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FROM LEARNERS TO LEADERS:

Building a Self-Sustaining Education Ecosystem for Youth Empowerment in Least Developed Countries

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Thematic Focus: Inclusive Growth Models | Bridging the Skills Gap

Executive Summary

Educational systems in Least Developed Countries face a structural crisis that conventional interventions have repeatedly failed to resolve. Teacher shortages, chronic underfunding, and fragile institutional pipelines persist despite decades of international investment. This paper argues that the root cause is not a lack of resources but a failure of design logic: education in LDC contexts continues to be organized around a delivery model that depends on external supply chains — trained teachers, donor funding, and institutional infrastructure — which are consistently unavailable or unsustainable in the environments they are meant to serve.

This paper proposes an alternative framework grounded in eight years of practitioner evidence: the Learning Together (LT) model, a community-based educational ecosystem developed and operated in Arad, Romania between 2017 and 2024. The model demonstrates that educational capacity can be generated internally — through participation, mentorship, and graduated responsibility — without dependence on external recruitment or sustained donor funding. The regenerative mechanism at the core of the model, termed the *Learning Loop*, enables learners to become volunteers, volunteers to become mentors, and mentors to transition into professional educational roles. This cycle, once established, is self-sustaining.

Key Findings

The LT model served approximately 350 children aged 4 to 17 across its operational history, mobilizing 328 volunteers over seven documented years — a 154 percent increase from 2018 to 2024. From Year 3 of operation, former students began returning organically as volunteers, confirming the internal regeneration mechanism. From Year 4, community demand shifted measurably: families began requesting volunteer placement rather than student enrollment, indicating a community-level recognition of the ecosystem's value beyond passive participation. Partnerships with pedagogical schools provided external institutional validation. A minimum of 21 individuals transitioned from volunteer to paid educator across seven years of operation.

A critical finding of this paper is that the LT model does not function solely as a teacher pipeline. It operates as a human potential discovery environment — a structured space in which young people explore roles, test aptitudes, and identify vocational directions before committing to formal

educational or professional pathways. Former participants have entered careers in education, management, visual communication, event organization, and entrepreneurship. This breadth of outcome positions the model as relevant not only to education policy but to youth employment, skills development, and inclusive growth strategies — all priority areas of the Doha Programme of Action.

Transferability to LDC Contexts

The model's transferability does not depend on contextual similarity between Romania and LDC environments. *The Learning Loop* mechanism requires no advanced infrastructure, formal certification systems, or sustained external funding. It requires social structure: community trust, regular interaction, shared physical space, and local ownership. These conditions are present across LDC communities. Comparable initiatives in Bangladesh (BRAC Education Programme), Colombia (Escuela Nueva), and Ethiopia (UNESCO Community Learning Centres) confirm that community-embedded, participation-driven educational models consistently demonstrate stronger retention, cultural relevance, and post-funding sustainability than externally designed alternatives.

Implementation

The paper proposes a 10-year phased implementation framework aligned with the remaining period of the Doha Programme of Action. Phase 1 (Years 1–2) focuses on community activation using existing spaces and local facilitators. Phase 2 (Years 3–5) introduces structured volunteer roles and incentive systems, with internal regeneration expected to become observable by Year 5. Phase 3 (Years 6–10) consolidates educator transition pathways, local partnerships, and financial self-sufficiency. This timeline reflects the operational experience of the LT model and is presented not as a pilot proposal but as a deployment framework for a documented mechanism.

Policy Recommendations

The following seven recommendations are submitted as direct contributions to the 2027 Midterm Review of the Doha Programme of Action, addressing DPoA Priority 1 and aligned with SDG 4, SDG 8, and SDG 9:

1. **Develop layered educational recognition** frameworks that formally acknowledge non-formal and community-based learning as legitimate credentials on a continuum of educational achievement.
2. **Invest in structured career exploration programmes** at community level, treating access to vocational information as a policy responsibility rather than an individual burden.
3. **Reorient teacher quality frameworks toward pedagogical effectiveness** — empathy, communication, and the capacity to inspire — alongside formal subject knowledge credentials.
4. **Fund community-based human potential discovery environments** that enable young people to explore vocational identities before committing to formal educational pathways.
5. **Establish identification and support pathways** for skilled community facilitators, independent of formal qualification level.
6. **Guarantee basic material incentives for volunteer participation** — including certified recognition of hours and roles, material support, and access to further learning opportunities — as a structural condition of community learning programme design.
7. **Develop a distinct regulatory category for community learning ecosystems** that ensures basic safety and accountability standards appropriate to their operational context, without applying compliance frameworks designed for formal institutional schools.

