

Management Response to the Midterm Evaluation of the BETTER Programme 2022-2026

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April 2025

1. Introduction

This note sets out the Management Response to the external midterm evaluation of the DGD funded programme 2022-2026 “Better Education through Teacher Training, Evidence and Research” (BETTER).

The evaluation was carried out by OxfordMeasurEd from April to December 2024. The final report was received on the 31st of January 2025. The evaluation focused on assessing the programme’s scaling and institutionalisation efforts through implementation of Result Area 2 of the generic Theory of Change across eight diverse outcomes implemented in the Global South.

The evaluation started with a kick-off meeting, followed by an inception phase comprising a desk review and remote interviews with global and country teams. In-depth case studies through field visits were carried out in Zambia, Uganda and Vietnam involving interviews with VVOB staff and partners. Sensemaking workshops were held with teams of the case-study countries and globally with VVOB’s Community of Practice (CoP) on Scaling. A validation workshop concluded the evaluation in December 2024.

The evaluation process and team were guided by a Technical Subgroup of the CoP on Scaling, along with an Evaluation Steering Committee composed of representatives from various countries and departments. The Management Response was developed with input from multiple country teams and was endorsed by VVOB’s Global Leadership Team.

2. Overall appreciation

The overall evaluation design, as well as its implementation, is appreciated from multiple perspectives. It provides a balanced yet comprehensive assessment of the scaling and institutionalisation efforts of VVOB teams across the eight outcomes. We value the evaluators’ ability to understand and capture the complexity of the BETTER programme, considering the diversity of outcomes and contexts in which it operates.

The report is of high quality, effectively reflecting this diversity while also highlighting the overarching achievements and challenges in the pathway(s) to scaling. The findings are accurate, coherent, and well-supported, with clear references to specific cases. Conclusions align with the findings, making the report convincing and its recommendations highly relevant. However, while the recommendations are useful, their feasibility for implementation may, in some cases, be overestimated.

The following section elaborates on VVOB’s views on the recommendations presented in the report and provides a formal response to each.

3. Management Response to the recommendations

The evaluation report formulated recommendations for implementation at the global and at country level. In addition, recommendations are rated on priority, importance and feasibility using following categories:

Priority	Long Term Vision (high investment / high impact) – These changes will take large, long-term investment, but will be transformational for the programme. They may not be immediate priorities but should be considered as part of long-term planning. Unmissable opportunities (low investment / high impact) – These are changes to the programme which will not take large investments but will have a large positive impact on the programme. They are unmissable opportunities and should be prioritised. Quick Wins (low investment / low impact) – These are changes that will not have a transformational impact on achieving the programmes objectives but will also not require significant investment. They should be implemented, but not in isolation. Rather, they should be included as part of a suite of changes.
Importance	Not addressing the recommendation...  risks the achievement of impact and outcomes over time  reduces potential to increase efficiency and/or effectiveness over time.  is a choice to be made based on a set of trade-offs
Feasibility	- Implementation is likely to require a shift in approach or strategy - Implementation is likely to require considerable time and resources - Implementation is likely to require significant amount of time and resources

