makes it difficult for portfolio level understanding of learning improvements that have been accomplished. However for the purpose of appreciating the criticality of systematic learning level assessments, we present evidence from BLF project which has invested significantly in measuring the changes in terms of learning levels of children. Table 1 presents evidence of changes in basic mathematics and English among children at four different time points

of the project. Such a systematic measurement becomes a significant best practice which needs to be encouraged in future projects.

Table 1 Cumulative Assessments of Learning Levels of Early Grade learners – BLF Project, Rwanda

Indicator (%)	Baseline Nov 2018	Progress 1 May 2019	Progress 2 Mar 2020	Progress 3 Nov 2021
Percentage of learners at or above basic proficiency in English in P3	16	19	28	46
Percentage of learners at or above basic proficiency in mathematics in P3	21	27	19	8
Percentage of children making progress in English	50	51	60	61
Percentage of children making progress in Mathematics	36	35	35	15

From the table it can deciphered that overall children's learning levels improved between 2018 and 2021. Proficiency in English (literacy) in P3 for instance increased from 16% in 2018 to 46% in 2021 while percentage of children making progress in English language increased from 50% in 2018 to 61% in 2021. Proficiency in Mathematics (numeracy) also increased from 21% in 2018 to 27% in 2019 but declined in 2020 (19%) and 2021 (8%). Similarly, the percentage of children making progress in Maths remain stagnant and declined in 2021. While overall results show a progression from baseline to mid-term, there appears to be a drop in the achievements in mathematics in P3 in the years 2020 & 2021, a factor attributed to the impact of COVID-19 and closure of schools for a prolonged period. This in fact is a factor acknowledged by all consortium partners and the government functionaries that COVID-19 has been a set-back to the progress in seeing continues increase in numeracy and literacy. Deployment of many new teachers (mostly untrained) and change in medium of instruction to English at all grades are also other factors that contributed to the learning crisis.

VfD for Education

VSOs volunteering for development (VfD) as a program delivery approach is identified with relational volunteering, VfD pathways (core approaches of inclusion, gender, social accountability and resilience) and people first principles. Partnerships, safeguarding and duty of care are other aspects that are identified critical for the delivery of VfD. This has found significant resonance with the implementation strategy, outputs and outcomes of all the projects studied. Measurement of success has been in terms of improvements in learning outcomes of children, school-community relationship, improvements in accountability and governance, school leadership and

teacher continuous professional development. Promotion of education technology for improving learning has also been an important feature of VSOs education portfolio.

Relational volunteering

At the core of VfD is relational volunteering. All projects have accorded high priority for volunteering for transfer of expertise, knowledge and practice related to development interventions. International, national and community volunteers shared their technical expertise, participatory practices, system strengthening processes with stakeholders in a significant way.

In BLF, institutional arrangements for capacity building of stakeholders (teachers, head-teacher/school managers, education officials and community leaders) through volunteers formed the central element of relational volunteering model that VSO has adopted. The project worked with a range of national and international volunteers which served as the major drivers of change at school, sector and district levels. BLF volunteers were placed at the district and sector (sub-district) levels, critical levels for systemic interventions, and they appear to have created a significant impact on the education system as well as school level processes according to stakeholders. Volunteers are technically well qualified, trained and highly motivated in the delivery of their responsibilities and their presence is felt all across the project and the country. The scale of influence volunteers had in transforming teaching and learning practices, peer learning and use of teaching and learning materials provided through the project have been acknowledged by all stakeholders. Their impact of the teaching of English and Mathematics have been noted as significant contribution to building the foundations of education in Rwanda.

Thus, VSOs relational volunteering model appear to be well suited for such comprehensive education improvement project, delivered at scale that addresses capacity enhancement *simultaneously* focusing on the teacher, the school and the system- the three critical ingredients in improving teaching and learning.

The fourth pillar of community capacity enhancement through volunteers can be emulated through the experience of Nepal where Big-sisters as community volunteers played a significant role in enhancing participation of parents and community in children's education.

