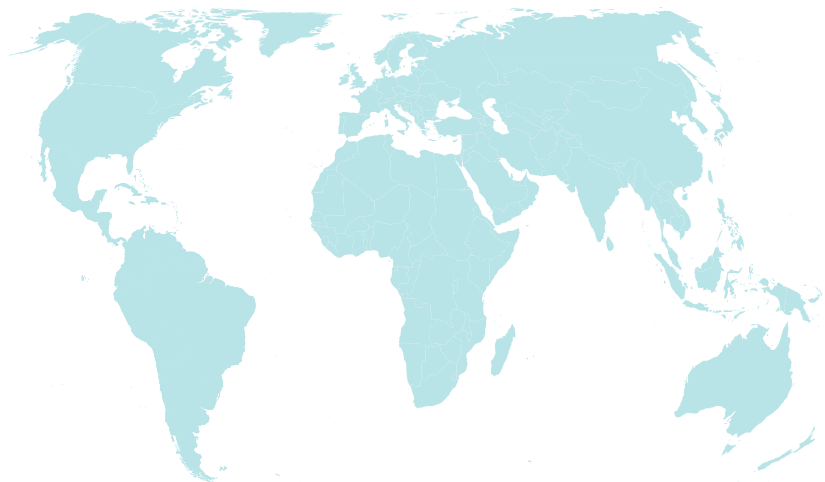


# Strengthening Peer Learning of Education Policies for SDG 4: The Role of Regional Organizations

A wide range of indicators has been defined to support country efforts to monitor progress towards UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. Most are quantitative and focus on education outputs and outcomes. While such indicators are needed to inform and guide education decision-making, they provide only a partial picture. Understanding how and why progress is being made is also important. Evidence-based policy is best conducted when it draws on additional information from national education systems, for example, major legislation; policies on teachers, curriculum and assessment; finance and governance practices; non-formal education programmes; and recent education reforms.

Some aspects of systems and policies can be represented with quantitative indicators. For example, information on the existence and duration of free and compulsory education can be gleaned from official documents. Other, more complex aspects require qualitative measures, involving both an examination of pertinent sources and exercise of expertise and proper judgement. For instance, the indicator on country efforts to mainstream sustainable development and global citizenship within curricula and teacher education requires careful judgement related to educational content from a comparative perspective.



This paper looks at an array of existing regional approaches to monitoring education systems and policies, as potential tools to evaluate and explain progress in the SDG 4 agenda. It may prove difficult for countries to contribute the information necessary to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their systems. Using regional organizations as an entry point may help address this challenge. This paper contends that it is members of regional organizations that are most likely to exchange information on their systems and reach consensus on purpose and policy priorities, prompted by in-depth national commitment and engagement.

Different parts of the world are establishing peer learning educational processes through regional organizations with educational agendas. Peer learning describes 'public officials or other practitioners with some responsibility for reform design gaining practical insights into technical reform options and tactical modes of implementation from each other' (Andrews and Manning, 2016). Such learning can occur through meetings, focused discussions (supported by expert papers or joint comparative assessments), experience sharing or formal training sessions. The basis for joint activity is a regional education strategy document aligning members to common goals.

This paper reviews regional peer learning experiences in high income countries, Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean, assesses reasons such mechanisms thrive to the benefit of participating countries and considers how they could be used to further the universal SDG 4 agenda at the regional level.

## PEER LEARNING IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

The European Union (EU) supports quality education, notably by “developing exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the education systems of the Member States”. The Member States agreed to include this explicitly in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

To give shape to this ambition, the EU’s Council of Education Ministers and the European Commission developed the Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020) strategic framework for cooperation in education and training in the EU (Council of the European Union, 2009). It provides jointly agreed strategic objectives for the 28 Member States and common working methods with priority areas for each periodic work cycle. ET 2020 is a forum for mutual learning, gathering and dissemination of information, as well as advice, peer learning activities and support for policy reforms. Member States can call on their partners for tailor-made peer counselling under ET 2020 to support a particular national reform agenda in education and training and transfer knowledge to policy makers at all levels.

