Mind the GAP!
And consider home-grown innovations that hold promise to catalyze progress toward SDG4

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The sustainable development goals (SDGs) enacted in 2015 marked a huge leap forward in the effort to put secondary education on the global radar. SDG4 enshrined an international commitment to ensuring that by 2030, “all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.” Some progress toward achieving SDG4 is evident, but it is neither large nor fast enough to meet the 2030 deadline. There is reason to be optimistic, however. This brief draws on the work of The Partnership to Strengthen Innovation and Practice in Secondary Education (PSIPSE)* to advance approaches that can catalyze faster and more inclusive change.

Current projections show that the world will fail to meet the secondary education SDG4 targets. For instance, the upper secondary school completion rate is only expected to reach 60 percent by 2030 (UNESCO 2019). And progress will be uneven as some nations come to grips with enormous challenges. For example, sub-Saharan African nations—which start out with the lowest education attainment levels—have the fastest growing population of school-age children in the world (UIS 2017). Projections also suggest that learning targets will be missed; only two-thirds of youth in middle- and high-income countries are expected to reach minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics (UIS 2017). And data also signal significant gaps for vulnerable youth around the globe—in particular youth in conflict or disaster settings, with disabilities, and out of school (UNHCR 2018; UIS 2017; UNICEF 2018).

Ironically, what makes SDG4 most exciting is also what makes it so difficult to achieve: It challenges us to meet multiple, equally important goals—ensuring that all youth are enrolling in and completing secondary school, actually learning while there, and graduating with relevant skills.

Achieving these goals requires both improving the education provided through existing schools and dramatically increasing access to education for those who are (and may remain) out of a formal school setting. What will it take to achieve this kind of change? The experience of PSIPSE grantees provides an answer: embracing innovative, local solutions that are appropriately tailored to their contexts and populations. Experimentation through 60 PSIPSE projects in South Asia (India), West Africa (Nigeria), and East Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda) suggests that innovations take three forms: adaptive, complementary, and disruptive.

• Adaptive innovations leverage existing policies or structures to create incentives to change.

• Complementary innovations fill a gap in services that make existing systems more effective.

• Disruptive innovations provide alternative education models where traditional ones have failed.

The boxes on the next page showcase compelling examples of these types of innovations as implemented in Africa and Asia.

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Researchers at the Luigi Giussani Institute of Higher Education (LGIHE) in Uganda are coordinating with the Uganda National Examination Board to introduce reforms that leverage existing educational structures to improve learning. Teachers focus primarily on examinations, which tend to drive instruction. So researchers are modifying exams given at the end of lower secondary school to include questions that assess essential life skills that are valuable to employers and necessary for adulthood. Critical thinking and problem solving are two good examples. The goal is to motivate teachers to change their practices—since they teach to the test, Ugandan authorities seek to ensure that these tests cover the competencies that youth need to acquire. Admittedly, not all competencies dovetail with this form of testing, but some do. The effectiveness of this approach will be assessed when the revised tests are pilot tested. Stay tuned for news from LGIHE!

In conflict-affected Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), constraints such as poverty, poor school infrastructure, forced school closures due to disease outbreaks, and unsafe environments put education out of reach, particularly for girls who face cultural obstacles and risk violent attacks while walking long distances to school. War Child Canada introduced interactive radio instruction (IRI) as an alternative educational model to accelerate distance education for girls in conflict-affected rural areas in the DRC. In partnership with the Congolese government, War Child created a curriculum of “educational radio dramas” that enabled girls to remain in the safety of their own communities and learn from trained teaching assistants who supported the radio lessons. During a recent pilot test, lower secondary students in intervention communities gathered five days a week to participate in IRI. War Child found high rates of success in government exams among girls participating in the pilot (as high as 95 percent in some communities) and is seeking to scale up the model (War Child 2019).

Innovative education approaches such as those shown above can be deployed separately or in tandem to enable faster and more inclusive change. Take the example of PSIPSE-supported innovations in Uganda: Educate! is working with the government to roll out a skills-development curriculum in schools while LGIHE is experimenting with using examinations to incentivize teaching of life skills—one complementary and one adaptive innovation that reinforce each other in seeking to improve the relevance of education provided through schools. In Malawi, two grantees, CRECCOM and Edukans, developed strategic partnerships with a teacher training college to deliver in-service training on active learning pedagogies, which then influenced the pre-service training provided through this college. These relatively small, disruptive innovations that test the adoption of a nontraditional pedagogical approach in the Malawian context might end up having a lasting impact on teacher preparation in Malawi.

There is no formula for prioritizing innovative approaches; they must be developed in response to local needs and opportunities. PSIPSE innovations responded to the needs of a range of groups and to the opportunities available in the target countries. The initiative intentionally sought to improve outcomes for both large groups of youth (such as girls or economically disadvantaged children) and smaller, more vulnerable groups that are often overlooked (such as youth with disabilities or in remote regions). Embracing such complementary and tailored innovative approaches will help to catalyze faster and more inclusive progress that moves us closer to SDG4.

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References

For more information about the PSIPSE partnership and work, go to psipse.org.