School leaders approaching equity and inclusion through collective action and professional networks: findings from Nepal, Pakistan and Afghan refugee settings.

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School leaders as local change agents

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BACKGROUND

- Much current schooling continues to systematically exclude large numbers of vulnerable and minoritized children from quality learning (UNICEF 2020; GMR 2023) and learning inequalities are stark in the countries of South Asia

- School leaders (headteachers/ principals and their deputies): key change agents in school systems (Fullan 2006, Scheer 2021)

- **Little existing scholarship** on school leaders' practices for equity and inclusion

OUR PROJECT

- Explores how school leaders' agency to problem-solve local education inclusion issues can be developed sustainably at scale through collaborative enquiry in supported school leader networked improvement communities (NICs) with open resources

- Consortium research 2021-2024 involved school leaders in collaborative professional enquiry (NICs) in Nepal, Pakistan and in Afghan refugee schools in the region

Looking at policy and practice contexts in our three countries

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Findings revealed:

- Multiple policies concerned with school inclusion
- Lack of clear policy implementation strategies
- School leaders:
  - Limited knowledge and understanding of national inclusion policies
  - Local understandings of poverty, gender, bullying, marginalization
  - Little use of data to implement or monitor inclusion actions

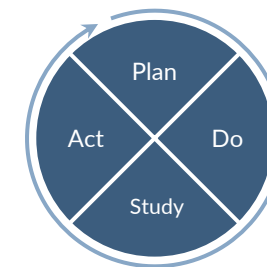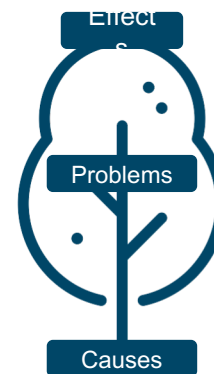# School leader communities (NICs)

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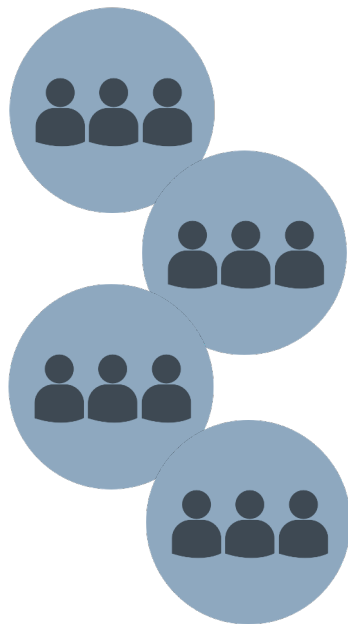
Four NICs in each country, each with 8 to 10 school leaders in two different geographic locations

NICs meet virtually or in-person at least fortnightly to discuss inclusion challenges

Effect
Problems
Causes

Plan
Act
Do
Study

NICs guided by online open materials to identify micro inclusion challenges (problem tree) and then carry out PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, Action) cycles to address them.
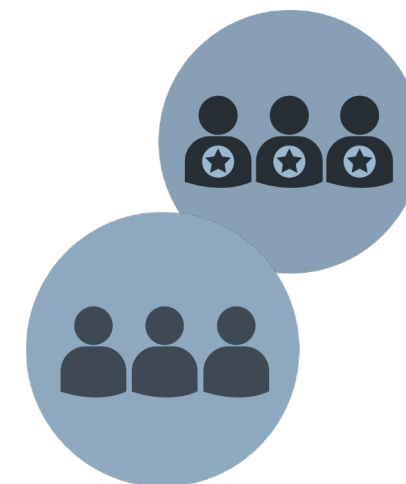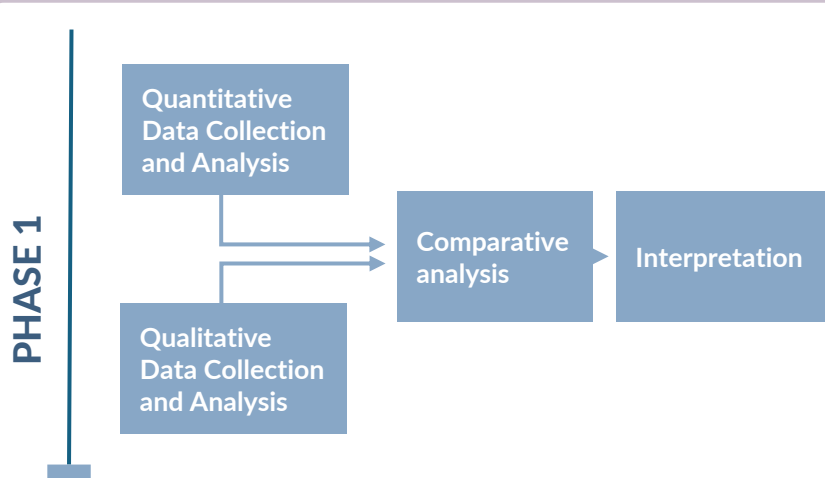
Support to each NIC from a facilitator (district official or teacher educator)

