EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Formative evaluation: The Effectiveness, Efficiency and Sustainability of the Measuring Early Learning and Outcomes (MELQO) Project – Phase 1

Evaluation period: 18 September 2015 - 31st January 2016

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I. Introduction

I.1. Background to the MELQO Project

The Measuring Early Learning and Outcomes (MELQO) project was initiated in early 2014, triggered by the need for more systematic data collection on children's development and learning at the start of primary schooling in low-middle income countries, for key indicators of early learning that could be tracked globally[1] and the urgency of improving the quality of early learning environments around the world.[2]

In its first phase, the project set out to design and trial ECE/ECD tools that are: 1) technically rigorous; 2) operationally feasible and 3) have the political and institutional support of governments and development agencies. Shaped by existing regional and international ECE/ECD instruments, the tools would ideally demonstrate clear and compelling links to empirical research or practice. The ultimate goal however was "…*to produce data that can be useful for improving learning environments by way of national policies, teacher support, and parent information. In addition, the project hopes to create global and national pressure for ECD and increase country level advocacy for ECD"* (desk study).

In support of this work, the MELQO project has built on the convening and outreach efforts of the Learning Metrics Task Force (LMTF) and recommendations of the World Health Organization. It has also drawn on inter-agency work undertaken within the framework of the "Readiness to Learn" Assessment Project (RLAP).[3] The project currently benefits from the collective leadership of the United National Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Early Learning Partnership (ELP) at the World Bank, the United National Children's Education Fund (UNICEF) and the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at the Brookings Institution.

I.2 General objectives of the formative evaluation of Phase 1

In early September 2015, the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF), MELQO's majority funder, commissioned a formative evaluation of Phase 1. As agreed during the inception phase, the evaluation was expected to meet the following general objectives.

1. Examine and challenge the Theory of Change for developing large-scale ECD measurement tools and data-driven ECD policies and services in low-middle income countries;

2. Assess the relevance and effectiveness of approaches and processes employed by the MELQO Consortium for the technical/operational design and field testing of the tools, as well as the parallel institutional goals;

3. Look at the extent to which Phase 1 has been able to build financial sustainability, partnership arrangements and country ownership of the tools;

4. Draw from lessons in Phase 1 to highlight potential steps forward for target setting, strategy development, coordination and governance and communications in the next phase.

CIFF and the MELQO governance structures placed a strong emphasis on the need for an **independent,**
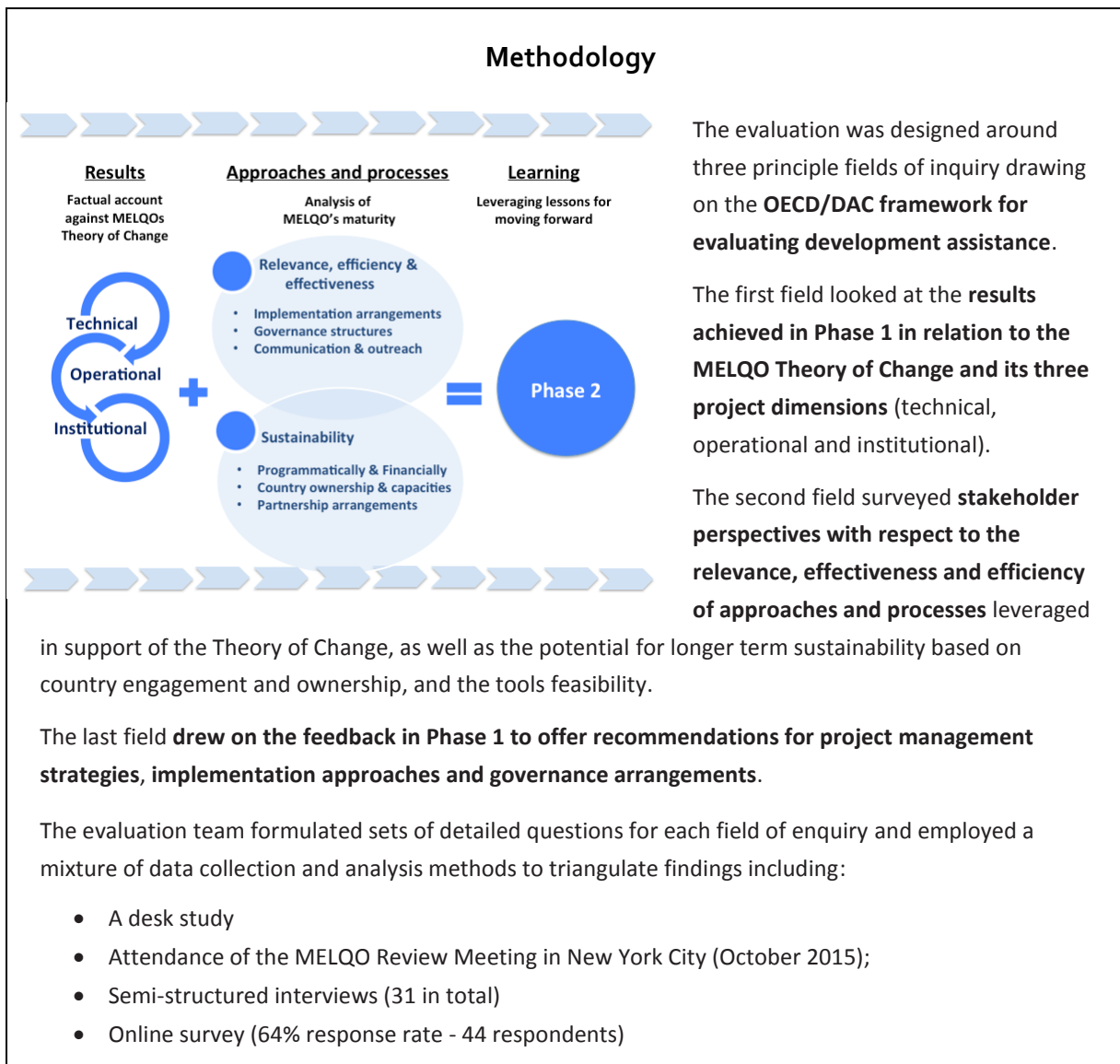
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[1] Toward Universal Learning: A Global Framework for Measuring Learning. Please see:
http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/towards-universal-learning-a-global-framework-for-measuring-learning-metrics-task-force-education-2013-en.pdf

