Improving Learning Outcomes at Scale: Learning from System-focused Programmes

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Abstract

Foundational learning is the gateway to success in school. Improving foundational learning at scale requires a transformative change in the teaching and learning process in tens of thousands of classrooms. The only way to create and sustain significant and sustainable change in learning is for non-profits to collaborate and co-create solutions with the government. Strengthening the government system should be an important part of any solution for improving learning outcomes. This system-focused approach has been attempted with some success in the past few years. This paper outlines learning from foundational learning programmes designed and implemented in collaboration with governments at scale.

The following important questions are addressed in this paper based on empirical evidence and insights gathered through collaborative work with state governments in India. What are the constraints of the government education system at the state, district, and sub-district levels? What challenges do non-profits face when working collaboratively with the government at different levels? What are good practices for working at scale with the education system? What 'ways of working' should non-profits avoid if they want to achieve impact at scale?

As the education sector evolves, collaborative models between non-profits and governments offer pathways for scalable and sustainable improvements in foundational learning. The paper would be a useful contribution to the emerging area of implementation research in the education sector.

Keywords: Foundational learning, collaborative partnerships, government systems, education sector, implementation research, learning outcomes

Introduction

There is widespread consensus in India that children are not learning foundational skills of language and literacy and basic mathematics in the early years of education. It is common knowledge that more than half the children at age 10 cannot read a simple text with good understanding. The World Bank has called this 'learning poverty'[i]. India's early learning crisis has two dimensions: low average levels of learning and high disparity in learning across regions, schools and within each classroom. There's no silver bullet to

improve learning outcomes in an equitable manner. Teaching and learning processes need to change significantly and consistently across tens of thousands of early-grade classrooms for a sustained improvement in learning, especially for children who are learning the least. A comprehensive solution for improving foundational learning (commonly referred to as foundational literacy and numeracy or FLN) in the government sector should include: (a) academic initiatives like active learning practices, children's learning materials like workbooks, teacher professional development programmes, academic mentoring for teachers, appropriate student assessment and remediation strategies, (b) enabling initiatives like improved monitoring and evidence-based follow-up, consultation and communication at all levels about the vision and strategies for change, and (c) administrative initiatives for enhancing teacher availability, increased instructional time, parent engagement for children's learning and improving student attendance etc.

Over the past three decades, programmes like the District Primary Education Programme, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and Samagra Shiksha[ii] have attempted to address some of the above dimensions to improve the quality of education at the primary stage. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the National Curriculum Frameworks (2022, 2023) have placed a strong emphasis on learning at the foundational stage. In the past 3 years, state governments have taken significant measures to improve FLN learning outcomes under the umbrella of the NIPUN Bharat Mission[iii]. Several good non-profits have also focused on FLN-related projects, often guided by domestic and international funding that has increasingly pivoted to FLN over the past 5 years. All of these have created a conducive environment for collaboration between state governments and non-profit organisations to improve FLN learning outcomes. Such collaborations have been formalised in at least 15 states as medium-term partnerships that cover the academic and monitoring aspects of the design and implementation of FLN programmes[iv].

In some of these states, credible non-profits have formed coalitions to provide more comprehensive support to state governments[v]. One of the partners in these coalitions frequently serves as a project management partner, working more closely with the government leadership to manage various aspects of the FLN programme.

This paper analyses how partnerships between governments and non-profits have worked in supporting system-led initiatives for improving FLN learning outcomes at scale. While these collaborations and experiences are only 4 to 5 years old, they have yielded

significant learning that can help similar initiatives in education and other social sectors. Although there is little 'evidence' available in the country from implementation-focused research for such system-oriented collaborative initiatives, this paper has drawn from insights gained from the work of several non-profits in at least five states in India. The insights presented in this paper are based on extensive interactions with leadership and field staff from both non-profits and the government education system, a few small-scale process studies, and the monitoring data collected from various FLN programmes in different states over the last 3 years. Additionally, I draw upon my work in the past 9 years with the Language and Learning Foundation (LLF)[vi] as well as over two decades of work within the government education system at the state and national levels to develop the arguments presented in this paper. The 'early analysis' of system-focused government–NGO collaboration presented in this paper provides insights on various key issues: What 'ways of working' helped forge successful and result-oriented partnerships with the government? What challenges do non-profits face in such partnerships? How can system strengthening and reform be prioritised alongside measurable improvement in learning outcomes through such partnerships? What considerations should guide non-profits when they work on system strengthening and reform programmes with governments? Do education systems experience any significant improvement over a 5-year period? The insights presented here are intended to be pragmatic suggestions rather than the basis for a theoretical framework. Further systematic studies that provide evidence from a larger sample of system-focused programmes will be necessary to develop such frameworks. This paper is an attempt to share some early learning with stakeholders in the education and the wider development sector about useful ways of working in large-scale partnerships with the government.

I begin by describing the collaboration arrangements between non-profits who work as a coalition and with the government at both the state and district levels. Next, the design of the comprehensive learning improvement programme for FLN, that has been co-created with five state governments, is outlined. The following section identifies the most important challenges within the government system and those resulting from the ways of working of non-profits that constrain successful design and implementation of large-scale reform projects. The last two sections elucidate good practices that can help non-profits work collaboratively with governments at scale for system-focused programmes as well as practices that should be avoided.

