Introduction

Most children in developed countries who finish primary schooling can read, write, and do basic mathematics. This is in stark contrasts with children in many developing countries. Despite billions of dollars spent each year for decades by donors, a large proportion of students in these countries are not learning. In sub-Saharan Africa, 84 percent and 88 percent of students did not achieve minimum proficiency in mathematics and reading, respectively, while in Central and Southern Asia, this figure was 76 percent and 81 percent in the same subjects. Contrast this with mathematics and reading in Europe and North America where only 14 percent did not attain minimum proficiency in both subjects.

Over half of the 617 million in-school children in the primary and lower secondary age group worldwide did not achieve the required minimum proficiencies. This number would be higher if the 260 million children not attending school are included.[1] These children, for reasons of economic constraints, violent conflict, gender and caste discrimination, physical disability, and other obstacles, are not enrolled in school.[2] This situation is alarming for all those who have spent so much time, money, and expertise on the noble mission of

[1] The *Global Education Monitoring* Report 13/14 (World Bank 2018) states that the cost of children not learning is about USD 129 billion. This amounts to 10 percent of the global expenditure on primary education.

[2] This information is from *Fact Sheet No. 46* (UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2017), published by UNESCO's Institute of Statistics, which summarizes learning levels in developing countries (2015 data). Globally, 56 percent of children in the primary and lower secondary age groups did not meet minimum proficiency levels in mathematics and 58 percent did not meet minimum proficiency levels in reading. All these numbers are averages with wide variations across countries, states, and provinces within a country.

improving learning through education in developing countries. Especially concerning is the lack of learning in the schools that received substantial funds to improve education quality from numerous international entities working together for the last thirty years. This reality of non-learning, which has existed for a long time, is now referred to globally as the "learning crisis."

Multilateral and bilateral financiers have consistently supported education reform in developing countries.[3] Specific intentions for primary education are expressed by two World Bank education staff: "Primary education has two main purposes: to produce a literate and numerate population that can deal with problems encountered at home and at work and to serve as a foundation on which further education is built" (Lockheed and Verspoor 1991, p. 1). I know these intentions well because I spent the first part of my professional life working for multilateral organizations with a passion for improving education quality and the next part working for bilateral entities with the same fervor to boost education in developing countries. Over the last quarter-century, I have had the opportunity to work in low-income countries spanning South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Pacific. I am part of an assortment of educationalists, political philosophers, public policy specialists, social theorists, and economists striving to find the magic bullets to improve teaching and learning in classrooms. Yet the bullets used have sometimes lost their shape, often veered off course, and mostly missed their target to improve what happens in classrooms. To put it bluntly, all that effort has not shown signs of bearing fruit in terms of the ultimate goal of education, which is learning. Though many professionals working for these multilateral and bilateral financiers operate with the best of intentions and come from some of the best universities across the world, including developing countries, things do not seem to have gone the way they should for the children who attend school with a desire to learn in a functioning education system.[4] Against the backdrop of this learning crisis, this book seeks to answer the following central questions:[5] Why did the work and investment of multilateral and bilateral financiers mostly miss the mark

[3] This information is published by UNESCO each year. According to *Policy Paper 36* (UNESCO 2018), USD 3.7 billion was spent on basic education in 2016 alone. If all levels of education are included, the figure rises to USD 13.4 billion. More details on this expenditure are provided in Chapter 2.

[4] "Developing countries" are defined by UNESCO as low- and low-middle-income countries based on the World Bank classifications (World Bank 2022). These countries are not members of the G8 or the European Union. South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa have the largest number of developing countries.

[5] Due to the enormity of the subject, the scope of this book is restricted to what was achieved in terms of learning with the multilateral and bilateral financing of education reform. It does not address how internal countries' budgets and functioning impact education.

despite all the emphasis on implementing "best practice"? Where did it all go wrong in the past and how can we prevent this from happening in the future? Are there instances where things did work to achieve learning?