[2] Annex 1 – Terms of Reference for the Steering Committee on Measuring Early Learning Quality and Outcomes (formerly Ready to Learn Indicators.

[3] This initiative was designed to complement a broader effort led by World Health Organization (WHO) to develop population-based assessments of early childhood development for children aged 0-8.

non-biased, external evaluation and **balance in the focus and interpretation of findings**. With recognition that the project plan had been set against very high expectations, and that the validation of the tools was still on-going, the evaluation would be mainly **formative** in nature – meaning it would draw on feedback from a broad cross section of MELQO Consortium stakeholders (and beyond) to answer as unequivocally as possible: *What works*? *What lessons can be learned from successes and challenges, procedures and evidence in Phase 1? What improvements, changes or additions could be beneficial for the next phase of implementation?*

Methodology

The evaluation was designed around three principle fields of inquiry drawing on the **OECD/DAC framework for evaluating development assistance**.

The first field looked at the **results achieved in Phase 1 in relation to the MELQO Theory of Change and its three project dimensions** (technical, operational and institutional).

The second field surveyed **stakeholder perspectives with respect to the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of approaches and processes** leveraged in support of the Theory of Change, as well as the potential for longer term sustainability based on country engagement and ownership, and the tools feasibility.

The last field **drew on the feedback in Phase 1 to offer recommendations for project management strategies**, **implementation approaches and governance arrangements**.

The evaluation team formulated sets of detailed questions for each field of enquiry and employed a mixture of data collection and analysis methods to triangulate findings including:

- A desk study
- Attendance of the MELQO Review Meeting in New York City (October 2015);
- Semi-structured interviews (31 in total)
- Online survey (64% response rate - 44 respondents)

I.3 Caveats, limitations and constraints to the progress reporting and data collection

The contents of this Executive Summary are based on the full evaluation findings which, in turn, are based on the information available to the evaluators at time of the data collection and report drafting (September 2015 – January 2016). Readers should note that a number of planned actions on the cusp of implementation at the time of the data collection have already been initiated. A number of recommendations from an earlier draft of this report have also been taken onboard by the project management. This summary subsequently **contains gaps in reporting/information on current developments** in the MELQO project.

It should also be borne in mind that the reporting against expected results, as well as the narrative reporting on stakeholder feedback, was colored by certain factors influencing the quality of data collection, namely:

- **Factual reporting against expected results**: The evaluators were unable to base their reporting on results, monitoring and evaluation frameworks setting out a hierarchy of expected results, planned actions and outputs for the three project dimensions.[4] In addition, the language describing the project's goals differed slightly across the various documents and was not completely aligned with the Theory of Change, which itself set very high expectations and suggested a very ambitious timeline for what was to be achieved by early 2016. As the description of goals and objectives also evolved over the timeline, this increased the difficulty for the evaluators in establishing a solid basis for assessing progress.

  In relation to reporting on results at country level, documentation on the non-technical dimensions of the project was not readily available at the time of data collection and the evaluators were limited by their timeframe and budget to undertake country visits. To counter the risk of scarce country data, information was sought from the multilateral country offices, lead experts within the Technical Advisory Groups and national data collectors where available. The evaluation team also made concerted efforts to access country information through the online survey and to interview Consortium stakeholders who had been directly, or in-directly, involved in the country pre-field testing. Nonetheless, it was very difficult to secure the level of country information, coverage and representation hoped for.

- **Stakeholder feedback:** The cross section of Consortium stakeholders interviewed had different perceptions and interpretations of the project - based on their level of participation in project activities, attendance at meetings and the documentation made available to them. These perspectives did not always line up with the project's goals as articulated in the founding documents, but offered good insights into what Consortium partners had believed/expected to come out of the project, and the degree of alignment between their expectations and what the project was actually doing.

In view of the above, readers should note that this summary is not intended to be read as an exhaustive representation of progress in Phase 1, nor of activities in all of the MELQO participating countries. Nor do the narrative elements of this report claim to be representative of all country stakeholder perspectives.

