

Accelerating SDG 4 in West Africa: A Regional Foundational Learning Compact Informed by Nigeria's Successes

Executive Summary

West Africa is significantly behind schedule in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4): Quality Education by 2030, mainly in SDG Target 4.1 which mandates that all children receive free, equitable, and high-quality primary education. Even though we have regional commitments and increased enrollment since 2015, foundational learning outcomes remain really low. Approximately 72 percent of children in the region cannot read and comprehend a simple text by age ten (UNICEF and World Bank), a huge indicator of learning poverty that places West Africa among the most challenged regions globally (UNICEF and World Bank). Compounded by insecurity, population growth, and short teacher preparation, learning outcomes have idled or worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic.

This brief proposes establishing a Regional Foundational Learning Compact (FLC) across Economic Community of West African States (**ECOWAS**) the Economic Community of West African States is the regional political and economic union comprising 15 West African countries. member states to rapidly accelerate progress toward SDG 4. The four proven strategies: structured lesson materials, Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), consistent teacher coaching, and simple, regular learning assessments. Nigeria's recent experience through EdoBEST and TaRL Nigeria shows that these approaches can dramatically improve reading and numeracy when implemented system wide. If adopted regionally, the FLC could help West Africa cut learning poverty, support youth development, and strengthen human capital more effectively than any other education investment.

I. Background: SDG 4 in West Africa

1. Overview of the Region

West Africa has fifteen countries in ECOWAS, and together they have a population a little above 420 million. Something that matters a lot for education policy is how young the region is. Almost half the population about 43 percent is under fifteen (UNESCO Institute for Statistics), which is honestly a huge number. Because of that, school systems are always trying to catch up. Even though most countries say they offer free primary education, that doesn't magically fix everything. Poverty is still a big issue, some areas deal with conflict that interrupts school, and there are still gender gaps. A lot of schools don't have the buildings or materials they need, and education funding hasn't really kept pace (UNESCO Institute for Statistics). So even with the policy commitments, it's still tough to make sure every child learns basic reading and math skills.

SDG 4 Progress: 2015–2024

When the SDGs started in 2015, West Africa was already behind. Many kids weren't in school, and the ones who were often sat in classrooms that were way too full. There also

weren't enough properly trained teachers, and early childhood programs barely reached most families. (UNESCO Institute for Statistics) So the region didn't begin the SDG period from a strong place.

By 2023, countries had made different plans and said the right things, but the learning results haven't really jumped. Reading proficiency is still around 27–29 percent (UNESCO Institute for Statistics). and math is below 28 percent (UNESCO Institute for Statistics). Then COVID-19 made everything worse. Schools closed for a long time in several places, and a lot of students had almost no access to remote learning. Kids from lower-income or rural households (UNICEF and World Bank). lost the most learning time, and many of those gaps are still obvious now.

Table 1. SDG 4 Indicators in West Africa, 2015 vs 2023

Indicator	2015	2023	Trend
Out-of-school primary-age children	32–33 million	37 million	Worsened
Minimum reading proficiency	30%	27–29%	Stagnant
Minimum numeracy proficiency	28–30%	25–28%	Stagnant
Learning poverty (cannot read by age 10)	70%	72–75%	Worsened

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) regional SDG 4 database; UNICEF & World Bank, State of Global Learning Poverty 2022 Update.

3. Key Barriers to SDG 4 in West Africa

A group of structural, social, and economic barriers continues to obstruct educational progress in West Africa. Among these are widespread poverty, forcing children into informal labor; deeply fixed gender inequalities, particularly in the Sahel; inadequate teacher recruitment and training pipelines; and persistent insecurity resulting from terrorism, displacement, and conflict. Northern Nigeria, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have experienced some of the world's highest rates of school closures due to violence(Oyekan). Additionally, overstretched classrooms often exceeding 60 students per teacher compromise instructional quality and limit individualized learning support (Oyekan).

