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Report to the Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

May 2015

INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ASSISTANCE

USAID Has Implemented Primary Grade Reading Programs but Has Not Yet Measured Progress toward Its Strategic Goal

GAO-15-479

GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-15-479, a report to the Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

While many developing countries have achieved important gains in primary school enrollment, students' reading skills remain very low. In response, USAID's 2011-2015 Education Strategy set a goal of improved reading skills for 100 million primary grade children by the end of 2015 (Goal 1). The 42 missions with funding for primary grade reading programs were to start programs aligned with the strategy by the end of fiscal year 2012 to allow time to assess results by 2015.

GAO was asked to review USAID's efforts to implement primary grade reading programs—Goal 1 of its education strategy. This report (1) examines five USAID missions' implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of reading programs and (2) assesses USAID's efforts to estimate progress toward its reading goal. GAO analyzed USAID's education strategy and other guidance, reading assessment data and methodologies, performance monitoring plans and reports, and program evaluations, and conducted fieldwork in five countries selected based on geographic diversity, funding for basic education, and availability of reading assessment data.

What GAO Recommends

USAID should select a methodology for estimating total numbers of children with improved reading skills, document a description of the methodology when reporting results, and set interim targets to assess progress toward a reading goal in any future education strategy. USAID concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View GAO-15-479. For more information, contact David Gootnick at (202) 512-3149 or gootnickd@gao.gov.

May 2015

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USAID Has Implemented Primary Grade Reading Programs but Has Not Yet Measured Progress toward Its Strategic Goal

What GAO Found

U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) missions in all five countries where GAO conducted fieldwork were implementing primary grade reading interventions recommended in USAID's education strategy guidance. A key intervention in four of these countries is developing new reading instruction materials in mother-tongue languages—in some instances, multiple languages. In Ethiopia, for example, USAID's reading program developed new student textbooks and teacher's guides for each of eight grades and seven languages and involved teams of local teachers, language experts, and story writers, among others. The complexity of these interventions in Ethiopia, Malawi, the Philippines, and Uganda increased the time before they could be introduced in classrooms. As a result, some targeted student populations are not expected to benefit from improved reading instruction until late 2015 or 2016, too late to be measured to contribute to USAID's strategic goal of 100 million students with improved reading skills by the end of 2015. In addition, the missions were monitoring their reading programs and planned to conduct program evaluations consistent with USAID guidance.

USAID is currently unable to estimate progress toward the education strategy's reading goal because of four factors. First, because it took some missions longer to implement reading programs than USAID estimated, only about two-thirds of missions are expected to have data to estimate progress toward the goal by the end of 2015. Second, only a small number of missions provided USAID the complete data and supporting information that it needs to aggregate and analyze reading assessment results. Agency officials attributed the lack of complete data and information to an absence of timely guidance. In 2014, USAID issued updated reporting guidance. Third, USAID has not selected a methodology for calculating percentages of assessed children demonstrating improved reading skills, and extrapolating the results to estimate the total numbers of children with improved reading skills. Along with incomplete data and information, other factors contributed to a delay in identifying a methodology—for example, USAID did not ask its contractor to examine the methodology proposed in 2012 and explore alternatives until 2014. Fourth, the education strategy did not set interim targets for assessing progress toward the reading goal as suggested by leading performance management practices. Without a methodology and interim targets, USAID officials and others lack aggregate information about progress toward the goal to assess the current strategy and plan a realistic goal for a future strategy.

Status of Missions' Implementation of Primary Grade Reading Programs

Countries starting projects in 2012 or earlier — Countries starting projects in 2013 or later

2008/2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	After 2014
• Democratic Republic of Congo • Egypt • Ethiopia • Guatemala • Mali • Peru	• Dominican Republic • Jamaica • Liberia • Malawi	• Georgia • Honduras • Kenya • Rwanda • South Sudan • Tanzania	• Djibouti • Haiti • India • Indonesia • Mozambique • Niger • South Africa • Uganda • Yemen • Zambia	• Bangladesh • Kyrgyz Republic • Pakistan • Philippines • Senegal • Tajikistan	• Ghana • Nepal • Nicaragua • Nigeria	• Afghanistan • Barbados/ Eastern Caribbean • Burma • Jordan • Morocco • West Bank/Gaza

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Agency for International Development data. | GAO-15-479

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Abbreviations

EGRA	Early Grade Reading Assessment
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

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U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE
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May 7, 2015

The Honorable Kay Granger
Chairwoman
The Honorable Nita M. Lowey
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

Learning to read is the foundation for future learning, and greater educational attainment contributes to economic growth, improved health outcomes, and democratic governance. However, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) reports that while many developing countries have achieved important gains in enrolling children in primary school, reading skills remain very low. In some countries, 70 to 90 percent of students tested at the end of 2 to 3 years of schooling were unable read a single word correctly in the first line of a simple passage.[1]

In response to such evidence, USAID's 2011-2015 education strategy set a goal of improving the reading skills of 100 million children in primary grades by December 2015—Goal 1 of the strategy.[2] The agency directed missions to have programs aligned with the strategy by the end of fiscal year 2012 and to gather data through reading assessments to measure improvements in reading skills of primary grade students.[3] USAID guidance for implementing the strategy noted, among other things, that the timing of program alignment was critical for Goal 1 because the strategy's quantitative target could not be achieved without at least 3 years of implementation by the end of 2015. USAID guidance also stated that it is important for missions to complete baseline assessments no later than fiscal year 2013 to allow time to measure the programs' impacts on

[1]A. Gove and P. Cvelich, *Early Reading: Igniting Education for All. A report by the Early Grade Learning Community of Practice, Revised Edition* (Research Triangle Park, N.C.: Research Triangle Institute, 2011).

[2]U.S. Agency for International Development, *Education: Opportunity through Learning. USAID Education Strategy 2011-2015* (Washington, D.C.: February 2011).

[3]According to USAID's education strategy, primary grades can be defined by the partner country's system, and can range from the first 4 to 8 years of schooling.

students' reading skills. In addition, the strategy included guidelines for monitoring and evaluating USAID's progress in achieving its basic education goals. As the current strategy's end date approaches, USAID is deliberating its post-2015 strategy for basic education assistance.

You asked us to review USAID's basic education programming. This report (1) examines five USAID missions' implementation, performance monitoring, and evaluation of primary grade reading programs and (2) assesses USAID's efforts to estimate progress toward the 2011-2015 education strategy's primary grade reading goal.

In preparing our report, we analyzed USAID's 2011-2015 education strategy, related guidance, and funding for basic education for fiscal years 2010 through 2014. We also conducted fieldwork in five countries—Ethiopia, Malawi, Peru, the Philippines, and Uganda. We selected these countries because they are geographically diverse and had received relatively large levels of U.S. funding for basic education. We also selected these countries because the USAID missions in these countries had implemented primary grade reading programs and had conducted at least baseline reading assessments. To examine the five missions' implementation, performance monitoring, and evaluation of primary grade reading programs—our first objective—we reviewed USAID guidance as well as documentation from the missions and interviewed USAID officials. To assess USAID's efforts to estimate progress toward its primary grade reading goal—our second objective—we reviewed the USAID education strategy and USAID policies and guidelines for completing reading assessments and analyzed USAID reports on missions' collection of reading assessment data. We also reviewed USAID contractors' documentation of proposed methodologies for estimating total numbers of children with improved reading skills, and we used GAO standards and generally accepted survey guidelines to assess these efforts to estimate progress toward its primary grade reading goal.[4] To assess the reliability of reading assessment data, we compared the design, data collection, and analysis of results for the assessments at the five missions against

[4]GAO, *Managing for Results: Agencies Should More Fully Develop Priority Goals under the GPRA Modernization Act*, GAO-13-174 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 19, 2013); GAO, *Managing for Results: Enhancing Agency Use of Performance Information for Management Decision Making*, GAO-05-927 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 9, 2005); and Office of Management and Budget, *Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys* (Washington, D.C.: September 2006).

generally accepted survey guidelines and USAID guidance.[5] In addition, we interviewed USAID officials and contractor staff in Washington, D.C., and USAID mission officials, USAID implementing partner officials, host government officials, and others in each of the five selected countries. We determined that the data we obtained were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our review.

We conducted this performance audit from May 2014 to May 2015 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

USAID's 2011-2015 Education Strategy

USAID's 2011-2015 education strategy, issued in February 2011, includes three goals: improved reading skills for 100 million children in primary grades by 2015 (Goal 1), improved ability of tertiary and workforce development programs to produce a workforce with relevant skills to support country development goals by 2015 (Goal 2), and increased equitable access to education in crisis and conflict environments for 15 million learners by 2015 (Goal 3).[6] Goal 1 represents a shift from an earlier broader focus on achieving universal enrollment of children in primary school as well as improving the quality of education.[7]

In August 2011, USAID issued guidance for implementing the education strategy, directing missions with basic education programs in non-crisis and conflict environments to narrow the focus of their interventions to

[5]Office of Management and Budget, *Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys*, and U.S. Agency for International Development, *2011 USAID Education Strategy: Implementation Guidance* (Washington, D.C.: revised April 2012).

[6]According to USAID guidance for implementing the education strategy, basic education funding is to be used in support of the numerical targets for Goals 1 and 3.

[7]In 2000, the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals included a goal that by 2015 all children "will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling."

achieving the goal of improving early grade reading by the end of fiscal year 2012.[8] According to the guidance, missions that were not in conflict or crisis-affected environments were to focus resources on primary grade reading and discontinue programming in such areas as early childhood education, secondary education, or adult literacy. In addition, missions' programming was to be based on evidence of what works to improve reading outcomes. The guidance stated that the timing of missions' alignment of education programs with the education strategy was critical because programs required at least 3 years of implementation to contribute to the strategy's numerical target.

USAID's Performance and Evaluation Requirements

USAID requires that missions' primary grade reading programs adhere to the agency's performance monitoring and evaluation framework requirements in order to track progress annually against the full set of expected results. Performance monitoring periodically tracks changes to determine whether desired results are occurring and whether projects are implemented as designed. USAID missions and implementing partners monitor programs by using performance management plans or equivalent documents that define what is to be measured, the unit of measurement, and the level of data disaggregation, among other information. USAID guidance for implementing the education strategy requires that these plans include, at a minimum, either of two standard outcome indicators related to primary grade reading, if relevant:[9]

- The proportion of students who demonstrate by the end of two grades of primary schooling that they can read and understand the meaning of grade-level text.
- The proportion of students who by the end of the primary school years are able to read and demonstrate understanding as defined by a country curriculum or standards or as agreed to by national experts.