II. Delivery against objectives

II.1. Overview

This factual account takes stock of the impressive progress made in the MELQO project's institutional, technical and operational dimensions in Phase 1, recognizing the results achieved in such a short space of time and the advances made towards **operationalizing multi-stakeholder thinking around measurements of child development** (including items in the non-cognitive domains), and **identifying core constructs to monitor the quality of provision in low-middle income countries**.

The project's achievements were made possible due to the large volume of work undertaken by the Core

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[4] The evaluation team composed a Results Table for the purpose of systematic reporting, based on information in project documents. An earlier version was presented in the evaluators' inception report and endorsed by the Reference Group for the evaluators to use.

Group in collaboration with many individuals and organizations within the MELQO Consortium. They are all the more notable "*given the complex nature of this project, the inter-agency institutional arrangements and level of funding available.*"

The project has indeed shown that it is able to **mobilize a broad spectrum of ECE/ECD experts, researchers and practitioners in the international community**, including some of the major players in this field, **generating enthusiasm for the work** and **leveraging the technical, implementation and convening capacity of the lead agencies for the overall effort**.

While the project exceeded many expectations, it nevertheless fell short on some of the original targets. The **Core Group itself acknowledges that the Theory of Change and the expectations for the project were "***fundamentally unrealistic in Phase 1.*" There is now an understanding that "*certain goals were essentially unachievable in such a short timeframe*" and that lessons can be learned from the experiences of Phase 1 for planning processes and implementation modalities in Phase II.

II.2 Achievements of the MELQO Project in Phase 1

In line with the Theory of Change, some of the main achievements of Phase 1 were identified as:

i) A coordinated, cross-agency approach to ECE measurements: The project has played a significant role in strengthening inter-agency cooperation around ECE measurements and in aligning international support and resources to countries. MELQO's inter-agency composition offered a unique channel for creating 'a common narrative across multilateral stakeholders' and drawing more attention to the ECE/ECD sector. The multilateral agencies themselves have benefitted from the design and trialing of the tools, with catalytic impacts for other areas of their work.

"Having clear measures and common narratives around ECD with a group of global stakeholders is relevant and necessary to better position ECD within the Sustainable Development Goals."

ii) Buy-in from the global early learning community, political and institutional support: Phase 1 generated engagement from diverse development and ECE/ECD partners at global level - as evidenced by MELQO's stable and growing support base. Consortium members participated in high level international meetings to generate awareness of the project's goals and each of the lead agencies used their political capital to raise the profile of the tools. The Brookings Institution also led in the formulation of a number of well-received policy studies and policy briefs. There is general agreement among key global stakeholders on the need for ECE/ECD measurements as a global good and the Core Group is currently on track to producing a consensus document.

iii) Technical inputs from a Consortium of ECE and ECE experts: The project was also successful in creating a Consortium and operational framework for collaboration amongst early learning researchers, practitioners and influential organizations around the world. The project's convening gave a boost to multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral dialogue around important child development and quality issues. The dialogue has been technically rigorous and the Core Group was able to leverage Consortium member's individual and organizational expertise towards the development of the prototype tools. The MELQO Consortium is currently considered valuable as it represents different perspectives on early childhood development, while the support base has important untapped potential that could be leveraged for further growth.

iv) Technical instruments developed, field tested and partly validated in low resource settings: Important advances were made in Phase 1 towards the development and trialing of prototype child development

(CDL) measurements and quality monitoring (QPP) tools. Two measures were developed for the CDL tool: a direct assessment for children between the ages of 4 and 6; and a teacher/caregiver report scale for children of the same age. A number of supporting tools were also created for the QPP tool, including: an Observation Tool for use in the classroom (to capture information on settings); a template for teacher interviews (to capture information on settings and systems); a template for supervisor interviews (to capture information on systems) and a Parent Survey to capture experiences of parent engagement.

In response to growing country interest in the project, which MELQO itself helped to generate, the tools or parts of the tools were trialed in more countries than initially envisaged. Seven countries were reached instead of two in the original project plan. The World Bank also reported strong demand for the tools within its country teams, especially those participating in the Early Learning Partnership and SIEP impact assessments, with demand outpacing capacity to keep up. UNICEF has also been able to integrate the tools as part of its country assistance to ECE/ECD reform processes.

III: Feedback from Consortium Stakeholders: Relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the MELQO project

This section considers feedback received on the MELQO project's goals and modalities, governance and management arrangements through the agreed evaluation lens of relevance, effectiveness and efficiency.

III.1 Relevance of the MELQO goals and tools

The majority of interviewees and survey respondents agreed that **MELQO's goals were pertinent and timely** at the end of Phase 1 in view of current debates on how to monitor SDG 4.2 and the need for global indicator development reflecting holistic dimensions of child development. Many stakeholders felt that the tools offer **needed innovations in the early learning measurement space**, can serve to "*take the temperature of ECE/ECD systems*" and **respond to a clear and emergent demand** from established partners, as well as from development actors just coming into the early learning sector.

