USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

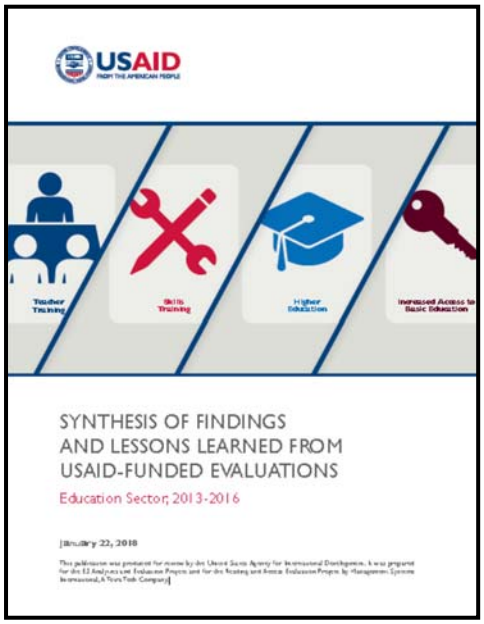
Evidence Brief

Synthesis of Findings from USAID-Funded Evaluations, 2013-2016

Strategy

The Office of Education in the United States Agency for International Development's Bureau for Economic Growth, Education, and Environment commissioned a study to synthesize findings and lessons learned for topics related to the goals of the Agency's 2011-2015 Education Strategy: (1) improved reading skills for 100 million children in primary grades; (2) improved ability of tertiary and workforce development (WfD) activities to generate workforce skills relevant to a country's development goals; and (3) increased equitable access to education in crisis and conflict environments for 15 million learners. The study's findings are expected to contribute to future USAID programming in these three goal areas.

This brochure highlights findings from the synthesis report on each of the three goals of USAID's 2011 Education Strategy, and summarizes cross-goal findings on such topics as gender, disability, information and communication technology, innovative financing, scaling up, and sustainability. The synthesis study considered only information provided in the evaluation reports that met the inclusion criteria (below) without further investigating the activities addressed in the reports. Cost data were not included in the evaluations and value for money were not considered as part of the review.