While performance monitoring is required for all programs, USAID's evaluation policy requires performance or impact evaluations of all large

[8]U.S. Agency for International Development, *2011 USAID Education Strategy: Implementation Guidance*.

[9]These indicators are included in a set of standard indicators known as the Foreign Assistance Framework, which the Department of State established for annual reporting of foreign assistance efforts.

projects.[10] The policy states that performance evaluations should focus on questions such as what a project or program has achieved, how it is being implemented, and how it is perceived and valued. Impact evaluations measure the change in a development outcome that is attributable to the project or program, based on models of cause and effect. In addition, USAID's guidance for implementing the education strategy instructs missions to integrate plans for performance or impact evaluation into program design during the planning stages and to derive data for evaluations from reading assessments. The guidance also states that performance and impact evaluations should be provided by an external, separately contracted team.

In addition, the guidance directs missions to collect data through standardized reading assessments, which USAID will use to estimate overall progress toward the strategy's Goal 1 target of improved reading skills of 100 million primary grade children by 2015. The missions may also use these data in monitoring and evaluating their reading programs' performance. The reading assessments typically provide reading performance data for different samples of students at the same grade levels over time—a cross-sectional approach. The technical notes to the education strategy encourage missions to complete a baseline assessment no later than fiscal year 2013 and an endline assessment by 2015 to contribute to USAID's primary grade reading goal by December 2015.[11] The technical notes also recommend midline assessments to monitor the early stages of program implementation and notes that at

[10]USAID's evaluation policy defines a large project as one that equals or exceeds in dollar value the mean (average) project size for each development objective for the USAID mission/office. The policy also requires that, if feasible, missions undertake impact evaluations of projects involving untested hypotheses or demonstrating new approaches that are anticipated to be expanded in scale or scope through U.S. foreign assistance. See U.S. Agency for International Development, *Evaluation: Learning From Experience. USAID Evaluation Policy* (Washington, D.C.: January 2011).

[11]A comparison of baseline assessment data (i.e., data collected before a reading program starts) and endline assessment data (i.e., data collected at or near the end of the program or before the end of fiscal year 2015) can be used by missions to report on the standard outcome indicators for performance monitoring and by the agency's contractors to estimate progress toward the goal of 100 million students with improved reading skills by December 2015. USAID officials noted that the need to assess learners toward the end of a school year, which often ends in May or June, may result in some missions assessing learning outcomes later than December 2015. See U.S. Agency for International Development, *2011 USAID Education Strategy Technical Notes* (Washington, D.C.: revised April 2012).

least two phases of assessment are necessary to measure reading improvement.[12] Figure 1 shows a reading assessment being conducted in the Philippines.

Figure 1: Reading Assessment Conducted in the Philippines

Source: Harry James Creo/ U.S. Agency for International Development/ Philippines Basa Pilipinas Program. | GAO-15-479

USAID does not require a particular type of reading assessment, but its guidance for implementing the education strategy indicates that missions should use a valid and reliable reading assessment instrument. Most missions have conducted an Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), an oral reading assessment that is typically adapted for use in a particular country and language and measures a variety of skills involving

[12]The number of children showing improvement in reading skills is potentially a lower threshold than the number of children demonstrating the ability to "read to learn," which experts describe as the ultimate objective—a combination of fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary skills that allows a person to read independently and to understand and use the information they read.

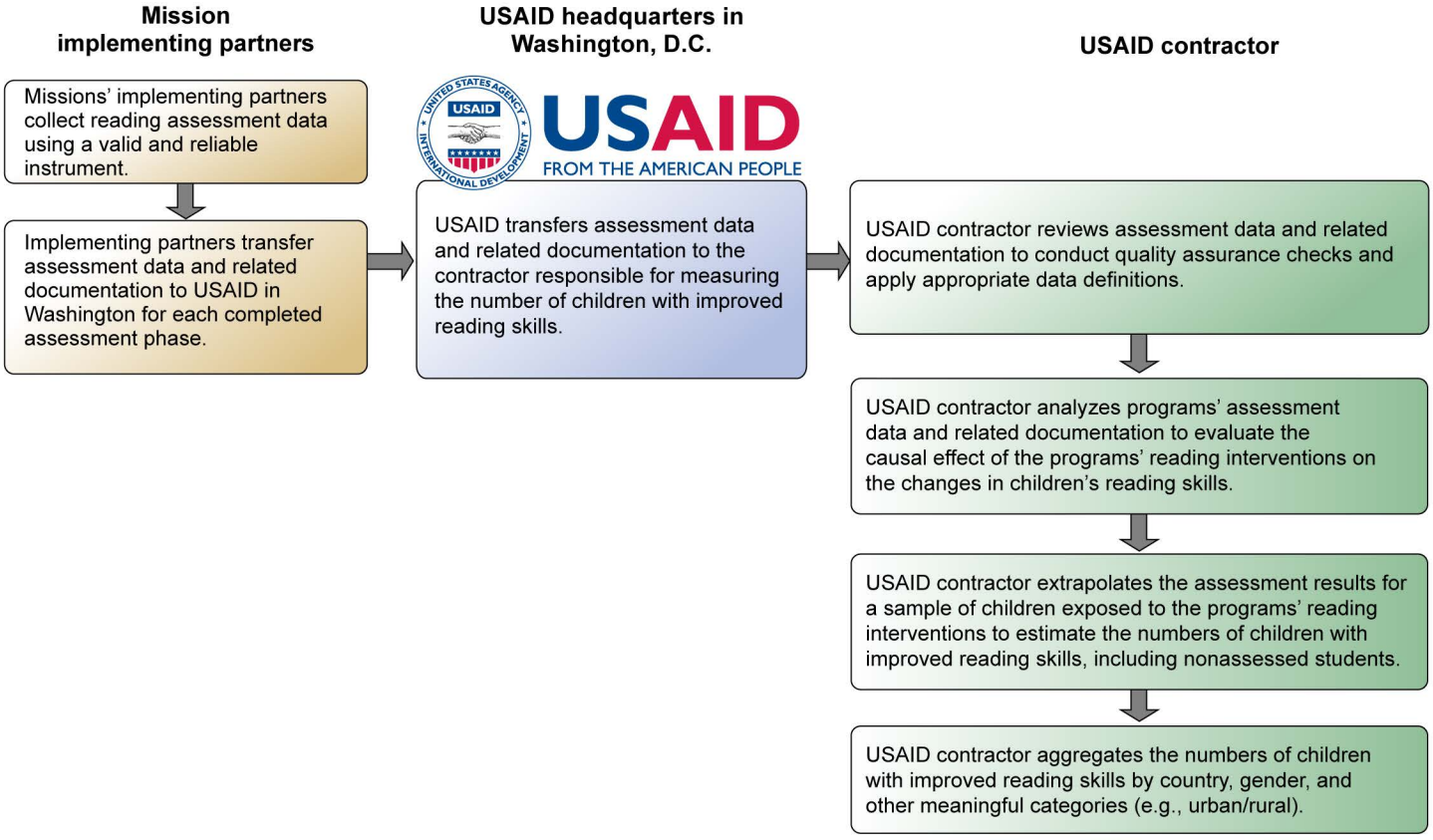
components of reading.[13] USAID's technical notes to the education strategy direct missions to use two reading skills to measure reading improvement: oral reading fluency and reading comprehension.[14] The technical notes also direct missions to report assessment results for the assessed sample of students reached directly through U.S.-funded programs and, if applicable, students reached indirectly through programs scaled up or continued by host governments or other donors without U.S. support.

To obtain the data needed for estimating total numbers of children with improved reading skills across all programs, USAID instructs missions to transfer their reading assessment data and related documentation to the agency's headquarters within 90 days after baseline, midline, and endline assessments. This directive was instituted in 2014. USAID then transfers the data and documentation to its contractor, which uses a web-based database to (1) aggregate missions' reading assessment data and (2) analyze related documentation provided by the missions' implementing partners. Figure 2 shows USAID's process for obtaining, aggregating, and analyzing the reading assessment data and documentation for use in estimating total numbers of children with improved reading skills.

[13]Research Triangle Institute International developed the EGRA under contract with USAID in 2006 to help USAID partner countries measure, in a systematic way, how well children in the early grades of primary school are acquiring reading skills.

[14]Fluency is the ability to read text accurately, quickly, and with good expression and is calculated based on the number of words read correctly per minute. Comprehension is understanding the meaning of what has been read. This is typically calculated based on the percentage of questions about a reading passage answered correctly. See *2011 USAID Education Strategy Technical Notes.*

Figure 2: U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) Process for Aggregating and Analyzing Reading Assessment Data for Use in Estimating Numbers of Children with Improved Reading Skills



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Agency for International Development information. | GAO-15-479

USAID Basic Education Funding and Management

In fiscal year 2013—the first year in which missions' education programs were expected to be fully aligned with the goals of the education strategy—USAID allocated about $790 million for basic education assistance divided between programs supporting the education strategy's Goal 1—improving primary grade reading—and programs supporting Goal 3—increasing equitable access to education in crisis and conflict

environments.[15] USAID provided basic education funding to 41 countries for primary grade reading programs in fiscal year 2013.[16] Table 1 shows USAID's allocations for basic education for fiscal years 2010 through 2014 by appropriation account. More than half of the 2013 funding was allocated for basic education activities in countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, where baseline reading scores were among the lowest globally, according to USAID. Appendix II shows the fiscal year 2013 allocations for basic education by country.

