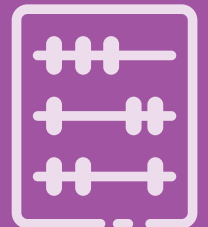


Quick Guide No. 2

Making the Case for a Learning Assessment



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UNESCO Institute for Statistics
P.O. Box 6128, Succursale Centre-Ville
Montreal, Quebec H3C 3J7 Canada

Tel: +1 514-343-6880

Email: uis.publications@unesco.org

<http://uis.unesco.org>

Prepared by: Dr María José Ramírez, Consultant, mariajose.ramirez001@gmail.com

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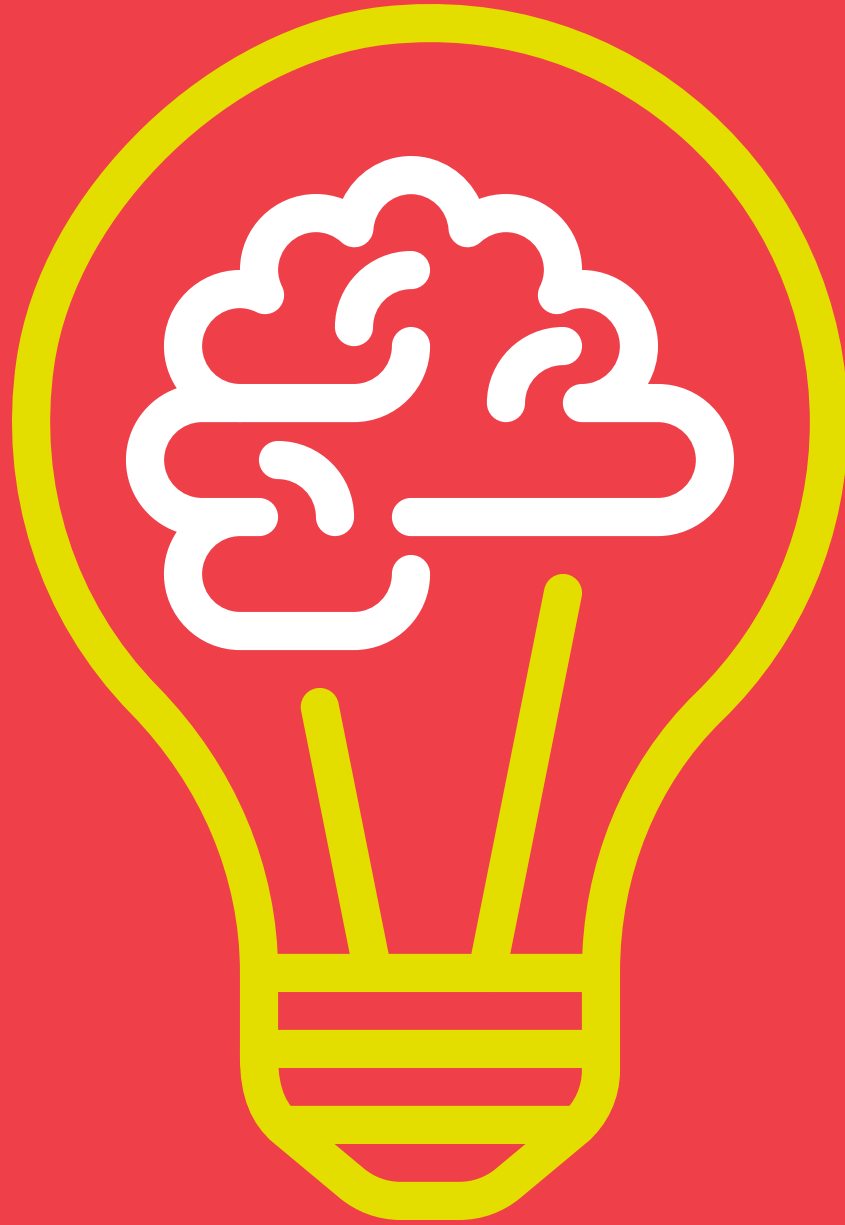


INTRODUCTION

Learning assessments are among the least expensive education reforms, typically costing far less than building schools or hiring teachers. When correctly implemented, learning assessments can be used to monitor learning for all and, most importantly, to improve learning. Assessments can be among the most cost-effective reforms a country can implement.

