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ALL CHILDREN READING ASIA (ACR-ASIA)

USAID SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING REVIEW

CASE STUDY - PHILIPPINES

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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 the Philippines.

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.



PHILIPPINES: BASA PILIPINAS AND ADVANCING BASIC EDUCATION IN THE PHILIPPINES (ABC+)

Basa Pilipinas and ABC+ are USAID-funded Activities that aim to improve early grade learning outcomes, working closely with the Philippines DepEd. Basa Pilipinas (2013–2018) focused on improving reading outcomes for early grades in Regions 1 and 7 of the country. ABC+ is an ongoing Activity that started in 2019 and focuses on reading, numeracy, and socioemotional skills, primarily targeting Regions 5 and 6, along with limited activities in select districts of Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (*Figure 1*).

FIGURE 1.

Philippines—Basa Pilipinas and ABC+: Overview of Activities

	Basa Pilipinas	ABC+
Time Frame	2013—2018	2019—2024
Main Implementing Partner	EDC	RTI
Geographical Scope	Regions 1 and 7	Regions 5 and 6 and BARMM*
Key Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved reading instruction • Improved reading delivery systems • Improved access to quality reading materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved early grade instruction and delivery systems • Improved access to quality materials • Improved education system capacity and commitment to manage and implement interventions supporting effective early grade instruction

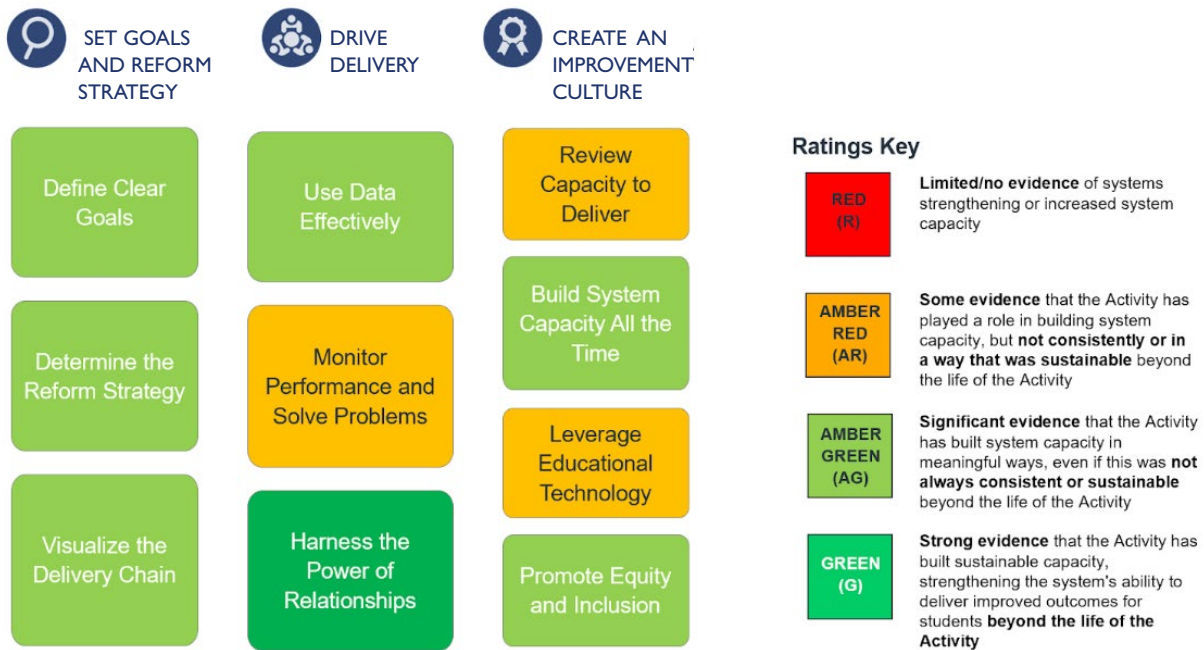
*Limited activities within Maguindanao's selected Magindanawn-speaking districts in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM)

How did the Activities strengthen the capacity of the education system in the Philippines 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 2*) and identify strengths and challenges against each of the elements.