Table 1: U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Allocations for Basic Education, by Appropriation Account, Fiscal Years 2010-2014

Dollars in thousands

Fiscal year	Assistance for Europe, Eurasia and Central Asia	Development Assistance	Economic Support Fund	Food for Peace Title II	International Organizations and Programs	Total
2010	$13,425	$365,971	$557,603	$4,455	$1,000	**$942,454**
2011	9,742	324,231	380,873	5,539	1,850	**722,235**
2012[a]	10,368	359,286	430,590	3,160	0	**803,404**
2013[b]	0	429,576	354,868	2,283	0	**786,727**
2014[c]	0	397,180	328,220	1,070	0	**726,470**
Total	**$33,535**	**$1,876,244**	**$2,052,154**	**$16,507**	**$2,850**	**$3,981,290**

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State/USAID data. | GAO-15-479

[a]The fiscal year 2012 appropriation language states that "not less than $800,000,000 shall be made available for assistance for basic education." See Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2012, Pub. L. No. 112-74, § 7062, 125 Stat. 786, 1248 (2011).

[b]For fiscal year 2013, Congress appropriated funds at the 2012 level for basic education. See Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2013, Pub. L. No. 113-6, 127 Stat. 198. However, USAID reported that for fiscal year 2013, the appropriation fell below $800 million because of sequestration.

[c]The fiscal year 2014 appropriation language also states that "not less than $800,000,000 shall be made available for assistance for basic education." See Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2014, Pub. L. No. 113-76, § 7060, 128 Stat. 5, 552. Of the $800 million, approximately $74 million was allocated to the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance and the Office of Transition Initiatives for basic education activities, according to a USAID official.

[15]The Department of State and USAID define allocations as the distribution of resources to bureaus and operating units by foreign assistance account. USAID receives a separate allocation for higher education programs (Goal 2 of its education strategy), which totaled about $365 million in fiscal year 2013.

[16]Niger also has a primary grade reading program with funding from the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which brings the total number of countries with funding for primary grade reading programs to 42.

USAID's basic education programs are planned and implemented primarily by USAID's overseas missions. In Washington, D.C., the Office of Education in USAID's Bureau for Economic Growth, Education and Environment provides technical leadership, research, and field support. The office also assists in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the USAID education strategy and resource allocation priorities. In addition, USAID's geographic bureaus advise missions on their education programs.

USAID Missions in Five Selected Countries Are Implementing, Monitoring, and Evaluating Reading Programs Consistent with USAID Guidance

In the five countries where we conducted fieldwork, the USAID missions had implemented primary grade reading programs that included intervention elements recommended in USAID's guidance related to its education strategy. In several of the countries, the need to develop new reading materials in mother-tongue languages and train classroom teachers in the use of these materials (see fig. 3) resulted in long lead times before fully reaching the targeted population of students. (Table 2 shows information about the programs in the five countries.) As a result, portions of targeted student populations in four countries are not expected to benefit from the programs in time to contribute to USAID's strategic goal of 100 million students with improved reading skills by December 2015. The programs' monitoring efforts produced data showing very low baseline reading skills among targeted students. In addition, the programs in the five countries all included plans for external performance or impact evaluations.

Figure 3: Teacher Training Provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development's Basa Pilipinas Program in the Philippines

Source: Sucgong/ U.S Agency for International Development/ Philippines Basa Pilipinas Program. | GAO-15-479

Table 2: U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Primary Grade Reading Programs in Five Selected Countries

Dollars in millions

Country	Program name[a]	Program funding[b]	Program start date	Program duration	Program scope	Number of students targeted[c]
Ethiopia	Reading for Ethiopia's Achievement Developed	$77.5	October 2012	5 years	• Seven mother-tongue languages, English as a second language • Grades 1-8 • Country-wide	15 million
Malawi	Early Grade Reading Activity	$24	June 2013	3 years, 4 months	• One mother-tongue language, English as a second language • Grades 1-3 • Eleven of 34 school districts	827,000
Peru	Amazonia Reads	$10.8	July 2014	3 years	• Spanish • Grades 1-3 • Two Amazon regions	28,000
Philippines	Basa Pilipinas	$22.9	January 2013	4 years	• Two mother-tongue languages, Filipino, English • Grades 1-3 • Four provinces	740,000

Dollars in millions

Country	Program name[a]	Program funding[b]	Program start date	Program duration	Program scope	Number of students targeted[c]
Uganda	School Health and Reading Program	$42	May 2012	5 years	• Twelve mother-tongue languages, English • Grades 1-3 • Thirty of 112 districts	1.1 million

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Agency for International Development data. | GAO-15-479

[a]The programs listed are the main primary grade reading programs in the five selected countries, according to USAID officials. In some instances, USAID was also implementing other related programs.

[b]Funding amounts shown are for entire program duration but do not include USAID funding for separate contracts for third-party monitoring and evaluation.

[c]Numbers of targeted students include only populations targeted for the programs' direct interventions and do not include populations that may eventually benefit indirectly from efforts to scale up these interventions.

Missions in All Five Countries Have Reading Programs with Recommended Elements, although Some Programs Will Not Reach All Targeted Students by 2015

Our fieldwork at the USAID missions in Ethiopia, Malawi, the Philippines, Peru, and Uganda showed that each mission had implemented primary grade reading programs with elements recommended in USAID's technical notes to the education strategy (see text box for key recommendations from the technical notes).[17] For example, in all five countries, the programs included teacher training and coaching in reading instruction; outreach to encourage community and parental support for reading during and after school (see fig. 4); and emphasis on five key components of reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Moreover, in four of the countries—Ethiopia, the Philippines, Malawi, and Uganda—the development of new reading instruction materials in mother-tongue languages as well as training and coaching teachers in the use of these materials were central to the reading programs, according to mission officials. The programs in these countries also included improving reading instruction in English.

[17]USAID's guidance for implementing the education strategy directs missions to undertake evidence-based programming to improve reading outcomes and the strategy's technical notes recommend key program elements that international reading experts have found to be effective.

U.S. Agency for International Development's Key Recommended Program Elements for Primary Grade Reading Programs

- Instruction in a language that students speak and understand, particularly in the early years of school.
- Instruction focused on five key component skills of reading alphabetic languages—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- Teacher training and coaching in reading instruction.
- Development of instructional material, including textbooks, decodable readers, teaching manuals, and lesson plans.
- Regular classroom-based, teacher-led assessment of students' progress.
- Periodic formal assessment to measure impact over time.
- Increasing community and parental support for reading, such as support for parent-teacher associations, teacher's aides, and after-school tutoring.
- Improving host-country education policy, such as increasing instruction time and adopting mother-tongue curriculum.
- Capacity building, such as helping host countries conduct early-grade reading assessments.

Source: 2011 U.S. Agency for International Development Education Strategy Technical Notes. | GAO-15-479

Figure 4: Teachers and Parents Participating in Community Meeting Related to Primary Grade Reading at School in Malawi

Source: GAO. | GAO-15-479

In several of the countries we visited, the need to develop reading materials in mother-tongue languages and train classroom teachers increased the amount of time before the programs could fully reach the targeted populations of students, according to mission officials. For example, in Ethiopia, the Philippines, and Uganda, new reading textbooks, teacher guides, and lesson plans had to be developed for each mother-tongue language in each grade covered by the program. Moreover, the number of languages involved in the programs in these three countries—7 in Ethiopia, 4 in the Philippines, and 12 in Uganda—added to the complexity of the interventions and increased the amount of time needed to develop the new materials and train teachers.[18]

In Ethiopia, for example, the program developed, among other instructional materials, student textbooks and teacher's guides for each of eight grades and seven languages, which required 2 years of work before the new materials could be introduced in the classroom with trained teachers. In October 2012, the program began revising the national reading curriculum for grades 1 through 8 and developing a scope and sequence for each grade and language. The program then developed the content for the textbooks and teacher's guides, first for grades 1 through 4 and next for grades 5 through 8, aligned to the new curriculum.[19] This process involved establishing seven teams—one for each language—to develop reading and writing materials, including stories, comprehension questions, student textbooks, and teacher's guides. Each team included an international reading specialist, a reading and curriculum specialist, as well as teachers, language experts, story writers, graphic artists, and typists from the local community who spoke the mother-tongue language (see fig. 5). Once the content was developed, a region-by-region validation process began, involving different education stakeholders across the country, to finalize and adopt the new textbooks. The books were then printed and distributed to schools, and teachers for grades 1 through 4 were trained. The program introduced the new mother-tongue reading instruction in grades 1 through 4 classrooms during the 2014-

[18]The USAID mission in Malawi initially planned to include three mother-tongue languages in its primary education reading program. However, at the request of Malawi's government, USAID narrowed the scope to reading instruction in Chichewa, the country's most widely spoken mother-tongue language.

[19]According to a USAID/Ethiopia official, the textbooks and teacher's guides were first developed for five regions and later adapted by six additional regions where one or more of the seven languages are used as the medium of instruction.

2015 school year. The program intends to introduce mother-tongue instruction in grades 5 through 8 during the following school year.

Figure 5: Team in Ethiopia Developing Primary Grade Instructional Reading Materials in Af-Somali Language

Source: Bashir Sheik Abdirahman Nur/ U.S. Agency for International Development/ Ethiopia Reading for Ethiopia's Achievement Developed Program. | GAO-15-479

Because of the scope of their undertakings, the missions in Ethiopia, the Philippines, and Uganda are introducing new mother-tongue reading instruction materials in classrooms in phases. For instance, in Uganda, the mission plans to introduce the new mother-tongue reading instruction materials (see fig. 6) in three clusters of four languages each, reaching the last cohort of schools and students in 2016. As a result, portions of the targeted student populations in each country are not expected to benefit from improved reading instruction until late 2015 or 2016, and USAID will not be able to complete endline assessments of these students in time to contribute to USAID's strategic goal of 100 million students with improved reading skills by December 2015.

