Russia Education Aid for Development (READ) Trust Fund: A Vision Note

“International assessments highlight large achievement gaps between students in rich and poor countries. Within countries too, inequality exists between regions, communities, schools, and classrooms. These disparities have important implications not just in education but for the wider distribution of opportunities in society.”

– Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2009

What is READ?

Agreed in October 2008, the Russia Education Aid for Development (READ) program is a collaboration of the Government of Russia and the World Bank aimed at advancing Russia’s role as an emerging donor in education, with a focus on improving education quality in low-income countries. The READ Trust Fund (hereafter referred to as READ) is a part of this program. It is an untied, World Bank-executed trust fund in the amount of $32 million to be used over a 5-year period.

READ will help low-income countries improve their student learning outcomes through the design, implementation, and utilization of national systems for student assessment. Such systems may include:

- tests designed to measure overall learning levels in the system, e.g., sample-based surveys of national achievement levels;
- tests designed to make decisions about individual students, e.g., graduation or university entrance examinations;
- daily classroom assessment activities;
- provision of information on learning outcomes to stakeholders;
- analysis of assessment results toward improving curriculum, instruction, and training policies and practices;
- teacher professional development materials on appropriate uses of assessments and their results.

READ’s support may be expected to cover diverse assessment-related activities including national surveys (“how well are our students performing in relation to our national learning goals?”), international assessments (“how well are our students performing in comparison with other countries?”), and public examinations (“which students should be selected to proceed to the next level of the education system?”)

A key aim of READ is to help countries strengthen the capacity of institutions that are responsible for measuring student learning outcomes or for using information from those assessments to improve teaching and learning. READ will support analytical work and technical assistance to help countries (a) establish systems or institutions—or strengthen existing ones—that formulate learning goals and carry out assessments of student learning; (b) improve existing or develop new instruments to measure student learning outcomes; and (c) strengthen existing or develop new mechanisms (policies) to use learning outcomes data to improve teaching and learning.

Seven countries have been selected by Russia for READ assistance at this time: Angola, Ethiopia, the Kyrgyz Republic, Mozambique, Tajikistan, Vietnam, and Zambia. These countries will benefit from hands-on technical assistance and knowledge and analytical services as needed, designed in collaboration with the country and based on the country’s interests. Many more countries will benefit from the development
and sharing of generalized guidance informed by this country-level support.

READ envisages support in particular to countries that participate in the Education for All Fast-Track Initiative (FTI). FTI is a global partnership aimed at helping low-income countries accelerate progress toward achieving the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary completion by 2015 (MDG2). READ will help FTI countries formulate and implement coherent, results-focused education sector plans. This, in turn, will reinforce efforts to measure learning outcomes and to use the results to improve education quality. READ complements existing external funding sources available to FTI countries by its singular dedication to improving learning outcomes through the use of student assessments and a focus on institutional capacity strengthening and cross-country knowledge sharing.

Why READ?

Many low-income countries have made progress and are well placed to achieve MDG2. While this progress is important, enrollment in school is only a first step. Unless students are learning the skills they need to continue their education and access good jobs, improvements in enrollment and completion rates throughout the developing world will not lead to the desired effects on individual lives, poverty reduction, and economic growth.

Learning matters: higher skills produce higher incomes. There is a considerable body of evidence showing that education drives economic returns. More than years of schooling, it is learning, that is, the acquisition of cognitive skills, which produces gains in individual productivity and income. Several studies show a strong correlation between higher test scores and higher wages. For example, in one study, a one standard deviation increase in test scores in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) was associated with 15-20 percent higher earnings.

Learning matters especially for the poor. There is evidence that, while skills have positive returns for people at all income levels, they have particularly strong returns for low-income individuals, especially those in the lowest 25 percent of the economic spectrum.

Investment in learning-focused education helps countries reduce poverty and promote economic growth. As more poor people acquire cognitive skills, become more productive, earn more, and rise out of poverty, countries benefit, realizing gains in economic growth and equity. Research shows that:

- differences in cognitive skills lead to economically significant differences in economic growth, and school policy can, if effective in raising cognitive skills, be an important force in economic development;
- a one standard deviation increase in scores on international assessments of literacy and mathematics competencies is associated with a 2 percent increase in annual growth rates of GDP per capita.

