

South-South Programme

Building a South-South coalition on foundational learning
through education exchange and evidence synthesis



Learning from Kenya

The experiences of Tusome and PRIEDE

This document is accompanied by a podcast on the same theme and is a part of a [library of Global Public Goods](#) about education reforms and coalition building in Global South countries.

We encourage people to share these materials freely, but use is strictly limited for educational purposes.¹

¹ This document was produced in 2023 by João Pedro Caleiro, from the Lemann Foundation Programme at the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford, as part of the South-South Programme, with support from partners Education Development Trust (EDT), the Lemann Foundation, the Lemann Centre for Leadership and Equity in Education in Sobral, Zizi Afrique Foundation in Kenya, Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) in Pakistan and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) of the United Kingdom.

This is a discursive learning document meant for education policymakers from Global South countries. It describes two national initiatives to improve foundational learning in Kenya, the Tusome literacy program and the PRIEDE numeracy program. It explores issues of scaling up, stakeholder buy-in, ownership and policy sustainability in the context of educational initiatives that involve international development funding.

These materials are intended to be useful even if numeracy or literacy programs, or working with international funders, has no special relevance to your context. The complex dynamics between the actors involved in these reforms provides insights that can apply to other issues and reflecting on them can help any policymaker better engage with different actors in their own education system and beyond.

In a separate document, we suggest learning tasks to be performed individually or in groups. Their purpose is to enrich the quality of deliberation and decision-making in education and to encourage participants to explore how elements of what is described in the discursive learning documents would work in their own contexts.

Introduction

In 2011 education in Kenya was struggling. Only one in ten kids could read at adequate levels in grade twoⁱ, which meant that most of the others were falling behind and struggled to catch up. Eight years after a reform which guaranteed free primary education for all, the country was making great strides in access, but quality was falling behind.

There is a consensus among educators on the key importance of foundational learning. When kids don't learn how to read and write at the right age, they can't follow the rest of the school content, and the relationship between what they should be learning and what they can follow gets increasingly distorted, leading to a greater risk of school evasion and diminishing returns.

In 2012, Kenya began experimenting with a solution. With the help of international partners (USAID, the UK's Department for International Development, and the NGO

RTI International), they set up a large-scale randomised control trial (RCT). When done properly, this is the gold standard of studies: by setting up two different groups which are comparable and then only making an intervention on one of them, the study can conclude precisely how effective that specific intervention was in solving a particular problem.

This was called the PRIMR initiative, which reached 1,384 schools and tested different strategies to identify which elements were most cost-effective in improving literacy and numeracy. The results were most promising on a strategy which combined three main interventions.

First, teachers and students received high-quality and low-cost materials in English, Kiswahili, and Mathematics, based on a new structured pedagogy approach. *Second*, county curriculum support officers (CSOs) practiced in-class observation and coaching using tablets, which tracked the frequency and feedback from this process. *Third*, both teachers and CSOs underwent pedagogical training to advance the new method.

The results after only one year showed that kids supported by this version of PRIMR were three times more likely to read at the benchmark than the kids in comparable schoolsⁱⁱ. PRIMR pupils also did better than their non-PRIMR counterparts in math, though the effect was relatively small.

Soon, a decision was made by the Kenyan government to scale up nationally. There was not full agreement on this: the PRIMR pilot team, for example, favoured a phased process, adding new provinces gradually over a longer time horizon, to incorporate new learnings, and the teacher's union (KNUT) was wary that mistakes could jeopardise the whole idea. Development funders, on the other hand, were in favour of scaling up, but just the literacy pillar, and not mathematics. This view prevailed.

New challenges would arise. Later on, in the middle of the process of scaling up Tusome, the COVID-19 pandemic happened, creating a new challenge for education everywhere. Kenyan schools closed on March 2020, partially reopening in October, and then fully reopening in January 2021ⁱⁱⁱ. School closures are associated with "large, persistent and unequal" negative effects on learning^{iv}, as well as higher

dropout rates, and with online education reaching only a small portion of the population, it was hard to avoid learning losses.

Even still, after a few years of implementation, Tusome results remained positive overall. The reading gains for grade two English students, for example, are equal to gains from an additional year of schooling when compared to baseline. However, questions remained as to whether the reform could be compatible with the rest of the Kenyan education system, given the challenges inherent to scaling up as well as the fact that dynamics of the system in other provinces might differ from those in the province where the reform was successful.