Figure 6: Student Textbook and Teacher's Guide in Luganda, 1 of 12 Mother-Tongue Languages in the U.S. Agency for International Development's Primary Grade Reading Program in Uganda

Source: GAO. | GAO-15-479

Performance Monitoring of USAID Reading Programs in Five Countries Shows Very Low Baseline Reading Skills

Performance monitoring efforts in the five countries where we conducted fieldwork reveal very low reading skills among targeted student populations. Consistent with USAID's guidance for performance monitoring, all five programs included in their performance monitoring plans the following standard outcome indicator: "Proportion of students who, by the end of two grades of primary schooling, demonstrate that they can read and understand the meaning of grade level text." To develop this outcome indicator, program implementers in each country, after reaching consensus with host governments, set benchmarks for reading grade-level text with fluency and comprehension. Program implementers in each country also conducted standardized reading assessments to establish baselines for the proportion of students meeting

the benchmarks.[20] Because they are tied to unique circumstances and linguistic differences, the benchmarks may vary by country or language. For example, Ethiopia's second-grade benchmark for oral reading fluency ranges from 55 words read correctly per minute for Tigrignia to 40 for Hadiyyisa. In Malawi and Uganda, the benchmark for reading fluently is 40 words read correctly per minute.[21] With the exception of Peru, where the host government has well-established benchmarks for grade-level reading, the benchmarks used are not final and may be adjusted as reading assessment data become available for further analysis by program implementers and local stakeholders, such as ministries of education. A USAID official in one of the missions we visited noted that some countries may decide to set more aspirational targets than others to try to motivate regions and partners.[22]

The baseline data collected in each of the five countries reveal very low reading skills among targeted student populations. In Uganda (see fig. 7), for example, the baseline reading assessment conducted in February/March 2013 found that no more than 2 percent of second-grade students tested met current benchmarks for grade-level reading fluency or comprehension in any of the four mother-tongue languages tested.[23] In the languages of Luganda and Ateso, not one second-grade student tested met the reading comprehension benchmark.[24] Despite these low baseline scores in Uganda, the reading program includes a target of about 50 percent of students reading at grade level in 2016. As table 3

[20]USAID's guidance for implementing the education strategy notes that reading assessments may also provide data for use in estimating overall progress toward the strategy's reading goal by 2015.

[21]According to a USAID/Uganda official, the 40 words per minute benchmark follows the international benchmark for grade 2 and was proposed in Uganda in 2009 for only two local languages. The official noted that after collection of two reading assessment data points for several Uganda local languages, it was evident that a single benchmark, for all 12 languages in the program's scope was not possible because of variations in language complexity and the low levels at baseline.

[22]Performance monitoring plans for the five programs also included output indicators, such as the number of teachers receiving training or coaching and the number of teaching and learning materials provided to schools.

[23]Uganda's benchmark for reading with comprehension is 80 percent of comprehension questions (i.e., 4 out of 5) answered correctly.

[24]The baseline reading assessment conducted for the reading program in Uganda had a sample size of 7,085 second-grade students in Luganda and 11,953 in Ateso.

shows, the program in Ethiopia set similar targets for improving reading despite students' very low baseline skills.

Figure 7: Primary Grade Students Participating in Reading Lesson in Uganda

Source: GAO. | GAO-15-479

Table 3: Summary of Baselines and Targets for Reading Program Outcome Indicators in Five Countries

	Baselines			Targets		
Country	**Percentage of grade 2 students reading fluently at grade level**	**Percentage of grade 2 students reading with comprehension at grade level**	**Baseline calendar year**	**Percentage of grade 2 students reading fluently at grade level**	**Percentage of grade 2 students reading with comprehension at grade level**	**Target calendar year**
Ethiopia	3.2	14	2014	5	20	2016
Malawi	8.4	3.4	2013	50	40	2019
Peru	NA	26	2012	NA	34	2016
Philippines	40	17	2014	72	72	2016
Uganda[a]	0 to 1	0 to 2	2013	50 to 52	50 to 52	2016

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Agency for International Development data. | GAO-15-479

[a]The table presents a range of baseline and target percentages for the first four mother-tongue languages in the program's intervention—Luganda, Leblango, Ateso, and Runyoro/Rutoro.

All Five Missions Have Planned Performance or Impact Evaluations of Primary Grade Reading Programs

Reflecting the emphasis on program evaluation in the education strategy and other guidance, all five missions where we conducted fieldwork planned for performance or impact evaluations of their reading programs, to be performed under separate contracts with external teams. The missions planned to conduct impact evaluations, using experimental designs that include both treatment and control groups, in accordance with USAID's evaluation policy,[25] and integrated the evaluation plans in their program designs. According to USAID officials, host countries are sometimes reluctant to accept program designs that intentionally withhold program interventions to some groups of recipients. For example, in Malawi, according to a senior government official, the government strongly preferred that all schools in the 11 participating school districts receive the program interventions but, to allow for USAID's planned impact evaluation, ultimately agreed to some schools being part of the control group and not receiving the program's intervention.[26] USAID officials stated that in Ethiopia, where USAID's program targets all schools, the program will receive a performance evaluation of certain intervention components, such as mother-tongue curriculum and teacher training, and an impact evaluation of other components, such as community outreach. Final evaluations of the reading programs in these countries are planned for 2017 or later.

As of April 2015, USAID Was Unable to Estimate Progress in Improving Reading Skills for 100 Million Children

As of April 2015, USAID lacked the ability to estimate overall progress toward its primary grade reading goal because of four factors. First, because it took some missions longer to implement primary grade reading programs than USAID estimated in its implementation guidance to the education strategy, only about two-thirds of missions are expected to have data that could be used to estimate progress toward USAID's reading goal by the end of 2015. Second, only a small number of the missions that have collected reading assessment data have provided complete data and supporting information needed to aggregate and

[25]Impact evaluations in which comparisons are made between beneficiaries who are randomly assigned to either a treatment or a control group provide the strongest evidence of a relationship between the intervention under study and the outcome measured. Performance evaluations often incorporate before-after comparisons but generally lack rigorously defined counterfactuals. See U.S. Agency for International Development, *Evaluation: Learning From Experience. USAID Evaluation Policy*.

[26]The external team evaluating USAID's program in Malawi worked with the program implementers to establish treatment and control schools.

analyze missions' reading assessment results. Agency officials attributed the incomplete data and information to a lack of timely guidance, among other factors. In 2014, USAID updated its guidance to clarify the agency's reporting requirements. Third, USAID has not selected and documented a methodology for estimating total numbers of children with improved reading skills, owing in part to the lack of complete reading assessment data and supporting information. Documenting methodologies used to derive an estimate and reporting the information used to evaluate its reliability, such as information on sampling designs, sample sizes, and modes of data collection, help ensure that stakeholders understand the appropriate uses of the estimate and interpret the results according to generally accepted survey guidelines.[27] Fourth, the education strategy did not set interim targets for measuring progress toward USAID's reading goal in comparison to planned performance, as suggested by leading performance management practices.[28] Without a methodology and interim targets, USAID officials cannot determine USAID's progress toward its goal or identify a realistic goal for a future education strategy.

About Two-Thirds of Missions with Primary Grade Reading Programs Are Expected to Have Data for Assessing Overall Progress toward USAID's Reading Goal by 2015

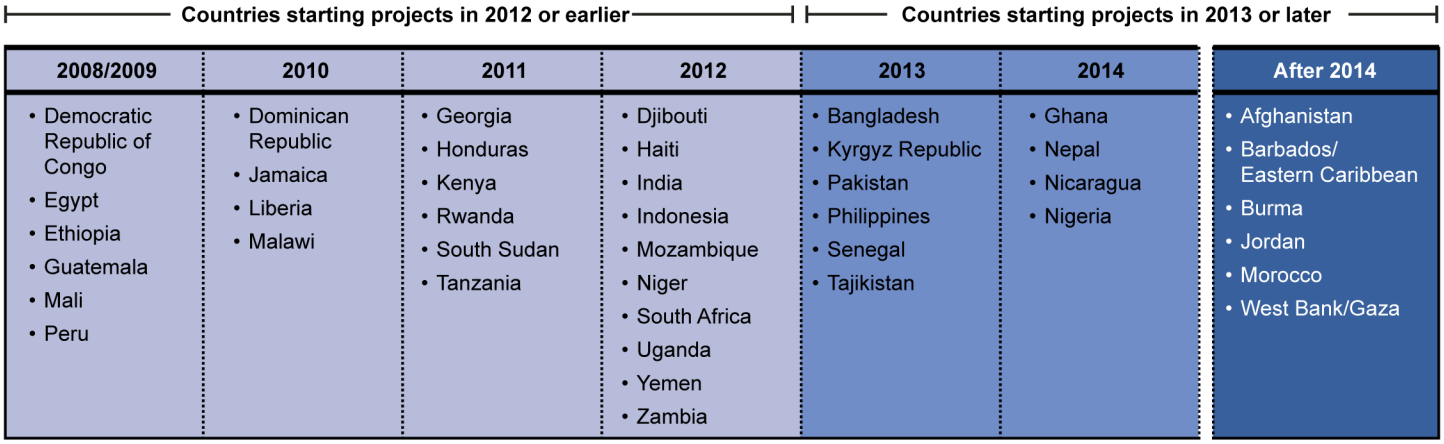
Because it took some missions longer to implement primary grade reading programs than USAID estimated in its implementation guidance to the education strategy, USAID expects only about two-thirds of missions with funding for such programs to provide baseline and midline or endline assessment data in time for the data to be used in estimating the agency's progress toward its primary grade reading goal.[29] As figure 8 shows, 26 missions (62 percent) of the 42 with funding for such programs had implemented them by the end of fiscal year 2012, the target date established in the education strategy's implementation guidance to allow at least 3 years of implementation. Thirty-six of the 42 missions (86 percent) had implemented primary grade reading programs by the end of fiscal year 2014.

[27]Office of Management and Budget, *Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys*.

[28]See GAO-13-174.

[29]According to senior USAID officials, the target dates for implementing reading programs consistent with the education strategy were unrealistic because of the length of time required for missions to design and implement such programs, including time to develop reading curricula and new reading instruction materials in mother-tongue languages, and to train and coach teachers.

Figure 8: Fiscal Years When U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Missions Implemented, or Expect to Implement, Primary Grade Reading Programs



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Agency for International Development data. | GAO-15-479

Note: USAID primary grade reading programs at the missions in Djibouti and South Sudan were terminated before they collected full reading assessment data.

USAID expects that most of the missions that implemented primary grade reading programs by 2012, as well as several that implemented their programs in fiscal years 2013 or 2014, will complete baseline and midline or endline reading assessments in time to contribute to meeting the agency's goal by the end of 2015.[30]

- Of the 26 missions that implemented their programs by the end of fiscal year 2012, all but 3 missions are expected to have completed a baseline assessment and at least a midline or an endline assessment by calendar year 2015.

