

**SUBMISSION TO THE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY:
REVIEWING THE STATE OF FOUNDATIONAL LITERACY AND NUMERACY LEVELS
IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

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1. Background

1.1 About ActionAid

ActionAid Zambia (AAZ) is a part of the ActionAid Global (AAG) Federation, sharing common values and aims to drive social change towards a just, equitable, and sustainable world. The ActionAid Federation builds the active agency of people living in poverty, their organisations, and movements, to address the structural causes of social injustice, gender inequality, and poverty. This is in line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which have identified the importance of addressing poverty and inequality.

1.2 Vision

Our vision is to have a just, equitable, and sustainable Zambia in which every person enjoys freedom from poverty and oppression for the enjoyment of their right to a life of dignity.

1.3 Mission

Our mission is to promote social justice, gender equality & poverty eradication for the people living in poverty, exclusion, and marginalised in society by working with the people living in poverty, their communities, organisations, activists & social movements for a just, sustainable Zambia.

2. Introduction

Primary education has historically been the foundation for formal education in Zambia. This submission examines the state of foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) in Zambia's primary schools within the context of recent education sector reforms. Increased investment in early childhood education and the implementation of the Free Education Policy have expanded access and participation at the primary level. The analysis draws on national policy frameworks, administrative data, and learning assessment evidence to assess learning outcomes, equity, and system capacity in support of parliamentary oversight.

2.1 Policy Framework

Globally, the Sustainable Development Goal number four (SDG4) has been the standard for all United Nations Member states and has informed long term development plans for quality and accessible education for all.¹ The 2022 Transforming Education Summit (TES) was the first global summit dedicated exclusively to education and served as a platform for countries to take stock of progress towards SDG 4, address learning losses exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and renew political commitment to education reform. Through national statements and transformation pathways, governments committed to prioritising foundational learning, strengthen education financing, and improve accountability and system resilience.²

The Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 2016-2025)³ and the recently launched CESA 2026-2035 strongly emphasises foundational learning, integrating it as a core focus under its Basic Education strategic area, aiming for quality early childhood development, literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills. This is supported by a new Continental Foundational Learning Monitoring Framework (FLN) to eradicate learning poverty by 2035 through harmonised indicators and data-driven action.⁴

At the national level, education policy in Zambia is guided by the Eighth National Development Plan (8NDP), which prioritises human capital development, improved

¹ SDG4 <https://globalgoals.org/goals/4-quality-education/>

² Transforming Education Summit (TES) Calls to Action <https://www.un.org/en/transforming-education-summit/calls-to-action>

³ Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025 <https://ecosocc.au.int/sites/default/files/files/2021-09/continental-strategy-education-africa-english.pdf>

⁴ African Union [https://au.int/en/newsevents/20251125/development-african-continental-foundational-learning-monitoring-framework#:~:text=26%E2%80%9335\).-The%20launch%20of%20the%20Continental%20Education%20Strategy%20for%20Africa%20\(CESA,Union%20Commission%20and%20its%20Partners](https://au.int/en/newsevents/20251125/development-african-continental-foundational-learning-monitoring-framework#:~:text=26%E2%80%9335).-The%20launch%20of%20the%20Continental%20Education%20Strategy%20for%20Africa%20(CESA,Union%20Commission%20and%20its%20Partners)

learning outcomes, and reduced inequalities as foundations for sustainable economic growth.⁵ These priorities are operationalised through the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) 2022–2026, which focuses on expanding access while improving quality, relevance, and equity in education. The ESSP places foundational literacy and numeracy in the early grades at the centre of education reforms, recognising them as critical to progression and lifelong learning. Key strategies include teacher recruitment and deployment, curriculum implementation, provision of teaching and learning materials, and the use of learning assessment data to inform planning and accountability.⁶

2.2 Implementation Challenges and Opportunities

Zambia is struggling with major, interconnected problems that are aimed at the achievement of universal foundational literacy and numeracy. Continuous underfunding, which has increased due to the recent fall in the portion of the national budget in the education sector, has resulted in overcrowding in classes and insufficiency in infrastructure and provision of teaching and learning resources, particularly in the rural and the poor communities. Teacher shortages, particularly at ECE and the primary levels, undermine the impartation of basic skills, whereas the unequal distribution of skilled teachers further increases the urban-rural divide. Monitoring and evaluation systems are inadequate, which discourages the use of data to make decisions and accountability.