3.1. Global level recommendations

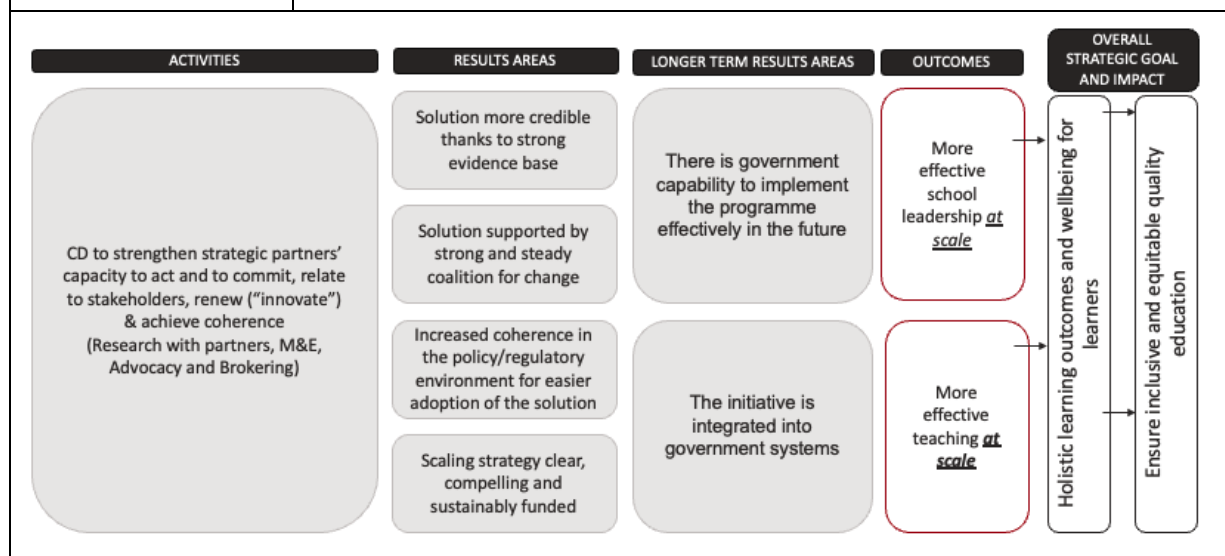
Recommendation 1	Clarify VVOB's vision and definition of what constitutes successful scaling. Develop, in close collaboration with country teams, an overarching model on innovating, piloting, implementing and scaling through government institutions for VVOB. Consider starting with the proposed model provided in this report, adapting where needed to suit VVOB's needs
Priority	Long term vision (high investment / high impact)
Importance	 Not addressing the recommendation risks the achievement of impact and outcomes over time
Feasibility	Requires considerable time and resources
Justification based on findings	This review has found that there are various innovation pathway models for non-state actors, whereby it is intended that the innovation moves from a problem to be solved, through to a Minimum Viable Initiative outside of government institutions. These models rely on NGO implementation and a "handing over" to government for scale up. Meanwhile, there is a "missing model" for non-state actors like VVOB, who innovate, pilot, implement, institutionalise and scale up within government systems.
Response	Accepted
Justification	The finding accurately reflects VVOB's approach to innovation and scaling with and through government systems. Unlike models that develop, pilot and test innovations before handing them over to the government for scaling, VVOB operates within government structures from the outset. Our approach ensures alignment with national policies, enhances institutional ownership, and strengthens long-term sustainability. By innovating, piloting, implementing, institutionalising, and scaling with and through government systems, VVOB aims for deep-rooted change that is embedded in existing structures rather than introduced externally. The recognition of this "missing model" highlights the need for a specific scaling model that acknowledges and supports the role of non-state actors working directly within public systems.
Actions Taken or Planned & Timing	The formulation of a vision, definition, principles and model for scaling that integrates evidence, will be taken up in 2025 by a dedicated taskforce of the Global CoP on Scaling. Several touchpoints with the entire Global CoP and with VVOB's Global Leadership Team are foreseen to ensure that the model resonates with different internal stakeholders. The taskforce will also seek input from scaling experts, including from the organisations with whom VVOB co-developed the Education Scalability Checklist (ESC). The aim is to have an overarching model for scaling and evidence finalised and validated by the end of the year so that it can provide guidance for the formulation and implementation of the next DGD programme.