A variety of multilateral and bilateral organizations supporting developing countries are responsible for the enormous investment in education over the years. For the purposes of this book these organizations will be clubbed together and referred to as the International Development Finance Institutions (IDFIs).[6] Of course, IDFIs care about the predicament of the poor, the sick, and the illiterate in our "world house" (Martin Luther King Jr.).[7] However, it is more than just compassion that steers the flow of funds to developing countries. For the World Bank, investment in the soft sectors, such as education and health, with very low or in many cases no interest, helps to grow the economy and no doubt bolster the developing countries' ability to repay borrowed funds at a regular rate of interest (Jones 2007). For bilateral organizations, providing grants to improve education helps strengthen diplomatic ties with countries, which in turn helps to extend complementary business and trade relations.[8] Coalescing somewhere in-between altruistic worldwide compassion and the vested lubrication of an international free market, there emerged a global compact between nations to work toward the development of communities and individuals. Such a common vision of development has been an important driver for education expansion across the world.

To capture current thinking as well as analyze various topics related to development, since 1978 the World Bank has produced the yearly *World Development Report* on different topics. For the first time an entire report was recently dedicated to education development, illustrating the importance

[6] A new term was coined, Development Finance Institutions (DFIs), to refer to both multilateral and bilateral financiers providing aid to developing countries. The DFIs also include national agencies that provide support for development. When these institutions are geographically located, they are referred to, for example, as European DFIs and Asian DFIs (About DFIs). To exclude national DFIs, the term IDFIs is used here, "I" referring to international multilateral and bilateral entities.

[7] This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great "world house" in which we have to live together – black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu – a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.
Martin Luther King, Jr. 1967, p. 167.

[8] Involvement of NGOs with sector reform would be philanthropic grants. Often NGOs are contracted by bilateral organizations to implement their grants in developing countries.

of this sector for economic growth and individual well-being: "When delivered well, education cures a host of societal ills. For individuals, it promotes employment, earnings, health, and poverty reduction. For societies, it spurs innovation, strengthens institutions, and fosters social cohesion" (World Bank 2018, p. 3). The primary UN agency working on education, UNESCO, also expands on the benefits of ensuring a working education system in every country. The *Global Education Monitoring Report*, which is published each year by UNESCO to monitor progress in education, highlights health and poverty reduction benefits with expanding quality education.[9] For decades now the impact of girls' education is also regularly emphasized.[10]

International donors across the globe have no doubt worked intentionally and tirelessly for decades to improve education in developing countries. Motivation and commitment of the international community coalesced overtime at the Education For All conferences hosted by UNESCO every ten years. Though learning per se is only referred to in the early 1990s, learning has always been important to the global development community. Echoing what Lockheed and Verspoor stated in 1991, the 2018 *World Development Report* on education acknowledges this directly almost thirty years later:[11] "But these benefits [of education] depend largely on learning. Schooling without learning is a wasted opportunity. More than that, it is a great injustice: the children whom society is failing most are the ones who most need a good education to succeed in life" (World Bank 2018, p. 3). Notably, better implementation of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals is associated not just with going to school but with the acquisition of

[9] This report found education correlated with improved health-seeking behaviors such as the reduced use of tobacco and less likelihood of obesity (UNESCO 2017, p. xvii): "Those lacking formal education are 6.5 times likelier to smoke than those with at least secondary education in lower middle-income countries. In 2013, the global shortage of healthcare workers was 17.4 million, including 2.6 million doctors and 9 million nurses and midwives."

[10] While guided by the general objective of financing education, donors from developing countries are also specially concerned with girls' education. A female population with secondary education leads to better health outcomes for children by reducing stunting and mortality rates of children under five years. A girl with basic education earns between 14 to 19 percent more than those without any education; and for girls with secondary education, the earnings are even higher. In countries where girls are married off at very young ages, education helps to delay the age of marriage and childbearing with an increase in the use of contraceptives. Educated women have better access to social capital and exhibit increased agency and decision-making power. A recent report jointly published by the Child Investment Fund Foundation, the Global Partnership for Education, the Malala Foundation, and the World Bank reiterates the importance of education for the girl child listing the many benefits (World Bank et al. 2018).

