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# ALL CHILDREN READING ASIA (ACR-ASIA)

## USAID SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING REVIEW

### CASE STUDY - NEPAL

November 14, 2022

AID-OAA-TO-16-00017

September 2016 – January 2023

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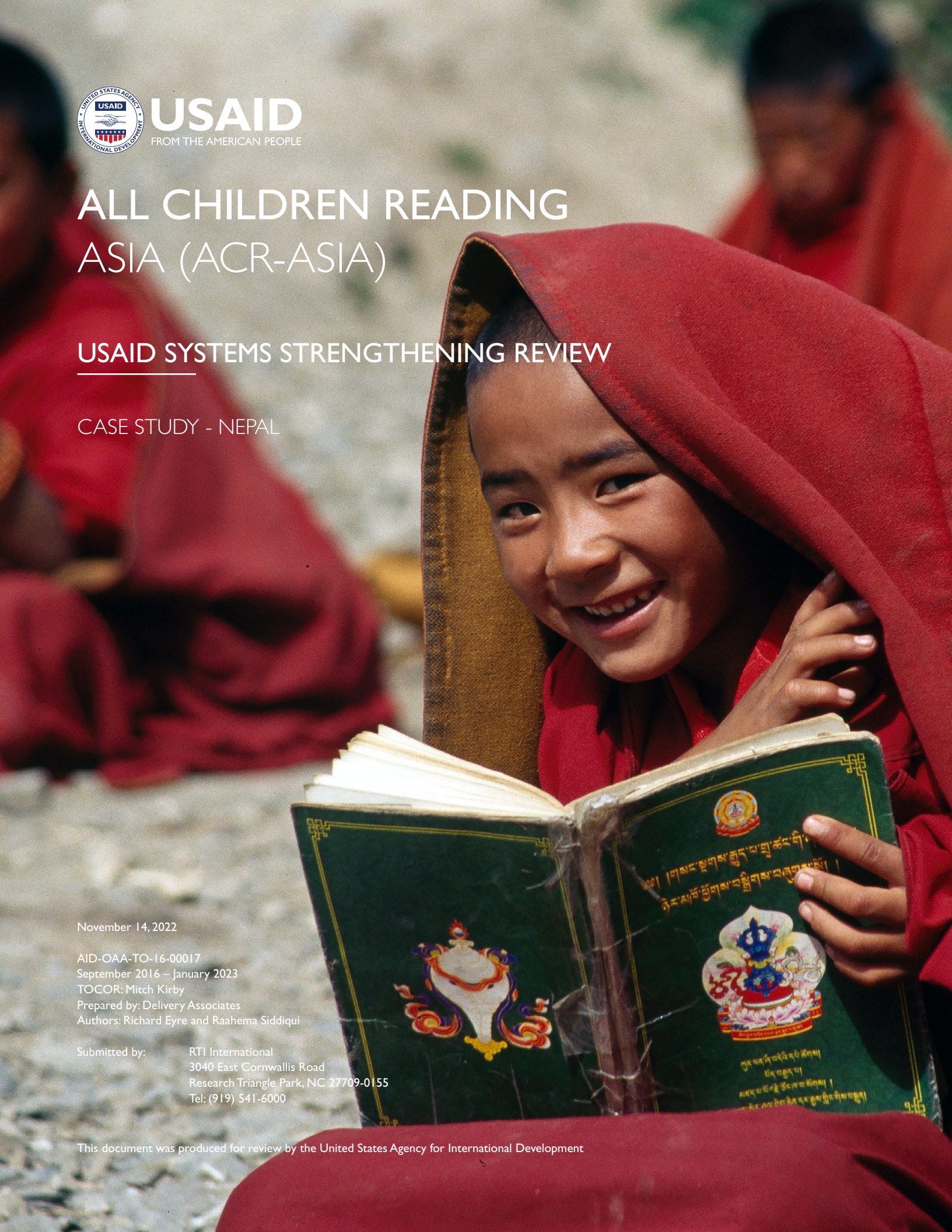
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This document was produced for review by the United States Agency for International Development



The [USAID Systems Strengthening Review](#) documented how Activities funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have helped to strengthen implementation capacity in education systems across Asia. The review gathered evidence via a mixed-methods approach, including a desk review, an online survey and key informant interviews. These sources were supplemented by deep-dive case studies for selected Activities in three countries (Cambodia, Nepal, and the Philippines). This document sets out the findings of the case study in Nepal.

