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Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Ethiopia: Impact Study

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Authors:

This impact study was written by Mesele Araya and Dawit Tibebe Tiruneh (REAL Centre, University of Cambridge) with oversight from Pauline Rose (REAL Centre), and feedback from Ricardo Sabates (REAL Centre) and Tassew Woldehanna (Addis Ababa University).

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Abstract

This impact study examines how the RISE Ethiopia research influenced education policy and practice in Ethiopia over the past five years. Based on interviews with government and donor stakeholders in Ethiopia as well as a review of policy and other related documentation, the study found a high-level of awareness, engagement and use of the RISE Ethiopia research. The main findings from the key informant interviews and citation searches are summarised below:

- Participants from the Ministry of Education and the Regional Education Bureaus were familiar with and valued the findings of the RISE Ethiopia research, due both to the dissemination workshops, as well as the ongoing close collaboration and engagement with the research team throughout the process.
- The RISE Ethiopia research was identified as having influenced policy and practice, such as in relation to bringing foundational literacy and numeracy to the forefront of policy attention, introducing the culture of evaluating large-scale education reforms in improving primary school students' learning outcomes, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and informing the planning of future nationwide education reforms.
- The RISE Ethiopia research also directly contributed to the processes of school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic by gathering real-time information from school principals, teachers, and parents. Our findings showed that without timely intervention, and if school closure had been extended by another six months, the potential learning loss for students could have been as severe as two years of schooling.
- Overall, participants noted that for large-scale education reforms like GEQIP, having an independent evaluation team such as RISE Ethiopia running parallel to the implementation of the reforms is important to examine the reforms' successes and challenges.

Introduction

The Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Ethiopia project was conducted between 2017 and 2022. It aimed to understand the impact of the General Education Quality Improvement Programme (GEQIP) reforms on promoting equitable access to quality education in Ethiopia. Using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, RISE Ethiopia generated vital evidence on the extent to which education reforms in Ethiopia over the past decade have been effective in promoting equitable access to quality primary education, including for girls, children from the lowest-income families, children in rural and pastoral areas, and children with disabilities.

The research adopted a longitudinal approach, integrating political economy analysis, quantitative school surveys, and qualitative data from school-based case studies. This multifaceted approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the educational landscape from national to local. The synergy among different research methods facilitated cross-validation and enriched the overall understanding of the education system. At the initial stage, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the RISE Ethiopia team and the Ethiopian Ministry of Education, which was very helpful in maintaining relationships with new State Ministers for General Education throughout the project.

The following are the four main areas of contribution of the RISE Ethiopia project to the Ethiopian primary education system:

- I. ***Examining whether and how GEQIP reforms work to improve student learning outcomes equitably:*** RISE Ethiopia research indicated that education reforms in Ethiopia improved students' access to key school resources, particularly in rural areas, and improvements in teacher qualification, specialism, training and content knowledge. A number of these improvements in school resources and teaching quality were found to be associated with higher student progress in learning over a school year.
- II. ***Informing the design, implementation and evaluation of future education reform efforts in Ethiopia:*** RISE Ethiopia research showed that the design process of the GEQIP reforms lacked regional and grassroots-level consultation, particularly with Regional Education Bureaus (REBs) and Woreda Education Offices. This has likely hindered effective implementation of the reforms and raised challenges for vertical accountability and potential incoherence. This, and similar RISE Ethiopia findings, contributed to informing the planning of future nationwide education reforms.
- III. ***Informing the Ethiopian Ministry of Education's response to schools reopening after COVID-19 closures:*** During COVID-19 school closures, the RISE Ethiopia team carried out phone

surveys with school principals and teachers from both rural and urban locations across 7 regional states and the capital city of Addis Ababa. The evidence gathered provided real-time information on challenges schools faced and found that interrupted education resulted in widened educational inequality, with significant gaps across income levels and gender. The team engaged extensively with the Ministry of Education and REBs as well as the Ministry of Health to discuss findings and provide recommendations for school reopening.

- IV. ***Bringing foundational numeracy and literacy to the forefront of policy attention and introducing the culture of evaluating large-scale education reforms in Ethiopia:*** Although the GEQIP reforms have been implemented since 2008, there is a lack of comprehensive evidence on the successes and challenges in promoting student learning outcomes, particularly how the reforms benefitted children from disadvantaged backgrounds nationally. The RISE Ethiopia team collected large-scale longitudinal quantitative and qualitative school-based and household data to understand the effects of the GEQIP reforms in improving student learning outcomes equitably. This included identifying successes and areas for future improvement in the design and implementation of nationwide education reforms.

Goals of the impact study

The purpose of this impact study is to examine how the RISE Ethiopia research has influenced education policy and practice in Ethiopia over the past five years and how findings and recommendations from the RISE Ethiopia team were used in education planning activities in the primary education system in the country.

We gathered testimonials from a range of actors in the Ethiopian education system in relation to perceived contributions of the RISE Ethiopia project to the primary education system. We particularly examined the views of government education officials (both federal and regional levels), school principals and representatives from locally-based international organisations involved in supporting the Ethiopian primary education system. We explored the following issues:

- how RISE Ethiopia research findings influenced education policy and practice over the past five years in Ethiopia, including during the COVID-19 pandemic
- how the RISE Ethiopia findings and recommendations are being used in shaping the next round of nationwide education reform, namely the Ethiopian Education Transformation Programme
- how the RISE Ethiopia project may have introduced the culture of assessing the impacts of previous and current large-scale education reforms and learning from the experiences.

Methodology

This impact study is primarily based on key informant interviews with government education officials at federal, regional and school levels, as well as representatives of international organisations based in Ethiopia. We conducted interviews in person, given the importance of relationships in gathering such evidence. The aim was to identify how RISE Ethiopia research influenced education policy and practice, and how findings and recommendations were used in upcoming planning activities. Interviews were conducted in the months of July and August 2023. In addition, we conducted searches to check if our research outputs were cited in internal policy documents and local newspapers.

Key informant interviews

The interviewees were purposively selected due to their experience and active engagement within the Ethiopian education sector. They included representatives from the Ministry of Education, Regional Education Bureaus (REBs) and locally based international organisations, including the World Bank, the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), and the Education Development Trust (EDT). School principals who had participated in the RISE Ethiopia school surveys and provided implementation information for GEQIP-E at the school level were also interviewed. The diverse selection of respondents, each occupying crucial positions within their respective organisations, aimed to capture a comprehensive perspective of key stakeholders on the extent to which RISE Ethiopia's research findings contributed to education policy in Ethiopia. The interviews were conducted in either Amharic or English to ensure effective communication and understanding, and were based on the language preferences of each interviewee. Each interview with participants lasted approximately an hour.

Participants, who were selected as ones with some engagement in RISE Ethiopia activities, were asked how they had been involved in specific RISE Ethiopia activities, starting in 2017 (which primarily included early consultations on the RISE Ethiopia project research design). Table 1 outlines the number of participants who were engaged at this early stage, or who participated in subsequent stakeholder dissemination workshops in Addis Ababa, or whether they were interviewed during the fieldwork. In addition, they were asked if they attended the 17 September 2020 workshop on school reopening, held in Bishoftu town on the outskirts of Addis Ababa at which the RISE Ethiopia team members from Addis Ababa University presented findings on school reopening based on phone surveys conducted with school principals, schoolteachers and parents in July 2020 in the middle of the pandemic.

Table 1. Profile of key informant interviewees and their knowledge about RISE Ethiopia research

| | | Total | Participation of key informants | | | | | |
|---|---|-----------|--|---|--|----------------------------------|--|---|
| | | | 2017 RISE Ethiopia research design meeting | September 2020 workshop on school reopening | December 2022 RISE Ethiopia dissemination workshop | July 2023 dissemination workshop | Interviewed for RISE fieldwork in the past | Never participated in any of those activities |
| 1 | Ministry of Education | 8 | 2 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 0 |
| 2 | Regional Education Bureaus (REBs) | 5 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| 3 | School Principals | 5 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 5 | 0 |
| 4 | Locally based international organisations | 4 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 0 |
| | Total | 22 | 4 | 6 | 15 | 13 | 11 | 1 |

Almost all participants interviewed in the Ministry of Education were engaged in various phases of the RISE Ethiopia project. The Director of the School Improvement Programme, the Deputy Director of Educational Assessment and Examination Services, the Executive Officer for Strategic Affairs, and the GEQIP expert in the Ministry played key roles during the initial consultation stage of the research design by participating in many of the activities indicated in Table 1. They were also interviewed for the political economy analysis to understand the coherence of the Ethiopian education system for learning.

