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Developing contextualized assessment tools for life skills and values in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Launched in August 2020, the Assessment of Life Skills and Values in East Africa (ALiVE) project seeks to catalyze the education systems of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda to focus on life skills and values. This will be achieved through developing contextualized, open-sourced assessment tools, conducting a large-scale assessment among adolescents aged 13–17, using the evidence to raise public awareness and advocate for system focus, and strengthening local capabilities to assess the complex competences, while nurturing the agency of local experts to amplify voice at the global level. First, a year-long consultative process conducted with members of the Regional Education Learning Initiative (RELI) arrived at ‘values and life skills’ as the way to refer to these competences in context and prioritized the measurement of problem solving, collaboration, self-awareness and respect. Second, ALiVE conducted a contextualization study involving 139 adolescents, 136 parents and 119 local experts in 30 villages across the region, yielding a culturally informed, internal understanding of the competences. Third, a lengthy tool development process

was adopted to accommodate the development of local capacities. This article presents the contribution of ALiVE to the global SEL conversation, specifically on the ‘why’ and ‘how to’ in contextualizing SEL in varied global contexts.

Développer des outils d'évaluation contextualisés pour les compétences et les valeurs de la vie courante au Kenya, en Tanzanie et en Ouganda

Lancé en août 2020, le projet d'évaluation des compétences et des valeurs de la vie courante en Afrique de l'Est (ALiVE) vise à catalyser les systèmes éducatifs du Kenya, de la Tanzanie et de l'Ouganda pour qu'ils se concentrent sur les compétences et les valeurs de la vie courante. Pour ce faire, des outils d'évaluation contextualisés et en libre accès seront développés, une évaluation à grande échelle sera menée auprès d'adolescents âgés de 13 à 17 ans, les résultats seront utilisés pour sensibiliser le public et plaider en faveur de l'orientation du système, et les capacités locales seront renforcées pour évaluer les compétences complexes, tout en encourageant les experts locaux à se faire entendre au niveau mondial.

Tout d'abord, un processus consultatif d'un an mené avec les membres de l'initiative régionale d'apprentissage en éducation (RELI) a abouti à la définition de ‘valeurs et compétences de vie’ comme moyen de se référer à ces compétences dans le contexte et a donné la priorité à la mesure de la résolution de problèmes, de la collaboration, de la conscience de soi et du respect.

Deuxièmement, ALiVE a mené une étude de contextualisation impliquant 139 adolescents, 136 parents et 119 experts locaux dans 30 villages de la région, ce qui a permis d'obtenir une compréhension interne des compétences, culturellement informée.

Troisièmement, un long processus de développement de l'outil a été adopté pour tenir compte du développement des capacités locales. Cet article présente la contribution d'ALiVE à la conversation globale sur l'ASE, en particulier sur le ‘pourquoi’ et

le 'comment' de la contextualisation de l'ASE dans des contextes mondiaux variés.

Desarrollando herramientas de evaluación contextualizadas para las habilidades y valores para la vida en Kenia, Tanzania y Uganda

Lanzado en agosto de 2020, el proyecto de Evaluación de Habilidades y Valores para la Vida en África Oriental (ALiVE, por sus siglas en inglés) busca catalizar los sistemas educativos de Kenia, Tanzania y Uganda para que se centren en las habilidades y valores para la vida. Esto se logrará mediante el desarrollo de herramientas de evaluación contextualizadas y de código abierto, la realización de una evaluación a gran escala entre adolescentes de 13 a 17 años, el uso de evidencias para aumentar la conciencia pública y abogar por el enfoque del sistema, y el fortalecimiento de las capacidades locales para evaluar competencias complejas, nutriendo, en el proceso, la capacidad de expertos y expertas locales de amplificar su voz a nivel global. En primer lugar, se llevó a cabo un proceso consultivo de un año de duración con miembros de la Iniciativa Regional de Aprendizaje en Educación (RELI, por sus siglas en inglés), el cual acordó 'valores y habilidades para la vida' como la forma de referirse a estas competencias y priorizó la medición de la resolución de problemas, la colaboración, la autoconciencia y el respeto. En segundo lugar, ALiVE llevó a cabo un estudio de contextualización en el que participaron 139 adolescentes, 136 padres y 119 personas expertas locales en 30 pueblos de la región, lo que permitió obtener una comprensión interna y culturalmente informada de las competencias. En tercer lugar, se adoptó un largo proceso de desarrollo de herramientas para dar cabida al desarrollo de las capacidades locales. Este artículo presenta la contribución de ALiVE a la conversación global sobre SEL, específicamente sobre el 'por qué' y el 'cómo' de la contextualización de SEL en diversos contextos globales.