Recommendation 2	Ensure a clear pathway for innovation and evidence integration. By acknowledging where evidence is lacking, partners can make informed decisions about risks and manage expectations. This will ensure that scaling efforts are not based solely on the desire to "get things done", but on a balanced approach that integrates evidence, evaluation, and risk management.
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	This pathway might be integrated within a VVOB scaling model (Recommendation 1) or be developed in parallel and/or in the absence of a full model
Priority	Long term vision (high investment / high impact)
Importance	 Not addressing the recommendation risks the achievement of impact and outcomes over time
Feasibility	Requires considerable time and resources
Justification based on findings	One key lesson from this review is the importance of explicitly defining the innovation pathway and clearly communicating how evidence informs scaling decisions. Delays in evidence generation did not result in delays in scaling, risking achieving outcomes at scale.
Response	Partially accepted
Justification	A clear pathway for scaling and evidence integration is indeed essential (cfr. response to Recommendation 1), as is well-informed dialogue with government and co-implementing partners about the expected advantages and risks of rolling out new approaches at a large scale. At the same time, the risk of (too rapidly) expanding new approaches to large populations solely by a desire to “get things done” is – in our experience – quite small in the education sector. Certainly, scaling efforts require long-term political commitment and a persistent desire to “get things done” on the side of our government partners. Collaboration with stakeholders across the education system and beyond, support from “frontline implementers” (teachers, school leaders), dedicated planning and alignment with institutional priorities, and – in many cases – support from external funders at critical junctions are equally necessary to build and keep momentum. We agree that scaling efforts should be informed by the best possible evidence. However, using evidence – including robust evidence of “what works” in a specific location (within the country) – does not automatically equal well-informed decision-making and does not guarantee impact at scale. Evidence generation for scaling needs to be timely, as well as ongoing and credible to government and co-implementing partners, donors and other stakeholders. This indeed requires considerable time and effort. The BETTER programme is VVOB’s first to have included an earmarked budget for research in all countries, and it reaffirms our ongoing commitment to evidence-based practice and continuous learning across all projects.
Actions Taken or Planned & Timing	1) The development of an overarching scaling model that integrates evidence will be taken up in 2025 by a dedicated taskforce of the Global CoP on Scaling (cf. response to Recommendation 1) 2) Strengthening the capacity of M&E and research staff will continue in 2025 through the continuation of the Internal Learning Trajectory on Evidence-Based Research and M&E. This trajectory was launched in 2021, ahead of the BETTER programme – the first to earmark funding for research across all countries. Monthly learning and exchange sessions are organised to address practical challenges and shared needs, supporting effective implementation of research and M&E activities within VVOB projects. 3) Since 2020, VVOB has introduced dedicated research positions in recognition of the growing importance of research within its approach. As outlined in the <i>Learning Unlimited Strategy 2030</i>, “VVOB invests in research and relies on research and evidence in its decision-making”. Over the course of the BETTER programme, seven country offices now have a Strategic Education Advisor (SEA) for “Research” or for “M&E and Research”.

Recommendation 3	Consider VVOB's risk appetite and balancing VVOB's long history of supporting partners to institutionalise and scale up, while also being an evidence-based organisation. Provide guidance to country teams on how to navigate risks and scaling at the country level
Priority	Long term vision (high investment / high impact)
Importance	 Not addressing the recommendation risks the achievement of impact and outcomes over time
Feasibility	Requires a shift in approach or strategy, rather than increased resources
Justification based on findings	This Review acknowledges VVOB's commitment to being an evidence-informed organisation and the importance of evidence is clear from VVOB resources applied within BETTER programmes. However, this Review has also found that when evidence generation has been delayed, scaling has not. This implies the need to take an organisational position on VVOB's risk appetite and if "getting things done" should continue despite the absence of evidence that the initiative is working, risking long-term impact.
Response	Accepted
Justification	We agree that VVOB has the responsibility to work with stakeholders to anticipate the potential benefits and risks associated with scaling, and to learn which risks stakeholders are willing to accept at each level of scale. As different stakeholder groups may well have different perspectives on the benefits and risks of scaling a new approach, it is equally our responsibility to consult widely, and to ensure that our scaling efforts enjoy broad support. Importantly, the urgency of the problem or need confronting stakeholders may change what they find acceptable. This can be particularly true for government partners, who may have a limited window of time in which to address the challenge at hand. For example, the (demonstrable) depth and scale of the learning crisis no doubt creates a sense of urgency around introducing and scaling an innovative approach to remedial learning, such as in Zambia. The launch of a new national curriculum – often after a considerable period of debate, design and development – creates an immediate and, typically, sustained need for professional development of teachers and/or school leaders at scale, as we see in Kenya and Uganda. These are complex situations, and it may well be necessary to move forward by relying on the evidence that is available and actionable, while "conclusive" evidence of "what works" is still missing. Credible evidence matters, but the decision to scale also depends on what matters to those affected by the issue at hand. Learning to properly and purposefully navigate these complexities and trade-offs properly is absolutely key, for all country teams.
Actions Taken or Planned & Timing	We will explore how to integrate risk into the global vision and scaling model so as to provide country teams guidance on making well-informed decisions about implementation and scaling together with key stakeholders.
Recommendation 4	Explicitly add "capacity to implement and integrate into the system" as Longer Term Result Areas. This includes embedding QA systems, MEL functions, updates to materials, professional training, integrated technology and long-term maintenance plans.

