Ministry of Education Officials and RSC-EGR staff discussing Early Grade Reading and School Management and Effectiveness Survey results during a workshop in April 2017.
PROJECT META REPORT

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<td>Early Grade Reading Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICA</td>
<td>Institutional Capacity Assessment</td>
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<td>MOE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
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<td>ORF</td>
<td>Oral Reading Fluency</td>
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<td>PED</td>
<td>Provincial Education Directorates</td>
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<td>PPP</td>
<td>Public Private Partnership</td>
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<td>Resources, Skills and Capacities in Early Grade Reading in Afghanistan</td>
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<td>SMES</td>
<td>School Management Effectiveness and Safety</td>
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INTRODUCTION

USAID is working with the Ministry of Education (MOE) to increase and improve research and programming aimed to increase student performance in early grade reading. Resources, Skills and Capacities in Early Grade Reading (RSC-EGR) is a 23 month, USAID funded project, designed to collect data and information which will provide the basis for broader discussion about challenges in early grade reading, and to shape the design and implementation of interventions to improve early grade reading.

Over the course of the project, RSC-EGR administered a national Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) of second and fourth grade students; conducted a study of School Management Effectiveness and Safety (SMES) that yields additional information on the factors affecting reading performance in Afghanistan at the second and fourth grade levels; conducted observations of reading instruction in grade two and four classrooms; assessed early grade reading materials and established an inventory of the reading materials; assessed the MOE’s essential departments’ capacity to implement early grade reading reform initiatives and conducted an assessment of the potential of education public-private partnerships to support reading activities.

A key aim of the RSC-EGR project is to build the MOE’s capacity in conducting assessments related to early grade reading and in particular in EGRA and SMES administration. Therefore, opportunities to build MOE’s capacity were integrated into all stages of the assessments, including tool identification and adaptation, piloting, revising, and administration in the field. Three working groups, namely Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) working group, Reading Materials Assessment (RMA) working group, and Institutional Capacity Assessment (ICA) working group, were created to work alongside the four major components of the project. These groups consisted of members from several departments and divisions of the MOE, including the Curriculum Department, Teacher Education Department, Academic Council, General Education, Academic Supervision, Planning Department and Social Mobiliza. Being the first of its kind, one of the key successes of the RSC-EGR project thus far is the continuous and in depth engagement with the MOE working group members who have served as key decision makers and thought leaders throughout the assessments.

This report is to provide insight into the process of working hand-in-hand with MOE, describing the different phases of consultation, data collection and analysis to conduct research pertinent to early grade reading reform. This report will emphasize lessons learned through these stages for future efforts to collect data on the quality of early
grade reading instruction and on the capacity of the MOE to deliver high-quality services in early grade reading.

SECTION I

RSC-EGR COMPONENTS

EARLY GRADE READING ASSESSMENT

The EGRA assessment was administered between April and August 2016 to over 19,000 students in grades two and four in 1,265 schools across 35 provinces of Afghanistan. Students were assessed in one of two languages, Dari or Pashto, based on the language of instruction in their schools and classroom. The EGRA assessment was administered on tablets, utilizing a customized Tangerine platform, an open-source electronic data collection system specifically designed for administering the EGRA. The purpose of the assessment was to answer three research questions, 1) what are grade 2 and grade 4 students’ reading skills, 2) how do students’ reading (EGRA) scores vary by student characteristics, type of school and teacher characteristics, 3) what other contextual factors or school level conditions impact student reading performance.

With assistance from MOE EGRA working group, EGRA was adapted to the Afghan context focusing on reading skills that children should acquire by the end of second and fourth grade. Students were tested in six competencies namely: 1) Phonemic awareness 2) Letter sound identification 3) Invented word or non-word reading 4) Oral reading fluency (ORF) 5) Reading comprehension and 6) Listening comprehension.

