Ushirika wa Maendeleo ya Elimu Barani Afrika
الرابطة لأجل تطوير التربية في إفريقيا
Association for the Development of Education in Africa
Association pour le développement de l'éducation en Afrique
Associação para o Desenvolvimento da Educação em África

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
REPUBLIC OF MALAWI

FLEX2026 REPORT

FLEX2026
Africa Foundational Learning Exchange
Lilongwe * Malawi | 15 - 17 July, 2026

From commitment to results: Delivering foundational learning at scale

Acknowledgement

The Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) wishes to express its sincere gratitude to all who contributed to the success of FLEX2026, held over three days in Lilongwe, Malawi.

ADEA extends its deep appreciation to the Government of the Republic of Malawi, through the Ministry of Education, for hosting this third edition of the Africa Foundational Learning Exchange with leadership, dedication, generosity, and warmth.

ADEA thanks the Honorable Ministers of Education, heads of government delegations, and senior officials from the 42 African countries who graced the event in Lilongwe to share their countries' experiences, challenges, and commitments, including: Botswana, Central African Republic, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritania, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, The Gambia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, among others.

ADEA is equally grateful to the development partners and organizations whose technical and financial support made this exchange possible, including: the Gates Foundation, the World Bank, Hempel Foundation, UNICEF, Federer Foundation, Human Capital Africa, IDRC Canada, Imagine Worldwide, Mastercard Foundation, Prevail Fund, Luminos Fund, Global Partnership for Education (GPE), World Food Programme (WFP), IGAD, and UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

ADEA also appreciates the many technical officials, researchers, session panelists, and civil society representatives who participated actively across the thematic sessions. Their willingness to share evidence, highlight real challenges openly, and engage candidly with peers from other countries informed the substance of report, in terms of specific figures, country examples, and lived experiences woven through every theme in the report.

ADEA is especially grateful to the students of Nkwiji Primary School, whose direct and unflinching demands opened FLEX2026 and grounded every subsequent discussion in what matters most.

ADEA extends sincere gratitude to the many Ministries and technical focal points who contributed the country case studies and tracking submissions that anchor this synthesis in real, self-reported experience — including work still in progress that made this report present a more honest situation.

This report reflects the dedicated work of the Rapporteur Team — led by Dr. Maggie Okore. The team documented, synthesized, and stayed faithful to what was discussed across every session. ADEA is grateful to Dr. Okore and her team comprising Oswald Rutayisire, Prof. Hellen Nasimiyuh Inyega, Thandi Gweba Mthethwa, Henriette Gwizamahoro, Kouame Kouman, Dr. Mary W. Sichangi, Dr. Liviness Mwale, Anna Muuru, and Eleanor Sykes.

Finally, ADEA also wishes to recognize the dedicated staff from the Secretariat and Inter-Country Quality Nodes (ICQNs) and the overall FLEX team of country and partner representatives whose planning, logistics, and support behind the scenes made FLEX2026 possible. Their work, which rarely appears in a session report, is critical, without which none of the sessions could have happened.

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Executive Summary

The Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) and the Government of Malawi organized with key partners the 2026 Africa Foundational Learning Exchange (FLEX2026) at the Bingu International Convention Centre in Lilongwe on 15–17 July 2026.

The event convened more than 42 countries with representatives comprising African Ministers of Education and Finance from 19 countries and senior government officials from 23 countries, the African Union, and major development partners including Gates Foundation, World Bank, Global Partnership for Education, Hempel Foundation, Human Capital Africa, UNICEF, Federer Foundation, Prevail Fund, Luminos Fund, International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and Imagine Worldwide.

FLEX2026 is the third edition in a three-year arc: commitment in Freetown (2023), action in Kigali (2024), results in Lilongwe (2026). Ministers reaffirmed the five Kigali guidelines — government ownership, partner alignment behind national systems, evidence-driven practice, aligned curriculum and assessment, and data-informed decision-making and accountability. The pupils from Nkwiji Primary School in Lilongwe Urban opened proceedings with the conference's most direct demand, emphasizing the need to exchange promises, not just ideas.

New and reaffirmed financing models signaled momentum: the Gates Foundation's FLIGHT initiative mobilized US$35 million; the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) pledged US$37 million for Lesotho, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe; and the World Bank's AIM4Learning initiative committed US$1.5 billion within a US$16 billion African education portfolio.

Domestically, Sierra Leone channels 21% of its national budget to education, The Gambia directs 25.39% of its education budget specifically to foundational learning, and Malawi allocates 52% of its education budget to basic education — some of the strongest commitments voiced at the conference.

The foregoing is evidence of political will translating into resourcing, despite financing models remaining uneven and salary-biased. Their appeal captured the conference’s central challenge - turning commitments into measurable improvements in learning outcomes across Africa.

The six thematic areas structuring this synthesis each show the same underlying pattern: credible, often striking, evidence of what works, sitting alongside an unresolved tension that determines scaling models.

1. Political Leadership and Ownership	Ghana's USD 100 million investment in kindergarten teacher salaries improved qualification rates to 90%, and Kenya's INSPIRED programme trained 600+ Head Teachers with 98% reporting improved classroom practice. That notwithstanding, no session presented a strategy for governing education technology (EdTech) and artificial intelligence (AI) at vendor pace.
2. Financing and Equitable Resourcing	Malawi channels 52% of its education budget to basic education, and Sierra Leone spends 21% of its national budget on education against just 9% on debt servicing. Yet salaries still crowd out training and resourcing the curriculum continent-wide, and in three of five Sahel countries, community spending now exceeds government investment.

3. Data, Assessment and Accountability	Rwanda's five linked information systems tie data quality directly to salary incentives; 52 African countries average 2.7 out of 4 on the continental Action Tracker. Three continental data initiatives namely; CAF-Africa, the Action Tracker, and AFLAI now run in parallel with nearly every country's own bespoke platform, risking duplication rather than reinforcement.
4. Scaling Evidence-Based, Context-Responsive Pedagogy	Tanzania's MEWAKA coaching model lifted foundational proficiency from 63.7% to 89.9%; Ghana's coaching-plus-materials model raised literacy from 19% to 79%. Yet, approximately, 87% of children in Sub-Saharan Africa are still taught in a language they do not fully understand, with each country solving the transition independently.
5. Enhancing Partner Coordination and Alignment	Every major partner converges on one principle that governments lead and partners strengthen as demonstrated by Zambia's Technical and Steering Committees that work structurally. The middle-tier officers report “operational fatigue” from duplicated programmes, and no Action-Tracker-style mechanism holds partners accountable the way it holds governments.
6. Whole-Child Access and Transition Pathways	Kenya's INSPIRED programme has integrated 1,884 learners with disabilities into mainstream ECE centers. However, 10.6 million children remain out of school across the Sahel, and only 13% of countries can implement the disability-inclusive policies while 60% have adopted on paper.

Case studies on Somalia, South Sudan, and Niger, profiled in Part Four, extend this pattern into the conference's most difficult operating environments. Niger's functional national coordination mechanism and 58.67% teacher-training coverage sit within the same Sahel security pressures that produce the region's 10.6 million out-of-school children. This demonstrates that a country's transition status is not the same axis as its technical system maturity. Independently, Kenya, Somalia, and Niger each arrived at the same underlying solution for religious schooling, integrating it into the formal system. The pattern is strong enough to count as a validated finding for this synthesis's core pedagogy and access recommendations.

Taken together, FLEX2026's evidence points to one conclusion: political leadership authorizes financing, data, and coordination mechanisms while the other themes depend on it. Noting that authorization alone has not consistently reached the classroom. The recommendations under each thematic area, and the Call to Action in this synthesis, set out the rapporteur team's account of what closing that gap requires next.

Based on the above, Ministers and key education stakeholders at FLEX2026 in Malawi agreed to collectively take forward the following recommendations.

1. Enhancing partnerships and coordination	Adopt Partnership-Compact-style agreements where governments set priorities and partners align funding/support behind governments, rather than running independent parallel initiatives.
2. Financing and equitable resourcing	While advocating for increased domestic funding to education based on set continental and global benchmarks, dedicate a specific budget line for foundational learning, that prioritizes teacher training, learning

	assessment, teaching and learning materials, and learners' welfare, which show the clearest link to learning outcomes.
3. Data, Assessment and Accountability	Strengthen school-to-national quality data pipelines and utilization, and build credible and sustainable measurement, monitoring, and accountability systems.
4. Results at Scale	Continue to scale evidence-based context-responsive approaches that improve foundational learning outcomes by strengthening and embedding partners' initiatives within government programmes.
5. AI and EdTech	Establish a creative policy that enables the growth of the use of AI and EdTech tools as instructional aids for teachers and learners.
6. Whole-Child Access and Transition Pathways	Align ECE admission and transition policies to ensure children enter primary school with adequate school-readiness support that includes capacity for basic reading, numeracy, and social and emotional skills.

How this Report is Organized

This report opens with the conference as a whole, narrows into the six thematic areas that structured every session, and closes with the individual country experiences that ground those themes in real, self-reported practice. Readers looking for a particular country, theme, or type of evidence can use the foregoing as a guide.

PART ONE – Introduction, Opening Ceremony and Plenary Highlights: This section sets the scene: the scale of FLEX2026, the children's opening demands, the host country's own initiatives, and the financing, data, and country-success headlines and challenges highlighted at the plenary level.

