

**High-level Regional Conference on Foundational Learning**  
**Sokha Resort and Convention Center**  
**23 February 2024**  
**09:00 to 17:00 GMT+7**

**Outcome document**

**Context**

Following the 14<sup>th</sup> Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) Regional Steering Committee Meeting, the High-level Regional Conference on Foundational Learning convened experts and high officials from Ministries of Education from the 9 SEAMEO Member Countries, partners, and experts in the region. The conference encouraged countries to accelerate the implementation of effective and evidence-informed policies and programmes in order to curb learning loss and propel the learning recovery process. It gathered high-level representatives from the Ministries of Education in the region and key partners to share regional and national-level initiatives geared towards advancing foundational learning. This event is collaboratively organized by the SEA-PLM Regional Secretariat, SEAMEO Secretariat, UNICEF EAPRO, and the ASEAN Secretariat, with support from the ASEAN-Korea of Cooperation Fund (AKCF). In particular, the conference focused on the:

- Review of evidence on learning and effective policies and strategies for addressing the learning crisis
- Sharing successes and challenges encountered in the execution of policy reforms, highlighting effective strategies, and identification of evidence that informed these reforms
- Exchanges on experiences in the region, lessons learned, and challenges in addressing the foundational learning crisis;
- Proposing recommendations to accelerate progress at the national level and collective actions at the regional level

Following the commitment of the Ministers of Education during the [6<sup>th</sup> Strategic Dialogue of Education Ministers \(SDEM\)](#) held back to back with the 52<sup>nd</sup> SEAMEO Council Conference on 08 to 10 February 2023 in Manila, Philippines, this high-level regional conference aims to advance the five (5) regional strategies to accelerate foundational learning and lifelong learning in the region namely:

1. **Digital Transformation.** Integrating digital transformation principles and concepts in foundational literacy and numeracy programmes
2. **Equity and Inclusion.** Prioritizing vulnerable learners by developing more inclusive approaches in the foundational years of primary school
3. **Teaching and Learning.** Enhancing capacity building for teachers on pedagogy for foundational learning
4. **Advocacy and Engagement.** Advocacy strategy to place strong focus on investing in foundational Literacy, Numeracy, and STEM education
5. **Monitoring and Evaluation.** Monitoring and evaluation of foundational and lifelong learning.

The High-Level Regional Conference on Foundational Learning was attended by nine (9) SEAMEO Member Countries namely, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Timor Leste, Thailand, and Vietnam; and partners, and experts from the members of the [Global Coalition on Foundational Learning](#), namely, FCDO, UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID, and the World Bank.

## Discussion Summary

The regional conference was convened in 5 (five) moderated panel presentations including an introductory presentation on the situation of foundational learning in the region and a short presentation on the synthesis of the key points raised across the five panels. The panels were designed to discuss thematic areas critical in the implementation of foundational learning, namely,

Session 1: Empowering teachers, what needs to be done to support teachers, and how to do it?

Session 2: Supporting learners, what learning interventions and approaches are needed to address the foundational learning crisis?

Session 3: Options for a better equity lens, what curriculum reforms and interventions are effective and sustainable in responding to the learning crisis?

Session 4: Optimizing the early years and ensuring school safety, how does early childhood learning contribute to the development of foundational learning?

Session 5: Financing critical skills, how does financial support and allocation impact the enhancement of foundational learning opportunities for all?

Experts and country representatives presented regional and national-level initiatives in advancing foundational learning in each of the thematic areas.

## Monitoring foundational learning in the region

Mr. Alejandro Ibanez, SEA-PLM Project Manager, and Mr. Antoine Marivin, SEA-PLM Senior Project Manager from the SEA-PLM Regional Secretariat, commenced the session by providing an overview of the regional learning situation. They drew upon consolidated information from international large-scale assessments, revealing significant variations and inequities among learners. Data underscores the existence of a learning crisis in the region, with widening gaps projected to persist and disproportionately affect disadvantaged and marginalized learners and communities.

