



Tusome Early Grade Reading Activity

Project Overview

USAID/Kenya and East Africa (KEA), in partnership with Kenya’s Ministry of Education (MoE), implemented Tusome, a seven-year, US\$88.8 million basic education initiative to improve the reading skills of approximately **7.8 million Kenyan children** from 2014-2021.

Tusome (“Let’s Read” in Kiswahili) builds on research-based reading initiatives to create a sustainable and affordable national reading program in Kenya. It seeks to improve the English and Kiswahili skills of grade 1, 2, and 3 children in 24,038 primary schools across the country.

Tusome Objectives

Tusome aims to improve supervision, support, and delivery of reading instruction to target students through the following activities:



Increased availability of teaching and learning materials



Improved methods of reading instruction delivery



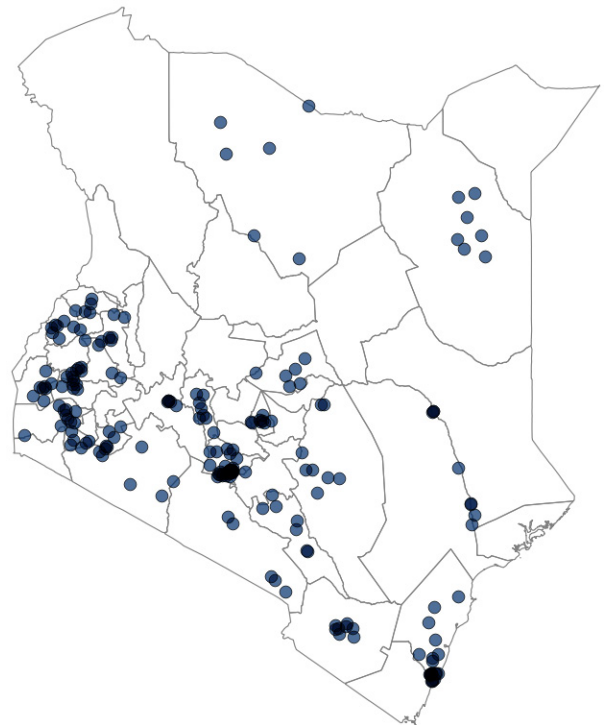
Supervision and coaching support to teachers

Early Grade Reading Assessment

The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) tests students on foundational skills necessary for literacy acquisition. In 2015 (baseline), 2016 (midline), and 2019 (endline), USAID/KEA through NORC at the University of Chicago and Management Systems International (MSI) conducted EGRAs in English and Kiswahili with **grade 1 and 2 students** from a panel of 204 schools distributed across all eight former provinces of Kenya. These schools were drawn from a sampling frame of 22,154 formal public schools and 1,500 non-formal (or Alternative Provision of Basic Education and Training – APBET) schools.

Eight EGRA subtasks were used to assess student abilities in **four foundational reading skills**: pre-reading, phonics, fluency, and comprehension.

School Sample Distribution



Key Findings

(1) Overall, independent evaluation results provide strong evidence for the efficacy of the Tusome model of instruction.

From baseline to endline, pupils have shown statistically significant improvements on all EGRA subtasks in both English and Kiswahili. Of particular note, grade 2 English reading gains observed from baseline to endline are roughly equal to gains from an additional full year of schooling. Furthermore, over the life of the USAID activity exposure to Tusome has consistently corresponded with reading performance: increased exposure to Tusome between baseline and midline/endline corresponded with an increase in pupil reading performance. Similarly, reduced exposure to Tusome between midline and endline under the revised Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) timetable corresponded with a decrease in reading performance.

Baseline to Endline Change in EGRA Raw Subtask Scores, by Grade and Language

EGRA Subtask	Items	Grade 1				Grade 2			
		English		Kiswahili		English		Kiswahili	
Letter sound knowledge	100	6.3	▲	6.3	▲	16.1	▲	17.5	▲
Invented word decoding	50	2.0	▲	0.3	—	5.1	▲	2.2	▲
Passage reading	60-70	3.3	▲	1.3	▲	12.4	▲	5.6	▲
Reading comprehension	6	0.1	▲	0.1	—	0.5	▲	0.4	▲
Listening comprehension	5			0.9	▲			1.2	▲
Syllable fluency	100			2.6	▲			8.8	▲
Phoneme segmentation	10	1.6	▲			3.6	▲		
Vocabulary	20	1.3	▲			1.6	▲		

▲ Statistically significant increase; ▼ Statistically significant decrease; — No statistically significant change

Statistical models at endline also show that better implementation of Tusome in the classroom positively correlates with reading fluency. Tusome lesson plan progress is positively associated with English reading performance: each 10-unit advance in the Tusome teacher’s guide is associated with an increase of one correct word per minute in English reading fluency. Similarly, teacher-reported frequency of pupils sounding out unfamiliar words is positively associated with English reading performance. When teachers use both English and Kiswahili while teaching Kiswahili—i.e., use “code switching”—pupils score 3.19 words per minute higher in Kiswahili.

(2) While there has been marked progress since baseline, the vast majority of early grade learners in Kenya are still unable to read at a grade-appropriate level.