And as Tusome transitions from a temporary project into permanent government policy, it faces a new challenge. How enmeshed and accepted is the program by all the stakeholders necessary to make it a success? In other words: how sustainable can the program be, and are there ways in which it can be improved?

Around the same time as the implementation of Tusome, different initiatives were being advanced in the country, such as SEQUIP, which was meant to improve student learning in Secondary Education and the transition from primary to secondary, and the Kenya Primary Education Development (PRIEDE) program, funded by the Global Partnership for Education, which was also a spinoff of the original PRIMR pilot.

Though the comparison between those programs does not allow for rigorous conclusions, like in the case of an RCT, it provides lessons on how the different relationships between stakeholders and issues around legitimacy and buy-in could be key for making educational reforms work.

The challenge of education in Kenya

Kenya has a population of 54 million^v and a GDP per capita of around US\$ 2,000^{vi}, classifying as a lower middle-income country. The country has a history of ambitious reforms and successful initiatives in education and spent around 9% of GDP in education and training (2016/17)^{vii}, which is relatively high for its income level.

However, Kenya has struggled, as most developing countries, to ensure that all its children have basic foundational learning outcomes. This means basic literacy, numeracy, and transferrable skills, such as socioemotional skills, which are the “building blocks” for a life of learning^{viii}. In 2011, for example, only one out of ten grade two Kenyan students could read at the recommended level, according to national assessments.

The Tusome program

Tusome, pronounced Too-SOH-meh, means “Let’s read” in Kiswahili. It is a pioneering experience of turning a literacy experimental pilot into a national program using pre-existing structures of government, with a cost of US\$ 96.2 million over 8 years^{ix}

Tusome pedagogy is based on the “I do, we do, you do” method, or the “gradual release of responsibility”^x, starting with clear explanations done by teachers (I do), which are progressively done conjointly by teachers and students (We do) until they can be fully taken by students independently (You do). This approach has been proven in different places to be associated with greater literacy outcomes^{xi}.

The clear goal of Tusome was to improve the English and Kiswahili skills of grades one and two (grade three was later added) in a sustainable way, targeting kids between the ages of 6 and 8 years, who began primary school during the 2014-2021 school years. This meant reaching a universe of 7.8 million Kenyan children in 24,038 Kenyan primary schools, the vast majority (22,538) public schools, but also including some 1,500 APBET (Alternative Provision of Basic Education and Training) schools, which are private but low-cost.

The interventions of Tusome, including the new materials, the new pedagogy, the training for teachers and the support of CSOs, were shown to be effective by a series of previous RCTs on a smaller scale within the PRIMR trial. The program design incorporated the learning from other experiences that large scale literacy programs often fail by focusing too much on the initial training, without considering that the change in instructional process requires constant feedback, as well as ways for educators to learn from each other during implementation^{xii}.

The Tusome lesson plan progress is positively associated with English reading performance: each ten-unit advance in the Tusome teacher's guide is associated with an increase of one correct word per minute in English reading fluency, and grade two English reading gains from baseline to endline were equivalent to one additional year of schooling.

Timeline

Before 2003: relatively good education system, but with major problems of access

2003: reform guarantees free primary education and leads to drastic increase in enrolment rates

2007-2008: education problems are exacerbated by post-election political violence, which resulted in massive destruction of education infrastructure in the country

2007: USAID/KEA and MoE run a one-year randomised controlled trial in 40 schools in the Malindi district

2010: New Kenya Constitution decentralises service delivery, while education remains the largest sector to not decentralise financial control

2012: PRIMR (Primary Math and Reading Initiative) starts as a three-year applied research programme on 1,384 schools (547 schools funded by USAID and additional 847 schools funded by DFID)

January 2015: Tusome is formally launched by Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta

May 2015: Implementation of PRIEDE is approved by the World Bank board^{xiii}

2017: Kenya introduces competency-based curriculum emphasising active learning and critical thinking

2020: The COVID-19 pandemic hits, leading to school closures.

2021: PRIEDE and Tusome are concluded.

The stakeholders

The implementation of Tusome on a national scale required the involvement of several actors from inside and outside the education sector in Kenya, from which active cooperation was deemed necessary for success.

