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JOURNEY TO SELF-RELIANCE

Case Study of Early Grade Reading Assessments in the Philippines

Over the course of four years (ending in 2016), the Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines grew increasingly self-sufficient at managing all aspects of early grade reading assessments (EGRAs). As DepEd's capacity developed over time, the role of the technical assistance provided through the Education Data for Decision Making project (EdData II) shifted, diminished, and then disappeared altogether. International development professionals sometimes cite the cliché, "If we were truly successful, we would be working ourselves out of a job." That sentiment now informs USAID's goal to help each country on a journey to self-reliance. The EdData II project's work in the Philippines provides some examples of what such a journey might include.

In 2011, the EdData II project initiated work in the Philippines, and a team of advisors conducted a review of the data systems in the country.¹ The objective was to determine the extent to which those systems and the data they produce serve the country's policy making, generally and in the education sector. Also of interest was whether existing data could inform USAID's country strategy and program development as well as

serve its reporting requirements. The EdData II review found that DepEd data systems used to support policy and planning relied mainly on access indicators, data on inputs, and proxy measures of quality such as dropout and promotion rates. While data on learning outcomes were available through the national achievement test (for grades 3, 6, and 8), those data were not linked to the education sector's management information system, and thus were not part of the annual planning process. The report concluded that the Philippine education system would benefit from greater use of data to more thoroughly track and report on progress in improving learning outcomes over time.

¹ DeStefano, J., Levine, V., & Nimbalkar, A. (2011). *Task Order 11: Information for education policy, planning, and management in the Philippines*. Education Data for Decision Making Project (EdData II). Washington, DC: USAID.

Shortly after the review, the Philippines embarked on a comprehensive system reform. In addition to expanding what had been a 10-year education system into a kindergarten to grade 12 one, DepEd also introduced mother tongue-based, multilingual education (MTB-MLE). This new policy changed what had been a bilingual system (with instruction in Filipino and English) into one that would use multiple mother tongues during the first years of school (K–3) before shifting into Filipino and English as media of instruction from grade 4 onward. MTB-MLE was piloted in a limited number of “pioneer” schools in 2012 and 2013.

During that same period, USAID, DepEd leadership, and the EdData project came together to identify ways in which EGRAs could assist in filling some of the gaps in the sector related to the availability and use of learning outcomes data to track progress and inform decision-making. Because the main source of student-level data on learning outcomes in lower primary grades was a national achievement test given only in Filipino and English, and only in grade 3, the gaps in data availability and use became even more pronounced under MTB-MLE. Also at that time, the World Bank program of education sector support put in place a set of disbursement-linked indicators related to the development and use of assessments appropriate to the implementation of the new MTB-MLE policy. The situation was thus ripe for the introduction of EGRA, and strong motivation existed within DepEd to develop capacity to use that assessment approach.

Beginning in 2013 and continuing through 2017, USAID supported the implementation of five EGRAs. The first assessed students in grade 3 in Filipino and English as a

baseline measure of their literacy skills in those languages prior to the full implementation of MTB-MLE. However, because the shift to the new multilingual policy was underway, the 2013 EGRA also piloted an assessment in grade 1 in one mother tongue—Ilokano—in pioneer schools in Region 1. Subsequent tests EdData supported (in 2014 through 2017) focused on four of some of the most widely spoken mother tongues—Ilokano, Cebuano, Hiligaynon, and Maguindanaoan—in four regions.

USAID’s objective was to develop capacity in the Philippines to carry out the above mentioned EGRAs, but also to broaden the application of that developing capacity to use EGRA to evaluate learning outcomes in the 19 languages that were introduced as media of instruction across the country.

Over the course of several years and numerous applications of EGRA across dozens of countries, the elements of developing and conducting an EGRA had become fairly standardized. Some of the capacities needed to successfully carry out an EGRA can be summarized in the following list in Figure 1.

