

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN AFRICAN GROWTH AND TRANSFORMATION

Lessons from UWEZO in East Africa

From the African Community of Practice on Management for Development Results at the African Capacity Building Foundation



Case Study
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SYNOPSIS

Across East Africa, near universal enrollment has been achieved in primary education. Concern has, however, been raised about quality. From conception in 2009, UWEZO – taken from a Kiswahili word for capability – has shifted attention from schooling inputs to learning outcomes. This case study focuses on the UWEZO approach to learning assessment in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda, with objectives of showcasing the innovative approach that has shown some strong results in improving the quality of education in the three countries.

Key findings. Fewer children in developing countries are out of school but more schooling has not resulted in greater learning. Youth are leaving school and entering the workforce without the knowledge or skills necessary to adapt to a competitive and increasingly globalized economy.

Key lessons. Establishing a student assessment system is critical. Ad hoc assessment can offer a snapshot of learning and a useful indicator of student learning and achievement but a sustained, systematic approach to assessment is key to monitoring, analyzing, and improving student learning and achievement levels.

Main recommendations. Stakeholders in the region and Africa more widely should support efforts to ensure children are learning effectively. It is important for education stakeholder to ensure that education systems in Africa are reaching the unreachable – the rural and poor communities – and to provide quality education for all with an emphasis on reaching out-of-school children. Equally important is to conduct periodical learning assessments, share, and act on the results. African countries are also encouraged to participate in the global learning assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Only a few countries are doing so (Botswana, Ghana, Morocco, South Africa, and Tunisia).

Introduction

In recent years, there has been increasing concern over a global learning crisis that is affecting the life chances of millions of children around the world. Despite significant progress in getting more girls and boys into school, gains have been uneven and learning levels remain low (World Bank 2013). In response, governments, international organizations, and other stakeholders are turning their attention to improving the quality of education and accelerating learning. More than years of schooling, it is learning

that produces gains in individual productivity and income. Additionally, there is a strong correlation between higher test scores and higher wages. One standard deviation increase in scores on international assessments of reading and mathematics is associated with a 2 percent increase in annual growth rates of gross domestic product per capita.

It is only through assessment of student learning that teachers, parents, and decision makers can know if teachers are teaching, and students are learning,

what they are both supposed to, and that education stakeholders know if there is a way to teach the subject better. Effective classroom assessment practices by teachers yield gains of a half to a full standard deviation on external standardized achievement tests, with the largest gains for low achievers. Social studies also show testing to be among the least expensive innovations in education reform, costing far less than increasing teacher salaries or reducing class size, and having a higher ratio of benefits to costs (Clarke 2011).

The global view

Compared with a decade ago, fewer children in developing countries are out of school but more schooling has not resulted in greater learning. Youth are leaving school and entering the workforce without the knowledge or skills necessary to adapt to a competitive and increasingly globalized economy. Recent studies in Latin America and South Asia found half of Grade 5 children (India) and Grade 2 children (Peru) unable to read, and half of Grade 3 students (Pakistan) unable to do basic multiplication (UNICEF 2016).

In many countries, there is no systematic measurement of learning resulting in the absence of a system for analyzing where problems lie or how to address them. Data on student learning and achievement are often sporadic, limited, and rarely cover the poor. However, more countries are starting to measure the reading and math competencies of their students through national large-scale assessment exercises, and are participating in regional and international assessments. In 2009, 65 countries took part in PISA, up from 43 in 2000. In 2011, 65 countries took part in TIMSS, an increase from 45 in 1995 (UNESCO 2015).

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Types of regional assessments

PISA. This evaluates the quality of education systems every three years by assessing knowledge and competencies in three issue areas: reading, mathematics, and science. The target population is 15-year-old students enrolled in schools at Grade 7 or above. So far, PISA has covered 74 countries (27 of which were developing countries/ODA recipients in 2010).

Progress in International Reading Literacy Study. This aims to monitor and improve the health of a country's education system and enable evidence-based decisions for improving student achievement in reading literacy.

The Basic Reading Skills Component of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study. This aims to monitor and improve the health of a country's education system and enable evidence-based decisions for improving student achievement in basic reading skills. The target population is students enrolled at the end of the primary school cycle (usually Grades 4, 5, or 6).

Online Reading Component of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study. This assesses how successful countries are in preparing students to read, comprehend, and interpret online information. The target population is students enrolled at Grade 4.

