

Measuring Early Learning Quality and Outcomes (MELQO) Evaluation Report Response and Update

MELQO Core team, May 2016

The core team (UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank, and the Brookings Institution) is grateful to the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) for its support of the Measuring Early Learning Quality and Outcomes (MELQO) project. The goal of this work is to improve outcomes for young children by making early learning assessment more accessible around the world. The MELQO core team welcomes the positive feedback, constructive recommendations, and the strategic opportunities outlined in the MELQO Phase I evaluation report commissioned by CIFF. The evaluation process was also complemented by the MELQO core team's own ongoing efforts to assess its impact on building consensus and developing measurement tools. To that end, this memo outlines the MELQO core team's reflections on its progress to date and strategic decisions.

Before discussing the evaluation findings, some context on activities since January 2016, when the evaluation completed its work, is useful. MELQO is now preparing its final report. Recognizing the contributions of many great MELQO partners, we are pleased to say that the MELQO community came to consensus in January that both modules (CDL and Quality) were pointed in the right direction, and should continue to be revised in response to feedback from piloting the tools and examining the data across countries. Many of the questions around the MELQO tools are challenging and benefit greatly from regular input from the larger MELQO community, so we have solicited feedback at multiple points since January. Some of the issues raised may not be possible to address in the final MELQO report, but can be good input for future initiatives on ECD measurement, such as delineation of a pathway from quality measurement and monitoring to teacher training, ongoing professional development, and system-level improvements to pre-primary education. For child development and learning, more work is needed on feasible approaches to measuring social/emotional development and executive function, along with attention to how the teacher/parent and direct assessment items may be measuring distinct or related constructs. These issues and others will benefit from coordinated, collaborative work in the future to address the challenging technical issues that arise in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals.

Going forward, there are several initiatives in the planning phases that may provide points of connection for discussion on ECD measurement, including the Global Alliance on Monitoring Learning hosted by UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the Assessment for Learning platform proposed by GPE, as well as the World Bank/UNICEF Partnership for Early Childhood Development. There continues to be strong demand for the MELQO tools, and will be additional opportunities for testing. The MELQO Phase 1 report will include a technical guide to accompany the tools, with free online access. This report will contain an overview of key constructs and why they are important to measure; description of the measures used to inform MELQO's preliminary tools; process for adaptation and guidance for countries on measuring Target 4.2 and other targets with connections and inter-dependencies with early

childhood development (including alignment with country standards for learning, values, and perspectives on children’s development and learning); approaches to study design; and a summary of progress made to date on common constructs, tools, and results from pilot testing. The report will include the findings from an institutional landscape analysis and national ECE stakeholder convenings in Tanzania, a process which is recommended for future MELQO piloting. The final report is expected to be complete by June 2016. Finally, a regional meeting is planned in Dakar, Senegal in July 2016 to engage governments in Sub-Saharan Africa, reflect on progress-to-date, discuss the revision process of the tools, and discuss future opportunities to build on the results of the first phase.

1. Key Accomplishments and Impact

The Measuring Early Learning Quality and Outcomes (MELQO) initiative began in 2014 in anticipation of the global emphasis on early childhood development (ECD) that was eventually included in the SDG education goal. MELQO was designed to promote feasible, accurate and useful measurement of children’s development and learning at the start of formal schooling (with items designed for children between the ages of three and seven years), and the quality of their pre-primary learning environments. Led by UNESCO, the World Bank, the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution and UNICEF, this consortium of experts, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and multilaterals has worked together to build upon current measurement tools to create a common set of items organized into modules measuring 1) early child development and learning, and 2) the quality of pre-primary learning environments, as well outline a process for context-specific adaptation and an institutional assessment designed to judge the readiness of countries to adopt national monitoring. The modules are designed to be implemented at scale, with an emphasis on feasibility for low- and middle-income countries, and can be integrated with other measurement tools for young children. MELQO’s long-term goal is to contribute to technically robust measurement tools in a synchronized, integrated manner, which will lead to improvements in the quality of information on early child development and learning at both country and global levels. The MELQO consortium is working to meet this goal through technical work on developing, field-testing and refining the common items in the modules, and by facilitating information-sharing so that experts and users of measurement tools in early childhood can learn from each other’s work.

MELQO has been quite successful in bringing together the global ECD community around measurement and played a role in instilling confidence that we can measure aspects of child development and learning for SDG 4.2. This is a time of change for the global ECD community, as it transitions from primarily a research and advocacy role, to one where the world is taking notice and asking for specific solutions and there is less consensus on what to offer. This global shift has been evident in the MELQO discussions, and there is still work to be done in aligning messages among the ECD community at the global level. MELQO has made a significant impact on these discussions by building consensus on the important domains and constructs to measure, and has done a good job of communicating to key decision makers negotiating the SDG indicator framework.