The interesting story of USAID’s support for five EGRAs in the Philippines is how the combination of actors called on to assure each of the above areas of technical, managerial, and political capacity shifted over time. From the beginning, DepEd staff, external technical assistance, and local organizations combined to fulfill these roles. As DepEd capacity developed, the number of areas for which the department assumed increasing responsibility grew, in exact synchronization with a reduction in the number of areas assured by the external technical team. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

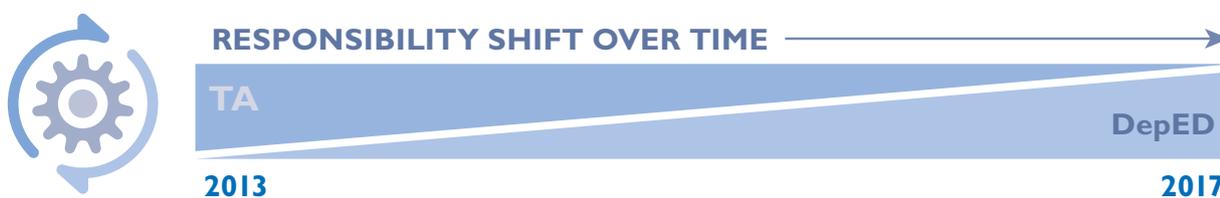
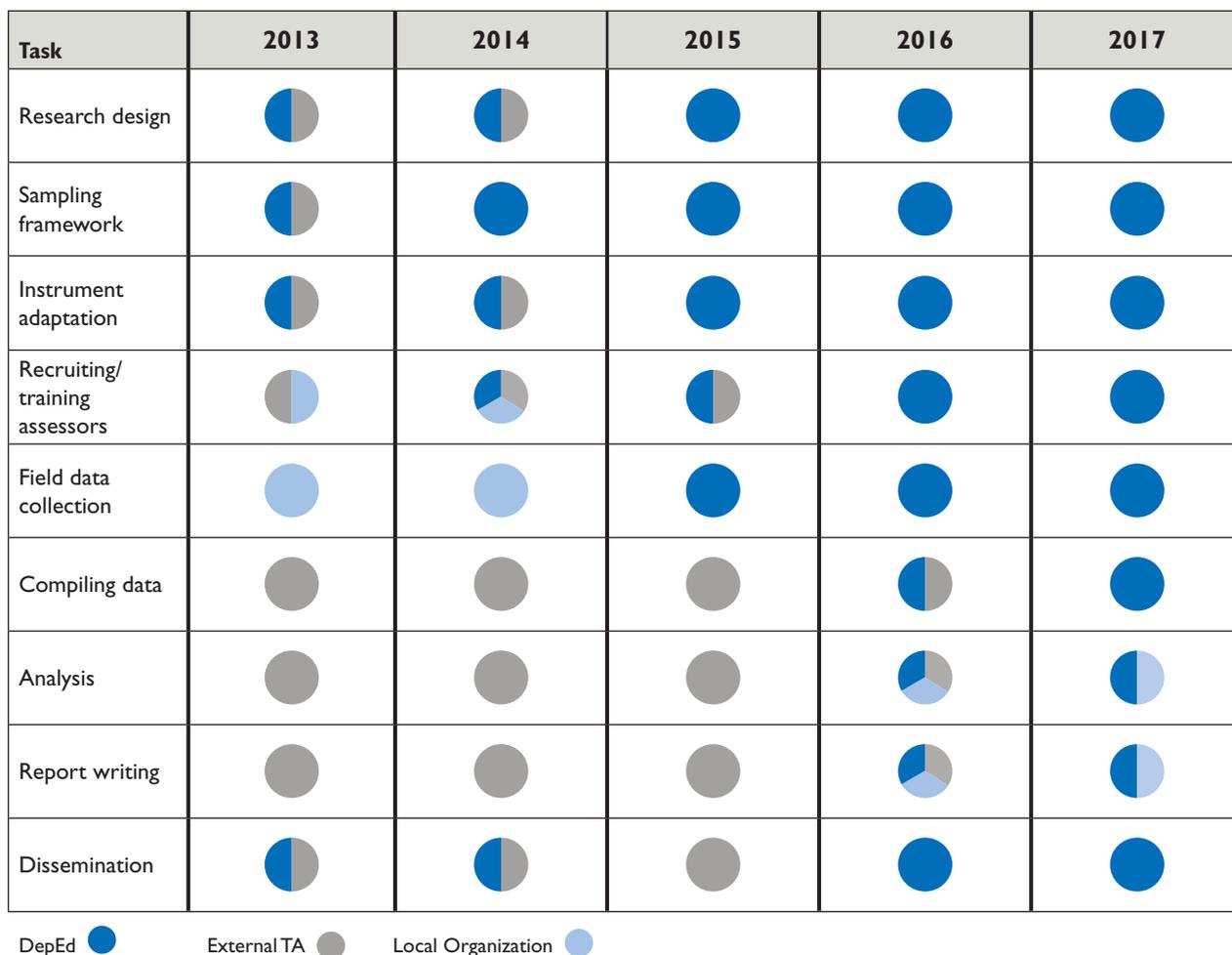
Figure 1. Components of capacity needed to carry out an EGRA