Improving FLN Learning Outcomes at Scale: Programme Design

Overall Program Design: Coalition Collaboration for State-wide FLN Initiatives

Non-profit partners forming a coalition in these five states collaborate with each other and the state government across various dimensions of a comprehensive FLN programme. Each partner has a small team at the state level, usually working out of a government office. The roles are divided among the partners. The academic partner(s) take up the role of working with the state's academic institutions to co-create the classroom instructional design, children's learning materials like workbooks, posters and conversation charts, storybooks etc, development of lesson plans, assessment practices, teacher professional development programmes and protocols academic mentors for observing classrooms and providing feedback to teachers for improving teaching practices etc. The project management partner engages with the state institutions on issues of governance, data-based monitoring, technology support for data collection and analysis and administrative support to the state leadership for overall programme implementation and monitoring. Both academic and management partners collaborate on follow-up activities with the state government, especially on issues at the intersection of academic and implementation concerns. This is a high-level description of roles. There are overlaps in some of the roles and responsibilities as discussed later.

Senior state level staff of the coalition partners meet virtually or in-person almost every week to discuss routine coordination issues at the state level. More strategic issues, including any major issues of coordination between partners, are deliberated at the leadership level of the partners on a monthly/quarterly basis. The agenda for these leadership level meetings is developed after careful consideration and consultation with the state teams. Some recommendations from these discussions are taken to the state government for negotiation at different levels, such as meetings of the Project Management Unit (PMU) within the Samagra Shiksha office or a quarterly Steering Committee chaired by the head of the education department. Meetings of the PMU are not held regularly, and, in several states, the nodal officer of NIPUN Bharat meets the representatives of each non-profit separately to discuss workstreams anchored by them individually. The most frequent interaction is with the staff of the project management partner, and often, decisions are conveyed to all partners through this partner. Steering Committee meetings are being held regularly in only one of the five states that are the focus of this paper. Discussions on strategic issues that require the attention of the

senior state leadership are often delayed. These discussions typically occur through specially requested meetings, where leaders from the partner organisations present their suggestions and decisions are taken by the state government. This has emerged as an important mechanism for the strategic discussions between the coalition partners and the state government leadership responsible for implementing the FLN programme.
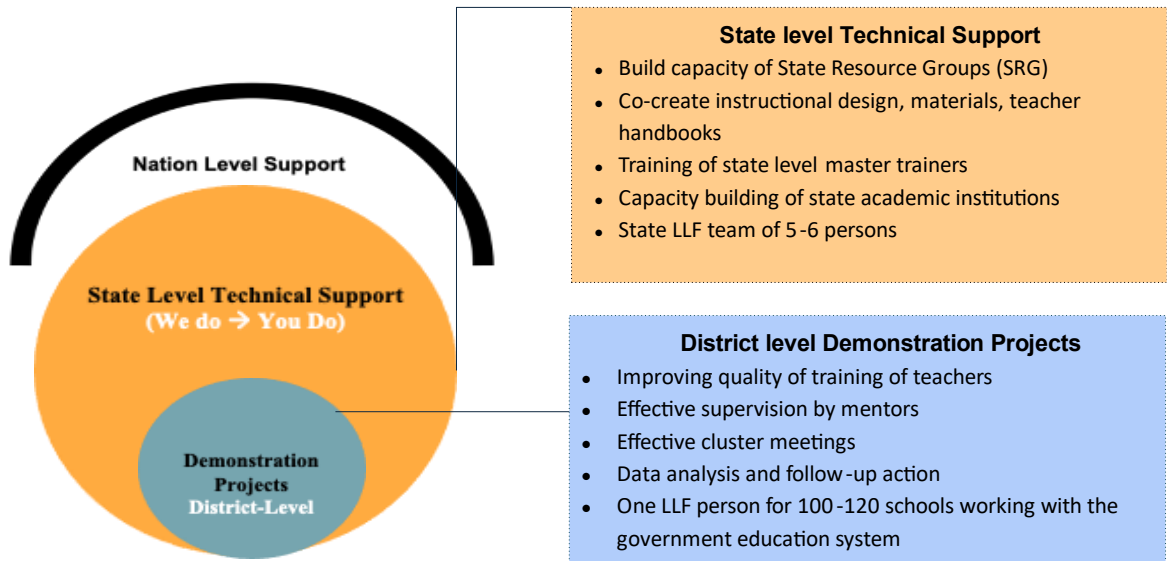
Overall, the objective of the partnerships for FLN programmes is two-fold. First, help the state government to develop and implement high-quality inputs like teacher handbooks, lesson plans and teacher training programmes in a timebound manner so that these reach all primary schools, teachers and students throughout the state. Second, build salience for foundational learning and capacity within the government to develop and implement high quality FLN programmes with minimal support in the future.

An added dimension of the programme design is to work with the district education system to demonstrate how the government's district and sub-district structures and staff can work more efficiently and effectively to implement high-quality FLN programmes and improve student learning over a period of three to five years. One or more coalition partners set up demonstration programmes in a few districts of the state with an 'indirect model' to strengthen governance processes, teacher training and mentoring, regular student assessments, and data-oriented review meetings at the block and district level with follow-up. The non-profit partner has only a few of their staff at the district or block level with the aim of helping the government institutions and staff develop and internalise improved processes that can support sustainable change in the classrooms (see Figure 1). These districts could become lighthouses for improved teaching and learning practices that are implemented across a large number of classrooms. The other objective of these 'low-touch' demonstration projects is to mainstream the learning from implementation to the state level on an ongoing basis and influence state-level guidelines, protocols and academic inputs based on this feedback.