Learning poverty⁷ due to factors such as poverty, malnutrition, child labour and gender inequality is estimated at 99 percent for Zambia.⁸ Additionally there are still gender disparities whereby girls are not adequately supported in their health and safety, such as poor investments in sanitary towels and scrapping gender-based violence prevention grants.

Irrespective of these challenges, Zambia has several opportunities that it can exploit. Foundational learning has a good political commitment, which is outlined

⁵ 8th National Development Plan (2022-2026) [https://www.mofnp.gov.zm/?wpdmpo=8ndp-2022-2026&wpdmdl=6375&refresh=695e99e548a051767807461&ind=1662055711380&filename=8NDP%20\(2022-2026\).pdf](https://www.mofnp.gov.zm/?wpdmpo=8ndp-2022-2026&wpdmdl=6375&refresh=695e99e548a051767807461&ind=1662055711380&filename=8NDP%20(2022-2026).pdf)

⁶ Ministry of Education, Education Sector Strategic Plan 2022-2026 <https://www.edu.gov.zm/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/MOE-STARTEGIC-PLAN.pdf>

⁷ Learning poverty - the share of children not able to read and understand an age-appropriate text by age 10 (UNESCO definition).

⁸ World Bank (2022) Learning Poverty Brief <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099015407212261134/pdf/IDU0019a8830020fb04ac50afe000af64a523d7c.pdf>

by the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP), which is subject to review in 2026.⁹ The scalable models of better FLN delivery are proven by successful pilot projects and interventions supported by donors, and technological advances, such as mobile platforms and radio-based learning, could be used to fill the access gaps in the most inaccessible communities. Greater involvement of civil society, parents, and the local communities is also an opportunity that can create more inclusive and supportive learning environments.

2.3 Our Approach

This submission is based on ActionAid Zambia's (AAZ) work on gender responsive public service delivery in the education sector. AAZ and partners have a presence across all 10 provinces in Zambia. Through projects such as the Tax and Education (TaxEd) Alliance¹⁰, we have generated evidence that informs our recommendations for better service delivery in the education sector.

As guided, this memorandum covers the current levels of foundational literacy and numeracy in primary schools; how well teachers are trained and supported to teach for foundational literacy and numeracy effectively; the availability and quality of teaching and learning materials; urban-rural disparities in literacy and numeracy outcomes, as well as equitable provision of resources and the development of qualified teachers; challenges and opportunities; and recommendations for the way forward.

⁹ Ministry of Education, Education Sector Strategic Plan 2022-2026 <https://www.edu.gov.zm/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/MOE-STRATEGIC-PLAN.pdf>

¹⁰ Global Partnership For Education (GPE), TaxEd Alliance <https://educationoutloud.org/project/tax-and-education-alliance-taxed/>

3. Analysis

Based on the outline above, our analysis is as follows:

3.1. Current levels of foundational literacy and numeracy in primary schools

Zambia has made significant progress in expanding access to primary education, achieving near-universal enrolment following the introduction of the Free Education Policy in 2022. By 2024, the Gross Enrolment Rate at the primary level stood at 117 percent, and approximately 95 percent of learners completed the primary cycle. However, these access gains have not translated into commensurate learning outcomes. Primary school examination pass rates remain at 71 percent, indicating that a substantial number of learners complete primary education without acquiring adequate foundational literacy and numeracy skills.¹¹

Evidence compiled by the TaxEd Alliance shows that Zambia is facing a foundational learning crisis, where schooling is expanding faster than learning. National and international assessments consistently demonstrate that many learners struggle to read with comprehension or perform basic numeracy tasks appropriate to their grade level by the end of primary school. This learning deficit undermines progression to secondary education and limits learners' long-term social and economic opportunities.

