



ADEA 2022 Triennale

SUB-THEME CONCEPT NOTE

Sub-Theme 2	Foundational Learning (Literacy, Numeracy, and Socio-Emotional Learning)
Co-leads	BMGF and Lego Foundation
Supporting partners	USAID, FCDO, JICA, Education Commission, ECD Measure, UNESCO-GEMR, UNICEF-MENA, UNICEF-ESARO, USAID, NORAD, FLN Hub, ACASUS, Africa Practice and SMART Africa
Focus countries	Niger, Kenya, South Africa, Egypt, and Mozambique

A. Context

Education is an important tool to overcome poverty in Africa. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 emphasises quality, equitable and inclusive education. This view is also echoed in Africa's education commitments. Both the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025 (CESA 16-25) call for the expansion of education and training systems to achieve economic growth. Progress has been made but many countries are yet to achieve the goals set out in these declarations. Without effective foundational learning, none of the other education goals are achievable.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought foundational learning in Africa into sharp focus. Interruptions to schooling threaten to erode developments in early learning. The numbers present a startling picture of children's socio-emotional challenges and staggering learning losses. In response to this crisis, education stakeholders are working together to put foundational learning on the agenda and to motivate world leaders to take appropriate action. The Transforming Education Summit (TES) is the latest example of the growing momentum to improve the quality of foundational learning. TES was convened in September 2022 to respond to a global crisis in education. During TES, world leaders endorsed a Commitment to Action (CTA) to improve foundational learning.

For decades, ADEA has been at the forefront of political dialogue, knowledge and experience sharing around practical and innovative solutions to address educational challenges across Africa. The ADEA 2022 Triennale promotes cross-country interactions to support peer learning and knowledge exchange. The Triennale will build from the national commitments made at TES so that gains in foundational learning are achieved more quickly.

B. About the Sub-Theme

Foundational learning (literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional learning) is one of the four focus areas within the 2022 ADEA Triennale. Foundational skills are the building blocks of future schooling success but there are many children in Africa who are unable to read for meaning in a language that they understand or solve basic mathematics problems in the early years. School closures during the Covid-19 pandemic have only worsened educational inequalities. The impact of school closures has been especially severe for children whose literacy and numeracy skills, and skills promoting children's social and emotional formation, were already below their grade level before the pandemic. The sub-theme will focus on sharing policy-level initiatives and best practices for the successful improvement of foundational learning in Africa.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities that are specific to early learners. With schools re-opening, the spotlight is now on effective, scalable programs to help African children catch up. Teachers are at the frontline of efforts to advance foundational learning. How to support teachers to improve learning remains an ongoing priority.

Based on emerging insights on the delivery of foundational learning, the proposed sub-topics under this sub-theme are as follows:

- Supporting children's quality Early Childhood Education
- Improving teaching for foundational literacy and numeracy
- Assessment-informed instruction to support foundational learning.

Related topics include play-based STEM, the use of education data, gender, equity, and inclusion, curriculum reform, teacher professional development, teaching practices, the use of ICT in education and remote learning, the language of instruction, and education financing models.

As part of its mandate and five-year strategic focus (2023-2027), ADEA is raising awareness about the importance of foundational learning through research, policy dialogue and peer-learning platforms. ADEA hosted a “High-Level Policy Dialogue Forum on elevating foundational learning as a pathway to skills development and lifelong learning through digitalization” in November 2021. The 2022 Triennale will add to existing cross-country exchange mechanisms that are already supported by ADEA, African governments, and other education stakeholders. Discussions and panel presentations will be designed to strengthen knowledge sharing efforts, with an emphasis on implementable recommendations. The key takeaways from the sub-theme's discourse will add to the core Triennale theme of building resilient education systems.