FIGURE 2.

Philippines—Basa Pilipinas and ABC+: Cumulative impact of the Activities traffic-light rated against the 10 elements of the systems strengthening review Analysis Framework



SET GOALS AND REFORM STRATEGY

DEFINE CLEAR GOALS

Basa Pilipinas and ABC+ both supported the system to orient its efforts toward achieving student outcomes for early grade reading. This included, for example, goal-setting discussions with DepEd facilitated by Basa Pilipinas, to agree on proficiency benchmarks for fluency and comprehension. ABC+ continues to support this effort: it is using the CRLA at the district level, to identify learners who are non-readers, for the district to focus attention and resources on supporting them. However, we heard that measurements and benchmarks for student outcomes defined by the Activities have not yet been translated into student learning outcome targets at the national or regional levels.

(Rating: Amber-Green)

“Basa helped give DepEd a more coherent picture of what [early grade reading] strategy can be, and it fully demonstrated effective instruction to teachers, management and supervision by principals and supervisors, and reading materials for appropriate levels.”

- IMPLEMENTING PARTNER FOR BASA PILIPINAS

DETERMINE THE REFORM STRATEGY

By piloting and testing approaches, both Activities supported the system to set coherent strategies to pursue existing early grade reading reform priorities: Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) and a new approach to teacher training. ABC+ is now facilitating the system to develop an integrated view of learning interventions, bringing together different learning and reading programs and initiatives led by DepEd.

(Rating: Amber-Green)

VISUALIZE THE DELIVERY CHAIN

Basa Pilipinas' sustained, meaningful engagement with DepEd across different levels of leadership *“enabled the system’s roles and responsibilities to come alive.”* ABC+ developed opportunities for central government and local government officials to work together to look at data, review implementation, identify solutions, and divide up funding. This collaboration has demonstrated the benefits of increased dialogue and has brought stakeholders into conversations with the regions in new ways. Stakeholders noted that as ABC+ continues this effort, the system could benefit from supporting regions to further clarify the roles and responsibilities along their delivery chain for specific reforms, such as for teacher professional development.

(Rating: Amber-Green)

“The chain of actors may look different in different regions, so the progress varies. The program is on track to resolve these challenges.”

- GOVERNMENT KEY INFORMANT FOR ABC+





DRIVE DELIVERY

USE DATA EFFECTIVELY

The Activities contributed to the effective use of assessment data within the system, by supporting the EGRA and the CRLA. Basa Pilipinas supported the system to use EGRA as a diagnostic tool, holding sessions with DepEd to discuss EGRA results and determine in which language domains learners were struggling and how teachers could support them. The use of CRLA supported by ABC+ has also helped the system identify schools that require additional support, as results get displayed in real-time on a widely used dashboard. Despite the Activity having developed a cadre of DepEd staff who understand and know how to administer EGRA, stakeholders noted challenges around cost and the need for additional system capacity to run the assessment, meaning that the system continues to rely on USAID support for its data processing.

(Rating: Amber-Green)

MONITOR PERFORMANCE AND SOLVE PROBLEMS

To develop a clear picture of implementation progress, Basa Pilipinas supported the system to conduct monitoring visits in the field. ABC+ has systemized monitoring of the teacher support system, collecting data to assess the participation of teachers and to understand capacity-building needs, and subsequently discussing challenges and solutions with system actors. Stakeholders noted that more embedded and routine conversations about implementation progress could strengthen the system's capacity to use data for problem-solving and decision-making.