Stakeholders also acknowledged that the project can serve a broader role beyond the development and trialing of the tools – in the first instance as **a global platform for dialogue and exchange** across the early learning policy and practice communities. At the New York and Washington DC meetings, **conversations on child development and quality issues were considered useful** and stakeholders called for the project to **keep the dialogue open**.

At country level, Phase 1 showed how the MELQO project can **meet latent demand for ECE/ECD measurements without countries wholesale take-up of the tools**. In Kenya, for example, institutional stakeholders found the conversations with the technical experts globally appropriate, but preferred their own ECE monitoring tool. Nonetheless, the **operational insights from the trialing the CDL tool were seen to add value to the government's efforts** to develop a national monitoring framework. In Colombia, the quality tool lined up with the Ministry's on-going work in revising national quality frameworks and standards and **added value as an organizing framework in this regard**.

III.2 Effectiveness of project strategies

While recognizing the considerable achievements and successes of Phase 1, the evaluators were able to gain valuable insights from Consortium stakeholders on the enabling factors, obstacles and bottlenecks to implementation - which meant that certain planned actions were able to advance rapidly, while other activities took more time than expected to complete, or could not be initiated at all in Phase 1.

In the section below, the effectiveness of the approaches and strategies employed is presented in relation to the project's ability to: i) capitalize on latent demand and institutional readiness within country ECE/ECD systems; ii) convene experts through the Technical Advisory Groups; iii) build on existing measurements for the creation of the prototype tools; iv) field test and validate the tools, and; v) build consensus, engagement and outreach.

III.2.1 Capitalising on latent demand and institutional readiness within country ECE/ECD systems

The desk review and stakeholder feedback suggest that the tools were well-received in countries where **governments had already invested in national ECE policies,** the World Bank and UNICEF were supporting governments through **structured technical support programs and investments**, and **the tools aligned with existing (or emergent) priorities for ECE/ECD measurement within Education Sector Plans**. Tanzania, Mongolia, Colombia and Sudan are examples of countries demonstrating such 'latent demand' or 'institutional readiness.'

The project saw the most benefit in countries where there was **high level institutional support within the Ministry of Education, institutional assessments were undertaken** and **regular liaison was possible between country multilateral teams and stakeholders at different levels of education management**.

Phase 1 indeed demonstrated **how important the institutional work is to prepare the ground work for the data collection**. Having acknowledged this, the evaluators heard that not every country had comprehensive information on country institutional contexts, or benefitted from enough lead time to prepare for the work ahead. The MELQO project budget was only sufficient to cover in-depth institutional assessments in the two countries where both the tools were being cross-validated (Tanzania and Nicaragua) and diverse country actors felt that **more lead time and situational analysis would have been beneficial to all countries**.

Approximately 50% of <u>country</u> survey respondents **would have liked more robust guidance**[5] to support the institutional dimensions of the country field testing, including:

- how to properly convey the benefits of the project and trialing to institutional counterparts;
- how to iron out misunderstandings around the aims of research and clarify what the tools are intended and not intended for;
- how to address governance and ownership issues and take onboard stakeholder's concerns and perspectives at sub-national level;
- guidance and lessons from similar measurement experiences;
- opportunities for peer learning with other country teams.

III.2.2 Convening ECE/ECD experts through the Technical Advisory Groups and creation of the tools

Under the umbrella of the Consortium, UNESCO and the Brookings Institution convened two Technical Advisory Groups (TAGs) during Phase 1 – the first for the child development tool (CDL) and second for the quality tool (QPP). Great importance was placed on **bringing together early learning experts with previous experience in developing regional or international measurements**, and/or "*having used*

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[5] It should be noted that a technical manual tailored around the MELQO tools is now being prepared to provide guidance

and validated ECE measurements in more than one country in the global south."

The convening process for the CDL TAG advanced very quickly as the **project initiators had a wide network of connections in the ECE policy and practice communities and there was a visible enthusiasm for the work**. Much effort was put into communicating widely and the early months of the project were characterized by "*multiple conference calls, face-to-face meetings and email updates*" to gather inputs on the domains and items for the child development tool.

The **creation of smaller TAGs** (for the CDL and later for the QPP tool) **enabled the technical work to go even faster** and the members of these **smaller groups expressed a high level of professional satisfaction in how the work was organized**. Yet while progress was rapid, and much was achieved in a very short space of time, the evaluation revealed that this came at a cost. Perceptions about the process changed as the project progressed, and divergent perspectives were heard on the overall effectiveness of the TAGs in Phase 1.

While some felt that the calls during the early months "…*provided sufficient opportunities for those who wanted to express their opinion [and]…there was a lot of back-and-forth questioning, criticism, opinion and debate,*" others who were not in the smaller TAG groups felt that "*there was so much more to say*" and would have liked **more opportunities to reflect around the tool's design and feasibility** throughout the timeline, as well as **the planning of the data collection**.

The main issue was about continuing to be part of a **'shared process and timeline' within a 'Consortium'** underlineadvising on the development of the tools. What started out as frequent communication and updating was perceived to drop away once the smaller TAGs were created. Thereafter, a few interviewees stated that they **struggled to find entry points for making contributions**. Some would have simply liked more **regular updates on key decision-making points,** while others felt that their **concerns were not reflected in processes**.