From outside Kenya:

USAID is an independent international development agency from the United States government and USAID/KEA (Kenya and East Africa) holds one of its largest portfolios^{xiv}

RTI international is a non-profit research institute headquartered in the United States “committed to improving the human condition”^{xv}

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) is the British equivalent of other countries' foreign ministry, responsible for diplomacy and development support abroad^{xvi}. It results from the fusion, in 2020, of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office with the Department for International Development (DFID)

From inside Kenya:

Kenya Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoE) is the main government body responsible for education in Kenya

Kenya National Union of Teachers (Knut), launched in 1967, is the main trade union and professional organisation of teachers in Kenya^{xvii}

Teacher's Service Commission (TSC) is an umbrella body responsible for “registering, employing, promoting, disciplining and paying teachers”^{xviii}

Teachers and County Support Officers (CSOs) are key parts of the Tusome method

Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) is the body responsible for the development of curriculum material for all levels of education below university^{xix}

Themes of attention

Now that you are familiar with the context of education in Kenya and the main features of the Tusome program, we want to explore larger issues that are raised by this experience.

Here, we will focus on two main themes: (i) the challenge of scaling up; and (ii) the process for securing ownership and sustainability in donor-led educational reforms in the Global South, and the effect of being perceived by stakeholders as being either from the “outside-in” or the “inside out”.

- **The challenge of scaling up**

Once the PRIMR pilot was proved successful in improving learning outcomes, there were initially three different views on scaling up. The PRIMR team preferred a scale up of both components, numeracy and literacy, but in a phased manner to adjust whatever was necessary along the way and minimise the risk of failure which would come with strong reputational damage.

For the Ministry of Education, immediate national scale up of both components was a must, because it would be politically complicated to exclude some areas from the intervention, as well as an administrative challenge to deal with two parallel curriculums concomitantly.^{xx}

Development funders (USAID and FDID) also wanted to scale up, but only the literacy component, due to restrictions on funding and capacity. KNUT did not have a clearly articulated position, and the Teacher's Service Commission was a notoriously thorny institution to deal with. Tusome required their buy-in, but it was unclear how to achieve it.

The development funder's view of scaling up literacy only ultimately prevailed, though the numeracy component would be picked up one year later by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) to become the PRIEDE project, implemented with a grant of \$88.4 million.

Scaling up pilot reforms brings its own set of challenges, something that governments often miss. The existing academic literature on scaling up is not very positive about the potential for these reforms to be taken up by educational actors and keep improving learning outcomes. However, some exceptions exist.

According to Fullan and Quinn^{xxi}, one useful way to think about this issue is identifying if your planned education interventions have good or bad drivers. Under good drivers, they mention capacity building, pedagogy, and systemic policies. Under bad drivers, they place punitive accountability, individualism, technology, and fragmented policies. In the case of Tusome, mostly good drivers seem to be in place.

Once the decision was made to scale, it was time to adapt. One advantage was that Tusome had been imagined at scale from the start with “sustainability, accountability and cost-effectiveness” as strong considerations^{xxii}. This means that the designers of Tusome interventions chose deliberately to minimise their complexity and make sure they were cost-effective.

The use of existing government staff meant there was no need to hire and train a whole new group of officers, for example. But some things had to change. The training of teachers, for example, went from ten days in the PRIMR pilot to six days per year on the national scale, and the support for the CSOs was not as constant as in the pilot.

The new scale of the program also required a new approach to technology, with the use of tablets with an open-source software to track visits and record the feedback from CSOs. The use of technology to support pedagogy in this case contributed to a positive feedback loop, a culture of accountability and an increase in transparency: “The tablets were not viewed as a silver bullet, but instead used as a tool to support a very specific aspect of teacher coaching.”^{xxiii}

The main challenge reported by teachers turned out to be insufficient time to be trained and supervised simultaneously on so many interventions at once: Tusome, PRIEDE, the competency-based curriculum, and the Digital Learning Program, which focused on integrating ICT into primary education^{xxiv}.

There are some aspects of the Tusome reform implementation that have been broadly perceived as successful. One of them is the fact that basic inputs for

education proven to improve learning gains were provided in a consistent, timely and cost-effective manner, something that cannot be taken for granted.