Final Word - The 2027 Midterm Review of the Doha Programme of Action is an opportunity to ask honestly whether the frameworks we have built are serving the communities they were designed for. The Learning Together model stopped operating not because the community stopped believing in it — but because a regulatory framework designed for formal institutions could not accommodate the community. We have enough experts. What we need now are educational communities and educational villages

1. Introduction

The world's Least Developed Countries are home to the largest concentration of young people on the planet. More than 60 percent of the population in LDCs is under the age of 25, including approximately 20 percent classified as youth between the ages of 15 and 24 (UN-OHRLLS, 2022). This demographic reality represents one of the most significant potential drivers of long-term development. Yet the systems intended to transform this potential into productive, confident, and civically engaged human beings are, in most LDCs, structurally ill-equipped for the task. Teacher shortages, chronic underfunding, and fragile institutional pipelines are real and urgent problems — but they are symptoms. The deeper problem is a failure of design logic. Current education systems in LDCs — and indeed across much of the world — are built around a delivery model: knowledge flows from certified professionals to passive recipients through institutional pipelines. This model has a single point of failure. When the pipeline breaks — when teachers leave, when funding ends, when infrastructure collapses — learning stops. And in LDC contexts, pipelines break constantly. This paper proposes a different logic, grounded in eight years of direct practitioner experience. The Learning Together model, founded in 2017 in Arad, Romania, is built on a simple but radical idea: education works best when it functions like a village. Not a school. Not a pipeline. A village — a living community in which every member contributes to the development of every other, in which roles are fluid, potential is discovered through participation, and the community itself becomes the engine of human capital formation.

This distinction matters because the LT model does not produce only teachers. It produces curious, capable young people who discover — through structured participation, mentorship, and real responsibility — what they are good at and who they want to become. Former LT participants have gone on to become educators, yes — but also managers, photographers, event organizers, entrepreneurs, and community leaders. The ecosystem does not determine the destination. It creates the conditions for each person to find their own.

Central to this model is something conventional education systems rarely offer: the freedom to explore. Around the world, students abandon degree programmes and university courses not because they lack ability or commitment, but because they were never given the opportunity to test whether their chosen path genuinely suited them before committing to it. Insufficient

information about career options compounds this problem — young people make life-defining choices based on incomplete pictures of what professions actually demand and offer. The LT model addresses this directly. Within the ecosystem, participants are not asked to commit — they are invited to try. A teenager who assists with event coordination discovers whether they enjoy logistics. One who takes photographs finds out whether visual storytelling is their language. One who helps manage schedules realizes they are drawn to numbers and organization. The ecosystem provides what the formal system withholds: a structured, low-cost, supported space in which identity and vocation can be explored before they must be declared.

In LDC contexts, where young people frequently face a binary choice between formal education and survival, this village model offers something the conventional system cannot: a structured, low-cost, community-rooted environment in which human potential is discovered, developed, and deployed — regardless of whether a formal qualification is ever obtained.

The paper aligns directly with Priority 1 of the Doha Programme of Action, which emphasizes building productive capacities through education and skills development, and with SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 9 (Innovation and Infrastructure). It is intended as a contribution to the evidence base for the 2027 DPoA Midterm Review — not as a theoretical proposal, but as a documented, adaptable, and immediately deployable framework for communities that cannot wait for perfect conditions.

2. The Structural Education Crisis in LDCs

Education systems in LDCs operate under an interconnected system of structural pressures that resist linear solutions. Three constraints define the environment: chronic underfunding, infrastructure deficits, and demographic pressure — the triad of scarcity.

Chronic underfunding affects every level. Many LDC governments spend below the UNESCO-recommended 4–6 percent of GDP on education (UNESCO, 2023), leaving teacher salaries, learning materials, and professional development consistently under-resourced. Hidden costs — uniforms, exam fees, transportation — drive dropout rates, especially among girls and low-income households. Infrastructure deficits compound the problem: rural schools may be kilometers from residential areas, classrooms overcrowded, and facilities lacking electricity or sanitation. The

UNESCO Institute for Statistics estimates 244 million children and youth remain out of school globally, with LDCs representing a disproportionate share (UIS, 2023).

Demographic pressure intensifies both constraints. With over 60 percent of LDC populations under 25, education systems must serve rapidly expanding student populations without comparable growth in institutional capacity — producing rising class sizes, teacher burnout, and declining quality. Overlaying these structural barriers is the digital divide: only 11 percent of young people in LDCs are enrolled in tertiary education, and just 21.7 percent of tertiary graduates complete STEM fields (UN-OHRLLS, 2025), limiting future economic participation precisely when digital skills are becoming the primary driver of employment.

Standard responses — building schools, recruiting teachers, deploying international volunteers — share a structural weakness: they depend on external supply. When funding ends, the pipeline empties. A different logic is required: enabling communities to produce educational capacity themselves.