The feedback also revealed a perceived **imbalance in contributions to the technical work (within the TAGs and project more generally) from the pool of ECE/ECD expertise in the global south**. While the evaluators heard that forty percent of stakeholders in the CDL group live/work in non-OECD countries and a third of representatives in the Quality Group live/work in non-OECD countries, Consortium practitioners felt that the work could have benefitted from the experiences and knowledge of people "*who live and breathe ECE every day*" and "*actors who know how things work in their context and who needs to be involved.*"[6]

The Core Group and smaller TAG group members underscored that the idea in the technical phase was to work with ECE/ECD experts with measurement experience "…*to create tools around which countries could engage.*" As this was a technical development and trialing period, "r*epresentation of the global south was never a specific goal*" as such for Phase 1. In saying this, one Core Group member stated "…w*e have tried to remedy [the imbalance] with the Quality TAG and it is a bit better,*" while recognizing that the experience of Phase 1 certainly "…*points to the need for so much work in this area…and MELQO Phase 2 can help address that.*"

III.2.3 Building on existing measurements for the creation of the prototype tools

In relation to the actual work of creating the tools, the project was also able to go very fast as **measurement items and quality constructs were drawn from existing regional and international measurements**. The CDL tool went particularly fast because **the majority of items are drawn from measurement**

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[6] See also the discussion on sustainability

instruments such as the Child Development Assessment (WCARO Prototype), IDELA from Save the Children, the Early Development Index (EDI), EGRA/EGMA and the East Asia Pacific Scale. The **rate of progress for the quality tool was slower for a number of reasons** - partly due to "*the need to go through all the existing quality frameworks and observational scales that have shown a good deal of convergence across countries.*"[7]

As the work proceeded, a drop box was created in which the smaller TAG group members documented the different iterations of the tools and referenced the authors and tools from which items were drawn. This box was freely available for consultation by the broader Consortium members. The evaluators nonetheless noted a recurrent issue related to **the attribution of items and constructs**. Only 36% of TAG survey respondents found that the contribution of constructs and items from existing measurements had been sufficiently attributed during Phase 1, while 95% of TAG survey respondents noted that the tools have largely benefitted from the previous trialing of items in diverse country contexts. This perhaps points to public outreach and communications issues which need to be addressed in Phase 2.

III.2.4 Field testing and validating the tools

The pre-field phase for the CDL tool began in early 2015, with the collection of information on the universality and feasibility of items within local school contexts and the extent to which they require adaptation. The data collection on the QPP tool began in late summer 2015 in Tanzania, with discussions for field testing now underway in Nicaragua.

The project was able to **leverage the logistical support and data collection capacities of the World Bank and UNICEF country offices in the participating countries**, as well as the **operational experience of partners such as Save the Children and RTI** which had already developed guidance manuals and tools to support the training of enumerators and data collectors.

The experience of Tanzania showed the **importance of a strong, stable in-country multilateral presence over a period of time** to "*manage the process"* and generate buy-in. This was very much needed for the two different scenarios for data collection on the Mainland and in Zanzibar. The country pilots were also facilitated through **collaboration with local projects**, Tayari in Kenya for example, which had a ready familiarity with the country ECE/ECD environment and the policy and administration context at sub-national level.

At the same time, Colombia and Tanzania both benefitted from **National Study Directors and Master Coders**, with a **high level of expertise, knowledge of national ECE systems at national and sub-national levels, awareness of opportunities and potential bottlenecks, and enjoying their own networks of graduate students who could be trained as enumerators**. These actors were able to visit schools in advance of the enumerator training and make recommendations for both the training and adaptation of measurement items.

Again, while much was achieved a very short space of time, the experiences of country pre-field testing in Phase 1 revealed that it was sometimes slowed down **by logistical and coordination difficulties,** including: the different levels of operational readiness of the lead agencies; the lack of dedicated financing arrangements and budget lines at country level; the lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities between the technical leads (from the TAGs) and country implementation teams on the ground, and; disjointed

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[7] These include: The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R); the Global Guidelines EDI; the International Step by Step (ISSA): Principles of Quality Pedagogy; the ACEI Global Guidelines Assessment (GGA) and Save the Children's Quality Learning Environment (QLE).

communications between country offices, TAG teams and data collection firms "…*to understand who was doing what and who was on point.*"

There were also issues related to the practicalities of organizing the data collection. The evaluators heard that more lead time was needed to **plan for different types of data collection scenarios** requiring **different logistical arrangements**. This was certainly the case for Tanzania. In countries with weak infrastructures (Sudan) or where multiple languages are spoken (Kenya), **finding suitable data collection contractors** and **assessors with the right language profiles,** and the **time needed for carrying out assessor training and the translation and back translation of tools and guidance materials** were more complicated than envisaged.