Changes in the procurement of student books, from a decentralised to centralised system, allowed for a decline in the unit cost of books and the achievement of a 1:1 ratio of book per child. Up until July 2022, over 26 million books have been distributed to grades one to three^{xxv}, and materials have been adapted, and distributed for children with hearing and visual impairments as well.

The impact evaluation demonstrated that the book was the single most important factor for achieving learning outcomes, and there was little to no effect, for example, in just providing teacher training without the books. The training established by Tusome, which has so far trained 77,000 teachers^{xxvi}, is also perceived as a successful model which is likely to be sustained by the Kenyan government.

- **Securing ownership and sustainability in inside-out and outside-in reforms**

Education reforms in Global South countries funded and led by external development partners from the Global North and their teams must also have to deal with a particular set of challenges due to their very nature, and that has been the case in Tusome as well, according to some interviewees.

External partners come with their own set of priorities, notions, and conceptions, as well as the background attached to their organisation, position, and countries of origin, be they aware of it or not.

Education reforms perceived to be brought externally may suffer from a deficit of legitimacy, particularly in countries with a legacy of colonialism, and decrease the degree of ownership felt by local actors towards the changes being implemented.

When participating in education reforms in the Global South, international development funders should also take special care to work within existing government structures and personnel and not rely solely on external resources, so that reforms are better able to be sustained over the long term.

They must also strive to build coherence with ongoing internal education initiatives outside of their scope. This is related to a shift over time in how development funding works. Historically, the preferred mode of funding for international donors was through “budget support”, with resourcing channelled directly to governments to back up national sector plans. The release of money was linked to key indicators in those plans, which were the object of constant scrutiny by these external players, who often worked in tandem through joint monitoring missions.

Challenges around the misuse of funds, among other reasons, led to a gradual shift towards funding of specific projects. However, the different funding streams increases the risk of lack of coordination, duplication of efforts, and leakage. With this increased fragmentation, the government might see its capacity to manage different projects divert efforts away from their own strategic plans.^{xxvii}

One example of challenge in Tusome was that Kenya was undergoing a major revision of its own curriculum at the same time as Tusome was being implemented. The integration with the new curriculum seems to have been complicated and delayed due to differences in values and priorities between local and foreign actors.

Another relevant issue is where to place the new program within existing government structures. Because of an assumption that a new initiative will come with new resources and prestige, there might be legitimate disputes and competition inside government to house the program, something that was reported in Tusome. The form in which those disputes are resolved by external actors could, in turn, affect ownership and buy-in from these bureaucratic structures in the longer term.

On some of these themes, it might be useful to contrast the Tusome experience with PRIEDE. While Tusome was initially implemented by project staff hired by an international organisation which were part of the pilot, PRIEDE was implemented since the onset by government staff at the Ministry of Education. According to interviewees, this led to differences on two dimensions.

First, on trade-offs related to state capacity. Results may be harder and slower to come by mostly using in-house teams for leadership, such as in PRIEDE, because they must face internal bureaucratic hurdles and prioritise among competing demands.

However, in that case all steps of the reform would be contributing to building state capacity, with rippling effects for other initiatives.

Another potentially problematic issue related to state capacity is competition for personnel, or “brain drain”^{xxviii}. The creation of separate delivery units outside government to advance donor-funded projects usually come with extra funding, prestige and career opportunities attached. This dynamic attracts talents away from government and towards external partners; these talents which could be valuable assets for government are drained away and unlikely to return.

Second, on sustainability. To enhance the chances of successful and sustained reform in the long run, it is generally advisable to involve the relevant stakeholders early on and place them at the forefront of the implementation process. A greater ownership of reforms by local actors may also mean it's easier to tweak aspects over time, nurture sustained efforts to integrate it into local practices and make them cohere with other ongoing changes in the educational system.

Tusome employed a “gradual release to system-level ownership” model^{xxix} and it was commonly noted by interviewees that the goal was for Tusome to just become a permanent government program in the long term, a process that is now underway. However, it is assumed this level of ownership might remain different depending on factors such as the region or where you stand within the educational system.

Learning tasks

We encourage readers to reflect on the themes of this document by completing the learning tasks available in the [library of Global Public Goods](#).

Endnotes

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^{xxviii} Interview with Rachel Hinton

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