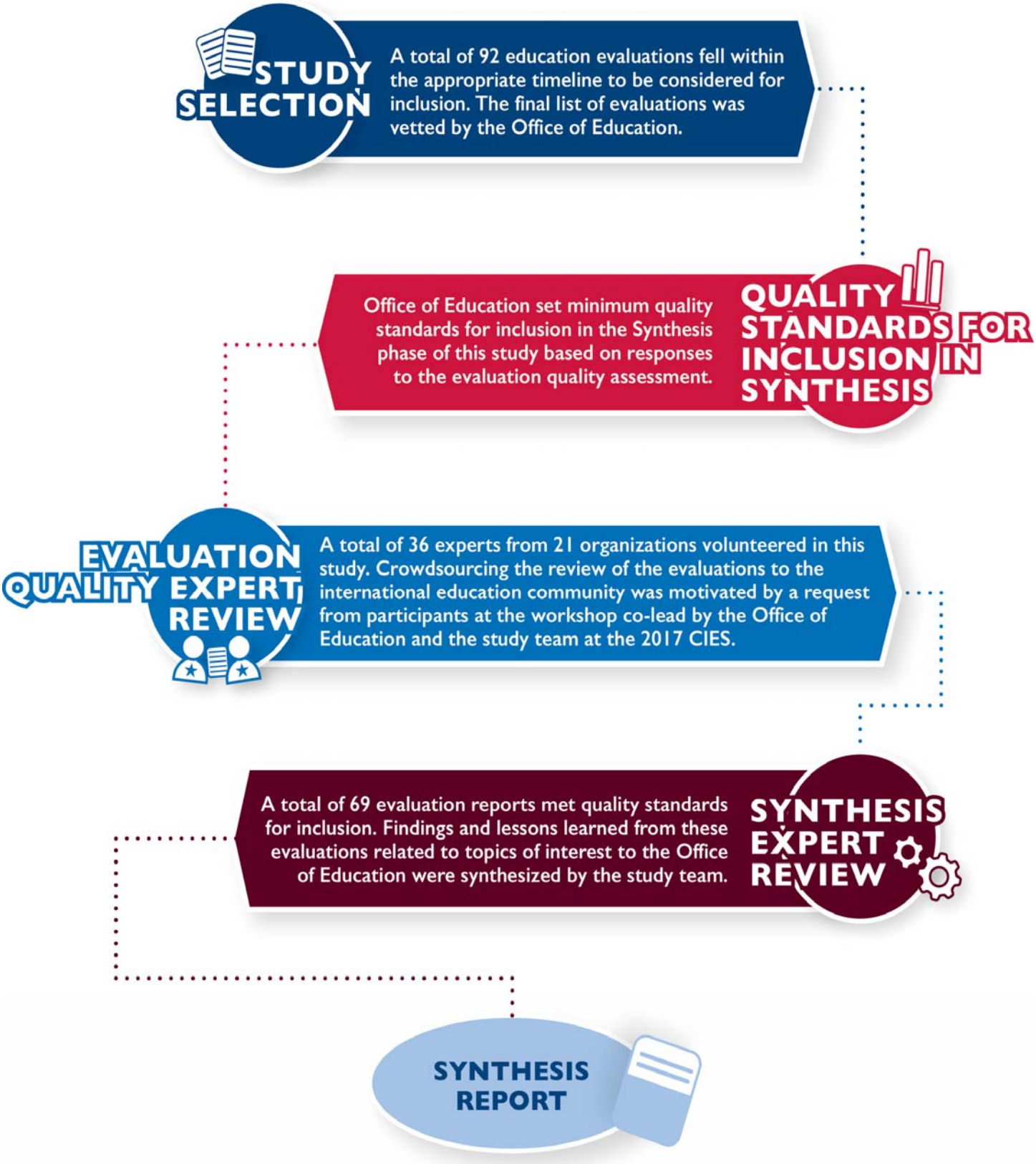
Full report available here.

Inclusion Criteria

Studies included in this review were: (1) USAID-funded evaluations of USAID-funded education interventions; (2) Published between 2013 and 2016; (3) Relevant to the Education Strategy; (4) Single, latest published report (in the case of reports for multiple phases of an evaluation); (5) Of acceptable quality based on minimum evaluation quality criteria set by USAID.