Introduction

The last few years have witnessed exponential growth in interest in social emotional learning competences across the world. Several global initiatives have either been concluded in the recent past or are still underway, targeted at increased understanding of these competences. Most consistent across these interventions has been the focus on the definition and prioritization of the competences for the various education levels and contexts, generation of knowledge on what works, and the development of assessments to measure and track progress.

Seemingly, there is emerging consensus that unlike other foundational competences like literacy and numeracy, social emotional competences are more understood and produced in local context. Various studies have documented differences in the social relationships and emotional relationships as culturally-embedded. A few of the studies have noted that most definitions of social and emotional competences have been developed in Western contexts, with a tendency to generalize these to (or even impose them on) non-Western contexts.

These critiques have yielded varied efforts to contextualize the frameworks in varied contexts. However, even these attempts have been criticized for carrying unnecessary Western burdens, often starting from the Western concepts and methods and using these as the basis for contextualization, without adequate examination and understanding of the different contexts where this is applied.

Second, the application of these competences to non-Western contexts has hardly produced transfer of capacities. Concern has been raised that SEL expertise has rested with experts in the West, with little investment in developing the capacities elsewhere. This asymmetry of capacity has been in itself a block to contextualization, in that the people who understand the competences in their contexts are rarely the ones who write and publish about them.

The Assessment of Life Skills and Values in East Africa (ALiVE) is a project launched in August 2020. This is a collaborative initiative

established by members of the Regional Education Learning Initiative (RELI) in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. ALiVE seeks to catalyze the focus of the education systems in the three countries to focus on nurturing and measuring life skills and values, so as to equip students with these competences. First, the project seeks to develop contextualized, open-sourced tools and use these to conduct household-based assessments among adolescents aged 13–17, use the evidence to raise awareness among parents, teachers and children of the value of these competences and to drive policy advocacy, as well as use the tool development process itself as a learning space for the strengthening of local expertise on SEL measurement, while amplifying the voice of African experts in global advocacy.

This brief shares the three principal elements of ALiVE in respect to contextualization – the contextualized understanding of competences, adapting assessment to the local context, and embedding a capacity strengthening approach in tool development.

Contextualized understanding of competences

The contextualization process went through three phases. First, RELI members examined the constructs that have been used to refer to the competences across varied global contexts, including, among others, 21st century skills, soft skills, transferrable and transversal competences, and social and emotional learning. Considering the need to simplify and align the constructs to the concepts used in the education systems across the three countries, it was concluded that values and life skills (VaLi) was what would resonate most in the context of East Africa. The concept of VaLi was validated and adopted. While values are notably deprioritized (even ignored) in Western literature, VaLi members maintained that these were as critical as the life skills, and that they would also be carried along in the measurement and interventions.

Second, the Values and Life Skills thematic cluster in RELI conducted a review of the definitions and prioritization of these

competences across the three countries, and documented the competences defined in the national curricula as well as those prioritized by interventions. While the prioritization was similar across the three countries, there were a few intricate differences. For instance, while all three countries prioritized problem-solving (and decision-making) in the cognitive domain, they varied in the domain of *self*, with Kenya prioritizing self-efficacy, Tanzania prioritizing self-awareness and Uganda prioritizing self-management. A series of negotiation meetings agreed that a regional focus would be important and arrived at the three life skills and one value, to start with: problem-solving, collaboration, self-awareness and respect.