3. Root Cause Analysis: Why Teacher Shortages Persist

Teacher shortages are often framed as a numerical problem — not enough trained educators to meet demand. This framing is misleading, and it is not exclusive to LDCs. Across the world, including in well-funded education systems in Europe and North America, teacher shortages are growing. The problem is not a lack of people capable of teaching. It is a failure of the systems designed to attract, prepare, and retain them.

At the heart of this global crisis is a fundamental misalignment between how teaching is presented and what it actually demands. Teaching is, at its core, a vocation driven by intrinsic motivation — a commitment to human development that no salary structure alone can manufacture or sustain. Yet recruitment systems worldwide continue to treat teaching primarily as an employment pathway, attracting candidates whose entry is driven by limited alternatives, job security, or social expectation rather than genuine purpose. When motivation is extrinsic from the start, attrition is not a policy failure — it is a predictable outcome.

Compounding this is what practitioners commonly describe as the reality shock: the profound gap between what teacher training prepares candidates for and what they actually encounter in

classrooms. Training systems, even well-resourced ones, tend to emphasize theoretical frameworks, curriculum planning, and subject knowledge. They rarely prepare teachers for the emotional complexity, social unpredictability, and relentless human demands of real classroom environments. When new teachers meet that reality — often alone, under-supported, and in under-resourced settings — many leave within their first three to five years. The system that trained them provided no bridge between preparation and practice.

In LDC contexts, these universal failures are amplified by structural conditions that remove any remaining buffer. Sub-Saharan Africa alone will need to recruit 15 million additional teachers by 2030 simply to replace those who leave, before accounting for population growth (ITF, 2022). Low salaries, rural isolation, and inadequate professional support accelerate the departure of those who do enter the profession, driving qualified educators toward urban placements or other sectors entirely. The result is a recruitment treadmill: resources spent training teachers who leave faster than new entrants can be prepared.

Centralized training systems further exclude the most promising candidates. Certification programmes located in urban centers require financial resources — tuition, housing, travel — that rural youth cannot access. The individuals most familiar with local communities, local languages, and local educational realities are systematically filtered out of the profession before they begin. This is not only an equity failure; it is a strategic one. Community-embedded educators are precisely the people most likely to stay, to communicate effectively with learners and families, and to adapt their practice to local needs.

Dependency on externally funded programmes adds a final layer of fragility. Many LDC education systems rely on short-term donor projects to address staffing gaps. When funding cycles end, trained personnel move on and institutional knowledge dissipates. The pattern repeats — each new intervention identifies the same problems and proposes similar solutions, without building the structural foundations for continuity.

Taken together, these factors reframe the question entirely. The challenge is not how to recruit more teachers. It is how to create conditions in which future educators emerge organically from

within their own communities — motivated from the start, prepared through practice, and rooted in the environments they serve.

4. Conceptual Framework: Education as Ecosystem

The dominant model of education in most national systems — including those in LDCs — is organized around delivery. Knowledge flows from trained professionals to passive recipients; institutions serve as the primary mediators of learning; and quality is measured by the fidelity with which a designed curriculum is transmitted to students. This delivery model functions adequately in contexts with stable funding, strong institutional infrastructure, and sufficient trained personnel. In LDC contexts, where all three of these conditions are frequently absent, the delivery model is structurally brittle.

An alternative conceptual framework — education as ecosystem — offers a fundamentally different logic. In an ecosystem, growth does not depend on a single actor or a linear pipeline. It emerges from the interactions between multiple participants who support, challenge, and resource one another. Applied to education, this means that learning is not confined to classrooms or limited to certified teachers. It circulates through relationships, shared responsibilities, and community engagement. Roles are fluid: learners can become mentors, and mentors continue to learn.

This perspective draws on well-established traditions in educational theory. Lev Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (1978) argues that learning occurs most powerfully in social interaction — through guidance from more capable peers rather than formal instruction alone. Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed (1970) challenges the passive-recipient model of education and argues for learning as a collaborative, emancipatory process. More recently, communities of practice theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) demonstrates how knowledge develops through participation in shared social environments rather than through transmission alone. The ecosystem framework synthesizes these traditions and applies them to the practical challenge of building educational capacity in resource-constrained settings.

Three properties distinguish ecosystem-based education from delivery-based education and make it particularly relevant to LDC contexts.

First, it is regenerative. Rather than depending on external recruitment to replenish its human resources, an educational ecosystem cultivates future educators from within. When learners are

gradually exposed to teaching roles, mentoring responsibilities, and leadership opportunities, they develop pedagogical competencies organically. Each generation of participants supports the formation of the next, creating a self-sustaining cycle.

Second, it is adaptive. Ecosystems do not require fixed conditions to function. They adjust to available resources, cultural contexts, and community dynamics. An educational ecosystem in rural Tanzania will look different from one in Cambodia or Haiti — but its core mechanism of participation, mentorship, and graduated responsibility can operate across these diverse contexts.