Priority	Unmissable opportunity (low investment / high impact)
Importance	 Not addressing the recommendation risks the achievement of impact and outcomes over time
Feasibility	Requires a shift in approach or strategy, rather than increased resources
Justification based on findings	This Review has found that building individual and organisational capacities to implement the initiative is reflected in all country activities. However, the expected results of these activities are not reflected in the BETTER programme ToC. Making this explicit will allow teams to focus on integrating delivery into government systems and structures to ensure <i>the system's capacity to sustain high-quality planning and delivery of the initiative</i>.



Response	Partially Accepted
Justification	Government capacity to institutionalise and sustain the education initiatives promoted by VVOB is indeed crucial for scaling their impact. The (generic) ToC of the BETTER programme explicitly includes related Results Area 2 – “Stronger enabling environment for institutionalisation & scaling” – which can be and is concretised and contextualised in country programmes as per examples in the Figure above (e.g., solution more credible thanks to strong evidence base, solution supported by strong and steady coalition for change, etc.). We agree that the ToC can be further unpacked to better monitor progress along the scaling journey. However, we are not convinced that the preferred option for unpacking the (generic) ToC is to add the level of “longer term result areas” in the proposed manner. For instance, such a level may get lost in the standard results framework of back donors that do not foresee this level. Alternatively, to better capture the results of the activities under Results Area 2, an expanded set of indicators related to institutionalisation and sustainability could be envisaged. Mechanisms for change related to institutionalisation and sustainability could also be made more explicit in the ToC, as moderating factors for outcomes at scale. For contextual relevance, country teams should retain the possibility to make a selection or propose additional indicators and / or mechanisms.
Actions Taken or Planned & Timing	Leading up to the next five-year programme cycle, we will decide on the best approach for unpacking Results Area 2 in the generic ToC and provide country teams with guidance on selection.

Recommendation 5	Change the second Result Area to “increased coherence in the policy environment” rather than “adjustments in the policy environment”. We have reflected this change in the proposed adjusted BETTER ToC under Recommendation 4
Priority	Quick win (low investment / low impact)
Importance	 Not addressing the recommendation reduces potential to increase efficiency and/or effectiveness over time
Feasibility	Requires a shift in approach or strategy, rather than increased resources
Justification based on findings	In both Uganda and Vietnam VVOB country teams reflected that the activities within BETTER programmes were not intended to result in “adjustments in the policy environment”. For Uganda, the team felt there were enough changes happening in the policy environment and in Vietnam, the team felt the Government of Vietnam is very clear that this is not within the mandate of NGOs.
Response	Accepted
Justification	This makes sense and can easily be implemented.
Actions Taken or Planned & Timing	This will be taken into account in the development of an overall Theory of Change for the next programme, as well as in the formulation of the scaling model. The possibility of “adjustments in the policy / regulatory environment” can remain for contexts where these can be reasonably envisaged, but “increased coherence” should also be an option.