The **most improved education systems** in the world use learning assessments to systematically inform policy and practice. At the policy level, assessment results can be used to inform program design and for impact evaluation purposes. Results can also be used to supervise schools and hold them accountable. Schools can use assessments as a diagnostic tool and set learning objectives based on their results. Teachers can benefit from assessment information by adjusting their pedagogical practices, for example, to address the needs of students that have different learning levels.

How do you introduce reforms in learning assessment? How do you implement an effective assessment? The purpose of this Quick Guide is to help countries to navigate through learning assessment reforms. **Chapter 1** presents the main arguments to convince stakeholders to introduce reforms in learning assessments. **Chapter 2** focuses on key questions to initiate the policy dialogue. Countries have to make decisions regarding what type of assessment to implement: Should they implement a national, regional or cross-national assessment? Should they develop a brand new national assessment or adapt an already existing one? **Chapter 3** offers guidance to make these decisions. Finally, **Chapter 4** focuses on considerations that are especially relevant for implementing a national assessment.



WHY INVEST IN LEARNING ASSESSMENTS?

1

The commitment of stakeholders is essential to invest in a learning assessment. Here are the key rationales for making the case to invest in a learning assessment and for initiating the policy dialogue with different stakeholders.

Rationale for the government, politicians and donors

- Learning is key for the social and economic development of the country and assessments can contribute to improve learning, not only to monitor it.
- Learning assessments can be used to raise awareness about the importance of learning. They can stimulate a national debate, garnering support for introducing reforms and increasing investment in education. For example, poor results can be used as a “shock value” to hire and train more teachers.
- Assessment results are important to monitor the impact on learning of different policies and programmes.

- Countries that have been successful in improving learning usually have in place strong learning assessments. Results are used systematically to inform policy and practice, and to inform different stakeholders (government, politicians, donors, civil society, educators, parents). This evidence-based approach allows for a better diagnostic of the problems and challenges that affect learning and for finding better solutions to overcome them.
- Assessments allow for knowing if the huge amount of money the country invests in education translates into learning. Investing in education without assessing learning is like paying for a product that you cannot see. Without assessments, it is not possible to know if the investment is supporting learning.
- Learning assessments are among the least expensive innovations in education reform. For instance, investing in an assessment is much cheaper than investing in building schools or hiring teachers. A national assessment may cost between US\$200,000 and US\$1 million. This usually represents less than 0.3% of the education budget of the countries.

Countries that have been successful
in improving learning usually
have in place strong learning
assessments.

- Learning assessments for monitoring purposes are usually much cheaper than examinations for certification purposes. This is because not all students are necessarily tested (they can be sampled). Another reason is that administration and security standards can be lower (and cheaper) since results do not have high consequences for the students. This argument is especially relevant for countries that are considering phasing out their examinations for primary or secondary school diploma.
- Learning assessments provide better information for monitoring purposes than examinations. This is because they measure a wider range of skills, not only the ones around a pass/fail cut-off point. Learning assessments also collect background information that enable putting results in a broader context.
- Learning assessments can be used for accountability purposes. Education is a shared responsibility among different stakeholders (e.g. central and local government, schools). Assessment results can be used to hold stakeholders accountable for results.
- Learning assessments are needed to inform the United Nations **Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4**: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. Learning assessments should be able to inform SDG Indicator 4.1.1: “Proportion of children and young people: (a) in Grade 2 or 3; (b) at the end of primary education; and (c) at the end of lower secondary education achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex”.



Rationale for educators

- Assessments can be a powerful tool to support teaching and learning. Teachers can use assessment information and results to better understand the competencies, contents and skills that students are expected to learn at school. They can adjust their pedagogy so that all students have opportunities to learn what is stated in the curriculum and what is measured in the tests. Assessment results can also shed light on the different learning levels of the students and the need to target instruction accordingly.
- School leaders can use school results to identify strengths and weaknesses and provide support to those teachers that need it the most. Assessment results can be used as an input to set learning targets and to design school improvement plans. School leaders can raise expectations by showing how other schools working on similar social contexts can attain higher learning levels.
- Supervisors can use assessment results to monitor the performance of schools under their jurisdictions. Assessment results provide concrete data to work on in partnership with schools. For instance, supervisors can work with each school to address learning needs of students who do not reach minimum learning levels.

Parents can play
a key role supporting
student learning.