Third, it is participatory. In ecosystem-based models, individuals do not simply receive education; they contribute to it. Students learn not only by listening but by doing, teaching, assisting, and creating. This participation strengthens both competence and confidence, while reinforcing a sense of belonging and shared ownership. Over time, participants come to perceive themselves not as beneficiaries of the system but as agents within it — a shift that is foundational to long-term retention and community investment.

The ecosystem framework does not reject formal education or professional certification. It complements them by strengthening the social foundation on which formal systems depend. In contexts where formal systems are overstretched or under-resourced, community ecosystems can provide the resilience and continuity that institutions alone cannot sustain.

5. Case Study: The Learning Together Model

The Learning Together (LT) model was founded in 2017 in Arad, Romania, by Roxana and Ioan Voștinar as a private educational center focused initially on language learning for children. Over seven years of continuous operation, it evolved into a community-based learning ecosystem in which students, volunteers, pedagogical interns, and professional educators interact within a shared structure of participation and graduated responsibility. The model provides a concrete, longitudinally documented example of how an educational ecosystem can function in practice.

5.1 Program Structure and Approach

At the core of the LT model is the integration of academic learning with personal and social development. The program serves children aged 4 to 17, combining language education — primarily English and Romanian — with activities designed to build communication skills,

collaboration, creativity, and emotional resilience. Instruction follows a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodology, in which language is treated not only as a subject, but as a medium through which broader knowledge and competencies are explored. This integrated approach allows participants to develop linguistic competence alongside transferable skills applicable across educational and professional contexts.

The program operates on an annual cycle, with intensive activity concentrated in summer periods supplemented by year-round engagement. Approximately 50 children participate per annual cycle, spanning age groups from early childhood through adolescence. Since 2017, this has resulted in an estimated 350 children served across the program's operational history.

5.2 The Multi-Layered Community Structure

What distinguishes the LT model from a conventional language school is its multi-layered community structure, in which participants do not occupy fixed roles, but move gradually through different levels of involvement. This structure has three principal layers.

At the foundation are learners — children who participate in structured educational activities guided by teachers and supported by volunteers. Through this participation, they develop academic skills, social competencies, and familiarity with educational environments.

The second layer consists of volunteers — young people, typically former students of the program or pedagogical school interns, who assist in program delivery, but not only. Volunteers contribute across a range of functions: instructional support, activity coordination, material preparation, group supervision and logistics. This distributed system of responsibilities allows participants to discover their strengths and interests through direct experience rather than abstract guidance.

The third layer comprises paid educators — individuals who have demonstrated sustained commitment and pedagogical aptitude and have been offered professional roles within the program. These educators emerge primarily from the volunteer pool, but not only, completing the cycle from learner to contributor to professional.

5.3 Practitioner Data and Observed Outcomes

The following data is reported by program founders based on operational records maintained since 2018. It is presented as practitioner evidence and is representative of the scale and trends observed over the program's documented history.

Year	Volunteers Mobilized	Key Observations
2018	22	Program establishes volunteer structure
2019	43	95% growth; community engagement accelerates
2020	47	Sustained growth despite COVID-19 disruption
2021	60	Peak year; expanded reach and role diversity
2022	53	Post-pandemic consolidation; resilience demonstrated
2023	47	Stable operation; quality deepening over expansion
2024	56	Recovery growth; demand from pedagogical schools

Total volunteers mobilized across 7 documented years: 328. This represents a 154 percent increase from the program's first year to 2024, with consistent operation across challenging conditions including pandemic disruption.

From Year 3 of operation onward, a minimum of five former students returned to the program as volunteers per cohort. This internal regeneration — the Learning Loop in observable practice — confirms that the ecosystem mechanism described in the conceptual framework is not theoretical; it is measurable.

A particularly significant indicator of ecosystem maturation emerged from Year 4 onward: parents began contacting the LT center to request placement in the volunteer program rather than the

student program! This demand shift reflects a community-level recognition that the volunteer experience — the opportunity to contribute, learn in practice, and develop professional skills — had become more valuable to families than passive enrollment. This is a cultural shift that no external intervention could manufacture.

External validation has come through partnerships with pedagogical schools, whose students have chosen the LT center as a practical training placement. This recognition positions the LT model as an institutional reference point for teacher preparation — a status achieved without formal accreditation but through demonstrated quality and community trust.

On employment transition: across seven years of operation, a minimum of three volunteers per year have been offered and accepted paid educational roles within or connected to the program. This produces a conservative estimate of 21 individuals who have transitioned from volunteer to paid educator through the LT pathway — a figure that represents, for a single small community-based organization with no external funding mandate, a meaningful contribution to local educational employment.