Recommendation 6	Within the context of the findings of this Review and Recommendations 1, 2 and 3, consider the scaling ambition that can be reasonably achieved in the programme period
Priority	Long term vision (high investment / high impact)
Importance	 Not addressing the recommendation reduces potential to increase efficiency and/or effectiveness over time
Feasibility	Requires considerable time and resources
Justification based on findings	This Review has found that evidence generation delays (often due to procurement) have resulted in a lack of evidence that BETTER initiatives are working. During sensemaking workshops at the country and global levels, questions were raised regarding the feasibility of achieving the innovation, piloting, implementing, institutionalising and scaling (with impact) of initiatives within the 5-year programme lifecycle. A great deal of the lexicon and culture of innovation focuses on going fast, including concepts such as “failing fast” and undertaking “sprints”. However, there is also value in slowing down, to get further in the long run (known as “Go slow, to go fast”). “Go slow, to go fast” means investing in the things that matter long term and that take time to develop, so that we can move quickly and become successful over the long haul. To use a well-known quote, Abraham Lincoln once stated “Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.”

	Alleviating some of the pressure within BETTER country programmes to achieve innovation, piloting, implementation, institutionalisation and scaling goals within the programme period, could result in more strategic thinking and decision making. This could result in achieving more overall in the long term.
Response	Partially Accepted
Justification	We fully agree that it is important to have a clear understanding of which scaling ambitions can be reasonably achieved within a programme period (and which are longer term), and to set targets accordingly. This external evaluation already gives us deeper insight in the causal mechanisms underlying our ToC ('generic' <i>and</i> practiced) and additional gains will be made through our follow-up of Recommendations 1, 2, 3 and 4. At the same time, we do need to point out that none of the BETTER country programmes have the ambition to achieve the innovation, piloting, implementing, institutionalising and scaling (with impact) of initiatives within the 5-year programme lifecycle – as a deep dive into the LogFrame targets will show.
Actions Taken or Planned & Timing	Assuming we obtain agreement from government partners and donors on levels of ambition, we expect the follow-up to Recommendations 1, 2, 3 and 4 to also result in defining scaling ambitions and targets that can be reasonably achieved within a programme cycle (and accepting which ones may need longer term commitment).

3.2. Country level recommendations

The evaluation report presents six recommendations at the country level. Although the recommendations are directed to all countries, specific insights are provided for the three case-study countries, Uganda, Vietnam and Zambia. As with the global-level recommendations, the country-level recommendations are rated on priority, importance and feasibility.

Recommendation 1	Articulate the Minimum Viable Initiative as soon as possible to partners. Produce explicit guidance on what aspects of the model can be adapted, and what shouldn't, taking into account legitimate cases where the model may need to be tailored to contextual factors during scaling.
Priority	Quick win (low investment / low impact)
Audience	All country programme teams who have not yet communicated the Minimum Viable Initiative to partners
Importance	 Not addressing the recommendation risks the achievement of impact and outcomes over time
Feasibility	Requires a shift in approach or strategy, rather than increased resources
Justification based on findings	This evaluation has found that partners across BETTER countries are not fully clear on what constitutes the core components of the initiative in each country. Clearly explicating what needs to be in place in order for the initiative to work is a quick win that improves the likelihood of initiatives achieving impact at scale.
Response	Accepted
Justification	We agree that defining the Minimum Viable Initiative (MVI) is essential for effective scaling and should be integrated into the programme approach from the onset. Clearly identifying the core components of each initiative will help ensure that partners understand what aspects ("active ingredients") must

	remain unchanged to achieve impact, while also allowing for necessary adaptations to contextual factors. Although discussions with partners on the initiative and its scaling are taking place, more explicit guidance on adaptations and non-negotiable elements is needed. Equally important is to leverage the use of evidence to inform the definition of the MVI. This includes both existing evidence that highlights the key elements of the MVI and new research that examines how the MVI manifests in our specific programmes.
Actions Taken or Planned & Timing	For the current programme, efforts are planned and/or underway to (i) further identify and describe the core components of the initiative and (ii) strengthen communication with partners to enhance clarity on what elements of the initiative are essential, what can be adapted, and how scaling will be approached. Partners feedback will be actively sought to refine and validate the Minimum Viable Initiative (MVI), ensuring alignment with local needs and priorities. Looking ahead, a more structured approach will be integrated into the next multi-year programme to ensure (rapid) iteration, refinement, and the development of a well-defined, evidence-informed MVI (see also higher – development of scaling and strategy model in response to Global Level Recommendations 1 & 2).