As part of the deep-dive case study, the Review Team considered additional documentation and conducted additional interviews with individuals from USAID missions, implementing partners and government partners. The Review Team also facilitated self-assessment workshops with key USAID staff and partners, during which participants discussed the cumulative impact of the relevant Activities on system capacity using the review's Analysis Framework. The evidence from this workshop was combined with all the other evidence collected by the Review Team to arrive at a synthesized final set of traffic-light ratings, findings and recommendations.



# NEPAL: EARLY GRADE READING PROGRAM I AND II (EGRP I AND II)

EGRP I and II were USAID-funded Activities that began in 2015 and provided technical assistance to the Government of Nepal to implement its National Early Grade Reading Program (NEGRP). The main goal of the Activities was to improve reading skills for public school students in the early grades (Grades 1–3) in 38 target districts in Nepal (Figure 1 and Figure 2). The Activities came about after discussions with the Government of Nepal, based on a USAID sector assessment, identified the need for a national early grade reading program. USAID provided initial support to the government to begin developing the NEGRP, after which the EGRP I Activity was set up to continue and build on the support for the continuing evolution and implementation of the national program.

EGRP supported the Government of Nepal amid a shift toward a recently developed integrated curriculum and ongoing decentralization in Nepal’s governance system. RTI International facilitated the Activities with support from partners, including Another Option, Plan International Nepal, Room to Read (RTR), and SIL LEAD. The first phase (EGRP I) focused on bringing the relevant implementing partners and development partners together to design and implement a national program for early grade reading in 16 districts. The second phase (EGRP II) focused on expanding the program to 22 new districts.

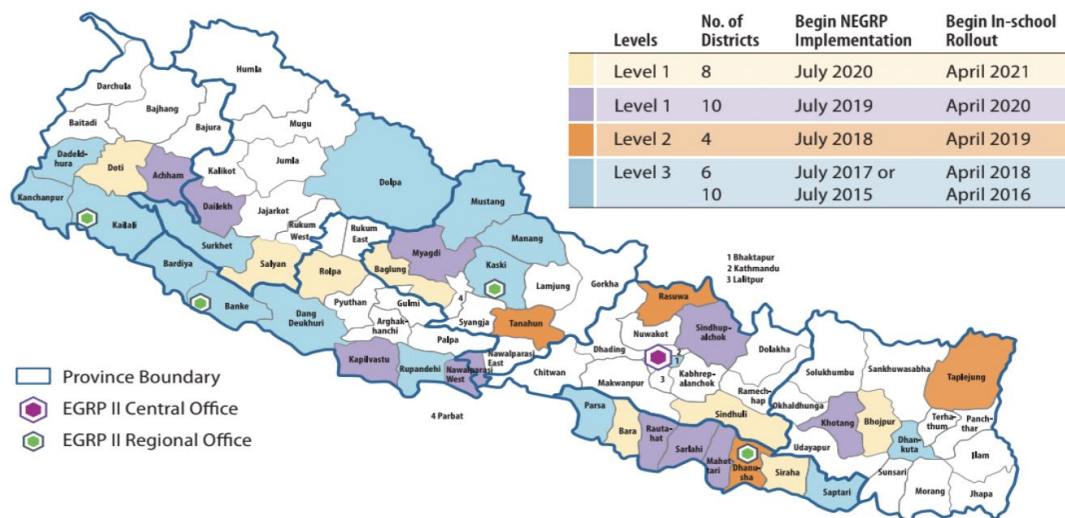
FIGURE 1.