PART TWO – Policy-level Highlights (Ministerial and Partners): Captures direct, Ministerial and partner level engagements as distinct from the technical evidence in the thematic sessions that followed.

PART THREE – The Six Thematic Areas (drawn from the four sub-themes): The heart of the synthesis. Each of the six areas — Political Leadership & Ownership; Financing & Equitable Resourcing; Data, Assessment & Accountability; Scaling Evidence-Based Pedagogy; Partner Coordination & Alignment; and Whole-Child Access & Transition Pathways — is presented as a continuous narrative, illustrated with charts boxed case studies from specific countries.

PART FOUR – Foundational Learning in Transition Contexts: Three country journeys — Somalia, South Sudan, and Niger — presented in parallel rather than ranked, each reported from the country's own submission or presentation, showing what reform initiation looks like at different starting points.

PART FIVE – Conclusion: Draws the sub-themes, six thematic areas, and the transition-context journeys back together into a single continuous story, with patterns and tensions that recur across the whole conference rather than within any one theme alone.

Rapporteur Team Credits: Individuals who documented and synthesized the discussions under each sub-theme.

Throughout, the case studies are meant to be read as illustrations of the surrounding theme, not as a ranked "best of" list — several countries appear more than once, under different themes, because their reforms genuinely touch more than one area at once.

Introduction: Opening Ceremony and Plenary Highlights

FLEX2026 was officially opened on 16th July at the Bingu International Convention Centre in Lilongwe with more than 42 countries represented. In attendance were: African Ministers of Education and Finance, senior officials, the African Union, and development partners including the Gates Foundation, the World Bank, the Hempel Foundation, UNICEF, the Federer Foundation, Human Capital Africa, IDRC Canada, Imagine Worldwide, the Mastercard Foundation, the Prevail Fund, and the Luminos Fund. Delegates described FLEX as a genuine continental accountability platform, with the movement's arc framed across three editions: commitment in Freetown (2023), action in Kigali (2024), results in Lilongwe (2026).

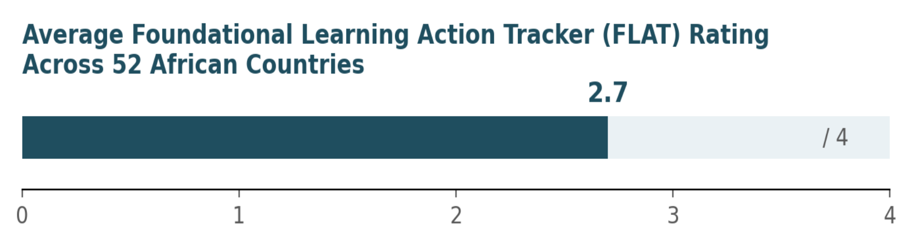
> *"Do not just exchange ideas — exchange promises. Act for us, act with us to end learning poverty together."* — Students, Nkwiji Primary School, Lilongwe.

Students from Nkwichi Primary School delivered the conference's most direct demands: materials in reading, numeracy, and reasoning in languages they understand; teachers who can teach at the right pace, with catch-up support for those who need it; climate-resilient schools; digital inclusion for rural communities; and removal of hidden barriers facing children with disabilities. As the host, Malawi answered with its own initiatives, including a National Reading Program (NRP), the tech-supported Building Education Foundations through Innovation and Technology (BEFIT) program, a Teaching at the Right Level pilot in 80 schools designed to refine remediation before scale-up, and a new pre-primary class called “P-Class” — a school-readiness initiative for five-year-olds. They reaffirmed the five Kigali guidelines that: government ownership must drive results; partners must amplify national systems; evidence must dictate practice; curriculum, materials, training, and assessment must align; and data must inform accountability.

> *"The children don't want us to bring any commitments again. We need to do what works at scale. If we don't, we are wasting the time of the children."* — Dr. Obi Ezekwesili, Human Capital

Financing commitments announced or reaffirmed at the plenary backed the guidelines concretely. Sierra Leone directs 21% of its national budget to education. The Gambia allocated 25.39% of its education budget specifically to domestic foundational learning financing. The Gates Foundation's FLIGHT initiative has mobilized US$35 million from philanthropy partners and is nearing operationalization. GPE pledged US$37 million to unlock additional multiplier financing for Lesotho, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The World Bank's AIM4Learning regional initiative represents US$1.5 billion within a US$16 billion overall education portfolio across Africa.

On data, progress was real but uneven: the average rating on the continental Foundational Learning Action Tracker (FLAT) stands at 2.7 out of 4 across 52 African countries, with most at the “established” rather than “championing” level, meaning policy formulation is generally strong but delivery at scale still lags. Both ministerial participation in FLEX forums and technical participation in the African Foundational Learning Ministerial Coalition's quarterly meetings improved since Kigali.



Delegates highlighted country success stories as evidence of what sustained delivery looks like: Kenya's Tusome Program, Zambia's Catch-Up Programme, Nigeria's Teaching at the Right Level (now in 12,000 schools), Malawi's National Mathematics Curriculum Reform Programme, rolled out to all public primary schools in the 2025/26 academic year. Senegal's and South Africa's mother-tongue bilingual education programs (12,000 schools), and Côte d'Ivoire's blended financing model, among others.

> "If learners are not given a strong foundation, they cannot make much progress. If they can't take off in the first five years, even university won't make them as productive in society." — Plenary remarks.

Two threats were elevated as newly cross-cutting concerns: climate change and the digital divide, both identified as forces actively widening existing inequities rather than simply adding new challenges.

Ministerial Highlights: Direct Engagement at the Highest Level

The thematic sessions that follow capture technical evidence and cross-country practice. This part captures something different in the ministers' statements regarding their own settings, political commitment, coordination, and the role of data. Two moments anchor it; the Ministerial engagements in plenary sessions and a closed-door Ministerial breakfast convened around education data governance, where ten countries spoke in turn.

The Ministerial Breakfast: Data, Leadership, and Coordination

A closed-door Ministerial Breakfast brought ministers and senior officials together around education data as a leadership conversation. Discussion centered on three coordinated continental initiatives: an education skills data coalition working with 25 countries, each with a nominated ministry focal point; an African education research initiative (AERI) and active in Malawi, Kenya, and Senegal; and the AFLAI model. The framing offered to ministers was direct: quality data does not advance without political leadership taking it up, and country-level engagement indicating that technical system design has been the harder challenge so far. A recurring theme: producing data is not the same as using it. Translating data into policy, connecting systems across ministries, institutionalizing data capacity from the school level upward, and sustaining stakeholder engagement all proved harder, and more unfinished, than data collection.

Central African Republic, new to this process, welcomed the chance to engage, calling foundational learning the natural starting point. Senegal recalled the Kigali commitment and asked directly how far countries had actually come, citing its own 2024 data project spanning three ministries as evidence of how central yet difficult inter-ministerial coordination proved to be. Botswana described its Education Management Information System (EMIS) as managed through the Ministry of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT), a deliberate choice ahead of wider rollout, while citing limited connectivity and infrastructure as constraints that have required direct involvement from the Office of the President. Seychelles pointed to its national education transformation plan and 2025 early childhood action plan, built around inclusive, holistic support for every child in line with SDG 4. Lesotho asked to learn from other countries specifically about generating and sharing data across stakeholders. Kenya reported an integrated system for credible data collection alongside continued emphasis on teacher capacity. Comoros described an education management information system now able to draw data from all schools. Rwanda framed the exercise as a standing question the room must keep asking together: exactly where each country stands on eliminating learning poverty, and whether initiatives remain coordinated rather than parallel. Sierra Leone kept its intervention brief, welcoming the chance to learn from peers. Madagascar shared a biometric system initiative for reliable data, offered candidly as ongoing rather than finished.

Together, the ministerial plenary discussions and the Ministerial Breakfast make a case the thematic sessions elsewhere build more slowly, through accumulated evidence: political leadership is not a precondition sitting outside the data and coordination themes; it is the bottleneck several ministers named directly, in their own words. Senegal's three-ministry coordination challenge, Botswana's ICT-ministry EMIS arrangement, and Rwanda's call to keep asking "where are we, really" are ministers naming, among peers, exactly the institutional friction this synthesis's thematic sections describe elsewhere from the outside.

TENSION: Political leadership is not a precondition sitting outside the data and coordination themes; rather, it is the bottleneck ministers named directly, in their own words. Senegal's three-ministry coordination struggle, Botswana's ICT ministry EMIS arrangement, and Rwanda's call to keep asking "where are we, really" are ministers naming, among peers, the same institutional friction this synthesis's thematic sections describe from the outside.

From Four to Six Thematic Areas

Discussions under FLEX2026 were anchored in the four sub-themes (data, assessment and accountability; teaching, learning and pedagogy; education workforce and system leadership; and governance, system alignment, cost effectiveness, and financing). However, as the event progressed, six distinct themes emerged upon which the foregoing is based.