Their presentation culminated in an urgent call to action, emphasizing the imperative to unpack insights from assessment data and translate them into concrete and effective policy actions. This call resonated with the pressing need to address the challenges posed by the learning crisis and work towards ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all learners in the region.

Countries in the region heavily rely on international large-scale assessments or national learning assessments to monitor progress at key stages in basic education. Assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metric (SEA-PLM) provide valuable insights for countries to evaluate learning progress against global indicators, particularly SDG4.1.1b at the end of primary and SDG4.1.1c at the end of secondary education.

SEA-PLM data analysis reveals significant variation in low achievers in reading at the end of primary education, ranging from approximately 9% to 3%, and at the end of secondary education, ranging from 92% to 3%. These findings from large-scale comparative assessments underscore a pressing learning crisis in the region, necessitating comprehensive efforts at both the regional and country levels to address it.

Despite the availability of existing tools and resources for assessing student learning, data

gaps persist in monitoring 2025 national benchmarks of SDG Goal 4, as highlighted in the 2024 SDG Scorecard. Some countries reported having no data for trend analysis on SDG4.1.1b, and to some extent, no data at all. This presents an opportunity for countries to utilize existing internationally recognized assessments to track progress over time and fill data gaps in alignment with the 2025 benchmarks and 2030 targets.

### Practices and gaps in improving foundational learning

To accelerate progress in achieving global goals, the countries reaffirmed the desire to expedite the implementation of evidence-based policies and programs in various key areas relevant to foundational learning. Guided by the regional strategies outlined in the 6<sup>th</sup> Strategic Dialogue of Education Ministers (SDEM), the countries presented reforms that focused on improving literacy and numeracy skills by responding to the following key thematic questions posed in the conference.

#### Empowering teachers, what needs to be done to support teachers and how to do it?

Dr. Lars Sondergaard, Lead Economist for Education in the East Asia and Pacific Region at the World Bank, outlined the primary hurdles faced by teachers in effectively imparting foundational skills. He emphasized the necessity for innovative programs promoting targeted instruction, teaching at appropriate levels, and implementing classroom interventions that are clear, feasible, and incentivizing for educators. Dr. Sieng Sovanna, Director of the National Institute of Education Cambodia (representing the Association of Southeast Asian Teacher Education Network), echoed this sentiment, advocating for the adoption of the Southeast Asia Teachers Competency Framework established in 2017, which delineates essential skills teachers should possess.

Mr. Chinna Ung, Director General of the Directorate General of Education at the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport in Cambodia, shared insights into Cambodia's comprehensive teacher policy. This policy encompasses aspects such as management, leadership, teacher education, and the cultivation of teacher identity and development, illustrating Cambodia's commitment to empowering its education system.

Mrs. Natha Pethanoo, Deputy Director at the Bureau of Education Testing, Office of Basic Education Commission in the Ministry of Education of Thailand, highlighted Thailand's endeavors to alleviate the burden on teachers. Thailand focuses on establishing robust support systems and fostering teachers' capacity-building and professional growth, underscoring the nation's dedication to enhancing its educational system.

Teachers wield considerable influence in enhancing student learning outcomes. Regional data indicate that countries implement capacity-building and professional development programs for teachers; however, there remains a lack of subject-specific approaches to teaching and learning. Moreover, the effectiveness of technology integration in teaching is still inadequately supported by evidence in the region. Promising support measures for teachers include reducing administrative workload, providing language proficiency aligned with curriculum and national standards, offering training on educational technologies, and developing teacher policy action plans delineating areas for guidance on teacher management, leadership, and ongoing development. Lessons from other regions underscore the efficacy of training teachers to utilize clear and concise lesson plans for effective instructional delivery and providing capacity building programmes geared towards literacy and numeracy. By addressing these aspects comprehensively, countries can empower teachers to enhance student learning outcomes effectively.

## **Supporting learners, what learning interventions and approaches are needed to address the foundational learning crisis?**

Dr. Suman Sachdeva, Education Specialist focusing on Primary Education and Foundational Learning at UNICEF HQ, commenced the panel discussion by offering an insightful overview of learning recovery strategies adopted by various countries, leveraging the RAPID framework model.