At a regional level, the involvements of participants from REBs included in this Impact Study were ones mainly associated with the dissemination workshops for the stakeholders in December 2022/July 2023. The Director of Planning and Resource Mobilisation in the Amhara region and the Director of the Teacher Development programme from Addis Ababa City attended both the September 2020 and December 2022 workshops. The Deputy of the Oromia Education Bureau attended only the July 2023 workshop, while the GEQIP Regional Coordinator for the Amhara region attended the one in December 2022. Other regional education officials were also involved in the initial research design meeting in 2017, and some also participated in political economy interviews during the fieldwork. See Appendix A for the list of major RISE Ethiopia engagement and dissemination events with stakeholders.

With respect to locally-based international organisations, the participants from FCDO and the World Bank were involved from the early stage of the RISE Ethiopia research design meeting, and provided feedback during the fieldwork, and during dissemination activities.

The participants from EDT and the Finnish Embassy in Addis Ababa were interviewed mainly in relation to the research findings. This was because of change in staffing in the Finnish Embassy, and that the EDT programme started some time after the beginning of RISE Ethiopia, and so were not engaged at the design phase. They actively followed the project's materials, reports, and research findings from its official website, in addition to monitoring the media coverage of the research findings.

Identification of citations

We searched for documents that cited RISE Ethiopia research outputs. This involved searching diverse repositories, visiting the Ministry of Education (see Picture 1), exploring resources at the main library of Addis Ababa University, and consulting a private consultancy firm, namely Frontieri. Frontieri is a leading research and consulting firm in Ethiopia, involved in exploring the general education sector in Ethiopia, including an [exit evaluation of the GEQIP-II reform \(BDS Center for Development Research, 2019\)](#).

Picture 1: RISE research team visiting the Ministry of Education library in Ethiopia.



Furthermore, the research team undertook an extensive search for news reports in local languages from both print and electronic media that were relevant to RISE Ethiopia. During the interviews with key informants, the participants were asked if they had encountered any RISE Ethiopia research that had been cited or referenced. Subsequently, the information provided by key informants was cross-referenced in both print and online sources to pinpoint precisely where the research findings were mentioned or made publicly available. Many of the key informants indicated that they had encountered RISE research findings in national mass media outlets and news articles, such as the Ethiopian Reporter, the Ethiopian News Agency (ENA), and the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation.

Fieldwork Process

Key informant interviews

Five experienced researchers conducted the key informant interviews. Three are members of the RISE Ethiopia project, and the other two were temporarily hired for fieldwork in Addis Ababa. Two of the RISE Ethiopia research team members are Ethiopians based in Cambridge and work at the REAL Centre, Faculty of Education, while one is based at the Institute of Educational Research at Addis Ababa University.

The three RISE Ethiopia research team members were involved from the inception of the impact study research activity. An orientation was provided to the three colleagues before the data collection by the research lead of the impact study. The orientation included an overview of the aims and objectives of the study, the administration of the planned interviews, the process for obtaining informed consent, addressing safeguarding concerns, as well as discussions around ethical behaviour and codes of conduct. The researchers were briefed on the guidelines to be followed and the processes for proper reporting in the event of any breach of protocol. Throughout the data collection, the researchers had direct contact with the research lead. De-briefing took place after the data collection, and fieldwork researchers were requested to provide a fieldwork report once the data collection had been completed.

Dual site ethical clearance

Ethical approval for the impact study was carefully pursued through a dual-site process involving the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge and the Institute of Educational Research (IER) at Addis Ababa University. This dual-site ethical approval process reinforced the ethical foundation of the research, ensuring that it aligned with the principles and standards upheld by both the University of Cambridge and Addis Ababa University.

Informed consent and anonymity

The participants identified for the impact study were contacted and provided with a written consent form that included comprehensive information on the purpose of the study, their role in the interview, issues of privacy and confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of their participation, along with the right to withdraw at any stage during the interview. Each participant was afforded the opportunity to pose questions and express any concerns about their involvement. Each interview was approximately one hour long. With the participants' consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and later translated and transcribed for in-depth analysis.

We received permission from the participants to use direct quotes when necessary, and explicitly indicate their names and roles in their organisations. For direct quotes included in this paper, only the position titles of the officials and experts were mentioned, except for the two State Ministers for General Education who were mentioned by name with their permission. Before publication, the statements included in the draft were shared with the participants for them to check for accuracy and confirm they were happy for the quotes to be included. This was particularly important as it was recognised that full anonymity would be challenging, given it could be possible to identify individuals from their positions.

To protect the anonymity of the five schools in Addis Ababa City Administration, pseudonyms have been substituted for school names: Menderin School, Burtkan School, Lemon School, Duba School and Kumel School. Similarly, the names of these school principals were anonymised when direct quotes were used.

Findings

Familiarity with RISE Ethiopia research

In this section, we begin by looking at participants' familiarity with our research findings at the Ministry of Education, Regional Education Bureaus, and school levels. We then present an overview of participants' engagement with RISE Ethiopia and examined how the research findings have influenced education policy and practices in the country.

At the Ministry level, we found that all eight participants were familiar with the RISE Ethiopia project and its research findings. Many of them were involved in different forms of the RISE Ethiopia project, including consultation on the design of the early stages of the research and providing interviews for the RISE political economy of learning analysis during the data collection. All the Ministry participants attended at least one of the RISE Ethiopia stakeholders' dissemination workshops in Addis Ababa (15 December 2022 or 13 July 2023). For example, the State Minister for General Education indicated his familiarity with RISE Ethiopia research as follows:

GEQIP has been implemented in different phases as one of the flagship projects to enhance the quality of the Ethiopian general education system. Its primary focus is on+ system improvement. As you know, project implementation and its impact on the ground greatly depends on empirical evidence. RISE Ethiopia project has researched the impacts of GEQIP reforms. It was instrumental in understanding the contributions of GEQIP reforms from a scientific perspective and using a scientific lens and a well-established methodology. It has helped us see how far we have achieved the desired outcomes under GEQIP-II and GEQIP-E – both the successes and challenges. *(State Minister for General Education, H.E Dr. Fenta Mandefro; August 2023)*

Other officials at the Ministry of Education also had similar knowledge of the RISE Ethiopia project and its research findings. The Director of the School Improvement Programme at the Ministry of Education stated that he knew RISE Ethiopia was a longitudinal study to understand the determinants of student learning outcomes in primary schools in Ethiopia. He noted:

I've been familiar with RISE from the outset. I was involved in the first consultation when the Cambridge and Addis Ababa Universities RISE team visited our office. I am also a frequent visitor to the RISE website, as I find the outputs relevant to my research work, particularly those related to COVID-19. I also attended two dissemination workshops and provided interviews for the RISE team a couple of times. *(Director, School Improvement Programme at the Ministry, July 2023).*

Most participants from the Ministry of Education were familiar with RISE Ethiopia research due to the close collaboration between the ministry and the RISE Ethiopia research team. Only a couple of the officials at the ministry who had been assigned to their current positions more recently became familiar with the RISE Ethiopia project after they had attended workshops and had read media coverage on the RISE Ethiopia research findings. A senior official who joined the Ministry in 2021 said:

My knowledge about the RISE Ethiopia project is primarily based on the project's research findings presented at the December 2022 dissemination workshop. The findings presented at the workshop were widely shared with the different stakeholders by the Ministry and the media. In addition, I have been informed about the project's activities and outcomes through direct communication with individuals from Addis Ababa University [Institute of Educational Research]. The combination of these sources has contributed to my understanding of the RISE Ethiopia project and its importance. *(Senior official at the Ministry of Education, July 2023)*