[11] According to Lockheed and Verspoor, "school attendance without learning is meaningless" (1991, p. 1).

knowledge and skill. Though no objective analysis has been undertaken to differentiate the benefits of purely enrolling in school versus attending and learning, it could be expected that schooling without learning would limit students' potential to absorb and use information.

The interventions that IDFIs financed to improve the quality of education and increase student learning are central to this discussion. While the contribution of developing country governments is substantial, critical, and irreplaceable, what these governments could have done differently is reserved for another book. Instead, the concern here is with what the donors did. There has been a shared approach and passion among the key IDFIs supporting quality education for decades, allowing for a tapestry of interventions to be woven across these countries. The main threads of this tapestry include infrastructure, instructional materials, teacher training, and community mobilization. Once these threads are scrutinized, the question then arises, without much impact on learning, what is the research and evidence that propelled donors to begin and continue financing these interventions over decades? The appropriateness and effectiveness of this research and the answers that were not provided by this body of work to help redirect and realign efforts to advance learning then enters the spotlight.

Based on the critical analysis of research that has guided education programming for decades, an alternative approach is offered which includes keeping a keen eye on two levels that could impact the whole enterprise of education reform for learning in developing countries. The first and most important shift involves turning toward systematically reviewing what happens in schools and classrooms or the micro level. The second shift involves knowing much more about in-country institutions, the meso level, that regulate, evaluate, and support what happens in schools and classrooms. We will not affect learning without a sound understanding of the entities that manage, motivate, facilitate, and support education in schools and classrooms.

At the level of schools and classrooms, developing countries are operating at a clear deficit. Educational systems across countries struggle to get children to attend school regularly and once inside provide consistent instruction for them to learn what they are supposed to in each grade. So often, even those who do come to school are barely learning. In fact, many students in these countries, especially those studying in public schools, are graduating from primary school without knowing what they are supposed to know in the lowest grade of primary school. Let me start by describing the micro and meso levels in three contexts: in India, Malawi, and Papua New Guinea.

The Indian state of Bihar, which often ranks toward the bottom when compared to other states, received significant donor funding to improve basic education. Though this state was receiving so much support, I realized learning could not possibly happen in the classrooms that I visited over an eight-year project period (1998–2006). Two to three days of the weeklong visit to the state were spent visiting schools and classrooms. Many of the classrooms we visited were tiny with between 75 to 150 children packed in like sardines under the supervision of a single teacher. Children sitting in front possessed scrappy notebooks, while the others in the class had neither book nor pencil. Managing so many children, especially in low-income government schools, is possible because they were relatively submissive to the authority of the teacher. Teachers would continuously explain lesson content from a prescribed textbook, using the blackboard as their main teaching aid. Almost to a predictable pattern, students in these classes just sat and listened, occasionally teasing a fellow student, looking around, or just staring drearily into space or out the window. Repetition was the main pedagogical technique to teach students confined in packed classrooms. To test whether students were attentive, teachers occasionally asked closed-ended questions. The students responded in unison, shouting at the top of their voices.

In Malawi in sub-Saharan Africa, the problems were different. I visited the capital Lilongwe in the latter half of 2011. The country was implementing education reform with external funding. A government official with a master's degree drove out with me to visit a school. I was struck by the clarity of this official's vision and his passion for transforming his country's education system. On the way to the school, we noticed another school nearby with nice buildings but empty classrooms. When we arrived at the school, we found there were 3,174 children, 47 teachers, and 16 classrooms. This works out to about 68 students to a teacher. Since there were not enough classrooms, about fifteen of the classes had to be held outdoors. Thankfully, our visit took place on a pleasant sunny day. Quite concerned about the lack of classrooms for students, the director had asked the headteacher to restrict school enrollment to 2,000 and encourage parents to send their children to the school nearby, which we had just passed with so many empty classrooms. The headteacher responded by saying that he had tried. However, parents only wanted to send their wards to his school because they felt it had good results and liked the fact that children were wearing uniforms (with support from a school in Norway).