Perhaps most critical to note, MELQO is responding to demand from countries to have better information on the status of children when they enter school. Prior to MELQO, the choices for a country

were to adopt one of several existing tools, or create their own tools. MELQO modules are unique in that they are quite adaptable to national goals, with core items that are consistent across countries. The institutional assessment process piloted in Tanzania will be useful in other countries seeking to use MELQO modules, or other ECD measurement tools.

2. Reflections on MELQO's Structure and Strategic Decisions

The formative evaluation offers some areas of constructive feedback to improve operational efficiencies, as well as key decision points for MELQO to address in its future strategy.

In general, we appreciate the feedback that the theory of change and communications were not as clear as they should have been, and also question whether the expectations for MELQO were shared and reasonable among all who participated in the MELQO process and evaluation. As with many new and ambitious projects, as MELQO unfolded, the amount of staff investment required to meet the goals exceeded what had been planned for. Because the overall purpose of promoting better ECD measurement was highly valued by many, work on MELQO proceeded at great speed but with little infrastructure in place. For some of the areas that were not as successfully addressed, some was due to unexpected changes in funding and scope of MELQO after the process had already been initiated: for example, a large amount of funding for country-level work and communications that was expected when plans were made was not received. Expectations within and outside of MELQO were not always in line with what could reasonably be accomplished, leading to lack of capacity to invest in communications; more limited country engagement; and implementation of a truncated version of the theory of change. While these limitations were not ideal, the MELQO team also sees the experience of Phase 1 as providing highly valuable lessons for the next phase of measurement efforts for Target 4.2. All told, there is a great demand for measurement and a need for objective information, better coordination and support. It is our intention that MELQO can help inform the design of these efforts in the next phase.

The core team would like to provide additional commentary on the following three issues:

Attribution of inputs: A primary goal of MELQO was to generate a common set of items that could be used to instigate national assessments while also informing global monitoring. For that reason, the common set was intentionally designed to draw from existing items and tools that had already been tested in more than one low and middle-income country – otherwise, the goal of merging data from existing assessments would be much harder to achieve. Despite the centrality of this goal, it was challenging to communicate, and many stakeholders may not have been fully clear on why the MELQO modules were drawing so heavily from existing assessments. The attribution of the items adapted during the MELQO technical process needed to be more intentional throughout the process. In addition to the fact that the final MELQO report provides a description of all of the source tools and the individuals involved, we also realized and addressed the need for clearer attribution by more explicitly acknowledging the multiple contributors in each presentation, beginning in 2016. Also, it was not always communicated well that the MELQO modules are not meant to replace existing tools, but to supplement

them with items and constructs that are common across tools and can be used to track children's learning and development globally.

Internal communications: Frequent communications and clear protocols for stakeholder engagement are important, and according to some stakeholders, were not sufficient. We learned from the evaluation that some thought it would have been helpful to clarify the role of the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) members, MELQO core team, Steering Committee, and any technical consultants prior to engaging on the technical work. For example, it is usually not possible to achieve complete consensus among technical experts on what constructs and items will be included in an instrument given the vast differences in approaches and lenses through which they view measurement. There is also a tendency for technical group members to rely more heavily on the tools and items they have developed, as they are more familiar and invested in those tools. For field-testing, decision-making on the tools is primarily led by country teams in partnership with the MELQO core team, based on the premise that decision-making should be led by those who are most closely connected to the goals of the national governments. For the final modules, we have recently adopted new systems for ensuring that feedback can be provided through online surveys and through meetings, which we hope will increase the accessibility of the feedback process. In general, because MELQO was working across a wide range of interests, communication and decision-making was not as well communicated as it could have been, and we are now working to ensure that there is more transparency and greater opportunity for input.

Country engagement: Because the first step of the MELQO process was to develop modules, the emphasis on engaging countries and embedding the measures into assessments systems was not highlighted in the first year of the project, as it would have been premature to promote adoption of a tool that had not yet been fully tested. As well, the funds and support for country engagement were much smaller than anticipated when the project began. In the design phase of MELQO, CUE and the World Bank had proposed to conduct an institutional assessment in four countries where MELQO modules were being field-tested and piloted. Due to the unexpected loss of funding early in the project, the number of countries where we had full funds for field-testing was reduced to just one, and so we had to be opportunistic about pre-field testing in sites where data collection was already planned. This led to inconsistency in sensitization about the MELQO modules with national stakeholders. In countries where the tools were being pre-field tested in a small-scale project, the intention was never to deeply engage the government as this would set expectations that MELQO could not meet. Looking across experiences to date, MELQO is designed to help promote country-level engagement, decision-making, and adoption of tools. We have now outlined this process, and have a much clearer sense of workable ways to encourage country engagement.

The second country to undergo the full MELQO piloting is Nicaragua, through a partnership with the World Bank. Core team members are currently working with the World Bank Nicaragua team to develop a work plan and field test design, and held an adaptation workshop in April 2016. Other field-testing sites are likely but have not yet been confirmed.