



# Smarter technical assistance, stronger systems

How edt helps governments to turn investment into measurable learning gain



# Building effective education systems for scaling: frameworks, ingredients, and implementation

The global education landscape in low-income countries is marked by a profound learning crisis, where billions of dollars in aid has not translated into commensurate improvements in learning outcomes. Whilst access to learning has improved as a result of such investments, poor learning outcomes and a lack of inclusivity in education remain ongoing challenges.

These persistent challenges, compounded by recent developments in global politics, widening inequality and cuts in aid funding, have revived discussions on doing development differently. Mimicry and siloed interventions that deliver short-term, small-scale results have been deprioritised for evidence-informed solutions that adopt a system lens approach to education reform, with the aim of delivering scalable lasting change.

The principle of system strengthening in education reform is not new. There is extensive literature on the key 'ingredients' required for an education system to deliver improved learning outcomes, leading all practitioners to assert that their education solutions incorporate system-strengthening principles; and yet the challenges to improved learning outcomes remain. Similarly, there is a considerable body of literature on pathways to scaling; however, relatively few evidence-informed solutions have been successfully scaled across diverse contexts<sup>1</sup>.

Based on our research and programme delivery, at edt, we recognise that successful system-strengthening initiatives leading to the scaling of education solutions are not determined by the "ingredients" alone; *their practical application in complex political environments is equally critical*. In particular, the approach used to embed these elements during the implementation or rollout of interventions can significantly influence whether outcomes are short term or lead to sustained, scalable impact.

In this brief, we reflect on decades of experience in system strengthening to support evidence-informed solutions, highlighting the key elements of our approach that have contributed to strengthened systems and the delivery of education solutions at scale.

Our approach to building effective education systems for scaling is rooted in six core principles:

## 1. We consistently adopt a systems-lens approach to solution design

While our education solutions address specific challenges, they are developed with the broader system and its complexity in view. Applying a systems perspective entails comprehensive diagnostics to develop a deep understanding of the context, including governance arrangements (such as vision, leadership, regulatory frameworks, financing, and human resources); data systems and processes for monitoring, accountability, and improvement; available resources (including infrastructure and learning materials); and the education workforce (including teacher training and management).

We examine how these elements interact – either enabling or constraining the successful scaling of education reforms – and thereby design solutions that place education systems on a sound reform trajectory from the outset.

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In our FCDO-funded Building Learning Foundations Programme in Rwanda, edt worked with officials to identify relevant and promising initiatives that would support improved learning outcomes in English and mathematics. This joint understanding of the problem and potential solutions, led to the creation of an innovative approach: selecting school leaders to work with middle-tier experts to support school improvement. These ‘Local Leaders of Learning’ were subsequently trained and qualified by the Ministry and University of Rwanda to lead monthly professional learning communities focused on improving learning outcomes in their cluster’s schools. This is a low-cost, sustainable and empowering approach to school improvement, in which learning data is used by school leaders and teachers for school decision-making on a regular basis.

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## 2. We aim for a multiplier effect

We know that a paradigm shift is needed from traditional models of aid and intervention towards technical assistance (TA) that has a multiplier or amplification effect and builds local capacity. Done well, catalytic TA acts as a strategic, risk-tolerant approach designed to unlock and multiply local capabilities.



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In Zimbabwe, in the TEACH programme, edt worked with ministry colleagues to select local education experts to develop the capacity of district education officials in all regions. These embedded regional experts were temporarily deployed to model, guide, and scaffold professional learning in school leader and teacher development, data use and school improvement. These district officials were trained and supported by the edt team and ministry colleagues and given explicit targets in relation to building leadership and teaching capability. The legacy has been a strengthened approach to deploying an effective middle tier.

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### 3. We are outcomes-driven

We work collaboratively with education systems to establish where they want to go (their desired future outcomes), where they are now (current status including strengths and gaps), and what it will take to get there (the requirements to achieve those goals). We intentionally adopt an appreciative enquiry, rather than a deficit model to analyse intended goals, needs and pathways. Establishing a *shared*, practical, and measurable vision of success from the outset is critical to building trust with key stakeholders, clarifying pathways to scale, and ensuring that resources are appropriately aligned to support education reform.