(Rating: Amber-Red)



HARNESS THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

As noted above, both Activities supported the system to strengthen relationships and align system actors—DepEd, regional offices, divisional officers, and school officers—around the reform efforts. Both Activities modeled approaches for cultivating and maintaining relationships with stakeholders, partners, and system actors. Basa Pilipinas increased the reach of teaching and learning materials by leveraging \$5 million through engagements with the private sector. Similarly, ABC+ supported the system to engage with the private sector and rotary clubs and emphasized the role of community engagement in supporting students' learning. In addition, ABC+ setup a multi-stakeholder forum—the Educational Sectoral Mechanism—to enable DepEd and Local Government Units to create consensus around solutions and priorities. Stakeholders noted that while these forums are sometimes championed by specific people within the system and could be further institutionalized, models for stakeholder engagement introduced by USAID Activities have become “blueprints for how we engage with other partners.”

(Rating: Green)

“The [ABC+] program has provided us with a lot of insights on how to engage our partners and this has become the blueprint for how we engage with other partners in DepEd.”

- GOVERNMENT KEY INFORMANT FOR ABC+

“I think one strength of the team was patience and persistence to make sure that key school officials and stakeholders are really involved...to make sure, that the most significant officials are on board and sold on the idea of really implementing the program.”

- GOVERNMENT KEY INFORMANT FOR ABC+





CREATE AN IMPROVEMENT CULTURE

REVIEW CAPACITY TO DELIVER

The Activities supported the system to reflect on its implementation capacity through systematic reviews of teacher training, development of district learning recovery plans in response to data and situational analysis, and dialogue between central government and local government (noted above). Stakeholders expressed an appetite for further, more deliberate reviews of system capacity going forward.

(Rating: Amber-Red)

BUILD SYSTEM CAPACITY ALL THE TIME

System leaders noted that implementation of the Activities was done in a way that built the capacity of those involved, ensuring “*sustainability that would benefit DepEd and the schools’ ability to innovate.*” For example, both Activities built the technical capacity of the system to develop teaching and learning materials, particularly for MTB-MLE. The system’s capacity to improve teacher training and support has also been strengthened, for example, the peer-to-peer mentoring model of Learning Action Cells was cited as a success by stakeholders, and the transition from external teacher trainers to building a cohort of trainers within the ranks of DepEd ensures decreased reliance on external support. Stakeholders noted that there are still variations in capacity between different regions and identified continued support to build local leaders’ capacity to independently drive reform as a priority.

(Rating: Amber-Green)

LEVERAGE EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

EdTech was not a focus in either of the Activities. However, EdTech was used in limited ways to further the reforms. For example, Basa Pilipinas introduced a classroom observation tool called SCOPE in the Philippines, which enabled the quick dissemination of feedback, and implemented the ICT for Reading Pilot, which involved the use of tablets with digital learning materials. The ABC+ Activity scope included improving the functionality and usability of DepEd’s learning resources portal. The Activity also pivoted toward the use of technology when the COVID-19 pandemic struck: it developed instructional video materials to help learners who were identified as non-readers by the CRLA. Limited access to technology and poor Internet connectivity were cited as challenges in the system to scaling up and systemizing EdTech interventions.

(Rating: Amber-Red)

PROMOTE EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Both Activities had specific components aimed at advancing various dimensions of equity and inclusion. For example, Basa Pilipinas took a “leave no schools behind” approach, which meant that all schools in target divisions were to receive the same level of support from the program. Similarly, ABC+ included a specific component for geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas. In line with existing system priorities, both Activities also focused on supporting DepEd’s MTB-MLE policy. For example, ABC+ conducted a language evaluation study to map the most widely spoken languages in the target regions. ABC+ support in developing materials in additional mother tongues helped DepEd fulfill the fundamental equity principle of the MTB-MLE policy, helping to integrate equity concerns more fully in the sector.

(Rating: Amber-Green)

“We have introduced technology to help us work in mother tongue-based education. We conducted a language mapping exercise, so we are able to identify the languages at the learner level. This allows us to ensure that no child is disenfranchised.”

- IMPLEMENTING PARTNER FOR ABC+

What conditions contributed to the Activities’ impact on systems strengthening?