This case study focuses on the UWEZO approach to learning assessment in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda, with the objectives of showcasing the innovative approach.

A desk review of literature from the UWEZO program included education reports from the three countries and from regional and international organizations.

Recent background

Status of education in Africa

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have provided a solid foundation for a common global development agenda and made significant progress

in advancing human development in the past decade (van Fleet, Watkins, and Greubel 2012. In building this solid base, the goal of universal primary education has been interpreted as education inputs related to systems and infrastructure. Specifically, MDG 2 on achieving universal primary education has focused the global community of actors in education (nongovernmental organizations, central statistics offices, and funders) on education access, overlooking learning outcomes, including the most basic competencies in literacy and numeracy. By failing to address these aspects of their development, children are denied the basic skills intended to contribute to their survival, healthy development, and full participation in society. The main issues in Africa are now described.

Increasing number of out-of-school children

According to UIS (2013), 59 million children of primary school age were out of school in 2010, half of them in Sub-Saharan Africa, which has the highest out-of-school rate in the world, at nearly one in every four primary school age children. The out-of-school figure in the region increased from 29 million to 31 million between 2008 and 2010 (ibid).

There are three categories of out-of-school children. The first category comprises children who are never expected to enter school. These children make up 55 percent of the out-of-school population in Sub-Saharan Africa. The second includes those who had enrolled but dropped out of school before completion. The third consists of school-age children who are likely to enter school soon. Table 1 shows a decrease in the number of out-of-school children globally and in Sub-Saharan Africa, but an increase in the share of such children in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Table 1: Out-of-school children in Sub-Saharan Africa and the world, 2013

Year	Sub-Saharan Africa (million/%)	Global total (million)
2000	40.6 (40%)	102
2005	32.8 (46%)	70.6
2011	29.8 (52%)	57.2

Source: UIS 2013.

In school but not learning

In recent years education in Sub-Saharan Africa has seen an increase in enrollment across nearly all countries, paired with a pan-African crisis in learning. African children now have more opportunity to attend school. However, there are large gaps in learning outcomes, including reading, writing, and mathematics.

Recent reports from Education for All Global Monitoring show that of the 57.2 million out-of-school children globally in 2011, 28.5 million lived in countries affected by conflict. Sub-Saharan African countries accounted for 44.2 percent (12.6 million), followed by South and West Asia with a combined 27 percent of out-of-school children. A UNESCO-sponsored study on out-of-school children showed that 7.5 million school-age Congolese children are not in school or have never been enrolled in school (UNICEF 2013). Rural areas account for 23 percent of out-of-school children against 12 percent in urban areas. Not only do the children from conflict-affected, rural, and poor areas have the least access to school, they also show the lowest academic performance.

Limited access to early childhood development and education

Early cognitive and social-emotional development of children directly affects their school outcomes (Gorman et al. 1993; Liddell and Rae 2001). The agenda for Early Childhood Development and Education in Sub-Saharan African countries is often lost or neglected because of the lack of urgency,

sustainable funding, and sensitization to the critical importance of early learning and appropriate care.

The lack of provision for young children is especially troubling in African countries that invest less than 0.1 percent of their education budget to early childhood and health interventions. While global development experts have justifiably emphasized the urgency of child survival efforts, the continuity of healthy child development has been largely abandoned.

For this reason, many early childhood programs and studies focus on the extension of schooling for compulsory early childhood and pre-school education (UNESCO 2010). Services offered prior to the years of compulsory schooling are insufficient or delivered inadequately to the children.

The implementation of multiple interventions is significant when considering early childhood (Marshall and Watt 1999). Early childhood is a critical area for caregivers, educators, and health workers to synchronize efforts and promote holistic care and development. Unfortunately, early childhood care and education is reported to be “too often fragmented and uncoordinated with the school system” (Woodhead and Moss 2007: 7). Such care and education is not yet a public sector concern in many African countries (UNESCO 2010).

Case study

Uwezo means “capability” in Kiswahili. Uwezo is part of TWAVEZA, an independent East African initiative that promotes access to information, citizen agency, and improved service delivery outcomes across the region. The initiative started as a five-year initiative (2009–2013) that aimed to improve competencies in literacy and numeracy among children aged 6–16 in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, by using an innovative approach to social change that is citizen driven and

accountable to the public.¹ It is Africa’s largest annual citizen assessment of children’s learning levels across hundreds of thousands of households.