Figure 1
Multi-level Support for FLN Programmes

LLF's model of FLN work focused on structured pedagogy

State level Technical Support
- Build capacity of State Resource Groups (SRG)
- Co-create instructional design, materials, teacher handbooks
- Training of state level master trainers
- Capacity building of state academic institutions
- State LLF team of 5-6 persons

District level Demonstration Projects
- Improving quality of training of teachers
- Effective supervision by mentors
- Effective cluster meetings
- Data analysis and follow-up action
- One LLF person for 100-120 schools working with the government education system

Approach for Pedagogical Change

Learning outcomes cannot improve, at least in a sustainable manner, unless teaching and learning practices improve significantly. The focus needs to shift from rote memorisation, choral repetition, lower-order, drill type activities where students remain mostly passive to practices that promote active learning with conversations, higher order questions and responses, drawing on students' real-life experiences and existing knowledge, working with teaching and learning materials, regular formative assessment of all children, and additional support and attention to students who are learning the least. And there are more specific pedagogical good practices that are appropriate for teaching and learning of language and literacy and early mathematics. The design supports an unrelenting focus on active engagement of *all* children in teaching and learning and additional time and attention for students who are not learning adequately for achieving equitable learning outcomes.

A home-grown and evidence-based structured pedagogy approach has been developed in these states that defines, almost on a daily basis, what is to be taught, how should it be taught, what teaching-learning materials should be used, how can students be assessed and what remedial support can be provided to students who are not learning adequately. The FLN resources for the classroom include textbooks, students' workbooks, daily lesson plans, teacher handbooks, a print-rich classroom environment and teaching-learning materials for literacy and numeracy. A comprehensive plan for professional development of teachers

including training workshops, online courses, WhatsApp nudges, peer learning during monthly cluster meetings, and on-site academic support through mentors is an integral part of the structured pedagogy approach.

Large Scale Educational Change

Change in large education systems is complex. A transformative educational change in the state of Uttar Pradesh, for example, would mean that most of the 450,000 primary school teachers in the state adopt many of the practices outlined in the previous section and use them consistently, on a daily basis. And 5500 teacher educators and teacher mentors and 2000 educational administrators need to have a shared vision of these changed practices and support teachers in their journey of adoption. Fullan (2015) identifies three dimensions of large-scale change in practices: new or revised *materials* (curriculum, materials, assessment etc)*,* new or improved *teaching approaches or behaviours* and, alteration in *beliefs* about the nature of learning (pp. 28–33; our italics). Is change happening in these state government-led FLN programmes on all these dimensions? Are teachers energised and convinced about the nature of change they are expected to implement in their classrooms? Does the structured pedagogy approach support adaptation and contextualisation by individual teachers who are reflective? Does the monitoring of programme implementation focus exclusively on a measurement of fidelity to the intended design? What is the scope for adaptation and evolution of practices with time? Is the programme being forced in a top-down manner with a focus on accountability at all levels or are elements of dialogue, consultation and feedback from a bottom-up perspective also included? What is the role of parents in this school and classroom-focused programme design? Hatch, Corson, and Van Dan Berg rightly state that "we need to develop a much better understanding of which children are being left behind and why and create more equitable and powerful learning opportunities for every one of them" (2021, p. 22). Has this been prioritised in the implementation of the FLN programme? How important is political salience for FLN for such systemic work to succeed? These are all good questions that can be debated until the cows come home. The focus in this paper is not on the pedagogical approach or even the efficacy of the solutions, but to examine the modalities of collaboration between non-profits working as part of a coalition and the ways of synergistic working with the government.

Limitations of the Government System

This analysis of certain limitations of the government education system is confined to factors related to the design and implementation of programmes for improving the quality of primary education at scale. It draws on insights from my over 25 years of experience working within the government system and more than a decade of collaborating on government-led educational initiatives from outside. Another perspective considered here is the challenges that non-profit organisations face when working collaboratively with a focus on system strengthening and reform. Large education systems comprising hundreds of thousands of individuals, who are each an agent of change, tend to have greater inertia and are slow to implement big shifts.

Frequent Changes in Leadership

Secretaries and Project Directors of Samagra Shiksha change frequently. In the past 3 years, four of the states LLF works in have seen an average of five Project Directors responsible for the FLN programme. Changing leadership in school education departments often results in a shift in priorities and even the introduction of new initiatives. Some Secretaries or Project Directors may be less accessible, others eager to try various new ideas in a short span, some sceptical of the need to work with non-profits in government programmes, a few cynical about the likelihood of change in the education system, or highly focused on tech-enabled solutions. Often, these senior government officers hold multiple charges and are unable to dedicate the necessary time and attention required for a big system change programme. Due to their short tenures, they tend to focus on 'innovations' that can show quick results, rather than on the less visible work on system reform. Several state education heads have implemented large-scale centralised periodic assessments of students on a census basis, which have not contributed at all to improving student learning at the school level. In at least three states, we have seen a roll-back of important decisions related to teacher training, the introduction of new workbooks, or centralised assessments taken by the earlier leadership. At the very least, the ways of working with partner organisations change every time there is a change in the leadership.