Despite the importance of learning, few low-income countries even measure learning outcomes. Some have experimented with national assessments of student learning (Figure 1), but often these have been ad-hoc experiences that are not part of an education strategy and are not sustained over time. A comparatively small number of developing countries have participated in international assessments of student learning such as TIMSS, PIRLS, and PISA, which enable countries to measure how their education systems perform
In summary, the benefits of education accrue to society only when learning occurs and when children and youth acquire cognitive skills. But too often, learning is not occurring, and in a number of countries there is not even any knowledge of whether learning is taking place, because there is no measurement of learning. Without measurement, there is no roadmap for analyzing where the problems lie or how to address them. The purpose of READ is to help fill this critical gap: to help countries put in place a system to regularly measure learning outcomes and use the results to improve learning outcomes, as a key driver of economic growth and poverty reduction.

How will READ work?

Measuring student learning outcomes is increasingly recognized as necessary not only for monitoring, but also for improving, education quality. Student achievement information can be used to inform a wide variety of education policies, ranging from the design and implementation of policies and programs to improve teaching and learning in classrooms, to identifying lagging students so they can get the support they need, to ensuring that low-performing teachers and schools receive adequate technical assistance and training and thus guarantee that all students have an equal opportunity to learn.

The low scores seen in countries where learning is measured highlight education quality as a critical challenge for developing countries. The international community, including the World Bank, seeks increasingly to extend its support beyond raising school enrollments to ensure that all children have access to an education of high quality.
to bear in helping countries design and use student assessments to raise education quality.

The TG will be responsible for two major strands of READ work: (i) developing global products to both inform local interventions and generate lessons from country-specific activities; and (ii) providing technical assistance and support to country teams in the implementation of READ activities (Figure 2).

Figure 2: READ global products and country-specific activities

i. Global products

One of the expected contributions of READ is a series of global products on the design and use of student assessment systems to raise education quality in low-income settings. These products may include toolkits for carrying out learning assessments, research-based policy papers, reports, and workshops.

i. Country-specific activities: the READ “Brand”

Countries engage in a variety of assessment activities and with varying frequency. Sustained attention to measuring student achievement is crucial, however, to steadily improving learning outcomes in a cycle of measuring, analyzing, and using data to influence the relevant policies and practices (Figure 3). READ proposes a systematic approach to putting in place this cycle, entailing the steps outlined below, which together make for a comprehensive framework of activities—rather than piecemeal and incoherent ones—aimed at developing a sound national system for student assessment as a basis for efforts to raise education quality:

• Carrying out a Self-Diagnosis based on a READ-designed template exploring questions related to student learning assessments and their use to improve teaching and learning, with the Self-Diagnosis followed by an international review of the findings and recommendations;
• Developing an Action Plan to strengthen national systems for student assessment and their use, accompanied by an evaluation strategy;
• Implementing Pilot Assessment(s), including utilization of assessment information for improving teaching and learning in classrooms; and
• Summarizing lessons learned from READ activities, including an evaluation of pilot assessments, to inform future policies and activities.

These steps, embodied in the READ “Brand”, are envisaged to underpin all READ assistance at the country level, applied flexibly and adapted to each country’s specific context. Flexibility is critical, and it is important to underscore that countries will drive the design of READ assistance, in line with the FTI principle of country ownership. Each of these steps will benefit from support from the TG, aimed at bringing international knowledge to bear in each country.
The TG will support countries in these activities, by:

- Providing a template with technical guidelines for the initial diagnostic, informed by international best practices;
- Reviewing and providing technical feedback on the diagnostic as well as recommendations for the Action Plan (including use of global products developed under READ), informed by international best practices;
- Reviewing and providing technical feedback on the Action Plan and Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy developed by the country team;
- Providing regular technical assistance to build capacity in country; and
- Providing guidelines and technical support in the preparation of lessons learned.

**Expected outcomes of READ**

The main expected outcome of READ is the strengthened institutional capacity of low-income countries to develop, carry out, and use student assessment information to raise student learning outcomes in a sustained manner. Because changes in teaching and learning take time to be reflected in student learning outcomes, the indicators that would be expected to measure READ’s progress toward achieving its objectives include, at the global level, development of knowledge products and their dissemination, and at the country level, the actions that countries take toward strengthening student assessment systems and their use. These include:

- Agreement on learning goals
- Completion of Self-Diagnosis (and international review)
- Preparation of Action Plans
- Implementation of pilot assessment(s) and its evaluation
- Training of country staff in areas related to student assessment
- Preparation of recommendations for policy changes based on the assessment results.

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Figure 3. Concept underlying READ

Agree/Confirm learning goals
Align with Education Sector Plan

Principles
- Country-driven design
- Actively engaging local actors
- Building on ongoing work
- Utilizing existing capacity
- Strengthening institutional capacity
- Informed by international best practices

Reform policies and practices to improve teaching and learning

Disseminate assessment data
Analyze data to determine how to improve quality
Pilot activities to improve teaching and learning based on the assessment data

Measure progress toward goals through student learning assessments
References