1. Political Leadership & Ownership

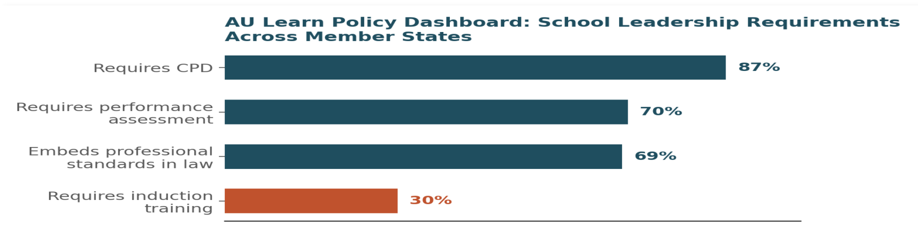
Across FLEX2026's three days, one message recurred more than any other: foundational learning succeeds or fails on the strength of political leadership and government ownership. This was no slogan — it is the precondition every other theme depends on, since financing, data, pedagogy, and partnership all require governments that lead rather than delegate. The Freetown-to-Kigali-to-Lilongwe journey has largely been a story of foundational learning moving from the margins of ministerial attention to the centre of national institutional architecture.

"Strong schools are led, not administered." — Dr Maurice Odondo, CEO of KEMI

Nowhere is this clearer than in how school and system leadership itself is being professionalized. Kenya's KEMI, Zimbabwe's MOPSE curriculum, Ethiopia's Gender Responsive Pedagogy policy, Zambia's Catch-Up Coordinating Committee spanning multiple government directorates, and Rwanda's dedicated FL Delivery Unit all mark a shift from one-off, externally funded projects toward durable, government-owned institutions. Ghana's investment shows the scale of this commitment: its National Play-Based Scaling and Coaching Model trained 29,000 kindergarten teachers, 14,700 Head Teachers, and 3,800 Ghana Education Service officials, while activating 600,000 mothers in home-based reinforcement, backed by USD 100 million invested directly into KG teacher salaries. Ninety percent of Ghana's KG teachers are now fully qualified, a milestone unreachable without sustained government financing and institutional commitment.

"No matter how good the programme is, without political will, the programme will be in vain." — Nigeria presentation.

Yet the African Union's own Learn Policy Dashboard complicates any simple success narrative. While 87% of AU member states require continuing professional development for school leaders and 70% require performance assessment, only 30% require induction training before a leader takes up the role. The implication is that many leaders learn the fundamentals on the job, after they are already accountable for outcomes. Kenya's INSPIRED programme in Wajir and Mandera counties shows what closing this gap looks like: 600-plus Head Teachers and 84 specialized county coaches trained in foundational learning supervision and quality assurance, with 98% of trained teachers reporting measurable, immediate improvements in classroom practice.



A second major finding was the elevation of middle-tier actors — namely, district, ward, and zonal officers - as the decisive link between national policy and the classroom. Repeatedly called "the engine of the system," middle-tier officers in Ghana (792 District Training Support Team members delivering intensive five-day training) and elsewhere are increasingly the practical mechanism through which curriculum reform, teacher coaching, and accountability reach schools. Community structures - school committees and parent assemblies, with particular focus on women's leadership - are being formally reframed as a legitimate accountability layer, empowered to hold schools responsible for outcomes, teacher attendance, and continuation of home-based learning. Mauritania now requires all new teachers to hold a Bachelor's degree plus teacher-college training and continuous professional development, paired with hardship allowances and housing subsidies for remote rural postings.

"The lesson for everyone; government ownership will do the trick." — Dr Sam Awuku, NECRI Secretariat, Ghana

The most instructive leadership case study came from Kenya's Arid and Semi-Arid Lands counties, where the INSPIRED programme confronted direct tension between religious and formal schooling. Strong cultural traditions require children to complete Quranic study in traditional Duksi classes before entering formal school, producing classrooms of overage learners and, initially, significant community resistance to Western-style education. Rather than displacing this institution, Kenya's government co-developed a combined national/Muslim Duksi curriculum manual directly with religious and community leaders. Resistance dissolved, access rose, and the programme attracted more than 1,000 new learners – proof that political leadership succeeds by integrating local institutions, a model this synthesis's Transition Contexts section shows recurring independently in Somalia and Niger.

"We must accept local solutions, and we will see true reforms that are owned by communities." — Martha Odundo, Ministry of Education, Kenya.

Government ownership extends into newer terrain too, particularly EdTech and AI policy, where sessions stressed that sustainability depends on governments, not private vendors, setting reform's pace — though no session offered a concrete strategy for when private partners move faster than public procurement can follow. Similarly, while community leadership structures are being empowered in principle, no session clarified how their authority interacts formally with middle-tier government structures, leaving open the risk of overlapping or contested mandates exactly where implementation succeeds or fails. Day 2's own breakdown of plenary discussion by sub-theme added a quieter finding: governance and financing dominated, while workforce and leadership was the least-discussed of the four sub-themes. This was an external confirmation of a gap flagged elsewhere in this synthesis, that teacher-workforce content still lacks a dedicated home in the six-theme structure.

On Day 2, Malawi's Secretary for Education – Dr. Ken Ndala, Rwanda's Minister of Education – Hon. Joseph Nsengimana, and Sierra Leone's Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education – Hon. Conrad Sackey, used the plenary Ministerial panel to reaffirm that governments must lead reform while partners strengthen, not substitute, national systems. Rwanda specifically called for greater partner investment in school infrastructure. As Dr. Maurice Odondo, CEO of the Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI), put it to the plenary: ownership is no longer contested in principle; the work now is building the institutional plumbing that makes it real.

TENSION: Governments are asserting ownership over curriculum and pedagogy, but no session offered a strategy for governing EdTech and AI at the pace private vendors set, or for reconciling newly empowered community structures with middle-tier government authority.

Recommendations

- Engage Parliament continuously in FL funding and oversight. This is to ensure continuity which outlasts changes in government.
- Pair middle-tier oversight with community-level accountability, rather than strengthening either in isolation.
- Review the full EdTech and AI spectrum now, before private vendors outpace public policy.

CASE STUDY — Kenya: Co-Designing with Communities. Rather than displacing Quranic Duksi schools, Kenya's government co-developed a combined national/Muslim curriculum manual with religious and community leaders. Resistance dissolved, and the programme attracted 1,000+ new learners — a pattern independently repeated in Somalia and Niger.

CASE STUDY — Ghana: Activating Mothers as Partners. Ghana's National Play-Based Scaling and Coaching Model directly activated 600,000 mothers, many non-literates, in structured home-based reinforcement of early literacy and numeracy — treating the home, not just the school, as a site of intervention. Niger's own recommendations independently echoed this approach.

2. Financing & Equitable Resourcing

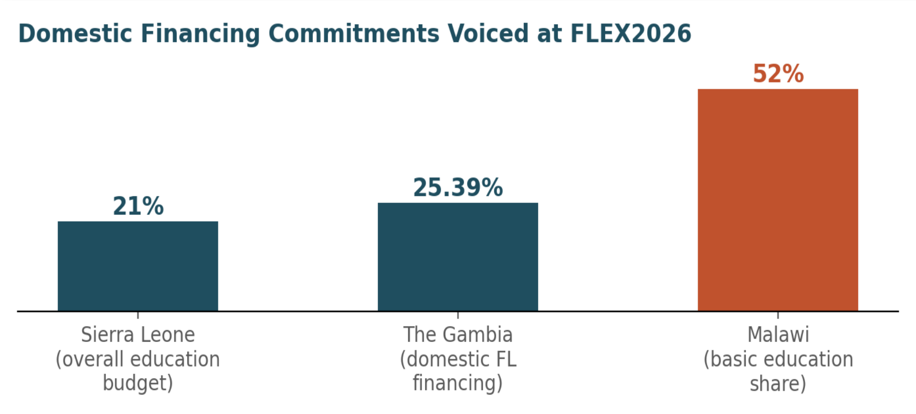
If political leadership is the will behind foundational learning reform, financing is the most honest test. FLEX2026 confirmed a familiar pattern: nearly every government has committed strongly to foundational learning, but translating that into dedicated, adequate, efficiently spent resources remains the agenda's most persistent gap. This is not simply a story of insufficient money, but a story of structural bias in how existing money is spent, and of financing models still being invented in real time.

Most African governments have no dedicated foundational learning budget line; available education financing goes mainly to salaries, leaving little for teacher training, learning assessment, and materials that the conference's own evidence shows have a strong link to outcomes. Côte d'Ivoire is illustrative: it allocates 24% of its national budget to education, yet 80% of that goes to salaries, with World Bank and partner support mobilized to cover the rest. This pattern recurs across the continent, helping explain why genuine political commitment still struggles to fund delivery at scale.

"Investment in FL is an investment in a country's sovereignty." — Minister of Finance, Malawi.

Countries are experimenting rapidly with new financing architecture. The Ghana Education Trust Fund (GET Fund), a 2%-VAT-based education trust, and Zimbabwe's Basic Education Fund are statutory, earmarked domestic revenue streams. Public-Private Partnerships, diaspora and alumni endowments, and school-run business units are being tested as supplementary channels. Mozambique cut textbook costs by roughly 50% simply by decentralizing production from commercial publishers to government-managed printing and regional distribution. This is a reminder that resourcing gains do not always require new revenue, just smarter spending of existing funds. Outcomes-based financing has also entered the conversation: Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Comoros are piloting models that pay for verified results; such as measurable gains in girls' literacy rather than inputs alone, with Rwanda's Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Outcomes Fund, backed by the LEGO Foundation and the EU, offered as a working example of blended, co-funded financing that treats partners as investors in outcomes rather than parallel funders.

Some of the clearest financing signals came directly from ministerial remarks. Sierra Leone reported spending 21% of its national budget on education against just 9% on debt servicing. The country argued that domestic prioritization is possible even under fiscal pressure and called for diaspora bonds and debt swaps as further tools. The Gambia allocated 25.39% of its education budget specifically to domestic foundational learning financing. Malawi's own figure, shared during the Day 2 ministerial panel, was striking: 52% of its national education budget now goes to basic education, one of the strongest domestic commitments voiced at the conference.