Through this process, we ensure coherence between the overarching reform vision, the realities of the current education system, and context-specific implementation approaches to scaling. This ensures that solutions are designed to be deployed within existing system capacities, while enabling us to work in partnership with governments to strengthen those systems and define clear pathways for scaling. Through this approach, we move beyond the 'capability traps'<sup>2</sup> of traditional development assistance, where well-intentioned interventions fail or cannot be scaled because they depend on system capabilities that have not yet been developed.



Our collaborative, outcomes-led, intentionally appreciative approach is more iterative and based on formative monitoring. We recognise that processes and approaches often need to adapt, to achieve the intended goals.

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In our Engeza programme, funded by the Gates Foundation, we supported the Ethiopian Ministry of Education to align the new competency-based curriculum with teacher education provision. Our outcomes-led, appreciative approach was highly intentional in emphasising collaboration between higher education and government stakeholders to agree and achieve relevant goals. It also minimised potential disagreement about reasons behind gaps in current provision, capacity, and capability, in favour of findings ways to address the gaps.

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<sup>2</sup> Pritchett, L (2017) Building State Capability, Harvard: US <https://bsc.hks.harvard.edu/publications/>; <https://riseprogramme.org/publications/applying-systems-thinking-education-rise-systems-framework.html>

### 4. We co-create sustainable, scalable solutions

At edt, we strongly believe that solutions should be informed by both global evidence and the realities of an individual education system and political economy. While we bring extensive knowledge and experience informed by global best practice, we know that the effectiveness of any solution depends on its suitability to the local context. As such, we work in close collaboration with local stakeholders to identify education problems and design solutions that are tailored to specific contexts. This ensures alignment with system leaders' vision for education reform, fosters local ownership, and, critically, guarantees that proposed solutions are appropriate for the system in which they will be implemented.

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In Ethiopia, we closely collaborated with the Ministry of Education (MoE) through the TARGET programme to develop key systems and tools to improve learning outcomes. This included the implementation of a Data for Delivery model to support the collection and use of real-time data to support improvements, which featured both the development of software and training for ministry officials to collect and use data to inform planning and remedial action. It was ultimately expanded across over 8,000 schools through integration into the MoE system.

We also worked alongside the MoE to roll out a professional practice-based approach to school leadership training and development, co-creating a school leader competency framework that ensured only those who provided adequate evidence of their transformed practice could qualify as school leaders. Subsequently, we co-developed an integrated school leadership strategy to align foundational training with the existing continuous professional development programme. This resulted in comprehensive training and support provided to over 11,000 'leaders of learning', impacting over 5.5 million learners.

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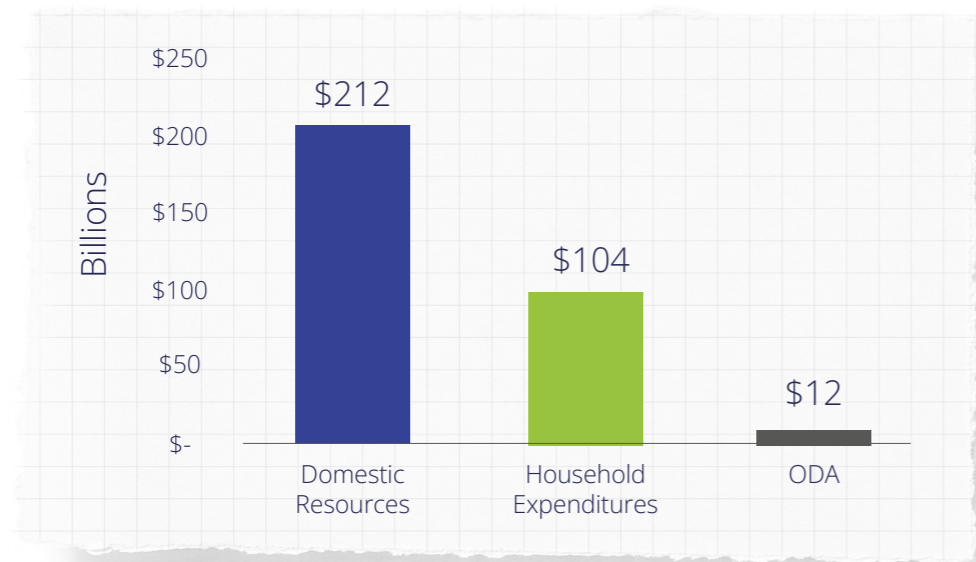