Mr. Pengiran Haji Mohammad Zul-Majdi Pengiran Haji Momin, Senior Education Officer at the Examinations Department of the Ministry of Education in Brunei Darussalam, shared Brunei's proactive approach in addressing learning recovery. He highlighted the establishment of a learning recovery task force within the Ministry of Education, aimed at providing comprehensive support to schools and developing robust monitoring and evaluation systems for effective implementation of learning recovery plans.

Dr. Ahmad Rafee Che Kassim, Deputy Director General of Education Malaysia, responsible for Policy and Curriculum Sector within the Ministry of Education, elaborated on Malaysia's strategic policy reforms. Dr. Kassim emphasized key initiatives such as the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, the MBMMBI Policy, and the integration of Digital Education, showcasing Malaysia's commitment to advancing education through comprehensive reforms and embracing technological advancements.

Supporting learners is greatly becoming more critical due to the existing learning crisis, exacerbated further by the pandemic. Global reports show that remediation for system effectiveness is needed, especially highlighting strategies built around learner-focused approaches. Some of these strategies can be employed through classroom-level initiatives such as designing structured pedagogies, targeted instruction, and catch-up sessions, and collaborating with teacher colleagues through instructional coaching and teacher support. Experiences from the countries illustrate macro policy reforms that include forming a learning recovery task force established to provide support in developing learning recovery plans, establishing M&E systems, and digital education policies; and also, micro reforms that target specific gaps in basic skills such as establishing literacy and numeracy programs, special remedial programs, and enhanced teaching modules to help students.

## **Options for better equity lens, what curriculum reforms and interventions are effective and sustainable in response to the learning crisis?**

Dr. Hyung Mi Joo, Senior Research Fellow at the Korean Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation (KICE), set the stage for the panel by presenting the 2022 Revised Korean National Curriculum. Dr. Joo outlined strategies within the implementation plan aimed at enhancing the curriculum to bolster fundamental literacy and numeracy skills. She emphasized the importance of providing tailored learning support leveraging educational technology to cater to individual student needs.

Ms. Gretchen Cordero, Chief Education Program Specialist at the Bureau of Education Assessment within the Department of Education in the Philippines, highlighted the MATATAG curriculum, a recalibrated version of the K to 12 curriculum reform. This curriculum reform prioritizes the development of foundational skills alongside 21st-century competencies, empowering teachers with opportunities to deliver a more holistic education.

Similarly, Dr. Than Than Myint, Director General of the Department of Education Research, Planning, and Training within the Ministry of Education in Myanmar, echoed the thematic focus on foundational and 21st-century skills. Dr. Myint elucidated on Myanmar's new KG +12 education curriculum, designed to promote equity by addressing critical developmental

areas and granting teachers flexibility to employ diverse instructional methodologies tailored to the needs of their students.

Continuous improvements and revision on the national curriculum represent the need to reflect global and societal education trends, public opinions, and other social changes affecting education. Especially in the context of the learning crisis, there is a need to revisit curriculum reforms that are reflective in promoting foundational skills such as reading, numeracy, and digital literacies. Countries have employed curriculum revisions such as explicitly embedding learning competencies that facilitate the development of basic skills, reduce educational gap, and realize a learner-centered education. Recalibrated curriculum that incorporates opportunities for schools and teachers to implement catch-up sessions specifically to focus on reading and address some learning gaps is a notable practice. Countries also institutionalized blended learning and other distance learning modalities to ensure flexible and resilient conduct of classes. Efforts such as the use of Mother-Tongue Multilingual Education Interventions in fostering foundational skills were shared to be a remarkable practice that other countries can replicate to improve basic literacies. In addition, optimizing language teachers to address language barriers and tap local teachers that can supplement the effective implementation of the curriculum were one of the best practices shared by the countries.