In Sahayatra, Nepal Evidence on working of relational volunteering model that VSO adopted appear to be overwhelmingly positive as the premises of transfer of knowledge, practice, attitude and behavior through cascading approach are visible. Big-Sisters as community volunteers remained at a centre stage demonstrating positive disposition of leadership and role model for children. They are valued highly by the parents, teachers and the community. They received support from national and international volunteers.

In Uganda, community volunteers formed critical part of the project as caregivers, early grade teachers, male action group members, youth volunteers. They were supported by national volunteers and international volunteers.

In EFL project Kenya, support and role of volunteers is highly valued by the primary actors as they ensured flexible and uninterrupted attendance of adolescents at the catch-up centres. Various volunteer groups supported the primary actors not only in learning, but also in life skills, sexual and reproductive health information, mentoring and business skills development. Contribution of volunteers appear to have had a positive impact as the data indicates improved self-confidence, decision making capacity and entrepreneurship capacities among adolescent girls.

Core Approaches

Inclusion and Gender

Of all core approaches a significant focus has been on inclusion. All four projects studied have intentional focus on ensuring children with disabilities have received attention and access to learning. Extra efforts of mainstreaming and policy integration of education of children with disabilities can be seen in BLF where in SNECOs as national volunteers provided a pioneering support to the government system as well as the primary actors. Other projects too made similar efforts through community awareness to remove stigma, improving facilities, teacher awareness and trainings and mainstreaming policies.

BLF has exemplified strategies and approaches for inclusion in a significant way. Access to education of children with disabilities and addressing children with learning difficulties are addressed through range of strategies that have ensured significant positive results. Mainstreaming inclusive education, bringing to the fore debate and discussion on Children with disabilities and children with learning difficulties is a major contribution of BLF. While gender inclusive and transformative pedagogy has not been initiated, there was conscious focus on gender mainstreaming in terms of addressing access challenges for girl children and also additional facilities and support for girls as part of safeguarding and addressing gender based violence and abuse within and outside school.

In Nepal disability inclusion has been managed through having a 'resource class' for children with disabilities which has ensured that those children do not lag behind. However capacity building of teachers on how to handle children with disabilities and learning difficulties has been an area of concern expressed by teachers themselves. Mainstreaming of inclusive education (in the normal class room setting) is a felt need in this regard.

In EFL, while adolescents with disabilities received opportunities to participate in life skills and livelihood skills education, the need for deepening this component of intervention was expressed by many stakeholders. However, on gender inclusion, the idea that adolescent girls can take up non gender stero-type of occupations has been demonstrated by the project and there has been support from community leaders and local officials for such an approach. Adolescent girls are seen to take up occupations like welder, mason and automobile repairs and computer repairs. While there is evidence of reduction in gender-based violence, the fact that adolescent girls still have to face resistance from male members for attending Catchup Centres is a reality which would mean that more gender awareness among men and boys is required. This would mean the project may have to devise strategies to work with boys and men.

In Uganda, Inclusion and Gender can be seen from a very interesting perspective. The project has been able to demonstrate inclusion and gender as core approaches. Children with disabilities have been drawn into the project and there has been perceptible change in the attitude of parents and community towards children with disabilities. Interventions included enhancing access, efforts towards building disability friendly infrastructure, capacity building to teachers and caregivers on inclusive methodologies. Gender transformative approach of including men into childcare responsibilities is a significant part of the project which appears to have yielded results.

