

Developing and Using Own Assessments of 21st Century Skills: Five Lessons from the Assessment of Life Skills and Values in East Africa (ALiVE)



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For the last 3 years, 20 organizations and members of the Regional Education Learning Initiative (RELI) have been on a process of learning how to develop and use contextualised assessments of 21st century skills. The process that started in August 2020 gathered 47 East Africans, and over 18 months, developed contextualised tools and conducted an assessment in over 100 districts in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. This learning process covered three competencies and one value: problem solving, collaboration, self-awareness and respect. We find that five lessons are most significant to the members of the AEEA, who may be on their journey to developing these assessments for the Sub-Saharan Africa context:

1. Contextualisation is both necessary and possible

Conducted in 15 districts, the ALiVE contextualisation study generated useful ground-up meanings from children, teachers and their parents. This not only brought in unique meanings to the local contexts (some differing from definitions and skill structures in global literature), but also, the answers given by the children became useful raw material for item development, facilitating sensitivity to age and culture.

2. Balancing between the process (learning how to do) and the tool is important

A 2018/19 situational analysis in East Africa revealed that most tools available were developed mainly in Western contexts. Also, most expertise for these assessments sits in the global north. Thus, developing own, valid and reliable measurement requires a critical mass of experts, rooted in context. To achieve this, theoretical, board-room training may not achieve the level of skill that a learning-by-doing approach achieves.

3. An incremental approach, starting with a few competencies first, is necessary

Measurement of these competencies is complex, given their variation in context, and the limitation of a right-wrong knowledge stance. For this reason, it may be strategic to start with a few competencies, and apply an incremental approach to develop measurement for all the prioritized competencies for a country.

4. Regional learning is facilitated by the fact that our contexts are very similar

Both the findings of the contextualisation studies and the assessment of adolescents revealed strong similarities in the contexts of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. For this reason, it may be possible to unite efforts and share resources as we learn together to assess these competencies across our countries.

5. Measurement is not enough. Assessments need to inspire, inform and support change in policy, curriculum and teacher practice

Our results have revealed that most adolescents have just started their journey to accumulating these competencies, and that a majority are far from where they perhaps could be. For this reason, assessments must facilitate change, to achieve better policies, better integration in curricula and better instructional and modelling approaches, so that children may acquire these competencies.