In order to ensure the successful implementation of ET 2020, Working Groups composed of experts nominated by member countries and other key stakeholders work on common EU-level tools and policy guidance. The primary focus of the Working Groups is to benefit the Member States in the work of furthering policy development through mutual learning and the identification of good practices, as well as understand what works in education. Working Groups are open to all Member States; Candidate and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) Countries; invited EU institutional partners, such as the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and the European Training Foundation (ETF); and social partner organisations (European Commission, 2017).

As a means of monitoring progress and identifying challenges, and contributing to evidence-based policy making, a set of reference levels of European average performance (‘European benchmarks’) was established to support the ET 2020 strategic objectives. Progress toward these benchmarks is charted every year in the *Education and Training Monitor* (European Commission, 2016). The publication relies on a broad range of quantitative and qualitative sources, including the Eurydice network.

The Eurydice network was established in 1980 and acts as information hub on contextual factors and qualitative aspects of education systems in Europe through its network of 40 national units in 36 countries. In addition to supporting the European Commission in preparing the *Education and Training Monitor*, which is the annual monitoring report for ET2020, Eurydice produces an online database of national education systems updated by national authorities (Eurydice, 2017a); comparative thematic studies (Eurydice, 2017b); and statistical factsheets in selected areas, such as education system structures, teacher salaries, and student fees in higher education.

### BOX 1

#### Setting common education standards at the Council of Europe

Built on the foundation of the European Cultural Convention (1954), the Council of Europe has an education programme that combines standard-setting and monitoring with co-operation and capacity building activities. The 47 Member States have adopted recommendations setting standards on topics such as quality education (2012), academic freedom and institutional autonomy (2012), education for democratic citizenship and human rights (2010) and higher education and research (2007). Monitoring is mostly conducted on the basis of qualitative indicators and data, such as the 5-year review cycle of the recommendation on education for democratic citizenship and human rights education, whose last round was concluded in June 2017.

The Council of Europe offers a range of policy measures to support implementation, such as rapid response or short-term interventions to help with one-off processes such as the review of legislation; and thematic or longer-term support around issues such as curriculum reform, inclusive education, and tools to support national progress monitoring. A new tool supporting implementation is the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, which from 2018 will amongst other things support the development of indicators and collection of data in four areas: curriculum, assessment, teacher education and pedagogy. The above activity is subject to inter-governmental peer review through regular Ministerial-level meetings and twice-yearly meetings of Ministry of Education officials.

Source: Council of Europe (2017).

## OECD: PEER LEARNING THROUGH THE INDICATORS OF EDUCATION SYSTEMS PROGRAMME

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is another cross-country mechanism of cooperation and peer learning, albeit not regionally based. Its Education Policy Committee of nationally appointed senior officials provides strategic oversight to the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills on policy and implementation issues ranging from early childhood education and care to youth and adult skills acquisition (OECD, 2017).

The Indicators of Education Systems (INES) programme, established in 1992, provides comparative performance data on education systems in the 34 OECD member countries and selected partner countries. These are made available primarily in the annual *Education at a Glance*. Among its aims, INES seeks to ‘accelerate improvements in education by enabling member and partner countries to learn from each others’ experiences’ (OECD, 2012).

One strand of the programme’s work focuses on ‘learning environment and the organization of schools’, which collects information on issues such as curricular content and decision-making responsibilities. In 2009, it evolved into the INES Network for System-Level Indicators (NESLI). ‘As mutual confidence and understanding is a prerequisite for establishing internationally comparable data’, the data collection process ‘requires considerable specialized expertise that depends on stable international working arrangements’ (OECD, 2009). INES oversight and coordination bodies determine the NESLI work plan. NESLI collects system-level data on, for example, teacher remuneration and instruction time using annual, cyclical or ad hoc surveys. Recent years have included data from non-member countries like Brazil (**Box 2**).

INES and NESLI follow in a long tradition of expanding diagnostic tools developed by the OECD. Systematic country education policy reviews, carried out since the 1970s, have diversified, focusing on selected areas or levels of education, such as early childhood or post-secondary skills acquisition. Concurrently, different information sources are being unified, for example through the Education GPS database, which links information on system indicators with other sources, and the *Education Policy Outlook* series (OECD, 2015). Finally, information sources outside INES, including the Higher Education Stakeholder Forum and the Early Childhood Education and Care Network, focus on benchmarking or identifying best practices to facilitate peer learning.