The Core Team acknowledges that the CDL tool was pre-field tested in more countries than originally planned and "…*along the way, we decided to be opportunistic about field testing and to take advantage of opportunities. The up side is we field tests in many more countries. The downside is each country did not have the level of support, management and rigor that we would ideally wanted.*"

III.2.5 Engagement, communications and outreach

As noted earlier, members of the Steering Committee and experts within the Consortium successfully represented the project on multiple occasions at high level meetings around the world and shared project experiences through their own channels. At the same time, the evaluators heard that **investments in communications and outreach more broadly were not prioritized in Phase 1 -** mainly stemming from the hesitancy of the Core Group to communicate around tools that weren't yet ready, as well as being unsure of where the need for communication was.

The consequences of this, as evidenced through the interviews and online survey, are that many **Consortium stakeholders and observers are still unclear about what the MELQO project is** and how it works. The evaluators noted confusion on: "*Is it a tool? Is it a platform? Does it have multiple objectives? If so, what are they?*" Nor are stakeholders fully clear on what the goals are in the different project dimensions.

At the same time, the project **does not have a 'go to' place** where stakeholders and potential partners and funders can find updates and information on country experiences, and Consortium stakeholders have been **unable to use outreach materials to act as advocates themselves for the project**. Some 76% of the survey respondents said that they are currently unable to promote the MELOQ effort through their professional networks.

III.3 Efficiency of governance and project management arrangements

The project was conceived with a **unique configuration of multilateral lead agencies representing the need for three parallel, inter-connected components** (technical, operational and political/institutional).[8] To this end, it was expected that the project could **leverage each agency's assets to achieve outcomes that no agency could achieve alone.**

UNESCO was funded to complete the technical work, with the Brookings Institution funded to provide convening, institutional work and communications. Both the World Bank and UNICEF were additionally expected to support the project at global level and play co-lead roles in the institutional work and in the

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[8] Identified in the CIFF Early Childhood Education Metrics (Investment Memorandum).

country field testing of the tools.[9]

Governance: A Steering Committee, composed of representatives of the lead agencies, alternated between virtual and face-to-face meetings on a quarterly basis. The Brookings Institution, on behalf of the Core Group, updated funders on progress following each of the Steering Committee meetings. These progress reports were supplemented with standard financial reporting by each agency directly to the funders.

Daily decision making and project management: A Core Group consisting of individuals from the lead agencies **consulted regularly in person and by telephone to coordinate the different work streams and to manage the project**. "*The core group had nearly weekly calls for two years. There was a process throughout to adjust plans and evolve the thinking. The Steering Committee and funders were informed and given opportunities for endorsement every quarter.*"

Through their weekly calls, decision-making and commitment, **the lead agencies were strengthening one of the founding principles and prerequisites of MELQO - cross-agency collaboration**. At the same time, as there were usually a number of management, technical and implementation decisions (or 'moving pieces') in play at once across the agencies, this contributed to the creation of strong dynamics and progress towards the achievement of results.

Individual roles and efficiency were widely recognized both in the interviews and in the qualitative feedback, while 75 % of the institutional survey participants found that general project management was efficient during Phase 1.

Nevertheless, while there seemed to be "*a convergence of the right organizations and the right people at the right time, it quickly became apparent that the inter-agency nature of the initiative was going to be challenging.*"

A first set of challenges related to **cross-agency project coordination and management**. On a day-to-day level, decision-making was complicated by **the lack of a joint management framework and unclear lines of responsibility and accountability across the lead agencies**.

> **What stakeholders said**
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> *"This project has required significantly more time and resources than we had originally planned for"*
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> *"It has been very difficult to manage the project with the loose involvement of many project members and with the financial resources spread out to several organizations with no one to coordinate overall."*

The evaluators also heard that the volume of **coordination needed across the TAGs, and with the multilateral country offices and data collectors,** was more than anticipated. Technical and coordination partners at global and country levels had to react quickly to risks and challenges, sometimes more than they had anticipated.

Last, but not least, while there were definite cost and time efficiencies in Phase 1 in terms of contracting out of services, **decision making did not always lead to putting resources where they were needed at management and coordination levels** (both Core Team and within country offices) and in relation to **needed investments in communications**. Both of these could have helped to ensure even greater efficiencies and avoid emerging tensions within the support base.

III.4 Efficiency of funding arrangements: CIFF as a partner

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[9] July 9, 2015. Memo on Measuring Early Learning Quality and Outcomes (MELQO). Prepared by Abbie Raikes for discussion with UNICEF, CIFF and UNESCO

The MELQO project benefitted from principle funding from the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF). From a development perspective, CIFF viewed Phase 1 as part of a multi-stage strategy towards reaching desired outcomes in the field of early childhood development and achieving impacts for children.

The Fund **played a crucial kick-starter role in the very initial stages**, reaching out to the lead agencies and bringing the different partners together to support the creation of an inter-agency approach to ECE/ECD metrics at the intersection of the Learning Metrics Task Force and the operational monitoring early childhood development at country level.

In many ways, **CIFF played a role that was more intensive than anticipated**. As the Core Group agrees, it was an important role of "*pushing/cajoling/supporting/solving and the project benefitted from that immensely.*" At the same time, As Phase 1 came to an end, the organization could have been better at understanding the need to take its foot off the pedal and maintain a healthy distance at certain junctures to enable the project team to work through different issues. CIFF has continued to play a key role in attempts to bring other funders and partners onboard, approaching several organizations who may be interested.