Nepal—EGRP I and II: Overview of Activities

	EGRP I	EGRP II
<b>Time Frame</b>	2015—2020	2020—2022
<b>Geographical Scope</b>	16 districts	22 districts
<b>Key Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving early grade reading instruction</li> <li>• Strengthening national, district, and local-level early grade reading service delivery</li> <li>• Designing and conducting reading assessments in the primary grades</li> <li>• Increasing family and community support for early grade reading</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scaling up the integrated curriculum</li> <li>• Building municipal- and provincial-level capacity for service delivery</li> <li>• Improving local governments’ ability to provide teacher professional support</li> <li>• Assisting continuity of learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic</li> </ul>

FIGURE 2.

Map of the geographical coverage of EGRP I and II<sup>1</sup>



NOTE: “Level 3” describes the 16 initial districts that were covered by EGRP I. Levels 1 and 2 are the 22 districts that received intensive support for the implementation of the NEGRP minimum package, where MoEST expanded early grade reading activities during EGRP II.

## How did the Activities strengthen the capacity of the education system in Nepal to implement effective reform?

We have synthesized the evidence collected for the review to rate the cumulative impact of the Activities on a four-point traffic-light scale against the 10 elements of our Analysis Framework. Below we share ratings (Figure 3) and identify strengths and challenges against each of the elements.



### SET GOALS AND REFORM STRATEGY

#### DEFINE CLEAR GOALS

The Activities have supported the development of local and central education plans focused on the quality of education and student outcomes in early grades. The School Sector Development Program developed by the Government of Nepal with support from the Activities defines yearly student outcome targets for the system. These targets have helped orient the local plans to a focus on early grade reading, helping to “synchronize the vision of the government with implementation plans at local levels.” (Rating: Green)

1. SOURCE: RTI INTERNATIONAL. (2021). USAID’S EARLY GRADE READING PROGRAM II (EGRP II) IN NEPAL, YEAR 1 ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT; JUNE 1, 2020–MAY 31, 2021. USAID (2021). USAID’S EARLY GRADE READING PROGRAM II (EGRP II) IN NEPAL, YEAR 1 ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT; JUNE 1, 2020–MAY 31, 2021. USAID.

