Learning assessment; primary education; systems strengthening

Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics is a regional programme that assesses the learning outcomes of Grade 5 students, informing policymaking and ensuring that all children achieve meaningful learning.

Problem: Although more than 90 per cent of primary school age children are enrolled in school in Southeast Asia, many continue to struggle to achieve basic learning. About one in three, or 70 million children in East and Southeast Asia, fail to achieve minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics. They leave school without the foundational skills needed for higher learning and participation in 21st century economies. Because of lack of tangible information on children’s skills, countries struggle to develop appropriate policies. Measurement of learning is limited and difficult to assess at national, regional and global levels due to incomplete coverage of countries, grades and populations over time with comparative tools and standards.

Solution: In response to this regional learning crisis, the UNICEF-supported Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) programme sets out to assist the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) member countries to better understand student learning achievement and thereby improve the quality of their education systems. The programme fosters regional collaboration on key education-related themes. Moreover, it helps member countries in building their capacity to develop robust learning assessment systems, enabling them to monitor student learning outcomes across subpopulations and over time.
SEA-PLM 2019 is currently implemented in six countries: Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, and Vietnam.

**SEA-PLM aims to achieve three key outcomes:**

1. Enhanced capacity to generate and analyse assessment data at regional, national and sub-national levels.
2. Enhanced capacity to utilize assessment data for education improvement and more equitable learning outcomes at regional, national and sub-national levels.
3. Enhanced ASEAN integration in terms of approaches to assessment, with an initial focus on primary Grade 5 in the learning areas of numeracy (mathematics), literacy (reading and writing), and global citizenship.

**Strong regional collaboration**

SEA-PLM is led by a steering committee of Ministries of Education in the region that is co-chaired by SEAMEO and UNICEF. The countries maintain ownership of the programme through this partnership, and collaboration is encouraged on key issues impacting education in the region. Technical processes, including methodology, instruments development, and quality control, are produced through a participatory process that engages countries and external assessment experts.

**Towards the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

SEA-PLM supports the acceleration of progress towards SDG4 – to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning. To improve learning outcomes, countries in the region have committed to strengthening their education systems and improving the design and delivery of education. The SEA-PLM programme is a response to this challenge and will provide outputs to track learning progress toward SDG 4. In 2019, systems will be able to locate, on common metrics, how close they are in achieving these international goals. Education systems are evaluated, while considering the regional context and inclusive of skills, attitudes and values that embrace 21st century needs.

In addition to measuring learning outcomes in reading and mathematics at the end of primary school (SDG target 4.1), the inclusion of the global citizenship and writing domains ensures a broader agenda for assessment of learner achievements that moves beyond the foundational areas of learning (SDG 4.7). To identify trends in learning outcomes, cyclic assessments will be conducted periodically until 2030 to attain more data and track progress over time.

**Advancing the quality of primary education**

SEA-PLM is working to enhance regional collaboration and to establish a comprehensive quality improvement strategy for education systems in the region. With a greater focus of integrating SEA-PLM into countries’ National Education Sector Plan, the programme will help governments identify how they can improve their education systems, including teacher training, curriculum implementation and school management.
Preliminary results, lessons learnt and next steps.

While the SEA-PLM 2019 regional report will soon be launched, preliminary results from the programme are already apparent. The programme brought together all ASEAN countries to work together to collect data from more than 30,000 students, representing the first attempt in the region to collect comparative data at the end of primary school. It has also generated improved capacity among education officials to design and implement learning assessment, as each step of the regional programme has engaged education officials from the six countries.

Most valuably, the programme initiated a regional platform for countries to work together to improve learning. In the coming years, SEA-PLM will provide data pertinent to each country context and will help countries to apply that data to developing better informed policies and practices.

SEA-PLM will bring new evidence on:

- **Building 21st century skills and global citizenship**: Foundational skills included in a 21st century curriculum are critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity. The global citizenship module will add new substance in the region to complete evidence on cognitive dimensions by providing new comparative data on socio-emotional learning. It will advance the ASEAN agenda and vision for living in community at local and global level with justice, equity, security, peace, citizenship and health. SEA-PLM therefore acts as a regional collective reform of curricula and teaching practices by providing an understanding of how students apply knowledge and connect with others.

- **Setting common metrics and indicators for the ASEAN region**: The student performance data will then be used to build a common set of regional metrics (proficiency scales) in mathematics, reading and writing that will serve as an important tool for countries to locate students and describe their competency on a learning continuum. Contextual data and indicators from the background questionnaires will be generated to capture students, schools and system context for understanding disparities within countries and the region for better targeting those at risk, and to track progress over time.

- **Monitoring national education sector plans and SDG 4 reporting**: The data provided by SEA-PLM for reading and mathematics at the end of primary school education can provide countries with the means to report progress and disparities, especially under SDG 4.1.1. SEA-PLM data will be utilized for international and national reporting, ensuring that education stakeholders understand the results of SEA-PLM, and drawing key recommendations for national sector reform from the findings.

**Cost effectiveness**

| SEA-PLM data and reports represent all pupils enrolled in grade 5 in all schools in all participating countries in one specific academic year: this is around 5.5 million pupils. The cost of SEA-PLM for each participating country is approximately US $100,000 per year for a duration of 5 years comprising the international and national operational costs. Additionally, about 1,000 education officials and teachers from the region have benefited from SEA-PLM 2019. |

SEA-PLM is a new programme and there is still considerable work to be done in order to deliver the first regional and national results from the main survey. Yet, if successful and cyclic over time, SEA-PLM has the potential to provide countries with the means to examine national policy objectives critically and periodically, based on real-time empirical data, while keeping children's learning at the centre of the ASEAN agenda. Cyclic assessments will be conducted regularly until 2030 and will offer more data to identify trends in learning outcomes.
The early stages of SEA-PLM have exhibited concrete achievements for student learning, demonstrating the programme's scalability and integration across the ASEAN region. Moreover, regional and country-level ownership keep the quality of education and learning at the centre of the ASEAN and UNICEF education agendas from today through 2030 – so that “Every Child Learns”.

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