

ICON-INSTITUTE GmbH & Co. KG Consulting Gruppe



Ockham Institute for Policy Support



Executive summary

External Evaluation Services: 2023 GEM Report external evaluation

**SUBMITTED TO:
GEM Report**

December 2023

Overview of the evaluation object. The Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM Report), hosted and published by UNESCO, is mandated to monitor progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) in the realm of education. For over 20 years, it has offered essential evidence to assess and monitor the commitment to inclusive, equitable, and quality education worldwide. Since 2015, it has offered a range of online and print publications, including global reports, regional and thematic reports, and online databases. Supported by an Advisory Board, in the last five years its actions were guided by the GEM Report Strategy 2019-2024.

Evaluation objectives and intended audience. This evaluation has the double purpose of i) determining how effectively the GEM Report fulfils its mandate; and ii) informing the updating of the GEM Report's strategy. It includes all GEM Report activities between 2018 and mid-2023, excluding the 2023 GEM Report on technology but including the global report editions up to 2021/2022 and the other GEM Report products.

Key elements of the evaluation methodology. Methodologically, the evaluation covers all revised OECD/DAC criteria: Relevance, Coherence, Effectiveness (including pathways towards impact¹), Efficiency, and Sustainability. It combines the reconstruction of a Theory of Change with a mixed-method approach. Data collection methods include a desk review, semi-structured interviews with representatives from various groups of stakeholders, an online survey of GEM Report users, and bibliometric, citation and social media analysis. A total of 585 individual stakeholders were consulted during the evaluation (44 through interviews, 541 through the online survey). Given the large stakeholder ecosystem surrounding the GEM Report, it is important to recognize some limitations of the evaluation's methodology in terms of representativeness and generalizability. To address these, the report distinguishes between perceptions, expert analysis, and objectively verifiable evidence in its conclusions. An Evaluation Reference Group and the GEM Advisory Board contributed to quality assurance of the evaluation process and the validation of the report.

A reconstructed theory of change for the GEM Report. The evaluation reconstructed the change process envisaged by the GEM Report, not only identifying the logical linkages between problems, activities, outputs, outcome and impact, but also reflecting on its underlying lines of reasoning, working mechanisms and assumptions. The 2015 Incheon Declaration formalised the GEM Report mandate as including two parts:

- monitoring and reporting on progresses related to SDG 4 and education;
- reporting on the implementation of national and international education strategies.

Reflecting on available documentation, the evaluation summarised the problem addressed by the GEM Report as a lack of insights among decision makers in data, evidence and recommendation that can stimulate reflection and allow accountability for education commitments towards SDG 4. Against this, the goal of the GEM Report is to provide the monitoring mechanism, the accountability measures, data, evidence, research and recommendations to stimulate reflection and dialogue at national, regional and global level allowing education systems, plans, policies and budgets to move towards achieving SDG 4.

The associated change process includes several steps:

- 1) Obtain trustworthy data and analyses on SDG 4 and education in other SDGs;
- 2) Report on progress on SDG 4 and explain progress and differences;
- 3) Stimulate reflection and dialogue among its target groups;
- 4) Improve policymaking, plans and policies to provide quality education to all and advance progress towards SDG 4;

¹ By applying a theory-based approach, the evaluation's methodology foresees to assess the impact of the GEM Report towards both contributing to monitoring of SDG 4 and to enhanced uptake of messages at policy level.

5) Contribute to inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (SDG 4).

The GEM Report is directly accountable for reaching the first three steps of the change process (activities and outputs), and indirectly accountable to the two higher levels change (outcomes and impact). In turn, the activities and outputs of the GEM Report include different processes and types of outputs. As detailed in the GEM Report Strategy 2019-2024, besides evidence, research and data these include communication and outreach, as well as policy advocacy and knowledge sharing.

Key findings

Relevance. The evaluation confirms that the GEM Report activities and associated products, including their format and delivery mechanisms, are to a large extent relevant to contribute to its envisaged change process. The majority of stakeholders confirms that GEM publications and related activities are serving both a monitoring and an analytic purpose. In contrast, the balance between the thematic and the monitoring sections of the main report generated much discussion across stakeholders. On one side, GEM Report Team and Advisory Board respondents consider both as equally important to the mandate of the GEM Report; conversely, other respondents showed mixed perceptions of their *relative* importance compared to SDG 4 monitoring, stressing in particular their definition, their relationship with SDG 4, and their prominence in the Global Report. While the Global Report remains the foundation of the GEM Report mandate, other products (including those created during this evaluation period) could benefit from a clearer identification and communication of their relevance to the mandate and its change processes. In this context, the regional reports and the country profiles received particular praise. However, since 2018, the format and delivery mechanisms have become more complex and would benefit from a revision of the online presentation to enhance clarity.