Uwezo at Twaweza considers itself as part of a family of citizen-led household-based assessments that seek to establish children’s actual learning proficiencies. The model was established by ASER/Pratham (Assessment, Survey and Evaluation Research) in India in 2005 and has since been adapted for use in Pakistan (2009), Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda (2009), Mali (2011), Senegal (2012), and Mexico (2013). In 2012 alone, these assessments covered over 1 million children in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, including about 350,000 in East Africa. Conducted annually, children aged 6–16 across East Africa are tested on their ability to perform basic literacy and numeracy tasks set at Grade 2 level (UWEZO 2013).

UWEZO facilitates assessments at the community level by providing learning assessment tools and guiding the implementation and administration of assessments. It also informs and engages the community around the learning that is taking place in their schools. To illustrate learning achievements, UWEZO and Pratham have developed report cards² for clusters of schools and for individual schools to better inform policymakers, parents, and others involved in educational development on learning outcomes.

The work of Uwezo at Twaweza is supported by donors including the Hewlett Foundation, DfID (UK), Sida, Hivos, CIFF, AJWS, and the World Bank.

Background to UWEZO results

Across East Africa, huge progress has been made in basic education in the last decade. Enrollments are up in both primary and secondary education, with millions more able to go to school. Tens of thousands

¹ <http://www.uwezo.net/> (accessed March 12, 2016).

² An example of a report card can be found at: <http://img.asercentre.org/docs/Publications/ASER%20Report>

ts/ASER_2012/schoolreportcard.pdf (accessed March 12, 2016).

of classrooms have been built and tens of thousands of teachers have been added to the rolls. These initiatives have required huge political commitment and larger allocations of public resources. Parents too have played their part by meeting the costs of uniforms, stationery, extra tuition, and transport.

Reason for the UWEZO approach

Governments have prioritized education but children are not learning. Since committing to Quality Education for All in the Dakar Framework for Action, schooling has expanded dramatically across the region but this has not been matched by improvement in quality. Schools across East Africa are characterized by insufficient and poorly trained, under-motivated teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of adequate teaching/learning materials. UWEZO's findings show that the vast majority of children in school are not able to perform at the required level and too many complete primary schooling without basic competencies in reading and arithmetic.

Numerous assessments have been undertaken but have had little impact. Before the introduction of Uwezo, there were at least three major regional and national learning assessments in East Africa. These assessments were all designed primarily to provide information for policymaking with limited value in East Africa where research, policy, and implementation are not effectively linked. There is little evidence that these studies have triggered greater policy clarity or change and the overly technical nature of these assessments may have rendered the findings inaccessible to their target audience.

New communication channels are increasingly powerful for civil society organizations. Citizen engagement is usually understood to be organized through civil society organizations, which often face significant challenges in integrity, quality leadership, internal governance, and sustainability. Their ability to reach and connect with citizens has been especially weak, limiting their political resonance and legitimacy. There is a growing need for citizen-

driven, local, broad-based accountability in service delivery. Communication channels are growing rapidly and thriving in East Africa. The growth of media has also created unprecedented space for access to differing viewpoints and public debate. Cell phone technologies have dramatically increased communication possibilities in both rural and urban contexts and empowered vernacular radio citizens who are both better informed and have greater space for direct voice and engagement.

Uwezo learning assessment

UWEZO was established based on the need for citizen involvement and oversight. Uwezo believes that informed and motivated citizens are the most powerful agents of sustainable change. At UWEZO, citizens are viewed as agents who can facilitate improved service delivery and public resource management.

Uwezo's successes

Uwezo's original goal for the first four years of operation was to contribute to a 10 percent increase in basic literacy and numeracy competencies of 6–16 year olds in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. It aimed to achieve this by shifting attention from the dominant focus on enrollment rates and infrastructure to learning levels (UWEZO 2013).

As of 2014, UWEZO had conducted four rounds of UWEZO survey assessments in the three countries (UWEZO 2014 plan). The survey results from the first three years showed that children in the three countries were not learning. Children were not acquiring the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy consistent with the official curricular requirements in their countries.

Box 1: Summary results from Uwezo 2012 survey in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania

- A significant number of children do not possess foundational Grade 2 level skills even as they approach the end of the primary school cycle. This implies that the quality of learning is low. Less than a third of children

enrolled in Grade 3 have basic Grade 2 level literacy and numeracy skills.