Over the period of the project, there were a number of changes in the State Minister for General Education, with seven State Ministers over the seven-year duration. The State Minister for General Education in 2023, who attended both the December 2022 and July 2023 workshops, briefed the media on the key findings from the dissemination workshop. In the December 2022 workshop, the State Minister explained to the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation:

Our education system now has more than 26 million students from pre-school to Grade 12. Given this magnitude of learners, improving the quality of learning is our primary agenda. The government is making many amendments to improve the quality and equity of learning, and we will use the suggestions from RISE Ethiopia as policy inputs. *(State Minister for General Education, 15 December 2022)*

The REB officials and school-level participants interviewed also mentioned familiarity with the RISE Ethiopia project and its findings. Officials at both the Amhara and Oromia REBs attended one or two RISE stakeholders' dissemination workshops, read the RISE research findings on its website, and had the opportunity to collaborate with RISE team members, particularly during the COVID-19 school closures. For example, the former Deputy Head of the Amhara REB mentioned:

I have learned about the RISE Ethiopia project in my former role as the Deputy Head of the Amhara Region Education Bureau...I was a research participant in an initial study conducted by the RISE Ethiopia team [at] the beginning of the project. In various internal meetings... colleagues mentioned...findings from the RISE Ethiopia project that shaped our understanding of student learning levels in the Amhara region. We benefitted greatly from the RISE Ethiopia research findings and the guidance of the RISE Ethiopia team, particularly during COVID-19 school closures. *(Former Deputy Head of the Amhara REB, July 2023)*

Participants from international organisations based in Ethiopia also stated they were well-informed about RISE Ethiopia's research findings. Those interviewed from the FCDO and the World Bank were particularly close to RISE as their organisations were involved in the study since its inception, and also had a lead role with GEQIP. At the start of the RISE project, the participants interviewed from both the FCDO and the World Bank attended a workshop and contributed towards the planning phase in Ethiopia. They also indicated their participation in different RISE dissemination workshops held locally and internationally, including the most recent dissemination workshops in Addis Ababa.

For example, the respondent from FCDO in Addis Ababa was part of RISE workshops held in London and Oxford. The participant also communicated with RISE researchers in Ethiopia and Cambridge at different times. The education advisor for FCDO said the RISE study has rich research findings that can

serve as a great input for future research work. She indicated that FCDO used the research findings for different purposes. Firstly, as an education advisor, she used relevant evidence to cross-check her work. Secondly, the findings helped her learn the complexity of large-scale education reforms and the challenges of implementing them. She further indicated that her office used the findings to guide the implementation of different activities and programme assessments. Similar feedback was received from the World Bank participant, who played a crucial role in the inception of the RISE study and actively participated in the dissemination of research findings. For example, he said:

I was involved at the very beginning of the RISE project. Gradually, I've also been involved in other implementations and dissemination of the research findings with stakeholders through the years. I found the dissemination useful. After a workshop, I always tend to share whatever I got from that workshop. I shared the documents with colleagues, but I'm not sure how they used them within a short period of time. (*Economist, World Bank Ethiopia Country Office, August 2023*).

Similarly, the participant from the World Bank was familiar with RISE Ethiopia, indicating that the study in Ethiopia followed a cohort-based study approach and compared students' learning outcomes over time in relation to GEQIP reforms. He was closely involved with the RISE team and stated:

I'm an economist with the World Bank in the education team, which is supervising the implementation of the General Education Quality Improvement Programme for Equity (GEQIP-E). During the design of the RISE project, I was invited to one or two consultation workshops. That's how I learned about RISE. As a person who works on GEQIP, I was closely involved with the team working on RISE. So, we have several interactions, including being key informant interviewees in one or two of the qualitative studies. I also attended a recent workshop and another one a while ago. It's been a good practice to engage with the team continuously. (*Economist, World Bank Ethiopia Country office, August 2023*)

Participants interviewed from EDT and the Education Sector of the Finnish Embassy in Addis Ababa were also familiar with the RISE Ethiopia research outcomes. They attended at least one of the RISE dissemination workshops in Addis Ababa. The participant from EDT attended the December 2022 dissemination workshop via an invitation letter from the Policy Studies Institute. Given that EDT Ethiopia works on the TARGET (Technical Assistance to Reinforce GEQIP-E in Ethiopia) programme, the participant indicated that he also had previous knowledge about RISE Ethiopia from its website and used materials for research at EDT Ethiopia. In the middle of their work, EDT Ethiopia also intended to collaborate with the RISE Ethiopia team to work on TARGET's Responsive Research Function, which aimed to respond to the Ministry's demand for research. However, close collaboration was not

possible, mainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. EDT has now produced several research papers on education, and the research team has used RISE papers from its website. The EDT participant also mentioned that the workshop was fruitful as was the research paper's content and use as reference material for education policy.

The education specialist at the Finnish Embassy in Addis also explained her research office has utilised RISE Ethiopia research findings to prepare national educational reports. Additionally, she was invited by the Policy Studies Institute to attend the dissemination workshop in July 2023. She said that RISE Ethiopia organised impactful dissemination workshops that brought together relevant stakeholders. She stated that, "*Involving and bringing research groups that focus on the quality and equity of education within the country to this kind of workshop will support future design and implementation of nationwide education reforms.*"

The five school principals interviewed also revealed that they became familiar with the study during the initial round of school surveys that commenced in 2018/19. Notably, during fieldwork at the school level, they were active collaborators with the research team, offering crucial information on the implementation of GEQIP reforms at the school level. All five school principals interviewed for this impact study attended at least one of the dissemination workshops and gained a deeper understanding of the research focus and the resulting impact of the reforms on students' learning outcomes.

Feedback on the dissemination workshops

Many of the participants attended the RISE Ethiopia dissemination events at different times. Some attended more than one workshop, including the one on 17 September 2020 on school reopening. The participants confirmed that the dissemination activities provided valuable insights into RISE's major contributions, which enriched their understanding of the Ethiopian education system and its associated challenges. The Planning and Resource Mobilisation Director of the Amhara REB mentioned that the participants for the various dissemination events were carefully selected, and there was a high-level discussion on many of the RISE Ethiopia findings, including differences in students' learning outcomes across regions. He further mentioned that the presentations at the event were less technical and likely to be easily understood by all the participants.

Two officials at the Amhara REB also provided two suggestions for improving future dissemination activities. One official who attended the December 2022 workshop suggested that it would be helpful to share brief findings in advance with the workshop participants so that they could read them before the event. This way, all the workshop participants would have the opportunity to deliberate on the

findings at the event. The second official suggested that sample teachers from all the participating regions should be invited to such events:

Although I really appreciated that many stakeholders were available at the RISE Ethiopia events that I participated in, my concern is that teachers did not attend the various dissemination events. I understand the challenges of inviting many teachers, but we need to understand that teachers are direct implementers, and we need to make sure that the findings are clearly and carefully presented to representative teachers from various regions. One way to keep the discussion alive regarding the learning crisis in Ethiopia is involving as many direct implementers as possible at such events, including listening to their views on potential solutions to the learning crisis. *(GEQIP Official, Amhara REB, July 2023)*

We also received similar feedback from the Deputy Director of the Oromia REB, who attended the July 2023 workshop. He said:

Distributing printed materials in the form of policy briefs or factsheets to regional offices would be particularly valuable. Given the limited access to the internet due to inadequate infrastructure at our offices, this approach could ensure that crucial information is widely accessible and reaches a broader audience, including teachers at the RISE sample schools, where internet access is almost non-existent. *(Deputy Head of Oromia REB, July 2023).*

Some officials at the Ministry of Education also suggested diversifying the modes of dissemination, such as webinars and online platforms, to reach a broader audience, including those who may not have the opportunity to attend in-person events.