TPD@SCALE COALITION FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH

GPE KIX
KNOWLEDGE INNOVATION EXCHANGE
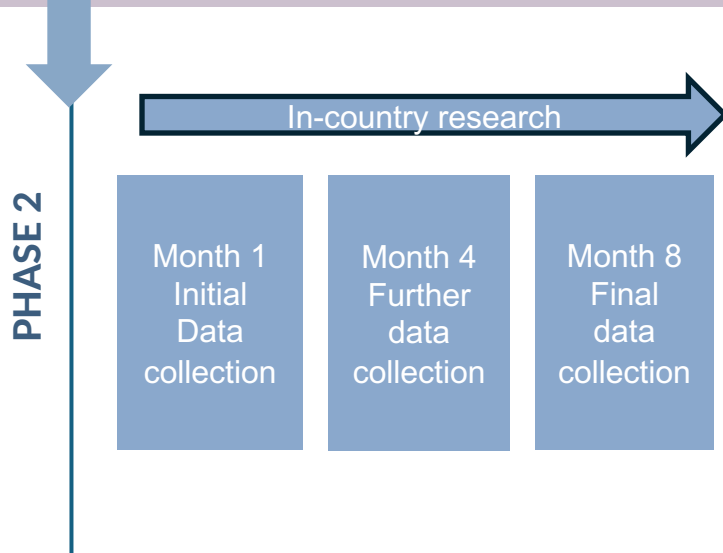
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY – PHASE 1

RQ: How can the NIC@Scale model be implemented in different contexts and to what extent does it bring about changes in school leader practices which address issues of equity and inclusion in access and learning for students?

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PHASE 1

- Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis
- Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis
- Comparative analysis
- Interpretation

PHASE 1: Context Understanding in each country prior to implementation of the NICs

- Survey with school leaders (n=529)
- Semi- structured interviews with school leaders and key personnel (n=38)
- Policy review

PHASE 2

In-country research

- Month 1 Initial Data collection
- Month 4 Further data collection
- Month 8 Final data collection

PHASE 2: Innovation Experiences

1st Phase
- Survey plus interviews with all School leaders (SLs) who participated in this study.
- Initial data from facilitators and stakeholders.

2nd Phase
- Regular NIC meeting notes and FGDs to capture SLs learning journey
- Observation of learning platform data fortnightly (focus on task attempt/ completion and forum discussion
- Interviews with SLs and facilitators

Final Phase
- Survey and interviews with SLs
- Interviews with facilitators, local education officials and other relevant stakeholders
- Analysis of learning platform data

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A SCHOOL LEADER STORY

Nepal

- Rohan's first experience of an online course, low interest at the start

- His starting point for inclusion was bringing both boys and girls to school

- His interest developed throughout and he began to contribute extensively to in-person NIC meetings

- He developed agency and confidence to take actions related to his identified inclusion issue

- Inclusion issue: bringing back dropout students and enrolling students without birth certificates. For the latter he engaged with local officials to persuade them to allow these students to attend his school.   Improving student engagement and participation by working with teachers

Name: Rohan
Age: 41 – 50 years
School: semi- urban in mid Terai
Leadership experience: 8 years
Prior inclusion TPD: No

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A SCHOOL LEADER STORY

Pakistan

- Safira developed skills to use student data

- Through this she identified very few students from the local catchment area attending her school (low SES groups: Afghan refugee community, street children and working children)

- Her selected inclusion focus was the enrollment and attendance of street children in her school

- Challenges – other teachers not prepared to make adjustments to include these teachers

- Other parents initially resistant to inclusion of these students alongside their children

- Through collaboration with parents, teachers, students and local religious groups she made progress and was able to implement a successful pilot which included flexible study hours

Name: Safira
Age: Mid-forties
School: rural middle school
Leadership experience: 10 years
Prior inclusion Training: No

GPE KIX
KNOWLEDGE INNOVATION EXCHANGE

A SCHOOL LEADER STORY
Afghan refugee camp

- Sara is a strong advocate for girls' education and for education of children with disabilities. Initially she claimed limited digital literacy

- Highly engaged with the NIC activities (posted 68 times in te course forum).

- Knowledge of inclusion enhanced, and now felt comfortable to speak on these issues

- Improvement actions included: creating a reward system for student attendance and following up with families of absent students (successfully reduced absenteeism) and; extending the school wall to enhance privacy and security for her students

- Worked collaboratively with her teachers to increase their understanding of inclusion

Name: Sara
Age: Under thirty
School: Refugee camp school for Afghans
Leadership experience: 6 yrs
Prior inclusion training: No

KEY LEARNINGS

- Agency of school leaders to recognise and address issues of inclusion is initially constrained by current conceptions of their role and prevailing institutional social norms

- NIC collaboration valued by school leaders; support, inspiration and emergence of collective agency

- Developing broader awareness of issues of inclusion in their school – noticing details of student and teacher behaviour

- Experimenting with activities to address identified inclusion issues

NEPAL – issues and solutions explored by school leaders

Extra support to girls during menstruation to improve school attendance, frequent interaction with students and parents, free bus service for children to and from school, use of data to analyse learning outcomes, bringing back students who dropped out, improving student engagement and participation, procuring text-books and stationery items for students facing financial difficulties

AFGHAN refugee schools – issues and solutions explored by school leaders

Bullying, language of instruction, classroom distractions and seating arrangements, school dropouts and attendance, infrastructure issues for example extending school walls for security or privacy, community engagement

PAKISTAN – issues and solutions explored by school leaders

Street children, school drop-outs, collaboration with parents, teachers, students and religious groups linked to financial support for children from families facing financial crisis

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