Another country in which I spent time recently was Papua New Guinea. During a site visit after traveling for a few hours, we arrived at a vacant set of

buildings. The local community informed us that the school had been closed for a year because of fighting between two tribes. Hostility between tribes does get deadly in some parts of the country and parents are warranted in not sending their children to school. We traveled on to another school where class sizes were small, with fewer than twenty students, and most of them had books and writing instruments. Surely, with such small class sizes there would be consistent instruction necessary for learning to take place? To determine whether this was the case, I requested teachers in a few classrooms to share the attendance register and/or the book where they kept a record of how much and what each student was learning. Both these requests were met with an element of surprise and in most cases a no show.

Apart from what takes place at the micro level of the classroom and school, a second level, or the meso level, is critical to ensure learning. The second level includes in-country institutions (technical, administrative, financial, political, and managerial) that regulate, evaluate, and support what happens in schools and classrooms. In developing countries, this level has significant power to transform public schools and to introduce a culture of accountability for learning. Reflecting more deliberately on the examples I described from India, Malawi, and Papua New Guinea, let me lift up elements from those school visits to throw some light on this other level.

In Bihar, India, donors funded teacher training to transform rote learning to activity-centered learning in the classroom. But the classroom sizes demanded that teachers manage the class through teacher-centered, student-docile methods of rote learning. Any high-performing teacher with all the passion in the world for more active forms of learning would not be effective with these many students in the class and without any supplies. In addition to these constraints, teacher absenteeism was rife in these schools. A longitudinal study done by a Bihari scholar for UNICEF (2003) found that between 2000 and 2002 teachers spent only about two months each year in the classroom.[12]

A question that has to be asked is what would be the benefit of training teachers if a system is not in place to ensure that the teacher is in the classroom and can actually use this training to teach? Surely, the investment in training has implications for the meso level that plays an enormous role helping teachers use the training that they received. With support from public sector management colleagues, I started exploring some of the myriad

[12] *Shrinking Instructional Hours in Primary Schools* (UNICEF 2003). I am not aware of any other longitudinal studies on how many days each year instruction takes place in schools.

meso-level deficits.[13] For a start, I had a simple and specific ask – to see how teacher training financed with donor funds was recorded in the personnel files of teachers. To my surprise, I found teachers' personnel records were often unavailable, incomplete, or inaccurate. No records or follow-up of donor-funded teacher training was in evidence.

Let me revisit the school trip in Malawi. During the drive back, I asked the official how he would handle the maldistribution of students across the two schools. He was not sure. He said he was not aware of this problem. It was only because of our visit that he was cognizant of the inefficient student distribution across the two schools. Lilongwe is the capital city of Malawi. I presume that the situation – and his lack of awareness – would be worse in the case of rural schools. The lack of data on how many students attended each school in the capital city and the absence of systemic regulation concerning how many students could attend a particular school point to gaps at the meso level of education delivery.

In Papua New Guinea, even if the classroom seemed to be working well, there was no established process for evaluating teaching and learning. Few teachers knew how their students were performing individually. There may be productive teacher-student interaction in these schools, yet there were no records in place to show which student was learning what through the academic year. Apart from the missing testimony from the teacher about how each student was progressing, there were no institutional mechanisms to ensure all schools in the province were keeping track of students' performance.

The examples from my involvement in different regions of the world capture the micro and meso levels that are critical to education systems in any country – the school and classroom or the micro level, where teaching and learning takes place, and the institutional or meso level, which regulates, evaluates, and supports schools. The ways in which these levels function, interact, and coordinate with each other are unique in each context. The focus of this book is on the way in which IDFIs' financing of education reform in developing countries over decades has engaged with these two levels, which I determine to be the key to resolving the learning crisis.