Policy influence of RISE Ethiopia research

National level policy influence

Almost all the officials at the Ministry of Education and experts in locally-based international organisations indicated that the RISE research findings contributed substantially to academic and policy-oriented discussion in education. They also expressed their belief that the research findings will have a role in shaping education policy in Ethiopia over the coming years. The State Minister for General Education expressed the view that the quality of empirical evidence is crucial for driving positive changes in education policies and practices in Ethiopia. He stated that:

The RISE Ethiopia study was vital for understanding the contribution of GEQIP reforms in Ethiopia. Although several [exit] assessments were carried out by different partners on the impacts of GEQIP reforms, RISE was very comprehensive, targeting seven regions and thousands of students and their parents, and with continuous engagement with officials at

the ministry and regional education bureaus. In this regard, the RISE Ethiopia project has made a huge contribution to help us understand the contribution of the GEQIP reforms in the Ethiopian primary education system. The RISE Ethiopia findings are being used by the Ministry as inputs for policy development. *(State Minister for General Education, H.E Dr. Fenta Mandefro, August 2023)*

Similarly, appreciating the longitudinal nature of RISE Ethiopia research in examining changes in educational outcomes due to the reforms, the Executive Officer for Strategic Affairs at the Ministry of Education attested that as an independent evaluation team, RISE Ethiopia has been helpful in generating a substantial body of research focused on quality of education and has played an important role in Ethiopia's recent education policy. The Officer explained that the RISE Ethiopia research team based at IER played a major role in the preparation of Ethiopia's Education Development Roadmap 2018-2030. RISE Ethiopia research findings based on the 2018-19 baseline survey were among the major sources of input for the Roadmap. The official further added that the dissemination workshops were helpful in planning similar projects in the future, indicating that the Ministry will make use of the findings:

Our office has made good use of findings and policy recommendations from this independent evaluation body [RISE Ethiopia] for planning and deciding about prospective nationwide education reforms. The recommendations are helpful in promoting effective learning in schools nationwide. We have already identified some findings that we will use as inputs for the design of upcoming education reforms in the country. *(Executive Officer for Strategic Affairs at the Ministry of Education, August 2023)*

The official from the Strategic Affairs office recognised that the RISE Ethiopia research has played a crucial role in providing evidence to understand equitable access to quality primary education in Ethiopia. It has done so by collecting data from REBs, including Zonal and Woreda Education Offices, with a particular emphasis on understanding the GEQIP-E reforms at these lower levels. The Executive Officer highlighted that the Ministry is currently in the process of designing the Ethiopian Education Transformation Programme (EETP), which adopts a distinct approach compared to previous educational reforms. Informed by the recommendations from the RISE Ethiopia study in relation to the design and development of the previous GEQIP-II and GEQIP-E reforms, the Ministry of Education is strategically structuring the EETP with a bottom-up approach. This involves active engagement with programme implementers at the grassroots level. The official from the Executive Officer for Strategic Affairs emphasised the significance of this approach to ensure a more comprehensive understanding

and effective implementation of educational reforms, thus acknowledging the need for inclusive participation in the transformative process. He stated that:

Informed by the recommendations from the RISE Ethiopia study, the Ministry of Education is designing the EETP systematically with a bottom-up approach. A generic template is shared with REBs, allowing each region to identify and prioritise areas for improving learning outcomes in their respective regions. Unlike past reforms, which were designed and developed at the national level, priorities are now set at the regional level. In the current EETP design, suggestions from REBs, woredas, zones and schools are given priority. This approach is largely based on recommendations from independent evaluation bodies, such as the RISE Ethiopia research. (*Executive Officer for Strategic Affairs at the Ministry of Education, August 2023*).

A senior GEQIP expert also highlighted that designing the next education reforms based on local consultation and regional priorities will improve the awareness of the programme implementers at regional and school levels. The RISE research team had identified that school principals' limited knowledge of GEQIP-E reforms poses a challenge. Following the December 2022 dissemination workshop, where the office of the senior GEQIP expert learnt that the design process of the GEQIP reforms lacked regional and grassroots-level consultation, particularly with REBs and Woreda Education Offices, the Ministry has now allocated a budget for training and creating awareness of the GEQIP-E programme at lower levels. Regional Bureaus are now instructed to collaborate with their respective Woreda/District Education Offices. For example, according to the GEQIP Senior expert, the ministry will encourage active participation and inputs from regional and Woreda education offices in identifying and ranking their priorities:

By consulting their respective Woreda/District Education Offices, Regional Bureaus are now requested to report five priorities for the next phase, which is tentatively named the Ethiopian Education Transformation Programme (EETP). The ministry has already allocated funds to regional and woreda bureaus to identify and rank their priorities so that they will have complete awareness and be accountable for the "EETP" implementation over the years to follow. I believe you, as a third-party assessment organisation [RISE], have played a role in identifying the challenges and informing the ministry towards this issue. (*GEQIP Senior Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation expert at the Ministry of Education, July 2023*)

For the next GEQIP reforms, regions are expected to consult school principals, community leaders, local NGOs working on education and Parent-Teacher Association representatives at school. This approach aims to ensure a more inclusive and contextually relevant strategy for the EETP, which will

foster a sense of ownership and accountability at both regional and school levels. By engaging in this collaborative process, the education system can better align with the needs of diverse regions and schools, ultimately contributing to the success of the upcoming transformation programme.

The Director of the School Improvement Programme, who has been engaged since the initial consultations, remarked that:

RISE has generated numerous publications containing relevant policy recommendations that demand careful consideration for coherence and accountability in our education system at the grassroots level. RISE has particularly indicated that prioritising the needs and interests of schools is imperative to improve learning and for effective implementation of the GEQIP programme...Value for money needs to be applied in the next education reform. Despite a substantial investment of \$1.8 billion in Ethiopia's education only through GEQIP over the past 15 years, learning outcomes have not improved. This can be evidenced by the National Learning Assessment trends. RISE Ethiopia has similar reports on learning outcomes. Combined, these findings underscore the critical importance of carefully designing the forthcoming reform. From the research findings, I have understood that avoiding the trap of *'borrowing uncritical policy'* is vital, as adopting strategies without scrutiny can lead to wasting resources and time within the education system. Thanks to the RISE team for showing that our education system is coherent for schooling but not for learning. To address these challenges effectively, due attention must be given to the school system's context, complexity, and resilience capacity, especially given the current conflict in the country. *(Director of the School Improvement Programme at the Ministry of Education, July 2023)*

Some participants in this impact study knew the RISE Ethiopia findings well but have not yet incorporated them into their work, and they believed that the findings could serve as a valuable resource to inform and enrich their future projects in education policy. The Deputy Director of Educational Assessment and Examination Services, recognised the potential value of the research findings for future work:

From the email sent every Tuesday from the RISE Programme and also at the recent workshop, I saw students experienced learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. I saw a 15 percent learning loss in early numeracy for the Grade 1 cohort. This learning loss also coincides with the real experience of our students at the secondary level and the national level. Last year's [2014 E.C] 12th-grade national exam results were disappointing: only 3.3 percent of the [896,520] students who took the exit exams scored 50 percent or above. This has sent shockwaves nationwide, needing concrete effort to reverse the course. We will

[therefore] wisely look at the findings, particularly on the political economy learning analysis, to influence policy on students' learning improvements from an early stage as learning is a long-term process. *(Deputy Director of Educational Assessment and Examination Services at the Ministry of Education, July 2023)*

The economist from the World Bank Ethiopia office also mentioned that his office is discussing how to involve the direct implementers of the next GEQIP project at the regional level. This is assumed to be a potential new approach in the design and development of this educational reform. He further said:

This is a key lesson we learned from the implementation of GEQIP-E. At the federal level, we were using result-based financing, but the arrangement between the federal and the Regional Education Bureaus was more of activity financing rather than result-based. We have to rethink the dynamics of approach between the federal and regional levels if we have to have some national-level activities. *(Economist, World Bank Ethiopia Country Office, August 2023)*