SCHOOL MANAGEMENT AND EFFECTIVENESS SURVEY (SMES)

The SMES assessment was administered along with the EGRA assessment between April and August 2016 to the same population of students and schools where EGRA was implemented. The SMES is designed to give a snapshot of the schools’ conditions and examine how key school-level factors can affect children’s performance in reading. The package consisted of interviews with students who participated in EGRA, grades 2 and 4 teachers, school principals, parents/shura members and school inventory checklist, all designed to measure key attributes of reading instruction such as teacher qualifications, availability of reading materials to students, as well as factors associated with conflict, and vulnerability to natural or human-made disasters.
To ensure cultural appropriateness and alignment of the tools with USAID and MOE priorities, the SMES tools were adapted to the Afghan context with assistance from the MOE EGRA working group. The SMES assessment consisted of five tools namely; 1) Student questionnaire 2) Teacher questionnaire 3) Principal questionnaire 4) School Inventory and 5) Parent/Shura questionnaire.

**READING MATERIALS ASSESSMENT**

The aim of this component was to collect and assess early grade reading materials and establish an inventory of these materials. With assistance from the MOE Reading Materials Assessment (RMA) working group, the RSC-EGR project was able to collect and assess 1,688 early grade reading materials out of which 1,042 were determined to be appropriate for early grades and therefore included in the inventory database created by the project. These materials were collected from NGOs, donors, publishers and from some private schools.

**INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY ASSESSMENT**

The RSC-EGR project conducted an assessment of the capacity of essential MOE departments and divisions to implement an evidence-based and conflict sensitive nationwide early grade reading program. The assessment focused on examining the current capacity of MOE in key areas considered as pre-requisites for improving early grade reading. The areas included examining the MOE’s policy commitment to improve early grade reading and capacity of MOE institutions to plan, manage, and evaluate their contributions to early grade reading reform programs.

The capacity of MOE was assessed at both the central and provincial levels. At the central level it included an assessment of the Teacher Education, Curriculum, Academic Council, Academic Supervision, General Education, and Planning Departments and at the provincial level it included a capacity assessment of Provincial Education Directorates (PEDs).

The ICA assessment provides an image of the MOE units’ capacity to effectively deliver an early grade reading reform program and identifies the key policy, resources, capacity opportunities, and gaps at MOE central and provincial levels. The assessment applied the USAID ICA tool to conduct the assessment on the MOE’s capacity to implement early grade reading reform programs.

**ASSESSMENT OF THE POTENTIAL FOR PUBLIC PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS**

From August through October 2016, the RSC-EGR project conducted an assessment of the potential to form partnerships between the public and private sectors to support early grade reading initiatives in the country. The Public Private Partnership (PPP)
assessment measured the interest and willingness of companies and universities to partner with the government, with schools and with civil society organizations to improve reading in primary grades, as well as the level of interest in the public sector for the development of education public-private partnerships. The PPP assessment also sought to collect information on what ways and to what scale companies would consider providing support to improve early grade reading.

To share the PPP concept with private companies and to collect their opinions, the project conducted 5 conferences in Kabul, Balkh, Herat, Nangarhar and Bamyan. Individual interviews and focus group discussions were also held with companies, including four mobile companies, universities, non-governmental organizations and MOE 11 directors. The MOE EGRA, RMA and ICA working group members were consulted on the design and adaptation of the PPP survey tools and administration.

SECTION 2
ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The RSC-EGR project was designed in consultation with MOE senior leadership. Some early thoughts about the project were shared with the Minister of Education in late 2013 which resulted in further consultations and some changes in the project design. The third National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) commits the MOE to improve early grade reading skills in the country. The role of the MOE departments and, in particular, of the Planning department was key to the design process.

The assessment of second and fourth grade students in reading competencies, assessment of supplementary reading materials, assessment of MOE capacity to implement early grade reading reform programs, and assessment of the potential of education public-private partnerships to support early grade reading made the four major components of the RSC-EGR project. Results of these assessments are interrelated, providing a solid foundation for the design and implementation of early grade reading reform programs.

