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Strengthening educational systems for agency for sustainable, inclusive development

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References

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Key points

- By 2050, Africa will be home to a billion children. African States have committed to "reap this demographic dividend" by realizing the right of all children to develop to their full potential.

- But sub-Saharan Africa is falling behind in achieving the SDGs, and COVID-19 has reversed previous gains and deepened poverty, social exclusion and access to critical services.

- To address these challenges, national education systems must strengthen the civic and political agency of every child to ensure a post-COVID recovery and get the region back on track to achieving the SDGs.

- The *CSTL Policy Framework* provides a roadmap for Member States to strengthen their educational ecosystems as vehicles for developing human capital. The complementary *CYAF* provides a roadmap for *education for agency* and is being tested in 40 schools in four SADC Member States.

- This brief summarizes recommended actions for supporting all schools as coordinating hubs that provide services to ensure inclusion, retention and completion of school by vulnerable children, and quality 21st century education for agency.

- Children and youth acquire agency from *co-educators* who make up an educational ecosystem for developing agency. Educational ecosystems must be strengthened so all co-educators understand their role and are supported.

- To develop agency, all children must be provided with (i) information, (ii) support to develop analytical, communication and advocacy competencies and (iii) opportunities to apply those competencies.

- To ensure that every child is included, CSTL schools must be universalized as hubs of the national educational ecosystems, which must be systematized across twelve systemic pillars.

- The advocacy challenge is to ensure policies and systems in all Member States enable and support all CSTL pillars for all schools.

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Introduction

2021 marks the 30th anniversary of the *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child,* as well as the first substantive year of the United Nation's *Decade of Action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals* by 2030. But by 2050, Africa will be home to a billion children. The represents an unprecedented opportunity to

… reap the demographic dividend and accelerate Africa's sustainable and equitable development. Children have the potential to transform Africa—but if neglected they could also increase the burden of poverty and inequality, whilst posing a serious risk to peace, security and prosperity.[1]

By adopting *Africa's Agenda 2063* and *Africa's Agenda for Children 2040*, African States have committed to reap this demographic dividend by building human capital for sustainable inclusive development by realizing the right of all children to develop to their full potential. They have committed to do so through strengthened education systems that provide 21st century education that prepares children to be active, engaged,

responsible citizens with the knowledge, skills and opportunities to bring a permanent end to the continent's greatest development challenges.

Notably, African States have also committed to strengthening integrated transformational education and health systems to ensure access barriers are overcome and relevant, quality 21st century education is provided to empower all children as *agents of change*—now and in the future—to end persistent development challenges, such as HIV&AIDS, early pregnancies, gender inequality, poverty and climate change.

While the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Region made some progress in the pre-COVID years in improving access to education and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services for children, retention and completion rates remain a challenge, and the quality of education provided has not developed children's and youth's agency. Furthermore, the SADC Region is not on track to achieve global and its own HIV-prevention goals; the region remains home to the largest HIV-affected populations. While some Member States have made some progress, the decline in new infections has been lower than expected and indeed has increased among adolescents and youth, and the region is not on track to meet its own and global targets.[2] The United Nations (UN) and the World Bank report that poverty levels have dropped globally, but progress has stalled and is indeed set to worsen in sub-Saharan Africa because of the failure to address inequality.[3] The World Bank predicts that by 2030, nine out of every ten persons living in extreme poverty will be in that region.

Children and youth bear the brunt of the lack of progress: they continue to live in poverty, remain at a higher risk of contracting and dying of HIV&AIDS, and are subjected to high levels of violence and harmful practices (such as child marriage). What is of further concern is that their circumstances, and the lack of progress, is set to trap them in poverty that will be passed onto their children—thus failing to meet the commitments made to inclusive and sustainable development of the continent and region.