Several findings complicate a straightforward positive reading. In the Sahel, Official Development Assistance now covers only 15% of education expenditure, and in three of five Sahel countries, community-led spending on education exceeds government investment. Malawi's own Resource Mobilization Committees, partnering directly with local banks to fund basic supplies like textbooks and chalk where central funding falls short, tell a similar story of local ingenuity substituting for centralized adequacy. Donor funding for foundational learning is reported as declining across multiple sessions, even as new pledges were announced at the conference: The Gates Foundation's FLIGHT initiative (US$35 million), GPE's catalytic pledge (US$37 million, aimed at Lesotho, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe), and the World Bank's AIM4Learning initiative (US$1.5 billion).

A parallel thread was cost-effectiveness; not simply how much is spent, but on what. Evidence from thirty conflict-affected countries showed children can make measurable learning gains even in the most difficult contexts, provided interventions are appropriately tailored and cost-effective. FCDO's SCALE programme, active in Nigeria, Malawi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Ghana, offered a cautionary finding cutting across financing and partnership alike: many well-designed, well-funded interventions still fail not for lack of money, but because government and donor priorities are misaligned from the outset. A World Bank evaluation in Ethiopia found a structural disjoint between pre-primary and primary systems, with little pre-service training support for pre-primary teachers — specifically a finding about resourcing sequence as much as pedagogy. The clearest message from this evidence was: big improvements in foundational learning require aligning, strengthening, and scaling the instructional core, not simply increasing the volume of funding.

As one Day 2 panelist put it, financing is not merely a technical budget question, but a matter of national self-determination, even as the practical work of closing Africa's financing gap remains substantially unfinished.

TENSION: In three of five Sahel countries, community spending on education now exceeds government investment; a sign of fragility, not resourcefulness, as some of the poorest stakeholders fill a gap government have not closed. And even as new pledges were announced at FLEX2026, whether they offset a broader decline in donor funding, or merely cushion it, is a question the conference raised but did not resolve.

Recommendations

- Diversify FL financing beyond national budgets structurally biased toward salaries.
- Tie disbursement to schools' own improvement plans, not uniform allocation, following Ghana's model.
- Prioritize teacher training, assessment, and learning materials — the clearest drivers of outcomes.
- Close financing “loopholes” so allocated funds reliably reach intended beneficiaries.
- Direct EiE funding to community-managed schools where governments cannot sustain provision, especially in conflict-affected and transition contexts.
- Favor affordable, low-cost EdTech over expensive AI models that strain budgets; use teacher reallocation and local resource mobilization as lower-cost equity tools first.
- Combine multiple financing models - blended, outcomes-based, levies - rather than betting on one before rollout.

CASE STUDY — Rwanda: Financing a Proven Intervention. Using global returns-on-learning modeling alongside its own cost-effectiveness data, Rwanda funded a targeted holiday remedial programme. Primary repetition (P1–P3) fell from 29.7% to 20.4% in a single year, building a proof point now driving further financing advocacy.

CASE STUDY — Côte d'Ivoire: Blended Financing. With 80% of its 24%-of-budget education spend absorbed by salaries, Côte d'Ivoire mobilizes additional World Bank and partner financing to close the gap, paired with an Ed-Lab (with IPA and the GECO Foundation) that pilots and evaluates reforms before they scale.

CASE STUDY — The Gambia: A Precise Domestic Commitment. The Gambia allocated 25.39% of its education budget specifically to domestic foundational learning financing — one of the most concrete, FL-specific budget commitments voiced at the conference.

CASE STUDY — Mozambique: Cutting Textbook Costs by Decentralizing Production. Mozambique cut textbook costs by roughly 50% simply by decentralizing production away from commercial publishers toward government-managed printing and regional distribution. This did not require new revenue or a bigger budget line — it came from restructuring how existing education funds were spent on materials procurement.

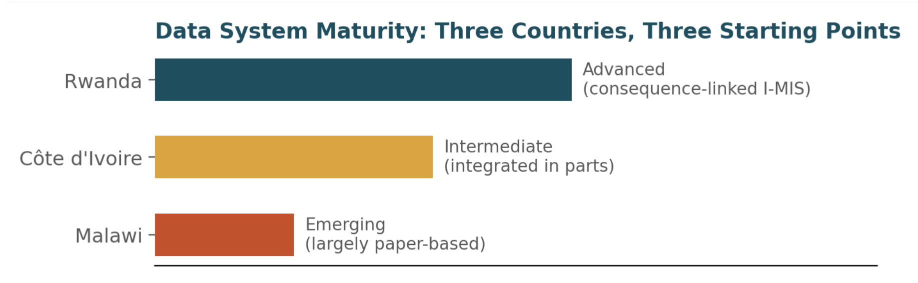
3. Data, Assessment & Accountability

No theme generated more granular, country-specific evidence at FLEX2026 than data, assessment, and accountability. None illustrated more starkly how unevenly African education systems are progressing, even among countries held up as regional leaders. The conference's data sessions moved well beyond whether countries are collecting information, into the harder question of whether that information is trustworthy, used, and connected to consequences.

"Let us use evidence from classrooms and not from board rooms." — Hon. Conrad Sackey, Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Sierra Leone.

The clearest illustration came from a single Day 2 session comparing Rwanda, Côte d'Ivoire, and Malawi side by side. Rwanda's Integrated Education Management Information System links five separate systems — a school and student database, a Teacher Management Information System tied to payroll and national ID, a Comprehensive Assessment MIS covering more than 4 million students, a daily student attendance tracker, and a Quality Assurance MIS — into one interoperable architecture, and ties data quality directly to consequences: headteachers can earn salary bonuses for data accuracy, and teacher salaries are linked to the system itself, an incentive structure that has driven the near-elimination of so-called "ghost teachers." Côte d'Ivoire sits at an intermediate stage, having integrated its school code system, national student database, and online registration and grading platform, and having established an Ed-Lab, with IPA and the Global Education Council -GECO Foundation, that pilots and evaluates reforms before they scale. Malawi, by contrast, remains largely paper-based, constrained by only 40% school internet access, with an EMIS Governance Framework developed with UNICEF around five pillars targeting 85% digital data submission by 2038. As Malawi's own EMIS lead put it candidly: the country currently has fragmented manual systems with no single source of truth.

"[Standards] do not require every airport to look the same. They do not require every airline to fly the same aircraft. We simply created confidence that different systems can work together." — Yanhong Zhang, UIS



Beyond this three-country comparison, other governments are building data and assessment infrastructure from different starting points. Zambia collected baseline foundational learning data specifically to diagnose why outcomes had deteriorated. Senegal's MIRADOR/GRIM platform tracks and maps its entire teacher workforce, including linguistic profiles, to match teachers to schools by language of instruction. Ghana uses an HR Management System and Ghana Education Service dashboards to analyze real-time teacher demand and vacancies, shifting deployment from arbitrary to evidence-based. Nigeria has launched a digitalized Education Platform with electronic school-visit scorecards and EMIS dashboards, with 15 states now having harmonized their administrative data structures. Namibia is transitioning to "Open EMIS" and integrating classroom-level assessment data to move from static annual reporting toward real-time dashboards supporting immediate teacher coaching, while Rwanda's separate "clustering" model links community-based early childhood centers to the formal school EMIS, letting them receive capitation grants and qualified teachers. Rather than relying on one-off, externally driven assessment projects, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Madagascar are each institutionalizing national learning assessments through dedicated units (NASU, NST, and ENAH respectively).

A second strand concerned citizen-generated data and civil society filling gaps government systems alone cannot reach. The ICAN-ICAR household-based assessment model, active across eleven countries including Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda, Mali, and Senegal, deliberately assesses children in their homes rather than in schools,

"Children are going to school, but are they learning? And this is the question that triggered this movement." — Armando Ali, CEO, PAL Network.

using more than 3,000 citizen volunteers to reach over 89,000 children, capturing out-of-school and chronically absent learners who are invisible to school-based systems entirely. Kenya's National Bureau of Statistics has taken this further, developing a formal eight-dimension quality framework to validate citizen-generated data for official national and SDG reporting a genuine maturation of the relationship between government and civil society. Zimbabwe, using a different strategy, is linking its ZELA national assessment directly with its EMIS to create a single source of truth, replacing previously siloed systems.

Accountability, several sessions argued, is not simply about producing better statistics centrally; it depends on getting data back down to the community level in a form people can act on. Kenya's practice of translating assessment findings into local languages and sharing them through local media and community forums was cited repeatedly as a model, meant to make foundational learning a topic of discussion in local markets and church groups. This grassroots approach sits alongside more technical continental efforts: the Continental Assessment Framework for Africa (CAF-Africa), developed by the African Union to harmonize learning assessments across all 54 member states, and the newly named African Foundational Learning Assessment Initiative (AFLAI),

> "Sunlight often is one of the best treatments for data quality. Do not be afraid of using the data — don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good." — Paulo-Pedro Azevedo, UNICEF.