The RSC-EGR implementation also involved certain level of consultations with the MOE leadership to get their buy in and support in the creation of working groups comprising of MOE working level specialists. Specialists were introduced by the MOE depending on their particular area of expertise. Members from General Education, Academic Council, Academic Supervision, Teacher Education, Curriculum, Planning and Social Mobilization departments were included in the working groups. These groups have been working hand in hand with the RSC-EGR project since the beginning of the project.
Drawing on the key aim of the RSC-EGR project to build the MOE’s capacity, opportunities to build this capacity were integrated into all stages of the RSC-EGR project, including tool identification and adaptation, piloting and revising the tools, and data collection in the field. MOE working groups were also involved in the EGRA and SMES data analysis. However their participation in analyzing the data of the ICA and PPP assessments was minimal.

**CONSULTATION, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OF EGRA AND SMES**

**MOE ENGAGEMENT**

The EGRA working group established at the national level consisted of 10 members from MOE departments and divisions including the Curriculum department, Teacher Education department, Academic Council, General Education, Academic Supervision and Social Mobilization. With support from the RSC-EGR project, the EGRA working group members adapted and designed EGRA and SMES assessment tools, piloted and refined tools and implementation methodologies, as well as acted as co-facilitators and Master Trainers along with RSI, the local data collection firm, during assessor training workshops.

**TOOL DEVELOPMENT**

The EGRA tools were developed by the RSC-EGR project in close collaboration with the MOE EGRA working group to measure core reading skills. Drawing on previous EGRAs both within and outside of Afghanistan, EGRA tools were developed in Dari and Pashto during an 8-day EGRA adaptation workshop held in November 2015, led by School to School (STS), a US organization providing technical assistance to the project. The Dari and Pashto EGRA assessments were then piloted in 40 schools across 6 provinces by the MOE EGRA working group and with Master Trainers from Rahman Safi International (RSI) in February 2016 and revised and finalized in March by RSC-EGR and by the EGRA working group prior to operational data collection. The same tool was administered to both second and fourth grade students.

In order to develop the SMES tools, RSC-EGR staff, with support from STS, worked with the MOE EGRA working group to identify topics that the SMES tools would examine—including school environment, parental support at home for reading, student engagement and wellbeing, and school support for reading. Drawing from the USAID EdData Snapshot of School Management Effectiveness (SSME) tool kit, the MOE EGRA working group drafted a set of tools including a student questionnaire, principal/head teacher questionnaire, teacher questionnaire, parent and /or Shura member survey, and a school inventory checklist. The SMES tools were reviewed and refined by the RSC-
EGR staff and STS, then piloted in the same 40 schools as the EGRA in February 2016 and revised prior to the operational data collection.

DATA COLLECTION

The PEDs at provincial level played a key role in enabling the project to conduct EGRA and SMES data collection throughout Afghanistan including some of the more remote and insecure regions, provinces and districts from April 11th to August 21st 2016. In total, 87 out of the 196 EGRA and SMES assessors were PED personnel from 24 of Afghanistan’s 35 provinces (including Kabul city). These assessors were trained along with the RSI assessors by the RSC-EGR EGRA team, the RSI Master Trainers and MOE EGRA working group members who served as co facilitators. The assessors were trained in three rounds (each for ten days) due to the large number of schools and assessors needed to complete the data collection. The data collection also occurred in three rounds in warm and cold climate schools subsequent to the assessors’ training.

It is worth mentioning that prior to the assessors’ training, a 10-day TOT training workshop was conducted by the RSC-EGR EGRA team in December 2015 to train the RSI Master Trainers and EGRA working group members to conduct the assessors’ training.

The EGRA and SMES questionnaires were administered on tablets, utilizing a customized Tangerine platform, an open-source electronic data collection system specifically designed for administering the EGRA. In schools located in highly insecure areas, paper tools were utilized to administer EGRA and SMES questionnaires to reduce the profile of the assessment teams. The MOE assessors’ direct engagement in data collection not only provided them with hands on experience in administering and supervising EGRA and SMES, but also gave them an in depth understanding of how EGRA and SMES are administered, and the quality of the data they can produce.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The data analyses were conducted by STS using SPSS and STATA software. The EGRA and SMES preliminary results were presented to MOE and stakeholders during a 5 day workshop in October 2016. The fourth day of this workshop was dedicated to training the MOE EGRA working group on basic statistical concepts and tests. The workshop provided an overview of statistical concepts and theory utilized in EGRA analysis as well as exercises for participants to practice using some of these concepts, including types of variables, descriptive analyses, distributions and use of t-tests to compare means. After presenting a series of slides to explain the concepts highlighted above, participants practiced two statistical procedures in Excel: running descriptive statistics and
conducted a t-test analysis. The participants had the opportunity to use laptops loaded with the Analysis Toolpack (a Microsoft Excel Add-in program) provided by the RSC-EGR project.