Third, a combination of contextualization studies and review of global literature was adopted to yield both deep and extensive understanding of the prioritized competences. The contextualization study comprised 15 districts across the three countries. These districts were purposively sampled to represent East Africa's varied contexts – large cities and smaller urban centers, rural agricultural and rural pastoralist (arid) areas, as well as lake and coastal communities, including smaller fishing communities. Ethnographic methodologies were adopted to explore how the constructs were defined and understood by adolescents, their parents and other local experts who worked with adolescents – including teachers, catechists, youth patrons and matrons in religious communities and social workers.

The results of this study were compared with the results of an extensive review of global literature on the three life skills. In summary, the contextualized understandings differed slightly from the definitions in literature, especially on aspects of the social-relational components of the competences. For instance, consulting someone emerged as a step in the process of problem-solving, in addition to steps defined in global literature including understanding the problem, gathering information, generating a variety of solutions, prioritizing, and applying the solution. In the same way, self-awareness was defined as both an internalized

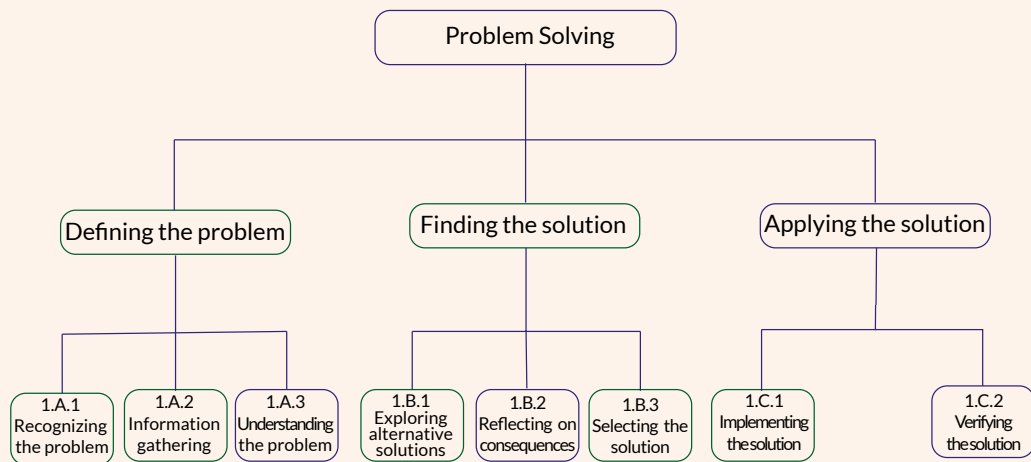


Figure 1: Problem-solving skill structure

and externalized competence that involves a balance between how you understand yourself and how this understanding mirrors your interaction with others.

Fourth, a team of around 45 collaborators (the regional tool development panels) took over these contextualized understandings. Working with an external facilitator over a period of almost a one year, the team finalized the contextualized definitions and used these to develop the skill structures and assessment frameworks for the competences. It is hoped that the skill structures and frameworks will be compared back and used to inform the existing global frameworks and contribute to the global conversation on SEL frameworks.

