The Collaborative Journey of ALiVE

Assessment of Life skills and Values in East Africa (ALiVE)

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Introduction

In this brief we will outline what we have learned from the ALiVE programme about **Collaboration** in the context of developing assessment tools. 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 skills[1] 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

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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

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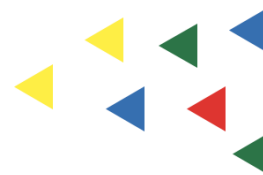
Defining Collaboration

Collaboration is one of the three core life skills and values measured by the ALiVE toolkit. According to the contextualised definition of collaboration developed by the ALiVE programme, it is described as a process where two or more people work together on a common task to realise shared goals. Within this are contained the key skills of communication, working together and negotiation.

Communication →

Collaboration
The process of working together to achieve a shared goal

← **Working Together**

Negotiating →

From this definition it is clear to see how collaboration manifests itself in the ALiVE programme. ALiVE is an initiative not delivered by one organisation, but by a network of organisations, which began within the Regional Education Learning Initiative's (RELI) Values and Life skills (VaLi) cluster. This positions it from its inception as a collaborative endeavour. Over the course of the programme's lifespan this collaboration has broadened to include technical advisors, government partners, teachers, adolescents, parents, communities, and many others involved in setting and delivering upon the ALiVE Agenda.

# Key Lessons on Collaboration from ALiVE

1

Strength in Diversity

ALiVE brought together a diverse coalition of different voices and perspectives to the process of contextualising and measuring life skills and values. The work of ALiVE was delivered by a wide coalition of actors, from the technical teams, to national advisory committees, global experts, and the adolescents and their communities who took part in the contextualisation and assessments. The contribution of all of these groups was not just through consultation, but in meaningful contributions to determining what was to be measured, how it would be measured, and what the results would be used for.

The process of aligning these points of view is not always simple, and requires time and flexibility. The collaborative approach taken by ALiVE was neither the quickest, nor the simplest way to define and measure life-skills and values. Through our reflections we encountered numerous points of contention at all stages of the process. Resolving these tensions without alienating those involved, and without reducing the quality of collaboration took patience and flexibility from all those involved.

However, the results of the collaborative approach are undeniable. There are numerous points at which we can reflect on the benefits of the collaborative approach. This goes beyond improving the quality and contextual relevance of the tools. For example, involving adolescents and their communities in the process of contextualisation and tool development, meant that when it came to conducting household surveys, communities already understood and supported the purpose of what ALiVE was doing. Similarly, the deep engagement from ministries of education throughout the process means that there is a greater sense of ownership and buy-in for the results.
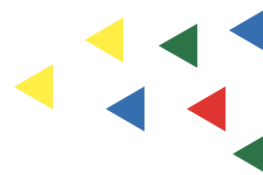
2 Collaboration is a process of constant engagement

Rather than thinking of collaboration as an activity, we can think of a collaborative space, made possible by activities and norms. Bringing people together within a project does not mean that they will collaborate. Collaboration is a space that needs to be built through constant, intentional activity. For ALiVE the pandemic required that most of this activity took place online. Regionally, this consisted of regular learnshops to allow for open discussion on issues related to assessment of life skills and values. In addition, time was created to make sure that all of the important stages and decisions in the process of contextualisation and tool development were reached collaboratively.

There is not one activity or set of activities that can guarantee the establishment of a collaborative relationship. Setting and managing expectations, and creating a collaborative space is about thoughtfully applying a range of tools, approaches, actions and behaviours in careful combination. This was facilitated by strong leadership. While leaders should be catalysts for ideas, ultimately, they were also the cohesive bond throughout the process. They are the ones who worked to earn the trust and respect of others.

3 If Collaboration is a house, its foundations are built on common goals

Essential to collaboration, particularly outside the core group of ALiVE, was driven by establishing common goals. This cannot be stated strongly enough. A process cannot be sustained if the participants do not share the same vision. For those at the heart of ALiVE this was relatively simple, a shared vision for improving quality of education through better data for more advocacy. However, the collaboration of ALiVE extended much beyond this core group, to include groups such as policy makers, community leaders, and adolescents themselves. Understanding what part of the ALiVE vision was important to these groups was essential. For example, how will having better data on life skills proficiency support the curriculum designers in the ministry of education? If you can't answer this question, you can't hope to establish deep collaboration.