In addition, on the fifth and final day of the validation workshop, STS and RSC-EGR led a session on interpreting the data with MOE EGRA working group members. In this session, the group discussed what can be learned from EGRA data, including the type of broad recommendations EGRA results can help inform (for example, avenues for further research, program design, or policy options). Furthermore, the group conducted an exercise exploring what type of interpretations and recommendations can and cannot be supported given the EGRA results. This session was particularly useful in helping to build the MOE’s understanding of how to utilize the data and results from the EGRA and SMES survey in the future.

CONSULTATION, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY ASSESSMENT

MOE ENGAGEMENT

The RSC-EGR project conducted an assessment of the MOE’s capacity to implement early grade reading reform initiatives. Given the sensitive nature of the assignment, the RSC-EGR project built the necessary relationship with the MOE to accomplish the task in a collegial manner and spirit of partnership. A Steering Committee was created for the overall conduct of the ICA, comprising of representatives at the deputy and directorate level from Planning, General Education, Curriculum, Academic Supervision, Academic Council and Teacher Education. The committee approved the terms of reference for the ICA component and were briefed on the work progress in various meetings. Although the terms of reference related to an institutional assessment, the steering committee requested that individual capacity assessment should be considered too with the purpose of supporting the MOE to identify capacity gaps at the individual level. The steering committee was involved in all stages of the ICA assessment including document analysis, tool development, piloting and refinement, data collection and analysis.

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Stage 1 of the analysis – the policy framework - consisted mainly of document analysis. Most evidence was drawn from two documents with the most up to date information: the Education for All Report (EFA, 2015) and the Education Joint Sector Review Report (EJSR, 2015). The National Education Strategic Plan (NESP 3) was also consulted. Other documents were too out of date to provide a realistic picture.

INTERVIEWS
The target groups of the assessment were the key actors and leaders in the MOE. At central level this included six directorates: planning, curriculum, academic supervision, academic council, general education and teacher education. At the provincial level the target group was heads of the provincial education directorates (PED) and four divisions: planning, academic supervision, general education and teacher education. Ten provinces were selected for field visits (Balkh, Bamyan, Kandahar, Herat, Nangarhar, Parwan, Panjshir, Badakhshan, Logar and Kapisa) with the criterion being that the project technical team could get security clearance to travel.

IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS

All people with relevant responsibilities to early grade reading reforms and holding influential positions within the MOE were interviewed. Actual selection of who would be interviewed in which divisions was done by each division director and by a Working Group within the Steering Committee. These officials also participated in the assessments at the central and provincial levels along with the project technical team.

Out of a potential 419 staff members, a total of 255 (60%) were interviewed in person. All, except one contract employee in Parwan, were staff in the tashkeel (establishment). 164 (40%) were not available for interview because they were away from their posts at the time, including travelling for monitoring and supervision purposes. As a 40% non-response rate is high, the results of the assessment need to be interpreted with caution and it cannot be assumed that those interviewed are representative of the whole.