Baseline to Endline Change in Proportion of Pupils Meeting Reading Fluency Benchmarks, by Grade and Language

Reading Performance Category	Grade 1		Grade 2	
	English	Kiswahili	English	Kiswahili
Fluent reader	▲ 3.5%	▲ 0.2%	▲ 6.4%	▲ 3.2%
Emergent reader	▲ 2.9%	▲ 5.7%	▲ 13.1%	▲ 12.7%
Beginner reader	▲ 12.0%	▲ 1.5%	▲ 4.2%	▼ 1.7%
Zero reader	▼ 18.4%	▼ 7.4%	▼ 23.7%	▼ 14.3%

As shown in the previous table, the number of non-readers (or zero readers) dropped considerably between baseline and endline, while the number of fluent and emergent readers increased for both grade levels and languages. Across the board, however, fewer than eight percent of grade 1 and 2 pupils are able to read Kiswahili at a grade-appropriate level. In English, just 14 percent of grade 1 pupils and 18 percent of grade 2 pupils are meeting Kenya’s reading benchmarks. Furthermore, there is a concerning high proportion of pupils who are unable to read entirely: nearly two-thirds of grade 1 pupils and one-third of grade 2 pupils cannot read a single word in Kiswahili. For English, the number of non-readers is 34 and 14 percent for grades 1 and 2, respectively.

(3) The reduction in English and Kiswahili instructional hours under the new CBC timetable appears to be a driver of declines in reading performance since midline.

At endline, teachers were on average around 30 (of 150 total) Tusome lessons behind midline levels due to the reduction in English and Kiswahili instructional time. That grade 1 pupils saw the sharpest performance losses since midline fits with this hypothesis, as grade 2 pupils were still under the pre-CBC timetable when they were in grade 1 and thus had a higher “dosage” of English and Kiswahili using the Tusome approach compared to their grade 1 counterparts. Overall, reduced exposure to Tusome appears to have negatively impacted children’s English and Kiswahili skills.

Average Number of Tusome Lessons Completed in October 2016 and 2019

Subject	Grade 1			Grade 2		
	Midline	Endline	Difference	Midline	Endline	Difference
English language activities	122.2	90.6	▼ 31.6	125.3	95.2	▼ 30.1
Kiswahili language activities	122.3	89.6	▼ 32.7	127	90.4	▼ 36.6

(4) Regular reading practice and classroom resources are positively correlated with reading fluency while larger class sizes and the use of local language at school are negatively correlated with reading fluency.

Pupils who report reading stories at home and/or reading aloud at school score 3-6 correct words per minute higher than those who don’t, holding all else constant. In addition, smaller class sizes, the availability of tables and chairs/benches for children, and the classroom having the timetable posted on the wall were correlated with reading fluency, possibly because they serve as proxies for school leadership or school resources. On the other hand, local language use during English instruction is strongly negatively associated with both English and Kiswahili reading fluency, with pupils from such classrooms scoring 7-12 correct words per minute lower on average (no such correlations were found for local language use during Kiswahili instruction).

(5) Teachers generally demonstrate moderate to high levels of support for Tusome, yet face a number of implementation challenges.

While teachers broadly support Tusome, they have struggled to keep pace with the instructional approach from the midpoint of the program onward. Insufficient time was the main implementation challenge teachers reported at endline, with 39 percent of teachers who face challenges saying they lack sufficient time to cover the content and 23 percent claiming that Tusome lesson pacing is too fast, likely owing to the reduction in instructional time from five periods to three periods per week for English and five periods to three periods per week for Kiswahili.

(6) Tusome was largely successful in securing ownership and buy-in from the Government of Kenya (GoK) at different levels of government and at different points in the implementation process, but more work is needed to ensure long-term sustainability.

Most GoK respondents were personally supportive of the methods and materials developed under Tusome and hoped to see them continue in the future. However, long-term sustainability of Tusome will depend on upholding existing procedures, policies, and guidelines—particularly the centralized book procurement procedure, with its facilitation of the 1:1 textbook to student ratio, and school-based coaching and teacher mentoring.

Recommendations



Ensure that Kenya’s learners achieve the English and Kiswahili reading goals of the CBC by allocating sufficient instructional time to cover the content.

The reduction in lessons from five to three per week during the 2019 school year led to gaps in coverage of Tusome instructional content. As a result, pupil reading performance actively worsened, moving away from GoK reading benchmarks. The GoK should thus consider increasing the instructional time for both English and Kiswahili back to five lessons per week to better align with Kenya’s reading goals under the CBC.



Implement remedial literacy programming for pupils in the “zero” and “beginner” reader categories.

While there has been marked progress since baseline, the great majority of pupils in Kenya are still unable to read with comprehension at a grade-appropriate level. Remedial programming for struggling readers could involve supplementing core reading lessons with additional English and Kiswahili instruction and guided practice time tailored to the learning levels and needs of pupils or extracurricular reading support by tutors, volunteers, teachers, and/or through education technology.



Ensure pupils have the time and resources to regularly practice reading, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Given the strong, statistically robust relationship between pupil reading performance and regular reading practice, ensure that children are able to practice reading in a variety of formats, including practicing reading silently/aloud as well as at home/in the classroom. This may involve ensuring access to English and Kiswahili decodable and leveled story books and work books for home use or supporting extracurricular reading clubs, especially for children whose home environments are less conducive for reading practice.



Put in place systems to ensure classroom-based observations continue after USAID funding ends.

This might include creating accountability systems to ensure Curriculum Support Officer (CSO)/Quality Assurance Standards Officer (QASO) school visits take place under the current GoK transport facilitation scheme, additional school-based support to complement CSO/QASO observations, or alternatives to face-to-face training and coaching in situations where face-to-face interactions are not feasible.



Implement a revised textbook policy that includes centralized procurement.

Given the importance of the centralized book procurement procedure, implement a revised textbook policy solidifying centralized procurement.