

Developing Contextualised Tools for Measuring Life Skills and Values

Assessment of Lifeskills and Values in East Africa

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Introduction

In this brief we will outline what we have learned from the ALiVE programme about **Tool Development and Contextualization**. This learning has been collected over the course of nearly two years of programme implementation and has been gathered and synthesised by the ALiVE team as we move forward into our next phase.

ALiVE is a 5-year collaboration between seven organisations in East Africa focusing on understanding, assessing and enhancing of life skills¹ and values. The evidence generated through the National Assessments hopes to: **i)** Generate interest of the various government education stakeholders to explore how best to enhance these competencies through enactment of policies. **ii)** Ignite a public conversation on the importance of enhancing these competences and the role of parents and communities in enhancing them.

We are now moving to the second phase of the projects where we explore the possibility of conducting classroom assessments through the various ministries of Education but also how we can use the evidence already generated to advocate for systemic change.

Goals for ALiVE



Develop **context-relevant, open-source tools** for assessing life skills and values in East Africa



Undertake a **household assessment** targeting adolescent (13-17 years) both in and out of school



Use the **evidence to draw attention** to and increase awareness



Enhance **peer learning and feedback** among the RELI member organizations

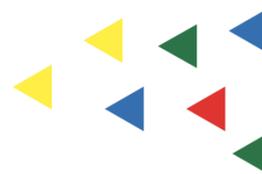
Achievements so Far

Tools developed for **Respect, problem solving, Self-Awareness** and **Collaboration**

National Household surveys carried out in **3** countries, reaching **46,000** adolescents

16 Papers published authored, **3** academic papers published, **10** blogs written, and **10** learnshops held

¹ Alternatively known as soft skills, core-competencies, non-cognitive and social emotional learning



Defining Contextualization

Contextualization is a ground-up process that starts with the prioritisation and definition of the competences and values for each context while taking in mind local ideologies, culture, and pedagogy.

In the context of ALiVE, contextualization was the process by which the Values and Life Skills cluster of RELI (20 organisations in the 3 countries) developed a culturally inclusive process of defining the competencies and developing the skills structures that form the ALiVE assessment framework.

Contextualization was a process that involved:

- (i) Prioritization of 3 skills and 1 value (problem solving, collaboration, self-awareness, and respect)
- (ii) A comprehensive literature review which investigated existing literature on life skills and values in East Africa
- (iii) An ethnographic study that sought to understand and conceptualise the selected life skills and values in the East Africa context
- (iv) Assessment tool development.

The prioritisation was a consultative process with over 20 member organizations of the Values and Life skills cluster of RELI in East Africa. The ALiVE Secretariat was formed to govern the processes, and the structured literature review and contextualization studies were conducted to provide a basis for the tool development process. With technical guidance from a local expert, 47 local experts from the countries of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda engaged in a collaborative hands-on process of developing a tool for assessing life skills and values in East Africa. Local experts were drawn from the national curriculum and assessment (examinations) institutes, and other key assessment bodies in the three countries. This facilitated buy-in from the three education systems as indicated by their representation in the ALiVE structures (National Advisory Committees and the tool development technical panels).

Key Lessons on Tool Development and Contextualization

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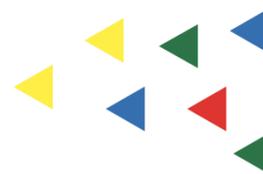


Contextualisation does more than just creating definitions

Contextualisation was a key process for ensuring our definitions matched adolescents' realities. By spending time with adolescents and their communities, working on defining life skills and values, we were able to ensure that the final definitions would match with their experience of the world.

Contextualisation helped in building relationships with communities, with increased parental understanding of and participation in assessment of the life skills and values. Through the process, we were able to spend meaningful time with adolescents, parents, guardians, and community leaders, helping them to understand our perspective on why measuring life-skills and values is important. This built buy-in for the initiative, which has supported both the collection of data, as well our advocacy work with local government. This would likely have been more difficult had we not spent the time with communities during contextualisation.

The contextualisation process supported parents and communities in thinking about how to nurture life skills and values. A key reflection on the process is that the contextualisation process has been an important way to “open the black box” between defining and nurturing life skills and values. By working with communities to break down constructs into clear, observable sub-skills, we helped to think through how parents could nurture those skills.



Contextualization evolves local capacities and competencies

The contextualization process helped build “hands-on skills” in the development of tools for assessing life skills. The “learning by doing” approach and construction of the skills framework using participatory approaches helped us unpack, think through, and break down the skills into comprehensible constructs that are measurable and observable. This provides a foundation and framework on which to base the nurturing of life skills and values among adolescents.

The contextualization process fostered the creation of a values and life skills learning community across the three East African countries. Through participatory and collaborative processes, contextualization fostered teamwork and peer/cross-border learning among us, strengthening our translation agenda and knowledge transfers. The participatory approaches demystified the complexity around the understanding of the skills and enhanced the development of the competencies to measure them among us. But even more important is how the learning community fostered personal development and transformation for all those who participated in the ALIVE journey.

Expert engagement in contextualization and tool development processes anchored the skills and competencies among us. A key reflection from the process was that as different teams engaged with global experts in the tool development and contextualization process, “we became experts” as well through the process. These skills and competencies were often taken back to our different organisations improving our work and practice in the end. Moreover, as our knowledge increased, our confidence levels also went up and so did our voice as we confidently talked about the skills as understood in our context.



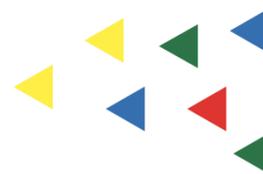
Contextualization breeds originality and ownership of assessment tools

The contextualization process affirmed indigenous knowledge and gave voice to it.

The process of interpreting the meaning of skill in the local context aimed at being inclusive of the local perspectives, giving value to the diverse and unique interpretation of the selected skills and value, thereby centring local knowledge throughout the contextualization and tool development process. As a result, unique and diverse indigenous voices were amplified, which provided accuracy in the interpretation of skills and values. This led to the wide acceptance of the tool, and the enormous response and openness that we saw during the household assessments. By getting different perspectives from different communities and cultures, and by listening to the local experts and speech communities that helped check appropriateness of the tools, we were able to come up with a more relevant, applicable, and widely accepted tool across the three East African countries.

The contextualization process led to the development of a life skills assessment tool for East Africa by East Africans. The contextualization process led to the development of a tool that is 100% local and yet very globally relevant. The process pulled to the limelight the unique, diverse and rich understanding of life skills and values present in each country enabling us to come up with a tool that respected, valued and fostered these uniqueness and diversity. Moreover, the collaborative, participatory and hands-on approaches enhanced the ownership and wide acceptance of the tool across the three countries.

Tools that work require a contextualised approach in its development process. The tool development process engaged a culturally inclusive bottom-up approach that took into consideration local ideologies and pedagogy. This approach facilitated the process of adapting and translating the tools making them more relevant to the context itself. The process also enabled us to generate, scrutinise and retain tasks and items that were appropriate and relevant for the context and which presented scenarios adolescents in the context could easily relate to. Even more important is the fact that the process challenged our assumptions and built consensus that was key for local ownership of the tools.



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Contextualization uncovers and addresses our biases

Contextualization helped us learn and unlearn perceptions. As we wrestled with different contextual definitions and meanings of skills and values, we were able to see the shortcomings and flaws in our own definitions and meanings and were open to learn, unlearn, and re-learn in the process.

Contextualization opened us up to embrace other people’s perspectives. Through the contextualization process, the idea that every voice mattered kept resounding. Listening to and incorporating each voice was crucial in the contextualization process. With different cultures and contexts, the process predisposed us to cultivating a posture of open-mindedness about cultural diversity and diversity of skill sets across contexts. Uniting all these to contextualise the definitions and tools became our mission.

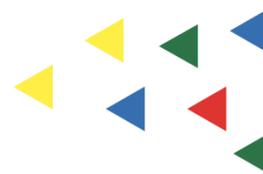
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Contextualization set the foundation for nurturing life skills and values

Contextual understanding of a skill is key to nurturing the skills. The contextualization process enabled us to appreciate how cultural beliefs and perceptions shape learning and skills development. Understanding the meaning of the selected skills and values in context sets the foundation for both teaching and assessing these skills and values.

Contextualization helped us set a framework on which skills development can be assessed. The contextualization process facilitated the development of a skill structure for each skill and value that we investigated. This process was pivotal to the construction of a skill framework that was very useful in the development of the assessment tools.



Where to from here?



Putting this into practice for ALiVE

How will we act on what we have learned? Through our reflection workshops we considered the following actions which we could prioritise in future programming:

- ▶ **Make learning intentional.** Through the contextualization and tool development processes, we learned a lot but lost sense of how the learning took place. This was because learning started late in the journey making it problematic to reflect effectively. Moving forward, we shall build learning into the work of ALiVE and allow for regular and frequent reflection. Documentation and dissemination of such learning will both enrich our work and provide evidence-based advocacy. In future programming, we look to build learning into our journey.
- ▶ **Keep the role of a critical friend.** Expert knowledge should always be sought for in every program but should never replace local knowledge. Engaging the expert as a facilitator of the process enhanced.
- ▶ **Place young people at the centre of interventions targeting them.** Engaging them at every stage of the intervention is critical. But also developing communication materials that are summarised to their level of understanding will go a long way into getting them to understand what it is that we are doing with them.
- ▶ **Adopt a posture of humility in our work.** What you know as an individual/organisation often gets dwarfed in the presence of a multi-disciplinary learning community that is committed to collaborative learning processes. We therefore need to adopt and embrace a learning posture that allows us to question what we know and open to what we do not know.
- ▶ **Build on ALiVE approaches, it works.**
- ▶ **Engage local leadership in all programming phases for ownership and buy in.** Continued engagement of local expertise and political and civil society leaders is key not only for appropriateness of the assessment tools to the context but also for enhancing stakeholders' level of understanding and ownership of the results.



What do we still need to learn?

What questions remain unanswered? ALiVE is a programme that will always continue to learn, and we hope that some of these questions can be answered not just by us but can be taken up by other researchers.

- ▶ **How do we manage the complexity of working in networks/system, including how to manage varying paces of work among diverse teams?** Understanding this could help us to harness the potential within RELI network for a greater voice on the policy table across the nation.