

UNLOCK LITERACY

Cost-Benefit Analysis



NOTE

This technical summary presents the Unlock Literacy core project model funded by World Vision Canada from 2019 to 2021, conducted by Limestone Analytics. Updates to this analysis will occur as additional projects adopt this model and new evidence is continuously collected. Consequently, figures may change to reflect a more accurate understanding of the pathways through which the model achieves its effectiveness and efficiency. All dollar values are reported in 2023 USD unless otherwise specified.

Introduction

Unlock Literacy (UL) is an early-learning project model developed by World Vision International to help young children—typically in grades 1 through 3—build strong reading fluency and comprehension skills. The approach brings together students, parents, teachers and schools. It is built around the knowledge that reading sets the stage for lifelong learning, individual success and thriving communities.

Between fiscal years 2019 and 2021, World Vision Canada (WVC) implemented 67 programs incorporating the UL model across 28 countries. To assess the effectiveness and efficiency of this portfolio, a cost-benefit analysis was conducted by the consulting firm Limestone Analytics.

Rather than only tracking costs borne by World Vision and other organizers like local governments, the evaluation measures the true, society-wide cost—including valuable time spent by parents, students and volunteers. It highlights overall global outcomes alongside country-by-country breakdowns to show how success varies across different communities.

The results show that WVC's UL portfolio has delivered strong value for money, creating significant benefits across implementation sites and generating positive Real Impact™ for communities.

Highlights (2019-2021)

- 290,471 children reached across 28 countries
- More than \$7 in benefits created for every \$1 invested, on average
- 716,523 additional years of learning generated—2.5 years per child
- \$942 increase in lifetime earnings per child
- 4,466 students avoiding grade repetition

Unlock Literacy Model

The model combines three main types of interventions designed to work together rather than as stand-alone interventions. How they work:

- **In the classroom:** Teachers are supported with dedicated training, ongoing mentoring, regular reading assessments and updated learning materials.
- **Learning resources:** UL provides books written in local languages, sets up community libraries and supplies extra classroom tools.
- **Community connection:** Reading workshops, learning camps and reading buddy programs keep kids engaged outside of school.

Regular checks on children's reading progress identify what's working and what needs improvement.

Methodology

To measure UL's Real Impact™, the study evaluated 67 projects implemented across 28 countries, reaching 290,471¹ children between 2019 and 2021 (see list below).

The analysis weighed project costs against literacy gains—factoring in not just WVC's investment, but contributions from local schools, volunteers, families and students.

To estimate educational impact, researchers measured improvements in reading fluency and comprehension. They converted these gains into Equivalent Years of Schooling (EYOS)—a metric showing how many extra years of traditional school a child would need to reach the same literacy level.

By looking at total learning gains rather than just costs, the study highlights how UL speeds up skill development far beyond standard classroom time. The analysis then calculated the long-term benefits of stronger literacy, such as higher adult earnings and fewer repeated grades. By comparing these future rewards against total project costs, the study estimates the value generated for every dollar invested in UL.

The 28 countries where UL was implemented:

Bangladesh	Mali
Brazil	Mauritania
Burundi	Mozambique
Cambodia	Nepal
Chad	Nicaragua
Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)	Niger
Dominican Republic	Peru
Ecuador	Rwanda
Ethiopia	Senegal
Ghana	South Africa
India	Sri Lanka
Indonesia	Tanzania
Laos	Uganda
Malawi	Zambia

¹ This figure is Limestone's baseline estimate of the number of children reached, built on primary data (project monitoring data on the number of children participating in Unlock Literacy interventions) where available.

Portfolio-Level Results

Learning gains and reach

Between 2019 and 2021, the initiative reached more than 290,000 children across 28 countries (Figure ES.2).