- There are large differences in learner achievement among the three East African countries, with Kenya performing better and Uganda faring worst.
- Tanzania has sizable differences in literacy and numeracy skills. The skills gaps in Kenya and Uganda are much smaller.
- Within countries there are large disparities. For example, the best and worst performing districts in East Africa are in Kenya.
- Children from poorer households consistently achieve lower competency levels, on all tests and across all ages.
- Out of every 10 teachers, at least one is absent from school on any given day in East Africa.

Source: UWEZO 2013.

These findings are alarming and have serious implications for the countries' achievement of their economic development strategies as well as for their social cohesion. East Africa, like many other African regions, has declared ambitious aspirations for the future in the Vision 2025 (Tanzania), 2030 (Kenya), and 2040 (Uganda). The production of illiterate and semi-literate children by the school systems will render it difficult to achieve these goals. It is also not possible to build vibrant economies and creative democracies in East Africa when most children in these countries cannot read and count well.

Another critical aspect is seen in the inequalities between rich and poor, and urban and rural, populations. If these differences are reinforced,

social cohesion in the region will not be achieved. The same situation exists in other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and other countries where recent reports indicate that over 250 million students are not learning.³

Uwezo has been able to stimulate discussion and ask difficult questions

In Kenya, there is convincing evidence that Uwezo findings are informing public debate. Uwezo findings and their implications are widely covered by the media as evidenced by the numerous citations in print and broadcasts. Respondents also referred to learning about the Uwezo findings through the media. However, the report indicates that the presence of Uwezo poses some difficulties because it is perceived not to be inclusive of all the stakeholders equally.

In Tanzania, it has been reported that Uwezo has had a significant impact on education policymakers. The Uwezo assessment findings have contributed to dialogue among education stakeholders on the quality of education. The Tanzanian government has started to compile its own assessment tools, inspired by the Uwezo methodology, in part to "prove whether the Uwezo results are correct." Furthermore, the government has initiated a program for improving the capacity of teachers through the Student Teachers Enrichment Programme. Uwezo's influence can be seen in the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training's creation of the Standard II assessments and additional training of teachers specifically for Standard I and II as part of its Big Results Now! initiative. In Uganda, Uwezo findings have made a considerable impression, particularly on those at national level. During the 2013 evaluation, one respondent from the Ministry of Education felt that there was "shock and disbelief" when they first

³ 2013/4 EFA Global Monitoring Report, Unesco.
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002256/225660e.pdf> (accessed March 13, 2016).

heard the Uwezo results indicating that learning levels were very poor (ibid).

Several members of parliament linked the Uwezo findings to the establishment of the Uganda Parliamentary Forum on Quality Education. Furthermore, one of the respondents from the Ministry of Education indicated that Uwezo contributed to the ministry starting a project to support teachers to improve their pedagogical skills and teaching literacy (ibid).

When asked about the role of Uwezo in the education sector in Uganda, most respondents from the national level recognized the quality of the independent research of Uwezo. There were also numerous calls for Uwezo to go beyond assessing outcomes and engage in a variety of other approaches including education policy analysis and reform of education law in Uganda (ibid).

UWEZO contributed to informing useful policies

Through Twaweza experiments with direct capitation grants and teacher cash on delivery, UWEZO has informed education policies in Tanzania and in the region combining incentives with resources that drive learning. Moreover, through UWEZO, successful delivery of the full amount of the capitation grants to school bank accounts on time informed the government of Tanzania in its decisions in 2015 to commit to disbursing capitation grants directly to schools.

How the above was achieved: The nationwide learning assessments (Uwezo 2013) have documented the low levels of learning in Tanzanian schools. Low levels of learning are driven in part by limited accountability in the education system, reflected in the frequent absence of teachers from schools. This is further compounded by the resource constraints that schools face. To understand better and stimulate debate about what drives learning in Tanzanian primary schools, Twaweza undertook a large scale randomized evaluation in 2013, in partnership with the Tanzanian Commission for Science and Technology, Ministry and District level education authorities, Tanzanian primary school

head teachers, and Innovations for Poverty Action, a US-based research organization. This randomized experiment is called KiuFunza, or “thirst for learning.” The aim was to examine the effectiveness of teacher “Cash on Delivery,” a teacher bonus that depends on the skills that students in their class master, and sending capitation grants in full, directly to the school bank accounts. This was done to compare the initiative with the existing practice represented by a control group.