### BOX 2

#### Engaging in multiple initiatives to diagnose education systems – the case of Brazil

In recent years, the OECD has expanded diagnostic education system assessments to cover non-member countries, e.g. education policy reviews of the Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Tajikistan and, jointly with UNESCO, Malaysia and Thailand. NESLI has also sought to engage OECD candidate countries, such as Colombia and Lithuania, and non-member countries, such as Brazil and the Russian Federation.

Brazil joined NESLI after participating in the World Education Indicators project, a joint OECD/UNESCO Institute for Statistics/World Bank effort. Brazil has benefited from both information exchange with other countries and improved domestic coordination between departments necessitated to collect the information. Limitations include Brazil’s inability to influence NESLI’s agenda as a non-OECD country and, as a federal country with a high degree of decentralization, difficulties reporting national-level information.

Brazil is also a member of several regional and sub-regional groupings that promote exchange of information on education systems. The Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI) has a common education agenda that increasingly looks at qualitative aspects of education systems. Mercosur is a customs union and trading bloc, which considers education one factor promoting regional integration and has carried out comparative reviews of member countries’ education systems.

Source: Mercosur (2008); OEI (2010).

## PEER LEARNING ON EDUCATION POLICIES IN OTHER REGIONS

While intergovernmental peer learning networks in high income countries have built a track record over past few decades and are well resourced, there are important examples in other regions too. These regional organizations have analysed systems and policies, although usually in relation to particular aspects of education.

### LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Several regional and sub-regional organizations have education strategies and members engaged in peer learning activities. The **Organization of Ibero-American States** (OEI) developed *Metas Educativas 2021* (Education Goals 2021), an education strategy approved by 23 governments at the 20th Ibero-American Summit of Heads of State and Government in 2010. Integration with SDG 4 is underway.

Located at OEI's Madrid headquarters, the Institute of Monitoring and Evaluation is a specialized body established to review progress on Metas Educativas' 11 targets and 39 indicators. The Institute's governing council of nationally appointed members reports to the conference of education ministers (OEI, 2015). The Institute's advisory board encourages the participation of educational, social and economic partners in monitoring and developing Metas Educativas 2021.

Begun in 2011, the annual *Miradas* (Perspectives) report publishes progress on the 11 targets, based on submissions from national institutes of education evaluation. Every two years, the report adopts a theme and offers a basis for peer learning, e.g. teacher status, training and evaluation (2013), education of indigenous and Afro-descendant people and communities (2015), professional development and leadership of school principals (2017).

The work of the **Caribbean Community** (CARICOM) is organized under the Council for Human and Social Development, which comprises different portfolio ministers from 15 member states and dependencies. In 2014, CARICOM heads of government established the Human Resource Development Commission of experts and stakeholders. The commission was tasked with shaping the Regional Education and Human Resource Development 2030 Strategy and Action Plan, with support from the CARICOM Secretariat and funding from the Caribbean Development Bank (CARICOM, 2016). The strategy will be accompanied by a monitoring framework and a plan to develop national capacity through regional education sector monitoring and evaluation meetings.

Harmonization of education policy in the Caribbean is in part to facilitate free movement of labour under the CARICOM Single Market and Economy and the revised Treaty of Chaguaramas commitment to establish common standards and ensure mutual recognition of qualifications (CARICOM, 2017). Additionally, the CARICOM Association of National Training Agencies

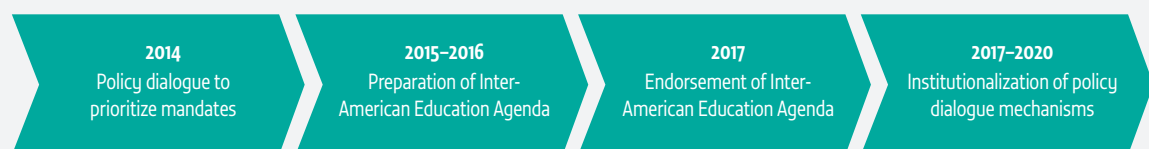
(CANTA) and other technical vocational education and training apex bodies implement the regional coordination policy in this sector. CANTA shares information on best practices and seeks to establish the Caribbean Vocational Qualification as a regional certification scheme.