He also highlighted the significance of the RISE study in documenting the successes and challenges of the GEQIP reforms at regional and school levels, particularly noting the valuable insights it provided to the GEQIP-E team at the World Bank Ethiopia Country Office. He added that despite declining average learning levels over time, he was struck by some findings that show the positive learning progress over the school year, particularly for marginalised students. In general, he underscored that many lessons were learned from RISE, and such evidence will support the government and policymakers:

Unlike the previous two phases, GEQIP-E [had the opportunity for] such a study going parallel with the implementation process. As I said, the GEQIP-E team at the World Bank is mostly busy with implementation and does not document the successes and challenges experienced at the regional and school levels. GEQIP-E is large-scale, making it difficult to tell clearly what the successes and challenges are. Having a study that documents systematically is very, very useful for the project and for the government. For instance, the greater learning progress for the marginalised students over one academic year, including in the GEQIP Phase I schools, and improved teacher content knowledge over time are important areas the government should scale up in the next educational reforms. *(Economist, World Bank Ethiopia Country Office, August 2023)*

The FCDO education advisor in Ethiopia similarly identified that the RISE study had rich research findings that can contribute to future research. She indicated that FCDO used the research findings for different purposes. She further indicated that her office used the findings to guide the implementation

of different activities and programme assessments, to shape ongoing projects, and to design future projects. Her office also shared RISE findings with relevant organisations, such as the Ministry of Education, World Bank, and other colleagues, through the web links provided at the recent dissemination workshop. She noted that:

At the stakeholder dissemination workshop held at the Hilton Hotel in December 2022, we were given a booklet containing research findings published by the team in various outlets. The wealth of information reported in these resources is vital for informing the development of the next GEQIP programme, GPE [Global Partnership for Education] compact, and any other education programme under consideration. It is important to strategically incorporate pertinent evidence drawn from these resources into the subsequent phases of the GEQIP-E successor programme. *(FCDO Education Advisor, Ethiopia Country Office, July 2023)*

Such remarks indicate that by leveraging the insights from the research findings provided in the booklet, stakeholders could ensure that the design and implementation of future programmes are evidence-based and reflective of the best practices identified by RISE. This approach strengthens the overall quality of the initiatives and reinforces the commitment to utilising knowledge and evidence to drive meaningful improvements in the education sector. This is particularly true for the GPE compact programme, which is also being produced in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders.

Strong policy influence at regional and school levels

Throughout the research process, RISE Ethiopia had close contact with REB officials and school principals, who were engaged in supporting the school and household surveys. This section draws on interviews with key stakeholders in the Amhara and Oromia regional states and the Addis Ababa city administration.

As the interviews highlight, accountability and effective implementation should be ensured at all levels of the education sector in times of large-scale reforms. For example, the Leader of the Teacher Development Programme of Addis Ababa City Education Bureau said that the RISE Ethiopia findings came at a critical moment when Ethiopia's education needs stronger transformation to bring equitable quality education. He found RISE's findings to be eye-opening and provided timely evidence of what is happening for learning at lower grades in Ethiopia.

Before moving to my current position, I was a school principal for five years. This allowed me to see the implementation of GEQIP practically at the school level. Now, it is good to see that RISE Ethiopia findings are raising challenges related to the implementation and

accountability of the GEQIP-E reforms at lower levels. In practice, the GEQIP resources were not implemented as planned at school levels due to numerous practical bottlenecks. So, the evidence on implementation challenges and accountability of the reforms will help address the gaps in the design of the next reforms. *(Teacher Development Programme Leader, Addis Ababa City Education Bureau, August 2023)*

The former Deputy Head of the Amhara REB explained that one of the challenges the Bureau faced was the inefficiency in collecting as much data as possible while implementing large-scale reforms:

It is not common to collect evidence continuously while reforms are being implemented both at national and regional levels. What we have learned from the RISE Ethiopia project is that we can implement education reforms and, at the same time, collect data continuously that would inform the successes and challenges, and areas that we learn for future education reform efforts. This is an important culture that I hope we have learned from the RISE Ethiopia project. *(Former Deputy Head of the Amhara REB, July 2023)*

The Deputy Head of the Oromia REB, who attended the July 2023 dissemination workshop, also said that RISE findings on learning loss presented at the workshop coincided with the current educational status of the region. The Deputy Head added that:

[The] Oromia Education Bureau will critically review the [RISE Ethiopia] findings and recommendations to extract regionally relevant lessons for our future approaches to improving student learning outcomes. This may also lead to tailoring the next reforms to the specific challenges and opportunities in our region. *(Deputy Head of Oromia REB, July 2023)*

In addition, similar to the reflections made by the Director of the School Improvement Programme at the Ministry of Education, the Deputy Head of Oromia REBs highlighted the importance of RISE Ethiopia research findings in revising the Payment for Results modalities, particularly for regions where capacity considerations were previously overlooked:

GEQIP-E plays a pivotal role in promoting sustainability within Oromia's education sector through its support programme. However, the problem with the latest reform is that the funds are tied to specific deliverables, making implementation inflexible. There is a need for a degree of freedom for the region and schools to do with the budget. Recognising the diverse needs of regions and schools, the Payment for Results (PFR) framework should be characterised by flexibility and must be open to enhance effectiveness. While attaching funds to specific deliverables is still important, empowering regions and schools with budget

management is crucial for optimising the programme's impact. This approach would ensure that the allocation of resources aligns seamlessly with the unique challenges and opportunities faced by each region, fostering a more responsive and effective implementation of the programme. *(Deputy Head of the Oromia REB, July 2023)*

As key implementers of GEQIP-E at the school level, school principals have also shared their valuable insights based on their experiences with the RISE Ethiopia school survey and the dissemination workshops. They indicate the importance of RISE research findings for shaping their future initiatives within schools, particularly in efforts aimed at improving student learning outcomes.

A school principal from “Menderin” school, one of the schools in the RISE research sample, expressed that the workshop proved instrumental in understanding the areas that require attention for enhancing learning outcomes:

I have been wondering what RISE would do with all those student assessments conducted in the academic years of 2018/19, 2020/21, and 2021/22. The RISE Ethiopia dissemination workshop gave me insights into what RISE has been researching over the years and why our students are taking the numeracy and literacy tests. ... The findings helped us understand where we need to focus in order to improve student learning... I was happy that marginalised or weaker students achieved greater learning progress over each academic year. This is a good policy tip for our school. Following this, our school will undertake action research on numeracy skills at the school level and prepare special modules that better support students who need special support or those with lower numeracy skills. *(School principal from “Menderin” School, July 2023)*

Similarly, a school principal from “Lemon” School said the RISE research findings were helpful for the minimum learning competence system that his school is going to introduce to measure learning in early grades:

I have not used the findings before now as the time is short. So far, we have been collaborating with the RISE Ethiopia researchers who visited us for the school surveys. But now, the findings are informative in understanding the quality of learning at the primary school level. As a school principal, I am motivated to work harder. For example, our school has a minimum learning competence system that is being prepared for every grade to evaluate the level of students’ knowledge for their respective grades. So, the RISE Ethiopia findings will serve as a base for this. *(School Principal from “Lemon” School, July 2023)*

A principal from “Burtkan” School also said she would share the findings with teachers and students when school starts in the next academic year:

The school is closed after the July workshop, so I have not used the findings yet. However, the research findings make me aware that I must work harder to improve the quality of education. I was particularly struck by the research outcomes on socio-emotional learning and social skills. I thought education was more of academic learning, but now the findings have provided insight into socio-emotional learning and how this is positively associated with the maths test scores of the students. During school disruptions like COVID-19, it is good to know that improved socio-emotional skills help students to be resilient. I will also share those findings with my community during our next Sunday gatherings for various social events.

(School Principal from “Burtkan” School, July 2023)

Contribution to school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Education, through the Education Strategy Centre, approached the RISE Ethiopia team to provide evidence on issues related to school reopening. Following this request, RISE Ethiopia conducted telephone surveys with 127 school principals and 316 teachers from rural and urban locations across seven regional states and the capital city Addis Ababa (Yorke et al., 2020). RISE also contacted parents of children enrolled in the Early Learning Programme (ELP) of the RISE Ethiopia schools after schools were reopened (Kim et.al., 2021).