IV. Sustainability

1) In relation to the project, its goals and tools

There are many positive signs for the sustainability of the MELQO project coming out of Phase 1, in view of the **momentum and support the project currently enjoys at global level**, the **growing interest in** and **demand for the tools from governments and the multilateral country teams,** and **level of institutional support** shown by Ministries of Education.

With data from the pre-field testing beginning to reveal "*points of convergence in measurement items and constructs across countries, experiences and organizations*", MELQO has also revealed its potential as a **platform for knowledge generation, data housing and information dissemination** on early learning measurements – especially with a view to informing the SDG monitoring dialogue.

More complete information is now needed on how the **tools can add value to existing measurement practice at national and sub-national levels.** As stakeholders in Washington DC highlighted, many low-middle income countries already have some kind of loose ECE/ECD 'system' with different formulas for provision, including a mixture of government, NGO, community based and private sector services, and many of these actors will have developed their own ways of monitoring whether children are 'developmentally on track' or ready for schooling.

The project was urged to reflect on how it can **bring this valuable information on measurements from local service providers to global monitoring conversations**. At the same time, more reflection is needed on how the MELQO project can contribute to **strengthening quality assurance mechanisms** in low resource countries as NGO/CBO/private sector provision expands.

With immediate concern to the tools and trialing, stakeholder feedback generated a number of valuable insights for increasing the project's sustainability. Particular importance was given to **canvassing opinions and hearing from country ECE/ECD experts and practitioners earlier in the process** – as part of the process of building traction around the tools, securing the engagement of country actors as *"advocates and champions for the MELQO project to other country*

"Assuming that the right time for dialogue with country counterparts is only when the tools are being field-tested would be to ignore country involvement in tools design as an important dimension of building government interest, investments and longer-term sustainability."

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stakeholders" and listening to the experiences and concerns of national and sub-national actors.

Stakeholders also underlined the need to find the right balance between the technical strength, validity and reliability of the tools and ensuring that country take-up is based on demand, relevance and feasibility. The tools should be guided by **national approaches to early learning and cultural perspectives on 'what' to measure and 'how'**? Phase 1 effectively demonstrated the danger of resistance, or pushback, if countries view the tools as external, or driven by needs at the global level rather than having country interests at the core.

In relation to **feasibility**, and given the variable infrastructures for early learning in low-middle income countries, stakeholders cautioned on the need to "***meet countries where they are.***" Until now there has been a high dependence within the MELQO project on external data collection and expertise, and Phase 1 showed that national data collection and institutional measurement capacities are uneven across countries.

Country teams and practitioners called for their feedback on institutional readiness and the realities of measurements work at school level to be taken onboard in the study designs - so that **the project's pace keeps in line with local actor's capacities to sustain the work**. In particular, the **capacity needs of teachers, school inspectors and parents now need to be integrated into the overall approach** so that they can participate fully in the data collection and "*recognize what 'developmentally on track' and 'quality' look like.*"

In the open source phase, stakeholders pointed to the **potential tension between the availability of the tools, and the technical and institutional capacities needed by countries to use them independently, to collect data and to leverage this data over the long-term for systemic improvements**. Particular concerns were raised in relation to the quality tool, and a number of practitioners called for close attention to its technical properties,[10] cost and the need to reduce the dependence on external expertise and financing.

Beyond the tool's validation, stakeholders during the October 2015 and January 2016 meetings in New York and Washington DC underlined that **the data emerging from the tools should be 'actionable'**. Could education decision makers use the data for policy formulation towards systemic improvements? Can the tools be used to stimulate better program investment? Could teachers and practitioners use the data in their daily practice?

Finally, and with regard to financial feasibility and sustainability, the evaluators heard that the project needs to take into account **the cost implications for scaling up the MELQO tools into large scale monitoring frameworks in low resource settings**. Bearing in mind that learning assessments are not prioritized and lack major investment within education sector budgets, the reflections around the scaling up of the MELQO tools must be realistic.

2) In relation to maintaining support within the Consortium and at country level

At the end of Phase 1, the issue of global south representation within the TAGs, along with uneven opportunities for country institutional actors and practitioners to be involved in processes, combined to create an **impression of the MELQO project as being research-focused and driven from the global north**. The evaluators heard a number of variations of: *"The project has been largely north-led with*

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[10] Admittedly the version available in late 2015 was still in the pre-pilot phase, containing "more items being tested than would actually be in a final version."

involvement of experts mainly from the OECD countries - more specifically from the North American circles."

This cumulative impression is probably the biggest threat to the project's support base at both the global and country levels. A number of institutional observers and ECE practitioners suggested that the project is lacking in connection to systems and practice on the ground and has missed out on opportunities to build sustainability from the bottom-up: "*The work has to grow from practice in the field.*"

Potential funders also noted that they want to see more evidence of country leadership, and partnerships with local actors and philanthropy, as the basis for results and sustainability going forward. Concretely at country level, the evaluators again heard that a few countries had raised issues of ownership and took time to understand the purposes of the research and trialing.