CARICOM is also overseeing work on teaching quality to foster regional competitiveness. In 2010, the Task Force on Teaching and Teacher Education launched the Framework for the Establishment of National Teaching Councils to operate under the umbrella of the Caribbean Community Council for Teaching and Teacher Education. In 2013, the Council for Human and Social Development launched Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession in the Caribbean Community.

Comprising 34 member states, including Canada and the United States, the **Organization of American States** (OAS) has a ministerial meeting every two years to discuss current issues in education policy and practice, establish a regional agenda for educational cooperation and review progress on the education-related mandate granted by the Summit of the Americas. Each ministerial meeting caps a policy dialogue process aimed at strengthening national educational policies and programmes through the exchange of lessons learned among member states. Proposed actions then feed into the work plan of the Inter-American Committee on Education, a permanent dialogue mechanism consisting of the regular meetings and meetings of the authorities held by education ministry representatives. The committee is supported by the Department of Human Development, Education and Employment at the OAS General Secretariat.

The 2015 ministerial meeting called for an Inter-American Education Agenda in three priority areas: (1) quality, inclusive and equitable education; (2) strengthened teaching profession; and (3) comprehensive early childhood education and care. It also requested the institutionalization of policy dialogue mechanisms and cooperation mechanisms to foster mutual knowledge (**Figure 1**). The agenda

**FIGURE 1:**  
Current attempts to strengthen policy dialogue in the Organization of American States



Source: OAS (2016).

was approved at the 2017 ministerial meeting and is expected to be 'an important tool to support OAS member states in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (OAS, 2017). Proposed actions include developing state-of-the-art teacher training and public policies on early childhood care in all its forms.

## ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

A wide array of sub-regional organizations have an active interest in education that engages members in peer learning.

The **Pacific Islands Forum** (PIF), comprising 16 countries and some associate members, has its roots in trade and economic cooperation. The first Forum Education Ministers' Meeting, held in 2001 by request of ministers of finance, agreed on a regional vision and plan. In 2009, this became the Pacific Education Development Framework within the Pacific Plan for Strengthening Regional Cooperation and Development. Currently under review, the framework would coordinate regional activities, provide advocacy and lead policy dialogue. The monitoring process requires ministries to report annual achievements against targets aligned with international commitments and encourages the sharing of ideas and experiences. The Forum Education Ministers' Meeting is supported by the Pacific Heads of Education Systems group.

Working groups of ministry and development partner representatives assess different sub-sectors and cross-cutting themes to formulate regional strategies and approaches, e.g. the guidelines for developing the National Quality Frameworks for Childhood Care and Education (PIFS, 2014). The guidelines offer a template for national efforts based on research and consultations with regional sector professionals and leaders. In addition, Post Forum Dialogue with key partners has fostered cooperation with key donors, including China, the European Union, Japan and the United States. As 14 of 16 PIF member states are developing countries, a large share of funding is provided by Australia and New Zealand.

The **Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization** (SEAMEO) mission includes aligning educational goals among its 11 member states and promoting regional understanding and cooperation. Primary means include partnerships, establishing networks and facilitating discussion and peer learning among policy-makers and experts. Eight high income affiliate countries and main donor country Japan help fund various programmes and the Education

Development Fund, created in 1973. The SEAMEO council of ministers decides organizational focus and direction. Background papers and country case studies prepared by the SEAMEO Secretariat, College and regional centres form a basis for regional agreement on future direction.

SEAMEO's education agenda to 2035 outlines seven priority areas: (1) early childhood care and education, (2) barriers to inclusion, (3) resilience in emergencies, (4) technical and vocational education and training, (5) teacher education, (6) higher education, (7) a 21st century curriculum. The agenda addresses these priorities in two ways: regional centres of excellence (dedicated to teachers of mathematics, science and language, for example) under the umbrella of the SEAMEO College; and harmonized education standards (for early childhood care and education or primary learning outcomes, for example).