A recurring caution across nearly every data-related session was the difference between process evidence and outcome evidence. Multiple country presentations could confidently report that materials had been delivered and coaching conducted, but far fewer could offer verified, longitudinal evidence that children's actual learning had durably improved. Data is not always welcomed simply because it exists: Kenya's own experience offered a candid cautionary tale, where assessment findings were initially disputed by officials because they contradicted a positive political narrative, and it took direct field exposure — bringing policymakers physically into classrooms — to shift resistance into genuine partnership. Capacity building emerged as a near-universal priority: Rwanda alone has trained more than 8,000 school leaders in data quality and analysis, while Côte d'Ivoire has trained 300-plus officials through an ADEA-supported project.

As this theme's evidence makes clear, the technical challenge of data collection is increasingly solved; what remains unresolved is whether the resulting information reliably changes what happens in a classroom.

TENSION: At least three continental data initiatives; CAF-Africa, the Foundational Learning Action Tracker, and AFLAI are now in motion simultaneously, while nearly every country is also building its own bespoke national platform. The next test for this theme is less about generating more data and more about making these efforts reinforce, rather than duplicate, one another.

Recommendations

- Strengthen school-to-national data pipelines with credible, sustained measurement systems.
- Build unified national teacher/education data systems as the backbone for equitable deployment and resourcing.
- Equip middle-tier officers with simple digital tools (Kobo Collect, digital scorecards) so data reaches decision-makers in real time.
- Close the 60%-vs-13% policy-implementation gap by training teachers to identify and record disability/inclusion data.

- Give national assessment agencies dedicated funding and a legal mandate, so they outlive individual champions and project cycles.
- Operationalize CAF-Africa as a shared, harmonized framework across all AU member states — not a fourth parallel initiative.
- Close the data-to-action loop: disseminate assessment results to community and school level, and link them to curriculum revision and teacher training.

CASE STUDY — Rwanda: Data Tied to Consequences. Rwanda's Integrated EMIS links five systems, including a Teacher Management Information System tied to payroll and national ID. Data quality is tied directly to consequences — salary bonuses for accuracy — driving the near-elimination of "ghost teachers."

CASE STUDY — Zimbabwe: Linking Assessment to the EMIS. Rather than running its national assessment as a standalone exercise, Zimbabwe integrated it directly with its EMIS to create a single source of truth — a smaller-scale model of the same integration principle behind Rwanda's more advanced system.

CASE STUDY — Sierra Leone: From Poor Baselines to Institutionalized Assessment. Poor EGRA/EGMA results led Sierra Leone to establish National Assessment Services Unit (NASU), institutionalizing national assessment as an ongoing government function. Minister Conrad Sackey: "use evidence from classrooms and not from board rooms."

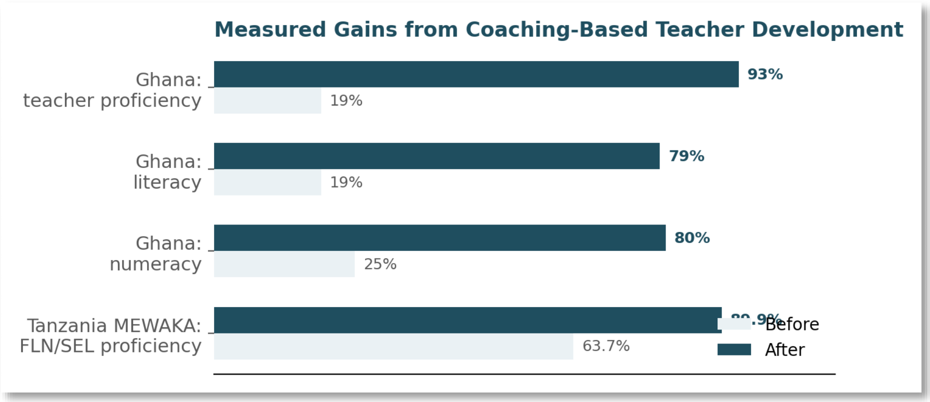
CASE STUDY — Botswana: An EMIS Inside the Ministry of ICT. Botswana houses its EMIS within the Ministry of ICT rather than Education, pairing it with a digitized curriculum — while candidly naming connectivity constraints serious enough to require Office of the President involvement.

4. Scaling Evidence-Based, Context-Responsive Pedagogy

Of all six thematic areas, pedagogy carried the conference's largest, most quantitatively rich evidence base and arguably its most settled consensus about what works. Session after session presented specific, measured interventions with double-digit percentage gains in literacy, numeracy, and instructional quality, suggesting the central challenge is no longer identifying effective approaches, but scaling and sustaining the ones already proven.

> "Anything we can think of trying has been tried in Africa by somebody else. We must focus on scaling and producing outcomes rather than running more pilots." — Hon. Joseph Nsengimana, Minister of Education, Rwanda

The strongest evidence came from coaching-based teacher professional development models replacing older, one-off cascade training. Tanzania's Mafunzo Endelevu kwa Walimu Kazini (MEWAKA) programme, a bottom-up, school-based continuous development system, lifted foundational proficiency scores from 63.7% in 2021 to 89.9% in 2025. Zambia's Targeted Improvement for Equitable Education Improvement (TIEEZ) School Improvement Cycle, pairing school-level assessments with community-linked improvement plans, achieved a 66–88% improvement in learning outcomes. Coaching models more broadly — Zambia's BOFO, Madagascar's "Espaces Collaboratifs," and similar approaches — nearly doubled school leaders' direct instructional feedback, from 24% to 49% of observed interactions, with data-informed teaching decisions rising from 19% to 48%. Ghana's training-plus-in-class-coaching model, evaluated through a single-district end-line against a non-intervention comparison group, produced some of the conference's most striking numbers: teacher proficiency rated "good" or "outstanding" rose from 19% to 93%, children reaching age-appropriate literacy rose from 19% to 79%, and numeracy rose from 25% to 80%.



If one finding cut across more sessions than any other, it was language of instruction. Global evidence spanning more than 150 studies and roughly 60 languages confirms children learn to read most effectively in a language they understand — yet roughly 87% of children in Sub-Saharan Africa are still taught in a language they do not fully understand, against a global average closer to 40%. Country after country is building its own response: Ghana teaches in the mother tongue from kindergarten through Primary 3 before transitioning to English; Senegal's Modèle Harmonisé de l'Enseignement Bilingue (MOHEBS) model pursues real-time bilingualism; Nigeria's Kanuri Arithmetic and Reading Initiative (KARI) programme serves Kanuri-speaking learners; Uganda's U-CatchUp and TaRL Africa's L2F2 model offer further variations; and Eswatini uses SiSwati as the language of instruction even when printed materials remain in English, prioritizing comprehension over material availability. The children who addressed the opening ceremony made this same point directly. The emerging concern: each reform effort is proceeding independently, country by country, with no shared continental framework for managing the bilingual transition.

> "Learning begins at home, and there can never be any better medium than the mother tongue." — Ghana policy message.

A parallel, equally rich body of evidence concerned Teaching at the Right Level and Catch-Up programming, drawing on Zambia, Eswatini, Uganda, Nigeria's Kaduna State, and Eritrea. Every case started with diagnostic evidence: Zambia's 2018 EGRA baseline found only 10% of Grade 7 learners reaching minimum reading proficiency and 72% of Grade 2 learners unable to answer a single reading comprehension question; Kaduna State found approximately 74.9% of learners affected by learning poverty. Countries that adapted TaRL successfully grouped learners by actual ability rather than age or grade, and paired coaching with continuous teacher support. Jonathan Stern of the Gates Foundation offered the session's most forward-looking challenge: countries must shift focus from "recovery" toward "prevention," so remedial catch-up becomes the exception rather than a permanent feature of the system.

Technology and physical materials formed a further significant thread. Malawi's BEFIT programme has reached 889,782 learners, distributed 200,375 tablets, and trained 17,900 teachers, targeting 3.5 million learners; a proposed "5Cs" framework for national EdTech integration emphasizes localizing AI tools to local languages and safeguarding critical thinking. Yet a Kenyan classroom-observation finding tempered any assumption that materials alone drive change: even where teaching materials were present, approximately 80% of observed lesson time remained whole-class, teacher-centered instruction.

> "Play-based learning must not be treated as a project or pilot; it must be institutionalized in the system." — Tanzania core message.

Early childhood education contributed some of the richest country-specific detail of the conference.

Tanzania's Quality Early Learning Package (QELP) scaled from initial design in 2021/22 to national supportive monitoring by 2025/26, reaching 100% of local government areas and 12,162 classrooms; a related BOOST-supported reform reached 12,360 teachers, with 99% of observed classrooms showing interactive materials present. South Africa's Six Bricks and Foundation Phase Initiative reached more than 2.74 million children across over 14,927 schools in all nine provinces. Zambia harmonized previously fragmented, competing NGO-led play-based approaches into a single national framework with a tablet-based formative assessment tool. Yet, as with TaRL, an honest caveat sits beneath these achievements: Tanzania's own data showed under 60% of classrooms with verified change, and only 15.2% of observed ECE classrooms were detached and fenced — a basic child-safety gap sitting quietly behind otherwise strong pedagogical results.

As one Ghanaian policy message put it: learning begins at home, and there can never be a better medium than the mother tongue.

TENSION: The evidence on what works is arguably the conference's most settled — yet each country is solving language-of-instruction and TaRL transitions on its own, with no shared continental framework. And the two areas showing the strongest numbers, materials distribution and ECE, both carry a quiet caveat: 80% of Kenyan lesson time stayed teacher-centered even where materials were present, and only 15.2% of observed ECE classrooms in Tanzania were safely fenced.