Recommendation 2	Clarify and unpack ToCs and use them regularly to adapt strategies if needed.
Priority	Long term vision (high investment / high impact)
Audience	All country programme teams who have not developed ToCs that clearly outline how programme components fit together, explicate assumptions and use the ToC at regular intervals to not only build the programme, but revisit and adapt to change strategies when needed.
Importance	 Not addressing the recommendation reduces potential to increase efficiency and/or effectiveness over time
Feasibility	Implementation is likely to require significant amount of time and resources
Justification based on findings	This Review has found that while current ToCs include a lot of information about alignment between VVOB's mission and the initiative, and the country need and the initiative, the current ToCs can be improved. ToCs can include a lot more information on how all of the programme components fit together, explicate assumptions, and use the ToC at regular intervals to not only build the programme but to test assumptions and revisit and adapt to change strategies when needed.
Response	Accepted
Justification	We acknowledge the importance of clarifying and regularly using the Theory of Change (ToC) to adapt strategies as needed. While the ToC has been referenced in strategic discussions and partner engagements, its use has varied across programmes and phases.
Actions Taken or Planned & Timing	For the remaining programme period, actions identified by country teams include:

	• Revisiting and updating the ToC in collaboration with partners, particularly in the final years of the current programme, with a focus on institutionalisation and scaling and making assumptions more explicit. • Developing supporting materials (e.g., impact notes) to further unpack key assumptions, and ensure alignment with the global framework/strategy. • Integrating the ToC into strategic discussions, including steering committee meetings and in other partner engagements. • Organise regular (e.g. every quadrimester) internal reflections to assess progress and inform necessary adaptations. In view of the next multi-year programme, more comprehensive ToCs are being developed for various flagship initiatives. These ToCs will also guide the design of specific ToCs for projects that align with a flagship initiative. The use of ToCs to shape the research agenda and evaluation plan - particularly by identifying key assumptions to test and evidence gaps that require further investigation - will also be emphasised in the formulation of the next programme. Importantly, the evidence generated through this process should also feed back into the ToCs, informing necessary updates and ensuring they remain relevant and evidence-based.
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Recommendation 3	Document scaling plans for the remaining 2 years of the BETTER programme in each country. Check understanding with government partners and align on the vision for scaling. Considerations in this process should include: • The scaling ambition that can be reasonably achieved in the programme period and align the ambition to what stage of scaling can be achieved with evidence that the initiative is working. • How the programme will be funded at the end of VVOB programme support • An assessment of capacity to sustain quality delivery of the programme at scale
Priority	Unmissable opportunity (low investment / high impact)
Audience	All countries that do not have documented scaling plans in place
Importance	 Not addressing the recommendation risks the achievement of impact and outcomes over time
Feasibility	Implementation is likely to require considerable time and resources
Justification based on findings	This Review has found that there is a need to facilitate and coordinate a discussion with partners to build a vision for the BETTER programmes' scaling ambitions. While there is a widespread belief that programmes will continue to scale, there is no plan in place in several countries, and some scepticism about the government doing this without agreements in place. Unanswered questions around scaling, funding and capacity exist across several countries. In Uganda, LEAP activities do not include developing or agreeing scaling definitions or strategies and therefore, there is no scaling strategy in place. While all partners are very aware that institutionalisation and scaling are key aims of LEAP, the lack of structured activities to discuss, consider options and agree a pathway towards scaling has not resulted in an agreed scaling strategy output. In Zambia there are unanswered questions related to whether government partners in Central Province and at National Level will have fully built the capabilities needed to lead planning, resourcing and high-quality delivery of Catch Up post 2026. In Vietnam, VVOB and