The *CSTL Policy Framework* and *Child and Youth Agency Framework (CYAF)*

Most SADC Member States have undertaken curriculum reform to provide 21st century education. However, this has not developed child and youth agency adequately: it has not secured the knowledge, skills, competencies and opportunities to enable children and youth to make responsible, informed decisions and act to bring an end to development challenges. This is evidenced by: the persistently high risky sexual and social behaviour; high HIV&AIDS transmission rates among girls and young women; low antiretroviral therapy (ART) adherence rates; high early pregnancy rates; the exclusion of girls from school because of pregnancy and early marriages; persistent gender inequality—this despite the development and delivery of a combination of life skills, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in schools and national adolescent SRH programmes.[4]

The onset of COVID-19 has reversed gains and deepened poverty, social exclusion and access to critical services, including health and education. The pandemic has deepened the vulnerability of children, educational access and learning inequalities, disrupted access to health services, and increased harmful social and cultural behaviour.[5] Furthermore, it has eroded the fragile human capital foundations that had been built, and has weakened the capacity of existing education and health systems to develop youth agency. As a result, development challenges such as early pregnancies, early marriages, child labour, school dropouts, exposure to risk of HIV&AIDS, non-adherence to ART, and gender-based violence and abuse have increased in the period 2020–21.[6]

The UN 2019 Sustainable Development Goals review confirmed that countries in sub-Saharan Africa (and in other regions) have failed to adopt the required "transformative change that is necessary to successfully achieve the [SDGs] by 2030."[7] The UN has therefore called on all Member States to act with urgency and make this "the *Decade of Action to deliver the sustainable development*" by 2030. This requires that all SADC

Member States (as members of the UN), along with the rest of Africa, pursue a "deliberate policy of human development and put human development at the centre of their growth and development strategy."[8]

This requires the prioritization and systematization of efforts to ensure the development of every child to their full potential so that they become agents and custodians of sustainable development if Africa is to achieve its shared vision of sustainable and inclusive social, economic, and political growth, development, peace and security. It is more important than ever that the agency of all children and youth be strengthened to enable and empower them to *act now*! It requires that they have agency to adopt and advocate for changes in the behaviour, values and practices of their peers, families, educators and communities to bring an end to developmental challenges, including high rates of HIV&AIDS, early pregnancies, early marriages and school dropouts; low ART adherence rates; gender inequality; climate change.

To build their agency, national education systems must be strengthened to develop, not just the social and economic, but also the civic and political agency of every child to ensure a sustainable post-COVID recovery and get the SADC Region back on track to achieving the SDGs.

The SADC Policy Framework on Care and Support for Teaching and Learning

The *CSTL Policy Framework* mandates all Member States, and provides a roadmap for them, to strengthen their educational ecosystems to be effective inclusive vehicles for developing human capital for sustainable development. It provides guidance on what a CSTL education system should achieve and describes its system's components to achieve the two core outcomes:

- Universal access
- Quality, transformative education for developing agency

It requires the development of educational ecosystems coordinated by the Ministries of Education that bring together role players to provide a combination of services and support to overcome barriers to access, participation and retention, and provide quality education for agency through schools as the facilitative hubs of the system.

Child and Youth Agency Framework

While the *CSTL Policy Framework* provides detailed guidance on the partners and social and economic services and support that should be provided to address social and economic barriers to inclusion, participation and retention, it does not provide guidance on what is required to develop and deliver quality, relevant education to develop children's agency. The complementary *Child and Youth Agency Framework (CYAF)* has therefore been developed to address this gap. It provides a roadmap for the delivery of education for agency through an appropriate 21st century curriculum, as well as the requirements to develop and implement it in CSTL schools. It is being tested in 40 schools across four SADC Member States[*] that are being supported to operationalize the *CSTL Policy Framework* and *CYAF* to become the hubs of effective educational ecosystems that bring a continuum of co-educators together to provide inclusive, quality, transformative education to build agency to address the current developmental challenges. Both frameworks describe the building blocks that must be in place in all schools and at a national policy level within the relevant Ministries—Education, Heath, Children and Youth, Gender, etc.—to mandate, enable and support schools to become sustainable CSTL schools.