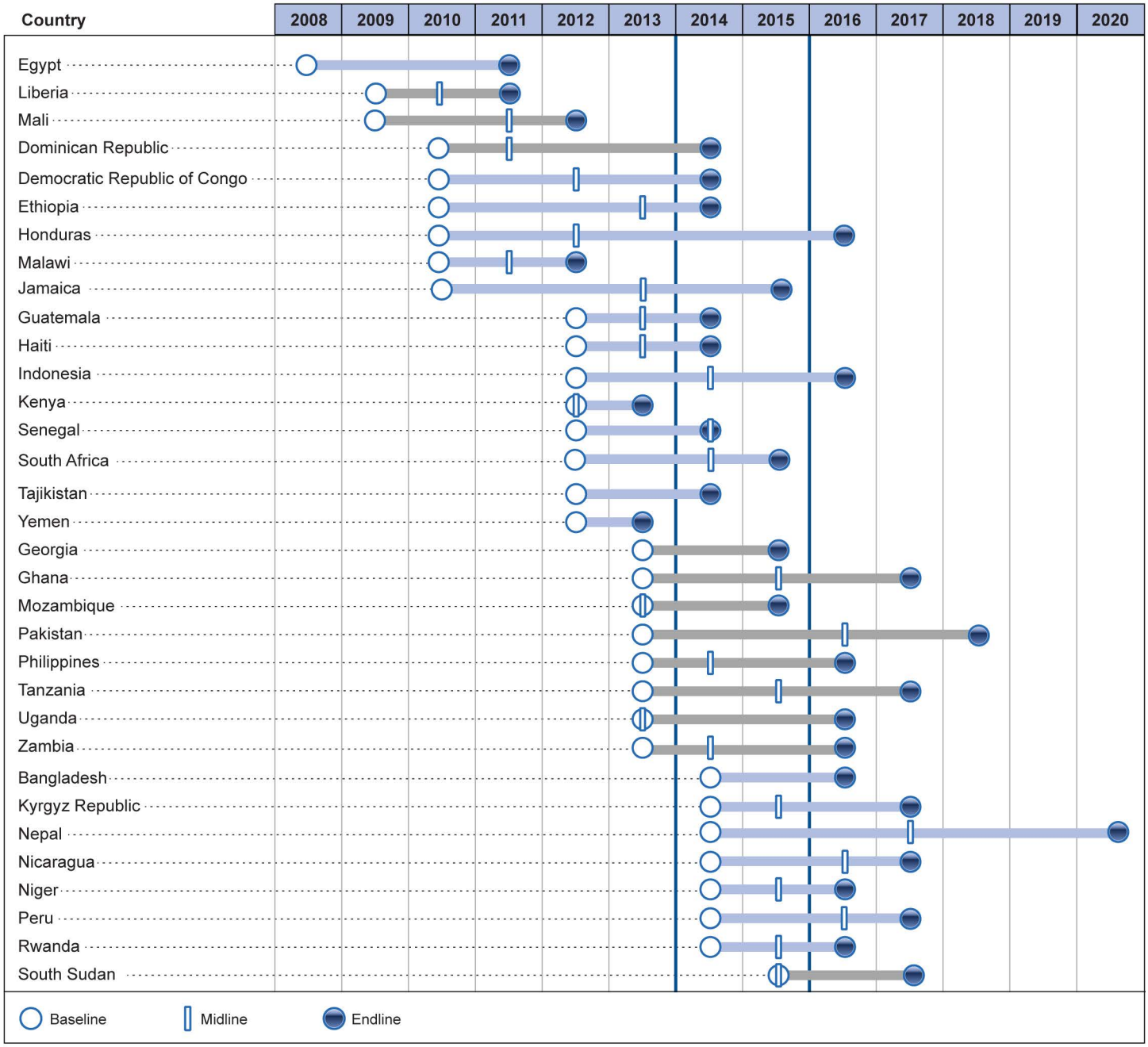
- Of the 36 missions that implemented primary grade reading programs by the end of fiscal year 2014, 25 missions completed a baseline reading assessment by the end of calendar year 2013, generally consistent with the agency's fiscal year 2013 target date. USAID expects that 28 of the 36 missions will have completed a baseline

[30]USAID reported missions' assessment dates in calendar years, although USAID guidance for implementing the education strategy established fiscal year target dates for implementing primary grade reading programs and collecting baseline, midline, and endline assessment data.

assessment as well as a midline or an endline assessment by calendar year 2015.

Figure 9 shows the calendar years when USAID missions with funding for primary grade reading programs completed, or are expected to complete, baseline, midline, and endline reading assessments. (See app. III for information about the quality of the assessment data collected at the five missions we selected for fieldwork.)

Figure 9: Actual or Expected Years for U.S. Agency for International Development Missions' Completion of Baseline, Midline, and Endline Reading Assessments



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Agency for International Development information. | GAO-15-479

Notes: Years shown are calendar years and denote the earliest dates of reading assessments.

Data are not available for the Afghanistan, Barbados/Eastern Caribbean, Burma, Djibouti, India, Jordan, Morocco, Nigeria, and West Bank/Gaza missions.

USAID officials said that several factors contributed to the length of time required for missions to implement primary grade reading programs and collect assessment data in accordance with the education strategy. Designing projects in collaboration with host governments and then awarding contracts or cooperative agreements with implementing partners can take a year or more. USAID officials cited the following factors that contributed to the time needed to begin reading programs aligned with the education strategy:

- Host governments may have had different education priorities than those articulated in USAID's education strategy and may not fully support a focus on primary grade reading. In such cases, there is a need for discussion with host government officials to balance the education priorities of USAID with those of the host government. For example, the Jordanian government's education reform efforts were focused on early childhood education and secondary education rather than primary grade reading. In December 2012, the mission in Jordan received USAID's approval for exemption from full compliance with the education strategy; however, the mission stated that it would add an emphasis on primary grade reading to its education program.

- Some missions had other, competing development objectives. For example, the mission in Morocco delayed implementing a primary grade reading program because the mission's education assistance was tied to the competing objective of addressing at-risk youths. However, in 2013 the mission began planning for implementation of a primary grade reading program to support school retention and facilitate reenrollment for primary grade dropouts.

- Designing new primary grade reading programs in countries where USAID did not have an existing program required additional time. For example, the mission in Nepal had not implemented a primary grade reading program before the education strategy was issued in 2011 and, as a result, needed time to assess the host government's capacity to operate such a program.

USAID Lacks Complete Data and Information Needed to Aggregate and Analyze Reading Assessment Results

Although the USAID contractor responsible for aggregating and analyzing missions' reading assessment results has begun to collect available data, as of April 2015, only a small number of the missions with completed reading assessments had provided both complete data and the supporting information that the contractor needs. In April 2015, the contractor reported that it had received complete baseline assessment data from 27 missions and midline or endline assessment data from 14 missions. However, the contractor reported that it had received complete supporting information about the programs and assessments from only 4 missions.[31] Examples of the supporting information that the contractor needs to finish aggregating and analyzing the data include a description of the reading interventions, the implementation dates for the interventions, the numbers of children exposed to the interventions, the dates of the assessments and the assessment instrument, and a description of the sampling design for the assessments and population of children assessed. Using this information, the contractor checks the quality of the data; analyzes the effects of the reading interventions on children's reading skills; compares sampled children's reading skills at baseline (before the reading interventions begin) and at endline (at or near the end of the interventions); and extrapolates the assessment results for the samples of children to estimate improvements in reading skills for all children exposed to the reading interventions, including children who were not assessed.

USAID officials and contractor staff told us that a lack of timely agency guidance had contributed to difficulties in obtaining and analyzing the data and information.[32] According to USAID officials and contractor staff, mission officials and implementing partners cited the need for further guidance from USAID about the types of supporting information required for each assessment and the time frames and procedures for transferring the data and information to the contractor. The contractor's staff also noted that variations in missions' assessment time frames and data sources and formats often made it difficult to coordinate with missions

[31]In April 2015, the USAID contractor reported that it had received complete assessment data and supporting information from the Ethiopia, Haiti, Kenya, and Malawi missions.

[32]Senior USAID officials noted that prior to the 2011-2015 education strategy, USAID's Office of Education had no precedent for such a data collection effort, which required USAID to develop a contractual and legal framework and guidance to facilitate the transfer of reading assessment data and supporting information from missions' implementing partners.

and implementing partners to request and verify the data and to correct errors or account for missing information.

Building on its 2012 implementation guidance, in August 2014, USAID issued updated reporting guidance to help ensure that missions have a clear understanding of the requirements and processes for reporting assessment results. The updated guidance clarifies USAID's expectations for the control and use of the assessment data and supporting information. The guidance also specifies the time frames and procedures for the transfer of assessment data and supporting information to USAID. In addition, the guidance specifies the types of data and supporting information required as well as the formats for the transfer of the data and information. Contractor staff said that the updated guidance has made the transfer of the required assessment data and supporting information more straightforward and consistent among missions and implementing partners.

USAID Has Not Selected a Methodology for Estimating Total Numbers of Children with Improved Reading, Limiting Its Ability to Measure Progress toward Its Reading Goal

As of April 2015, USAID had not yet selected and documented a methodology for using missions' assessment data and supporting information to estimate progress toward its goal of improved reading skills for 100 million children by 2015. According to generally accepted survey guidelines, documenting methodologies used to derive an estimate and reporting the information used to evaluate its reliability—for example, sampling designs, sample sizes, and modes of data collection—is important to help ensure that stakeholders are able to understand the appropriate uses of the estimate and interpret the results accurately.[33]

In 2012, USAID issued technical notes to the education strategy that proposed a methodology for estimating total numbers of children with improved reading skills.[34] However, according to the contractor responsible for aggregating the assessment results, the lack of missions' assessment data with supporting information has limited the contractor's

[33]Office of Management and Budget, *Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys*. Many Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidelines represent long-established, generally accepted good practices, including the collection of interview-based survey data. We found that the majority of OMB guidelines were also reflected in USAID's own implementation guidelines.