Top-Down Style of Governance

State education departments, like most other government departments in India, function in a hierarchical manner without strong consultative processes and established

feedback mechanisms from the ground up. The lower levels of administration, at the district and block levels, are not delegated adequate decision-making authority. Thus, most decisions and new initiatives flow top-down from the state level and are rarely questioned. This also leads to a lack of a shared vision for the desired change across different levels. Senior officers are rarely challenged with alternate views or informed about decisions that are not working well in the field. The culture of subservience and saying yes to a higher authority permeates the entire education system, resulting in senior education leadership being out of touch with ground realities. Most education departments *do not have a medium-term roadmap* that could help provide consistency in the design and implementation of learning improvement programmes. Programmes like NIPUN Bharat provide some degree of continuity over time. But centrally designed schemes with their cookie-cutter programmatic and financial norms could promote a 'one-size-fits-all' approach in diverse contexts.

Overburdened Staff

Staff in the department seem to be *overburdened at all levels.* In four of these five states, only one officer at the state level works full time for the NIPUN programme. District and Block Education Officers typically implement and/or monitor more than 20 schemes of the education department[vii]. They manage large spans of control—1000 to 2000 schools for a District Education Officer and 100 to 250 schools for a Block Education Officer. They must attend many meetings at the district and state levels, including several related to other departments, prepare for court cases and attend hearings related to service matters of teachers and others. Most officers find it difficult to find a balance between these mandatory administrative tasks and the work related to academic monitoring and school improvement (Tara et al., 2010). Many district and block education officers' positions are vacant[viii]. State-level leadership is often keen to implement an initiative in a large number of schools or even throughout the state quickly. For example, one state decided to add a new pre-primary class in all the primary schools of the state in one go without creating the appropriate conditions like availability of teachers and materials for young children.

Data Collection: Quantity, Quality, and Usage

Data collection and its transmission upwards seems to be the major focus of school monitoring. In Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, over twenty million items of information are collected every month through classroom observations and spot assessments of students[ix]! Only a part of this data gets analysed and a very small fraction gets used for any

follow-up action. The quality of data is a big issue for a variety of reasons. The monitoring staff do not receive any feedback about the quality of the data, making data collection an end in itself. The leadership at different levels likes to see particular trends in data, e.g., improvements in learning outcomes or increased adoption of newer practices. This formal or informal messaging results in data being deliberately misreported.

System Capacity and Innovation Fatigue

The capacity of the system to absorb, internalise and consistently implement significant changes in the curriculum, pedagogical practices and beliefs is quite limited. In most states, there is considerable fatigue among teachers and middle management due to frequent changes in programmes and instructional designs.

Plethora of Non-Profits

In the last decade, it has become commonplace for state governments in India to sign agreements with non-profits to provide technical support or implement projects or programmes in the education sector. In the states that we work in, the governments have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with 10 to 30 non-profits for various aspects of elementary education. These are 'non-financial' MOUs, where the government makes no commitment to undertake any expenditure for the project. Additionally, a few state governments do not take complete responsibility for deciding on the priorities and steer non-profit support towards identified gaps. One of the challenges emerging from this is the overlap in the work of non-profits and jostling for space either at the state or district levels.

Limitations of Non-Profits: Working at Scale with the System

Some non-profits believe that the public education system is not result-oriented and quality-focused, making it difficult to significantly impact classroom practice and student learning if the work is scaled through the regular government structures. Those non-profits who want to collaborate with and strengthen the system struggle to raise resources for system-focused work as most domestic funding is tied to programmatic activities and outcomes. Furthermore, the time horizon of their work, often guided by the funding sources, is short; while working with the government to make a meaningful impact at scale would require a timeframe of 7–10 years. Donors—especially corporate donors in India—want to see quick results, and many non-profits often fall prey to this demand. Typically, non-profits

are reluctant to collaborate with other non-profits. Collaboration requires a strong intent and follow-up and significant staff time. Developing and sustaining partnerships is hard work! The funding landscape often promotes a competitive, rather than a collaborative spirit. The need to secure partnerships with the government also contributes to a spirit of self-promotion, rather than allying with others for greater impact. Most non-profits don't invest time and resources for reflection, learning, and documenting their work to share with peers. Some NGOs who work at scale tend to replicate their programme design and 'packages' in new locations; however, in diverse Indian contexts, it is important to contextualise solutions and co-create some aspects of the programme in each different location in collaboration with state government institutions.

Despite all these limitations, the good news is that most larger non-profits in India are focused on collaborating with the government and innovating within the system (Menezes et al., 2017). These organisations have decided to work with the system, strengthen it and help scale impact through the government's programmes and structures. Over 90 per cent of the funding that supports such system-focused work in the education sector is from foreign sources, especially some big foundations[x]. In the education sector, specifically in foundational learning, at least 8 non-profits have formed coalitions of 2-3 organisations each in a state to offer a comprehensive suite of expertise to the state government for supporting the state's initiative for FLN[xi]. In a few states, these coalitions also include for-profit consulting firms. Even for these coalitions, collaboration is not easy and requires significant effort at different levels including the leadership to iron out the challenges and keep refining the ways of working together. Some non-profits working in a partnership mode also tend to promote themselves individually with the government to project their contributions and take on some tasks without sharing adequately with other partners.