Rationale for teacher training institutions

- Teacher training institutions can use assessment results and information to improve the way they train future and current teachers. Teacher training programmes can be improved by having a more accurate diagnostic of the actual learning levels of the students. This diagnostic can be used to reflect on the best teaching approaches to attain the learning objectives stated in the national curriculum.

Rationale for parents

- Parents can play a key role supporting student learning. Assessment results can explain to parents what their students know and can do; results can also tell them if students are meeting curricular expectations. Parents can be asked to support student learning at home by, for example, ensuring that students have a quiet time to do their homework. Parents can also discuss assessment results with teachers and inquire about what the school is doing to improve them.

Arguments against learning assessments typically refer to a reduction of the curriculum to the topics that are included in the test only, teaching to the test (meaning preparing students mechanically to take the tests), blaming the teachers for poor results and school stigmatisation (when school results are made public), among others.

These concerns should be taken seriously, for instance, by stressing the fact that education is a shared responsibility and that assessment results are going to be used to support teachers, not to blame them.





HOW TO INITIATE THE POLICY DIALOGUE IN LEARNING ASSESSMENT REFORM?

2

Countries can initiate the policy dialogue by addressing the following topics and questions:

- **Stakeholders support.** Who wants a learning assessment? Who opposes it? Why? It is critical to ensure political support from stakeholders (e.g. government, policymakers, educators, parents, donors) to make the assessment viable in the country. Different arguments can be used to convince different stakeholders (see **Chapter 1**).
- **Assessment champion.** Who in the country can be the assessment champion or person leading an assessment reform? This can be a technical or political person with a high credibility and capacity to convince key stakeholders (e.g. Minister of Education). The champion must also have management capacity to implement the assessment.
- **Previous country experience.** Has the country ever administered a national, regional or cross-national assessment? What are the lessons learned? What aspects could be replicated if a new assessment is implemented? What mistakes should be avoided?

- **Clarity of purpose.** It is important that stakeholders agree on the purposes of the assessment and on the way results will be communicated and used. For instance, is the national assessment going to measure the curriculum? Is it going to report school results? A steering committee made up of representatives of key stakeholders (e.g. policymakers, educators, parents and assessment specialists) should answer these and other key questions. If there is no steering committee, the government should specify the purposes and intended uses of the assessment in consultation with stakeholders.
- **National curriculum.** Is there a national curriculum that could guide the assessment? The curriculum can provide the framework for developing the tests. Assessment results can be used to monitor if students are reaching the curricular objectives and to support teachers in implementing the curriculum.
- **Policy framework.** Is there a clear policy framework that supports the learning assessment? This is important to ensure that there is a common understanding of the assessment and that it is sustainable in time. For instance, a law can specify the purposes and expected uses of the assessment results, governance, institution in charge and annual budget. Other policy documents can indicate subject areas, grades and frequency of administration and inform about the assessment plan for the coming years. Policy documents should be available to the public.



- **Funding.** Is there enough and stable funding to implement the learning assessment on a regular basis? It is important to secure sufficient funding to cover the whole assessment cycle, including the communication of results. Funding may come from the national budget, donors or others.

- **Institutional arrangements.** Is there an institution that can implement the assessment? Different institutional arrangements are possible. For example, a unit within the Ministry of Education (e.g. a “curriculum and assessment” unit or an EMIS (Education Management Information Systems) unit), a semi-autonomous examinations office or a university. The institution in charge of the assessment should be accountable to a clearly-recognised body. It must have the appropriate resources (e.g. computers and software) to run the assessment.
- **Local capacity.** Is there local capacity to implement the assessment? Usually countries need support on instrument (test and questionnaire) development, sampling, data collection, data analysis and reporting. It is important to identify the individuals who have experience doing these tasks and the ones who can be trained to do them. International technical assistance may be needed to provide hands-on training on key assessment tasks. This can be provided by institutions or individual consultants.
- **Readiness to handle poor results.** Is the government prepared to publish poor results? Assessment results can show that there is a big gap between curricular objectives and the actual learning levels of students. The government should be prepared to mitigate criticism and negative media coverage. For instance, results could be framed as a diagnostic or starting point, and a new policy could be launched to improve learning.
- **Types of assessments.** Countries may choose among different types of assessments. A country may decide to participate in a cross-national assessment with global coverage, whereas another may prefer to do a regional assessment that measures countries from its same geographic area. Another country may opt for developing a brand new national assessment, whereas another may consider adapting an already-existing national assessment from another country. A country may also consider adapting some of the free assessments that are available online. The following chapter provides guidance on how to select the best assessment for your country.