[34]U.S. Agency for International Development, *2011 USAID Education Strategy Technical Notes*.

capacity to test the proposed methodology. For example, according to the contractor, the fact that few missions had provided data from both baseline and midline or endline assessments made it difficult to test for the minimum levels of reading improvement that children must meet to be counted as improved readers in different languages. In addition, the lack of information from multiple countries about the populations of children exposed directly or indirectly to the programs' reading interventions limited the contractor's ability to develop possible methods for extrapolating assessment results for samples of children to all children exposed to the interventions. According to contractor staff, as missions and implementing partners transfer data from additional assessments, with complete supporting information, the contractor will be better able to test and implement a methodology for measuring reading improvements in samples of assessed children and to extrapolate the results.

Although USAID proposed a methodology in 2012, it recognized that the methodology had limitations that needed to be resolved prior to its application. After unsuccessfully attempting to resolve these limitations, USAID requested that a second contractor examine the methodology and explore alternative methodologies in July 2014. USAID also asked the second contractor to conduct further technical work to implement a methodology, using selected reading programs for which baseline and midline or endline assessment data were available.

The second contractor reported key challenges to developing a methodology. These challenges included the difficulty of selecting a methodology that is applicable to different programs and of using a cross-sectional approach, in which different samples of children are assessed at baseline and at endline, as recommended by USAID's implementation guidance.[35]

According to the second contractor, before USAID can produce an estimate of improved readers and monitor progress toward its goal, the agency must

[35]The guidance recommends using a cross-sectional approach—assessing performance at the same grade levels over time—rather than a longitudinal approach—assessing different grade levels for the same sample—to count the numbers of students with reading skills gains.

- define the minimum increase in reading levels that children must demonstrate to be counted as improved readers,
- select a methodology for calculating the percentages of assessed children demonstrating improved reading skills, and
- select procedures for extrapolating the results from the assessed sample to the targeted population.

In November 2014, after completing its technical work, the second contractor reported to USAID regarding two possible methodologies for calculating the percentages of assessed children demonstrating improved reading skills: the threshold methodology, which USAID proposed in its technical notes to the education strategy, and the gain score methodology, which the contractor proposed as an alternative. According to the second contractor, once USAID selects a methodology, the contractor can calculate the percentages of assessed children who demonstrate improved reading skills. The contractor will then extrapolate these percentages to the populations of children exposed to the programs to estimate total numbers of children with improved reading skills.

- **Threshold methodology.** The threshold methodology calculates the percentages of improved readers on the basis of changes in the proportion of children who improve from below a threshold level of reading in a baseline assessment to a level at or above that threshold in an endline assessment. For example, different threshold levels of reading are created using the average numbers of words read correctly per minute and numbers of reading comprehension questions answered correctly for the sample of assessed children at baseline. The percentage of improved readers is then calculated on the basis of the differences between the proportions of children at each of these threshold levels at baseline and at endline.

- **Gain score methodology.** The gain score methodology ranks assessment results for a sample of children assessed at baseline and a sample assessed at endline and matches results for individuals in each sample to calculate percentages with improved reading skills. For example, assessment results for the child reading the 10th fewest words correctly per minute at baseline are matched with results for the child reading the 10th fewest words correctly at endline. The percentages of children with improved reading skills are calculated on the basis of the numbers of matched pairs whose reading skills

increased by a given minimum—for instance, who read an additional 1, 5, or 10 words correctly per minute.[36]

The USAID contractor staff used assessment data from eight USAID programs to compare percentages of improved readers that they calculated using the two methodologies and various minimum reading levels. According to the contractor's analysis, using the two methodologies to analyze the same assessment results produced different estimates of the percentages of children demonstrating improved reading skills. Specifically, the contractor found that the gain score methodology consistently produced higher estimates of improved readers than did the threshold methodology. According to the contractor, the discrepancy in the estimates from the two methodologies occurs because the threshold methodology only counts children whose reading improves across a threshold level. The threshold methodology does not count children who demonstrate some level of improved reading, but whose reading skills remain below or above a threshold level.

The USAID contractor has also reviewed possible procedures for extrapolating the percentages of samples of assessed children demonstrating reading improvements to all children exposed to the reading interventions. However, the contractor noted that it needs to conduct further technical work before making recommendations regarding these procedures to USAID.

USAID Lacks Information Needed to Assess the Current Education Strategy and Plan a Post-2015 Strategy

Lack of information about progress relative to USAID's primary grade reading goal limits the agency's ability to assess its current approach to achieving its reading goal and establish a realistic goal for a post-2015 education strategy. Because USAID has not selected a methodology for estimating total numbers of children with improved reading skills resulting from exposure to primary grade reading interventions, it has not produced interim estimates of its progress toward the goal of 100 million children

[36]In technical comments on the draft report, USAID officials stated that as of March 2015, USAID had concluded a process of validating the gain score methodology with stakeholders and technical experts and intends to use the methodology as the basis for measuring progress toward its primary grade reading goal. USAID, with continued support of the contractor, is currently engaged in defining the minimum number of words that children must read correctly to be counted as improved readers. In addition, USAID, with the help of its implementing partners, is in the process of fully developing the gain score methodology so that it can be tested, validated, and formalized.

with improved reading skills by December 2015. In addition, USAID's education strategy and guidance did not establish any interim targets for measuring progress toward USAID's primary grade reading goal. As a result, USAID officials and other stakeholders currently lack aggregate information needed to monitor and report on the numbers of children whose reading skills have improved as a result of the USAID-supported programs. Establishing interim performance targets and using reliable estimates to assess progress toward an agency goal allow managers and stakeholders to address any performance issues that may affect the outcome of the agency's goal, according to leading practices for performance management.[37] Frequently reporting progress in achieving interim performance targets allows managers to review the information in time to make improvements. Without interim targets and reliable estimates, USAID cannot assess its actual progress against its planned performance and use the information to make any adjustments needed to better achieve its goal.

Furthermore, as the current education strategy's December 2015 end date approaches, the lack of aggregate information about USAID's progress in achieving its primary grade reading goal may constrain its efforts to develop a new education strategy. According to agency officials, USAID is presently engaged in developing its post-2015 strategy. We have previously reported that agencies can use performance information to make decisions that affect future strategies.[38] Performance information helps program managers decide among competing priorities and reassess their performance goals and strategies. The lack of information about the outcome of USAID's current primary grade reading goal could limit USAID officials' capacity to assess USAID's current strategy and goal and make effective decisions about a realistic goal for USAID's education strategy after 2015.

Conclusions

Goal 1 of USAID's 2011-2015 education strategy represents a shift in the focus of education assistance from achieving universal enrollment of children in primary school to improving their reading skills. The strategy also emphasizes the use of standardized reading assessments to measure overall progress toward the goal of 100 million children with

[37]See GAO-13-174.

[38]See GAO-05-927.

improved reading skills by December 2015 and to provide data for program monitoring and evaluation. In the five countries where we conducted fieldwork, the USAID missions have implemented primary grade reading programs with elements recommended in USAID guidance and have conducted standardized reading assessments. However, the very low reading skills revealed by data from these assessments suggest that improving skills to the point where students can read with fluency and comprehension will be a long-term effort in these and other developing countries.

USAID's use of standardized reading assessments represents an important step in its efforts to measure the outcomes of its basic education assistance. However, in part, because of the time required for missions to design and implement programs and assess children's reading skills, USAID's contractor has limited access to reading assessment data. USAID officials acknowledged that the education strategy's time frames were unrealistic. Moreover, USAID has not yet selected and documented a methodology—including reporting information on the sampling designs, sample sizes, and modes of data collection—for estimating total numbers of children whose reading skills have improved. Until it selects and documents a methodology for calculating the percentages of assessed children demonstrating improved reading skills, and extrapolating the results to estimate the total numbers of children with improved reading skills, USAID cannot monitor and reliably report estimates of the results of its efforts to improve reading skills of 100 million children.

Furthermore, unless it selects and documents a methodology and sets targets for measuring progress toward a reading goal in any future education strategy, USAID will be limited in its ability to assess progress toward that goal in comparison with planned performance. Accurate reporting of USAID's progress toward its strategic goal would inform stakeholders about the impact of the agency's efforts to improve children's reading skills in the final year of the current education strategy and could help inform USAID officials' efforts to develop a realistic goal for a future education strategy.

Recommendations for Executive Action

We recommend that the Acting USAID Administrator take the following three actions.

To help ensure that USAID reports a reliable estimate of the results of its efforts to achieve the goal of improving reading skills of 100 million children, we recommend that the Acting Administrator

- select a methodology for estimating the total numbers of children with improved reading skills as a result of exposure to primary grade reading programs and
- document a description of the selected methodology as well as the information necessary to evaluate the estimate (i.e., sampling designs, sample sizes, and modes of data collection) when reporting progress toward the reading goal.

To improve USAID's ability to measure progress in achieving a quantitative reading goal in any future education strategy, we recommend that the Acting Administrator ensure that the future strategy includes targets that will allow USAID to monitor interim progress toward its goal in comparison with planned performance.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to USAID for comment. In its written comments, reproduced in appendix IV, USAID agreed with our findings and recommendations. USAID also provided technical comments, which we incorporated throughout the report, as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to interested congressional committees and the Acting USAID Administrator. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at http://www.gao.gov.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-3149 or gootnickd@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix V.

David Gootnick, Director
International Affairs and Trade

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

We were asked to review several aspects of the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) basic education programming. We focused our review on basic education programming related to Goal 1 of USAID's education strategy. This report (1) examines five USAID missions' implementation, performance monitoring, and evaluation of primary grade reading programs and (2) assesses USAID's efforts to estimate progress toward the 2011-2015 education strategy's primary grade reading goal.

For both of these objectives, we analyzed funding for basic education for fiscal years 2010 through 2014 and reviewed USAID's 2011-2015 education strategy,[1] as well as guidance for implementing the education strategy[2] and USAID's technical notes to the education strategy.[3] We also interviewed USAID officials in the Bureau for Economic Growth, Education and Environment; the Bureau for Policy, Planning, and Learning; and four of the agency's geographic bureaus. In addition, we conducted fieldwork in five countries—Ethiopia, Malawi, Peru, the Philippines, and Uganda—which we selected because they are geographically diverse and received relatively large levels of U.S. funding for basic education in fiscal year 2013. We selected the three African countries because this region received more than 50 percent of USAID's allocation for basic education assistance in fiscal year 2013 and was identified in the education strategy as a priority region for investment of resources. In addition, we selected the five countries because the USAID missions in these countries had primary grade reading programs under way and had conducted at least baseline reading assessments. During our fieldwork in these countries, we met with USAID mission officials; USAID's implementing partners; host government ministry of education officials; local school district officials; school principals; teachers; and members of parent groups, such as parent-teacher associations.