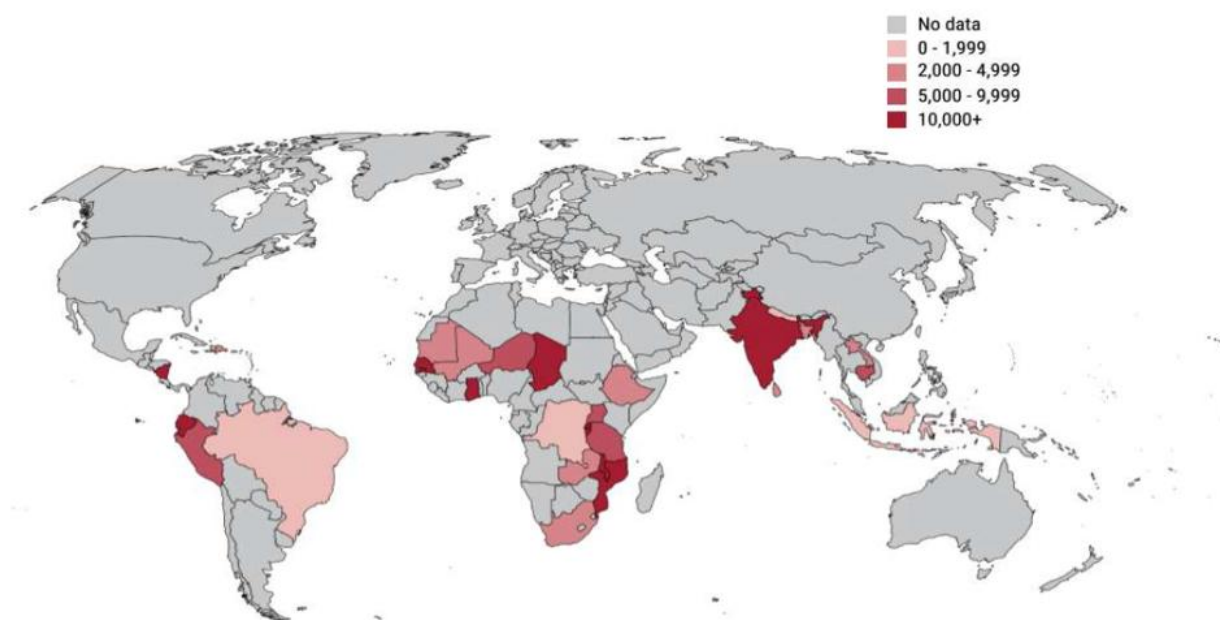


Figure ES.2. Child participation estimates for World Vision Canada-funded Unlock Literacy implementations (by country)

On average, participants gained skills equivalent to 2.5 additional years of quality schooling, accumulating over 716,000 total years of learning across the cohort. Because their reading skills improved so dramatically, 4,466 children avoided repeating a grade, saving families and local schools precious time and resources.

Economic impact and return on investment

When children learn to read, their future earning potential increases, lifting whole communities out of poverty over time. Looking at long-term economic gains, the UL projects created over \$323 million in overall benefits—or about \$942 per student.

Compared against total implementation expenditures of \$41.9 million across the 67 projects, the model yielded exceptional returns: every dollar invested generated over seven dollars in societal value (Figure ES.3).

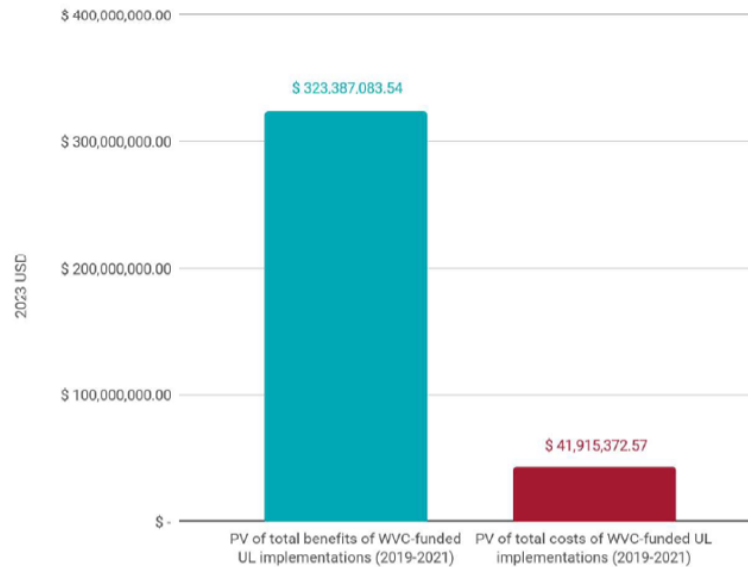


Figure ES.3. Comparison of aggregate benefits and costs of 67 World Vision Canada-funded Unlock Literacy Implementations

Country-Level Results

Financial returns on investment (ROI) varied by country, as shown in Figure ES.4. The strongest financial returns were in areas where implementation costs were lower, reading improvements were highest, and the program reached the largest number of children. Strong school, family and community engagement were critical to success.