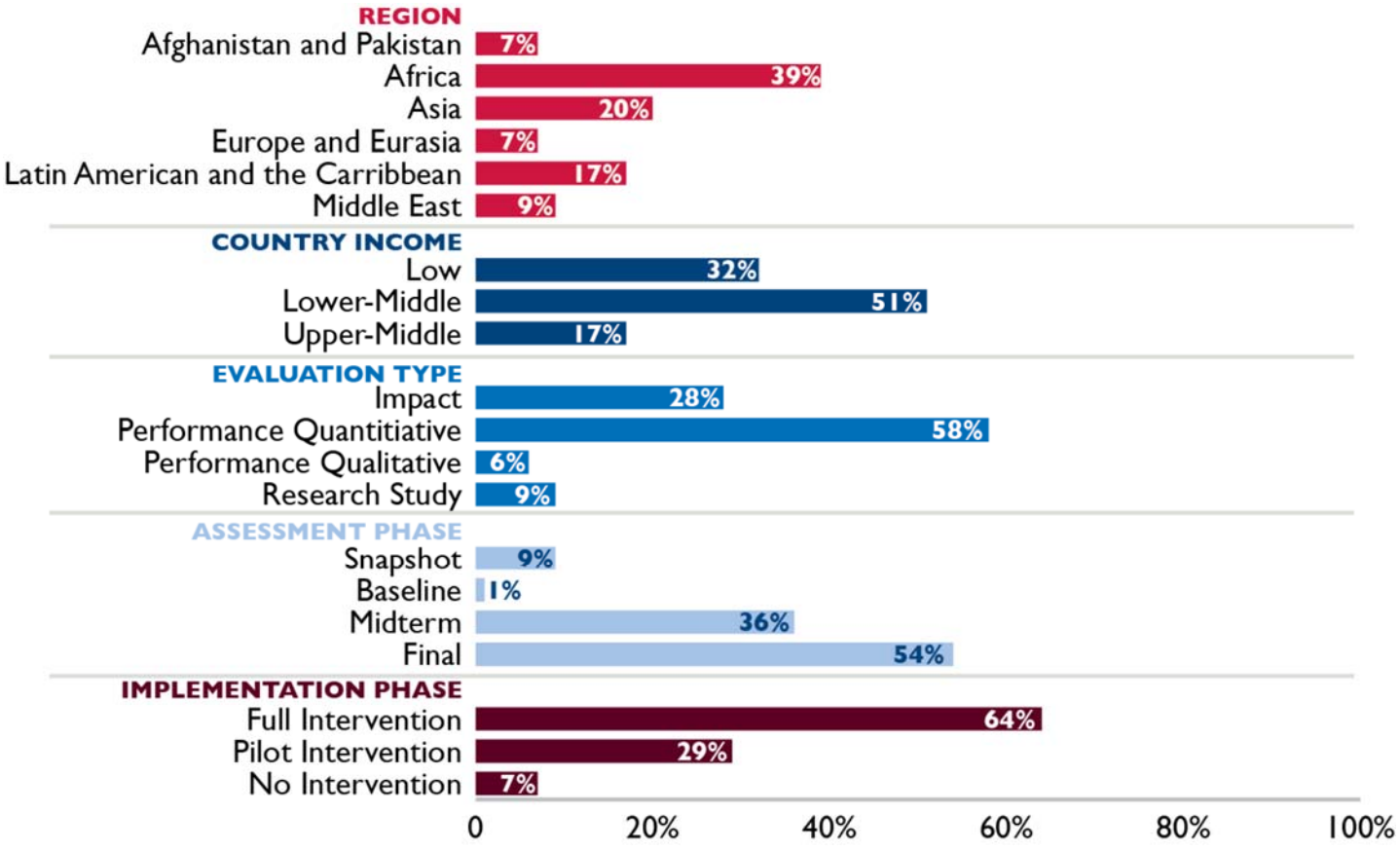
This Evidence Brief is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It was produced for review by USAID and prepared by Management Systems International, A Tetra Tech Company, for the Reading and Access Evaluation Project and the E3 Analytics and Evaluation Project.

Methodology



Summarized Topical Areas

Sixty-nine evaluations met the Office of Education's quality criteria, and were included in the syntheses review. The study only considered information provided in these evaluation reports, so activity information may be incomplete. The 2011 Education Strategy required USAID missions to align programming with the Strategy by 2013, as such this study only reviewed evaluations published after the alignment. In many cases, the requirement to realign activities according to the Strategy likely affected implementation and corresponding evaluations. Many activities that continue to support the Education Strategy Goals were awarded in the 2014-2015 period, and as such, relevant findings and learnings from these activities will continue to unfold until at least 2019.



Topics of Interest to the Education Office

- **Goal 1: Reading** – Learning outcomes, support for classroom instruction, teacher training, community engagement, and policy and systems strengthening.
- **Goal 2: Workforce Development and Higher Education** – Responsiveness to labor market demands, university extension services, entrepreneurship, access for marginalized groups, policy and systems strengthening, responsive to needs and dynamics in conflict-affected regions, and measurement issues.
- **Goal 3: Education in Crisis and Conflict** – Strengthened institutional capacity, violence prevention and countering violent extremism, improved programming, safer learning environments for children and youth, equity, social and emotional learning, and school dropout prevention.
- **Crosscutting Themes** – Gender, disability, information and communications technology, innovative financing, and scaling up/sustainability.