Good Implementation Practices for Working at Scale with the Public Education System

When working with the public education system at scale, the investment in all inputs should typically be made from government funds. For example, for system-focused support to the NIPUN Bharat programme, the government incurs the entire expenditure for the development and production of children's learning materials, teacher handbooks, training workshops for teachers and mentors, and cluster, block, and district level meetings through the national Samagra Shiksha programme. This should be a tenet or non-negotiable for such

large-scale non-profit–government collaboration. Non-profits usually bring in the resources needed to support their staff at the state and district levels. The state and district teams of the non-profits are, in most cases, provided space within government offices. This 'embedding' results in better collaboration and alignment with the government staff and promotes organic learning. Some of the other good practices based on our work in the past five years are elucidated below.

Shared Vision of Change: Non-profit Partners and the Government and Across the Education System

Non-profits that are willing to form a coalition need to have or develop a shared understanding of the pedagogical change and a conceptual framework for this change backed by theory and research. This should form the foundation of the agreement to collaborate. For example, prior to approaching the state governments of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, LLF and two other coalition partners agreed that we would propose a structured pedagogy approach that includes lesson plans, children's workbooks, teacher handbooks, and regular formative assessments for the FLN programme design. There should also be a consensus on the strategies for working with the government and the theory of change at scale. Whether it is a coalition or an individual non-profit, the approach and potential design of the programme must be discussed with the government at the initial stage. It is true that governments are unlikely to agree formally with the details of the proposed programme design or the changes that the non-profits would like to propose in the existing FLN approach already being followed. However, an agreement with the government on the broad approach and major programme elements at the initial stage is always useful. Also, it is important that the design, including the pedagogical approach, materials, strategy for system-wide professional development, and mentoring of teachers is co-created with the state's academic institutions. I say this based on an experience of our non-profit in one state during 2019–2021. We approached the state as part of a coalition of three organisations for reform in the FLN space and signed an agreement to provide technical support. However, even after two years of work, we could not come to an agreement with the state's lead academic institution about the nature of change in the curriculum, materials, and the teaching and learning process, and we ultimately had to withdraw from working in the state.

Additionally, a communication strategy that reaches out to the entire education system— including teachers, teacher educators, monitoring staff and administrators—is also

crucial. It must inform them about the nature of change that has been envisioned and the milestones or roadmap for achieving the same. At the start of the Mission Prerna initiative in Uttar Pradesh in 2020 and 2021, a comprehensive communication strategy involving frequent YouTube live sessions, virtual and in-person meetings with District Collectors, District Development Officers, District and Block Education Officers, and follow-up through call centre staff who reinforced specific messages helped to create an initial awareness and understanding of the new pedagogy and learning outcomes even before a teacher training programme was implemented.

Strengthening System Capacity

Non-profits working with the government need to invest strongly in capacity building across all levels of the system. There is limited system capacity and understanding of pedagogical reform and continuous professional development (CPD) of administrators, teacher educators and teacher mentors, which should be an integral part of any programme aimed at impact at scale. LLF has consistently prioritised CPD in all our work with the government, which has been instrumental in creating commitment and capacity within the government system to implement high-quality FLN programme. Strengthening system capacity is a multidimensional effort. It could include courses and workshops, mentoring through joint visits to schools, technical support for specific skill sets like data analysis and follow-up from evidence, targeted programmes to build facilitation and negotiation skills for teacher mentors etc.

Even for the development impact bonds (DIBs) that LLF implements, we have insisted on including a strong component of system strengthening that gets tracked through system strengthening indicators (SSIs). A recent example is the LiftEd DIB[xii] where system strengthening indicators are included as part of the targets included for measuring success and final pay-outs to the investors.

However, structural constraints and a lack of accountability for outcomes in the government system cannot be solved solely through capacity building measures. It is important to work with the government to address these dimensions systematically while developing a roadmap for reforms and strengthening the system. Government systems don't change in a short timeframe. Non-profits who are focused on system strengthening need to be committed to this work for a 7–10-year timeframe. Demonstration of shifts within the

government system in some locations like selected districts is an important step in advocating for change on a larger sale. It is heartening to note that several large non-profits have begun to focus on system strengthening as an important focus of their work, apart from specific outcomes related to improvement in student learning.