To examine the five missions' implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of primary grade reading programs—our first objective—we reviewed key

[1]U.S. Agency for International Development, *Education: Opportunity through Learning. USAID Education Strategy 2011-2015* (Washington, D.C.: February 2011).

[2]U.S. Agency for International Development, *2011 USAID Education Strategy: Implementation Guidance* (Washington, D.C.: revised April 2012).

[3]U.S. Agency for International Development, *2011 USAID Education Strategy Technical Notes* (Washington, D.C.: revised April 2012).

planning and reporting documents associated with USAID's primary grade reading program in each of the five countries. These documents included, among others, contract awards or cooperative agreements, monitoring and evaluation plans, performance management plans, and implementing partners' annual work plans and quarterly and annual reports.

To determine whether the reading programs in the five countries included key program elements that USAID's education strategy recommends as effective in improving reading outcomes, we compared elements in these programs, as identified in their planning documents, with those recommended in USAID's technical notes to the education strategy. We also visited schools, where we observed classroom reading lessons that used instructional materials developed through USAID's programs and met with local teachers, education officials, and community organizations to discuss program interventions. In Ethiopia, we observed local teams of teachers, story writers, editors, and typists in the process of developing reading curriculums in seven mother-tongue languages for grades 5 through 8. To identify the programs' timelines for delivering improved reading instruction to targeted students, we reviewed the programs' performance management plans and annual work plans and met with USAID officials at the country missions as well as implementing partner officials.

To examine the five USAID missions' performance monitoring of the current primary grade reading programs, we reviewed outcome and output measures identified in the missions' and reading programs' monitoring and evaluation plans and relevant standardized reading assessment reports. We identified each country's benchmarks for reading at grade level—number of correct words read per minute and percentage of comprehension questions answered correctly—and summarized each program's baseline data showing the percentage of students meeting these benchmarks. To examine each mission's plans for conducting performance or impact evaluations of current primary grade reading programs, we reviewed USAID's evaluation policy[4] and interviewed USAID officials at missions and implementing partners responsible for conducting external evaluations of these programs. We also reviewed the

[4]U.S. Agency for International Development, *Evaluation: Learning From Experience. USAID Evaluation Policy* (Washington, D.C.: January 2011).

missions' related requests for proposals and award agreements, as well as work plans and interim or quarterly reports submitted to the missions by these implementing partners.

To assess USAID's efforts to estimate progress toward the education strategy's primary grade reading goal—our second objective—we reviewed the USAID education strategy, guidance for implementing the strategy, technical notes to the strategy, and the strategy's reporting guidance to identify the agency's policies and guidelines for completing reading assessments at USAID missions and for analyzing the data and supporting information.[5] We analyzed USAID reports on missions' collection of reading assessment data. We also analyzed reports prepared by the USAID contractor responsible for aggregating and analyzing the reading assessment data, to determine the missions' progress in transferring reading assessment data and supporting information to the contractor. In addition, we interviewed USAID officials and USAID contractor staff in Washington, D.C., regarding the guidance and procedures for collecting and analyzing the reading assessment data and supporting information as well as missions' progress in transferring the data to USAID for aggregation and analysis.

To examine USAID's potential methodologies for estimating total numbers of children with improved reading skills, we reviewed USAID contractors' documentation of proposed methodologies. We also reviewed the USAID contractors' reports on the development of potential methodologies.[6] In addition, we interviewed USAID officials and USAID contractor staff in Washington, D.C., about the development and implementation of potential methodologies to measure improved reading skills, and the challenges and limitations to collecting and analyzing missions' reading assessment data. We used GAO standards and

[5]U.S. Agency for International Development, *2011-2015 USAID Education Strategy Update to Reporting Guidance* (Washington, D.C.: August 2014).

[6]Management Systems International, *Counting Improved Readers on USAID Education Projects: Methodology Paper* (Arlington, Va: Nov. 19, 2014), and Optimal Solutions Group, LLC, *Secondary Analysis for Results Tracking Midline Report* (College Park, Md: May 15, 2014).

generally accepted survey guidelines to assess USAID's efforts to estimate progress toward its primary grade reading goal.[7]

To assess the reliability of the reading assessment data, we compared the design, data collection, and analysis of results for the assessments at the five missions against generally accepted survey guidelines as outlined in Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance and USAID guidance.[8] Many OMB guidelines represent long-established, generally accepted professional survey practices, including the collection of interview-based survey data. We also found that the majority of OMB guidelines were also reflected in USAID's own implementation guidelines. GAO methodologists compared the information collected from agency documents and during interviews with agency officials and implementing partners and generally found that the reading assessments met these guidelines. We also determined that the data we obtained for both objectives were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of our review.

We conducted this performance audit from May 2014 to May 2015 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

[7]GAO, *Managing for Results: Agencies Should More Fully Develop Priority Goals under the GPRA Modernization Act* GAO-13-174 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 19, 2013); GAO, *Managing for Results: Enhancing Agency Use of Performance Information for Management Decision Making* GAO-05-927 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 9, 2005); and Office of Management and Budget, *Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys* (Washington, D.C.: September 2006).

[8]Office of Management and Budget, *Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys*, and Research Triangle Institute International and International Rescue Committee, *Guidance Notes for Planning and Implementing Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA)*(July 2011).

Appendix II: Basic Education Funding in Fiscal Year 2013 by Country and Region

In fiscal year 2013—the first year in which missions' education programs were expected to be fully aligned with the goals of the education strategy—the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) allocated funding to 41 countries[1] for programs to improve the reading skills of 100 million children in primary grades by December 2015—Goal 1 of its education strategy.[2] Table 4 shows USAID funding in support of Goals 1 and 3 of the strategy.[3]

Table 4: U.S Agency for International Development Allocations for Basic Education in Fiscal Year 2013, by Country

Dollars in thousands			
Country	**Fiscal year 2013 allocation**	**Goal 1**	**Goal 3**
Afghanistan	$72,333	x	x
Pakistan	59,098	x	x
Jordan	49,000	x	
South Sudan (includes Sudan, pre-2011 election)	38,577	x	x
Ethiopia	30,474	x	
Democratic Republic of Congo	28,933	x	x
Nigeria	28,663	x	x
Ghana	27,178	x	
Liberia	24,111	x	x
Egypt	21,564	x	
Malawi	21,497	x	
Mali	21,497	x	x
Mozambique	21,497	x	
Rwanda	21,497	x	
Zambia	20,629	x	

[1]In addition to the 41 countries to which USAID allocated funding for Goal 1, Niger also has a primary grade reading program with funding from the Millennium Challenge Corporation, which brings the total number of countries with funding for Goal 1 programs to 42.

[2]U.S. Agency for International Development, *Education: Opportunity through Learning. USAID Education Strategy 2011-2015* (Washington, D.C.: February 2011).

[3]The education strategy defines Goal 3 as increased equitable access to education in crisis and conflict environments for 15 million learners by 2015.

Dollars in thousands

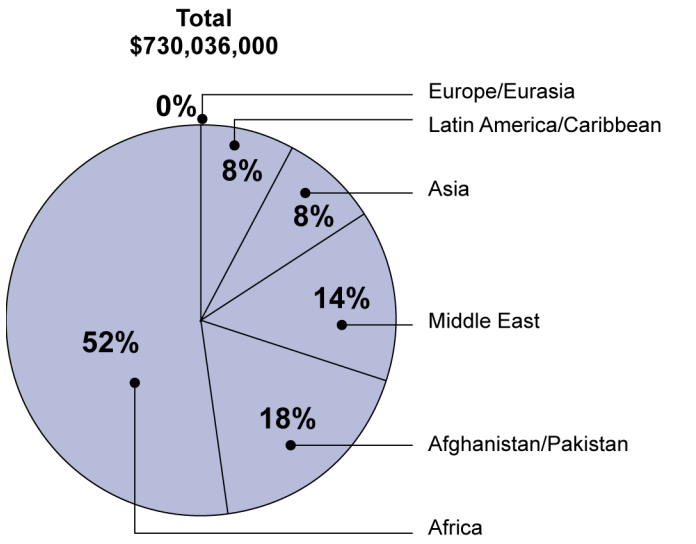
Country	Fiscal year 2013 allocation	Goal 1	Goal 3
Kenya	20,572	x	x
Uganda	20,499	x	
Senegal	20,150	x	x
Indonesia	19,758	x	x
Philippines	18,497	x	x
Honduras	17,182	x	x
Haiti	16,242	x	x
Tanzania	13,090	x	
Lebanon	11,785		x
Nepal	9,554	x	
South Africa	8,556	x	
Guatemala	6,688	x	x
Peru	6,688	x	
Somalia	5,787		x
Dominican Republic	5,255	x	
Yemen	4,881	x	
El Salvador	4,777		x
Morocco	4,299	x	
Bangladesh	3,822	x	
India	3,822	x	
Tajikistan	3,800	x	
Kyrgyz Republic	3,731	x	
Nicaragua	2,867	x	x
Burma	2,749	x	
Georgia	2,029	x	
Barbados and Eastern Caribbean	1,911	x	
Djibouti	1,911	x	
Jamaica	1,911	x	
West Bank and Gaza	675	x	x
Country total	**$730,036**	**41**	**19**

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Agency for International Development data. | GAO-15-479

As figure 10 shows, more than half of USAID's funding for Goal 1 of the strategy was directed to countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, where baseline reading scores were among the lowest globally, according to USAID.

Afghanistan and Pakistan received the next largest share, a combined total of 18 percent of USAID's 2013 basic education allocations.