II. Policy Analysis: A Regional Foundational Learning Compact

1. The Proposed Investment

The Regional Foundational Learning Compact (FLC) proposes a standardized package of reforms across ECOWAS countries to strengthen literacy and numeracy achievement. This compact consists of four evidence-based components: (1) structured pedagogy that provides teachers with daily lesson guides and aligned learning materials; (2) Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), which clusters students by actual learning proficiency; (3) regular teacher coaching and classroom support; and (4) annual or twice-yearly assessments that track student progress and inform instructional adjustments. These interventions address the core drivers of learning poverty by targeting instructional quality and remedial learning the two most important causes of early-grade learning outcomes.

2. Why This Works (Theoretical Foundations)

The FLC intervention package aligns closely with Human Capital Theory, (Becker) which posits that investments in skills particularly foundational reasoning skills yield high returns for both individuals and societies. According to Becker, early literacy and numeracy enhance human productivity, leading to higher earnings and improved economic outcomes. Complementing this, Sen's Capability Approach highlights the basic value of literacy as a freedom-enhancing capability (Sen), enabling individuals to fully in social, economic, and political life. By focusing on foundational learning, the FLC strengthens both involved and basic dimensions of development.

3. Evidence From Nigeria: A Scalable Model for the Region

Nigeria is one of the clearest places to look when trying to figure out whether the core ideas behind the Foundational Learning Compact could work across West Africa. The country has already tried several pieces of the approach, and the results give a decent sense of what might be possible elsewhere. For instance, TaRL Nigeria has been introduced in a number of states, and most reports show that students start improving in reading and basic numeracy pretty quickly (TaRL Africa). One element that seems to matter is grouping students based on what they actually know instead of their grade level, since that helps the ones who are behind get instruction they can realistically follow.

Another example is EdoBEST. Edo State launched it in 2018, and the program mixes structured classroom materials with regular coaching for teachers plus a digital system that lets administrators keep track of what's going on. Independent studies including some connected to the World Bank found that students in EdoBEST schools scored about 6–7 percentage points higher in English and math (Edo State Government and World Bank) after a year or two compared to other students. What's interesting here is that the program didn't just stay local; similar ideas have already made their way into places like Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire, which suggests there's nothing uniquely "Nigerian" about its success(TaRL Africa; Edo State Government and World Bank).

4. Implementation Feasibility Across West Africa

It's not unreasonable to think an FLC-type model could work across West Africa. ECOWAS already gives the region a basic structure for coordinating education strategies, even if countries use it unevenly. And since organizations like UNICEF, UNESCO, and

the World Bank are already very active in the region's education sector, (UNESCO Institute for Statistics; UNICEF and World Bank) the support systems for rolling something out are mostly in place.

Even so, there are obstacles. Teacher motivation isn't always strong, monitoring systems miss a lot, and state capacity varies a lot from one country to another. But these problems can usually be managed if the rollout happens gradually, with solid teacher support and materials that aren't overly complicated. One thing that helps is that programs like structured pedagogy and TaRL tend to be relatively inexpensive for learning improvement they create (J-PAL), which makes them a sensible option for governments working with tight budgets.

III. Recommendations and Conclusion

If West African countries want to make faster progress on SDG 4, one option is for ECOWAS to set up a Regional Foundational Learning Compact. The goal wouldn't be to start from zero but to give countries a shared set of literacy and numeracy targets while scaling approaches that already show promise. This would include expanding structured pedagogy and TaRL, strengthening coaching for teachers, and improving assessment systems so policymakers actually know what is happening in classrooms.

Nigeria's programs show that these methods can work, and there's no strong reason they couldn't work elsewhere if implemented well. Donors would need to commit to longer-term support that focuses on actual learning outcomes, and national governments would need to put early-grade instruction and teacher development at the center of their plans. Improving foundational learning is one of the most reliable ways to build human capital in the region, and it remains one of the smartest investments available for meeting SDG4.

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