CHOOSING THE BEST ASSESSMENT FOR YOUR COUNTRY

3

Different assessments have different purposes and characteristics: They may measure different subject areas, at different grades, using different administration modes. They may vary in the frequency of the assessment administration and implementation costs. Countries aiming to introduce learning assessments should be aware of these differences and should select the assessment that best fits their purposes, needs and resources. They should also select them based on the geographic areas where these assessments have a stronger presence (see **Figure 1**).

Table 1 presents key characteristics of cross-national and regional assessments and free assessments that are available for any country interested in administering them. See the Annex for more detailed information.

Different assessments can complement each other. For example, a country may administer a national assessment in Grade 3 and a cross-national assessment in Grade 6. However, given scarce resources, countries may need to opt for one or the other. **Table 2** presents pros (potential benefits) and cons (potential risks) of national assessments vis-à-vis regional and cross-national assessments.

Figure 1. Geographic distribution of regional and cross-national assessments

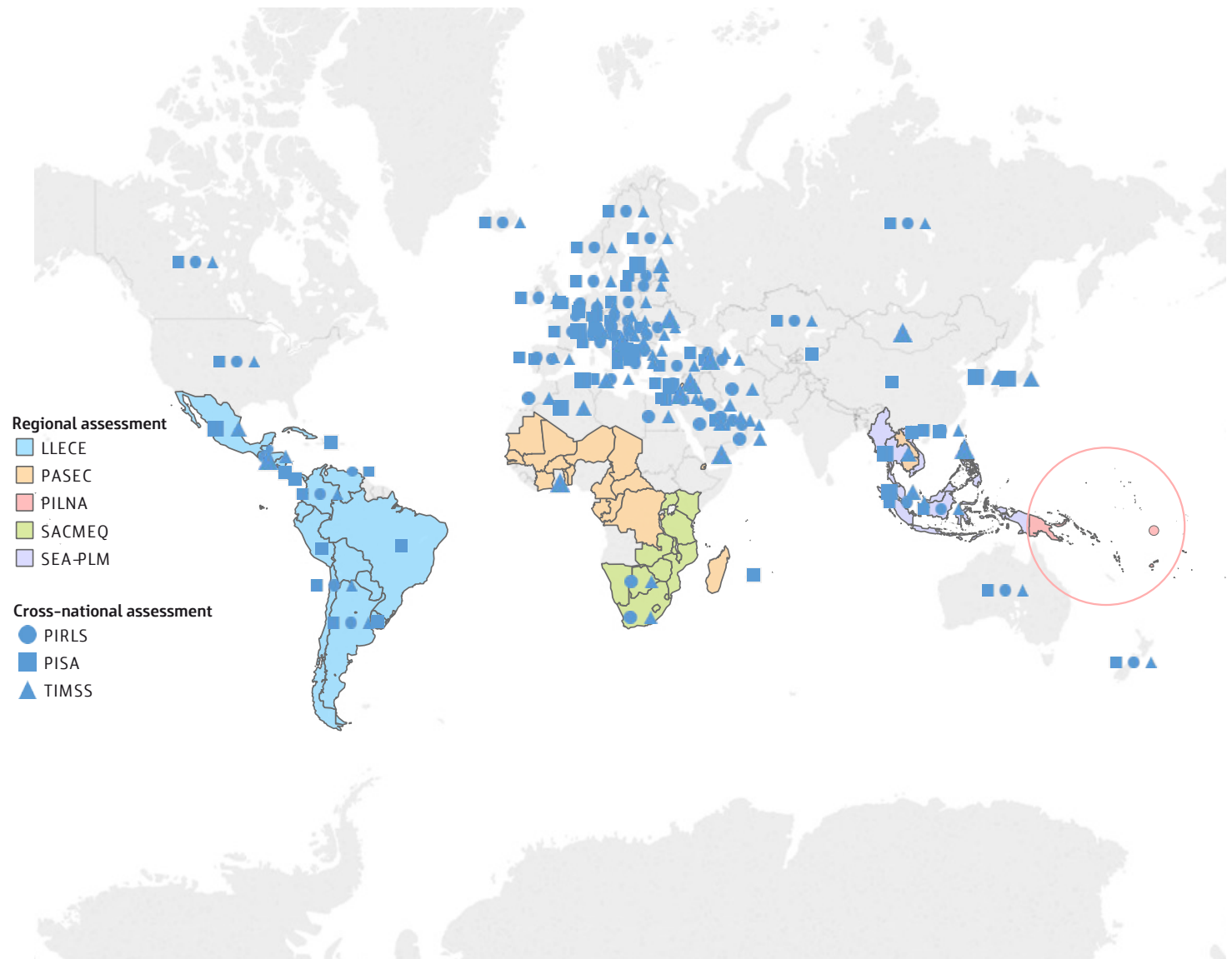


Table 1. Characteristics of cross-national, regional and free assessments

Cross-national assessments	
Main subject area	PISA: Mathematics, language (reading), natural sciences TIMSS: Mathematics, natural sciences PIRLS: Language (reading)
Grade/age	PISA: 15-year-old students TIMSS: Grades 4 and 8 PIRLS: Grade 4
Frequency	PISA: Every 3 years TIMSS: Every 4 years PIRLS: Every 5 years
Administration mode	PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS: Group administration of paper and pencil tests are being gradually replaced by computer-based tests.
Type of questions/items	PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS: Multiple-choice and open-ended questions
Administration site	PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS: School-based PISA-D also includes out-of-school youths (household administration)
Costs	PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS: Countries need to pay participation fees and in-country implementation (test preparation and administration, data capturing and dissemination of national results). Total cost per country usually varies around US\$800,000 depending on the assessment programme and local costs.

Different assessments may measure different subject areas, at different grades, using different administration modes.

Table 1 (continued)

Regional assessments	
Main subject area	<p>LLECE: Mathematics, language (reading and writing), natural sciences</p> <p>PASEC: Mathematics, language (listening/oral comprehension, decoding and reading)</p> <p>PILNA: Mathematics, language (reading and writing)</p> <p>SACMEQ: Mathematics, language (reading), health</p> <p>SEA-PLM: Mathematics, language (reading and writing), global citizenship</p>