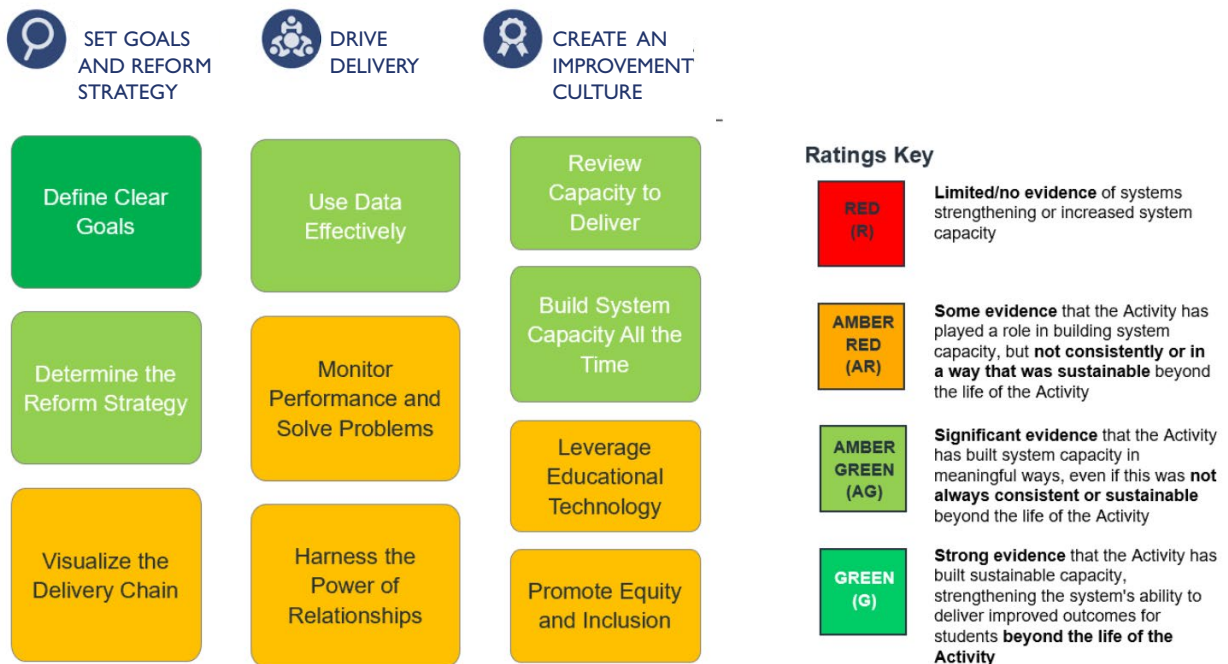
## DETERMINE THE REFORM STRATEGY

The Activities played a significant role in shaping the NEGRP. This included the design and demonstration of a national model that the government could implement nationwide within its budget, and discussions with policymakers from the national and subnational levels to plan and operationalize the NEGRP. With the support of the Activities, the Government of Nepal developed its strategy document reflecting the goals, objectives, and key performance indicators, aligned with the new decentralized education governance system in Nepal, setting the system up to sustain and expand early grade reading interventions throughout the country. Stakeholders noted that more than half of the local governments across the country have developed also now their Municipal Education Plan with the support of the Activities.

(Rating: Amber-Green)

FIGURE 3.

Nepal—EGRP I and II: Cumulative impact of the Activities traffic-light rated against the 10 elements of the systems strengthening review Analysis Framework



## VISUALIZE THE DELIVERY CHAIN

Although EGRP I and II were able to improve the coordination and definition of roles between central and subnational education structures in the context of decentralization, this continued to be a challenge for the Activities due to the delay in the passing of the Education Act. Despite the issuance of supporting policies that define the roles of the different levels of the government, stakeholders noted that, in practice, weak accountability mechanisms, undefined data flows, poor communication, and absence of strategic linkages between the different levels of the system limited the Activities' ability to institutionalize good practices.

**(Rating: Amber-Red)**



## DRIVE DELIVERY

### USE DATA EFFECTIVELY

The Activities contributed to the system's capacity to use data by supporting the setup of the integrated education management information system (EMIS) platform, which is used by education stakeholders for planning and budgeting. Stakeholders noted that although system actors across levels of the governments access data, analyze the data, and use it for decision-making, their capacity to do so independently is still variable. Turnover of staff at local governments was cited as a particular challenge in building sustainable capacity for data use. The Activities have also supported the system to generate and use student learning data, by introducing the EGRA to the system and building the capacity of local government officials to conduct these assessments. In addition, the Activities worked closely with the Education Review Office at the central level to support it to independently administer EGRA and analyze its results

**(Rating: Amber-Green)**

“There are no clear division of roles and responsibilities between different layers of government as there is no Education Act, so there is no clear division of responsibilities between the national and local governments, especially regarding teacher management.”

- KEY INFORMANT FOR EGRP

“EGRP I and II supported the government at the federal and local level to build their capacity in using and analyzing the EMIS data for planning purposes.”

- KEY INFORMANT FOR EGRP



### MONITOR PERFORMANCE AND SOLVE PROBLEMS

The Activities supported the system to hold annual meetings to review progress and conducted joint monitoring visits with government officials to check implementation on the ground. However, we heard that these conversations on progress could have been more effective if they had been held with greater frequency and with system actors at different levels. Stakeholders noted that, between the annual reviews and monitoring visits, the Activities found it challenging to maintain a clear picture of progress in the field. Monitoring and the use of information from monitoring to problem-solve implementation challenges remains an area for improvement within the system.