### **Optimizing the early years and ensuring school safety, how does early childhood learning contribute to the development of foundational learning?**

Dr. Vina Adriany, Director of SEAMEO CECCEP, commenced the session by underscoring the pivotal role of early childhood care education (ECCE) in nurturing children's foundational skills. Dr. Adriany highlighted regional examples and key frameworks, including the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on ECCE in Southeast Asia. She spotlighted SEAMEO CECCEP's initiatives such as the Happy Neighborhood Eco Circle Capacity Building and Parenting module, aimed at facilitating children's smooth transition from ECCE to primary education.

Dr. Anoulom Vilayphone, Director General of the Research Institute for Educational Sciences within the Ministry of Education and Sports in Lao PDR, shared policy reforms supporting ECCE in their education system. These reforms prioritize innovative strategies like play-based learning, scaling up projects for learning materials provision, and community-based engagement utilizing local resources.

Mr. Apolinario Serpa Rosa, Director General of the Directorate General of Preschool, Basic, and Recurrent Education at the Ministry of Education in Timor Leste, highlighted efforts to reform preschool and primary-level curricula. These efforts emphasize a science-based methodology for literacy learning and the integration of a multilingual education component.

Dr. Quoc Khanh Pham, Deputy Director General of the Vietnam Education Quality Management Agency within the Ministry of Education and Training, elaborated on the government's policy framework to advance early childhood education in Vietnam. Initiatives include strengthening Vietnamese language proficiency for ethnic minority children and implementing a national project for preschool education development aligned with primary education.

Early childhood is a crucial phase for children to acquire basic skills necessary to commence greater cognitive tasks and complex skills. High-quality and accessible early childhood education is recognized to be part of child's rights. To ensure that this is realized, countries have implemented policy interventions geared towards supporting and embedding ECE solutions, even to an extent of making preschool education a compulsory endeavor. Promising approaches were shared such as the formulation of community-based programs



and strengthening parental involvement by providing resources and training. In terms of early diagnosis and early interventions, countries were utilizing assessments of foundational learning outcomes designed to identify learning gaps and provide early support. At the classroom level, countries have shared encouraging strategies such as play-based learning, multilingual exposure, reading readiness programmes, and social and emotional learning. Countries have noted, however, that there is still scarcity of research on ECE and limited evidence to show effective practices that improve foundational learning, especially targeted to the most disadvantaged groups and learners.

### **Financing critical skills, how does financial support and allocation impact the enhancement of foundational learning opportunities for all?**

Dr. Quoc Khanh Pham, Deputy Director General of the Vietnam Education Quality Management Agency within the Ministry of Education and Training, shed light on Vietnam's experience in financing foundational learning. He outlined strategic budgeting and planning initiatives undertaken by the Ministry, grounded in various legal frameworks and mechanisms. These efforts aim to ensure sufficient resources are allocated to promote foundational learning effectively.

Dr. Lars Sondergaard, Lead Economist for Education in the East Asia and Pacific Region at the World Bank, offered insights into financing education, emphasizing that differences in spending reflect varying national priorities among countries. He advocated for countries to support literacy programs through budgetary pitches based on existing evidence, ensuring optimal and effective funding for foundational learning.

Dr. Manos Antoninis, Director of the UNESCO GEM Report Team, shared lessons from Africa, highlighting the potential supplementation of public expenditure on education through other social spending, such as aid expenditure. He stressed the importance of focusing aid expenditure on quality-improving interventions to enhance educational outcomes.

Prioritizing equitable financing on foundational learning is an essential element on how education outcomes are achieved. In fully realizing foundational skills for all children in the region, governments must address education financing that demonstrates adequacy, efficiency, and equity. Education financing, however, is a policy decision that entails prioritization and optimization of resources to specific areas in education that need extra support. Lessons from Africa showed that at higher levels of spending, questions of efficacy may arise which illustrates debates and trade-offs between teacher recruitment vs teacher quality, or shifting the budget towards monitoring and support. Public expenditure outside of education, for example, can still play a big role in providing support to children and facilitating the improvement of student learning. One example of this is the provision of free school meals which can provide a promising intervention funded typically outside of public funds in education.