SEAMEO's overarching aims are linked to the broader objectives of the **Association of Southeast Asian Nations** (ASEAN), its plan for an ASEAN Economic Community and its Work Plan on Education 2016–2020. The SEAMEO and ASEAN secretariats convene an annual coordination meeting to pursue shared regional goals and priorities on education. With this strategic objective in mind, ASEAN and SEAMEO are taking steps to harmonize regional higher education systems to facilitate mobility of students, faculty and researchers for better regional economic integration. This analysis has led to work that compares, links and coordinates higher education systems in areas such as quality assurance, credit transfers and student exchange programmes (Niedermeier and Pohlenz, 2016; Ratanawijitrasin, 2015).

The **South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation** (SAARC) comprises eight countries whose heads of state convene at bi-annual summits. The council of foreign ministers meets twice a year to prepare the agenda and follow up on key decisions. A Standing Committee of Foreign Secretaries is responsible for overall monitoring and for coordinating cooperation programmes, approving projects and identifying new areas of cooperation (Singh, 2017).

Efforts for regional education cooperation have not been systematic. An initiative for coordination among open and distance learning institutions in the late 1990s, for instance, was short-lived. A call by SAARC Committee of Heads of University Grants Commissions/Equivalent Bodies to establish a SAARC Quality Assurance Network in 2015 has not been fulfilled. A notable exception is South Asian



University, an international university offering post-graduate and doctoral programmes, which started operations in 2010, with operational costs shared by all member states.

However, the SDG agenda has galvanized cooperation among SAARC member states. The 2nd meeting of SAARC Ministers of Education in October 2014 issued the New Delhi Declaration on Education, which called for a cooperation mechanism and identified regional priority areas of action. The New Delhi Agreement for enhancing SAARC collaboration for Education 2030 of October 2015 further called for a SAARC Framework for Action for implementation of SDG 4 and a coordination mechanism along the lines of that of SEAMEO. A partnership based on a memorandum of understanding with SEAMEO is an option being considered.

A draft SAARC Framework for Action was submitted in September 2016. Its action plan lists 13 joint activities, with expected results, timelines and proposed lead countries for each activity, representing an important statement of intent. However, key coordination and implementation decisions are pending on issues such as the ministerial coordination mechanism, SAARC Secretariat capacity, fund sharing, apex research/educational institution networks, best practice sharing and policy dialogue, and a joint monitoring mechanism. Further action is currently on hold, since the meeting to formally adopt the Framework was postponed.

## AFRICA

The **Association for the Development of Education in Africa** (ADEA) has been leading policy dialogue for 30 years. Its roots lie in an initiative to promote donor coordination. As a result, the ADEA is governed by a steering committee of 10 ministers of education and 10 representatives of multilateral and bilateral development organizations. It is supported by an executive committee, which facilitates decisions on operational matters. The ministers on the steering committee constitute the ADEA Bureau of Ministers, which provides a framework for dialogue and consultation. The ADEA elaborates strategic medium-term plans, the most recent of which covers the period 2013–2017. The ADEA is currently hosted by the African Development Bank.

In 2008, the ADEA signed an accord protocol with the **African Union** (AU) and merged its Bureau of Ministers with the AU's corresponding Bureau of the Conference

of Ministers of Education. ADEA annual programmes and activities must reflect the convergence between the strategic objectives of both. The ADEA Secretariat and the AU Commission on Human Resources, Science and Technology hold regular discussions. The elaboration of the AU Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016–2025 offers an opportunity to define clear responsibilities and make effective use of the two organizations' comparative advantages. The AU is also introducing an Annual Report of Continental Activities to provide a concise progress reporting mechanism on the strategy (Byll-Cataria, 2017).

ADEA working groups carry out research, capacity building, advocacy and networking activities. They cover, among other areas, books and learning materials, higher education, non-formal education, and teachers, largely overlapping with the seven AU areas of priority. The ADEA has also set up five Inter-Country Quality Nodes, led by ministries of education, which bring together countries and strategic partners in early childhood development (Mauritius), literacy and languages (Burkina Faso), mathematics and science education (Kenya), peace education (Kenya) and technical and vocational skills development (Côte d'Ivoire). Finally, with the support of the OECD, the ADEA has also initiated peer review processes in five countries.