Stakeholders see the thematic discussions in the GEM Report as relevant for the change process, providing research on a critical set of areas which are important to the global education community. At the same time, the engaged stakeholders expressed differing opinions and concerns on the scope of the themes and their relevance for SDG 4 monitoring. While this is understandable in light of the global mandate of the GEM Report, of the complexity and diversity of stakeholders' priorities among education issues, it again emphasises the challenge of aligning themes with monitoring goals.

Coherence. The SDG 4 monitoring landscape in which the GEM Report operates includes various agenda setting and monitoring initiatives, be it at global, regional or national level.² In this diverse environment, the various organisational mandates are not always perceived as clear or lived by. This creates space that can be taken by additional initiatives, prioritising specific aspects of the SDG framework. The evaluation found that such fragmentation negatively affects the position of the GEM Report as the mandated organisation for providing the mechanism for monitoring and reporting on the SDG 4, and thus its value as a global public good. At the same time, against this background, respondents also highlighted the complementarity of the GEM Report and associated products rather than overlaps, with the GEM Report being overall well aligned to other initiatives and working with some of them in partnership. At the outcome and impact level, it is more challenging to find clear evidence on whether the GEM Report's position and recognition enable it to fully contribute to the conducive environment by which countries are stimulated to progress towards the SDG 4. This might be linked to the broader SDG4 architecture envisaged by the Incheon declaration, which does not provide such optimal conducive environment.

Effectiveness. Stakeholders confirm that the GEM Report publications are highly credible, authoritative and supported by extensive consultations and by a solid conceptual framework. The

² E.g. UNDESA SDG Monitoring, SDG Monitoring by "Our World in Data", OECD initiatives (including PISA), UNESCO/UNICEF SDG4 Progress Review of SDG 4 in Asia/Pacific.

review of sources shows the solidity and high-quality of the evidence base used in the GEM Report, with its diversity and strength increasing since 2018. The high regard in which stakeholders hold GEM Report publications indicates that they can meaningfully contribute to monitoring global progress on education goals, offering new and innovative tools to education communities to compare and review national, regional or global progress to SDG 4. Stakeholders consistently reported to have used GEM Report's evidence (e.g., 80% of survey respondents indicated that they either cited GEM Reports in their work, or used GEM Report data). At the same time, the evaluation identified room for more targeted dissemination of GEM products and tools to specific audiences. The growth in numbers and diversification of available tools, publications and outreach activities underline the GEM Report's commitment to engage a variety of stakeholders and stimulate discussion on education policies. This was also corroborated by stakeholders who confirmed usage of GEM Report findings among their partners. At the same time, expectations towards the GEM Report's direct contribution to policy change need to be carefully managed. Overall, the perceptions of stakeholders suggest that its unique value lies more in its ability to provide independent, high quality and relevant research. The evaluation finds that the databases (WIDE, VIEW, SCOPE) and the SDG 4 Scorecard primarily contribute to the first part of GEM Report's mandate, while Global Report, SCOPE, Spotlight support the second. The Global Report, the SDG 4 Scorecard, the Regional Reports and the Policy papers are likely to contribute primarily to the change process leading to reflections and dialogue among target stakeholder groups through providing insights on data and policy. The Youth and Gender reports, PEER, and Education Finance Watch products, are less strongly perceived to be linked to the second part of the mandate.

Efficiency. The evaluation confirms that the planning, implementation and monitoring of GEM Report activities are conducted efficiently: The GEM Report delivers results in an economic and timely way. Both GEM Report staff members and external stakeholders expressed concerns about intense workloads, suggesting an imbalance between the increasing number and diversification of GEM Report products, available budget and staff resources. Furthermore, resources are also stretched in view of an enhanced need for investment in resource mobilisation. At the same time there are concerns on the coordination with UNESCO in the publishing and communication of products and reports. Considering the overall governance structure (i.e., how the GEM Report aligns to the High-level Steering Committee), respondents are overall slightly critical, as they do not always see how the GEM Report gets the best out of this positioning. A critical issue remains on how the governance arrangements and the Advisory Board support the GEM Report to interact and align with the Global Education Cooperation Mechanism. Zooming in on the structure, quality and composition of the Advisory Board, respondents are generally satisfied. They indicate that the meetings are well organised, that the discussions that take place are informative and that the GEM Report team is well-prepared. This being said, as mentioned by some interviewees, the Advisory Board could be more engaged in more strategic and organisational discussions (being discussed in the GEM Report funders' meeting) instead of the focus on themes and content.