Various IDFIs are committed to improving education in developing countries, but this book focuses on those that have provided the most aid to improve primary education. Among multilateral organizations, which are

[13] This review was done for the report *India, Bihar: Towards a Development Strategy* (World Bank 2003).

supported jointly by several nations including developing countries, the World Bank has provided the most funds for primary education. While there are numerous bilateral entities financing education, support from two countries, the United States and the United Kingdom, is by far much higher than the others for primary education.

Each agency has rigorous and detailed documentation and legal protocols that have to be adhered to before any funds are transferred to a country. Based on my own experience, and working for bilateral and multilateral partners, the following stages form part of this process. First, each agency develops an education strategy that guides project development across the countries they work in. Second, before deciding on project components, each entity embarks on a situation analysis, mostly based on existing research and analysis. In cases where an entity is unable to carry out a situation analysis, the work done by other entities informs project design. In other words, there is a general commitment across donors that what is financed must be "evidence-based" and represent "best practice." This book will examine ways in which strategy and research took into account the two levels critical to an education system.

Third, depending on the findings of the research undertaken, agencies activate the task of designing the project, which includes specifying and costing project components. To capture project impact, baseline data is collected before beginning project implementation. The fourth stage is project implementation, which usually extends over a few years and during this period there is regular review and reporting on what is taking place on the ground. Adjustments may be made to project interventions based on ongoing research. Finally, the end of the project is marked by summative evaluations undertaken either by project staff or by an external team. Recent projects also include detailed end line surveys to help gauge impact.

The book is based on an interpretive meta-synthesis of donor documentation in the following four areas (Da Costa et al. 2016; Garavan et al. 2019): (i) donor strategies; (ii) analytical studies undertaken or financed by donor agencies or research that have influenced investments; (iii) project documentation; and (iv) project impact reporting. The review is not exhaustive but intentionally directed toward understanding how donor strategies and research have influenced project development, taking into account the micro and meso levels to progress learning. The intentional meta-synthesis will conclude with how strategy, research (methods, subjects/areas, data collection, and analysis), and projects can be redirected for holistic and incremental reform of education systems with a higher potential to improve

learning. Considering the enormity of the learning crisis, there is much rethinking to be done by multilateral and bilateral financiers across all elements of project financing to ensure that student learning in developing countries does improve.

The book has four chapters and an epilogue. Chapter 1, "The Learning Crisis," introduces donor financing of education reform in developing countries followed by a brief discussion of the global commitments to sector outcomes and what indeed has been achieved so far. The first global event in Jomtien included a significant and urgent obligation of the donor community to address learning. This concerted focus on the fundamental role of education disappears after this event. Notwithstanding, the next section shows how much donors were concerned with trying to understand the learning landscape in the places where they worked. This concern was demonstrated in their substantial support for the measurement of learning. Three instances of this support are described. The first instance is a multi-donor project, which I worked on – the Indian District Primary Education project implemented for about twelve years. Negotiated in the early 1990s, it is one of the oldest and largest education projects and includes significant NGO participation in learning assessments. The second instance is the support received from donors for regional cross-national learning assessments in primary education in different parts of the world. The third instance brings into focus assessments in the early primary school grades taking place in many countries across the globe. This initiative represents a recent donor attempt to understand the impact on learning. These examples serve to illustrate the fact that assessing learning is tried and tested and yet has not helped to progress learning, questioning the current emphasis on measuring learning. The conclusion summarizes the learning status across developing countries, mostly based on the assessments supported by donors.

Chapter 2 moves from the learning crisis to donor programming in education. Entitled "Donor Interventions in the Education Sector," it examines the process of designing projects in developing countries and the interventions that were financed. Early emphasis was on developing school infrastructure. Initial research, especially the school effectiveness studies, informed donor decisions on the content of their financing of education reform. There is an evolution in approach with the donors' collective construction of a basket of investments for quality education. There are commonalities across agencies in the interventions that are financed. For example, every agency includes teacher training as one of the key interventions even if there is very limited evidence that training has made a difference.