Grade/age	<p>LLECE: Grades 3 and 6</p> <p>PASEC: Grades 2 and 6</p> <p>PILNA: Grades 4 and 6</p> <p>SACMEQ: Grade 6</p> <p>SEA-PLM: Grade 5</p>
Frequency	<p>LLECE: 1997, 2006, 2013, 2019</p> <p>PASEC: 2000-2010, 2011-2012, 2014, 2019</p> <p>PILNA: 2012, 2015, 2018</p> <p>SACMEQ: 1995, 2000, 2007, 2013, 2019</p> <p>SEA-PLM: 2018/19</p>
Administration mode	<p>LLECE, PILNA, SACMEQ, SEA-PLM: Group administration of paper and pencil tests</p> <p>PASEC (Grade 2): Individual and oral administration</p> <p>PASEC (Grade 6): Group administration of paper and pencil tests</p>
Type of questions/items	<p>LLECE, PILNA, SEA-PLM: Multiple-choice and open-ended questions</p> <p>PASEC (Grade 2): Students answer questions orally</p> <p>PASEC (Grade 6), SACMEQ: Multiple-choice only</p>
Administration site	<p>LLECE, PASEC, PILNA, SACMEQ, SEA-PLM: School-based administration</p>
Costs	<p>LLECE, PASEC, PILNA, SACMEQ, SEA-PLM: Countries need to pay participation fee and in-country implementation (test preparation and administration, data capturing and dissemination of national results). Total cost per country may vary around US\$200,000-US\$500,000, depending on assessment programme and local costs.</p>

Table 1 (continued)

Free assessments	
Main subject areas	<p>EGRA: Language (listening/oral comprehension, oral reading fluency, decoding, reading). You can download the free toolkit here.</p> <p>EGMA: Mathematics (numbers and operations, word problems). You can download the free toolkit here.</p> <p>ASER: Mathematics, language (decoding, reading, writing). You can download the free toolkit here.</p> <p>UWEZO: Mathematics, language (decoding, reading, writing). You can download the free toolkit here.</p>
Grade/age	<p>EGRA, EGMA: Grades 1-4</p> <p>ASER: Children/youth aged 5-16</p> <p>UWEZO: Children/youth aged 6-16</p>
Frequency	<p>EGRA, EGMA: Varies by country</p> <p>ASER: Administered annually in India and Pakistan</p> <p>UWEZO: Administered annually in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda</p>
Administration mode	EGRA, EGMA, ASER, UWEZO: Individual and oral administration
Type of questions/ items	EGRA, EGMA, ASER, UWEZO: Children/youth answer questions orally or in written
Administration site	<p>EGRA/EGMA: In-school children/youth</p> <p>ASER, UWEZO: Both in- and out-of-school children/youth</p>
Costs	EGRA, EGMA, ASER, UWEZO: Tests and instruments are available online for free. Countries only have to pay the costs of implementing the assessment; they do not have to pay participation fees. Total cost per country may vary around US\$200,000 depending on the way the assessment is implemented (e.g. national versus sub-national level) and local costs.