The findings collected from school principals, teachers and parents in the middle of the pandemic were presented to officials at the Ministry of Education and Directors of REBs from Addis Ababa, Amhara, Benshangul-Gumuz, Dire Dewa Administration City, Gambella, Harari, Oromia, SNNP, Somali and Sidama in the presence of the then State Minister H.E. Huria Ali on 17 September 2020. She explained to our research team that given the magnitude of shocks of the pandemic at that time, the Ministry of Education was very hesitant to reopen schools in October 2020. However, the RISE research team played a pivotal role in reshaping perspectives in the middle of the pandemic. H.E. Huria Ali acknowledged the invaluable insights provided by the RISE research team, shedding light on the perspectives of parents, teachers, and school principals at the grassroots level.

H.E. Huria Ali added that the Ministry was impressed at how the RISE Ethiopia team effectively gathered crucial information during the unprecedented pandemic challenges. This information proved instrumental in prompting the Ministry to reconsider the duration of school closures. Recognising that the COVID-19 pandemic would persist, she suggested swift action had been imperative:

Without the timely intervention facilitated by RISE's consultative meetings, school closure would have been extended by another six months, and the potential learning loss for

students could have been as severe as two years. *(Former State Minister for General Education, H.E. Mrs Huria Ali, July 2023)*

This indicates that the findings not only expedited the reopening of schools in October 2020 but also prevented a potential six-month delay, which could have doubled or tripled the learning loss. This also minimised the impact on student mental health and well-being stemming from prolonged absence from school. This would have been a significant concern for most of the students, as a RISE study on socio-emotional skills showed that social skills stalled during the eight months of school closures (see Bayley et al. 2021).

Overall, the phone surveys provided compelling evidence that supported the safe reopening of schools with preventive measures. The Ministry of Education and the REBs embraced the RISE recommendations, including the importance of resuming classroom learning, implementing accelerated learning programmes to compensate for lost learning, maintaining some degree of physical distancing within schools, and establishing school-level planning committees to coordinate the complexities associated with reopening. The timely recommendations supported the safe return of 27 million children to school, as identified by the Former State Minister for General Education:

During the consultative meeting with Federal and REBs officials at Bishoftu, RISE came up with surprising perspectives on the needs of parents, teachers and school principals...RISE helped us understand how students can learn even during COVID-19. It helped show how the education system can be resilient and provided direction on what interventions should be taken for students to return to school in the middle of the pandemic. No one could find that helpful information at the grassroots level during that dark period of COVID-19. Even the Ministry was surprised at how RISE managed to gather information during that unthinkable period. The findings helped the Ministry swiftly rethink the school closure period and the necessity to reopen as early as possible, knowing that the COVID-19 virus would live with us for quite some time. Without such research, school reopening would have been postponed for another six months, and then learning loss would have been doubled or tripled, not to mention the impact it would have on the mental health and well-being of the students as they would stay out of school. But thanks to the relevant research findings, which provided the Ministry with real-time evidence on reopening schools with due care to the health and safety of students in schools. It gave us timely direction on how students can return to school in the middle of the pandemic. With due care to the COVID-19 protocols and standards, RISE assisted us in deciding to reopen schooling. It helped us understand what

steps and procedures should be taken at the school level in terms of class size and teaching approach. *(Former State Minister for General Education, H.E. Mrs Huria Ali, July 2023)*

Another official at the Ministry of Education supported the then State Minister's reflection on the importance of the RISE research on school reopening in October 2020:

RISE research during the COVID-19 period gave us the chance to think of an alternative method where it was almost impossible to think of opening schools soon. To be honest, we were planning to reopen schools as soon as possible in March 2021, but RISE came up with the perspective of the most important stakeholders: parents, teachers, and school principals. Through this research, RISE showed us reopening schools could be safe by applying a shift programme or every other day of the week, including Saturdays. To address lost time, RISE also suggested an application of an accelerated learning programme... Even now, we are using this accelerated learning programme in Tigray, where schools were closed for over three years due to the conflicts and COVID-19. [RISE] findings and consultative meeting motivated us to reopen schools and face the 'new normal' schooling system in the middle of the pandemic. As you know, RISE has shown a 15 percent learning loss for the cohort in Grade 1 after school reopened, but the learning loss could have been much worse than this if schooling had not resumed with remedial classes in October [2020]. *(Director, School Improvement Programme at the Ministry of Education, July 2023)*

The Director for a high-level office at the Ministry also confirmed that the evidence on learning loss was informative, saying:

We at the Ministry had a common understanding that the pandemic would result in a learning loss, but we did not have actual student test scores comparing cohorts. RISE Ethiopia came up with such large-scale student assessments, which gave us a good understanding of the extent of the pandemic-related learning loss. Although I heard from the media about the effect of school closure on increasing school dropout and affecting the socio-emotional learning skills of students, it is only the RISE Ethiopia team that has provided us with empirical evidence. *(Director of a senior office at the Ministry of Education, July 2023)*

The former Deputy Head of the Amhara REB also mentioned the contribution of the RISE Ethiopia findings during the COVID-19 school closures. He said his office benefitted from the RISE Ethiopia research outputs shared during the pandemic (blogs, phone survey findings, findings on learning loss associated with school closures, etc.). The former Deputy Head mentioned he was responsible for the education-related activities during the COVID-19 school closures. He noted that he:

...constantly discussed the findings from the RISE Ethiopia team in our meetings: What are the main challenges in relation to the learning of children from marginalised groups? How could we provide instructional support for those in remote areas? How should we prepare ourselves to support all students when schools reopen from the COVID-19 closures? *(Former Deputy Head of the Amhara REB, July 2023)*

He further underlined that the Amhara Regional Bureau benefitted from the guidance of the RISE Ethiopia team on how different groups of students would be affected by the school closures and how the bureau should prepare to safely reopen schools and support those students who might have been disproportionately affected by the school closures:

It would have been extremely difficult for us (Amhara REB) to prepare and act at the level we did during the COVID-19 school closures had it not been for the evidence-based recommendations and continuous engagement with the RISE Ethiopia team. *(Former Deputy Head of the Amhara REB, July 2023)*

The Planning and Resource Mobilisation Director at the Amhara REB similarly emphasised the RISE Ethiopia contribution to informing them on COVID-19 responses. This included using the evidence to support them in getting financial support from the federal government and donors:

The Bureau (Amhara REB) is particularly grateful for the studies that were conducted by the RISE Ethiopia team during the COVID-19 school closures. We decided to go for the radio instruction after we received reports from the RISE Ethiopia studies that COVID-19 school closures may widen the achievement gaps between rural and urban students, for example. The Bureau decided to do something about the potential increase in achievement gaps that might have occurred when students are back to school after the closures. The Bureau used the RISE Ethiopia findings when we requested financial support from the federal government and donors (e.g., UNICEF) on why we should deliver lessons via radio and TV during COVID-19 school closures. We also received continuous support from members of the RISE Ethiopia team, including those in Addis Ababa University, on what preparations we should make to address the issue of “learning loss” when schools are reopened. *(Planning and Resource Mobilisation Director at the Amhara REB, July 2023)*

The economist at the World Bank also identified the contributions of the RISE research in relation to COVID-19 and school reopening and using the evidence of learning losses to rebuild the education system:

It is very fortunate to have RISE baseline data collected before COVID, which was used as a source for the phone surveys during the school closure. You know, it's a no-brainer that this information has real-time information, especially in a time when movements and household surveys were impossible; having that resource was very helpful. My view is we need to do this more intentionally, like to have a means of, or at least a sample where we can do phone surveys in the future in case something like COVID happens, or even without an emergency like that, it's a very cost-efficient, rapid source of finding data from all walks of life. So, the lesson is the research from RISE was important for the decision to reopen schools, but even having that system is also something of a recommendation on its own for the future. *(Economist, World Bank Ethiopia Country Office, August 2023)*