	partners have different expectations regarding scaling and somewhat different visions for scaling
Response	Accepted
Justification	We acknowledge the importance of having documented scaling plans to ensure alignment with government partners and a shared vision for the remaining two years of the BETTER programme. While a vision for scaling exists in various programmes, a clearly defined scaling strategy or plan is not yet in place. By articulating and documenting scaling ambitions and strategies, we can enhance clarity on the steps needed for institutionalization, assess the feasibility of scaling given available evidence and resources, and facilitate discussions with partners on long-term quality delivery.
Actions Taken or Planned & Timing	To support the development of documented scaling plans, country teams will organise structured discussions with government partners to align expectations and clarify definitions of scaling. A key focus will be identifying and articulating Minimum Viable Initiatives, and ensuring they are well-documented and agreed upon with partners. The Education Scalability Checklist (ESC) will remain an important tool to support the formulation of a scaling strategy. To improve its usability with partners (so far the ESC has mainly been used internally, while some country teams have adapted it for use with the partners), the tool will be revised starting in 2026, to make it more user-friendly and to strengthen the link between scalability assessment and scaling strategies.

Recommendation 4	For future programmes: Establish quality monitoring and Quality Assurance (QA) systems at the beginning of programming. Consider the risks during the scaling process linked to capacity assessments and quality monitoring, and adjust programming when needed. For the current BETTER programme: Start to systematically build quality monitoring and QA systems. Continue to build on and consolidate these efforts in the next phase of the programme.
Priority	Unmissable opportunity (low investment / high impact)
Audience	Any country programmes that do not currently have a quality monitoring and QA system in place
Importance	 Not addressing the recommendation risks the achievement of impact and outcomes over time
Feasibility	Requires a shift in approach or strategy, rather than increased resources
Justification based on findings	Quality monitoring has presented challenges in several countries. In Zambia, while data is available on learning outcomes, there is insufficient data on the quality of Catch Up sessions. If the quality of these sessions is poor, this would represent a significant missed opportunity in terms of harnessing the full potential impact of Catch Up on learner outcomes. In Vietnam, quality delivery of training at the school level was not initially achieved and adaptations to address challenges in the TOT model (which is essential to scaling) were needed. This could have potentially been identified earlier with a QA system in place.
Response	Partially Accepted

Justification	Although current monitoring efforts include data collection on fidelity and quality of implementation and delivery, we recognise specific gaps, and scope for a more structured and coherent approach. We also recognize the importance of establishing a robust quality assurance and monitoring system from the onset. However, building rigorous monitoring and quality assurance, is an iterative process, where improvements are informed by implementation experiences and emerging insights. As we strengthen (quality) monitoring within the BETTER programme, we also need to ensure that enhancements are aligned with and integrated into partners' systems and processes as much as possible. This approach will not only improve the effectiveness of monitoring efforts but also support long-term sustainability and ownership by our partners.
Actions Taken or Planned & Timing	For the current programme, we will work to refine and expand quality monitoring frameworks, ensuring they capture critical aspects of programme delivery and inform necessary adaptations. In countries where QA systems are in place, efforts will focus on aligning them more closely with national frameworks. Globally, through the learning trajectory on research and M&E, efforts will focus on good practices and tools to improve data quality and use (analysis). We will enhance the integration of quality assurance within the MEAL system for future programmes, ensuring that quality considerations are embedded in the development of Minimum Viable Initiatives. Additionally, the planned development of a Global Project Information and Monitoring System in 2026, also aims to enhance the focus and quality of monitoring efforts.

Recommendation 5	For future programmes, consider contracting Learning Partners for the duration of the programme, rather than contracting specific evaluation deliverables. Learning Partners can work with programme teams to develop clearer ToCs, design and implement nimble evaluation activities, reflect on ToCs in light of emerging evidence and support a step-wise approach to evidence generation and scaling. A Learning Partnership contractual relationship also allows for studies to be designed in collaboration and for plans to flex when needed. If programmes aim to start the procurement of Learning Partners as soon as possible at the start of BETTER programming, details of the design can be agreed after the selection of the provider.
Priority	Unmissable opportunity (low investment / high impact)
Audience	All country programmes
Importance	 Not addressing the recommendation risks the achievement of impact and outcomes over time
Feasibility	Requires a shift in approach or strategy, rather than increased resources
Justification based on findings	This Review has found that procurement processes can be long, and delays are commonplace. Starting procurement process once enough is known about the programme to design a full evaluation can lead to time pressures. Contracting Learning Partners can provide flex and also support programmes in other M&E and Research activities throughout the lifecycle of the programme.
Response	Partially Accepted

