
[Use of Learning Assessment Data: Lessons from Zambia](#)

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Student assessment

Assessment is a critical function in education that helps focus teaching and educational investment towards what matters most, learning. Thus, assessment assists educational providers to go beyond access and participation and focus on the actual learning outcomes of each learner. Having learning assessment data about where learners are in their learning and the progress that they have made is crucial to designing strategies for further improvement in teaching and learning. Sharing and owning such information across the education system is essential to meet information needs and support decision making at classroom, school and education system levels.

Zambia is among the countries in Southern Africa that [conducts and participates in a number of large-scale regional and international assessments](#) such as National Assessment Survey (NAS) for grades 5 and 9, Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) for grade 2, Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA) for grade 2, Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SEACMEQ) for grade 6 and the Programme for International Student Assessment for Development (PISA-D).

In a study on the [use of learning assessment data in the education planning cycle](#), which was designed by IIEP-UNESCO and implemented in Zambia by researchers from the University of Zambia in 2020, three issues stood out, which can provide opportunities for improvement in the use of regional and international learning assessment data in Zambia.

Collaboration between the Central and Decentralized Levels

Like many African countries, educational administration and policy implementation in Zambia is highly centralized. Thus, information and educational implementation strategies flow from the central administrative directorates to the provinces, then to the districts, through zones before they reach the schools. In the case of regional and international assessments, although the provinces and districts are involved in the collection of data for such assessments, the data that is generated is rarely availed after it is analysed at the central level. It is important to note though that Zambia is among the few countries with a National Learning Assessment Framework ([NLAF](#)), which actually provides a free two-way flow of information from the central level to the schools (NLAF: MoGE, 2017). The framework specifies that 'As figure 3 shows, there should be a flow of assessment information from national level down through provinces, districts and zones to schools. There should also be a free

flow of information in the reverse direction. Assessment information is a powerful improvement tool but only if it is made available to everyone, at all levels, who can use it to improve learning. This ‘two-way traffic’ of assessment information ensures that all practitioners are able to play their part in providing appropriate feedback and implementing interventions’ (MoGE, 2017:10). However, the NLA implementation road map could not be implemented since the Ministry of General Education (MoGE) has been highly depended on the Zambia Education Sector Support Technical Assistance Facility (ZESSTA), a UK aid and GPE funded project delivered by the British Council, which ended in early 2018.

Figure 3. The flow of assessment data through all levels of the education system



Source: MoGE, 2017: 10

This framework for the information flow is in itself an advantage for the MoGE if only it was used more effectively in the coordination of assessment data. Despite having the NLA, there seems to be a disjoint in the flow of learning assessment data from the central to the schools where it is actually needed.

Sharing of Learning Assessment Data

Many reasons may explain the limited use of learning assessment data in education policy and implementation. In Zambia, lack of systematic dissemination and sharing of such data is one of the impediments to using the data. Although assessment is done, the results are not shared especially with the teachers who should be using them in teaching. Interestingly, even at national or central level, coordination among different departments is not always efficient. Evidence from the study showed that departments within MoGE were working in “silos” and this negatively affected the possibility for improvement based on assessment data. The MoGE does not have a central place or platform where all the different assessments can be easily accessed by all the interested parties. Instead, assessment results are kept by individual officers and in the event that such individuals leave the ministry, the institutional assessment data memory is likely to be lost.

Ownership of Assessment Data

While regional and international assessments can help to provide evidence of the exact challenges that learners face, officials in the Ministry tend to rely more on the summative examinations conducted by the Examination Council of Zambia (ECZ) at grades 7, 9 and 12, assessments used for progression of learners to the next level of their education. Moreover, parents and sponsors of learners also take particular interest in these assessments as they determine the future of their children in terms of progression even if the performance of such learners leaves a lot to be desired. However, there is a mismatch in the information provided by examinations and large-scale assessments. For instance, while recent regional assessments, such as EGRA, EGMA and SEACMEQ reveal that most learners in primary school in Zambia have enormous challenges in literacy and numeracy, the MoGE announced on 12th February 2021 that all students who sat for the 2020 national examinations at grade seven qualified to proceed to secondary school in grade 8. The challenge with the examinations is that they are summative, therefore less suitable for national diagnostic purposes. In addition, reports from the ECZ regarding challenges that learners face do not reach the teachers and learners in schools.

On the other hand, regional and international assessments, whose focus is more on diagnostic

learning achievements, are mostly funded by cooperating partners since over 90% of what is allocated to education from the national budget mostly goes to salaries and other emoluments. Cooperating partners such as USAID, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and UNICEF, for instance, have taken a keen interest and funded the regional and international assessments up to the analysis stage. Since cooperating partners mostly take the lead and interest in funding such activities, this situation creates a lack of ownership of the data once it is made available to Ministry officials. Secondly, lack of sufficient funding of assessment activities in the MoGE and the ECZ creates a sense of helplessness among ministry officials who although are presented with assessment data, have no means of disseminating it to the provinces, districts and eventually to the schools.

The Zambian situation about the use of learning assessment data seems to suggest that having policies and institutions in place is not enough as such policies should be effectively implemented, institutions should be functional, well-coordinated and funded. You can find more information on the results of the study in Zambia [here](#).

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