**(Rating: Amber-Red)**

### HARNESS THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

EGRP supported the discussions of the government-led working group on early grade reading to minimize duplication of efforts and supported a strong alignment between donors and multilateral organizations in the early grade reading sector. Despite successful efforts during EGRP I to mobilize the community and parents and engage them with the learning process of students, budgetary constraints meant that this component was not carried forward to EGRP II. However, EGRP II did support the government to introduce the home- and community-based learning model to address learning loss of students due to COVID-19.

**(Rating: Amber-Red)**

“Since the three layers of the government work independently and at the same time they work in a cooperative approach, there is not a clear monitoring mechanism over the tiers of the government.”

- KEY INFORMANT FOR EGRP





## CREATE AN IMPROVEMENT CULTURE

### REVIEW CAPACITY TO DELIVER

The Activities supported actors at both central and local levels to periodically review their implementation capacity for delivering early grade reading reform. For example, an impact evaluation for EGRP I, which included a cost-effectiveness exercise, informed the system's School Sector Development Program. Stakeholders noted that system actors undertake annual self-assessments to identify needs of staff and areas of improvement. A strong example of an outcome from ongoing conversations about system capacity was the development of the NEGRP Minimum Package. After it transpired that the government could not afford to continue the program, as originally designed, in its entirety, the package was developed to outline interventions that local governments can implement given their budget constraints

**(Rating: Amber-Green)**

### BUILD SYSTEM CAPACITY ALL THE TIME

By engaging with staff at all levels of the system, the Activities were able to build capacity along the delivery chain. At the federal level, stakeholders cited teaching and learning material development and focus on students' learning assessment as strengths of EGRP's capacity-building, with the officials in the Curriculum Development Center and Education Review Office "*capacitated to run capacity- building activities on their own.*" At the local level, monitoring, development of educational plans, and setting up teacher support mechanisms were identified as strengths. However, stakeholders described challenges in maintaining momentum for the reform efforts through changes in administration and staff turnover, commenting that "*[There is] no formal system for continuity of activities through political terms.*" Some stakeholders also noted that thinking more creatively about how to engage the private sector has the potential to enhance the system's capacity-building efforts.

**(Rating: Amber-Green)**

"The program team worked together with the Government of Nepal officials at all levels and supported them to develop their capacity in various aspects. For example, at the federal level, the focus was on material development and students' learning assessments, whereas, at the local level, the focus was on monitoring, development of educational plans, and teacher support mechanisms."

- KEY INFORMANT FOR EGRP



## LEVERAGE EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

Although EdTech was not a focus for the Activities, EGRP made some efforts to address the digital divide by providing tablet devices preloaded with curriculum materials for teachers in municipalities with a low Equity Index to increase access, introducing radio lessons for areas with poor access to the Internet, and making 119 titles available online on the Center for Education and Human Resource Development's website. Stakeholders reported that the Activities sometimes experienced challenges in enabling the use of EdTech consistently or at greater scale, for example, challenges in resolving "bottlenecks around ownerships, copyrights and access to portals."

*(Rating: Amber-Red)*

## PROMOTE EQUITY AND INCLUSION

EGRP promoted equity by prioritizing disadvantaged districts in its rollout. The Activities also made efforts to embed inclusivity by developing learning materials in Nepali and in some non-Nepali mother tongue languages, as well as in sign language, and developing materials for learners with dyslexia. However, stakeholders noted that increased support for marginalized and disadvantaged learners, and tailored approaches for diverse lingual groups, could further strengthen the system's capacity to be equitable.

*(Rating: Amber-Red)*

"We have to develop a program in such a way that teachers can support children with different language backgrounds."