Justification	VVOB has positive experiences with Learning Partners in other projects, where they supported teams in unpacking and finetuning the Theory of Change during the inception phase, defined a learning agenda, formulated learning questions and set up research and monitoring. While we see value in the Learning Partnership model, additional research partners are likely still needed to conduct the studies identified and designed with the support of the Learning Partner. This is because each study, depending on the type and the design, will require specialised expertise that a single Learning Partner may not possess. Procurement wise, it is also challenging to contract a Learning Partner at the onset for the entire process (i.e. identifying, designing and conducting the research) if the level of effort and specific deliverables are not yet clearly known and defined, since this largely depends on the scope and the nature of the studies that will be required.
Actions Taken or Planned & Timing	We will take the recommendation into consideration and explore its feasibility for the next programme. Working with Learning Partners from the onset for the duration of the programme (for instance a single Learning Partner supporting same flagship programmes) alongside research partners contracted as needed, could be a viable approach. However, this also comes with additional costs. We will reflect on whether we want to work with external Learning Partners or manage this internally within VVOB. Furthermore, efforts to strengthen our procurement processes and internal capacity to write technically sound calls for quotations for research will be continued.

Recommendation 6	Expand collaborative decision-making with partners by bringing them into the innovation pathway process. Involve partners in considering adaptations that might need to be made to the initiative and build support for the process, rather than the output.
Priority	Unmissable opportunity (low investment / high impact)
Audience	All country programmes
Importance	 Not addressing the recommendation risks the achievement of impact and outcomes over time
Feasibility	Implementation is likely to require considerable time and resources
Justification based on findings	This Review has found a tension between Results Areas “Initiative more credible thanks to a strong evidence base” and “Initiative supported by strong and steady coalition for change”. This is due to a potential trade-off between the two, whereby building a coalition to support the initiative requires advocacy, while evidence that the initiative works might not yet be available. By building support for the process, rather than the output, adaptations can be made jointly with partners to ensure the initiative works <i>and</i> there is a strong and steady coalition for change.
Response	Partially Accepted
Justification	We acknowledge the importance of expanding collaborative decision-making with partners by involving them more deeply in the innovation pathway process. While operational partners in some countries are already highly engaged - such as Teacher Training Institutions in Uganda - this involvement is often output-oriented rather than process-driven. We recognize the need to

	shift towards a more purposeful engagement of operational and strategic partners that builds support for the process rather than just the outcome. At the same time, we should be mindful that fully integrating partners into the innovation pathway also comes with challenges, such as time constraints, hierarchical structures and bureaucratic requirements, which may slow down progress. Striking the right balance between (rapid) iterative programming and meaningful partner involvement will be essential to ensure that adaptations can be made jointly without delaying implementation.
Actions Taken or Planned & Timing	To enhance collaborative decision-making with partners in the innovation pathway process, actions identified by country teams include both operational and strategic levels. Operational Level: Throughout 2025 and into 2026, we will actively engage operational partners in defining and articulating Minimum Viable Initiatives. This will be done through meetings and workshops, particularly with leadership teams. By involving them in adaptation discussions, we aim to shift from an output-oriented approach to one that prioritizes co-creation and iterative learning. Strategic Level: Steering committee meetings in 2025 and 2026 will serve as key platforms for engaging with strategic partners, such as ministries of education, to build broader support for the innovation process. Rather than focusing solely on specific adjustments to initiatives, these discussions will present the full picture of scaling efforts, ensuring that partners understand and support the overall process. To maximize alignment, preparatory meetings with operational partners will be organised before these strategic discussions. Additionally, more structured opportunities for collaborative decision-making will be integrated in the next programme, ensuring that partners are more engaged in adaptation discussions from the onset, while balancing feasibility within existing bureaucratic and structural constraints. As we continue to advocate for shared ownership, we will also explore ways to empower partners to take a more active role in institutionalization and scaling, ensuring sustainability beyond the programme's timeframe.