Designing Demonstration Programmes for Scale: Focus on Mainstreaming

Demonstration programmes should always be designed for scale. They should not include elements that are complex and difficult for the mainstream system to adopt. For example, an intricate design initiated by a non-profit in India that required differentiated instruction for four different groups of children to address the multilevel learning situation in classrooms could never be scaled. Ideally, demonstration programmes implemented at the district level (1000 to 2000 schools) in collaboration with the district and sub-district education structures can show how the government system can improve its efficiency and effectiveness for implementing different components of a state-wide FLN programme. The levers for change for an FLN programme could include improving the quality of training workshops delivered at the final stage of the training cascade for teachers, supporting government mentoring staff to conduct focused classroom observations and provide prioritised and actionable feedback to teachers to improve practice, strengthening peer learning and sharing of best practices in the teacher monthly meetings at the cluster level and helping shift the focus of block and district level education meetings to improving teaching practices and student learning with regular review of evidence from classroom observations and student assessments. LLF and a few other organisations are implementing these 'indirect' models of district level demonstration programmes in about 30 districts in the country to improve foundational learning of students and strengthen district level capacity for sustainably implementing FLN initiatives. These demonstration programmes serve two other purposes. One, they serve as sites for surveys and process studies to understand the nature and extent of adoption of new materials and practices as well as the issues and reasons for inadequate uptake to provide valuable feedback to the state level teams. Learning from these districts can be mainstreamed for making state-wide changes in design and implementation. Two, new or revised strategies like assessment practices or classroom observation instruments can be tried out in these districts before finalization for state-wide implementation.

Coalitions for Societal Impact

Non-profit coalitions help to bring together the strengths of multiple organisations to be able to offer comprehensive solutions for supporting governments at scale. For example, coalitions or partnerships in the FLN domain in India bring together academic partners focused on instructional design and classroom practices, a project management partner who can anchor different workstreams and be the direct interface with the government for operational aspects, a partner focused on capacity building of school leaders and educational administrators. Coalitions also have greater heft for influencing governments if non-profit leaders can present a united front on crucial issues. After a change in the leadership of a state education department, the structured pedagogy approach with daily lesson plans was questioned and was likely to be diluted. This would have created confusion in the field and wiped out the earlier gains of introducing teacher handbooks that teachers had started becoming familiar with. The coalition leadership approached the state government to explain that the new decision was fraught with risks. Finally, the earlier curriculum was continued.

These partnerships can work well if there is a shared vision and mission for the coalition and a clear division of roles and responsibilities. Frequent conversations and meetings at different levels, e.g., state-level teams of the partners, the second line of leadership, and informal and formal interaction at the leadership level are crucial to strategise for interactions with the government and avoid misalignments. The interaction between partners should also include theme-based strategic discussions to formulate a shared position on important issues.

Supporting Effective Use of Data and Prioritising Follow-Up Action

One of the most important tasks that non-profits need to work with the government is to help improve the quality of data, its regular analysis and prioritizing the follow-up based on data trends. There are multiple issues that need to be addressed along with the government at state and district levels. First, explore the possibility of reduction in the number of items on which data is collected during each school visit and classroom observation. Second, develop a prioritization for analysis and follow-up based on what changes in teaching practices can be targeted in different phases. There are two ways of doing this: identify which practices are likely to have high impact on children's learning (pedagogic reasoning) and which ones need to be internalised first to prepare the ground for a deeper change in the teaching and learning process. For example, LLF is working with twelve districts in three states in India to identify high-impact teaching strategies (HITS) that should be the focus of all messaging through

educational administrators, feedback that the government teacher mentors and LLF staff provide to teachers after classroom observations, discussions during the monthly peer learning meetings of teachers at the cluster level etc. This focus on a few prioritised practices is useful to support behaviour change at scale. Third, establish a clear protocol for district and block level review meetings for a mandatory discussion on evidence from classroom monitoring and student assessment data and decisions for follow-up action. Fourth, it is useful to work with the government to put in place an additional monitoring arrangement with an independent group constituted at the state or district level, with government and coalition partner representatives, that can carry out sample checks of the data being collected by the regular coaches and monitors. A discussion about the data discrepancies can lead to improved quality of data and its use for follow-up.

Regular Consultation and Feedback From the Field

While the government system functions in a hierarchical manner, through top-down instructions (often called GOs or Government Orders), it is important that mechanisms be created for getting regular feedback from schools, blocks, and districts. Two strategies seem to work well if they are implemented consistently by the government, with support from the non-profit partners. One, establishing a mechanism for regular reviews and feedback between the block, district, and state levels. These review meetings should focus not merely on progress and target achievements for different government schemes, but also provide feedback to the next higher level about the challenges in bringing about the large-scale systemic change that has been rolled out by the state. It has been a problem to change the nature of these meetings to make them more reflective and responsive to feedback from lower levels. This requires a significant change from the current culture of subservience and maintaining the status quo. Two, conducting regular process studies and surveys that require consultation and feedback from teachers, mentors and local administrators about new materials, training programmes, assessment systems etc. helps to bring grassroots feedback into the discussion at the state level. It also promotes a spirit of consultation, and teachers' voices get heard. Doing this well and regularly is also a cultural shift that non-profits can try to instil gradually.

Developing and Standing by Non-Negotiables for Core Aspects of the System Change Initiative

Flexibility and letting the government take the lead are at the heart of a non-profit's strategy for a system-focused programme. Advocacy and negotiation on different aspects of the programme design and implementation are also integral to the work of a non-profit for such initiatives. However, non-profits are often confronted with situations where they need to take a position on an issue that's core to the efficacy of the learning improvement programme that they are collaborating with the government to design and implement. It is important that non-profits develop and maintain a set of 'desirable' and 'non-negotiable' positions that can form the basis for negotiation with governments. For example, as an academic partner to state governments, LLF has had to take a stand on several occasions on reducing centralised census assessments, enhancing the number of days of training workshops for teachers, the minimum time a mentor should spend on classroom observation, increasing the number of pages in children's workbooks and the set of teaching and learning materials for early grade classrooms.

