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# Early Grade Reading Programs Scaling Up with Evidence of Outcomes

Nepal



## TRANSFORMING EVALUATIONS INTO ACTION

*International donors are increasing available funding to an early grade reading program in Nepal after an impact evaluation proved the program’s effectiveness and supported national expansion.*

### CONTEXT

In 2014, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) supported a nationally representative early grade reading assessment in Nepal, which found that 34 percent of second graders and 19 percent of third graders could not read a single word in Nepali. In response, USAID’s Early Grade Reading Program (EGRP) provided direct financial and technical support to the Nepali government to scale up and assess the National Early Grade Reading Program (NEGRP). EGRP’s theory of change proposed that providing inputs such as teacher training, ongoing teacher support, early grade reading materials, dedicated instruction time, out-of-school reading activities, and parent and community support would improve reading instruction and opportunities to practice reading in and outside of school, thereby improving reading ability. The USAID program worked with non-governmental organizations, schools, and parent-teacher associations to implement advocacy campaigns, develop materials, and conduct teacher training.

## EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

From 2016 to 2020, USAID supported a quasi-experimental impact evaluation of the USAID-funded EGRP and Nepal's now expanded NEGRP. Conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, the [impact evaluation of the NEGRP](#)<sup>1</sup> focused on grades 1 through 3, and measured the effects of the EGRP and NEGRP on reading outcomes in two pupil cohorts over four years. The first of these cohorts (6 districts) received the full intervention package<sup>2</sup> for all four years, and the second cohort (10 districts) received a light intervention<sup>3</sup> over the first two years followed by the full intervention over the next two years. The two-cohort design was chosen in order to 1) phase the implementation of a new program, and 2) observe potential differences in the two approaches to inform the roll-out of the program to the rest of the country. The main questions the impact evaluation sought to answer focused on the extent to which the NEGRP improved the reading outcomes of native and non-native Nepali speakers.

The evaluators used a difference-in-differences approach to measure the impact of the programs on student achievement and to inform the Nepali Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology's ten-year School Education Sector Plan. Difference-in-differences is a widely used and simple methodology that compares the changes between baseline and endline in the treatment group with the changes between baseline and endline in a comparison group.

## EVALUATION FINDINGS

The EGRP interventions supported by USAID and the Government of Nepal were highly effective in helping students improve their reading achievement. The program improved the reading performance of pupils in cohort 1 (4 years of full intervention) and cohort 2 (2 years of light intervention, plus 2 years of full intervention), as well as for students who are native and non-native Nepali speakers. At baseline and midline, there was still a very large gap, however, in reading skills between students with Nepali mother tongue and students with a non-Nepali mother tongue, approximately equivalent to one full year of schooling. The NEGRP was able to improve performance among non-Nepali mother tongue students but not enough to reduce the disadvantage they experience as non-native speakers.

Teachers' instructional practices in the classrooms improved after receiving NEGRP training. The program was successful at ensuring students' access to Nepali-language workbooks and leveled reading materials, as well as ensuring teachers' access to teaching guidelines, materials, and curriculum. Almost all teachers reported using these resources. Thus, it is likely that a combination of improved teaching practices with broad access to and use of learning and teaching materials contributed to the positive effects of the program.

<sup>1</sup> All impact evaluations in the Evidence to Action briefs follow USAID standards as defined in ADS 201.3.6.4. For more information, see the [USAID Evaluation Policy](#) and the full [EGRP Impact Evaluation](#).

<sup>2</sup> Includes distribution of Nepali teaching and learning materials, in-service teacher training, teacher coaching, mentoring, and support; and public service announcements to promote early grade reading.

<sup>3</sup> Includes distribution of some teaching and learning materials; orientations for head teachers and school management committees; equipment distribution; and public service announcements.





## ACTION BASED ON EVIDENCE FROM THE FINDINGS

The Government of Nepal used the evaluation findings to inform the selection of priority actions in basic education under the School Education Sector Plan; improve the implementation of the EGRP; and develop a plan to scale up the NEGRP to new districts, expanding the program nationally. Additionally, conducting the early grade reading assessment helped induce the development of a scientific measurement and threshold determination for reading in grades 1 through 3 in Nepal. Using these lessons, USAID and several other donors, including the World Bank, the Global Partnership for Education, the Asian Development Bank, the European Union, and the Embassy of Finland, will support the Government of Nepal to roll out the NEGRP nationally; development partners will pool funds and use a results-based financing modality to continue to support the NEGRP's expansion. Nepal's Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology is already allocating budgets to the districts implementing the reading program and adding new districts each year.<sup>4</sup>

## LESSONS LEARNED

- **Clear results can help streamline and improve national assessments.** Previously, the Government of Nepal conducted National Assessments of Student Achievement in a variety of subjects such as math, language, and science, using non-standardized tests. However, with the results of the NEGRP impact evaluation, the government decided to save time and money by only assessing student's ability to understand and work with numbers and reading (the foundation for learning in higher grades) through the National Assessment of Reading and Numeracy that uses internationally practiced assessments such as the Early Grade Reading Assessment.
- **Learning by doing strengthens local capacity.** By conducting early grade reading assessments and developing testing tools, the Nepali Education Review Office built its staff capacity to conduct assessments. Using the techniques learned under the program, the Education Review Office is independently conducting national assessments of reading and numeracy. The Government of Nepal has institutionalized the early grade reading assessment and the Education Ministry uses in-house expertise, supported by a partnership with a research firm, to conduct sampling and collect data.



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<sup>4</sup> During the first phase ending in 2022, 38 districts were covered by the NEGRP. Moving forward, the program hopes to expand the NEGRP across all of Nepal's 77 districts.

*This document was produced for review by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It was prepared by Environmental Incentives for the Program Cycle Mechanism. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of Environmental Incentives, LLC, and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the U.S. government.*