Given the impact of COVID-19 on education systems, increased vulnerability of children and deepening development challenges, it is more important than ever that SADC Member States operationalize the *CSTL Framework*, as augmented by the *CYAF*, to "reap the child and youth demographic dividend" to recover lost

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[*] Lesotho, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe

ground and accelerate Africa's sustainable and equitable development in this *Decade of Action for achieving sustainable development*.

Purpose of this brief

Research was conducted in the four pilot member states to identify current strengths and weaknesses in the national systems of education, health and others—as measured against the requirements or building blocks of the CSTL transformational educational ecosystem described in the frameworks. This learning brief provides an overview of the results and recommended actions for strengthening the enabling policy environment so that they mandate, enable and support the development of all schools as CSTL coordinating hubs that facilitate the provision of:

- Services and support to ensure inclusion, retention and completion of school by vulnerable children
- Quality, relevant 21st century education for agency to address pressing development challenges

It also provides an overview of the gaps and then the actions that must be taken to strengthen various systemic building blocks, including: enabling policies and laws; programmes; human resources; infrastructure; financial resources; leadership and coordination.

Strengthening systems for agency for development
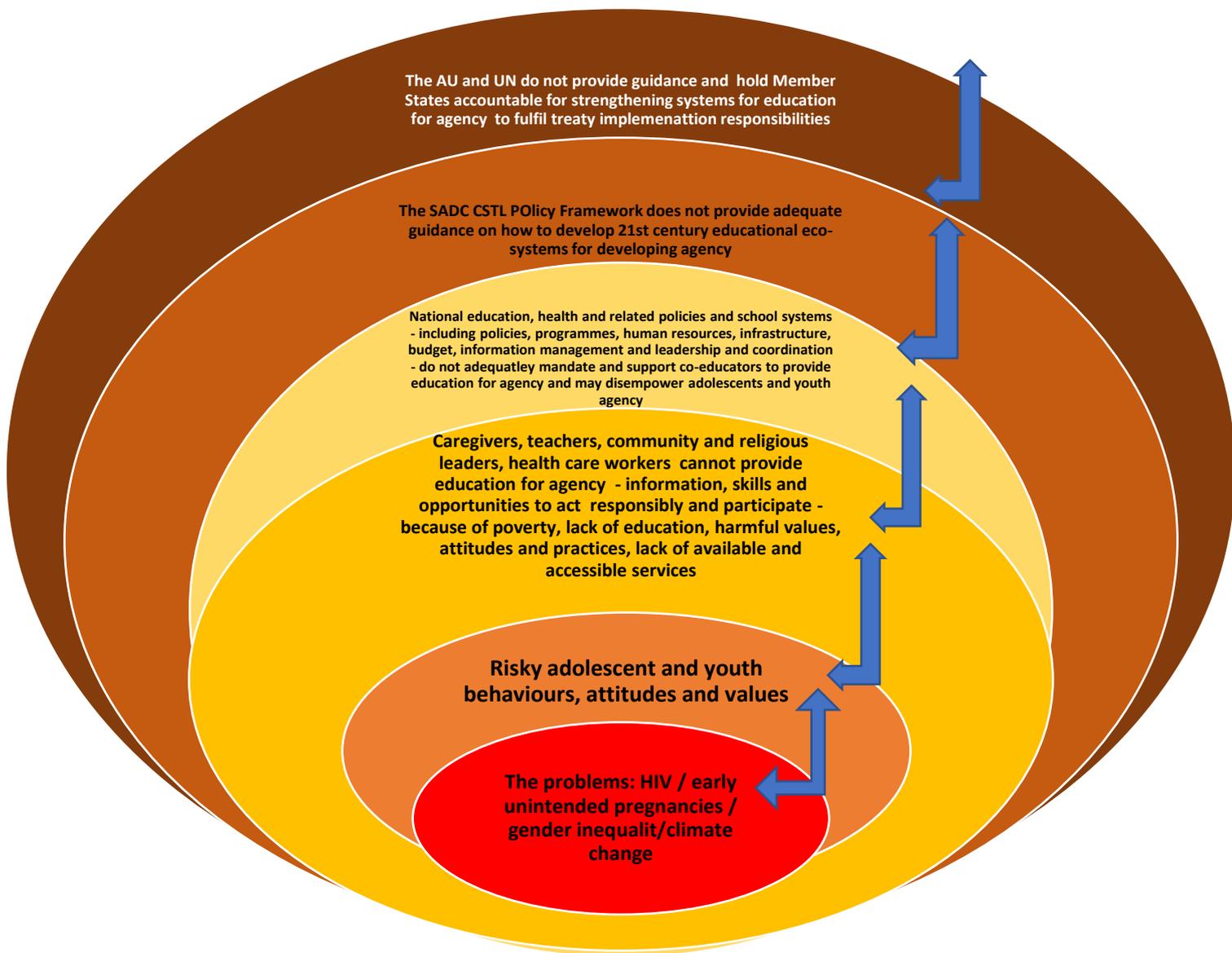
The problem and causes