Figure 10: Distribution of U.S Agency for International Development Allocations for Basic Education in Fiscal Year 2013, by Region



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Agency for International Development information. | GAO-15-479

Appendix III: Reading Assessment Data Collected At Five Selected Missions

We found that the design and implementation of the reading assessments in the five countries where we conducted fieldwork—Ethiopia, Malawi, Peru, the Philippines, and Uganda—met generally accepted survey guidelines and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) guidance on implementing Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA).[1] In four of the five countries we visited, a U.S.-based contractor assisted in the design and data collection using the EGRA. Contractor staff in headquarters provided input into both instrument and sample design and conducted in-country training for assessors and supervisors. For example, in each country, assessor and supervisor reliability scores were calculated during training and those assessors and supervisors with low scores were either retrained or not allowed to collect data. Also, sampling designs appropriately considered analytical goals, such as expected precision of subpopulation estimates, and the geographical distribution of schools and the population of students. In some countries, the sampling design also included information about languages. We also generally found that the contractor appropriately calculated country-level estimates based on the complex sample design after assessment data were collected.

In three of four countries that used the EGRA, data were collected electronically on tablets and regularly transmitted to contractor headquarters for review (see fig. 11). Data were reviewed on a timely basis so that any potential problems could be identified and corrected in the field. For example, if an assessor was consistently taking too little time administering a reading assessment, that assessor could be identified and retrained if necessary. One country using an EGRA, Ethiopia, collected data using paper questionnaires—a method with the potential for more errors than electronic data collection. However, certain data quality procedures were in place, such as requiring that a consultant verify all of the data entered.

[1]We used the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) *Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys* as criteria which represent long-established, generally accepted professional survey practices. Most of OMB's standards and guidelines are also reflected in USAID's *Guidance Notes for Planning and Implementing Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA)*.

Figure 11: Use of Electronic Tablet to Conduct Reading Assessment in Uganda

Source: U.S. Agency for International Development/ Uganda School Health and Reading Program. | GAO-15-479

One country where we conducted fieldwork, Peru, did not use an EGRA to collect reading assessment data but instead relied on reading comprehension scores from a national assessment administered by the Ministry of Education to all second graders. Ministry officials told us that certain safeguards are in place to protect the integrity of the data collected. For example, assessors attend training and must pass a test, and ministry officials supervise testing sites where the validity of previous results has been questioned. Ministry officials also told us that the current methodology had been in place since 2007 and asserted that year-to-year comparisons of test scores since 2007 were valid. Assessment scores are provided to each region and school, including those receiving basic education assistance, to track children's reading comprehension progress.

Appendix IV: Comments from the U.S. Agency for International Development

APR 24 2015

David Gootnick
Director
International Affairs and Trade
U.S. Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Gootnick:

I am pleased to provide USAID's formal response to the Government Accountability Office (GAO) draft report entitled "INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ASSISTANCE: USAID Has Implemented Primary Grade Reading Programs but Has Not Yet Measured Progress toward Its Strategic Goal" (GAO-15-479).

This letter, together with the enclosed USAID comments, is provided for incorporation as an appendix to the final report.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the GAO draft report and for the courtesies extended by your staff in the conduct of this audit review.

Sincerely,

Angelique M. Crumbly
Assistant Administrator
Bureau for Management
U.S. Agency for International Development

Enclosure: a/s

USAID COMMENTS ON GAO DRAFT REPORT
No. GAO-15-479

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft report "INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ASSISTANCE: USAID Has Implemented Primary Grade Reading Programs but Has Not Yet Measured Progress toward Its Strategic Goal." The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) would like to offer the following comments on the main conclusions and recommendations of the draft audit report referenced above.

USAID is four years into the implementation of an education strategy that is unprecedented in its aspirational goal of improving the reading skills of 100 million children in primary grades. The Agency has carried out intensive work in order to shift and focus resources and investments on programming aligned with this goal. We have completed focused strategic planning exercises, evidence-based project designs, and procurement of activities. Missions have conducted extensive policy dialogues with host countries, developed new curricula, supported teacher training and coaching, developed and disseminated books and learning materials, and engaged communities on the path toward measurable improvements in reading. Through these activities we are building evidence, momentum, and host country commitment to address critical challenges within the education sector. Over the past four years, USAID has:

- Supported primary grade reading programs in 42 countries.
- Established over 100 newly designed or realigned reading projects.
- Collected data on student reading skills through the implementation of more than 100 baseline, midline, and endline assessments.
- Reached more than 30 million individual primary grade learners with evidence-based reading interventions and programs.
- Confirmed from data generated on our reading programs – like those in Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Mozambique, and Uganda – that children who started the school year unable to recognize letters and words are now developing foundational skills and moving toward becoming emergent readers.
- Found evidence that USAID reading programs – like those in Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Jordan, and Kenya – are measurably improving students' reading fluency and comprehension skills.

USAID has rightly focused on the profound challenge of improving reading skills for children in primary grades. We are confronting systemic issues that require long-term engagement and solutions. We are learning as we implement the strategy about our programs and interventions, our operations and management, and about strategy design itself. Across all three of these areas, timeframe is important. Our programs and interventions will take time to show impact, particularly given the extremely low levels of student learning in the schools and areas in which we are working. The design and start-up of new projects takes time, particularly in the complex

systems and environments in which USAID operates. We initially underestimated the magnitude of the global learning crisis, made clearer by the data we have collected, as well as the effort and the timeframe required to realign our education portfolio. We also overestimated the scale and results that are realistically achievable in a five-year timeframe. With that being said, we are proud of the progress that USAID has made in shifting our education portfolio to focus on the evidence-based design, implementation, and evaluation of programs oriented to the achievement of measurable improvements in reading. The GAO report captures both the progress and the challenges associated with implementing and managing such an ambitious strategy.

To help ensure that USAID reports a reliable estimate of the results of its efforts to achieve the goal of improving reading skills in 100 million children:

Recommendation 1: We recommend that the Acting USAID Administrator select a methodology for estimating the total numbers of children with improved reading skills as a result of exposure to primary grade reading programs.

Response: We agree with the GAO recommendation that USAID finalize a methodology to measure and report our Agency-level progress towards the primary grade reading goal of the USAID Education Strategy. This report has highlighted how USAID is pioneering an approach to education programming with an unprecedented focus on the measurement of learning outcomes. A principal challenge in this shift has been the need to develop altogether new frameworks for analyzing and aggregating the learning data generated through the country-level programs we support. USAID has been monitoring and measuring improvement through reading assessments at the country-level and project-level. It is the aggregation of this data across countries and languages to a single Agency-level indicator that poses such a complex challenge.

In 2012, through consultations with experts in the field of international education, USAID proposed an initial methodology for aggregating data. Recognizing the limitations of this methodology, we worked to identify an alternative. We are pleased to have identified a methodological framework that resolves technical shortcomings of the previous approach, and which we will use to measure progress towards our primary grade reading goal. As of the writing of this letter, there remains a crucial component of this methodology that requires further research and consultation before the methodology can be finalized.

We acknowledge the need to define a methodology quickly. At the same time, the Agency recognizes the importance of doing so in an evidence-based manner in order to ensure that our methodology, and by extension our representation of USAID's work under the Education Strategy, is technically credible. This requires that we allow sufficient time to vet and test the details of the methodology before formalizing a final approach. We believe that it is important to complete a number of steps prior to finalizing the methodology for an aggregate count: 1)

examine the technical and practical feasibility of all identified potential gain score approaches to select a single, preferred approach; 2) apply this preferred approach to a small set of country-level reading assessment datasets in order to determine a preferred sensitivity level; 3) document the full methodology, test on country-level reading assessment datasets, then solicit feedback on the full methodology from select stakeholders and technical experts; 4) adjust the methodology based on stakeholder feedback and apply to a broader set of projects; and 5) finalize the methodology and approach. These steps are necessary in order to ensure that the final methodology is credible and valid.

Recommendation 2: We recommend that the Acting USAID Administrator document a description of the selected methodology as well as the information necessary to evaluate the estimate (i.e., sampling designs, sample sizes, and modes of data collection) when reporting progress toward the reading goal.

Response: We agree with this recommendation. We will document a description of the selected methodology as well as the information necessary to evaluate the estimate when reporting progress toward the reading goal. The USAID Office of Education (E3/ED) is committed to an open and transparent approach to measuring and reporting our progress towards the primary grade reading goal of the USAID Education Strategy. This commitment is not limited to taking an open, consultative process to developing and documenting the selected methodology framework, but also extends to establishing the capacity to responsibly share descriptive information on the programs we support, learning assessment datasets and documentation, and the contribution of individual programs to the aggregate primary grade reading goal count. We believe this commitment brings with it a number of benefits including valuable stakeholder input into the methodology development process, enhanced credibility, and public understanding of the advantages and limitations of our approach. Open availability and accessibility of learning assessment datasets and project information will expand public use of USAID data to accelerate development of the field of knowledge surrounding early grade reading.

To improve USAID's ability to measure progress in achieving a quantitative reading goal in any future education strategy:

Recommendation 3: We recommend that the Acting USAID Administrator ensure that the future strategy includes targets that will allow USAID to monitor interim progress toward its goal in comparison with planned performance.

Response: We agree with this recommendation and that effective target setting, including the setting of metrics to monitor interim progress, is an important component of the results-based management approach utilized by USAID. As is evidenced by the gap between the initial target of 100 million learners with improved reading skills, and the 30 million learners reached by our

programs to date, USAID found it challenging to set realistic targets when shifting to a topline, Agency-level strategy goal measured by an indicator for which there is no precedent to serve as the basis for target setting. The learning gains achieved by any reading program depend on factors such as the contextual circumstances within which the program takes place, the elements of the design and implementation of programmatic interventions known to positively influence learning, and the partnerships engaged to complement, support and sustain these interventions.

USAID remains dedicated to the achievement of its ambitious goal of improving the reading skills of 100 million children in primary grades, and will continue to pursue that goal beyond the end of the Education Strategy in 2015. As we expand the body of knowledge surrounding the achievements of current projects, we will have a better basis for setting ambitious yet achievable country-level and project-level targets that will inform the timeframe for achievement of our Agency-level goal. The Agency is also committed to continuing to strengthen its monitoring and reporting frameworks for education, including the use of rigorous performance and impact evaluations. These factors combined will allow for an improved ability to report interim progress on the path to achieving our Agency-level primary grade reading goal.

Appendix V: GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

David B. Gootnick, (202) 512-3149 or gootnickd@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the individual named above, Michael Rohrback (Assistant Director), Howard Cott, Justin Fisher, Bradley Hunt, Jill Lacey, Reid Lowe, Grace Lui, and Michelle Serfass made significant contributions to this report.

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