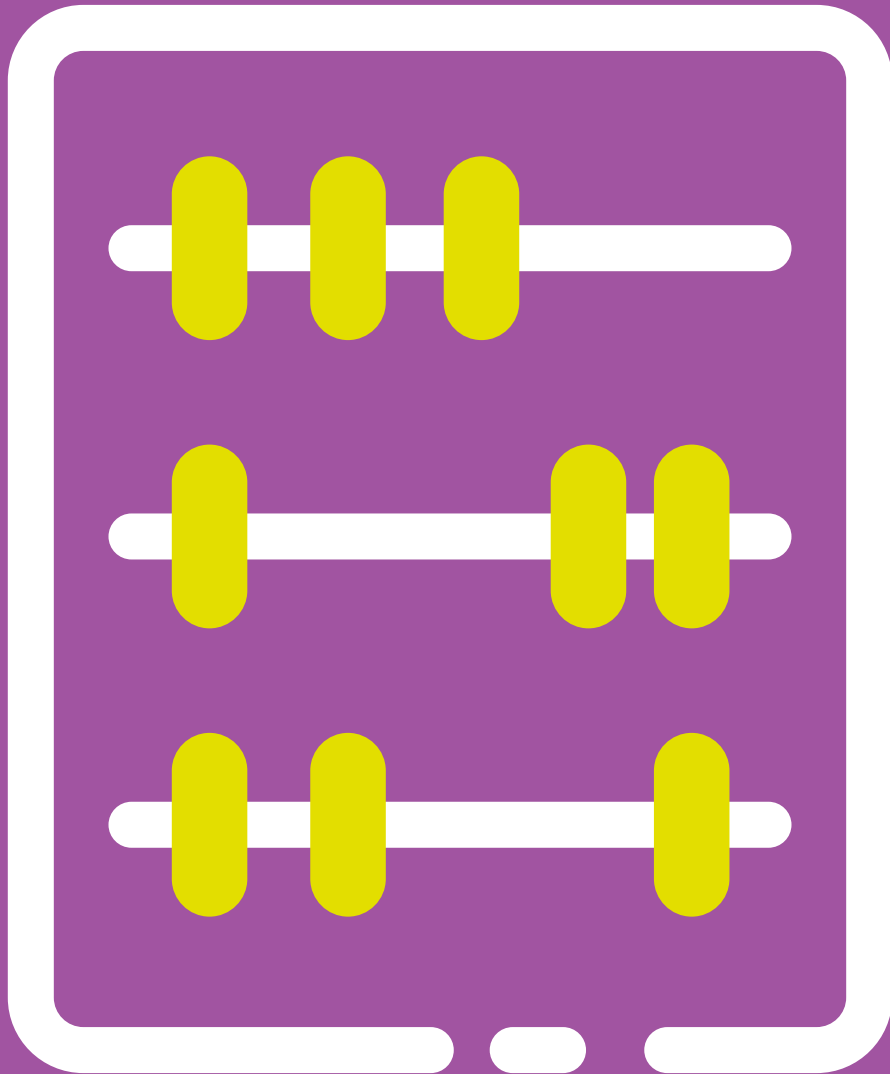
Table 2. Pros (+) and cons (-) of national assessments vis-à-vis cross-national and regional assessments

National assessments	Cross-national and regional assessments
(-) More likely to be affected by country politics. Results may not be published or they may not be trusted.	(+) Independent of country politics. Results are more likely to be trusted.
(-) Usually lower degrees of transparency and credibility. This may negatively impact support from stakeholders.	(+) Usually higher degrees of transparency and credibility. This positively impacts support from stakeholders.
(+) Allows for involving local stakeholders in the assessment and therefore more likely to ensure their support.	(-) Local stakeholders are less involved in the assessment and therefore may be less likely to support it.
(+) Usually more aligned with the national curriculum and its learning objectives.	(-) Usually less aligned with the national curriculum and its learning objectives.
(+) May be better suited to measure "at the right level", given the real (low) learning level of students.	(-) May be too difficult for the students in the country, given their real (low) learning levels.