The immediate cause of some of the persistent development problems SADC Member States are faced with is risky and unsustainable behaviour by young people. The education sector has provided teaching Life Skills, CSE and environmental studies to inform learners with a view to changing their behaviour. However, this has not resulted in the required change in behaviour among the growing young population. The reasons are many, but in summary, many vulnerable children still do not access and complete school because of social, economic and health-related barriers, and most children and youth are not empowered to act on the information provided. They are not acquiring the skills and competencies and afforded the opportunities to apply their learnt knowledge—as is required of a 21st century education for sustainable development—to change their behaviour.

Teachers cannot, nor are expected to, provide the services, support and teaching necessary for developing agency; rather, this is the responsibility of a range of role players from whom children learn and who are responsible for providing care, support and services to them. Children and youth are empowered and enabled—or disempowered and disenabled—to acquire and apply knowledge to change their behaviour from the following co-educators who make up an educational ecosystem for developing agency:

- Their caregivers* and families
- Their friends and peers
- Their teachers
- The media
- Community, religious and political leaders
- Service providers, such as healthcare and social workers
- NGOs and development partners

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* In this brief, "caregivers" is used to designate parents, other members of the family, guardians or other adults who provide daily care to the learner.

However, many co-educators are unable to provide the support and continuing education and opportunities children need because of their own circumstances, such as poverty, harmful traditional and religious values and practices, and lack of knowledge, support and resources.

The AU and UN do not provide guidance and hold Member States accountable for strengthening systems for education for agency to fulfil treaty implemenattion responsibilities

The SADC CSTL POlicy Framework does not provide adequate guidance on how to develop 21st century educational eco-systems for developing agency

National education, health and related policies and school systems - including policies, programmes, human resources, infrastructure, budget, information management and leadership and coordination - do not adequatley mandate and support co-educators to provide education for agency and may disempower adolescents and youth agency

Caregivers, teachers, community and religious leaders, health care workers cannot provide education for agency - information, skills and opportunities to act responsibly and participate - because of poverty, lack of education, harmful values, attitudes and practices, lack of available and accessible services

Risky adolescent and youth behaviours, attitudes and values

The problems: HIV / early unintended pregnancies / gender inequalit/climate change

THE CONTINUUM OF CHALLENGES PREVENTING RESPONSIBLE ADOLESCENT AND YOUTH BEHAVIOUR

The solution

To develop agency of a growing youthful population, national educational ecosystems must be strengthened to ensure all co-educators understand their role and are mandated and supported to provide the required support, education and opportunities. This requires the strengthening of an enabling system made up of:

- Laws, policies and strategies that mandate and enable co-educators, and which do not create legal barriers to children and youth acting responsibly

- Programmes at scale to provide co-educators with the support they need to fulfil their roles and that secure the provision of quality education for agency (information, skills, competencies and opportunities) facilitated through a universalized network of CSTL schools

- The required human resources to implement the programmes in the form of adequately mandated, trained, mentored and accountable co-educators

- The required infrastructure to enable provisioning

- The required financial resources to ensure sustained delivery, at scale, of quality services and education

- Leadership, coordination and supporting institutional arrangements to unite and oversee the educational ecosystem and co-educators to commit to and deliver quality, inclusive education for agency

To ensure that all national systems are developed to provide education for agency of all children in the region, SADC must enable, guide, support and hold Member States accountable for developing the required system that is fit for purpose by, for example: adopting the *CYAF* as an addendum to the CSTL Policy Framework; developing General Comments on implementation responsibilities; holding General Days of Discussion; facilitating sub-regional and regional policy dialogues, seminars and webinars.