6. The Learning Loop: Mechanism Analysis

The effectiveness of the LT model rests not on its specific content or geographic context but on the structural mechanism it creates. This mechanism — **the Learning Loop** — is a regenerative pathway through which participants develop the skills, confidence, and motivation required to assume educational roles. Understanding this mechanism is essential to assessing the model's transferability and replicability.

The **Learning Loop** operates across five sequential and overlapping stages:

The Learning Loop — Five Stages

Stage 1 — EXPOSURE: Children enter as learners. They observe multiple role models, develop academic and social skills, and become familiar with educational environments.

Stage 2 — ENGAGEMENT: Older participants return as volunteers. They choose roles based on interest and explore responsibilities through practice rather than instruction.

Stage 3 — FEEDBACK: Volunteers work under teacher supervision and receive continuous informal guidance. Skills are refined in real contexts through daily practice.

Stage 4 — RESPONSIBILITY: Committed volunteers take on progressively more complex tasks — leading activities, mentoring younger students, assisting with instruction.

Stage 5 — TRANSITION: Some participants pursue further training or professional roles in education. They enter with practical experience, community familiarity, and proven commitment.

What makes this mechanism powerful is its integration of learning and practice from the outset. Traditional teacher preparation typically separates theoretical training from real classroom experience — candidates learn pedagogy in institutional settings and then apply it in schools. The Learning Loop integrates these stages continuously: participants develop skills while exercising them, in authentic contexts, under guided mentorship. This integration produces both competence and confidence in ways that classroom-based training alone cannot replicate.

The mechanism also addresses the motivation problem identified in Section 3. Because participants enter the volunteer stage voluntarily and choose roles aligned with their interests, they are intrinsically motivated from the beginning. Their engagement is not conditional on salary or certification; it is grounded in a sense of belonging, contribution, and personal growth. When professional transitions do occur, they are made by individuals who have already demonstrated commitment — making retention far more likely than in conventional recruitment pipelines.

Critically, the Learning Loop is not dependent on the personal charisma or exceptional skill of individual leaders. It depends on the design of the structure itself: a community environment that provides exposure, offers graduated responsibility, enables experimentation, and delivers continuous mentorship. Where these structural conditions exist, the loop can function — and can be replicated.

7. Transferability to LDC Contexts

The central question this paper must address is explicit in the LDC Future Forum's submission guidelines: where lessons are drawn from countries outside the LDC category, their direct relevance and applicability to the LDC context must be clearly articulated. The LT model originates in Romania — a middle-income European country with stable governance, basic infrastructure, and functioning institutions. LDCs face conditions that differ fundamentally across all of these dimensions. This section directly confronts that gap.

The argument for transferability does not rest on contextual similarity. It rests on the observation that the Learning Loop's core mechanism — participation, mentorship, and gradual responsibility — does not require stable institutions, advanced infrastructure, or significant financial investment. It requires social structure: trust, regular interaction, shared space, and a community willing to invest in its own development. These conditions exist in LDC communities, including those experiencing poverty, displacement, and resource scarcity. They exist, in many cases, more robustly than in urbanized middle-income settings where community bonds are weaker.

7.1 Five Dimensions of Adaptability

The transferability of the LT model to LDC contexts can be understood through five interrelated dimensions.

- 1. Pedagogical adaptability:** The LT approach uses modular, thematic learning structures that can be adjusted to local languages, cultural priorities, and curriculum needs. The CLIL methodology is not dependent on English as a target language — it can be applied to any language of instruction and any thematic content. In LDC contexts, this means activities can be built around locally relevant topics such as agricultural knowledge, health literacy, civic participation, and vocational skills, using whatever languages the community speaks.
- 2. Material flexibility:** The LT structure is designed to function with simple, locally available resources. Storytelling, games, collaborative tasks, drawing, and group discussion can support cognitive, social, and linguistic development with minimal cost. This is not a compromise; it is a design principle. In LDC contexts where resource availability is unpredictable, material flexibility is a structural advantage rather than a limitation.
- 3. Volunteer mobilization potential:** LDCs possess large youth populations — often described in development literature as the demographic dividend — many of whom are

underemployed or engaged in informal economic activity. The LT model offers structured, meaningful, skill-building participation that does not require prior credentials. In contexts where formal employment is scarce, volunteer roles that develop real competencies and open pathways to professional transition carry significant incentive value.

- 4. Cultural alignment:** Because the LT model cultivates educators from within the community itself, rather than importing them, it naturally aligns with local cultural norms, communication styles, and social expectations. This is a critical advantage in LDC contexts where externally designed programmes frequently fail due to cultural mismatch. Community-formed educators share references, relationships, and trust with their learners in ways that externally recruited teachers rarely do.
- 5. Partnership potential:** The LT model does not require a standalone institution. It can be integrated into existing community structures — schools, community centers, religious organizations, youth clubs, or civil society groups — using available physical spaces and complementing existing activities. This reduces startup costs, builds institutional trust, and creates natural pathways for program expansion.