Working to establish common goals and "win-win" relationships with partners throughout ALiVE was not always straightforward. Working with smaller partners where the balance in power is marked and there are unspoken dependencies or expectations from the smaller partners creates challenges in establishing balanced relationships. Secondly, working with 'inherited partnerships', especially those where partner expectations differ substantially from ours requires considerable work and investment to 're-calibrate' the partnership. ALiVE experienced all three of these challenges these a lot during the large-scale assessment where we involved different partners in the outreach and data collection processes. At the heart of the solution to each of these three challenges was the focus on establishing common goals and ways of working towards them.

4 Shared values sit at the heart of collaboration

Trust, respect, transparency and passion were the anchors of ALiVE's collaborative work. These values allowed programmatic goals to be achieved collaboratively. The trust detailed here is trust in the existence of a shared vision or understanding of the goals of the programme. Respect was then the value that allowed individuals to respectfully disagree within a shared framework of trust. Transparency, was mainly from the leadership on the project progress, expectations and gaps. Finally, passion kept everyone committed to that shared goal and the work needed to reach it collaboratively.

Transparency in communication ensured that all organisations understood where they stood in relation to the collaboration. As is highlighted above, organisations across the ALiVE collaboration came in with different needs and expectations from the programme. This creates the potential for mis-understanding and misaligned expectations. Transparency is a key tool in avoiding this. Understanding that transparency does not erode trust, but is rather a recognition that agreements may be understood
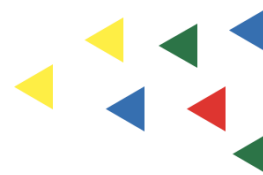
differently. Being transparent on what benefits organisations would (or would not) receive from the collaboration helped to avoid issues further down the line.

5 ⚖️ A localised approach to our work doesn't mean less global collaboration, it means better collaboration.

While ALiVE benefitted from its collaborations with donors and global partners, this collaboration was rooted in a ground up, emancipation focused approach. It was widely recognised during reflections that our collaboration with external experts, facilitators and our donors allowed us to look beyond our context, and to have a group of peers who could view the programme from an external perspective, highlighting things those closest to the context may miss. However, this benefit needed to be aligned with ALiVE's core aim of demonstrating that all of the expertise needed to measure holistic learning in East Africa can be found and nurtured within East Africa.

Key to establishing a localised, ground up approach to collaboration were learning, and the establishment and ownership of the programmes vision. Experts, partners and donors were invited to contribute to and collaborate on, but not to shape the vision for ALiVE. This was the key factor, ensuring that ownership of the vision and direction of AliVE rested with the core organisations. Once this ownership was established up on and agreed upon, AliVE could choose how to use external relationships and support. In addition, this approach to collaboration placed learning at the centre, ensuring that any skills that were externally sourced were used to build the same skillset in East African organisations.
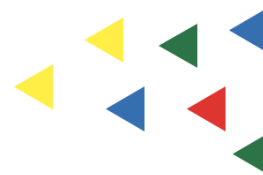
Where to from here?

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:

▶ **Re-establish a clear framework for collaboration in AliVE.** While a document existed outlining the collaboration framework for the first phase, more could be done to institutionalise and use the framework. This could take the form of in depth on boarding sessions for partners and the development of explicit "co-working" agreements.

▶ **Be more intentional about establishing clear win-wins.** While we know that organisations benefitted from their participation in AliVE (See brief 05 of this series for more information), we could be clearer on ensuring that we are intentionally supporting organisational growth through the collaboration.

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.

▶ **As we move forward into deeper relationships with governments, how do we continue to build balanced collaboration?** How do we balance incentivising and compensating for collaboration, with ensuring that collaboration is driven by intrinsic motivation?

▶ **How do we clearly establish the vision for ALiVE in a way that can reach a variety of different audiences?** This is key for establishing the shared goals necessary for ALiVE. When we are talking to teachers, school or parents, what is the pitch that we are making that can bring them on board to our collaboration?

▶ **As we move to the classroom and to action how can ALiVE collaborate with young people** within communities as agents of intergenerational dialogue and social change?