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<u>Item **7** of the provisional agenda</u>

MAKING EVALUATION WORK FOR THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SDG 4 TARGET 5:
EQUALITY AND INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

SUMMARY

In accordance with 207 EX/Dec.5.II.A, this report provides a summary of a recently completed evaluation, namely:

Making evaluation work for the achievement of SDG 4 Target 5: Equality and inclusion in education.

Decision required: paragraph 24.

Job: 202000401

INTRODUCTION

1.   The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Education 2030 Framework for Action, adopted in 2015, placed equality and inclusion at the heart of the international development agenda. While targets for gender parity, equality and inclusion in education appear across SDG 4 on quality education, they are captured explicitly in SDG 4 Target 5: "By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education for all and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations".

MAKING EVALUATION WORK FOR THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SDG 4 TARGET 5: EQUALITY AND INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

A meta-synthesis of evaluation recommendations, best practices and lessons learnt to help tackle equality challenges in education

2.   Greater equality and inclusion in education will require a collective effort and now, more than ever, robust evaluation data are needed to track and strengthen progress in this regard. To this end, UNESCO Internal Oversight Service (IOS) undertook the "Evaluation for SDG 4" (E4SDG4-) initiative with the evaluation offices of UNESCO, UNICEF, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) and the World Bank (the "Coalition") in order to explore how evaluations in the field of education can better support Member States in advancing towards SDG 4 Target 5. Leading on this effort, the UNESCO IOS Evaluation Office commissioned a study with the aim to collect and synthesise publicly available evaluation evidence on what works, for whom and in what contexts to advance on gender parity, equality and inclusion.

3.   This meta-synthesis, which was undertaken in the first half of 2019, assessed gaps and challenges in existing evaluation evidence (*findings*). The study also presents *lessons learnt*, which suggest which initiatives, according to the available data, are effective in improving equality and inclusion in education. Emerging findings and lessons learnt were reviewed in a series of workshops in five countries: Ghana, Guatemala, Lebanon, Nepal and Peru. The detailed findings, conclusions and recommendations of this evaluation are presented in the full report, which is available on the IOS website.

Objectives and methodology of the meta-synthesis

4.   The meta-synthesis drew on a dataset of 147 independent evaluations that were commissioned by the evaluation units of 13 United Nations (UN) and other development organizations, published between January 2015 and March 2019. Evaluations were selected for consideration when they studied an intervention that occurred in an educational setting and reported on equality objectives or results.

5.   The synthesis was conducted in two steps. First, evaluations were coded to allow for a descriptive mapping of the evaluation dataset. Second, narrative content analysis was used to analyse evaluation evidence at four initiative levels: children, households and communities; teachers and schools; systems and sector level; and thematic. In addition, evidence on interventions for specific disadvantaged populations was reviewed and summarised.

Findings

6.   The findings of the meta-synthesis are as follows:

What was the availability of evaluations covering SDG 4 Target 5?

7.   Over the period between 2015 and 2019, the 13 organizations combined produced 30-40 evaluations annually on average with relevance to gender parity, equality and inclusion in education. Geographically, the largest number of evaluations was undertaken in sub-Saharan Africa. The vast majority of evaluations in the field of education identified in the search process had objectives or

outcomes related to SDG 4 Target 5. The predominant focus of these evaluations was on education access or participation, rather than completion or learning, and on interventions in basic education (understood as primary and/or secondary education) and early childhood education. The measurement of equality and inclusion was often not the primary focus of evaluations when measuring the impact of interventions.

What questions and methodologies were used in the evaluations?

8.   Questions were typically aimed at understanding the effectiveness of an organization in delivering an intervention or programme of interventions. Evaluations usually answered questions related to all five OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) criteria,[1] though answers to questions on efficiency (cost-effectiveness) and impact were notably weakest. The evaluations were typically comprised of desk reviews of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) reports and other documents, field interviews and site visits as well as secondary analyses of school-level, national or regional data. Only 28 (i.e. 19% of) evaluations used rigorous quantitative evaluation methods with a counterfactual.