7.2 Evidence from Comparable LDC Initiatives

The ecosystem logic underlying the LT model is not without parallel in LDC contexts, and existing evidence confirms that community-based, participation-driven educational models can function effectively in low-resource environments.

In Bangladesh, the BRAC education programme — the world's largest non-governmental education system, having served over 11 million students — draws teachers from the communities they serve, providing practical rather than formal training at locally sustainable cost levels. It consistently demonstrates that locally embedded educators outperform externally trained counterparts on retention and community engagement (BRAC, 2023). In Colombia, the Escuela Nueva model redesigned rural schooling around collaborative, peer-supported learning, improving outcomes and reducing dropout rates in multi-grade classrooms across one of Latin America's most resource-constrained education environments; it has since been adapted in Uganda, Zambia, and Vietnam (Colbert, 1999). In Ethiopia, UNESCO-supported community learning centers mobilized

local volunteer facilitators to build adult literacy, demonstrating sustained operation beyond initial funding cycles where local leadership was integrated from inception (UNESCO, 2020).

These programmes confirm that the core principle — cultivating human resources from within communities rather than importing them — produces greater sustainability than externally sourced models. The Learning Together model builds on this confirmed foundation. However, it extends it in three significant ways that the above initiatives do not address.

First, none of these programmes are designed as vocational discovery environments. BRAC, Escuela Nueva, and the Ethiopia centers are fundamentally educator pipelines — they produce teachers and facilitators. The LT model produces curious, capable human beings who discover their own direction through participation. Former participants have become managers, photographers, event organizers, and entrepreneurs — not only educators. This breadth of human capital outcome is a distinct contribution that existing models do not document or design for.

Second, the LT model deliberately integrates multiple age groups — children aged 4 to 17 — within a single shared community space. This intergenerational design is not incidental; it is the mechanism through which younger children observe older role models and older participants develop responsibility toward younger ones. The comparable programmes operate within more narrowly defined age or skill cohorts and do not specifically leverage intergenerational dynamics as a pedagogical tool.

Third, the LT model produced a community demand shift that none of the comparable programmes document: from Year 4 onward, families began requesting volunteer placement rather than student enrollment. This shift indicates that the community itself had begun to recognize the contribution experience as more valuable than passive participation — a cultural transformation that represents the deepest form of ecosystem maturation. It is not an outcome that can be externally designed or donor-funded. It emerges from within, and it is the clearest evidence that the Learning Loop had become genuinely self-sustaining.

7.3 What Adaptation Requires

Transferring the LT model to LDC contexts does not mean replicating it unchanged. Adaptation requires attention to three factors: **contextual assessment of existing community structures** and

trust networks; incentive redesign calibrated to local economic realities (see Section 8); and **partnership development** with existing institutions to provide physical and logistical grounding. The model's structure is a framework, not a blueprint. Its strength lies in its flexibility — the capacity to take different forms in different contexts while preserving the core mechanism of the **Learning Loop**.

8. Incentive Design for Low-Resource Environments

In contexts marked by economic vulnerability, participation in educational initiatives cannot be assumed. Families and young people in LDCs must prioritize immediate needs — food, health, income, household labor. Any model that ignores these material realities will see its participation collapse regardless of conceptual soundness. Incentive design is a structural requirement, not a peripheral concern.

The LT framework suggests incentives should function as hybrid support mechanisms combining intrinsic motivation with tangible material or social recognition — not transforming participation into salaried employment, but removing the barriers that prevent engagement. The Learning Together model developed its incentive structure through eight years of direct practice. Every volunteer received a formal certificate documenting hours worked and roles performed — a genuine professional asset in contexts where credentials are scarce. Beyond this universal recognition, LT operated a tiered system: selected volunteers received books, full sponsorship for internationally recognized Cambridge English examinations, or scholarship enrollment in language courses at the center. These provisions were responsive to individual contribution and circumstance, making them more meaningful to recipients and more sustainable for the organization.

This graduated approach holds direct lessons for LDC adaptation. Basic material assistance — meals, transportation, learning materials — addresses immediate needs without monetizing participation. Employment pathways, even modest connections to local businesses or public institutions, demonstrate that educational engagement leads to livelihood outcomes, one of the strongest motivation drivers in low-resource settings. Gender-responsive incentives require particular emphasis. Girls and young women face layered barriers: social expectations, domestic responsibilities, restricted mobility. Structured leadership roles, visible female mentors, and

flexible scheduling are prerequisites for genuine inclusion, not optional additions. LT's experience consistently showed that when female participation pathways were actively supported, women became among the most committed contributors to program continuity. Incentive structures should be community-centered — defined collaboratively — ensuring they are accepted and sustained rather than externally imposed.

