



Global Learning Portal: Supporting Strong Collaborative Networks for Education Development Global Assets Evaluation

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FINAL REPORT

Supporting Strong Collaborative Networks for Education Development

**GLOBAL EVALUATION & MONITORING II
GEM II BPA Number EDH-E-00-08-00003-00**

Global Learning Portal | Global Assets Evaluation

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Executive Summary

GLP: Supporting Strong Collaborative Networks for Education Development

To help developing countries reach Education for All goals, USAID has invested in internet-based tools to spread ideas and energies across distances. Part of this experiment has been vested in the Global Learning Portal (GLP). From its advent in 2002, the GLP constituted an effort by USAID, through an alliance led by AED, to weave together networks of teachers, policymakers, schools, ministries, and, related educational groups to share information, enable constructive conversation among partners, and test models of collaboration. While there are certainly other internet sites set up to provide resources for developing-country education, few have pursued an active stance toward promoting communication among participants. This continues as a novel experiment in terms of an effective platform, the methods to attract users to it, and how to use it effectively to foster development in education.

With the GLP's funding cycle moving forward, USAID faces decisions about whether to continue supporting pan-development efforts in support of collaboration, or whether new efforts started from scratch or individual, project-based marketplace resources would better serve the Agency's push to promote better coordination of resources and promote collaboration. This formative evaluation was commissioned to provide fresh perspective and concrete, realistic recommendations to both USAID and the GLP for moving forward. The evaluation team was asked to focus most specifically on the last 3 years of GLP work – 2006 through early 2009. The evaluation team worked in partnership with the GLP and USAID to identify stakeholders, example projects, and potential programs and activities that could illuminate aspects of the GLP's work that have gone well and others where additional attention or new efforts might be warranted. The evaluation team conducted dozens of interviews with staff from projects, USAID, and other multilateral and bilateral stakeholders; conducted field studies in three African countries and in Afghanistan, surveyed participants in a large-scale education policy discussion held via the GLP; and conducted technical reviews of the GLP site. The main findings and recommendations follow.

Summary of GLP Evolution and Accomplishments

Since its advent in 2002, the Global Learning Portal has gone through a number of technical and approach methods, establishing more than 100 different networking support platforms projects, archives, and communities while upgrading its technical platform several times as portal technology has improved. The original concept seeking to link teachers from many different backgrounds, geographies, and languages fairly quickly moved to a more focused approach to assist dozens of education affinity groups with a collaborative platform. Other programs employed the GLP as a platform for preserving valuable information developed over the course of education projects; and more recently, the GLP has been adopted for use by existing education or development projects sponsored by others outside USAID, including the US State Department and the Middle East Partnership Initiative. Broad donor support was always a goal of the GLP, but it has had to show its worth before moving beyond USAID to other sponsors. In all, thousands of participants have interacted through the GLP.

More fertile and dynamic experiments have been tried within the last two years, including direct project support for the Afghanistan Higher Education Project and to a medium-scale infrastructure and networking initiative in Zambia, both aimed at strengthening teacher education by encouraging the sharing of materials and ideas.

The latest and most hands-on initiative is the implementation of the Rwanda Education Commons, a pilot program for the Africa Education Commons, which seeks to identify teacher educational needs (primarily but not exclusively around the use of ICT) and to bring together the appropriate organizational stakeholders to solve those needs in a coordinated fashion. The GLP's on-the-ground organization has already started building meaningful networks among stakeholder organizations, and lessons from earlier field projects provide actionable areas for improvement as internet-based tools are brought on to assist communication.

Away from the field, the GLP has also developed expertise in promoting online policy discussions within USAID and across partner organizations internationally. A follow-up survey to a recent large-scale discussion forum on education strategy revealed widespread enthusiasm for online discussions generally and support for the GLP's discussion platform specifically.

Findings, Lessons Learned, and Recommendations

The evaluation team focused on the Afghan, Zambia, and Rwanda work, as well as on the USAID and policy-maker engagement through the visioning exercise USAID conducted in early 2009. Through these investigations the team found a number of broad findings and lessons learned leading to concrete recommendations for both the GLP team and for USAID, pertaining to:

1. What it takes to build participation and engagement in collaboration through the Web;
2. Strategies for sustaining and cultivating field engagement with GLP;
3. Implications for GLP site and tool design, based on the above; and
4. What it is likely to take to build donor support for GLP.