9.   A challenge that emerged from this synthesis is the need to further strengthen the evidence provided by evaluations, in particular of complex, multi-level component programmes that aim to support system-level reform. In addition, the limited availability, quality and comparability of data on equality outcomes were repeatedly noted as limitations across the evaluations. Concluding recommendations in the evaluations often focused on implementation-related considerations, but rarely included an explicit focus on strengthening mechanisms to improve gender equality and inclusion of vulnerable groups in the education initiatives under evaluation.

What kinds of educational initiatives were included in the evaluations?

10.   The largest group of interventions evaluated were directed at the level of children, households and communities (e.g. school feeding, cash transfers and non-formal life skills programmes). The second largest group of evaluations were of programmes operating at the system or sector-level. The smallest number of evaluations, and also those with the weakest evaluation evidence related to equality and inclusion, was found for interventions at the level of teachers and schools.

Which target populations were intended beneficiaries in the evaluated activities?

11.   A large proportion of interventions of which the evaluation was included in the meta-synthesis contained activities aimed at strengthening gender equality (and predominantly benefiting girls), addressing socio-economic disadvantages and disadvantages due to place of residence, i.e. living in an urban or rural area. Disability and forms of inequality linked to ethnicity, culture or language were less frequently mentioned. An important aspect of the dataset for the meta-synthesis was the large number of evaluations of interventions that addressed the needs of children in fragile and conflicted-affected settings, contexts that are rarely the focus of large-scale syntheses of evidence in education.

Lessons about what works to support SDG 4 Target 5

The strongest evidence of positive impact related to equality and inclusion was found for interventions at the level of children, households and communities, especially cash transfers and school feeding programmes.

12.   Conditional cash transfers improved school attendance among children in poor households in several contexts, as did unconditional transfers in others. They were found to boost enrolment for girls in schools where gender parity had not been achieved and tended to reduce children's work and household chores. Bursaries were shown to lead to improved access to post-secondary education for vulnerable youth and refugees.

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1   I.e. relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability and, recently, coherence.

13. While school feeding programmes have demonstrated strong positive effects on primary school enrolment, particularly in areas of high food insecurity including drought-affected and internally displaced/refugee contexts, unintended results included overcrowded classrooms, sometimes aggravated by the conversion of classrooms into food storage and eating spaces and additional demands on teaching staff and school management. Such demands were often seen to distract from their core educational roles.

14. Non-formal life skills programmes and community-based information and advocacy interventions show some promising anecdotal and qualitative evidence for promoting gender equality and improved educational opportunities for vulnerable groups (especially in conflict-affected contexts), but require a larger and more diverse pool of evidence.

Evaluations at the level of teachers and schools (including pedagogy) provided limited evidence of impact related to reducing inequality, signalling the need for stronger evaluative evidence in this area.

15. Still, there is evidence to suggest that improved teacher training increases school completion rates, especially for girls, in some contexts. In other contexts, programmes for building new schools reduced school drop-out and the provision of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities led to more equal school enrolment in arid, pastoralist areas. While results pertaining to information and communication technology programmes (ICT), and specifically online learning, reported mixed results, interventions supporting education in emergencies show considerable evidence of rapid increases in children's enrolment in refugee camps/host communities.

Evidence from evaluations at the system and thematic levels provided important insights.

16. For example, they explored the mixed impacts of new forms of development financing (e.g. results-based aid) and point to equality and inclusion challenges in complex decentralisation and school-based management reforms. The limited available evaluation evidence suggested limited impact of results-based financing on school completion rates, learning or gender equality. In one case, findings suggested that while budget support improved overall education spending and access, it did not improve policy dialogue in areas beyond access.