9. Systemic and Development Impact

Community-based educational ecosystems generate outcomes that extend well beyond immediate academic results, aligning directly with the DPoA and SDG frameworks. Social capital formation — dense networks of trust and cooperation between students, volunteers, educators, and families — creates durable community resources supporting collective problem-solving and civic engagement. Communities with strong social capital demonstrate greater resilience under economic shocks and political instability (Putnam, 2000; World Bank, 2011), providing informal safety nets where formal social protection systems are limited.

Locally rooted human resource development addresses LDC education's most persistent vulnerability: externally trained professionals migrating away from the communities they were trained to serve. Community ecosystems cultivate educators who share languages, relationships, and long-term stakes with their communities — more likely to remain, more effective in communication, and more capable of adapting practice to local needs. Economic adaptability is supported when learning environments develop collaboration, problem-solving, communication, and initiative alongside subject knowledge — competencies the WEF identifies as critical for future labor market participation (WEF, 2023) and directly relevant to SDG 8 targets on decent work and productive capacity.

Gender inclusion advances when participation structures create visible pathways for girls and young women, contributing to the cultural shifts that sustainable gender equity requires (SDG 4.5, SDG 5). Community resilience — the capacity to maintain functions under stress — is enhanced when knowledge and responsibility are distributed across many participants rather than concentrated in institutions. Where learning ecosystems exist, educational activities can continue when individual educators are absent, when funding is temporarily reduced, or when external conditions are disrupted.

10. Implementation Framework

Sustainable educational ecosystems are not built overnight. The Learning Together model required eight years of continuous operation in Romania to reach full self-sustaining capacity — from first cohort to community-driven regeneration. Adapted for LDC contexts, this paper proposes a 10-year implementation framework, deliberately aligned with the remaining period of the Doha Programme of Action. This is not a proposal for a new experiment. It is a deployment framework for a proven mechanism, with measurable milestones at Years 2, 5, and 10.

Years 1–2 — Activation: Establish a functioning learning environment using existing community spaces — schools, community centers, youth clubs, religious facilities — without waiting for new construction. Identify two to three community members with communication skills and local trust as founding facilitators. Recruit an initial cohort of children aged 6–15 and prioritize engagement over assessment: collaborative activities, storytelling, and group tasks that build social bonds and establish a reliable routine. By Year 2, success is measured not by academic outcomes but by attendance consistency, community trust, and the emergence of young people expressing interest in contributing beyond participation.

Years 3–5 — Structuring: Introduce the volunteer layer. Invite older participants and interested community youth to take on supporting roles. Provide short, practical training workshops — two to three days — in facilitation, group coordination, and mentoring, delivered by local educators or NGO partners. Formalize incentive structures: recognition certificates, basic material support, and connections to local employers. By Year 5, the first indicators of internal regeneration should be visible: former students returning as volunteers, community demand for participation growing, and early employment transitions beginning to occur.

Years 6–10 — Consolidation: Deepen the ecosystem and build genuine long-term sustainability. Formalize the volunteer-to-educator transition pathway. Connect outstanding volunteers to further training opportunities and, where resources allow, remunerated roles. Develop partnerships with local educational institutions, businesses, and civil society organizations. By Year 10, the program should be generating meaningful self-sufficiency through community contributions and local

partnerships, with a documented pipeline of community-formed educators and a reduced dependency on any single external funder.

Core Implementation Principles

- Use existing spaces — never wait for new construction
- Begin with relationships, not curricula — trust precedes content
- Introduce roles before requirements — explore before formalizing
- Document from Day 1 — simple records compound into powerful evidence
- Celebrate transitions publicly — learner to volunteer, volunteer to educator
- Design for the most constrained participant, not the average

11. Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are directed at LDC governments, development partners, and multilateral institutions, framed as direct contributions to the 2027 Midterm Review of the Doha Programme of Action. They address DPoA Priority 1 and align with SDG 4, SDG 8, and SDG 9. They are not theoretical proposals. Every one of them emerges directly from eight years of practitioner experience building and operating a community-based learning ecosystem.

1. Break the educational binary — create a recognized spectrum of learning

Education policy must move beyond the binary of qualified and unqualified, educated and uneducated. Governments should develop layered recognition frameworks that acknowledge partial, non-formal, and community-based learning as legitimate and valuable steps on a continuum. A young person who has spent two years as a volunteer educator in a community program has learned something real and consequential. That contribution deserves recognition — not as a consolation prize, but as a legitimate credential in its own right.

2. Treat career information as a policy responsibility

Young people across LDCs — and globally — make life-defining educational and professional choices based on severely incomplete information. Governments and development partners should invest in structured, accessible career exploration programmes that inform young people of the full

range of options available to them, beginning at community level and long before formal qualification decisions must be made.