Two types of in-person interviews were conducted:

- Individual and small group interviews with 79 out of a potential 83 leaders at central and provincial level (General Directors, Deputy Directors, heads of finance and heads of procurement. This group was interviewed using the Leader Interview questionnaire (Annex 2)
- Individual interviews with 150 out of a potential 302 key staff using the survey instrument (Annex 4)

TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

Because only ten provinces could be visited in person, mobile phone interviews were conducted with Provincial Education Directors in order to give all Directors an opportunity to comment on key topics. The question guide (Annex 3) was constructed as a satisfaction survey oriented to getting opinions related to the five Ts. Opinions, rather than factual responses were sought in recognition of likely reluctance to speak freely about potentially sensitive subjects and because factual data can be highly unreliable. Many calls were made (up to 10) to get the best possible response rate. At 26 out of 34 (76%) the response was excellent, considering the pressures these leaders face. Of the nine who did not respond, some excused themselves due to tight working schedules (Logar and Nangarhar), some did not respond to calls (Herat, Badakhshan and Balkh) and some phones were always turned off (Uruzgan, Sar-e-Pul and Takhar).
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

Focus group interviews were conducted with the Working Groups established under the project: EGRA Working Group (6 members); Reading Materials Assessment Group (10 members). They were also conducted with Chemonics technical staff and with three Regional Coordinators. After exploring capacity that had been developed at individual level, the focus question was whether this was being institutionalized and, if not, what the barriers were.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data was collected in questionnaires by the project technical team and members of the working group. This was then entered into a database in quantitative form. The questions were constructed to elicit a response which could then be graded by the interviewers in five categories: very satisfactory, satisfactory, unsatisfactory, and very unsatisfactory and didn’t know the answer. However, as the criteria for judgement had not been clearly specified, various challenges arose in interpreting the responses. When the questionnaires were checked individually in order to analyze the qualitative data, it was found that the interviewers had mainly simply graded the response rather than recording the detail of the response. This meant that the data was not necessarily reliable. So, when analyzing the data, in order to increase reliability the five categories were reduced to two: satisfactory and unsatisfactory. This had the disadvantage of not being able to recognize excellence or very poor performance but it also removed distinctions that, in practice, were subjective and possibly arbitrary. A second data analysis challenge relates to validity. Because 40% of the sample were not available for interview it is possible that the responses of the 60% interviewed are not representative of the whole. Since the total population that should have been interviewed is of a little over 400 people, and assuming that the population is homogeneous, the number of people interviewed well represent the total population adequately.

Construction and analysis of the PED phone interviews took account of these limitations and can be considered more reliable.

SECTION 3

RECOMMENDATIONS AND
LESSON LEARNED

1 Reliability means that, if another survey was done by different interviewers, the judgements would be the same. Validity means that the judgment corresponds realistically to the actual situation.
The working group concluded that most of the early grade reading materials collected were developed without coordination with the MOE Curriculum Department and publishers. This did not ensure that these materials were supportive of reading skills of primary grades’ students. To solve the problem and ensure the quality of these reading materials, the working group recommended that the Curriculum Department to establish an Editorial Team with members from various departments to manage the coordination between the MOE and publishers.

The working group found that Afghan children faced a lack of decodable and very simple books. They recommended the Curriculum Department and other publishers produce a number of high quality decodable books for Pre School and grades 1 and 2.

The working group members were concerned about professionally teaching these materials. As such, they recommended that the Teacher Education Department include a two-day training for primary grades’ teachers on best practices for teaching reading materials, and for the Academic Supervision Department to monitor these trainings and teaching processes of the reading materials in primary grades.

RSC-EGR did not collect and evaluate audio and visual materials. It is recommended that the Curriculum Department, using and adapting the criteria developed by the RMA working group members, evaluate this kind of material and upload them to the data base.

RSC-EGR highly recommends establishing “reading labs” at the provincial and district levels. These labs should contain materials for children to practice reading and should be open for teachers to do reading activities with their students.

An MOU should be signed with MOE at the inception of future projects. The MOU should elaborate the roles and responsibilities of the partners on how to collaborate over the course of the project.

Provision of regular updates to MOE on the work progress is key to the smooth delivery of the project especially in conducting assessments of student learning outcomes where the project would need the MOE by its side to plan, conduct, and publicize the results.

MOE should introduce staff with relevant expertise to actively take part in more complex tasks such as sampling, data analysis and reporting. This will also provide an opportunity for the MOE experts to evolve, develop a sense of ownership for the project, identify opportunities and gaps, embrace the assessment results and act upon them.

To institutionalize knowledge and skills, the MOE Learning Assessment Unit should be involved in the future assessments of students’ learning outcomes.