- IMPLEMENTING PARTNER FOR EGRP

## *What conditions contributed to the Activities' impact on systems strengthening?*

**The Activities were set up with the explicit goal of supporting the Government of Nepal's national strategy.** This promoted buy-in from the government and paved the way for the Activities to work closely with key offices within the MoEST, such as the Curriculum Development Center and Education Review Office, as well as directly with local governments to build their capacity.

**The Activities made a concerted effort to engage and support actors at different levels of the system, particularly at the municipal government level, in the context of ongoing decentralization of education governance in Nepal.** This was a critical focus for Activities during a period when Nepal devolved responsibility for basic education from national government to the local level. The Activities' advocacy with local government representatives for the allocation of resources to early grades was identified by stakeholders as a strength. Support from the Activities to develop local education plans also ensured that those local staff responsible for implementation had a clear roadmap for their work and were syncing their priorities with those of the national government.

**The Activities used financial incentives to promote greater ownership of the reforms within the system.** The Activities made use of the government-to-government (G2G) results-based funding mechanism to create an incentive for the government to set strong goals and use data to identify areas where support was needed. This mechanism meant that goals had to be both ambitious and realistic, and support had to be well targeted and likely to deliver the desired results. Stakeholders reported that this funding mechanism helped solidify the commitment and interest of the government in the implementation of the interventions.

“I think the G2G financing was a really useful mechanism because it helped ensure that they had direct budgetary support to carry out the activities that we were developing their capacity for. The joint funding pool was there but G2G helped develop a very close working relationship between USAID, EGRP and the government.... ‘I do, we do, you do’ was embedded in it.”

- IMPLEMENTING PARTNER FOR EGRP

**The Activities matched the model of support provided to the financial and operational capacity of the system to ensure greater sustainability of the reforms.** Frequent capacity review conversations helped the Activity identify reforms appropriate to the system’s maturity. This was illustrated by the finalization of the minimum package, which was cited as “a major step forward in making the NEGRP—and by implication, EGRP—sustainable” by enabling the system to sustain and scale up reforms in low-cost but effective ways.



## *How can future Activities continue to build on the systems strengthening impact of EGRP I and II?*

- Further **strengthen strategic linkages between plans at different levels of the system**, by ensuring that national level goals are cascaded into municipal plans and making sure that operational realities and implementation lessons emerging at the municipal level inform the policy and system management and planning decisions at the provincial and national levels.
- Support the system to **clarify roles, responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms at different levels of the system**. Help system leaders to systematically think through the delivery chain for early grade reading, identifying where roles need to be clarified and the ways in which, in the absence of formal accountability mechanisms, the government can use funding incentives, effective communication, and capacity and relationship building to keep implementation on track.
- **Systemize the flow and use of data across different levels of the system**, by setting up systematic data collection tools for monitoring implementation of EGR reforms, ensuring that these monitoring data are shared frequently with relevant stakeholders and integrated into the program's decision-making structures.
- Continue to **assess capacity gaps regularly and systematically at local levels** and ensure that **school improvement efforts are focused and within the realistic capacity of districts**.
- Focus on **building implementation capacity at the local level**, such as the capacity to independently analyze data and derive actionable insights from them. In particular, ensure that capacity-building efforts for local levels plan to **address the varying capacity among different districts**, which may be a result of geographical disadvantages and inequities across different regions in the country.
- **Establish “delivery routines” to strengthen M&E mechanisms**. Set up frequent structured conversations for actors at different levels of the system, including system leaders, to review implementation data and progress. Use these conversations as a means of checking that support is being responsive to varying local needs, and to make adjustments where needed.
- **Mainstream equity** into the design of programs by ensuring that Activities understand and monitor **which districts, schools, and learners have the weakest performance**; understand the root causes behind these inequities; and make **sustained efforts to target reforms for their improvement**. In addition, ensure that programs effectively leverage the lessons from the **Nepal Reading for All** program, on how the system can effectively cater to students with disabilities.