### **Next steps: Regional Priorities for Action on Foundational Learning**

Guided by the regional strategies outlined in the 6<sup>th</sup> Strategic Dialogue of Education Ministers (SDEM), the SEA-PLM Regional Secretariat sought input from the countries on the initiatives happening at the country-level specifically policy reforms and programmatic actions towards the improvement of foundational learning given their unique contexts and particularities of education systems.

## Priority Action 1: Digital Transformation

### What countries are doing?

- Formulation of comprehensive ICT policies that lay down appropriate use of technology that can offer solutions to issues of access, quality, system management, and digital environment.
- Leveraging suitable and fit-for-use digital tools, learning management systems, platforms, and other technological instruments to facilitate foundational learning.
- Utilizing technology for implementing computer-based and adaptive assessments for classroom, national, and international assessments.

### What support is needed?

- Training for teachers to increase digital literacy and maximize technology's potential to improve teaching.
- Resources for teachers that show exemplars and best practices in using ICT tools to enhance instructional delivery.
- Capacity building on psychometrics and learning assessments to take stock of data gathered from classroom, national, and international assessments.

## Priority Action 2: Equity and Inclusion

### What countries are doing?

- Rolling out of early grade learning (EGL) initiatives to provide stronger support for schools across the country
- Implementing primary literacy and numeracy programmes aimed at providing targeted support to students who struggle with basic literacies
- Providing remedial programs at the school level to employ early interventions for primary students experiencing challenges in literacy and numeracy
- Empowering the teacher workforce through recruitment of language teachers to address language difficulties in ethnic areas

### What support is needed?

- Program strategies that can identify vulnerable learners and develop early interventions to address challenges in foundational skills.
- Capacity building in the establishment of community learning centers that aim to supplement learning in schools by conducting remedial sessions, particularly for vulnerable learners
- Specialized training for teachers that ventures into pre-school education, alternative education, special education, technical and vocational schooling, and other specialized areas that cater to specific groups of students
- Provision for the improvement of mother tongue, and multilingual education to help accommodate more groups of learners from various socio-cultural backgrounds

## Priority Action 3: Teaching and Learning

### What countries are doing?

- Upgrading teacher training formula to strengthen teacher professional development (e.g. 12+2 for preschool teachers, 12+4 for primary school teachers)
- Developing teacher career pathways to ensure professional growth and continuity in the field of education
- Utilizing teaching guides and learning materials that inform teaching pedagogies focused on foundational learning
- Employing on-site coaching for clinical supervision and instructional evaluation by school administrators
- Building Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) for teachers that aim to share effective practices and teaching techniques on foundational learning

- Implementing catch-up intervention and remediation to fill learning gaps and strengthen the literacies of students

**What support is needed?**

- Provision for richer and open source Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) available for teachers that would provide teaching materials and resources useful in teaching basic literacies
- Knowledge management systems are established and in place to provide a support system to teachers leveraging each other's expertise and mentorship capacity
- Continuous capacity building and training for teachers in pedagogical practice and instructional strategies targeted to improve foundational learning
- Highlighting best practices and teaching techniques that can be replicated and scalable to increase the use of effective strategies addressing gaps in the classroom

**Priority Action 4: Advocacy and Engagement**

**What countries are doing?**

- Raising awareness on the importance of literacy and numeracy programmes, including STEM education among education stakeholders
- Building on existing networks within schools such as parent teacher association and school councils to continuously advocate the importance of literacy, numeracy, and STEM education
- Integrating STEM education into various programmes such as teacher training and school activities

**What support is needed?**

- Development of a comprehensive awareness campaign that aims to engage stakeholders on the importance of basic literacies in education
- Formulation of school quality assurance standards and frameworks that can promote stakeholders collaboration and involvement in school improvement plans

**Priority Action 5: Monitoring and Evaluation**

**What countries are doing?**

- Establishing Monitoring and Evaluation units in various levels of governance of the Ministries of Education

**What support is needed?**

- System-level monitoring of student's foundational learning with data and information that will be useful for policymakers, school leaders, and teachers