Sustainability. The GEM Report funding landscape has improved considerably compared to the period before 2018, both in terms of the scale of support, as well as in ensuring the commitment of a more diverse base of donors, and not least through increasingly including private foundations. However, the evaluation identified a noticeable omission in the donor landscape of the GEM Report: organisations, other than UNESCO, which play a key role at global and regional levels to support countries reaching the SDG4 but that do not appear among the contributors to the GEM Report. These are in particular other UN organisations and other multilateral organisations who are part of the SDG 4-Education 2030 High-Level Steering Committee and who could be expected to support the GEM Report as a global public good and contribute to the sustainability of the GEM Report and its mandate. The continued reliance on primarily short-term funding commitments from donors constitutes another challenge. While the GEM report team's efforts to secure an increasing share of longer-term financial support has led to some

improvements, persistent short-term funding commitments by most donors poses challenges for the longer-term planning of GEM Report activities. Considerations of environmental sustainability, such as reduced printing and online events have overall lowered the GEM Report's carbon footprint. At the same time, physical attendance of the GEM Report team members at launch events and meetings are considered as necessary. Environmental considerations resulting from GEM related travel needs could be reassessed and balanced against the benefits to the envisaged change process.

Conclusions

1. The GEM Report and associated products are highly valued, relevant and influence the work of partners. The GEM Report and its products are widely respected, authoritative, deemed relevant, and have influenced partners' work. They provide valuable insights into global education progress, with regional reports and interactive tools breathing new life in education communities. Potential remains for more targeted dissemination and streamlining these tools for specific audiences. Interviewed stakeholders hold differing opinions on the importance of the thematic versus the monitoring aspects of the GEM Report. For a number of stakeholders, moving closer towards 2030 calls for increased focus on the monitoring aspects to help hold all relevant partners to account for their commitments towards 2030.

2. Stakeholders' and donors' expectations of the role and ambitions of the GEM Report have been moving towards expecting the GEM Report to support policy implementation and influence policy change, which lies beyond the GEM Report mandate and beyond what can reasonably be expected from its theory of change. The mandate does not call explicitly upon the GEM Report to improve policymaking or countries progressing towards the SDGs. The GEM Report provides an institutional framework for discussions and reflections and provides the data to feed such discussions. Improved policymaking is however fully dependent on the countries themselves and to some extent on organisations that support them. This being said, there are expectations, especially among some donors, that the GEM Report contributes more directly to policy change. Hence, the expectations need be managed carefully. The unique value added of the GEM Report in the busy field of international education policy community is not its ability to influence national policies – which could divert it away from its mandate if it starts engaging with individual policies in individual countries – but primarily its ability to provide independent, high quality and 'policy relevant research and analysis.

3. GEM Report's position as a global public good is challenged in the global education environment marked by proliferating initiatives and competition. The fragmented environment around SDG 4 monitoring has led to various organizations launching additional initiatives, requiring heightened efforts for the report to assert its significance and authority as a global public good.

4. The expanded variety of GEM Report products since 2018 has been comprehensive and structured, but the overall contribution of a number of the additional products to the GEM Report core mandate ('monitoring' and 'holding stakeholders to account') remains less clear, while they do contribute to a perceived overstretching of GEM Report staff. Since 2018, the GEM Report has seen a considerable shift in focus, most visibly observed in the increasing range of publications and tools developed. While this expansion has been comprehensive and structured, its overall contribution to its core mandate remains less clear. Overall, the Global Report, the databases (WIDE, VIEW, SCOPE) and the SDG 4 Scorecard are most contributing to the first part of the mandate (monitoring). The second part of the mandate is best supported by the Global Report, SCOPE, Spotlight and the SDG 4 Scorecard (holding to account). The Youth and Gender reports, Profiles Enhancing Education Reviews (PEER), and Education Finance Watch products, while serving their specific purpose, are less strongly linked to the mandate and contributing to the envisaged change process. Furthermore, these additional

products, while also attracting additional donors, also put pressure on the GEM Report staff, who have seen the amount and variety of work across these publications increase substantially.

5. Short-term financial commitments from its donors continue to limit the longer-term sustainability of the GEM Report. By 2023, the concerns about the GEM Report's long-term sustainability remain unresolved, with heavy dependence on short-term funding, and consequent implications on long-term planning.