Recommendations

- Scale bottom-up, school-based coaching (MEWAKA, BOFO) over top-down cascade training — the outcomes gap is measurable.
- Localize AI and EdTech to local languages, and keep them instructional aids — not shortcuts around critical thinking.
- Prioritize training for community-recruited teachers, who form the majority of the workforce in the most vulnerable areas.
- Adopt language-in-education policies with clear benchmarks, giving children time to build literacy in a familiar language before transitioning to English/French.
- Move materials monitoring beyond stock counts to track actual classroom use and quality of instruction.
- Pair every material or EdTech investment with teacher orientation and follow-up coaching — distribution without training rarely changes practice.
- Ground TaRL/Catch-Up design in diagnostic evidence (EGRA-style baselines), not assumptions about where learners are.
- Invest in continuous coaching and mentoring, not one-off training. Eswatini's regional master-trainer model sustains delivery quality.
- Engage community, religious, and political stakeholders early and consistently to build durable trust before rollout.

CASE STUDY — Senegal: Real-Time Bilingualism. Senegal's MOHEBS model teaches French and local languages alongside each other from the start, rather than switching abruptly — directly targeting the finding that 87% of Sub-Saharan African children are taught in a language they don't fully understand.

CASE STUDY — Malawi: Structured Pedagogy at National Scale. Malawi's Structured Pedagogy Programme scaled from a 500-school pilot to full national primary coverage, backed by a domestic commitment of 52% of the education budget to basic education.

CASE STUDY — Tanzania: MEWAKA's Four-Year Gain. Tanzania's bottom-up, school-based coaching model lifted foundational proficiency scores from 63.7% to 89.9% in four years — one of the conference's largest measured gains, though longitudinal durability remains untested.

5. Enhancing Partner Coordination and Alignment

Partner coordination occupies a distinctive place among the six thematic areas: it is where rhetorical consensus is strongest, yet the gap between stated principle and lived experience on the ground is most visible. Virtually every partner organization that addressed FLEX2026 - the Gates Foundation, the World Bank, GPE, UNICEF, the Hempel Foundation, and the Prevail Fund among them converged on an identical formulation: governments must lead foundational learning reform, and partners exist to strengthen national systems, to avoid building parallel ones.

"We must not build multiple systems over governments." — Partner representative.

This principle is visibly moving from rhetoric into structure in several countries. Zambia established both a Foundational Learning Technical Committee and a Steering Committee, government-led with formal partner membership, specifically to coordinate action and reduce duplication. More broadly, the conference pointed toward Partnership-Compact-style agreements, modelled on GPE's own approach, as the preferred structural mechanism going forward: governments define priorities, partners align funding and technical support behind them. Blended financing arrangements, such as Rwanda's ECCE Outcomes Fund, co-funded with the LEGO Foundation and the EU, were offered as a working example of what this alignment can look like.

Yet sessions closer to actual implementation told a more complicated story. At the middle-tier level — namely, district and ward officers translating policy into classroom practice — programme duplication and poor coordination among development partners were described as producing active "operational fatigue," a direct contradiction of the coordination principle affirmed on the plenary stage. Commitments made at a political or continental level do not automatically propagate down to the operational level, where multiple organizations still run separate programmes with separate reporting lines and separate points of contact for already-stretched government officials.

The Day 2 partner session added further texture. FCDO's SCALE programme, active across Nigeria, Malawi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Ghana, offered evidence for both sides of the coordination story: in Rwanda and Sierra Leone specifically, foundational learning implementation improved markedly when government and partners coordinated directly around shared priorities, while FCDO's own broader analysis found many otherwise well-designed interventions fail because government and donor priorities are misaligned from the outset. Partners at this session named six specific gaps in government-side delivery: moving from policy and pilots to large-scale implementation; increasing and sustaining domestic financing; strengthening the use of data for accountability; improving government-side coordination; building teacher and school leadership capacity; and ensuring equity in the digital transition. The one substantive pushback partners offered was a request to invest across the full spectrum of evidence-based interventions, including physical infrastructure — an area partners have historically avoided funding.

Six Gaps Partners Named in Government-Side Delivery

A quieter but important finding is an asymmetry in accountability. Governments now face increasingly visible, quantified scrutiny of their delivery through tools like the Foundational Learning Action Tracker; no equivalent mechanism holds partners accountable to their own coordination commitments — an asymmetry FLEX2026 did not resolve, though partners naming their own gaps suggests an opening for a more genuinely reciprocal conversation in future editions. A further, less-discussed dimension is the involvement of the private sector and youth directly in foundational learning conversations and implementation, treated in several sessions as an underused resource for expanding financing and delivery capacity.

> "The question is no longer what works, but rather who will take action and how those solutions will be delivered at scale." — Dr. Oby Ezekwesili, Human Capital Africa

The shift this theme calls for is consistent: from coordination as a stated value to coordination as an enforced structure — technical and steering committees, Partnership Compacts, and clearly distributed roles doing the practical work that goodwill alone has not.

TENSION: This is the theme where consensus is strongest and the gap with lived experience is widest. Middle-tier officers describe "operational fatigue" from duplicated partner programmes even as partners affirm coordination on the plenary stage. Governments face quantified scrutiny through the Action Tracker; no equivalent mechanism holds partners accountable to their own commitments.

Recommendations

- Involve the private sector and youth directly in FL conversations, programming, and implementation.
- Establish national FL technical/steering committees to align government and partners and cut fragmentation.
- Formally distribute leadership roles across ministries and partners — including at school and middle-tier levels in a coordinated, non-duplicative way.
- Adopt Partnership-Compact-style agreements: governments set priorities, partners align funding and support behind them, not parallel initiatives.

CASE STUDY — Zambia: Coordination as Institution. Zambia's government-led Technical and Steering Committees, with formal partner membership built in, turn "governments lead, partners align" from plenary rhetoric into a standing coordination mechanism with a mandate.

6. Whole-Child Access & Transition Pathways

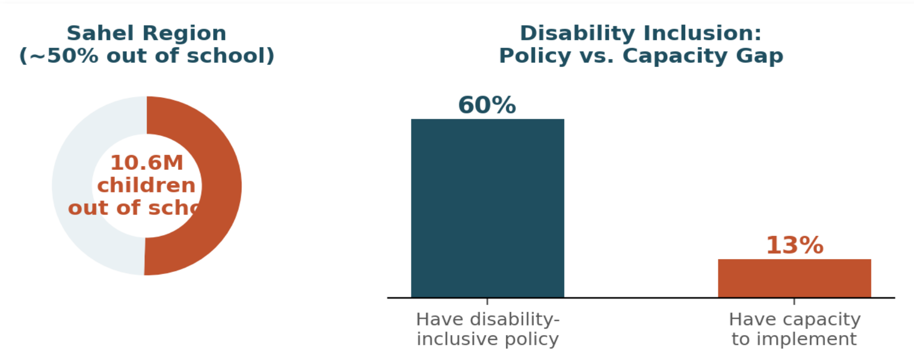
Whole-child access and transition pathways carried the conference's most urgent, and most unevenly distributed, evidence. Where other themes could point to measured percentage gains and scaling success, this theme was defined as much by what remains unresolved as by what has been achieved — sharpened by the observation that the countries celebrated as “success stories” throughout FLEX2026 were, without exception, not the countries facing the hardest access and inclusion challenges. The children who addressed the conference put it directly: children are not robots but human beings who need more than reading and writing — they need to “be,” in an environment that cares for their social and emotional development.

> "You have the power and the budgets. We have the potential. If you invest in us today, we will be able to live up to the expectations and needs of our countries." — Children's Appeal.

The starkest figures of the entire conference came from this theme. Across five Sahel countries, roughly 10.6 million children — approximately half the school-age population in that region — are completely out of school. In South Sudan, a severe shortage of qualified teachers means many community schools cannot open grades beyond Primary 5. These figures sit in uncomfortable contrast with the conference's own celebrated success stories — Kenya's Tusome, Zambia's Catch-Up, Nigeria's Teaching at the Right Level, Malawi's Structured Pedagogy, and South Africa's mother-tongue bilingual education — none of which originate in a conflict-affected context, raising the question of whether this movement's evidence base is genuinely representative of the hardest cases.

Where formal government systems have struggled to reach excluded children, community-led responses have often filled the gap. Flexible, community-led re-entry frameworks, including maternal-led safeguarding and tracing programmes, are helping out-of-school children return to formal education, while middle-tier actors run “back-to-school” campaigns and track the teacher absenteeism that undermines continuity even for children nominally enrolled. Mauritania's approach to children in refugee contexts offered a notably different model: rather than routing them into parallel structures, Mauritania integrated refugee learners directly into its formal public education system to preserve continuity.

Disability inclusion emerged as a second major thread, with a genuine but partial success story. Kenya's INSPIRED programme integrated 1,884 learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities into mainstream ASAL-county ECE centers, providing adaptive teacher guides and specialized textbooks as standard components rather than optional add-ons. This sits, however, against a continent-wide gap documented elsewhere in this synthesis: while 60% of African countries now have disability-inclusive education policies formally in place, only 13% have the workforce and systems capacity to actually implement them.



A further significant strand concerned the transition from early childhood education into primary school, approached from two genuinely different angles. Namibia is restructuring its own government architecture, shifting ECE governance from the Ministry of Gender to the Ministry of Education by 2027 to align early-years data with the primary-school system. South Africa, facing a different manifestation of the same underlying problem, reported deep inequality and inconsistent Grade 1 admission ages. That two countries are addressing the same transition challenge through such different institutional levers suggests the problem is widely recognized, with complementary approaches emerging even without one shared solution yet.