The project management is aware of the danger of "*relying on a Westerner's perception of what the measurement priorities and values are in developing country contexts.*" To remedy that …"*we have done a lot of virtual work with participants around the world who were unable to attend meetings in-person.*"

V. Recommendations

The recommendations for future work by the MELQO project are based on the lessons learned and feedback from Consortium stakeholders during this evaluation.

TECHNICAL AND OPERATIONAL WORK

Recommendation 1: **Expand investments beyond the technical and trialing work, particularly to enable country ownership and participation in processes**. Country convening and participation will be the cornerstones for building traction and embedding of the tools in large scale assessments in the next phase and beyond. Interviewees at the New York meeting suggested that MELQO now needs to expand investments across a broad range of complementary work streams (beyond the tool's adaptation and trialing) to achieve its longer-term goals. Broader work streams may include: institutional capacity development, knowledge dissemination on trialing experiences so far, the creation of an online site for data housing and information sharing, and support to peer learning and communities of practice at regional level in the global south.

Recommendation 2: **Diversify the modalities for technical support within countries**. Given the lessons learned on liaising/working with institutional actors at national and sub-national levels, the evaluation recommends the investment of financial resources in more dedicated guidance outside of the technical work. Resources should enable country teams to undertake situation analysis and capacity assessments, to engage in more in-depth planning exercises during the lead phase and to communicate more effectively with country stakeholders.

PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

Recommendation 3: **Ensure that the Theory of Change (TOC) is realistic in its ambitions and timeline and develop strategic planning and project management tools that align with, and support, the TOC**. The development of a fully costed Strategic Plan, and Results and M&E frameworks, should clarify the project's pathway to achieving its ambitions and advancing the aims of the Theory of Change. Tools are also needed that help to improve day-to-day management and coordination efficiency.

Whichever options are chosen for the MELQO governance and coordination structures in the next phase, it will be doubly important to clarify roles and not to underestimate the management, coordination and communications investments, resources and capacities needed to allow the project to evolve beyond its technical core.

Recommendation 4: **Invest in management tools that lay the ground work for achieving longer-term goals - including goal-oriented fundraising and partnership parameters**. Many ECE partners and organizations (universities, research councils, ECE experts and practitioners) would like to offer their energies and inputs in an advisory role in a more channeled way. MELQO's fundraising strategy and communications materials should clarify partnership entry points and suggest how multiple partners can support different work streams. Partnership parameters might include "*clearer objectives and entry points for strategic engagement and clearer modalities for cooperation in light of partner's respective capacities and interests*." More generally, "…*the important thing is to make sure that the right partners are matched with the right roles, so that partner's strengths can be leveraged for different task areas*."

> "*If the project wants to get new funds at global or country levels – it will need communications materials, a pitch package – to give clarity on what investors are putting their money into.*"

Recommendation 5: **Develop a fully resourced, multi-level external communications plan**. Given some of the communications and image challenges of Phase 1, and to avoid the threat of push back at country level, external communications need to be much more invested in Phase 2. A set of guiding principles for the next phase could be disseminated underlining the continued importance given to multi-sectoral dialogue around child development and quality issues, as well as partnerships with countries and ECE/ECD experts in the global south.

Potential funders and partners also suggested that: "*There is a need to bolster the evidence base to advocate for quality and scalable models that work in low-resource settings, by sharing existing evidence as well as more coordinated efforts on research agenda*[s]." They also called for "*honesty about what has been learned through the pilots in terms of feasibility of measurements, tools contents and implications for national systems*."

> "*The project needs to show that it has clear leadership, strong and stable governance and coordination structures.*"

More general communications should be tailored to the needs of different audiences, providing the **thread that generates public clarity around the project's goals, governance and implementation arrangements while underpinning efforts to expand the support base**. Communications to countries are especially needed in the open source phase on what the tools are intended for, the types of support available, and frequency with which the tools would ideally be used. More, "*the communications chain has to go all the way down to the local level*."

Recommendation 6: **Develop an internal communications and information dissemination strategy**. Given the frictions caused by the perceived lack of updating on decision making, an internal communications strategy could begin with the dissemination of a lay strategy document providing an overview of the purposes and structure of the project in Phase II and expected milestones.

VI. Theory of Change: Does it still hold?

While the creation of technically strong tools is a key building block for the MELQO project's longer term

goals, Phase 1 affirmed that they are just one part of the chain of what needs to happen for stronger measurements to have impacts for children.

The operational work, in terms of adapting the tools and collecting data at country level, was influenced by many interacting forces and actors and proved to be more complex and demanding than initially thought. As stakeholders also highlighted, very few countries are currently ready to institutionalize ECE/ECD measurements, or are in a position to support the use of data from learning assessments, in a way that brings about deeper change "…*the implied leaps [in the Theory of Change] are just too big….we are talking about countries where early learning is low priority and will be lucky to have one person in the Ministry of Education taking care of early childhood education*."

Nevertheless, the Theory of Change and assumption that 'stronger measurements and data lead to policy changes and improved impacts for children' do still hold if a longer-term view of early learning assessments is taken and the project is viewed within a 10-15 year timeline. In the immediate future, however, the project needs to **embed country participation and capacity development within its 'investment model'** and address the many levers for change, opportunities and risks at global and country levels within its operational framework.

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