The rapid increase in enrolment following the Free Education Policy has placed considerable strain on education system inputs, including teachers, classrooms, and learning materials. As a result, instructional quality has been diluted, particularly in early grades where literacy and numeracy foundations are established. Without targeted interventions to improve early-grade learning outcomes, Zambia risks entrenching a cycle of high completion but low proficiency.¹²

The state of fundamental skills acquisition among primary learners in Zambia remains so alarming that the 2018 Zambia Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) discovered that only 12% of Grade 2 pupils could read with comprehension in their local language, and only 6% demonstrated similar proficiency in English. Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA) indicated that only 15% of Grade 2 pupils were able to carry out basic mathematical operations suitable for their grade.¹³ The 2020 National Assessment Survey by the Examinations Council of Zambia (ECZ) reiterated these patterns, with nearly 60% of Grade 3 pupils being unable to read a simple

¹¹ Ministry of Education, Education Statistics Bulletin 2024 <https://www.edu.gov.zm/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Education-Statistics-Bulletin-2024.pdf>

¹² UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2024). Zambia education indicators. UIS. <https://www.uis.unesco.org/en/data/respository-education-indicator-reports>

¹³ USAID 2018 Zambia Early Grade Reading Assessment <https://shared.rti.org/content/national-assessment-survey-learning-achievement-grade-2-results-early-grade-reading-zambia>

passage or solve elementary math problems. The outcomes of these learning deficits are severe, with children unable to master FLN in early years having a higher chance of leaving school, repeating, or not achieving more sophisticated skills in adulthood. These consequences thwart the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 4 in Zambia, which involves inclusive and equitable quality education for every individual.

3.2. Teacher training and support for foundational literacy and numeracy

Teachers are the cornerstone of effective literacy and numeracy instruction, yet Zambia continues to face serious challenges related to teacher availability, deployment, and professional support. The national pupil-to-trained-teacher ratio at the primary level is 43:1, exceeding both the national and UN-recommended benchmark of 40:1. In approximately 24 percent of districts, pupil-to-teacher ratios exceed 80:1, reflecting acute shortages that are most severe in rural and remote areas.¹⁴

The training programmes of pre-service teachers usually do not pay sufficient attention to the early-grade pedagogy, to the inclusive teaching methods, and to the practicality of mother-tongue education. Policy-based in-service professional development is sporadic and does not always offer teachers the skills and support necessary to meet the specific learning challenges of foundational learning. The field experience is educative: in one example, Grade 1-3 teachers in a pilot programme in Eastern Province in 2021 were given specific FLN training and frequent mentoring by UNICEF. This programme was a significant improvement in reading comprehension 15%, and teacher confidence and motivation were observed.

Similarly, the 2012-2017 “Read to Succeed” (RTS) project funded by the USAID aimed at sustained professional growth, teacher mentoring, and the establishment of literacy-rich classrooms, bore much fruit in the form of reading gains on the early-grade levels. Although these have been successful, there are challenges. The deployment policies used by teachers usually lead to the posting of less experienced teachers in the rural and underserved regions where they receive little support and supervision. At the time, the insufficient teacher numbers, especially

¹⁴ UNICEF, Mills, Michelle, Teachers for All: A qualitative investigation into the 2022 mass recruitment and allocation of primary school teachers in Zambia, UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, Florence, February 2025 <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/reports/teachers-for-all-zambia>

in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) sector, degraded the implementation of robust learning bases.

At a time of austerity, teacher motivation and effectiveness are further undermined by low remuneration and wage bill constraints. Teachers earn between ZMW 3,790 and ZMW 6,570 per month, significantly below the estimated cost of living of ZMW 10,393 as of November 2024. Education International has documented how these conditions force teachers to seek secondary employment, reducing preparation time and classroom effectiveness, and making the profession less attractive to qualified candidates.¹⁵

3.3. Availability and quality of teaching and learning materials

Community case studies from Mbabala and Batoka in Southern Province show progress in access to essential learning resources. Schools in the Sichikali zone now have clean drinking water and desks in nearly all classrooms, creating healthier, more supportive environments for learners. However, quality challenges persist, linked to teacher training and curriculum implementation. Parents report that not all teachers are trained in the new curriculum and that some schools have not yet transitioned, forcing Grade 8 learners to compete for limited spaces and creating inequities in access to quality education.

