

CONTEXT INDICATORS IN THE USAID EDUCATION SECTOR

WHAT ARE CONTEXT INDICATORS?

USAID defines context indicators in [ADS 201](#) as “indicators [that] measure factors outside the control of USAID that have the potential to affect the achievement of expected results...which may be tracked at any level of an RF [results framework] or logic model.” USAID has developed resources to help Missions and partners to develop and use context indicators. General guidance on context indicators is available in ADS 201 and USAID Learning Lab’s [Context Indicator Reference Sheet Guidance and Template](#).

As the name implies, context indicators provide insights regarding a country’s context. Having a clear understanding of the local context is essential when designing or modifying strategies or activities. USAID uses context indicators across sectors to track external factors beyond the Agency’s control—such as population changes and partner country government funding—that affect implementation and influence expected results. For this reason, context indicators do not directly measure the results of a strategy or activity. Context indicators provide data to assess factors that inform design and implementation. USAID recommends context indicators for any level of a results framework or logic model from a Country Cooperation Development Strategy down to an Activity Monitoring and Evaluation Plan, but they are not required. Most context indicators rely on secondary data from partner country government ministries or multilateral organizations like the World Bank or United Nations agencies.

HOW CAN WE USE CONTEXT INDICATORS IN EDUCATION?

Mandatory and optional context analyses can examine the factors that affect development outcomes related to the education system. Identifying context indicators based on these analyses provides data on the factors affecting outcomes and generates a clearer understanding of the education system’s landscape.

Track and understand strengths and weaknesses of partner country education system. On a basic level, context indicators provide a landscape of the education system and highlight the factors that affect the system. They permit an understanding of the challenges as well as the strengths in the system. Information from context indicators can focus attention on the factors affecting the education system as well as the strengths and aspects of the education system that need support.

- Government expenditure on education gauges the government’s ability to finance and prioritize education among other sectors. The government is the largest source of financing for an education system. When there is insufficient financing or prioritization of education, there is a need to encourage government spending on education and explore sources of financing from the private sector and other international development partners.

Context indicators provide ongoing data to monitor factors affecting the education system. Thus, data for the context indicators can inform adjustments for the design and implementation of strategies and activities in education.

Inform strategic and operational plans for strengthening partner countries’ education systems. Context indicators provide a data-informed basis for decisions about how strategic or

operational plans should address the education system’s identified needs. In short, they offer justification for goals and objectives of the education system in strategic and operational plans.

- Transition rates show whether learners are progressing from a lower level of education to a higher level of education. Meanwhile, repetition rates indicate the efficiency of the education system. If the transition rate to lower secondary education is low and repetition rates in primary grades are high, it can justify addressing instructional quality for foundational skills in reading and math as well as factors limiting learners’ access to education.

Serve as the basis for programmatic assumptions and determine whether assumptions hold.

Context indicators are useful to verify the assumptions underlying the design of strategies or activities. When the data demonstrate that assumptions no longer hold, they become a rationale for adjusting the theory of change and intended results of the strategy or activity.

- The higher education graduation ratio shows the share of graduates for bachelor’s and master’s programs relative to the theoretical population of graduates. If the ratio is low, it demonstrates low output of higher education and inefficiency in the higher education system. A low ratio could serve as the basis for an assumption to revise programs of study for higher education degrees. Therefore, if the ratio changes significantly, then the assumption and its implication for implementation might change.

Identify when strategies or activities have crossed trigger thresholds. Context indicators use triggers instead of targets. Triggers are predetermined values like targets. When trigger values are not met, it catalyzes an action such as re-examining the results framework for the strategy or activity.

- Youth as a percentage of population shows the population share of youth in a country. The youth unemployment rate indicates the percentage of youth in the labor force without a job. When youth account for a large share of the population coupled with a high youth unemployment rate, it can trigger a reassessment of an activity’s outcomes for its goal or objectives and how the activity intervenes to achieve those outcomes.

WHAT CAN CONTEXT INDICATORS MEASURE IN EDUCATION?

- Context indicators can measure characteristics, outputs, and outcomes directly related to the education system, but context indicators relevant to education might draw from other sectors such as health, environment, economic growth, and governance. Below we offer some illustrative context indicators, organized by USAID’s education continuum and cross-cutting themes.

EDUCATION LEVEL	ILLUSTRATIVE CONTEXT INDICATORS
Pre-primary	Measures of access to education and indirect evidence of education quality differentiated by International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level or grade level such as enrollment rates, net intake rates at Grade 1, percentage of new entrants to Grade 1 with pre-primary education, attendance rates, survival rates, completion rates, repetition rates, transition rates, dropout rates, average class size, and learners per textbook.
Primary	
Secondary	
Post-secondary non-higher education	Indicators that describe youth (ages 10–29) such as youth as a percentage of the population, youth labor force participation, illiteracy rates, and youth unemployment rate.
Higher Education	Measures of access to education and indirect evidence of education quality like enrollments by program ISCED level, graduation ratios, percentage of graduates by field, and net flow of internationally mobile students.

THEME	ILLUSTRATIVE CONTEXT INDICATORS
Educational attainment	Indicators that gauge the level of education for a country's population such as mean years of schooling, percentage of population with different levels of schooling, percentage of labor force with different levels of schooling, learning-adjusted years of schooling, literacy rates, adults' (25 or older) completion rates for levels of education.
Education finance	Context indicators cover public financial management and domestic resource mobilization, non-state actors in education, education in conflict and crisis, and higher education. These indicators include government expenditure on education, control of corruption, official development assistance for education, private school enrollment, household expenditure on education, private philanthropy for education, and humanitarian assistance for education.
Equity and inclusivity	Data to describe equity and vulnerable populations such as gender parity indices, number or proportion of out-of-school youth, typology of out-of-school youth, overage enrollment ratios, and number of refugees or internally displaced persons. Many context indicators from secondary data provide disaggregation for gender, disability, and ISCED education levels.
Teachers	Measures of teacher characteristics differentiated by grade-level or ISCED education level such as percentage of teachers who are trained, ratio of teacher training graduates to teachers, number of graduates from accredited pre-service teacher training, and teacher attrition rates.

HOW CAN YOU GET STARTED?

Specific guidance for context indicators in education can be found on the [USAID Education Context Indicators](#) webpage and include:

- Guidance Note on Education Finance Context Indicators
- Context Indicator Reference Sheets for Education Finance Context Indicators