Similarly, use of male action group (volunteers) to enhance awareness among men of families on the importance of sharing childcare responsibilities by men folk. This initiative appears to have an impact in terms of altering to some extent, gender relations within the family and community. Many testimonies of stakeholders point out that men members of the family are taking care of young children and undertake tasks of escorting the child to ECD centre, participation in parents meeting and etc

Accountability

On accountability, especially in relation to communities seeking accountable and responsible conduct of duty bearers, BLF appears to have taken a line which reflects the local context of guided engagement between citizens and government system. The evidence points to the participation of communities in education of children with disabilities and their participation in school development and improvement processes through the involvement of School General Assembly Committees (SGACs). School General Assembly Committee a body of parents appears to be an 'invited' space for communities rather than a 'claimed space' for articulating views and demands.
In Uganda social accountability practice, though not focused to engage with the government system, has been successful in inculcating ownership among communities and the structures created are suited to seek forward accountability and accountable delivery of results.

In Nepal, Community volunteers, Big-Sisters, have ensured various social accountability processes through their facilitation. They were able to contribute to the changes in terms of parental commitment towards education of their wards, improved parental participation in school affairs and children's learning, improved school governance (SMC/PTA strengthening and accountability relationship between the school and community), social responsibilities and leadership of children, young people and the community. Several triangulated testimonies point towards positive changes in these aspects.

Institutionalised mechanism of Complaint Response Mechanism (CRM) has been achieved through advocacy with the local government, which acts both as a social accountability as well as safe-guarding mechanism.

At the same time, there are gaps in terms of streamlining accountability work in EFL project in Kenya. While there are references for SMC/PTA strengthening and working with government departments on accountability, there appears to be no evidence on how the accountability relationship between right holders and duty bearers is fostered and what has been the results and it reflects the need for deepening the work in this respect.

Sustainability and Resilience

Understood variously in a nuanced way meeting the context, the focus of VSO has been on ensuring that the gains reached by stakeholders remain and continue to work for the wellbeing of the primary actors. While children's improved learning levels would ensure their progression on their learning curve, projects have ensured closer government (bureaucracy) relationship during implementation, having continuous teacher community of practice (CoP), leadership development of SMC/PTA as strategies to ensure that interventions are continued.

A best example of moving towards sustainability can be seen in BLF, where special needs education coordinators (volunteer -advisors) SNECOs are mainstreamed as government recognised their strategic presence at the sector level education system. Similarly national level leaders, local level leaders (teacher resource personnel) are being supported through the department of education to continue undertaking CoP activities at the school and sector levels. These reflect the reality that things will continue even after VSO formally withdraws. The resilience of the interventions can also be seen from the transformative leadership that the head teachers and sector education inspectors have demonstrated where in they convene meetings of stakeholders.

In other projects community (SMC/PTA) leadership is also seen as a strategy towards sustainability. Resource mobilisation by SMC/PTA for various activities including construction, mid-day meal and offering their services for school activities are a way forward for sustainability.

An important strategic outcome in the direction of sustainability is transfer of skills and knowledge through relational volunteering. Big-sisters, teacher volunteers, educators, male action group members have all acquired skills and practices that ensure that their community awareness and empowerment actions will continue at the village/ward level even after the project activities ceased at a particular field area. Resource pool that has been generated at BLF in the form of national level leader (NLL), local level leader (LLL), disability focal teacher (DFT) are another instance of ensuring that the activities focusing on teacher continuous professional development takes place at the school level.
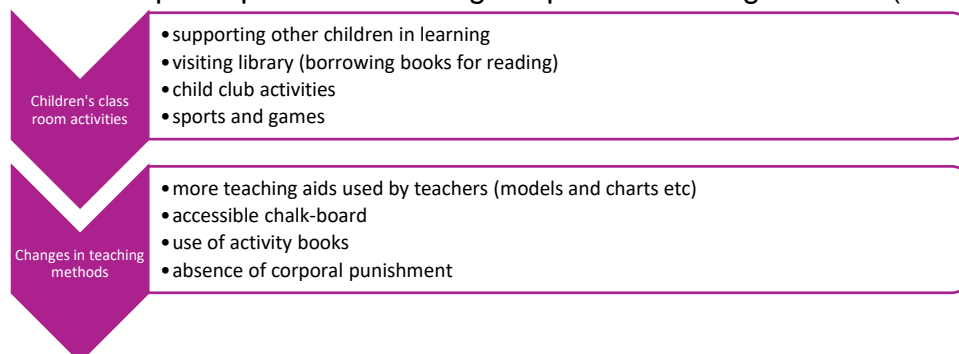
However a challenge remains, in terms of resourcing activities that were hitherto undertaken by VSO project. For this, projects have resorted to mobilise local resources as is the case with ECD in Uganda or EFL in Kenya where community already started making contributions. Such an approach needs acceleration and a strategic support.