These challenges are compounded by broader shortages of teaching and learning materials, particularly for early-grade literacy and numeracy, exacerbated by increased enrolment under the Free Education Policy. Textbooks, desks, and supplementary materials remain inadequate, especially in rural districts. Budget constraints worsen the situation: in 2024, 94 percent of the education budget went to recurrent expenditure, leaving only 6 percent for capital investment, far below the 14 percent recommended under SDG 4 costing frameworks.

Consequently, teachers often rely on shared or outdated materials, limiting learner engagement and the use of interactive, learner-centred pedagogies. Without sustained investment in curriculum-aligned resources and teacher capacity, gains in foundational literacy and numeracy will remain constrained.

3.4. Rural-urban disparities in literacy and numeracy outcomes

Disparities between the urban and rural schools is still one of the challenges that characterise the system of Zambian education. Urban schools tend to be better equipped, with average pupil teacher ratios of 35:1, whereas the rural schools must deal with ratios of 60:1 or higher. Most teachers in the urban environment (more

¹⁵ TaxEd Alliance. (2025). Financing the future: Delivering SDG 4 in Zambia. ActionAid International, November 2025.

than 80 percent) have the minimum qualification, unlike the rural environment (55 percent).

Schools in rural areas are also three times more likely to complain of a lack of textbooks and other learning materials. These disparities are also manifested in the end achievement of learning, where only 40 percent of rural learners were able to achieve the minimum literacy levels, against 70 percent of urban learners. Poverty, malnutrition, and other household duties that are more disproportionate to the rural community compound these shortages. Although there are policy frameworks in place to facilitate fair distribution of resources, proper implementation has been elusive because of logistical, financial as well and administrative limitations. Rural teaching incentive programs are not regularly used and, in most cases, are not sufficient to attract and maintain experienced teachers in rural locations.

These inequities undermine the principle of equal opportunity in education and perpetuate intergenerational disadvantage. Without deliberate equity-focused financing and teacher deployment policies, learners in rural and marginalised communities will continue to lag behind their urban counterparts in foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes.

3.5. Challenges and opportunities

Challenges	Opportunities
Rapid expansion in enrolment following the Free Education Policy has outpaced investment in teachers, classrooms, and learning materials, contributing to overcrowded classrooms and reduced instructional quality. ¹⁶	Strong political commitment to education reform, demonstrated through the Free Education Policy and increased investment in early childhood education, provides a platform to refocus on learning quality and foundational skills.
High pupil-teacher ratios, uneven deployment of trained teachers, and low remuneration undermine effective teaching of early-grade literacy and numeracy, particularly in rural and remote areas. Teacher absenteeism is also common in rural areas (Education International, 2022).	Ongoing and recent large-scale teacher recruitment presents an opportunity to address shortages if complemented by targeted deployment, continuous professional development, and improved conditions of service.
Inadequate availability and quality of early-grade teaching and learning	Alignment of education financing with the TaxEd Alliance 4S Framework (Share, Size,

¹⁶ TaxEd Alliance, 2025: <https://actonaid.org/sites/default/files/publications/Zambia-Nov2025.pdf>

materials due to limited capital investment, with the majority of the education budget absorbed by recurrent expenditure (Ministry of Education Statistical Bulletins; TaxEd Alliance, 2025).	Sensitivity, Scrutiny) offers a structured approach to improving equity, efficiency, and accountability in education spending. ¹⁷
Persistent urban–rural and socio-economic disparities in literacy and numeracy outcomes, driven by inequitable resource allocation and infrastructure gaps (UNESCO UIS: https://uis.unesco.org).	Existing national learning assessment systems (EGRA, EGMA, NAS, SEACMEQ, PISA-D) provide a strong evidence base that can be better utilised to target interventions and inform resource allocation (UNESCO IICBA: https://www.iicba.unesco.org/en/zambia).
Weak integration of assessment data into policy decisions, budgeting, and classroom practice limits the impact of learning assessments on improving outcomes.	Strengthening institutional coordination among the Examinations Council of Zambia, the Directorate of Planning and Information, and the Directorate of Standards and Curriculum can improve the use of assessment data under the National Learning Assessment Framework.
Wastage of resources and corruption in the award and utilisation of CDF (including bursaries) and funding.	High interest from cooperating partners in foundational learning is emerging.