The ADEA biennale/triennale and specialized conferences are key focal points for policy dialogue. Following the Maputo biennale (2008), many countries elaborated policies to extend basic education from six to nine years. A conference in Dakar (2009) was followed by the development of early childhood development strategies across the region. A conference on bilingual education in Windhoek (2005) contributed to the decision by AU heads of state to integrate African languages into education systems. The conference on contract teachers in Bamako (2004) was linked to the development of a training process and the alignment of their status with that of civil servants in 7 of 12 francophone countries that had participated.

## PEER LEARNING, REGIONAL EDUCATION STRATEGIES AND SDG 4

Education strategies and policies transform resources (the traditional focus of education monitoring) into effective processes (rarely monitored), resulting in measurable outcomes (the current focus of education

monitoring in the SDG agenda). Determining which systems and policies are effective relies considerably on the nature of the evidence collected and analysed. Sharing experiences between countries and promoting policy dialogue, based on broadly comparable information on education systems, will facilitate the collection of such evidence and effective decision-making.

While a global framework for reviewing education systems and policies is desirable, a regional or sub-regional framework is a feasible first step. Many regions have common educational contexts and can structure reviews to reflect shared values, objectives and challenges. While the range of topics covered is broad, an interest in regional economic integration and labour mobility drives much of regional education policy work (Table 1).

Members of regional entities are more likely to demonstrate stronger political commitment to regional or sub-regional peer learning processes. The results of such processes are then more likely to be used in policy-making and sustained over time, not least because governments have an interest in the performance of neighbouring countries.

With greater country commitment to regional processes comes the need for stronger coordination mechanisms from the regional intergovernmental organizations that include education development among their objectives. Countries can draw on the experiences presented in this paper to take stock

of their policy dialogue processes, peer learning mechanisms and system-level indicators. It is an especially timely moment to assess the extent to which these are relevant to their regions, as well as to the Education 2030 agenda.

This brief overview has shown that almost all regions in the world have established entities that allow countries to share information on education and learn from each other. Strengthening policy dialogue and peer learning mechanisms at the regional level entails the following:

- A regional education strategy needs to be in place, with clear priorities, targets, resources and monitoring frameworks.
- Regional education strategies should consider ways to align with the global education strategy, represented by SDG 4 and the Education 2030 Framework for Action, and provide regional perspectives for how SDG 4 targets will be achieved.
- The process of improved alignment between regional and global education targets and monitoring frameworks can be facilitated by UNESCO regional offices and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. A mapping of strategies, targets and monitoring frameworks would be helpful in that respect.
- The technical units and secretariats that coordinate regional processes need to have clear political guidance and operate within an explicit policy cycle to ensure ownership and the translation of findings into relevant recommendations.

**TABLE 1:**  
Selected areas of peer learning activities in education policy, by regional organization

Organization (Strategy)	Early childhood care and education	Teachers	Learning assessment	Technical education	Higher education	Accreditation	Education indicators
ADEA/AU (Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016–2025)	X	X		X	X		X
CARICOM (Regional Education and Human Resource Development 2030 Strategy)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
EU (ET 2020)	X	X		X	X	X	X
OAS (Inter-American Education Agenda)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
OEI (Metas Educativas 2021)	X	X			X	X	X
PIF (Pacific Education Development Framework [under review])	X	X		X	X	X	X
SAARC (Education 2030: SAARC Framework for Action)							
SEAMEO (7 Priority Areas 2015–2035)/ ASEAN (Work Plan on Education 2016–2020)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Note: SAARC peer learning activities have not yet begun on a systematic basis.  
Source: GEM Report team analysis of various regional organization documents.

- Peer learning activities should be planned and comprehensively addressed in all priority areas in education over the course of strategy implementation.
- Resources need to be dedicated to cover the considerable coordination costs of peer learning mechanisms and need to be allocated in a way that motivates participation and contribution by all member states.
- Regional organizations with a strong record of peer learning processes in education should be encouraged to reach out to other organizations, seeking to strengthen their capacity to conduct such processes.

References for this paper can be found online at the following link: [https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/sites/gem-report/files/SDG4Paper\\_References.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/sites/gem-report/files/SDG4Paper_References.pdf)

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