

Research to Improve Student Learning Worldwide Will Study National Education Reform Package

The five-year research project will examine whether and how a large package of national reforms works to improve learning equitably in one of the world's poorest and most diverse countries.

In recent years, Ethiopia has rapidly expanded primary school enrolment to achieve near-universal attendance. Yet, learning levels are poor, and appear to have stalled in recent years. As a result, even when children finish many years of schooling, they still lack needed skills.

In-depth, multi-year projects by RISE in a diverse group of countries - India, Pakistan, Tanzania, Vietnam, and, now, Ethiopia - aim to shed light on ways to address a global learning crisis, and to emerge with lessons for nations around the world.

“The fact that more children are in school than ever before represents an enormous victory for humankind,” said Lant Pritchett, RISE Research Director, senior fellow at the Center for Global Development, and a professor of the practice of international development at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. “Now that they are there, let’s continue that momentum to make sure that every child in school is learning.”

The situation in Ethiopia offers an emblem of the problems facing many countries in the developing world. Over the past decade, as the country has experienced tremendous economic growth, net enrolment in primary schools has soared from 25 percent in 2000 to 94 percent in 2015, government figures show. Despite national efforts to improve and to invest more in education, girls from poorer backgrounds and rural areas particularly continue to face problems in learning once in school, and in completing primary school. These issues present tremendous challenges for a nation in which more than 80 indigenous languages are spoken, and where many children live in remote areas and as ‘pastoralists’ – in nomadic, herder communities.

“Ethiopia offers researchers a chance to explore the ways to expand universal education with a true push on learning, and, at the same time, to understand how to emphasise equity for all,” Pritchett said. “Ethiopia is in many ways thriving and bursting with aspirations, but at the same time, it is confronting a legacy of poverty. Primary school enrolment increased only recently, so the stock of educated people is very low, and many students in school are first-generation learners.”

The Ethiopian Country Research Team is a multidisciplinary group with expertise in economics, education, political science, development studies, anthropology, and psychology. The project is an international partnership of researchers at universities and research centres worldwide, and is coordinated by the Ethiopian Development Research Institute and University of Cambridge’s Research for Equitable Access and Learning Centre. Partner institutions include the Institute of Educational Research at Addis Ababa University, and the Ethiopian Education Strategy Centre. Other partners include the University College London Institute of Education, Cornell University, and Stockholm University.



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The RISE project will examine the government's flagship education programme, the General Education Quality Improvement Programme for Equity (GEQIP-E) (2018-2022), a complex and evolving series of reforms intended to facilitate sustainable improvements in equitable learning. GEQIP-E is the third phase of the government's education reform programme, and this phase marks a shift from the input-based approach of previous phases to a more concentrated focus on outputs around equitable and quality learning. The RISE project will consider the effectiveness of the previous reform programmes, and will track progress in the design, implementation and impact of GEQIP-E.

"We want to know the impact on student learning from the programme of reforms' – basically, what works, and what does not work," said Tassew Woldehanna, the project's principal investigator. He is a professor of economics at Addis Ababa University; a research fellow of the Ethiopian Development Research Institute, an organisation established to conduct research that can support Ethiopia's development; and a principal investigator for Young Lives Ethiopia, which is part of a 15-year-long, international study of childhood poverty. "Ethiopia has the desire to learn from the evidence. We're hoping that the evidence we provide will help to strengthen the education system, and provide an evidence base for future reforms' so that we can understand why any changes succeed or fail."

The starting point for RISE Ethiopia is considering whether the GEQIP-E reform programme supports equitable learning in Ethiopia. The innovative systems approach employed by RISE Ethiopia will involve different research methods employed in a sequential manner including a system diagnostic, quantitative data collection, and qualitative case studies to understand how the education system functions as a whole. The team intends to gain insight into the extent to which reforms work at scale, why certain reforms work or fail, and how to overcome any impediments. In addition it will consider the impact of the new Performance for Results (PforR) financing modality that will underpin the implementation of this programme, which is expected to galvanise and incentivise stakeholders around a common set of results, and help to leverage more impact.

"We want to understand the consequences of the quality reform package, particularly with regard to marginalised populations – girls, children in extreme poverty, pastoral populations, children who speak various minority languages, and children with disabilities," said Pauline Rose, who coordinates research project with Tassew Woldehanna. She is a professor of international education, and the director of the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the University of Cambridge. "We hope to understand



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the solutions for addressing the problems of learning for all, but particularly for these, the most disadvantaged children. Ethiopia has a diverse, geographically dispersed population, and the challenges are to find equitable, inclusive and effective policies."

The potential benefits of the research project extend beyond Ethiopia, which is in some respects a forerunner for other large education systems now seeking to make a transition from expanding attendance without leaving children from disadvantaged backgrounds behind.

Please contact info@rise.ox.ac.uk for additional information, or visit www.riseprogramme.org.

RISE is supported by:

