



THE ALiVE WAY: CONTEXTUALIZING THE MEASUREMENT OF LIFE SKILLS AND VALUES IN KENYA, TANZANIA, AND UGANDA

John Mugo | Mauro Giacomazzi | Purity Ngina | Shariff Khadija



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REFRAMING THE LEARNING CRISIS

Globally, more than 258 million children and youth are in school without learning (UNESCO, 2019). The World Bank has shown the gap in terms of Learning Poverty (inability of children to read by age 10) and has established that by the age of 10 years, around 53% of children could not read a simple text (Azevedo, 2020). Sub-Saharan Africa is the worst affected region by this crisis, with up to 87% of children unable to read simple text by the age of 10 (World Bank, 2019). COVID-19 has worsened this crisis, and up to 90% of children may be affected (World Bank et al., 2022).

The framing and measurement of the learning crisis has largely been limited to foundational literacy and numeracy. However, there is growing recognition of holistic development as the ideal for foundational learning. Evidence reveals the importance of social and emotional skills in supporting the positive academic outcomes of children (Curby et al., 2015). It also reveals its vital link to skills formation: desirable for both personal and civic wellbeing (Malhotra et al., 2021). In line with this, the Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (2016–2025) integrated life skills and values with foundational learning competencies to prepare children for 21st-century living and working.

This has resulted in education systems, including those in East Africa, increasingly mainstreaming these competencies in formal curricula, though there is a considerable gap between the written intentions and the readiness of education systems to nurture and measure these competencies.

Established in August 2020, the Assessment of Life Skills and Values in East Africa (ALiVE) is a learning-focused initiative of the Regional Education Learning Initiative (RELI). ALiVE aims at supporting the movement from policy formulation to implementation through the development of contextualized assessments, generation and sharing of evidence to raise public awareness, by informing policy decisions, and by strengthening local capacities. ALiVE is a collective impact process by the Values and Life Skills (VaLi) cluster of RELI, involving 20 civil organizations across Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, and a learning and self-empowerment community of over 100 individuals in the three countries.

WHY CONTEXTUALIZE?

Many previous interventions lacked profound contextual clarity and used assessments developed for different contexts to measure progress. Arguments have been made that foundational skills are deeply embedded in culture and that they are understood and expressed within specific contexts (Tabulawa, 2003; 2013). Therefore, if the assessments of these competencies are to be relied on, then there is the need to pay keen attention to the contextual definitions. Jukes et al. (2018) underscore the importance of not just a mere process of adapting tools to the Global South contexts, but a ground-up process that starts with the prioritization and definition of the competencies and values for each context, while taking into account local beliefs, culture and pedagogy (Nguyen et al., 2006).



THE ALIVE APPROACH TO CONTEXTUALIZATION

There are four main steps in the ALiVE contextualization approach: 1) Prioritizing the competencies in context; 2) Understanding the skills in context; 3) Developing tools in context; and 4) Defining the assessment process in context.

1. Prioritizing the Competencies in Context

The ALiVE process began with prioritizing the competencies to be included in the regional measurement. This was done by conducting an extensive literature review of the global frameworks of these competencies that included the CASEL framework, the Big 5 framework, the framework of the World Health Organization (WHO), and the extensive comparison of global frameworks by the EASEL Lab, among others. Moreover, the regional study on life skills and values (in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda) by Echidna Giving generated a list of the skills that each country had explicitly defined (Wamahiu & Bapna, 2019).

A second consideration was estimating the number of competencies that could be measured within a single assessment, learning from other existing global assessments which ranged from two to five competencies. We learned that developing the assessment tasks and items from scratch was an extremely demanding undertaking and that it could take several years to complete the tool.

A RELI regional learning session was held in 2019 in Entebbe to review the results from this review. Consensus was reached to measure three life skills and one value: problem solving, collaboration, self-awareness, and respect. These four—which are included in the education curricula of the three countries—represented the three main broad categories of competencies, which include thinking skills, intrapersonal skills, and interpersonal skills.

2. Understanding the Skills in Context

ALiVE aimed to assess adolescents aged 13 to 17 years, both in and out of school. A study was designed to reach adolescents, parents, and educators in varied contexts in the three countries to capture their understanding of the four competencies. The study had three objectives: 1) To develop local definitions of the constructs; 2) To generate ideas on how to assess the competencies in context; and 3) To build a repertoire of problems, items, questions, and behaviours for the assessment. A qualitative approach was chosen to allow deep immersion into the local realities through rapid ethnographic interviews.

A total of 124 adolescents and 244 parents, guardians, and persons who work closely with the adolescents participated in the study and the results were discussed by comparing them with the findings of the review of the global literature. The results also presented a localized understanding of the skills and significantly contributed to the definitions of tasks and questions adopted for the assessment.

3. Developing the Assessment Tools in Context

A total of 47 individuals were sourced from the three countries and an external facilitator engaged to lead the 40-week learning-by-doing process, dubbed the “ALiVE Academy.” The adopted definitions from the literature review and the contextualization study paved the way for the development of skill structures and identified the critical dimensions and sub-components of the skills, and the behaviours that show how the sub-components could be observed in adolescents. The last step involved identifying and deciding the assessable dimensions and sub-dimensions, and compiling these into the assessment framework.

4. Defining the Assessment Process in Context

The above three steps yielded the definition of an assessment tool that combined five main characteristics:

Oral, one-on-one: the assessment did not have literacy as a requirement to take into account adolescents who could not read. The tool was translated into 17 languages in Kenya and 12 languages in Uganda to ensure that language comprehension was not a hindrance to any adolescent. Lastly, the questions were as short as possible and allowed a maximum repetition of two times to the question, upon the request of the adolescent.

Household-based: the assessment was conducted at the household, and aimed at sparking public conversation on the value of these competencies and on why teachers and parents should pay greater attention to nurturing them. It also aimed at including ALL adolescents: those in and out of school and those who attended alternative learning and training institutions.

Every adolescent takes all: Every adolescent was to be assessed on all the three (3) skills and one (1) value, to make possible the comparison of performance across the different skills.

Combining scenarios and task performances: the assessment combined two methods of assessment. The first one was oral, one-on-one (for Problem solving, Self-awareness, and Respect); which used scenarios and a rubric to score the responses, with a second assessor writing the responses verbatim on paper. The second method was using task performances to assess a group of four adolescents (involving both single-sex and mixed groups). The demonstrated behaviours were recorded on paper as the adolescents performed the tasks (for Collaboration), and then scored on an assessment rubric.

The final tool included a total of three (3) tasks and fifteen (15) items on Problem solving, three (3) tasks and eight (8) items on Collaboration, Five (5) tasks and twelve (12) items on Self-awareness and 4 tasks and 10 items on Respect. The average time taken to assess each adolescent was forty (40) minutes.

Inclusion of reading and digital literacy test: There is growing evidence that life skills and values contribute to achievement in academic subjects and other areas of learning. For this reason, reading and comprehension were adopted to check the possible correlations between the life skills, values and literacy. For this same purpose, the ALiVE tool included two questions on digital literacy: the first asking the adolescents about their access to and use of digital devices and the second, a practical assignment to go online after being given a smartphone.

Teacher trainees as assessors: The capacity of teachers to implement the new competency-based curricula in the three countries is still low. Therefore, ALiVE used teacher trainees in data collection to create more awareness as far as these competencies were concerned, and to offer practical experience to the next generation of educationists. A total of 160 teachers and 640 teacher trainees were engaged in Kenya, while Uganda and Tanzania engaged 800 and 1360 volunteers to conduct the assessment respectively.

	Households visited	Adolescents assessed
Kenya	15,347	17,567
Uganda	7,940	11,000
Tanzania	13,970	17,506
Total	37,257	46,073



WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT

- Local experts are willing to invest and learn: Local experts in the region are ready and willing to invest their time and resources. The ALiVE technical team members who engaged in tool development comprised a total of 47 individuals who had been sourced from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. All the co-creation sessions recorded over 95% attendance despite many competing priorities and COVID-19 related challenges, among others.
- A collaborative approach is possible: So far, the ALiVE process and assessment has involved more than 100 local organizations. Among these are ten (10) members of RELI-VaLi, nine government agencies, 17 teacher training colleges (in Kenya), and one hundred (100) local implementing organizations. This collaborative approach has taken time to shape up, but has been possible. A conference paper has been presented on this collaborative approach.
- The household-assessment is useful in reaching parents and communities: While pre-tests and pilots provide useful ground for tool validation and checking the workability of tasks and items, the actual assessment happens in context, and a dry-run (process test) is paramount.

The ALiVE dry-run revealed the most salient ways of introducing the assessment to the households and the most effective ways of organizing the interactions. In particular, we realized that parents were more interested in knowing the importance of life skills to their children rather than how the project linked to the new Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC).

- Task performance is a feasible measurement option, but only worked for collaboration: ALiVE started from the standpoint that the assessment of these competences could go beyond the self-rating scales and multiple choice. ALiVE adopted the scenario-based and performance task methodologies. These two approaches were tested, with the performance task approach working well with collaboration and the scenario-based approach working well with Self-awareness, Problem solving and Respect.



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