Key Findings

Cross-Goal Findings

Reading. The evaluation synthesis study found that USAID-funded early grade reading interventions had positive effects on student scores, though the magnitude of the gains was generally small. Activities with extremely low or high baseline scores tended to have the most difficulty showing improvements. Boys generally outperformed girls on most activities, though girls often made progress in closing achievement gaps from baseline scores, especially in the early primary grades. Some district-level teacher coaching and in-school mentoring models showed promise, but most experienced implementation difficulties due to staffing, training, and logistical issues. Community engagement models focused on parent-teacher associations and school management committees, with a small amount of quantitative evidence showing minimal effects on student learning. Promotion of reading outside of the school day was implemented in a small number of activities, with some of them showing positive effects on learning outcomes. (Goals 1 and 3)

Capacity Building. The reviewed evaluation reports often mentioned capacity building. However, the review found that there was a lack of strategic focus on systems strengthening, with little evidence of follow-on investment to sustain and scale up reform across institutions and systems. Reported activities related to Goals 1 and 3 centered around improving M&E systems by ministries of education, improved learning environment, and improved local governance and leadership in school management, whereas reported activities related to Goal 2 centered around Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), professional development, industry associations, and training of faculty and university administrators. (All Goals)

Violence Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). Analysis of Goal 2 activity evaluation reports suggests that sustainable livelihoods and workforce participation are thought to promote stability and peace. WfD interventions are commonly employed to prevent youth participation in violent activities and mitigate against the negative labor market and community conditions that affect young people as the result of conflict and crime. However, few evaluations measured the effect of WfD on violence prevention and CVE outcomes. Analysis of evaluation reports of Goal 3-related activities suggest the most effective approaches for increasing learners' access to education while also mitigating causes of violence were to promote community participation, strengthen local governance capacity (e.g. justice reform measures, assistance to police), and improve access to quality services in education and health. (Goals 2 and 3)

Equity. Issues of equity centered around how vulnerable or at risk a child was. The review of the evaluation reports suggests that equity, defined broadly, is best addressed through cross-sectoral interventions. Gender and marginalization were the most commonly addressed vulnerabilities. Reports indicate that community-based education (CBE) activities had a significant impact on reducing inequities in access to education. Interventions have differential impacts by gender, age, type of school, or even type of teacher. However, articulating those impacts was not possible. Evaluations of WfD activities indicate that most focus on vulnerable youth, such as second-chance education, training, and employment services targeting marginalized youth. Marginalized youth may face a range of risks, including gang membership, recruitment by violent networks, and extreme poverty. Non-formal WfD activities address the stigmatization of out-of-school youth by mediating between the youth and potential employers, and by building positive self-confidence through life skills workshops. (All Goals)

Key Findings (continued)

Crosscutting

- **Gender.** While gender disaggregation was frequently mentioned in the evaluation reports reviewed, gender is not yet a key influencer in the design, implementation, and evaluation of education interventions.
- **Disability.** Disability is acknowledged as a risk factor in the evaluation reports reviewed, but seldom measured or addressed purposefully.
- **ICT.** Technology was used in many of the activities, but the evaluation reports reviewed indicated that these activities were rarely evaluated rigorously and systematically to assess cost-effectiveness.
- **Innovative finance.** The reviewed evaluation reports indicate that innovative financing of education is not yet part of USAID programming/evaluations.
- **Scaling up and Sustainability.** There was little indication in the evaluation reports reviewed of activities attempting to systematically evaluate the results of sustainability efforts.

Recommendations

Cross-Goal Recommendations

Gender. Conduct and deepen gender analysis prior to activity design to identify gender-based dynamics affecting education quality, access to education and training, and youth labor market outcomes after activity completion. Gender analysis should include understanding the different perspectives, life circumstances and outcomes for *both* girls/young women and boys/young men, and these dynamic relationships should be captured in the activity design. The analyses should focus on increasing equity, safety and empowerment while promoting gender equality and reducing gender gaps. For example, if young women are discouraged from accessing certain types of career training, changing attitudes of families and male peers could be part of the activity design alongside empowerment activities for the young women. Similarly, if materials and training modules have built-in gender biases, then activities should work with governments to design a process for making revisions, including piloting modified materials to ensure that gender biases have been removed prior to scaling up production and distribution. USAID should support implementing partners and independent evaluation teams to understand and integrate Agency guidance on gender-sensitive theories of change.