Physical safety, often treated as separate from access and inclusion, surfaced as part of this theme too: in Tanzania, only 15.2% of observed ECE classrooms were found detached and properly fenced. This concern was echoed directly by the children who addressed the opening ceremony, whose stated priorities — climate-resilient schools, digital inclusion for rural communities, and removal of hidden barriers facing children with disabilities — read, in retrospect, as the plainest possible summary of this sub-theme's mandate.

Taken together, this theme's breadth demands treating whole-child access not as one programme among many, but as the frame the other five themes must ultimately serve.

TENSION: Every country celebrated as a FLEX2026 success story — Tusome, Catch-Up, TaRL, Structured Pedagogy, mother-tongue bilingual education — comes from outside a conflict-affected context, even as 10.6 million Sahelian children remain out of school. And while 60% of African countries now have disability-inclusive policies on paper, only 13% have the capacity to implement them.

Recommendations

- Develop data systems from birth to track out-of-school children, run enrolment campaigns, and secure safe routes to school.
- Ensure that the curriculum embeds social and emotional skills development to support the holistic development of the child.
- Redesign school calendars around local agricultural and economic cycles, and embed mother-tongue instruction, to cut dropout linked to poor fit with community life.
- Target resources and teacher deployment at hard-to-reach areas to remove access bottlenecks like South Sudan's Primary 5 ceiling.
- Position Early Childhood Education as the starting point of national foundational learning strategy, not a standalone agenda.
- Align ECE admission and transition policies so children enter primary school at a consistent age, backed by adequate school-readiness support.
- Institutionalize parent and community engagement — home-learning guidance, multilingual materials, parent-center committees — to protect learning continuity outside school.

CASE STUDY — Mauritania: Integrating Refugee Children. Rather than routing refugee learners into parallel structures, Mauritania integrated them directly into its formal public education system to preserve learning continuity — a model held up as worth replicating elsewhere.

Foundational Learning in Transition Contexts

Three country journeys, presented in parallel: Somalia, South Sudan, and Niger.

Every success story celebrated on the FLEX2026 stage comes from a relatively stable, better-resourced system, several years into implementation, with outcome data to match. None originates in a conflict-affected or transition context — even though transition countries carry a disproportionate share of the continent's out-of-school children and face a significantly deeper learning challenge.

Somalia, South Sudan, and Niger are presented here as parallel journeys, each in a genuinely different position. Somalia is building assessment, teacher, financing, and curriculum systems across many fronts simultaneously, with early pilot signals to show for it. South Sudan is candid about a workforce still dominated by untrained volunteer teachers and months of unpaid salaries, while pursuing specific, dated national targets — 75% literacy and 20% of the national budget to education, both by 2030 — alongside improving the textbook ratio from 1:6 to 1:1. Niger shows that a country navigating serious regional security and humanitarian pressure can still run a national assessment system that feeds policy and a functioning central-to-local coordination mechanism — a reminder that the pressures a country faces nationally and the maturity of its technical systems sit on entirely different axes. None of the three is further along than the others; each is worth reading on its own terms.

These case studies follow a deliberate standpoint: each is drawn directly from a national self-reported source — a standardized FLEX2024 commitments tracking form, or a country-authored conference presentation — rather than external evaluation. All three countries are presented as contributors, not just subjects of review. South Sudan's own presentation, for instance, explicitly lists what it can teach other countries: language-of-instruction lessons, structured pedagogy under real constraint, and government-partner partnership models.

COUNTRY JOURNEY 1

Somalia: Rebuilding Foundational Learning

Illustrating transition-context delivery alongside the six thematic areas.

Why Somalia

Somalia's case belongs in this synthesis because it is not yet a comparable success story. It is initiating the same categories of reform — strong assessment systems, quality teacher data, diversified financing, evidence-based pedagogy — from a much lower starting base, under active capacity constraints, without the multi-year track record other case studies can draw on. Its TaRL pilot result (18,750 children involved over eight months) is an early positive signal from a single pilot cohort, not a proven at-scale outcome. What Somalia offers is visibility into what reform initiation looks like under transition-state conditions — a stage few other country cases in this synthesis show.

Snapshot of Reforms Underway (Early-Stage, Not Yet Comparable Outcome Data)

TaRL pilot (single cohort)	18,750 Grade 3 children showed improved foundational reading and math after 8 months of daily one-hour sessions — an early pilot signal though not yet an at-scale result.
Teacher workforce	6,000 new teachers recruited over the last 2 years, completing blended training; a further 4,000 to be recruited and begin training by end of 2026.

Infrastructure	1,000 new classrooms, 20 new girls' schools, 52 additional schools (by June 2027), and 4 new Teacher Training Centers under construction.
Domestic co-financing	Government topped up GPE-supported Ministry curriculum center construction with US$1.85M; topped up the WFP school meals programme with a further US$5M.
Financing innovation	National Education Development Fund (NEDF) channels contributions from private business, individual philanthropists, the diaspora, and donors.

Interventions Mapped to the Six Action Areas

1. **Political Leadership & Ownership:** A dedicated Education Finance Framework is being rolled out to state level, and three new Ministry HQs and a National Curriculum Centre are under construction — institution-building rather than parallel project offices.
2. **Financing & Equitable Resourcing:** The NEDF diversifies financing beyond government and traditional donors to include diaspora contributions and private philanthropy; domestic co-financing top-ups show resourcing layered on top of, not purely dependent on, partner financing.
3. **Data, Assessment & Accountability:** A National Learning Assessment (NLA) Framework has been completed and piloted, now moving to full scale; a Teacher Information Management System nearing completion links teacher records to national ID, payroll, and GPS attendance tracking.
4. **Scaling Evidence-Based, Context-Responsive Pedagogy:** The piloted TaRL approach is now being scaled nationally; a curriculum review is shifting from outcome-based to competency-based education; lessons have been digitized for self-paced access.
5. **Enhancing Partner Coordination and Alignment:** Partners such as GPE, World Bank, UNICEF, WFP, and IGAD each finance distinct, clearly delineated components rather than duplicating one another; a Ministry team visited Malaysia and Indonesia specifically to study Quranic-school integration. A similar visit is planned for The Gambia.
6. **Whole-Child Access & Transition Pathways:** The Integrated Quranic Schools (IQS) initiative integrates Quranic study with formal schooling rather than displacing it; a new Climate Education Initiative responds directly to recurring climate shocks; 20 new girls' schools target gender access gaps.

Why This Case Study Matters for the Synthesis

Somalia's value to this synthesis is deliberately not as a success story; it is a record of reform initiation — the stage that precedes evidence of outcomes. Its Integrated Quranic Schools approach independently echoes a pattern seen in Kenya's Duksi model and Niger's renovated Quranic schools — the same approach recurring in three countries.

COUNTRY JOURNEY 2

South Sudan: Building Foundations While Rebuilding a Nation

Drawn from the country's presentation, "Foundational Learning Reform in the Republic of South Sudan," by David Lowela Lodu, Director General for Basic and Secondary Education, MoGEI. South Sudan has named foundational learning a national priority in its General Education Strategic Sector Plan (GESP) 2023–2027 and its Partnership Compact, backed by specific, visible reforms: a Competency-Based Curriculum shifting instruction toward skills and practical application; a Pre-primary Policy tabled at the Council of Ministers and progressing toward Parliamentary approval and Presidential assent; a completed Diagnostic Study on Foundational

Learning; and a National Pre-primary Education Advocacy Framework (2023–2033).

Progress Since FLEX 2024

A mother-tongue instruction pilot in Primary One has been completed, with national languages now rolling out to Primary Two and Three. Between 2023 and 2025, the Ministry trained more than 14,500 teachers, facilitators, inspectors, and education managers, including focused training in 111 primary schools. Classroom assessment tools have been developed, and education data systems strengthened. South Sudan frames this as a shift "from expanding access alone towards improving learning outcomes."

"Foremost, foundational learning reform is not just a policy, it is a vital step by the Government of South Sudan to ensure that every child gains the basic skills needed for lifelong learning and national development. This vision cannot be achieved through fragmented efforts." — Government of South Sudan

Why This Reform Matters: The Evidence Behind It

South Sudan's own MICS data states the case clearly: among children attending Grades 2 and 3, only 5% demonstrate foundational reading skills and only 11% demonstrate foundational numeracy skills. Among children of the expected age for those grades, in school or not, these figures fall to 1% for both. The Ministry's own presentation is direct: increasing attendance alone will not deliver the continental and SDG 4 targets without real improvement in teaching quality.

Government Commitments and Targets

National literacy target	Increase national literacy rates to 75% by 2030, alongside scaled-up TaRL catch-up learning and expanded structured pedagogy.
Education financing target	Progressively increase public expenditure on education to 20% of the national budget by 2030.
Textbook distribution	Distribution of 1.1 million textbooks underway, moving the pupil-to-textbook ratio from 1:6 towards the 1:1 target.
EGRA/EGMA baseline	Launched in 20 schools — the country's first step towards a formal early-grade assessment system.
Out-of-school children	2.8 million children and youth remain out of school — a challenge central to the government's equity commitments, particularly for girls and children with disabilities.