Child and youth agency—*in and through* the system

The establishment of this educational ecosystem is a pre-requisite for providing education for agency. It is key that children and youth be enabled to participate meaningfully in the design, development and delivery of the system, as they are in turn both beneficiaries and co-educators. They must therefore be included in all systems- strengthening planning and decision-making. The educational ecosystem must support the development of their advocacy, leadership and communication competencies and create the opportunities for their meaningful participation in the planning and delivery of education for agency in their families, schools, communities, country and region.

Systems-strengthening priorities

To develop agency to address the developmental challenges, every child and young person must be provided with:

- *Information* (through CSE, and on gender equality and climate change, etc.) from a diversity of sources on the implications, different approaches, rights and responsibilities, global, regional, national goals, etc.

- *Support to develop analytical, communication and advocacy competencies* to find, analyse, understand and apply information to identify challenges and make responsible, evidence-based and rights-based decisions to change behaviour, attitudes, practices and values for themselves and their families, schools, communities and countries

- *The opportunity* to apply the information, advocate for and implement the plans to bring about the required changes in behaviour, practices, values, policies and instruments

Treaty and development instruments obligate *education systems* to develop agency because they have universal reach. However, schools acting alone cannot ensure universal quality education for agency. What is required *is the delivery of 21st century education for agency by co-educators acting in unity within a national educational ecosystem*. But this requires education ministries to take the lead in systematizing and coordinating educational ecosystems that bring the various role players (schools, teachers, caregivers, communities, peers, the media, traditional and religious leaders, healthcare providers, development partners etc.) together to:

- Address access barriers

- Provide quality, transformational education for agency—as co-educators—across multiple educational platforms

To ensure that every child is included, receives quality education and *develops agency,* CSTL schools must be universalized as hubs of the national educational ecosystems. Educational ecosystems must therefore be

systematized across eight systemic building blocks. The biggest and most common gaps in these systemic building blocks in the SADC Region are tabulated below.[9]

TABLE: SIGNIFICANT SYSTEMIC WEAKNESSES

SYSTEMIC BUILDING BLOCK	BIGGEST GAPS PER THE AUDIT
International, regional and sub-regional instruments that obligate and guide Member States to develop educational ecosystems for providing quality education for agency through the coordinated action of co-educators, under the leadership of the education sector	The UN, AU and SADC do not have General Comments or frameworks in place that direct the development of educational ecosystems for developing child and youth agency to deliver on implementation responsibilities to provide quality education for building human capital in the 21st century.
Enabling and adequate national and sectoral policies and laws (including national curriculum policy frameworks; CSE policies and curriculum; School–Health policies) that mandate the establishment and delivery of education for agency through educational ecosystems as a key to achieving SDGs	• National development and education policies do not prioritize education for agency (as a driver of human capital for development) with enough clarity or mandate the systematization of educational ecosystems. • National education curriculum frameworks do not adequately describe education for agency (beyond economic agency) across all curriculum components: content, competencies, pedagogical requirements, co-educators, assessment processes and indicators. • CSE policies do not adequately mandate and describe the role of the health sector as a co-educator.
Integrated programmes at scale for addressing HIV, early pregnancies and gender equality by creating or promoting: • A continuum of co-educators through schools as hubs • A curriculum that integrates information and a teaching methodology that builds capacity for advocacy, communication and related skills • School health programmes • CSE programmes, etc. • Extracurricular peer groups and clubs to develop and implement plans; debating clubs; child and youth media programmes	• Education curricula are missing key elements, including 　▪ Civic and political responsibilities and rights 　▪ Development of advocacy and communication skills as core 21st century competencies 　▪ Opportunities to act for change or participate in decisions affecting their agency • CSE curricula focus on information, but neglect other critical elements of agency, including skills and opportunities. • Healthcare through schools is not universalized and opportunities to access youth-friendly health services is limited. • Extracurricular activities creating opportunities to apply knowledge to develop and implement plans and campaigns for change (for example, school newspapers, debating, participation in national and community policy dialogues, climate change clubs) are not universal.
Mandated and qualified human resources—i.e. qualified co-educators across the continuum: • Caregivers • Teachers • Peers • Community leaders and civil society organizations • The media • Health and social workers	• Co-educators do not recognize their role as co-educators in the educational ecosystem and for agency. • Co-educators lack the capacity to fulfil their education-for-agency role. • Caregivers as co-educators is a neglected area. There is little direction and few policies in place to formalize and secure their role as co-educators.