The education advisor for the FCDO Office in Addis Ababa also pointed out that RISE evidence contributed to letting the government know about learning losses experienced during COVID-19 school closure. She appreciated RISE's phone survey study during the pandemic as the evidence of this research provided clues on the nature of education and the need to reopen schools in Ethiopia:

I am aware that RISE has conducted a study on the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and well-being of children, including the disproportionate effects on children with disabilities. I believe these findings have been helpful in informing policies aimed at fostering inclusive education in Ethiopia. *(FCDO Education Advisor, Ethiopia Country Office, July 2023)*

As school principals were the ones contacted during the phone surveys in the middle of the pandemic, the research team asked them to reflect on the impact of the RISE research on school reopening and how reaching them during the lockdown was essential to share their perspective on the need to reopen schools. The school principal from "Lemon" School highlighted that:

The phone interview carried out during the school closure was an opportunity for us to provide our opinions on the impact of the pandemic and the need to reopen schools. Although we were doing our best to reach students using remote learning materials, it did not work well as most students didn't have the necessary materials, even radio, at home. We were sending textbooks so students would read them, but they needed supervision. Learning at-home programmes were not only creating equity gaps, but those without access were entering into depression and suffering from anxiety. If these school closures continued for six months or one year, the situation would worsen; many students could not return to school. In this way, the contributions of RISE at the school level were valuable in relation to COVID-19 and the reopening of the school for students to return safely. *(School principal from "Lemon" School, July 2023)*

Similar reflections were received from the principal of “Menderin” School who suggested that the evidence from RISE Ethiopia’s phone survey contributed to shortening the period of school closures:

As far as I know, RISE was the first to undertake a phone survey during the pandemic [with us] and ask teachers and school principals what should be done for schools to be reopened without delay. As our school had already had contact with the researchers before COVID, we were delighted to share our perspective frankly during the phone surveys. In this regard, I believe RISE provided appropriate and relevant evidence for policymakers. During the school closure, while students from rich families attended class from home using technology, those from poor went to work to cope with rising living expenses. It is a pain for us as teachers when we hear such gaps. Therefore, I assume the phone survey with us shortened the school closure ... RISE significantly contributed to rebuilding the school system during COVID-19.
(Principal of “Menderin” School, July 2023)

Strong and continued collaboration between RISE Ethiopia, Ministry of Education and Regional Education Bureaus

With respect to collaboration with the Ministry of Education, we found strong evidence of the importance of continued collaboration with the RISE research team. The State Minister highlighted that the Ministry of Education is currently undergoing a significant transformation to improve the quality and equity of education across the country, both in emerging and established regions. The State Minister indicated that the Ethiopian Education Transformation Programme (EETP), the next GEQIP programme, is being reviewed, and other funds aimed at system transformation from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) are due. He proposed that there was a continued role of the RISE Ethiopia team in the assessment of these ambitious projects:

As you might be aware, the Ministry is more than ever in a huge transformational process. This transformation, as I said earlier, greatly depends on empirical evidence and grounded research, for which I think that RISE is one of the instruments to achieve such results. For example, recently, we have started [the] Ethiopian Education Transformation Programme, which focuses on the whole system transformation. Another huge programme is also coming from GPE, called the system transformation programme. Such projects and programmes have to be continuously assessed. So, I believe such a research wing would really play a crucial role. RISE has to be part and parcel of the entire process during project development to have a primary lens from the beginning, during the implementation phase and in assessing the results of those projects. RISE can easily capture what was really aimed at, what has been achieved, [and] what can be improved ... So, the RISE team needs to work with the Ministry,

and the Ministry itself has to work closely with the team. The planning department is responsible for coordinating this, particularly for general education. So, I strongly suggest that those projects be drafted together with the RISE experts, stakeholders and the ministry. *(State Minister for General Education, H.E Dr. Fenta Mandefro, August 2023)*

The economist from the World Bank also highlighted the positive collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the RISE Ethiopia team:

...during the design and then validation workshops and later dissemination, what I've seen is positive collaboration and collegial spirit between the ministry and the RISE team—involving the government from early on improved the possibility of taking up the results. If some researchers do the analysis and then present the results, I tend to see the ministry being a bit resistant to that. But if they are involved from the get-go, it will improve the chances of a take-up. Close collaboration will help the research team to respond to the question that the ministry has. Then, the research findings will be taken up for improvement of education. *(Economist, World Bank Ethiopia Country office, August 2023)*

The Director for the School Improvement Programme similarly said that collaboration was strong, and the contribution of the RISE team has been considerable, particularly during the school reopening. He was hoping for even greater collaboration based on the consultative meeting held with senior researchers from the REAL Centre, University of Cambridge in 2017. He noted that the engagement and collaboration were more on research and policy advice rather than empowering its staff to conduct educational research. Nevertheless, the official highlighted that his office – the School Improvement Programme – will undertake reforms focusing on school inspection and packages of intervention programmes to improve learning. According to him, pilot schools will soon be given guidelines and strategies for new school inspections and programmes to support student learning outcomes. This pilot programme will then be scaled up to a national level. However, to do so, there is a need to evaluate the impact of such reform on the intended goals before scaling up to the national level. In this case, he called for “*continued collaboration and valuable contributions of the RISE Ethiopia research team to evaluate those pilot programmes.*”

Citation of RISE Ethiopia research findings in policy documents

Almost all those interviewed believed that the RISE research team made significant contributions to education policy in Ethiopia through their academic and policy-focused research work. This was evidenced by the fact that many of them identified RISE research outputs and cited them as references in internal documents, policy documents or news articles. For example, most of them read RISE research outcomes in at least one of the following news articles: Ethiopian Reporter, Ethiopian News

Agency, Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, BBC Amharic and Afan Oromo languages, Sheger FM, the World Bank and IMF libraries, online blogs such as the Luminos Fund, and the Thomson Reuters Foundation News.

In terms of internal documents, the Director of the School Improvement Programme highlighted that RISE materials were used when the Ministry developed an internal report on COVID-19's impact on education: *'COVID-19 aggravated learning crisis in Ethiopia'*. Similarly, the GEQIP senior expert at the Ministry indicated that he came across RISE Ethiopia research findings cited as a reference source in a slide presentation by Frontieri on a topic related to *'Results framework of GEQIP-E implementation'*.

Another official at the Ministry of Education also revealed that several research papers were cited in a draft document of a programme concept note focusing on the next education reform, namely the *'Ethiopia Education Transformation Programme'*. In addition, the FCDO education advisor based in Addis Ababa said RISE Ethiopia research had been cited many times in their internal documents, including: *'FCDO Annual Review – Support to Ethiopia General Education Quality Improvement Programme for Equity (GEQIP E), (58506694) 300236– GEQIP E, November 2020, official document'*. At the World Bank Ethiopia Country Office, the RISE research team found two RISE research papers cited in two internal documents: *'Ethiopian Education Sector Public Expenditure and Institutional Review (PEIR): Analysis of Equity, Efficiency, Effectiveness, Adequacy, and Sustainability of Public Spending and Institutional Arrangements in the Education Sector. Document of the World Bank. Report No: AUS0002531'*; and *'Learning Losses and Dropouts: The Heavy Cost COVID-19 Imposed on School-Age Children'*.

The RISE Ethiopia research team identified one RISE paper cited in EDT's research works: *'An international review of plans and actions for school reopening'*, published in October 2020. Furthermore, the education specialist at the Finland Embassy in Addis Ababa indicated that she has referred to RISE research papers during her yearly report writing and the design process of educational projects. When her office needed an update on education, she usually referred to the RISE website to obtain relevant evidence, as she could find results disaggregated by intersectionality by gender, disability and poverty.

In conclusion, all the references highlight the valuable contributions of the RISE Ethiopia research and its impact on informing educational policies in Ethiopia.