Community Participation (Primary Actor Participation)

All studied projects engage with primary actors in this case school age children and their immediate families in education process. Parental awareness, spaces for their participation in school affairs, taking interest in children's learning, interface meetings with duty bearers, safeguarding roles were some of the features that reflect increased participation of community.

Children have also participated in activity-based clubs, extra-curricular activities and providing feedback to teachers and education leaders on the teaching learning process and activities at the classroom. An illustrative example found in BLF gives an idea of how child participation can become an effective way of seeking children's perspective of change. Children of grade 3 and 4 have expressed in many ways what they perceive it to be a change in the classroom practice and their own learning experience.

Children's participation and change expressed through a FGD (BLF Rwanda)

Children's class room activities	• supporting other children in learning • visiting library (borrowing books for reading) • child club activities • sports and games
Changes in teaching methods	• more teaching aids used by teachers (models and charts etc) • accessible chalk-board • use of activity books • absence of corporal punishment

System Strengthening (Education Management and Policy)

System strengthening has varying experiences across the four projects studied. While BLF has the strong element of improving capacities education managers to demonstrate leadership at school and system level, other projects have engaged with system from the perspective of policy advocacy and ensuring effective enactment and implementation of policies.

VSO facilitated community groups have worked with education administrators in Uganda, Nepal and Kenya in order to seek accountability of the duty bearers. Effective interface of SMC/PTAs is an important mode of influencing the system. Some of the gains in terms of policy change can be seen in Rwanda in terms mainstreaming of education of children with disabilities, complaint response mechanism in Nepal, strengthening local government support (and community resource support) for ECD in Uganda and effective facilitation of livelihoods of parents of children in Kenya. Facilitating networks of community based organisations towards seeking policy change has been a major part of VSOs policy advocacy and system strengthening agenda.

Perceptions of Change

Primary actors and other stakeholders including different volunteer groups across four countries have expressed the change that they experienced at the individual, family and community levels due to the interventions of VSO projects. While changes in learning levels of children is broadly acknowledged by all, there are several qualitative dimensions of change that are articulated through various testimonies.

They ranged from personal and behavioral change among parents in terms of valuing girl child education and that of children with disabilities, improved participation of parents in children's education, teachers, educators and caregivers experiencing enhanced agency and leadership in terms of classroom and learning transactions, improvements in school leadership on education management, improved classroom practices and use of teaching aids due to continuous professional development of teachers, conscious disability inclusion practices and focus on girl child basic learning achievement and empowerment are some of the changes articulated by the stakeholders.

III. Recommendations

Based on the above summary findings, following exhaustive recommendations are presented for the consideration of Inclusive and Resilience Education Portfolio. Such a detailed recommendations are warranted as there are many contextual nuances that need to be articulated while formulating the same.

- Experience presented here provide a template for engaging with education interventions, especially that focus on the core strategic priorities of IRE portfolio, viz,. strengthening ECCD and foundational learning of children.

- Holistic program outcomes are possible if projects are designed in such a way that they ensure access, participation of children in the education system; continuous teacher development; education leadership and system strengthening. All these must be envisaged as simultaneous and inter-related engagements that lead to realization of objectives.