## 5. We work to leverage domestic resources

Official development assistance (ODA) is a small part of financing of education systems. This does not mean it is unimportant. However, it can be used more strategically to unlock local solutions and support more strategic domestic financing.

Edt is supporting the SCALE programme in scoping the feasibility of multi-year, higher value, innovative partnerships, working closely to support government-led test, learn, and adapt approaches to improving foundational learning outcomes in LICs. We work with local FCDO colleagues and local education officials to assess the strength of the global evidence alongside local political will and context, in order to judge whether a test, learn, and adapt or innovative partnership approach (as opposed to relatively low-cost standalone technical assistance) is appropriate. In each scenario, we seek to establish which approach will best unlock local capacity and domestic funding, as well as aligning multiple interventions and/or influencing wider funding.

**Figure 1:** ODA as small part of financing LIC (from FCDO Business Case for SCALE<sup>3</sup>)



In a Ugandan SCALE programme, we collaboratively scoped potential options for ways to reduce violence against children in schools, leveraging domestic capacity and capability. This resulted in a newly formed national training institution developing plans to roll out a whole-school violence prevention module on a national scale. A small amount of technical assistance harnessed pre-committed domestic funding to have a potentially high impact on the creation of safer schools and - ultimately - on improved learning outcomes.

## 6. We do not underestimate the value of implementation

Over the years, we have learned that in education reform, the 'how' (implementation approach) is often as important – if not more so – than the 'what' (the solution itself). While the principles of system strengthening and scaling are essential, they can only drive lasting change when applied effectively. Consequently, ensuring robust implementation is a central priority for edt.

For us, this involves designing implementation strategies that provide scaffolding to progressively strengthen the system while laying the foundation for scaling. This encompasses aspects such as resource mobilisation, capacity development, and other key elements of a rollout process. In other words, we design implementation strategies that leverage and enable local funding, capacity, and capability. We are transparent with stakeholders about the realities of reform: because it is often slow, complex, and non-linear, scaffolding is essential to ensure each stage of a reform programme is well established and that subsequent steps build on a stable foundation. Implementation is not a stage in the reform process. It is embedded within the design and execution of any reform.

Effective implementation means embracing an iterative approach: being willing to try, fail, learn quickly, adapt, pilot, and scale. Adopting a 'test, learn, adapt' methodology ensures that solutions are well-suited to the local context, thereby positioning countries on a sustainable pathway for scaling education solutions.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.edt.org/insights-from-our-work/edt-provides-technical-assistance-through-scale-programme-to-improve-foundational-learning-outcomes/>



Edt supported the Ministry of Education in Sierra Leone to drive and track implementation of key secondary school improvement strategies. This involved setting up an implementation body within the ministry to oversee and drive the impact of priority learning improvement policies in the classroom. We co-created national-level impact roadmaps and modelled and guided processes and tools towards a low-cost, data-informed approach that harnessed the efforts of middle-tier officials towards a consistent and relentless focus on learning improvement in schools.

# Conclusion

The reflections presented in this brief serve as a reminder that principles of system strengthening and scaling remain just that – principles – until they are applied effectively. They gain relevance and impact when operationalised with skill, guided by a steadfast commitment to placing local stakeholders at the centre of the process. This involves collaborating to design solutions that leverage existing systems while implementing a scaffolded plan that both *enhances the capacity of the system* and its actors and *establishes a solid foundation for scaling evidence-informed solutions* – all carried out with humility. At edt, this approach is fully aligned with our values and central to our methodology in education reform. The successes we have achieved to date stand as a testament to its effectiveness.

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