Component	Capacity
Research design	Defining the assessment objectives and research design
Sampling framework	Developing and applying a sampling framework that responds to the research design
Instrument adaptation	Adapting instruments in the language(s) that will be used for the assessment
Recruiting/training assessors	Recruiting and training assessors to use the EGRA instruments
Field data collection	Managing and quality assuring the field data collection
Compiling data	Compiling, processing, cleaning, and assuring the quality of the data
Analysis	Analyzing the data within the framework of the research design
Report writing	Incorporating analyses, designing graphics, and writing the report
Dissemination	Organizing, hosting, and facilitating dissemination events

Circle shaded light blue indicate either that DepEd colleagues were gaining skill and experience or that, once DepEd began gaining experience, then the role of external technical assistance shifted to supporting or providing refresher training.

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Figure 2. Developing capacity and shifting responsibility over time



and local organizations combined to fulfill these roles. As DepEd capacity developed, the number of areas for which the department assumed increasing responsibility grew, in exact synchronization with a reduction in the number of areas assured by the external technical team. This is illustrated in Figure 2. As illustrated in Figure 2 above, after the first two EGRAs in 2013 and 2014, responsibility shifted increasingly to DepEd colleagues as they grew more experienced in each of the phases of EGRA development and implementation, and thus more self-reliant. The role played by the local organizations also shifted. In the first two years, the EdData project contracted with a local research and survey firm to supply the assessors and to manage and oversee the field data collection. As DepEd became more self-assured at handling those elements of the work (and able to allocate the people and funds to cover some of it), the need for a local organization to play those roles disappeared. However, as DepEd assumed greater responsibility for the analysis and report writing, DepEd itself decided that, given limitations on staff availability, they could more efficiently get that work done by contracting with a local organization with available capacity to assist them.

The approach to capacity development often relied on two main methods. Workshops were the venues for combining training and learning-by-doing when it came to instrument adaptation in the first two years. In 2013, external technical advisors led the workshops, with DepEd and other local experts learning about EGRA and the means to adapt the assessment methodology for different languages. In 2014, DepEd played an increased role, and in fact while the technical assistance focused on the development of the instruments in the four regional languages, DepEd facilitated groups of staff and experts to work in parallel and develop instruments in eight

additional languages. Similarly, when it came to training assessors, external assistance led those trainings in 2013, cofacilitated the training with DepEd colleagues in 2014, and provided just refresher training for DepEd staff, who then led the actual training of assessors. By 2016, DepEd had requested that the compiling and processing of data be handled by its information systems and research staff. The external technical advisors therefore helped the relevant bureau in DepEd set up the means to receive and manage data as they were uploaded from the field.

And when it came to analysis and report writing, a similar approach was taken in 2016. DepEd identified the staff and local partner that would assume responsibility for those tasks and requested only that the external technical assistance run a short workshop to help them consider which analyses, and which structure of the report, would best serve to address the research questions in which DepEd had an interest. In 2017, DepEd and its local partner were able to handle that without assistance.

This is one case in which, quite literally, external assistance worked itself out of a job. However, in retelling such a story, brevity necessitates smoothing over some of the imperfect ways in which the process of capacity development actually unfolded. For example, in 2015, Basa Pilipinas project resources had to be mobilized to cover data collection costs because DepEd could not process the expenses through its own budget procedures in time. A seemingly small point, but one that speaks to the other ways in which self-reliance is developed. The challenge is not just technical capacity, but also helping institutions within a country manage their resources and procedures effectively. How programming can address these kinds of system capacity is another dimension of self-reliance that would be a good subject for another case study.

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