Preference for household-based assessment

A second contribution of the ALiVE process will be alignment to the ‘leave no one behind’ principle. A quick scan indicates that most (if not all) existing SEL evidence has been generated from children in school and classroom contexts. Considering this, VaLi members agreed that starting from a school-based assessment would miss

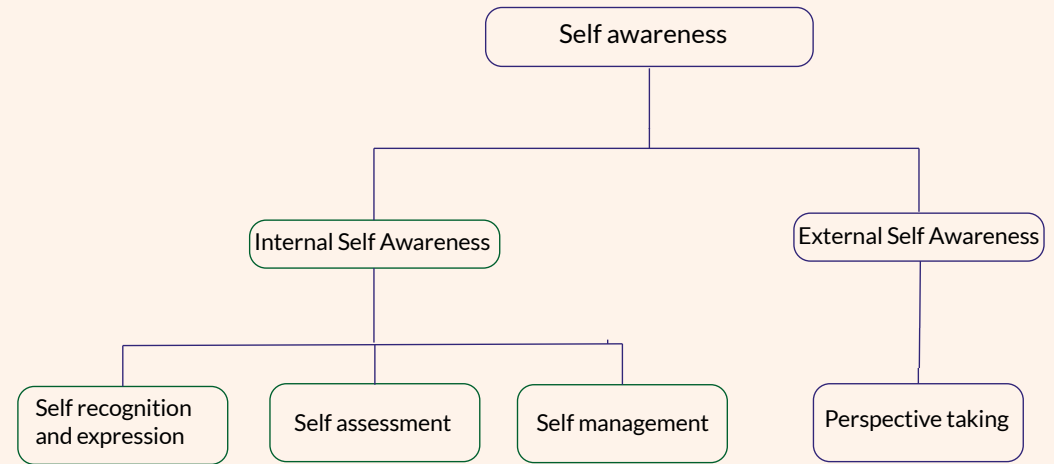


Figure 2: Self-awareness skill structure¹

several opportunities. First, at least a third of the adolescents in East Africa are either not attending school or are attending alternative learning and training institutions not conventionally defined as school, including vocational training and apprenticeship. A school-based assessment would then not tell the whole story, and would miss the analytical opportunity of estimating the contribution that schooling makes to the accumulation of these competences. Second, values and life skills are acquired first from home (and substantially formed in pre-school years), then complemented at school. A household assessment would create the connection to the home environment and contribute to parental engagement and awareness.

Third, assessing at home rather than at school would create a free environment for everyone (including teachers in the community) to engage in conversations about these competences, free from exam-oriented pressure in schools. For instance, it may be difficult to differentiate the ALiVE assessment from all the other tests

¹ In figures 1 and 2, the color green denotes the skills and sub-skills prioritized for measurement.

and assessments happening within the school environment, and potentially create conflation that would inhibit independent public conversation about the meaning and worth of these competences, and the potential roles of everyone in nurturing these.

While the choice for a household assessment looks rational, it also posed various challenges. First, the theoretical challenge. The project ultimately seeks to influence the system to focus on producing these competences throughout the schooling system. Beginning from home is a rather long route to this destination and may require potential coupling with school- and classroom-focused intervention. Second, household assessments carry the logistical burden of reaching out to a scattered target population instead of just meeting them in one place. Third, while teachers may find it easier to pay attention to such a process because of its connection to what they do on a daily basis, parents have many competing priorities and do not always see educating children as their responsibility.

To navigate these, ALiVE will draw lessons from and build on the citizen-led assessments conducted on foundational literacy and numeracy across varied contexts in the global South, among them the Uwezo learning assessment. Unlike these assessments, however, assessing values and life skills may be problematic in the level of expertise needed to assess the complex competences, which may potentially render the use of citizen volunteers either untenable or inadequate. On influencing the system, it is hoped that ALiVE will continue to explore and integrate work tracks for direct engagement with the Ministries of Education as well as the national curriculum and assessment institutes in the respective countries, with the possibility of conducting a pilot for a system-focused national assessment of values and life skills. These explorations will also include the possibility of assessing younger age for better pipeline understanding on when and where these competences are accumulated, and better conception of the spaces available to make the needed difference.