- ECD interventions require contextual considerations especially in terms of choice of delivery space (home based and centre based) and caregiver training and capacity building and playway methods of learning are found to be most effective. Downward shift of primary grade learning achievement as objectives for ECCD may not be a desirable approach, rather focus has to be on children's cognitive and psychomotor development. Towards this end, child centred and play based methodologies can be effective modes of delivery. Comprehensive ECCD approach can be formulated by the PA in due course.

- VSOs VfD approach is found to be successful in delivering results in terms of enhancing access, capacity building of teachers and system strengthening. Volunteers' contribution in terms of technical inputs is invaluable across all types of educational interventions. VfD has also delivered effective education governance (locating learning within the social context of the community).

- Big-Sisters and caregivers (community volunteers) as transformative agents of change need to be mainstreamed in Resilient and Inclusive Education Programming approach in future projects as evidenced in Nepal and elsewhere.

- School-community interface need to be nurtured and strengthened through direct interventions through project structures in terms of community volunteers who would be able to work towards capacity building of communities as well as liaison between school system and communities.

- Institutional arrangements for strengthening teacher capacities and continued professional development are crucial and project may invest in developing such systems as part of design.

- Transfer of ownership of the processes must be envisaged from the start of the project and adequate mechanisms must be put in place especially within the government system so that project interventions are carried forward beyond the life of the project.

- Adoption of VfD evidence logic of 'HOW did we achieve change, WHAT learning outcomes leading to WHICH of the structural/underlying causal changes', ought to form basis for evidencing.

- VSOs education projects may accommodate duty of care in terms of well-being and welfare of volunteers (who often work for 3-4 years) so that they continue to demonstrate commitment towards supporting the communities and teachers.

- At the project level however, indepth capacity building of SMC/PTA, centre management commitees (CMC), organising interface meetings with duty bearers and leveraging resources for school /centre improvement plans from the government are required to further strengthen education governance.

- Sustainability of improvements in teaching methods, learning levels of children, school and home environment for learning requires continuous mediation of agency like national volunteers as resource persons or 'Big-Sister' as community volunteers for a considerable period so that future generations develop the culture of learning. Conscious effort to establish such institutional arrangements within the government system can be explored for sustainability.

- Lessons from inclusion can be systematically documented further in order to identify how to mainstream education of adolescent children with disabilities and create livelihoods. While inclusive education in formal contexts is somewhat systematized, this project provides an opportunity to address issues that arise while imparting learning in informal settings like catchup centres.

- The need for strengthening technical capacities in disability education can be factored in within the overall PA level strategy to strengthen teacher/educator professional development.

- PA may identify systematic interventions in the arena of social accountability in any future project designs as few current projects demonstrate it as a missed opportunity.

- VSO projects addressed some of the gender transformative aspects related to learning and it would be interesting to document specific case studies and disseminate in order to influence the policy makers, donors and future project designs. Working with men and boys can be considered as a strategy to create change at the family and community levels there by ECD learners as well as adolescent girls will get more support.

- ECD project provides some interesting insights on how partners can coordinate with VSO and deliver results in a conflict context. A detailed study on partnerships can be thought of as a follow up of this learning exercise which would provide insights on how to work in fragile contexts.

- Child friendly and play-way methods of transactions at the ECD centre appears to have worked well as the stakeholders appreciated the same. Practice Area may develop best practices in this perspective and engage in detailed study linking the processes to learning outcomes of children.

- Transition experience of children (and perceptions of teachers) from ECD to primary grade and the impact of the same in terms of coping and learning outcomes of children can also be studied in depth so that PA can firmly establish the relevance and necessity of ECD.

- Working at the intersection of learning/education and livelihood skills can be explored especially with a focus on out of school adolescent girl child more intensely in terms of pedagogical practice, contextual understanding and relevance and potential for influencing the system.

- For example, methods of using digital technologies (talking books and tablets) for approaching literacy and numeracy as well as life skills have found traction among out of school adolescent girls.

- This is even more important as learning and livelihoods nexus is becoming important with communities becoming urbanized and new occupations are emerging in many countries.