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## Cross-National Assessments alignment with the Global Framework for Reading and MPL analysis

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## Introduction

This paper aims at answering the following questions:

1. How do the regional and international assessments of reading align with UNESCO Global Framework for Reading?
2. How can the alignment be improved?
3. How do the minimum proficiency levels from different regional and international assessments of reading relate to each other?
4. How can the comparability be improved?

In order to answer the previous questions an analysis of regional and international assessments of reading was carried out. Regarding the first question, the paper will show their alignment to the Global Framework at the three educational levels considered in the 4.1.1 indicator of SDG 4, which are Grades 2 & 3 (4.1.1a), the end of Primary education (4.1.1b) and at the end of Low Secondary education (4.1.1c).

Firstly, the cross-national assessments analyzed will be briefly described. Secondly, their alignment to the constructs from the Global Framework for Reading will be portrayed. Thirdly, the assessments will be compared in reference to their minimum proficiency levels, considering the possible overlapping between assessments designed for different educational levels. Finally, some recommendations for improving comparability will be presented.

### Characteristics of the regional international assessments

Table 1 shows the cross-national assessments considered for this paper. Most of these tests are designed to evaluate formal learning, as is the case of reading. However, both ASER and UNICEF MICS 6 are broader questionnaires that aim at obtaining other development indicators at a personal, family, and environmental level, which include a section on reading that is the one considered in this analysis.

**Table 1. Characteristics of the assessments**

Name	Abbreviation	Grade/Age	Corresponding SDG 4 indicator	Minimum proficiency level	Observations
Annual Status of Education Report	ASER	6 to 14 year-olds	4.1.1.a;	Standard 2 (story)	Part of a household questionnaire in which the assessment is individual.
UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Service	UNICEF MICS 6	5 to 17 year-olds	4.1.1.a;	Foundational Reading Skills	Part of a household questionnaire in which the assessment is individual.

UWEZO Annual Learning Assessment	UWEZO	6 to 16 year-olds	4.1.1.a;	Standard 2	Part of a household questionnaire in which the assessment is individual.
Early Grade Reading Assessment	EGRA	Grades 1 to 3.	4.1.1.a	Not specified	Individual assessment
Third Regional Comparative and Exploratory Study	TERCE	Grades 3 & 6	4.1.1.a; 4.1.1.b	Level 2	School-based assessment
Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment	PILNA	Grades 4 & 6	4.1.1.b	Level 4 (grade 4) and Level 5 (grade 6).	School-based assessment
Progress in International Reading Literacy Study	PIRLS	Grade 4	4.1.1.b	Low international Benchmark (second level)	School-based assessment
The Analysis Programme of the CONFEMEN Education Systems	PASEC	Grades 2 & 6	4.1.1.a; 4.1.1.b	Level 3	School-based assessment. Partly individual assessment
Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality	SACMEQ	Grade 6	4.1.1.b	Level 3	School-based assessment
Programme for International Student Assessment	PISA and PISA-D	15 year-olds	4.1.1.c	Level 2	School-based assessment

### Regional and international assessments' alignment with the Global Framework for Reading

In order to answer the first question an analysis based on the performance level descriptors (PLDs) used by each assessment was carried out. The domains, sub domains and constructs belonging to the Global Framework for Reading considered by each assessment are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Regional and international assessments' alignment with the Global Framework for Reading.

	READING COMPETENCY									LINGUISTIC COMPETENCY						METALINGUISTIC COMPETENCY					
	DECODING			READING COMPREHENSION						LISTENING			SPEAKING			VOCABULARY	PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS				
ASSESSMENT S	1.1.1	1.1.2	1.1.3	1.2.1	1.2.2	1.2.3	1.2.4	1.2.5	1.2.6	2.1.1	2.1.2	2.1.3	2.2.1	2.2.2	2.2.3	2.3.1	2.3.2	3.3.1	3.3.2	3.3.3	3.3.4
ASER	X	X	X	X	X																
UNICEF MICS 6		X		X	X	X															
UWEZO	X	X	X	X	X																
EGRA	X	X	X	X	X	X				X	X						X	X	X		X
PASEC (Gr. 2)	X	X	X	X	X					X			X	X		X	X				X
TERCE (Gr.3)				X	X	X										X	X				
PIRLS (Gr. 4)			X	X	X	X	X														
PILNA (Gr. 4 y 6)				X	X	X	X														
PASEC (Gr. 6)		X	X	X	X	X	X														
TERCE (Gr. 6)				X	X	X	X														
SACMEQ (Gr. 6)				X	X	X	X										X				
PISA (Gr. 9)				X	X	X	X									X					

Note: In the Reading Competency the Decoding sub domain includes the following constructs 1.1.1. Alphabetic Principle; 1.1.2. Precision; 1.1.3. Fluency. In the Reading Comprehension sub domain are included: 2.1.1. Identify; 2.1.2. Retrieve; 2.1.3. Interpret; 2.1.4. Reflect; 2.1.4. Metacognition and 1.2.6. Motivation and Disposition. In the case of the Linguistic Competency, this includes the Listening sub domain which is constituted by 2.1.1 Retrieve; 2.1.2. Interpret and 2.1.3. Reflect. In the case of the Speaking sub domain, the constructs are 2.2.1. Form; 2.2.2. Content; 2.2.3. Use. The last sub domain from this competency is Vocabulary, being the constructs within 2.3.1. Acquire new words and 2.3.2. Recognize. Finally the Metalinguistic Competency has only one sub domain, phonological awareness, that includes the following constructs: 3.1.1. Distinguish; 3.1.2. Blend; 3.1.3. Generate words from and 3.1.4. Segment.