¹⁷ ActionAid, 2023: <https://actionaid.org/publications/2023/transforming-education-financing-toolkit>

4. Recommendations

Based on the analysis above, we have the following recommendations to ensure that the Parliament, through this committee, achieves decisive action on various fronts to implement the Zambian ambitions on foundational literacy and numeracy.

1. **Increase the share and size of the education budget:** To improve foundational literacy and numeracy, Zambia should increase the share of the national budget allocated to education to at least 20 percent and raise education spending to 6 percent of GDP, in line with UNESCO benchmarks.¹⁸ This is essential to address persistent shortages in teachers, materials, and infrastructure. Expanding the overall size of the education budget through progressive, gender-responsive tax reforms and debt relief is critical to sustaining long-term improvements.
2. **Incentivise rural teachers:** Targeted investments are required to strengthen teacher training, recruitment, and retention, with a specific focus on early-grade literacy and numeracy pedagogy. Improving teacher pay and working conditions, particularly in rural areas, will enhance motivation and instructional quality while reducing attrition (Education International, 2022; TaxEd Alliance, 2025).
3. **Invest in learning materials and infrastructure:** The government should also increase capital investment in learning materials and infrastructure, ensuring that all primary schools have adequate textbooks and age-appropriate teaching aids. Implementing an equity-based funding formula, such as the proposed Consolidated Equity Index, would help direct additional resources to the most disadvantaged schools and learners. The provision of textbooks and other learning tools, particularly to early grades and schools in rural areas, should also be the priority of parliament through this committee. The extension of investment in digital and additional materials should be augmented, and plans made to make it reach places with low connectivity. It is also vital to design culturally and linguistically competent resources that are in accordance with the curriculum reforms.
4. **Strengthen coordination and stakeholder engagement:** The Ministry of Education should also strengthen the coordination, resourcing, and institutional capacity of national learning assessments. In particular, targeted support should be directed to the Examination Council of Zambia, the Directorate of Planning and Information, and the Directorate of Standards and Curriculum, which are responsible for implementing and coordinating Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA) in Grade 2, the National

¹⁸ ActionAid, Financing the future: Delivering SDG 4 in Zambia (2025) <https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/publications/Zambia-Nov2025.pdf>

Assessment Survey (Grades 5 and 9), and the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SEACMEQ) in Grade 6.¹⁹

5. **Strengthen learning assessment, data use, and monitoring:** As the Education Sector Strategic Plan ends and is reviewed in 2026, efforts should focus on improving the quality, timeliness, and use of assessment data. Feedback loops must ensure data informs curriculum reforms, teacher training, resource allocation, and early-grade classroom practice. The government should also invest in effective monitoring and evaluation, institutionalise frequent learning assessments, and enhance education data systems to track teacher performance, resource distribution, and learning outcomes.
6. **Explore innovative financing mechanisms:** new financing initiatives like the education levy and targeted incentives should be implemented as a way of marshalling more domestic resources. Core elements of education financing should be ringfenced in addition to school grants that are currently administered through the Constituency Development Fund to help the implementation of free education and ensure attainment of basic learning objectives.

5. Conclusion

Zambia has made commendable progress in expanding access to primary education, but foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes remain critically weak. This submission highlights that without sustained investment in teachers, learning materials, equitable financing, and robust national learning assessment systems, improvements in access will not translate into meaningful learning.

Parliament has a central role to play in strengthening oversight of education financing, ensuring that resources are equitably allocated, and holding the executive accountable for translating assessment evidence into policy and practice. Prioritising foundational literacy and numeracy is essential not only for achieving SDG 4 but for building the human capital required for inclusive and sustainable national development in Zambia.

¹⁹ UNESCO <https://www.iicba.unesco.org/en/zambia>