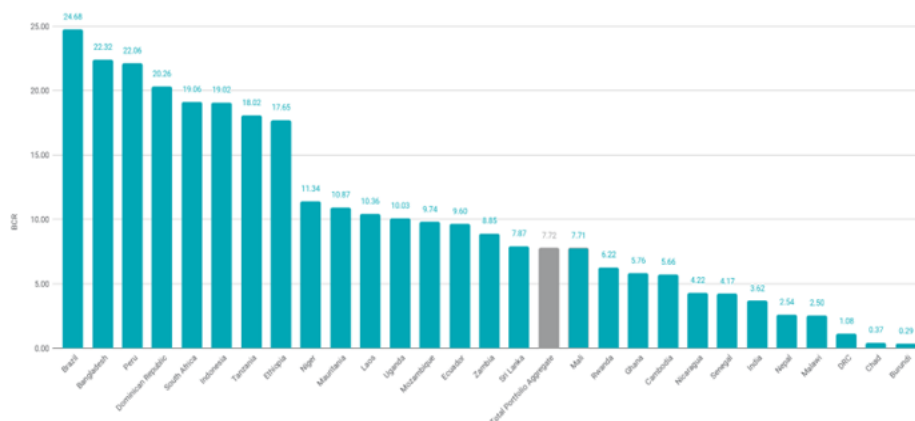


Figure ES.4. Cross-country comparison of benefit-cost ratios (BCRs) of World Vision Canada-funded Unlock Literacy implementations

To fairly evaluate performance across varied economic environments without penalizing lower-income regions, the study evaluated cost-effectiveness independently of baseline wage levels. It found:

- **UL delivers a full extra year of learning for \$63 per student** (\$52 in direct costs for WVC, schools and volunteers, plus \$11 in time spent by families).
- In comparison, the **standard year of primary school cost is \$582**, on average, when factoring in school budgets and family time.
- In 26 of 28 countries, **UL improved literacy far more cost-effectively** than an extra year in a standard classroom setting.

As illustrated in Figure ES.4, countries like Burundi (0.29) and the DRC (1.08) show lower benefit-cost ratios (BCRs). This doesn't mean their teaching is less effective. Because these ratios measure success using local income levels, low-income areas naturally show lower dollar values on paper—even when students are making major learning gains.

Learnings

Key insights into what drives strong reading success:

- **Teaching children to read early creates benefits that last a lifetime.** Strong reading skills help children succeed throughout their entire education and significantly boost their future earning potential.
- **Integrating multiple intervention methods bring the best results.** Pairing teacher training and reading materials with regular assessments and community involvement works better than relying on any single intervention on its own.
- **Large-scale impact can be achieved in diverse settings.** Across countries and school systems, the UL model consistently delivered positive results to hundreds of thousands of children.
- **Further investment in tracking and measuring student progress is needed.** The study encountered challenges in collecting high-quality, comparable data across countries and time periods. This affected the ability to precisely quantify the portfolio's impact and compare cost-effectiveness across contexts. Investments in strong data collection will help refine the programs, sharpen future impact estimates, and identify the most cost-effective strategies.

Conclusions

Unlock Literacy is a highly effective, cost-efficient investment in children's education. Across 28 countries, the program helped more than 290,000 children improve their reading, created learning gains equal to more than 716,000 extra years of schooling, and increased students' future earning potential. Based on this research, we can say:

- Girls and boys who join Unlock Literacy demonstrate reading skills that are two years more advanced than children who don't.
- For every dollar invested, more than seven dollars was generated back to local communities in benefits, such as lifetime earnings for the children who participate.

Notably, these results were achieved at a fraction of the cost typically needed to get the same results through standard classroom schooling alone. UL delivers immediate reading improvements while establishing long-term opportunities for children, families and communities.

For donors, their support equips children with the core skills they need to succeed in school, boost their financial futures, and build stronger, more resilient communities.

Study Limitations and Recommendations

Study limitations

Like any large-scale study, the results are best understood alongside a few important context points:

- **Estimated impact:** Full research tests were not run in every single country, so test results from a few countries were used to estimate the overall results for the rest.
- **Future earnings are estimates:** Proven research shows that learning to read leads to higher pay later in life. However, these specific children have not yet been tracked into adulthood to measure their actual high school graduation rates or adult wages.
- **Sensitive calculations:** In a few regions, small changes in local costs or reading scores caused big shifts in the final numbers, showing that better tracking will make future calculations even clearer.

Recommendations

- Run direct research studies in more countries to rely entirely on real local data instead of estimates.
- Track participating children as they grow up to see how the program directly impacts their graduation rates and job success.
- Support local teams to better track exact program expenses and reading progress, making future value calculations even more precise.