Table 2 (continued)

National assessments	Cross-national and regional assessments
(-) Technical quality may suffer as a consequence of low local capacity and insufficient resources.	(+) Usually adhere to higher technical standards. The most sophisticated techniques and procedures are used.
(-) The local team may not have access to appropriate training to implement the assessment.	(+) The local team can benefit from high-quality, hands-on training in each step of the assessment. Very valuable to build local capacity.
(+) May be cheaper than a cross-national assessment. Countries need to cost test development, data analysis and reporting.	(-) May be more expensive than a national assessment. Countries need to cost participation fees and travels, and assessment implementation.
(+) May be better suited for accountability purposes (e.g. central and local governments, schools).	(-) Not or less suited for accountability purposes within the country.

Different assessments
can complement each other.



CONSIDERATIONS IN IMPLEMENTING A NATIONAL LEARNING ASSESSMENT

4

If a country decides to implement a national learning assessment, the following questions should be answered:

- **WHAT are the purposes of the national assessment?** These should be defined taking into account the broader education goals, the local context and the resources available in the country. For example, to monitor if students are reaching the curricular objectives in mathematics and reading at Grades 3 (end of first cycle of primary education), 6 (end of primary education) and 9 (end of first cycle of secondary education) and to support learning for all. The national assessment should be designed to fit this purpose.
- **WHAT will be tested?** Common subject areas or domains are language (reading and writing), mathematics, sciences, health and civic education. Countries also need to decide in which language(s) the assessment will be administered (e.g. mother tongue in the earlier grades or language of instruction?).
- **WHAT other information will be collected?** School, teacher and student questionnaires can be used to collect background information to understand learning.

- **WHO will be tested?** Countries need to specify a) the target grade or age at which the assessment will be administered; b) if the assessment is going to be sample-based (e.g. a nationally-representative sample of students participate in the assessment) or census-based (e.g. all schools participate in the assessment); and c) if the assessment is going to include out-of-school children and youth (e.g. household survey).
- **HOW will students be tested?** For example, paper and pencil or computer-based tests, multiple-choice or open-ended questions, group or individual administration.
- **WHO will administer the assessment?** External test administrators may be trained for administering the tests under the same conditions to all students. Teacher may also do so if they adhere to standardised administration guidelines.
- **WHEN will the assessment be administered?** For example, every three years, at the end of the school year.
- **HOW will results be published?** Results should be published as soon as possible. They should address key research questions, for example: What percentage of students reach the minimum proficiency level in reading?

Countries should answer these questions according to their broader education goals, the local context and the resources available. Stakeholders should be involved through consultations or steering committees.

In implementing a national assessment, countries should consider different options: to develop a brand new assessment or to adapt an already existing one. For example, Mozambique adapted an assessment from Brazil (**Provinha Brazil**) for its national assessment. Gambia has been administering EGRA/EGMA tests to nationally-representative samples of students. Pakistan has been administering the household test **ASER** annually to nationally-representative samples of children and youth. In this [link](#) (see the Annex) you can find a comprehensive list of national assessment programmes from countries around the world.

WHERE TO FIND MORE INFORMATION?

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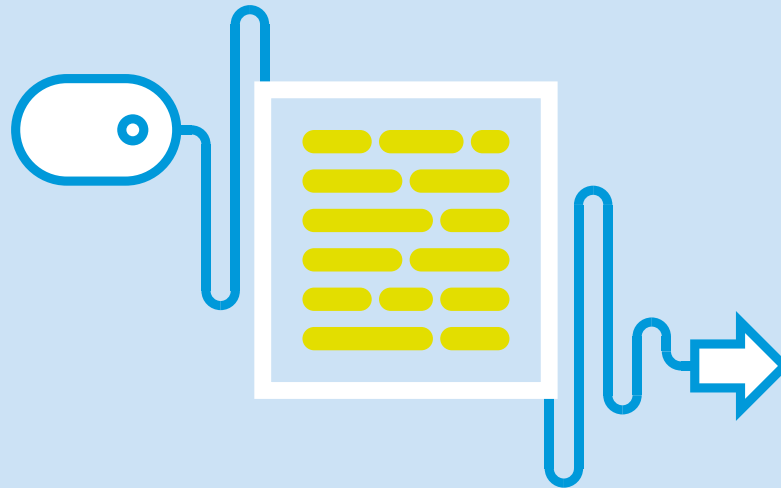
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ANNEX