Disability. Expand efforts to create inclusive learning and work environments for people with disabilities. Two suggested approaches to implementing this expansion could be: to require a component on improving access for populations of people with disabilities in very large education activities; and to create a small number of pilot activities around key disability categories that would bear experiences that could be replicated in larger activities. Further guidance on how to define and measure "special needs" in individual studies and additional evaluations that focus not only on specialized education (efforts that focus on a specific type of disability) but also on disability inclusive education (related to changes to the overall education system for the full spectrum of disabilities) could also enrich the body of evidence produced by USAID on education programming related to disability.

Recommendations (continued)

ICT. Further research on the value of ICT is needed, as well as possible uses of technology in the field to gather information during monitoring. The reviewed evaluations indicate the use of technologies for instructional purposes, scaling of EMIS systems, employment services, education management, professional networking, agricultural research, and as a means to both increase student engagement with school and promote school retention. However, a range of technical and design difficulties in getting the systems to work as intended were reported, and maintenance was cited as an ongoing issue with computers (although cellphone technology seems promising). Further research is recommended, such as qualitative research to identify the technical issues hampering the adoption of technologies; quantitative research to measure the impact and cost-effectiveness of these investments in comparison to alternatives such as face-to-face training; and exploring the usefulness of the selected technologies, given the intervention modality and environment where it would be deployed, during the activity design phase. A further recommendation for research is to examine IT applications that would make information collection and processing more efficient and effective for adaptive management.

Innovative Finance. Experiment with innovative finance to build resources and sustainability for programming for disadvantaged populations. A starting point may be to conduct cost-effectiveness or unit cost analyses so that the level of finance for activities is known in advance and funds can be solicited using accurate data. Innovative financing schemes may help leverage badly needed private sector funds to complement public and donor funding, and incentivize service provider innovation. Social impact bonds, development impact bonds, results-based financing, as well as student loan schemes and employer pay-for-service agreements, may help unleash new funding sources for education activities. In crisis and conflict contexts, USAID could collaborate with national governments, other donors, and implementing partners through the Education Cluster and Protection Cluster platforms to discuss how to best tackle sustainability. Private sector partners could also be invited to discuss different finance mechanisms for testing. For entrepreneurship promotion, USAID could augment financing for entrepreneurs through angel investing and crowd-sourcing. USAID's Development Credit Authority is available to reduce the risk of such schemes. Given the novelty of such approaches in the development field, targeted and well-designed tests of selected modalities are recommended.

Lack of Impact Evaluations. Increase the number of experimental and quasi-experimental impact evaluations to enable judgments about the effectiveness of specific interventions to inform investment decision-making. More of such evaluations are needed across the goals. These evaluations could be used to inform choices about the length and intensity of training, and the most effective (and ideally cost-effective) combination of training and other intervention components.

Lack of Clear Description of Key Information in Evaluation Reports. Request that evaluations consistently include clear descriptions of key information. This information includes descriptions of interventions implemented, including duration and intensity of treatment (by hours, over time), the characteristics of the beneficiaries, and the outputs and outcomes reported. Wherever possible, evaluations should provide comparative information to make judgments about activity effectiveness more transparent and evidence-based.

Lack of Cost-Effectiveness Analyses. Increase the number of cost-effectiveness studies to improve activity design decision-making and increase financial sustainability of USAID investments. The cost-effectiveness analysis is a critical dimension for judging the effectiveness of interventions. Furthermore, collection of cost data and consideration of cost in the country context during the activity design phase is vital to ensuring interventions can be sustained within the budgets of country governments or private sector implementers. Collection of cost data is not common in USAID activities, so to do so well will require planning, coordination, and transparency with implementing partners, as well as with country stakeholders responsible for sustaining programmatic outcomes.