Embedded capacity strengthening

To address the gap of inadequate SEL capacities in East Africa, a lengthy process of tool development was adopted and created as an elaborate space for learning. First, mapping was conducted of local experts and SEL enthusiasts in the region. A google sheet was created, with close to 70 persons known to have worked on values and life skills. A number of these were based in the national curriculum and examinations institutes of the three respective countries, while others included academics and independent consultants who had either studied or participated in varied initiatives and interventions. Assessment of this list was conducted, looking at the skills mixture and interests necessary for the collaborative development of contextualized tools. For each country, a shortlist of around 10–15 participants was generated, including assessment experts, psychologists and psychometricians, practicing teachers and creatives. A call was also made to the members of the Values and Life Skills thematic cluster of RELI to participate in the tool development, with clearly stated time investments extending to at least 40 weeks. Over 10 members of the cluster stepped forward to this challenge. The technical panel was formally constituted, including a community of 47 learner-experts. An external facilitator – Professor Esther Care of the University of Melbourne – was engaged to lead the process.

The learning process flowed through a series of five workshops, connecting the panels in the three countries and oscillating between blended and virtual sessions as driven by the COVID-19 situation in each country. To allow for learning, the style of work involved getting introduced to a specific aspect by the facilitator, retreating to work on it, and receiving questions and reviews from the facilitator to refine the aspects of tool development. Given the similarities observed during contextualization, it was agreed that cross-country teams would be formed to focus on specific skills, each country taking leadership of a skill but having representatives from the other two countries. Tanzania took the lead on self-

awareness, Uganda on problem-solving, and Kenya on both collaboration and respect (owing to a larger number of members in the technical panel).

The first workshop focused on reaching the major agreements like the purpose of the assessment, identifying the national curriculum materials that would help in developing the assessment tasks, and understanding the process of developing the skills descriptions. In workshop two, the teams worked through refining the skill structures, fine-tuning the principles and concept domains. Workshop three focused on developing the assessment framework, identifying the assessable elements of each skill, and moving these all through to define the assessment for each element. During this workshop, performance tasks and test items were developed, and the team introduced participants to the Think Aloud methodology of conducting pre-test for these complex competences. Workshop four looked at the results of the Think Aloud and used the results to revise and re-write the test items. A pilot exercise was conducted, and the tasks and items were selected and finalized.

This process of developing contextualized tools has reaped much success in the learning approach. Learning through doing has been a powerful experience. Through such intensive working sessions, the process has connected tightly to each other the local experts working on these competences in the three countries, creating a strong foundation for regional interventions. Thirdly, the inclusion of government officers from the ministries of education and national curriculum and assessment institutes not only strengthens the capacities of the system, but also establishes bonds that may be useful for policy advocacy once the evidence has been generated.

However, the learning through doing approach has also experienced several challenges. Working through the COVID-19 period has lengthened the hours of working and led to extensive exhaustion from working many hours online. The allocation of country leadership for each skill was an adaptation that enabled some people to work in an in-person session and lessen the fatigue. A second challenge is cost. Holding five workshops with 47 participants has

been very expensive. Luckily, the number of virtual sessions across the region significantly brought down the cost. It has also been costly to secure the time of such a large number of participants over eight months, though also extremely rewarding. Fourth, the Think Aloud method never worked very well. It was realized that the Think Aloud method was better suited for literacy-rich populations and print-based assessments and is very problematic for an oral assessment like ALiVE.

Overall, we agree with Mathew Jukes in his insistence on ground-up contextualization², noting that commitment by local experts and availability of resources to support the process are extremely necessary. Moving forward, the process will flow to a dry run and graduation/certification of the tool developers early in 2022, followed by conducting the household assessments by mid-year and launching the report by the end of 2022. A regional conference on values and life skills is planned for early 2023 as the climax of sharing and celebrating this work with the global SEL community of friends.

2 Jukes, M.C.H., Mgonde, N.L., Tibenda, J., Gabrieli, P., Jeremiah, G., Betts, K.L., Williams, J., and Bub, K.L. (2021). *Building an assessment of community-defined social-emotional competencies from the ground up in Tanzania*. *Child Development*, 92, e1095–e1109.