A common characteristic to all of the assessments analyzed is that independently of the age or grade they are designed for, these consider at least two of the constructs corresponding to the Reading Comprehension sub domain. This is of great relevance, as it is the only sub domain that is included in all of the assessments.

Moreover, it can be observed that the assessments designed to be applied in lower grades cover the Decoding sub domain, while the assessments designed for third grade onwards do not consider those constructs, except for PASEC in grade 6, which does include decoding in its assessment. This seems coherent with the developmental characteristics of reading acquisition. While the alphabetic principle is acquired in the first grade, in the second grade sufficiency levels are achieved regarding the precision construct. Finally, between third and fourth grade, depending on the characteristics of the language, sufficiency levels of fluency are attained.

Furthermore, regarding the Linguistic Competency, only five out of the twelve assessments analyzed include at least one of the constructs that correspond to this competency. PASEC (Grade 2) and EGRA stand out as the ones that more thoroughly evaluate this area. This is not surprising as reading acquisition implies the previous development of sufficiency levels both in the linguistic and metalinguistic competencies.

Finally, in reference to the Metalinguistic Competency, only EGRA and PASEC (grade 2) include the constructs belonging to this domain. It is important to consider that both of these assessments are either completely (EGRA) or partially (PASEC) applied individually, which allows to perform metaphonological tasks that would be almost impossible to conduct as a group. Moreover, both assessments present the evaluation of reading readiness as one of its aims; therefore it seems logical that phonological awareness tasks are included, as these are considered as pre-reading skills.

### Comparison of minimum proficiency levels set by cross national assessments

In this section, in order to answer the third question a comparison between the different regional and international assessments is performed by looking for possible overlapping between assessments that are designed for different educational levels. This comparison is based on the minimum proficiency level (MPL) set by each assessment.

In this regard, even though most of the assessments state the specific grade or grades in which these should be applied, in some cases there seems to be incongruence between the performances expected by different assessments. Special cases are the ones of ASER, UNICEF MICS 6 and UWEZO, which have a broad age range of application.

A relevant aspect to take into consideration is that the MPL expected for TERCE in third grade (Level 2) is more demanding than all possible performance levels for PASEC (second grade). Moreover, this MPL is also more difficult than the first 5 levels of performance in SACMEQ (Grade 6) and PILNA (Grades 4 & 6). If we analyze the MPLs set for each assessment in table 1, it can be observed that TERCE's minimum proficiency for third grade is more difficult than what SACMEQ's and PILNA's for grade six. Moreover, all of the performance levels considered by ASER, UNICEF MICS 6 and UWEZO appear to be easier than the TERCE's lowest level for third grade. This is surprising considering that these assessments include students up to 14, 17 and 16 years old respectively, which means that the minimum proficiency expected for

third graders by TERCE is higher than what is expected at the end of low secondary by these three assessments.

A similar situation is found when analyzing TERCE's MPL for Grade 6. When comparing Level 2 of TERCE, which is its MPL, with the other assessments designed for the same grade, it can be observed that TERCE's Level 2 performance descriptor is more difficult than all performance descriptors for PASEC, SACMEQ and PILNA. Furthermore, TERCE's Level 2 is also more difficult than PISA's Level 4, which is surprising considering that PISA sets its minimum proficiency in Level 2, and is designed for 15 year-olds. Once more this shows incongruence between the expectations that the different regional and international assessments have for students. Even though, in the case of TERCE the assessment is performed in Spanish, which is a transparent language, which could facilitate reading acquisition, the difference in language characteristics does not seem to be big enough to explain the expectation gap among assessments.

Similarly, but to a lesser extent, the first level of performance considered in PIRLS 2011 for grade 4 seems to be more difficult than the first two levels for PASEC (grade 6) and the first three levels for SACMEQ, also designed for grade 6. However, if we consider the first level of performance from PIRLS 2016 these differences sharpen, being more demanding than the first five levels from both PILNA and SACMEQ.

Finally, when analyzing PISA's MPL (Level 2) it can be observed that this level is slightly more difficult than the MPLs set by PASEC for grade 6, by PIRLS 2016 for grade 4, and by TERCE for grade 3. Moreover, as stated above it is easier than any of the performance level descriptors stated by TERCE for grade 6.

### Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion, if we go back to the first question that guided this paper it can be said that in general terms the regional and international assessments of reading align with UNESCO Global Framework for Reading. As expected given the characteristics of the assessments, this alignment is greater with the reading comprehension subdomain and to a lesser extent with the decoding subdomain. Few assessments explicitly evaluate the linguistic and metalinguistic competencies.

This seems coherent as some competencies are considered to have been previously acquired by students. However, in order to increase the alignment among the different regional and international assessments and between these and the Global Framework for Reading an option would be for the assessments to explicitly state in their framework which processes, abilities and skills are they assuming that students have already achieved when being evaluated.

Regarding the third question, even though most assessments are designed to be used with students in a specific grade or that are a specific age, the proficiency expected in the different assessments for the three educational levels is not necessarily congruent. Having found cases in which the expectations at the end of primary school are lower than those for grades 2 & 3, as well as cases in which the demands at the end of primary school are greater than those of the end of lower secondary.

This lack of congruence shows the need for the use of reference frameworks that are common to all of the assessments allowing for the international comparison of results.

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