



# MILLIONS LEARNING

SCALING UP  
QUALITY EDUCATION  
IN DEVELOPING  
COUNTRIES

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EXECUTIVE  
SUMMARY

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# Millions Learning executive summary

Around the world, countries are grappling with how to scale quality education for their children and youth. Quality education is at the center of a nation's progress, and it is also enshrined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which 193 countries have recently committed to support. While the spread of schooling over the past 150 years is one of the most widely successful "going to scale" stories, this expansion too often has been met with little mastery of core academic content and higher-order thinking skills.

An estimated "100-year gap" persists between education levels in developed and developing countries, and if business proceeds as usual in the education sector, this gap is not projected to close. Today, 250 million children around the globe—many of them having spent at least four years of school in a developing country—lack the most basic literacy and numeracy skills. Additionally, countries around the world are struggling to help young people develop 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking and collaborative problem solving, which are increasingly demanded by the labor market.

*Millions Learning* tells the story of where and how quality education has scaled in the developing world. The story emerges

from wide-ranging research on scaling and learning, including 14 in-depth case studies, from Brazil and Honduras, to Uganda and Zambia, to Jordan and India.

What we found is that from the slums of New Delhi to the rainforest in Brazil, transformational change in children's learning is happening at large scale in many places around the world. We found that successful scaling of quality learning often occurs when new approaches and ideas are allowed to develop and grow on the margins and then spread to reach many more children and youth. What constitutes the margins varies on a case-by-case basis. For some, it means a flexible central government giving freedom to its officials within a district to try a new approach. For others, it involves a community movement that develops new ways of reaching marginalized children whose educational options are limited.

Scaling from the margins occurs in two main ways: *idea adoption*, namely the spread of new approaches across an education ecosystem, and *delivery innovation*, the development of new ways to deliver education to marginalized children and youth. With the former, effective new approaches to improving

components of the teaching and learning process—from curriculum, to materials, to teacher development—have spread across education ecosystems and been adopted by different actors. With the latter, new education delivery approaches for the most marginalized communities—such as distance learning models or alternative education programs—have developed and grown within and across countries.

We identified 14 core ingredients, in different combinations depending on the context, contribute to scaling quality learning. Each of these ingredients is central for scaling effective approaches that improve learning. Their importance is frequently reinforced from evidence in the broader scaling literature. They include essential elements for designing, delivering, financing, and enabling scaling of quality education.



## DESIGN

**Improving learning at scale starts with committed leaders planning for scale from the outset. Ingredients necessary to do this are:**

1

• **LOCAL EDUCATION NEEDS:**

Interventions should be designed in response to local demand and should ensure the participation of end-users.

2

• **COST-EFFECTIVE LEARNING:**

Cost structures affordable at scale should be incorporated in the design.

3

• **FLEXIBLE ADAPTATION:**

Core elements of effective learning approaches should be identified and replicated across contexts while adapting the rest to local circumstances.

4

• **ELEVATING TEACHERS:**

Community expertise should be leveraged to support and unburden teachers.



## DELIVERY

Attention to the operational realities of implementing or delivering at large scale is essential. This involves a combination of technical and political actions. Ingredients needed for this are:

- 5 • **EDUCATION ALLIANCES:**  
All actors need to work together to achieve a common goal.
- 6 • **LEARNING CHAMPIONS AND LEADERS:**  
As scaling quality learning is a political and technical exercise, champions within and outside government and the classroom are crucial.
- 7 • **TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES:**  
Context-appropriate technologies can accelerate education progress.
- 8 • **WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY:**  
Effective education approaches are more likely to take root and spread when they align with country priorities.
- 9 • **BETTER DATA:**  
Data on learning and scaling play a central role by motivating informed action at the policy and practice levels.



## FINANCE

How resources are allocated matters as much as absolute amounts. Ingredients needed for this are:

- 10 • **FLEXIBLE EDUCATION FINANCING:**  
Financing should be flexible, including to build core operational capacity.
- 11 • **LONG-TERM EDUCATION FINANCING:**  
Stable and predictable support is essential.
- 12 • **“MIDDLE PHASE” FINANCING:**  
Financing is required to bridge the critical stage between pilot and broad uptake.



## ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

As critical as these three other aspects are, scaling does not happen in a vacuum. Largely guided by governments from national to local, the environment in which programs or policies operate plays a critical role in facilitating or impeding the scaling process. Ingredients needed for this are:

- 13 • **SUPPORTIVE POLICY ENVIRONMENT:**  
Government policy must safeguard every child’s right to a quality education while remaining open to a diversity of ideas and actors to contribute to this common aim.
- 14 • **A CULTURE OF R&D:**  
Ensuring that more children learn requires a strong ethos of experimentation, collecting learning data, and using it for continuous improvement.

Scaling quality learning requires a move to a new norm of inclusive and adaptive education ecosystems. This calls for education ecosystems that provide space for innovation and experimentation to thrive, and then actively help facilitate the spread of new ideas or approaches that most effectively improve learning. Governments play a pivotal role in this ecosystem. Not only is it their responsibility to deliver on every child’s right to a quality education but they must also actively foster an environment where all actors can

effectively contribute their expertise—from households, to communities, to civil society organizations, to the private sector, and academia. These ecosystems must be inclusive and adaptive, leveraging all assets these actors bring as well as ensuring that the most marginalized children are reached. This is the best way to move forward based on evidence of what has successfully scaled to date. Moreover, it is key to developing a nimble education ecosystem ready to adapt in a rapidly changing world to whatever the future holds.

**We recommend the following five main actions to create inclusive and adaptive education ecosystems and ultimately help scale quality learning for millions of children and youth:**



## DEVELOP

### A CULTURE OF R&D IN EDUCATION

Leaders across all parts of the education ecosystem—from government to civil society to business—must embrace new approaches to solving problems at scale. Building a strong culture of research and development (R&D) within the education ecosystem is a key step. Governments should provide the policy space, funding, and infrastructure support necessary to try new approaches to persistent problems. Donors, civil society, governments, and business should work together to cultivate a cohort of Learning Leaders who have the skills and attributes necessary for pushing forward a culture of R&D in education.



## SHARE

### NEW IDEAS THROUGH A NETWORK OF IDEA HUBS

Leaders in governments, in partnership with civil society and the private sector, should establish Idea Hubs for identifying, adapting, and sharing effective approaches to improving learning and scaling them. The Idea Hubs should be nimble mechanisms that allow decision-makers to stay up to date with rapidly changing innovations. Approaches led by all actors—government, educators, business, civil society—should be discussed. These hubs should be linked through a global network to allow for experiences and lessons shared between countries and among regional and global actors.



## ACTIVATE

### TALENT AND EXPERTISE OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

To scale quality learning in the developing world, including in the communities that are hardest to reach, a creative injection of support and energy is needed. Teachers and other education personnel who are on the front lines are overburdened and require tangible assistance. For addressing tough education problems, expertise from diverse actors outside schools can be one important source of this support. From nonprofit workers and young graduates to business professionals and technology specialists, different types of expertise

can be strategically tapped to assist educators, elevate them in their roles, and help reach children who are falling through the cracks. Governments, civil society, and the business community should launch bold All-In Community initiatives, including through leveraging technology, to support teachers and other education personnel in their respective countries.



## FUND

### THE MIDDLE PHASE

This is crucial to help effective education approaches cross the “valley of death” to scale. Too often, promising approaches fall victim to a funding gap between new ideas or prototypes and implementation at a national level. Governments, donor agencies, foundations, and investors should develop a more organized ecosystem of education funding to support scaling. Additionally, donor agencies and foundations should provide flexible support, including for core costs, which is crucial for building scaling capacity.



## MEASURE AND LEARN

### WHAT WORKS THROUGH BETTER LEARNING AND SCALING DATA

Government and donor agencies should strengthen national student assessment systems, particularly in developing countries where data are sporadic and often of limited use. Data on student learning should start at the classroom level and be used by teachers and move up through national level data on what children can know and do. In particular, new ways of helping teachers assess 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills will be essential. This is in line with the Learning Metrics Task Force recommendation on learning data as a global good. The research community should improve data on scaling through a Real-time Scaling Lab. Such a forum would provide space to examine and document the process of scaling effective approaches to learning as they unfold, contributing to building a body of evidence on how to scale quality learning interventions.

Ultimately, *Millions Learning* is the story of possibility—the story of how collectively the global community can seize this moment in time and scale

quality education for all the world’s children and young people, enabling them to reach their full potential and contribute to their societies.

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