Specifically, in 2013–2014 Twaweza compared the student learning outcomes between four different interventions: first, schools were provided with extra resources through capitation (or per pupil) grants. Second, teachers were provided with a bonus based on the performance of their students in an externally administered exam. Third, schools received both programs. Fourth, the control group received no support.

Findings showed limited evidence that merely providing resources improves learning outcomes but sending the resources directly to school bank accounts ensures that the schools suffer significantly fewer shortages of learning materials.

Challenges

While it appears clear that Uwezo does reach a wide spectrum of key actors at national level, the Uwezo communications strategy faced some criticism. One respondent noted that although many stakeholders were invited to the launch of the previous report, very few attended. Uwezo had not gone beyond the initial “fire” caused in the headlines by the release of the findings. A national-level media expert observed that a communication campaign to disseminate Uwezo results was neither long enough nor intense enough to spark debate or action by the targeted general audience. Another media-based respondent suggested improving links with rural and locally based media, since the worst learning outcomes tend to come from rural areas.

Future plans and prospects

Uwezo will continue to pursue its original goal of contributing to a 10 percent increase in basic literacy and numeracy competencies of 6–16 year olds in the three countries. It will pursue a learning goal, notably by experimenting to establish what works in improving the large-scale assessment, communicating evidence, and influencing citizen action. Subsequently, Uwezo will pursue seven outcomes, five main outcomes by the country offices and the two higher-level ones by the regional office. They include:

- Establishing children’s actual competency levels.
- Fostering greater public understanding and debate about learning to facilitate the collection of robust data on children’s competency levels, analyze, and publish the data to inform policies and citizen action.
- Developing policies, programs, and practices to emphasize learning as a means to achieving greater public understanding and debate about learning and through increased awareness of parents and teachers, of the actual levels of learning competences of children.
- Generating lessons and informing policy and practices to ensure that policies, programs, and practices at both national and local levels develop a better focus on learning and improvement of literacy and numeracy.
- Developing a standard quality assurance program for UWEZO programs, which will be implemented, documented, and communicated to achieve rigorous monitoring of Uwezo work and effects, and to learn and use lessons to inform planning and execution.
- Documenting and disseminating Uwezo lessons and experiences within the region and globally to influence thinking at national, regional, and global levels.

Scope

Uwezo relies heavily on partner organizations and volunteers to administer the assessment each year. The number of individuals required to conduct the assessment in all three countries is over 20,000 volunteers trained each year. Uwezo uses the annual learning assessment report to catalyze countrywide conversations and practical citizen action to improve learning, and create pressure for policy change from the bottom-up.

The scale of Uwezo’s reach—covering hundreds of thousands of households—coupled with the simplicity of its assessment tool, annual recurrence, and wide communication has created an unprecedented level of focus on the question of basic competencies across the region. Uwezo has generated new information on children’s literacy and numeracy across East Africa. There has been widespread exposure to the findings, which has triggered an array of reactions. Going by media reports and conversations with citizens, there is a heightened awareness on the poor state of learning and the necessity of refocusing on competencies. After initial resistance, governments, policymakers, and politicians agree that school quality needs serious improvement.

Conclusions and recommendations

There is a real need to generate robust evidence of what works. Uwezo key strategies include teaching and learning materials development/provision, policy dialogue, reading advocacy, community mobilization, and reading and numeracy assessments. These strategies have proved to work and help in linking measurements to change and results, and have improved learning. Some of the key points are particularly commendable such as community participation awareness regarding learning; community participation and campaigning—a bottom-up approach including teacher motivation; and linking school financing to learning.

Recommendations are:

- 1) Education stakeholders in the region and Africa should adopt and support efforts and approaches like that of Uwezo to ensure that children are learning. This also means promoting and supporting a rights-based approach to education.
- 2) It is important for education stakeholders to ensure that education systems in Africa are reaching the unreachable—the rural and poor communities—and provide quality education for all with special efforts focusing on identifying and integrating the out-of-school children.
- 3) It is important to conduct the period learning assessments, share, and act on results promptly. African countries are encouraged to participate in the global learning assessments such as PISA and TIMSS.
- 4) The African Union and other regional bodies should expand initiatives such as UWEZO throughout Africa by requesting countries to put in place structures that foster low-cost assessments of children's learning skills at local, regional, and national levels. Such efforts could help determine which policy interventions or reforms are needed to improve children's learning.
- 5) African states should promote innovative education financing along with putting concrete efforts on domestic resource mobilization to enable sustainable financing of their education systems.

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