The government system has constraints that need to be factored in while negotiating on these issues, including limited budgets, span of control of education officers and mentors etc. However, when compromises begin to seriously impinge on programme quality and efficacy, it's important to take a stand and resist them. This is when an organisation's internal set of non-negotiables can come into play. Being part of a coalition of non-profits gives greater strength in such situations. For example, we succeeded in getting a state government to reduce the emphasis on multiple large-scale assessments for every student and enhance the focus on formative assessments. However, in many instances, we have been unable to get favourable agreements from the state government. There have been instances where some important aspects of a programme have even been rolled back. Is there a threshold of such compromises that should guide a non-profit's work?

The Regular Stuff That is Well Known

These are 'ways of working' with the government that most non-profits have either mastered or are always working to improve. It's important that the non-profit is seen by the education stakeholders as an integral part of the government's programme. This enhances the effectiveness of the role of the non-profit. Other commonly followed good practices include: attributing successes of the programme to the leadership of the government, avoiding confrontation with a senior government person in an open meeting, being tolerant of delays that occur in the government system, not asking for any branding of the non-profit on

materials or training programmes etc., and building strong relationships with government staff at all levels. The last one is the most crucial. Relationships are key to any successful collaboration, especially when working with the government. Good personal relationships are useful, but it is more important to develop strong professional relationships where there is mutual trust, and the government side is able to see how the non-profit staff are adding value to the programme and enhancing the effectiveness of the initiatives being taken at different levels. These relationships need to be built and sustained not just with the senior national/state leadership of the education department, but also with mid-level officials at the state, district, and block levels. The Secretaries of Education and the Project Directors have limited tenures since they belong to the civil service cadre. Often, the initial relationship is at this level, but this should get extended to the mid-level state officials who have much longer tenures and could become strong pillars of a system change initiative or could also stand for maintaining the status quo. This is also crucial for the non-profit staff who are 'embedded' in government offices at district and block levels and may need skill development in aspects like communication, negotiation, and facilitation of discussions.

It is established good practice to identify champions at different levels for the change being attempted. These could be key senior government officials like Directors, District Collectors, and District Education Officers who are convinced about the need for change and understand and strongly advocate for the change. These people carry a lot of influence and can be instrumental in convincing others in the system. Teachers who are early adopters of changed practices can also be important champions for other teachers. It is useful to bring these teachers as master trainers and facilitators in training programmes and other forums like cluster meetings to talk about and demonstrate the practices that they have adopted.

Implementation Practices to Avoid When Working for System Change

This analysis will not be complete without discussing some implementation practices that non-profits should avoid in their work with the government. Outlined below are a few that stand out.

Substituting the Work That the Government is Already Doing

In an effort to show quick results, non-profits, especially the project management partners, have placed 15–20 staff with the state education department to carry out functions that were already being done, even if not too efficiently, by government officials. Secretaries

and Project Directors feel good about this small army of bright and young persons to support their work, and this helps get close to the senior bureaucratic leadership. However, this could create a dependency syndrome and be detrimental in the long run. The government offices could emerge weaker and less capable of efficient programme implementation once this kind of extensive partner support is withdrawn. It is important to limit the support to filling in crucial gaps in roles and responsibilities that can make the system change work happen more effectively and efficiently, while simultaneously working on building capacity within the system to take on these roles in the near future. This strategic lens needs to be used while providing staff support to state government offices.

An unrelenting focus on system strengthening and specific aspects of reform should be maintained, rather than supporting the government with basic implementation tasks. Non-profits need to have a clear set of outcomes related to state-level support so that 'system support' staff do not get drawn into too many routine tasks. While it is not easy to maintain this balance between strategic and routine implementation tasks, this should be a constant theme of reflection within the organisation and with coalition partners. We have found staff who anchor the state project management units (SPMUs) to be increasingly working on day-to-day administrative work to support the Secretary or Project Director.

The closeness of project support staff to the government leadership places them in a unique position to be able to influence strategic decisions for large-scale initiatives. However, a big challenge that is faced by system support partners whose staff works closely with the senior education officers at the state level is that they are unable to take strong positions on important issues. They often find it difficult to promote ideas and strategies that are not aligned with the thinking of the leadership. Since they are seen as an extended arm of the senior government leadership, they are expected to operationalise the ideas and decisions of the senior officers and carry out their instructions.

Following a Cookie-Cutter Approach to Programme Design

Situations in different states and regions in the country are diverse and a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is inappropriate. It is often argued that evidence-based pedagogical solutions for FLN would work in all contexts -for example, the science of reading is universal. This is not true. The approach to early language and literacy development will be hugely different in multilingual contexts where children come to school with oral fluency in a

language that is quite different from the medium of instruction at school and have a limited understanding of that language. Local cultural contexts, past programmatic initiatives and administrative culture would shape the design and implementation in a particular state or regions of a state. It is important to spend time on a situation analysis and interaction with stakeholders in the education ecosystem before working on the programme design for a particular context. Alongside, it is imperative to follow a process for 'co-creation' of the design, materials, training programmes and other components of the programme with the state's academic institutions and teachers who are represented in state level resource groups. Even implementation strategies will differ based on local contexts.