17. Evaluations at system and thematic levels suggested the need for greater coordination and learning across organizations, a finding that was echoed in the country validation workshops. Both greater cross-agency and country-level learning and exchange represent substantial opportunities. Finally, the analysis highlighted the need for greater attention to building national capacity to monitor and evaluate equality and inclusion in education.

Conclusions and the way forward

18. Since the adoption of the SDGs, significant work has been carried out to support improved indicators and data related to equality and inclusion in education. However, the large volume of evaluations with reference to equality and inclusion in education has not been matched by a coordinated system to generate, synthesise and disseminate such evaluation evidence. To address this challenge, four overarching recommendations were proposed to the Coalition led by UNESCO IOS Evaluation Office:

19. **Recommendation 1 – Address evidence gaps**: Agencies should work together to address areas with key gaps in evaluation evidence for SDG 4 Target 5, such as on the effects on equality and inclusion of teacher development initiatives, alternative/non-formal education, school-based management, school grants and decentralisation reforms. A particularly important imperative for future evaluations is to help address the question how complex system-level interventions can be better designed to reach children and youth with disabilities and indigenous and ethnic minority groups. Evaluation investment should also be focused on areas where there is promising qualitative evidence but limited quantitative data to support scale-up of interventions.

20.   **Recommendation 2 – Contribute to stronger and more consistently available data**: Good quality national data on equality and inclusion is critical to progress towards SDG 4 Target 5. The evaluation units of international organizations can support and contribute to national capacity by investing in the work of national partners when collecting data on equality and inclusion, thereby strengthening national data systems.

21.   **Recommendation 3 – Strengthen evaluation methodologies**: Agencies should explore ways to strengthen their evaluations by (i) incorporating stronger and more consistent equality and inclusion measures; (ii) embedding quantitative designs in their evaluations of system-level programmes; and (iii) investing in the collection of cost-effectiveness data. Creating a common set of 'best practices' for evaluation in this area would lead to significant advances in level of evidence available related to SDG 4 Target 5.

22.   **Recommendation 4 – Synthesise and collaborate to make evidence more useful to national stakeholders**: Building on the momentum generated through this collaborative study, and on recent United Nations commitments for greater collaboration and coordination of evaluation work, development partners should foster ways to systematically coordinate, synthesise and promote learning from their evaluations. Effective strategies to this end might include the creation of a registry of planned or commissioned evaluations in the field of education; commitment to regular international syntheses of evaluations; and routine efforts to link evaluation evidence to the wider research literature on what works and what doesn't.

23.   This study, which was presented at two side events at the 2019 High-level Political Forum (HLPF) in New York, and at two learning events in Rome, at the World Food Programme (WFP), which joined the Coalition in April 2019, and Oslo, at Norad, provides a starting point for such future collaborative efforts. It offers a path for how evaluations can more effectively support learning among countries and their development partners, ensuring a more robust evidence base to support the implementation and scale-up of effective education strategies to improve gender parity, equality and inclusion of vulnerable groups in education.

Proposed draft decision

24.   In light of the above, the Executive Board may wish to adopt a decision along the following lines:

The Executive Board,

1.   Having examined document 209 EX/7,

2.   Welcomes the "Evaluation for SDG 4" (E4SDG4) initiative, and the cooperation between UNESCO's Internal Oversight Service Evaluation Office (IOS/EVS) and Education Sector and the evaluation offices of other technical and financial partners (the "Coalition") working towards Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, with a view to helping evaluate progress made;

3.   Also welcomes in particular the report "Making evaluation work for the achievement of SDG 4 Target 5: equality and inclusion in education" (IOS/EVS/PI/178);

4.   Calls upon all Member States, partners and donors to support the "Evaluation for SDG 4" (E4SDG4) initiative;

5.   Invites the Director-General to dedicate adequate resources to enable follow-up to all the recommendations contained in document 209 EX/7, and to explore opportunities with a view to broadening the "Evaluation for SDG 4" (E4SDG4) initiative.