Recommendations

On the basis of its conclusions and the suggestions from engaged stakeholders, the evaluation developed the following four recommendations:

- A. Consider rebalancing the monitoring and thematic part of the GEM Report:** While the evaluation team recognises that the thematic parts of the global report are highly valued, with only seven years from 2030, the monitoring part could receive more prominence in the global report and other products so as to increase an overall sense of urgency in relation to progress towards SDG 4. The GEM Report could more actively take up its mandate to help hold countries and stakeholders to account for their commitments. This could mean to move beyond passively publishing the data available on the indicators, but building on the mechanism that allows countries to set their own priorities and agree on which indicators they are monitored (in line with steps already taken together with UIS on the benchmarking). This would also better link the monitoring and the policy part of the mandate. The mandate of the GEM Report allows for its publications and team to be bolder and more critical about the lack of progress when presenting country data, in an effort to encourage debates and reflections on the way forward. The following actions could be considered:
- 1) Prioritise a selection of the SDG 4 indicators and targets that are disruptive enough for governments to act as proxy for progress.
 - 2) Focus the thematic part of the GEM Report more on the underlying dynamics of why countries do not progress towards the SDG 4.
- B. Consider streamlining and better integrating the number of GEM Report products to better fulfil the mandate of monitoring progress and help holding partners to account on their commitments:** While the different GEM Report products are appreciated, they differ in their connection and relevance in relation to the GEM Report mandate concerning monitoring progress and help holding partners to account on their commitments. In relation to this, it is recommended to streamline and better integrate the GEM Report products and activities in line with the GEM Report mandate and to streamline and integrate the work processes leading to the GEM Report products better to reduce the experienced workload of the GEM Report staff. The following action could be considered:
- 1) Further improve the links between GEM Report products and bring them in line so they together in the best way contribute to fulfilling the GEM Report mandate (in line with the available funding).
- C. Better mobilise partners working directly in countries to use GEM Report products for impact and policy change:** The evaluation showed the limits of what can be expected from the GEM Report in terms of reaching actual policy change. It should be up to other organisations – those that work directly with stakeholders in countries – to use the GEM Report's findings and analysis to support countries in developing and implementing policies by which they progress towards the SDGs. This requires the GEM Report to clarify its envisaged change process and identify which other organisations can play a role in bringing the GEM Report messages to impact at the policy level. This implies better knowing how the GEM Report and related products are used and by whom. It also requires building more operational partnerships with organisations active in the

countries. This work is not limited to building partnerships, it should also strengthen the communication, active outreach, and follow-up activities to keep partners working in countries engaged. Through enhanced cooperation with such organisations, the GEM Report will be able to complete its envisaged change process, and as such make its contribution to moving countries in the direction of SDG 4 (noting that such movement remains outside the GEM Reports' accountability). The following action could be considered:

- 1) Further strengthen operational partnerships with organisations active in the countries (i.e., UN Country teams, UNESCO and regional organisations) and involve them already in the preparation of reports and in planning activities after the reports are published and mobilise them to engage in discussions at country/regional level.
- 2) Further strengthen the communication and outreach activities to keep all partners, at global, regional and national levels engaged in the GEM Report related discussions so that they bring the messages to the ministerial and programmatic levels.

D. Adopt a strategic vision that reflects on the envisaged change process and that demands from the community sustainable funding to function as global public good:

The evaluation found that the mandate of the GEM Report is still highly relevant and coherent to what can be expected from the GEM Report. However, it seems to lack the power to position GEM Report well in the changing landscape. A reflection on the mandate in this changing landscape and reaffirmation of the position of the GEM Report in the wider infrastructure related to SDG 4, could help to strengthen the recognition by international organisations and countries of the GEM Report as a global public good. This reflection could inform the development of a new strategy prioritising the sustainability of the GEM Report in terms of requiring long-term financial commitments from those organisations that acknowledge that the GEM Report is a global public good and worthwhile funding (without earmarking). The following actions could be considered:

- 1) Develop a new strategy taking into account the above recommendations and considerations.
- 2) Further seek long-term financial support to better secure the GEM Report as global public good by approaching the global community (including explicitly organisations in the UN family).
- 3) Refine the value-for-money indicators in line with the new production and dissemination strategies.
- 4) Further monitor the carbon footprint of the report production cycle, including travel, printing and other activities following the 2021 UNESCO Environmental Sustainability and Management Policy.