CROSS-NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND FREE ASSESSMENTS

Cross-national assessments	
PISA	The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) from the OECD is a cross-national assessment which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students in mathematics, reading and science. It has been administered in more than 70 countries and economies every three years since 2000.
PISA-D	PISA for Development (PISA-D) from the OECD is a cross-national assessment that focuses on the more foundational knowledge and skills measured by PISA. It measures 15-year-old students in mathematics, reading and science using easier tests that are more appropriate for low- and middle-income countries. This assessment is in the process of being implemented for the first time in a few countries.
PIRLS	The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) from IEA is a cross-national assessment that provides internationally-comparative data on how well children read by assessing students' reading achievement in Grade 4 (main target grade).
TIMSS	The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) from IEA is a cross-national assessment which measures trends in mathematics and science achievement in Grades 4 and 8. It is conducted every four years.
LANA	The Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (LaNA) from IEA is a cross-national assessment that focuses on the more foundational knowledge and skills measured by PIRLS and TIMSS-Mathematics section in Grade 4.

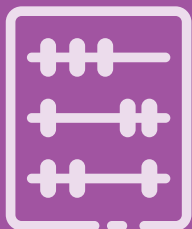
Regional assessments

LLECE	The Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (LLECE) is a regional assessment led by UNESCO's Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC/UNESCO). It has been administered in mathematics and language (reading and writing) in Grades 3 and 6, and in natural sciences (Grade 6 only) in 1997, 2006 and 2013 and will be administered again in 2019.
PASEC	The Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems of CONFEMEN (PASEC) is a regional assessment for monitoring the quality of education systems belonging to the CONFEMEN. It measures student competencies at the beginning (Grade 2) and end (Grade 6) of primary education, in language (oral/listening comprehension, decoding and reading) and mathematics. It has been administered in different years by different countries between 2000-2010, 2011-2012 and in 2014, and will be administered again in 2019.
PILNA	The Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA) is a regional assessment that measures language/literacy (reading, language features, writing) and mathematics/numeracy (numbers, operations, measurement and data) skills in Grades 4 and 6. It was administered in 2012, 2015 and a new administration is planned for 2018. It is led by the Educational Quality and Assessment Program (EQAP) of the Pacific Community, the Secretariat of the Pacific Board of Educational Assessment (SPBEA), the Pacific Ministers for Education and UNESCO.
SACMEQ	The Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) is a regional assessment that assesses performance levels of students and teachers in Grade 6 in language/literacy, mathematics/numeracy and health. Up to 16 countries have participated in SACMEQ I (1995), SACMEQ II (2000), SACMEQ III (2007) and SACMEQ IV (2013).
SEA-PLM	The Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) is a regional assessment developed to assess primary Grade 5 students in language (reading and writing), mathematics and global citizenship. SEA-PLM is led by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) and UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office. The first administration is planned for 2018/2019.

Free assessments

EGMA	The Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (<u>EGMA</u>) measures students from Grades 1-4 typically in early mathematics skills: addition and subtraction, oral counting fluency, one-to-one correspondence, quantity discrimination, missing number, geometry, patterns and word problems. It has been administered in over 20 countries with the aim to monitor proficiency levels and improve teaching and learning at the national or sub-national levels.
EGRA	Early Grade Reading Assessment (<u>EGRA</u>) measures pre-reading and reading skills in students from Grades 1-4 typically. It has been administered in over 70 countries with the aim to monitor proficiency levels and improve teaching and learning at the national or sub-national levels.
ASER	The Annual Status of Education Report (<u>ASER</u>) is an assessment initiative born in India. It has been adapted for use by 13 other countries across three continents (e.g. <u>UWEZO</u> in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda). ASER measures children's ability to do basic reading and arithmetic tasks. ASER uses sample-based household surveys, local participation and easy-to-use tools to measure learning.

For an in-depth analysis of technical commonalities and differences among cross-national and regional assessments, click [here](#).



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