SYSTEMIC BUILDING BLOCK	BIGGEST GAPS PER THE AUDIT

Appropriate teaching and learning materials and infrastructure to support education for agency, including:
• Access to diverse media and technology
• Sufficient written materials
• Environmentally-friendly infrastructure
• Youth-friendly accessible SRH services
	• Infrastructure for agency is inadequate, including:
	  ▪ Access to technology
	  ▪ Access to information, education & communication materials
	  ▪ Environmentally-friendly infrastructure
	  ▪ Adequate water and sanitation facilities
	• Teaching and learning resources supporting application of information is inadequate for universalizing opportunities, for example:
	  ▪ Information about health services is not universally available.
	  ▪ Youth-friendly health facilities is not universally accessible.

Adequate budgets to sustain the system and the suite of services and support required at scale	• Inadequate education and health budgets limit scaled-up, sustained delivery of quality education for agency and drives the other major systemic gaps. Budget cuts post-COVID will aggravate this.
Information management systems for: • Assessing progress in acquiring agency • Strengthened systems • The CSTL reporting tool, structured around the existing *Policy Framework* and implementing mechanisms	• Educational assessment and evaluation systems do not adequately define agency competencies, outcomes and measures of progress. • Global, regional and national monitoring frameworks do not assess improvements in strengthening educational ecosystems for providing education for agency. • At the AU and UN levels, there is no explicit accountability mechanisms for monitoring the provision of quality education for agency as a rights-based sustainable development imperative.
Leadership and coordination structures that are inclusive, representative and multi-sectoral and engage in co-identification of challenges and development of solutions, including: • Co-educators across the continuum • Children and youth • Media	• Weak implementation of existing structures • Weak national and school coordination • Exclusion of children • Exclusion of caregivers, who lack the capacity to engage meaningfully

Advocacy challenge: measures to strengthen the system

Concrete measures to strengthen international-, national- and school-level policies and systems build and sustain the CSTL schools as facilitative hubs of the educational ecosystem must be strongly advocated for. Policies and systems must enable, support and hold all schools accountable for becoming a CSTL school through planning and putting in place the following twelve CSTL building blocks (as set out in the frameworks):

• Curriculum support

• Teacher development and support

• Enabling and inclusive infrastructure

• Water and sanitation

• Parental and community involvement (including the involvement of children)

• Health promotion

• Nutritional support

• Safety and protection

- Social and welfare services

- Material support

- Psychosocial support

- Inclusive, transformational leadership, coordination and enabling inclusive, rights-based policies and budgets

CSTL rights-based, socially inclusive school providing transformative 21st century teaching and learning to develop agency for sustainable development

THE TWELVE CSTL BUILDING BLOCKS, OR PILLARS

The advocacy challenge is to

- Ensure national policies and systems in all Member States to enable, sustain and support all CSTL pillars for all schools

- Mandate and support CSTL educational ecosystems for agency as the vehicle for the "Decade of Action for achieving sustainable development"

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