Promising Quick or Unattainable Outcomes

Sometimes non-profits, in an effort to get the buy-in from the government, show pathways to attaining quick results–for example, improved learning outcomes within one year. There is no magic wand to improve learning outcomes and teaching and learning practices need to change for each school and for each child across thousands of classrooms for a transformative change in learning at scale (Bamber & Mourshed, 2007). Often, the promise of quick results is based on an innovation, for example, a technology-based solution. While these interventions are seductive, they make no attempt to address the root causes of inequitable learning.

Conclusion

Over the past few years, governments in India are increasingly collaborating with non-profits for large-scale system-led interventions for improving foundational learning. Some non-profits are entering into coalition arrangements to jointly offer comprehensive support to state governments for the national FLN Mission. This paper has analysed the ways in which such collaborations have worked in the past few years, based on personal reflections and extensive interactions with education leaders in the government and non-profit sectors as well as findings from surveys with teachers and middle-level educational administrators. There are some clear insights emerging about what works (and what doesn't) when non-profits collaborate with state governments in specific contexts for implementation of government led FLN programmes at scale in India. These insights clearly show that the implementation of large-scale programmes that involve a variety of stakeholders in the education ecosystem is a complex process.

While comprehensive FLN programmes with a government-non-profit collaboration model are being implemented in at least 15 states, there is no significant 'implementation research' that is being conducted to develop a better understanding of the processes and 'what works' in specific contexts. The existing research base about why certain implementation processes work, for whom they work and the circumstances under which they work is quite limited (Allison, 2023). In the health sector, implementation science is the scientific study of methods and strategies that facilitate the uptake of evidence-based practice and research into regular use by practitioners and policymakers[xiii]. However, the diverse contexts and complex interactions between stakeholders make the study of education change more difficult and also highly contextual. In the education sector, we need much more implementation research about why and how an intervention or reform works by considering the context, stakeholders, and process of implementation. Of particular interest is the specific case of how government–non-profit collaborations have worked to design and implement large-scale learning improvement and reform programmes in different contexts in India. There are important questions that need to be addressed: How have PMUs functioned and have they been able to promote significant reform? What ways of working with the government have been more successful? In which aspects of programme design and implementation have non-profit contributions been most useful? What changes in the established practices in the system are being sustained/likely to be sustained? How have different approaches to system strengthening worked? What do stakeholders like administrators and teachers feel about non-profits working alongside the government at state and district levels? Have demonstration programmes been able to influence state-wide approaches, practices, and protocols? The insights presented in this paper could help trigger greater interest and studies about implementation practices in programmes that attempt a significant change in teaching and learning at scale with a partnership between the government and nonprofit organisations.

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[i] Learning poverty means being unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/what-is-learning-poverty

[ii] The Samagra Shiksha scheme is an integrated scheme for school education covering the entire gamut from pre-school to class XII. The scheme treats school education as a continuum and is in accordance with Sustainable Development Goal for Education (SDG–4). The scheme not only provides support for the implementation of the

Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 but has also been aligned with the recommendations of the NEP 2020. Find out more at: https://dsel.education.gov.in/scheme/samagra-shiksha

[iii] The Government of India launched the National Mission on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy on 5th July, 2021 known as the 'National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy' (NIPUN Bharat). The goal is for all students to achieve identified FLN skills by 2026.

[iv] These states include Assam, Haryana, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Delhi and Himachal Pradesh.

[v] Some non-profits which have formed coalitions to provide comprehensive FLN support to state governments include Language and learning Foundation, Central Square Foundation, Room to Read, Vikramshila Education Resource Society, The Education Alliance, Leadership for Equity, Piramal Foundation, Sampark Foundation, and Akshara Foundation.

[vi] LLF Language and Learning Foundation (LLF) is a system-focused and impact-driven organisation dedicated to improving student learning at scale in Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) outcomes of Children in India since 2015. LLF believes that a large-scale transformation in the teaching and learning process is required to address this crisis, therefore we work in collaboration with the Indian public education system.

[vii] LLF's internal study in five states (2024).

[viii] In an analysis conducted by LLF in one state, 32 per cent of BEO positions are being managed by a principal from a secondary school.

[ix] Each teacher mentor observes 30 classrooms each month and assesses 5 students during each classroom visit.

[x] These include organisations such as the Bill and Melinda gates Foundation, USAID and a few big corporate social responsibility donors.

[xi] In Uttar Pradesh, Central Square Foundation, Language and Learning Foundation, and Vikramshila Education Resource Society have come together as a coalition. In Madhya Pradesh, The Education Alliance, Room to Read, Central Square Foundation, and Vikramshila Education Resource Society work with the government for the NIPUN programme.

[xii] LiftEd is working in alignment with the Government of India's NIPUN Bharat Mission. It was launched to equip every child in India with Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) skills – the cornerstone on which a child's learning journey is built. LiftEd has convened leaders in education across the private sector and civil society to form an 'impact multiplier', bolstering the government's commitment to India's education goals. LiftEd taking a 'systems change' approach, working with stakeholders who influence education at scale.

[xiii] For more information, refer to: https://impsciuw.org/implementation-science/learn/implementation-science-overview/