These are described briefly below.

1. Building partnership and engagement through the Web – Visualizing ‘success’

Users readily grasp the broad outlines of how collaboration and resource-sharing can be beneficial, but translating these into meaningful benefits and expectations is not so obvious. They have to see how collaboration can serve them in a real way; and that it is a continuing process, not a one time thing; they also need to understand what it takes to make it useful. To make this happen, GLP support activities need to confront the challenge of developing a strategy which brings together a team approach that harnesses GLP's technical proficiency in the web platform, along with technical competence in technical assistance in ways which not only trains users but helps them function as part of a community of users, and local knowledge for both how to mobilize and cultivate users in the local context, and how to showcase tangible and meaningful results from their use. Effective use of GLP is really a dynamic, ongoing partnership process between implementation owners and the GLP. A

signal learning from the successes of the Afghan HEP project experience to date, is that GLP support activities have to be set about intentionally, melding education, social, and technical objectives into a process that yields visible and tangible benefits for, as well as beyond, the immediate users. To these ends we recommend that GLP:

- work with individuals, related projects, and participating or sponsoring institutions to identify specific and tangible benefits from collaboration and sharing; and show-case these benefits (as well as how they were developed) on both the community site in question and on the general GLP site;
- identify long-term sponsors (such as ministries) and work with their staff to build support for, and identify organizational benefits from, using collaborative tools such as portals; to clearly articulate strategies for implementation, and progress monitoring, and to explore longer term expansion to include a broader stakeholder pool;
- provide ways of publicizing and disseminating shared expectations, benefits, and outcomes at the local network level and, if appropriate, on the central GLP.net site.

2. Sustain and cultivate field engagement – Mobilizing and recognizing success

The GLP cannot establish and nurture productive field networks from its offices in Washington. As seen through field studies, having ground-level staff or partners to nurture a network and monitor its progress is critical. In Afghanistan the field project has provided a strong and consistent presence for nurturing use of the Higher Education Portal, with the result that several hundred faculty use the HE portal with some regularity. In other places, however, where the benefits were perhaps less understood and the GLP had less support, the use of it foundered. To help realize the range of benefits for development in country, then, the GLP (and USAID Missions, as applicable) should:

- identify synergistic partnerships with funded projects that could take advantage of the GLP’s collaboration and communications tools, and which in turn could provide the GLP with field-level assistance in training, monitoring, and network support;
- identify and support enthusiastic champions from within network participants who can help jumpstart use of a portal, evangelize its use, and help identify participant issues that need to be addressed; across institutions, such champions can help to create a strong initial human network;
- Actively search for existing local associations and partnerships that could benefit from GLP’s networking tools and provide collaboration synergies. For example, in Kenya, the Elimu Yetu Coalition of education stakeholders presents a ready opportunity for providing tools to an existing network (while planting the seed of a possible Kenya Education Commons) – they could be engaged as part of an advisory group to the existing GLP community; to help all stakeholders understand better what collaboration means and can achieve.

If potential benefits from sharing and collaboration are real and observable, appropriate tools for measuring progress should help address the questions – How does this help me? Should I really spend time on this, or is it just a frill, or something for someone else? Field studies found that some users were afraid this may be a ‘one time thing’; that what it could

accomplish was not well articulated, and that even while it was obvious how resources could be better coordinated using GLP, users did not necessarily see something so practical as possible. To these ends the GLP should:

- provide more in-depth initial and follow-up training on basic tool or platform use, and on methods for using resources effectively, working with project staff, and specifically tailored to local concerns;
- develop monitoring tools to measure progress toward outcomes, with the use of local staff, and with follow-up measures if progress flags;
- provide individuals with ways of providing immediate feedback on processes (such as discussions) and resources.

3. Implications for GLP site design, based on the above – Make it ‘easy as pie’

While participants have expressed general satisfaction with GLP portal implementations, many have said they would like more control over the environment and a more powerful set of tools for putting together and presenting information. In current implementations of GLP portals, regular participants are restricted to uploading documents or making comments on discussion threads; only technical administrators are able to put up web pages or similar. Further, lessons learned, how-tos, and common resources need to be available across networks. The GLP should help “collaboration managers” and participants to:

- contribute meaningfully – through developing a more robust toolset so that participants are motivated to create their own content areas (web pages, photo or video galleries, etc.) using templates or similar modules;
- engage in a way that makes collaboration easy – through providing social networking capabilities that will allow participants to invite others to join subgroups and collaborate in a more personal fashion;
- be efficient – by providing tools and methods for organizing information so that it’s easy to find, both within a network and across networks;

4. What it will take to build donor and other support for GLP – Answering “why GLP?”

Collaboration should be seen as an experimental, living process that itself is shared. Saying “collaborate” isn’t enough. Potential participants are likely to first think of the GLP as equivalent to any other tool they have, and not understand what it can do. Participants need illustrative examples of how using GLP can or does actually contribute to bottom-line goals; and then how to go about sharing resources, structuring on-line discussions, training newcomers, building content pages, or seeking additional resources to sustain a network and its infrastructure. Participating individuals and organizations also need to know what works and what doesn’t, and how other groups have adopted and adapted materials or processes. The GLP’s central website, GLP.net, is the obvious place to host this cross-network compendium. The GLP should:

- identify successes at large – what it has helped groups do and achieve, and what this has meant;

- provide more in-depth how-tos – provide examples or frameworks for how to structure and moderate online discussions, to organize resources, or to adapt and use monitoring tools; show what works and what does not; show how to sustain collaborative links beyond one-off activities and to handle expectations from users on next steps once an ‘event’ ends;
- provide briefings and status reports: USAID, GLP partners, and key development allies want to know what is working well and what needs improvement, and how to help reach some bottom line goals and objectives. Periodic sharing and strategizing on both the good and the bad, via GLP.net, through webinars, or through meetings or workshops, can help improve coordination and collaboration while bringing in new partners.
- focus beyond collaboration on specific community interests – for example, seek new ways of helping Missions meet their strategic objectives and to help Ministries work on specific issues they want addressed.
- build networks of networks (most obviously web of in- and cross-country connections that will become the Africa Education Commons) by promoting sharing across networks through a central site; actively seek content from other projects or initiatives that might be shared either within or across networks, and draw in new stakeholders.

The GLP has gotten considerable traction from partnering with other AED or USG-funded projects, but it has had considerably less success in promoting itself to other bilateral or multilateral donors. Part of this is due, quite reasonably, to the experimental nature of the initiative, especially given the infrastructure context in most cases. This situation is expected to change significantly in the next few years as more least-developed countries become better wired and cell phone capabilities continue to grow. USAID can be instrumental in helping the GLP broaden its “ownership” base while leveraging its considerable investment into the future. The GLP and USAID should jointly:

- identify and pursue partnerships with a range of field-level implementers, where the partner has objectives and ground-level resources that complement each other, to help assure success. (For example, in Zambia, at this point, it’s possible that both AED’s Equip2 project and EDC’s QUESTT distance education project, could provide mutual assistance to furthering the objectives for collaboration and education development. This might be an useful partnership to explore to enlarge the GLP reach and resources.)
- seek competent local partners that may more easily attract support from other donor countries;
- hold briefings for country donor or multilateral groups, highlighting field successes and inviting participation; Missions may be able to identify opportunities for collaborations supportable by other donors;
- conduct organizational audits to find and fill staffing gaps. What does the GLP need to do to achieve excellence, and can USAID provide or help identify resources to fund staffing needs?

Conclusions of the Evaluation

GLP is really more than a learning portal, it is (or could be) a tool for collaboration and coordination that can connect policy and decision makers with each other as well as with local teachers and even parents or students. It needs to be recognized as such, then staffed and operated to promote this potential. The GLP's understanding of how to create and nurture collaborative networks is growing with each project it takes on. The great challenge of the GLP-implemented Rwanda Education Commons will be to dispassionately examine the pros and cons of past efforts and then enthusiastically apply those lessons to the new context. The stakes for the GLP are high, but the consequences for Rwanda and other countries aggressively addressing educational issues are much greater. The evaluation team is optimistic that lessons from the past will make efforts going forward much stronger.

USAID has taken up a difficult GLP support role not always lauded either internally or from without, but the basic premise pertains: the internet or something very much like it is coming to Africa, and using it may be one of the best ways of jumping over geographical and physical difficulties that have impeded education in the past. Figuring out how to support human networks with ICT and internet-based tools is not a trivial undertaking and requires patience. USAID can actively engage with the GLP to get the most out of the effort while encouraging other donors and stakeholder groups to link up with ideas, effort, and financial support. The GLP can make this task easier by providing demonstrable field successes.