The Activities focused on addressing priorities that had already been identified by the system, building on an existing national policy. Through consultations with DepEd, Basa Pilipinas was able to align its programming with the priorities of DepEd: the Activity was originally designed to focus on English and Filipino under the Department’s bilingual education policy and made a shift to begin working in a wider range of mother tongue languages when DepEd introduced its MTB-MLE policy. Consequently, ABC+ was conceptualized to “scale up the gains” from Basa Pilipinas interventions and focus on sub-regions where those languages were widely spoken, and to take on the challenge of implementing MTB-MLE in more multilingual parts of the country. Basa Pilipinas also supported DepEd’s Kindergarten to Grade 12 Basic Education Curriculum. This close alignment with the system’s priorities allowed the Activities to be embedded within DepEd and led to strong ownership and buy-in. Although the two Activities targeted different regions, ABC+ was able to continue Basa Pilipinas capacity-building efforts in the central government and promote a long-term focus on early grade reading reforms.

“[Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao], one of the ABC+ regions, needs a lot of help in terms of aligning because there has been a political transition in the region, and it is re-establishing its connection with the DepEd central office. Region V has developed a learning recovery plan with very defined roles and specific targets. In Region VI, we were able to do that through a different mechanism where both [Local Government Unites] and DepEd are accountable for setting their targets and having occasional check-ins.”

- IMPLEMENTING PARTNER FOR ABC+

Both Activities worked by engaging closely with government counterparts at all levels, including adapting to the needs of regional leaders. By adopting an approach based on collaborative working, for example, co-designing teaching and learning materials instead of developing them externally, program staff were more effectively able to model these processes for their government counterparts. ABC+ took a phased institutional capacity-building approach and is “*working within existing structures, mechanisms, and programs of the government to [better] anchor project interventions.*” At a regional level, ABC+ is also supporting the system to tailor its approach, enabling regional leaders to think critically about implementation, adapting the needs and challenges of their local context.

Capacity beyond the system was leveraged through a multi-stakeholder approach. The Activities support the government to mobilize a range of actors outside the system to further the early grade reform agenda. This included public-private partnerships and engagement with NGOs, civil society, and parents. Through these efforts, the system was able to improve access to investment for learning materials and bolster community support for the changes introduced in schools.

Both Activities had an explicit focus on strengthening the system and institutionalizing the reforms. For example, stated aims of Basa Pilipinas referred to strengthening the capacity of “education institutions to design, implement and monitor early grade reading interventions at various levels” and of the “host government to implement sound early grade reading diagnostic tools in English, Filipino, and at least two mother tongues.” ABC+ had an even more explicit focus: in addition to improving early grade instruction and delivery systems and improving access to quality materials, the Activity had an objective (IR) dedicated to improving “education system capacity and commitment to manage and implement interventions supporting effective early grade instruction.”

How can ABC+ build on the systems strengthening impact of the Activities?

- Support the system to translate EGRA and CRLA benchmarks into **system-wide goals and regional goals for learning outcomes** for early grade reading, providing a basis around which to further focus and align the reform effort.
- Continue to help system leaders to map out the **delivery chain**—the chain of actors through which reform will happen, from the central level down to schools—for each key reform in each target region, and facilitate them to review the **skills, accountability relationships and mechanisms, and support required** for successful implementation.
- Support DepEd to plan and work through **sustaining and scaling up the reforms** in other regions, including working through financial considerations and technical and human resource capacity needs.
- Convene regular, structured conversations with DepEd to **agree how ABC+ will build DepEd’s own capacity to implement reforms**—that is, the most important systems, skills, and behaviors the Activity can help DepEd develop and institutionalize at the national level, building on early successes such as the Educational Sectoral Mechanism.
- Build the capacity of the system to **analyze EGRA data independently** to ensure the sustainability of its use and integration into conversations about progress and efficacy of reform efforts.