Use of RISE findings in meetings

The testimonies from the officials at the national and regional levels and experts at local international organisations collectively emphasised the broad awareness and influence of RISE research findings in

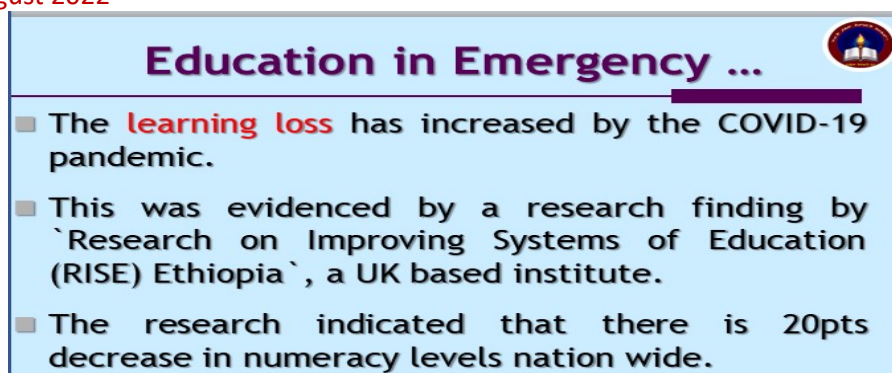
Ministry of Education, regional, and stakeholder meetings. For example, the Director of the School Improvement Programme recognised the use of RISE research findings, not only in regular meetings but also in sessions at the ministry: *'I frequently use and cite RISE research findings, and I am aware of the use of those findings in meetings, including ministerial sessions at the Ministry.'*

Similarly, the Director of School Inspection stated he actively brings up RISE findings during their GEQIP-E meetings, further establishing the research as a reference point in internal discussions on education policies and improvements. The Director is a member of the GEQIP-E at the Ministry of Education and confirmed that other Ministry staff had raised points from the RISE findings at their GEQIP-E meetings while monitoring their quarterly activities at the ministry. This indicates that RISE research has become integral to high-level policy discussions, and has substantially informed policies and practices.

The Planning and Resource Mobilisation Director at the Amhara REB also mentioned that during their internal and external meetings, he discussed all relevant findings that provided empirical evidence on the region's education activities (see Figure 1):

I recall I used several RISE Ethiopia findings when I recently presented the trends in student learning outcomes in Amhara region. For example, I referred to a RISE Ethiopia finding in relation to learning loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic for a presentation to Government and Partners' annual forum where the Head of the Amhara REB and other high-level officials were participants. *(Planning and Resource Mobilisation Director, Amhara REB)*

Figure 1: Screenshot of a slide presented at the Amhara Education Regional Development Annual Summit, August 2022



The economist from the World Bank indicated that he frequently attends internal meetings at their Ethiopia country office as part of the World Bank's involvement in GEQIP-E, where the RISE findings are sometimes mentioned. He said,

GEQIP-E has four areas, and each of the result areas has task forces. I regularly attend the internal efficiency task force meetings at the World Bank. So, some of the things we hear in the dissemination workshops are shared with colleagues participating in task force meetings. Moreover, during missions and so on, when we try to make sense of some of the updates we get during missions, we look back to some of the evidence. In this, people mention RISE findings every now and then. (*Economist, World Bank Ethiopia Country Office, August 2023*)

The consistent reference to RISE evidence during missions and discussions within these task force meetings at the World Bank highlights the impact of RISE Ethiopia's research on shaping the discourse around education efficiency and effectiveness. The FCDO education advisor also indicated that she had referenced some of the RISE Ethiopia findings when preparing internal documents and used RISE study recommendations to fuel discussions on topics with colleagues at her office in Ethiopia. She said, *'Given our substantial involvement in the GEQIP-E reform, the insights from RISE are highly valuable and worth mentioning as references in our meetings.'* Furthermore, she indicated that the RISE team had participated in different fora where they shared the study outcomes with international audiences. For example, conference platforms such as CIES and UKFIET, where she and most RISE team members participated, and the team presented the findings from Ethiopia. She also shared publication lists from workshops with other people working in education, many of whom referred to the RISE website and findings.

Conclusion

This impact study has examined how the RISE Ethiopia research influenced education policy and practice in Ethiopia. It found that there was a high-level of awareness and engagement and wide use of the RISE Ethiopia research findings among education stakeholders in Ethiopia. The study found that the close collaboration between the RISE Ethiopia team, government officials, and locally based international organisations over the period of the RISE Ethiopia project supported their engagement with, and use of the evidence. This collaboration started before the research began and continued both through formal events (such as workshops and dissemination meetings) and informal ongoing engagement, involving the sharing of documentation. The collaboration ensured that insights from the RISE Ethiopia project informed policy and practice, particularly in bringing foundational literacy and numeracy to the forefront of policy attention, and introducing a culture of comprehensive evaluation of large-scale education reforms aimed at improving learning outcomes of primary school students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The findings also contributed significantly to the processes of school reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic and to inform the planning and implementation of future nationwide education reforms.

Given the limited experience with understanding the impact of large-scale education reforms in Ethiopia, the RISE Ethiopia project hopes to have introduced a culture of using evidence to inform the design and implementation of such large-scale education reforms. It is also hoped that the research process adopted by RISE Ethiopia, which combines high-quality evidence with on-going engagement to achieve impact, will provide lessons for other contexts.

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Appendix

Table A: RISE Ethiopia engagement and dissemination events with stakeholders

| | Date | Event | Activities | Media coverage |
|---|--------------------|----------------------------------|---|--|
| 1 | 26 October, 2017 | RISE Ethiopia Launch | The RISE Ethiopia Launch event took place at Ghion Hotel in Addis Ababa. Over 30 people attended, including ministry officials, representatives from the Regional Educational Bureaus, and key donor organisations working in the education sector, including the World Bank, FCDO, and USAID. | Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC); Ethiopian News Agency (ENA); Addis Gize News Paper; FM Addis 97.1 |
| 2 | 12 February, 2019 | Engagement with key stakeholders | This event took place on 12 and 14 February 2019 with donors and government officials in Addis Ababa and Bishoftu, respectively. The aim was to discuss the work and findings of the RISE Ethiopia System Diagnostics report. The workshops included 7 donor representatives and 23 government stakeholders, several of whom had participated in previous system diagnostic interviews. Along with exploring the emerging findings, the workshops provided an opportunity to update stakeholders on the progress of the RISE Ethiopia research. The State Minister for General Education & the Deputy Director at the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) opened the workshop. | |
| 3 | 19 September, 2020 | Engagement with key stakeholders | This was an in-person dissemination workshop to share RISE Ethiopia findings with various stakeholders based on data collected during the COVID-19 school closures. The participants included Ministry officials and directors of Regional Education Bureaus in Ethiopia. | Covered by Addis Standard newspaper on 21 September 2020. It was also indicated in a report by the World Bank on 25 September, 2020. |

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|---|-------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| 4 | 15 December, 2022 | RISE Ethiopia Dissemination Workshop | <p>At this event, major outputs of RISE Ethiopia research were presented to government education officials and stakeholders. The workshop was attended by a State Minister for General Education (MOE), Director General of the Education and Training Authority, Deputy Director of General & Social Policy Study Cluster Head of the Policy Studies Institute (PSI), Director of planning and Resource Mobilization Directorate, Director of School Improvement Programme Directorate, Chief Executive Officer of Teachers Education and Leadership at the Ministry and representatives of FCDO, World Bank, Education Development Trust (EDT) and Regional Bureaus of Education from across the country.</p> | <p>Ethiopian News Agency (ENA), Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporate (EBC), Fana Broadcasting Corporate (FBC), Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN), Walta TV and FM, and Addis Ababa University Radio 99.4.</p> |
| 5 | 13 July, 2023 | GATES Project dissemination event | <p>This event aimed to share findings with government education officials and stakeholders regarding the complex relationship between GEQIP-E reforms, COVID-19, and learning losses. It was attended by a State Minister for General Education, the Deputy Director General of Educational Assessment and Examination Services (EAES), selected school principals, and representatives of locally based international organisations such as FCDO and the World Bank.</p> | <p>Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporate (EBC); Ethiopia News Agency (ENA); Oromia Broadcasting Network (OBN)</p> |



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REAL Centre

Faculty of Education

University of Cambridge

184 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 8PQ, UK

Email: REALCentre@educ.cam.ac.uk

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