Challenges, from the Government's Perspective

South Sudan names its key constraints plainly: limited domestic financing has meant teachers going unpaid for months; the workforce is dominated by untrained volunteer teachers; qualified teacher shortages are acute among female teachers; conflict, displacement, and climate-related shocks continue to force school closures; and remote areas still have limited access to quality education.

The Value of South Sudan's Experience

South Sudan can share five areas of experience with other countries: lessons from introducing national language instruction in early grades; experience implementing structured pedagogy under genuinely difficult conditions; government-partner partnership approaches; strengthening education management through quality data under real capacity constraints; and innovative approaches to reaching vulnerable and crisis-affected learners.

COUNTRY JOURNEY 3

Niger: Technical Maturity Amid Wider Transition Pressures

Based on submitted FLEX2024 Commitments Tracking Form.

Why Niger

Niger presents a different journey: a national learning assessment that is not only developed but actively used to inform policy and classroom practice; a functional coordination mechanism running from central to local level; multi-year budget data rather than a single snapshot; and teacher-training coverage (58.67%) more complete than the other transition cases reported. Still, Niger remains part of the Sahel group, navigating the same regional security and humanitarian pressures, including the region's 10.6 million out-of-school children. Niger demonstrates that a country's broader transition state is not necessarily on the same axis as its technical system maturity.

Interventions Mapped to the Six Thematic Areas

1. **Political Leadership & Ownership:** Backed by an unusually well-documented policy architecture, though coalition-meeting attendance at the political level needs improvement.
2. **Financing & Equitable Resourcing:** The only transition-context case with three consecutive years of budget data across three indicators; textbook and in-service training shares remain under 3% and 0.3%, respectively.
3. **Data, Assessment & Accountability:** A national learning assessment is developed, implemented, and actively used across the policy-to-classroom chain; data is submitted to continental and global platforms.
4. **Scaling Evidence-Based, Context-Responsive Pedagogy:** Named, currently-implemented programmes — the Pedagogical Remediation Strategy (SRP), the Quality-Focused Minimum Package (PMAQ), digital coaching, Read@Home, the Accelerated Bridge Schooling Strategy (SSAP), and the Community Alternative Education Center for Youth (CCEAJ)— provide concrete, quantified pedagogy inputs.
5. **Enhancing Partner Coordination and Alignment:** Coordination examples — PASEC, the World Conference on Early Childhood, and IFADEM — are drawn from a Francophone regional ecosystem distinct from mostly Anglophone examples elsewhere in this synthesis.
6. **Whole-Child Access & Transition Pathways:** The renovated Quranic schools programme is a third documented instance of integrating rather than displacing religious schooling; SSAP and CCEAJ both target learners outside the standard school pathway.

Snapshot (Self-Reported, July 2026)

Political engagement framework	Backed by multiple named national instruments: LOSEN (1998 Education Orientation Law), PTSEF, the Refoundation Charter, the PRR programme, and a ministerial mission letter.
National FL coordination mechanism	Reported as functional, described as “a permanent coordination arrangement running from central to decentralized level.”
National learning assessment	Developed, implemented, and reported as actively used to inform policy, classroom practice, and programme design.
Teacher training coverage	58.67% of teachers formally trained in evidence-based instructional approaches.

Learner: book ratios	3:1 for literacy; 5:1 for numeracy.
Budget trend, 2024–2026	Textbooks: 2.15% → 1.79% → 2.87%. In-service teacher training: 0.06% → 0.11% → 0.27%.

Why This Case Study Matters for the Synthesis

Set alongside Somalia and South Sudan, Niger demonstrates that "country in transition" cannot be treated as a proxy for "technically immature." The detail most worth carrying into the wider synthesis is the Quranic-schools finding: Kenya, Somalia, and now Niger independently arriving at the same integrate-rather-than-displace approach is close to a validated finding, and belongs in this synthesis's core pedagogy and access recommendations.

A Pattern Worth Naming: Integrating, Not Displacing, Religious Schooling

Kenya's Duksi curriculum integration, Somalia's Integrated Quranic Schools initiative, and Niger's renovated Quranic schools programme were each developed independently, yet all three arrive at the same underlying approach: where families prioritize Quranic study before formal schooling, reform succeeds by integrating that institution into the formal system rather than displacing it. One country doing this is a local adaptation; three doing it independently is close to a validated finding — strong enough to move into this synthesis's core pedagogy and access recommendations.

Conclusion

Read across all six areas, FLEX2026 tells one continuous story rather than six separate ones. Political leadership is the precondition on which the other five themes depend, and it is professionalizing fastest where governments invest directly. Ghana's USD 100 million into KG teacher salaries and Rwanda's dedicated FL Delivery Unit show this — yet leadership itself was the least-discussed of the conference's four sub-themes, even as every other theme names it as the bottleneck. Financing confirms the same pattern in a different register: political will is real, but there is a structural bias toward salaries. Community spending now outpacing government investment in three of five Sahel countries shows that commitment alone has not yet translated into sufficient resourcing to deliver teacher training, assessment, and materials that most reliably drive outcomes. Data is the theme where the technical problem is closest to solved, and the behavioral one is not: countries increasingly know how to collect information, but three continental initiatives now run in parallel with nearly every country's own bespoke platform, and the harder question is whether that information reliably changes what happens in a classroom.

Pedagogy provides the conference's most convincing evidence that specific interventions work, but each country is still addressing language-of-instruction and Teaching at the Right Level transitions independently, with no shared continental framework to accelerate what the evidence has already established. Partner coordination is the theme where rhetoric and practice diverge most: consensus on governments-lead, partners-strengthen is nearly universal in plenary, yet middle-tier officers describe active operational fatigue from duplicated programmes, and no mechanism holds partners accountable the way the Foundational Learning Action Tracker holds governments. And whole-child access is less a sixth theme than the frame the other five must ultimately serve, every success story celebrated at FLEX2026 came from outside a conflict-affected context, even as 10.6 million children remain out of school across the Sahel alone.

The transition-context case studies sharpen this picture rather than complicating it. Somalia, South Sudan, and Niger show that a country's transition or security status is not the same axis as its technical system maturity. Niger's functional central-to-local coordination mechanism and 58.67% teacher-training coverage sit within the same Sahel security pressures that produce the region's 10.6 million out-of-school children. And one finding recurs clearly enough, independently, in three separate contexts to count as more than coincidence: Kenya's Duksi curriculum integration, Somalia's Integrated Quranic Schools initiative, and Niger's renovated Quranic schools programme each arrived, without coordinating with one another, at the same underlying approach in terms of integrating religious schooling into the formal system rather than displacing it. One country doing this is a local adaptation; three doing it independently is close to a validated finding, and it belongs in this synthesis's core pedagogy and access recommendations going forward.

Calling on Governments, with Partner Support

- Institutionalize what already works; coaching-based teacher development, TaRL, and mother-tongue instruction rather than running more pilots.
- Close financing loopholes, allocate approximately 20% of national budgets or 6% of GDP to education, and diversify beyond salary-biased budgets, so new pledges measurably offset, rather than merely cushion, the decline in donor funding.
- Operationalize one shared data framework, built around the Continental Assessment Framework for Africa (CAF-Africa), instead of layering a fourth continental initiative on top of nearly universal national platforms.

- Further inputs to strengthen the coverage in transition and conflict-affected contexts such as; Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, South Sudan, Niger, and the Sahel's 10.6 million out-of-school children in the next edition's evidence base, so success stories reflect the hardest cases, not only the most stable ones.

FLEX2026's own framing of its three-year arc - commitment in Freetown, action in Kigali, results in Lilongwe - sets a clear bar for the next edition: less exchange of ideas, more evidence that the promises made in plenary sessions were kept back in the ministries that hold the budgets.

What determines whether FLEX2026 becomes the reference point for FLEX2027/28 or one more conference remembered for its declarations is not the strength of the ideas gathered here, but the fidelity of execution back in the ministries. Leadership authorizes financing; financing bankrolls the data systems and pedagogy that already work; coordinated partners help carry both into classrooms. That sequence, more than any single recommendation, is this synthesis's cogent case.

Part of the FLEX2026 organizing team…

Annex 1: Rapporteur Team

Names	Sub-Theme
• **Dr. Maggie Okore**	**Chief Rapporteur**
• Oswald Rutayisire, ADEA • Prof. Hellen Nasimiyuh Inyega, University of Nairobi & ADEA	Sub-theme 1: Data, Assessment, and Accountability & plenary discussions
• Thandi Gweba Mthethwa, ADEA • Henriette Gwizamahoro, Right to Play, Rwanda	Sub-theme 2: Teaching, Learning, and Pedagogy
• Kouame Kouman, ADEA • Dr. Mary W. Sichangi, Centre for Mathematics, Science and Technology Education in Africa (ADEA & CEMASTEA), Nairobi, Kenya • Eleanor Sykes, Lively Minds	Sub-theme 3: Education Workforce and System Leadership in Africa's Foundational Learning Agenda & plenary discussions
• Dr. Liveness Mwale, Ministry of Education, Malawi	Sub-theme 4: Governance, System Alignment, Cost Effectiveness, and Financing
• Anna Muuru, TaRL Africa	Plenary discussions

Annex 2: References

- Technical and plenary session presentations and discussions. Presentations available at https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/1eO-UIAw9MTp7MHxotrw5d093GuNdF5Vg
- FLEX2026 programme: https://flex2026.adeanet.org/programme.
- FLEX2026 Photos: https://flex2026.adeanet.org/photos

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