3. Redefine what quality teaching means

Governments over-invest in credential validation and under-invest in pedagogical effectiveness. A doctoral degree confirms what someone knows. It says nothing about whether they can inspire a struggling child, adapt in the moment, or sustain commitment in a difficult environment. Teacher selection and development frameworks should assess empathy, communication, adaptability, and the capacity to inspire — alongside subject knowledge. The most important question is not how much a teacher knows. It is whether they can make others want to learn.

4. Invest in human potential discovery environments

Community learning ecosystems are not only teacher pipelines. They are structured spaces in which young people discover what they are capable of and what they are suited for — before being asked to commit to a path. Around the world, students abandon universities and degree programmes not from lack of ability but from lack of prior exploration. LDC governments and development partners should fund community-based environments that offer young people the freedom to try, to test, and to discover — producing not only educators but managers, organizers, entrepreneurs, and leaders of every kind.

5. Identify and support inspiring facilitators — not only qualified ones

The first and non-negotiable requirement for replicating the LT model is brilliant facilitators who understand the ecosystem logic and genuinely want to inspire others. These individuals are not always found through formal qualification systems. They are found in communities — recognized by the trust others place in them, by their curiosity, and by their natural capacity to draw others forward. Policies should create pathways for identifying, supporting, and retaining such individuals, regardless of their formal credential level.

6. Guarantee basic incentives for volunteer participation

Asking young people in economically vulnerable contexts to contribute their time and energy without any form of recognition or material support is not idealism — it is naivety. Basic incentives — certificates, meals, transportation, access to examinations or courses — are not luxuries. They are the structural minimum that makes participation possible. The LT model demonstrated this consistently: every volunteer received a certificate documenting their hours and roles; selected volunteers received books, Cambridge examination sponsorship, or scholarship enrollment in language courses. These provisions cost relatively little. Their impact on retention and commitment was disproportionately large.

7. Create a protective regulatory framework for community learning ecosystems

This is perhaps the most urgent recommendation of all — because without it, every other recommendation is at risk. Regulatory frameworks designed for formal institutional schools are routinely applied to community-based learning initiatives, with consequences that are not protective but destructive. In 2024, the Learning Together program received an inspection requiring air-conditioned spaces at 23–24 degrees Celsius during heat waves, separate toilet facilities for teachers, volunteers, and students respectively, and physical separation of kindergarten and primary school-age children during outdoor activity. Each requirement was designed for a formal school. Applied to a community ecosystem — one whose entire value rests on intergenerational mixing, shared space, and human proximity — they were operationally impossible and pedagogically counterproductive. The requirement to separate age groups directly contradicted the model's core mechanism. Governments must create a distinct, lighter regulatory category for community learning ecosystems: one that ensures genuine safety and basic accountability without imposing compliance burdens that only well-funded formal institutions can absorb. The goal is not less protection. It is smarter, context-sensitive regulation that understands the difference between a school and a village.

12. Conclusion

The world does not lack experts. It does not lack research, frameworks, conferences, or policy documents. It does not lack people who understand, in precise technical detail, why education

systems in Least Developed Countries are failing. And yet they continue to fail. Teacher shortages persist. Young people remain excluded. The demographic dividend remains unrealized. The gap between knowledge and change grows wider with every passing year.

This paper has argued that the problem is not a lack of expertise. It is a failure of design logic. We have built education systems that require perfect conditions to function — sufficient funding, certified teachers, compliant infrastructure, institutional stability — and then deployed them in environments where none of those conditions reliably exist. We have trained experts to diagnose the problem and proposed solutions that the system itself prevents from taking root. We have regulated community initiatives into collapse and funded institutional pipelines that empty as fast as they fill.

The Learning Together model offers a different starting point. Not a perfect system. Not a silver bullet. **A village — a living community in which young people are trusted to participate, invited to explore, supported to discover, and gradually empowered to lead.** A place where a child who cannot afford a university degree can still find out that they love organizing, or photography, or teaching, or numbers. A place where the question is not "do you have the right qualification?" but "what can you contribute, and what do you want to become?"

This model stopped operating in Romania not because the community lost faith in it, not because the volunteers disappeared, not because the children stopped coming — but because a regulatory framework designed for formal institutions could not accommodate a village. That is not a local failure. That is a global policy failure repeated in communities across every LDC where grassroots educational initiatives have been strangled by systems that cannot distinguish between a school and a living ecosystem.

The 2027 Midterm Review of the Doha Programme of Action is an opportunity to ask honestly whether the frameworks we have built are serving the communities they were designed for — or whether we are, once again, measuring the wrong things, funding the wrong structures, and protecting the wrong interests.

We have enough experts. What we need now are villages.

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