Specific objectives:

The specific objectives of the foundational learning sub-theme are:

- Deepening commitments to advance foundational learning
- Implementing COVID-19 recovery strategies
- Sharing knowledge, experience, and best practices
- Strengthening partnerships
- Using data and evidence for designing and improving foundational learning programs

Expected outcomes:

The expected outcomes of the foundational learning sub-theme are:

- Agreement about the next steps to take to build resilient education systems for delivering quality foundational learning in the future.
- Awareness of innovative approaches to assess foundational skills, link research to policy and reverse learning losses brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Improvements in stakeholder partnerships to support governments as they align their policies and budgets with the Commitment to Action.

C. Storyline

Before COVID-19 disruptions to schooling, 57% of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries were unable to read or comprehend a simple story. Two years of COVID-19-related school closures have deepened education inequality ([UNICEF 2022](#)). Learning poverty is currently estimated to be as high as 70%. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, 94% of learners worldwide were affected by

school closures, with devastating consequences for learning and socio-emotional development ([UNESCO 2020](#)) Around 105 million primary school children have missed at least three-quarters of classroom instruction time ([UNICEF 2021](#)). Children who were already disadvantaged before the pandemic (children from the poorest households, girls, children in rural areas, children with disabilities) have paid the heaviest price ([World Bank 2021](#)). Only one quarter of children aged between 36 and 59 months attend an early childhood education program in sub-Saharan Africa ([UNICEF 2022](#)). Limited access to remote ECE services has made the transition from home to school especially hard for young children.

Foundational skills form the basis of all learning. If children start formal schooling with different levels of readiness, these gaps may widen over time. Children who are unable to attain basic literacy and numeracy skills, as well as skills that strengthen their socio-emotional development, by the early primary level may find it difficult to cope with the rigor of the curriculum in later years and are at a greater risk of dropping out of school. The rising demand for an educated workforce increases the urgency of strengthening foundational learning.

Fortunately, the news is not all bad. The pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities that are specific to early learners, prompting conversations about how to build greater resilience in African education systems. Although recent setbacks to early education are unparalleled, there is compelling evidence about how to improve foundational learning using approaches that are age-appropriate and effective. These include the following:

- Interactive approaches that show promise in early education systems.
- Clarity about what children can realistically achieve in the early years and assessing their progress is key.
- There are clear benefits to children acquiring foundational skills in a language that they understand.
- Support for teachers can take many forms but the common denominator is that teachers need to be equipped with the right tools to be effective in the classroom. Structured pedagogy is proving to be a useful approach.

Introducing educational reforms remains complex. What works in one context might not produce the same results in another. Therefore, creating platforms for peer learning and knowledge exchange on foundational learning is important.

Focus Areas:

This sub-theme will focus discussion on three areas:

1. **Supporting quality Early Childhood Education** – including play-based STEM for early learners, strengthening foundational skills, the language of instruction, building a reading culture, community involvement, and social and emotional development in the early school years.
2. **Improving teaching for foundational learning** – improving learning outcomes through structured lesson plans, teacher professional development, teaching at the right level, and accessible educational resources.
3. **Assessment-informed instruction to support foundational learning, including a child-centred perspective** – including national assessments, early grade reading and mathematics assessments, and formative assessments to track recovery from Covid-19 learning losses.

The overall Triennale theme also considers the cross-cutting areas of data management and utilisation; gender, equity, and inclusion; education financing; and the integration of ICT in teaching and learning.

D. Guiding questions

1. What reforms is your country introducing to improve foundational learning?
2. What was the impact of COVID-19 on foundational learning (from the early childhood development phase to the upper primary level)? What steps are decision-makers taking to support learner catch-up and to build more resilient education systems?
3. What types of partnerships can strengthen foundational learning across Africa?
4. How can education policy makers integrate research, data, and evidence into their planning?

E. Structure

In line with the rest of the Triennale, participation in this sub-theme will be hybrid (in-person and virtual) with the following structure:

1. Discussions will start with short presentations (ADEA and the co-leading partners and countries) of the research and study findings.
2. The designated Minister or partner will comment on the presentations to lay the ground for discussions.
3. The moderator will facilitate a panel discussion on the focus areas.
4. The moderator will then open the floor for questions and comments.
5. The moderator will highlight the key messages, along with the rapporteur, to be presented in plenary during the report-back session.
6. The moderator will close the session.