

This Case Story was submitted to the 2016 CLA Case Competition. The competition was open to individuals and organizations affiliated with USAID and gave participants an opportunity to promote their work and contribute to good practice that advances our understanding of collaborating, learning, and adapting in action.

## **Digging Deeper: Collaborating, Learning and Adapting with the Ministry of Education in Uganda to Accelerate Early Grades Reading**

**Rachel Jordan**  
**RTI International**



Girls Reading, Mbale District. Credit: RTI International.

### **What is the general context in which the story takes place?**

All children have the right to learn to read. But this is not true for many Ugandan children. In 2012, UWEZO, a regional NGO, reported that only one in 10 Primary 3 learners could read a Primary 2 level story.

With the introduction of Universal Primary Education in Uganda, primary school enrollment skyrocketed from 3.1 million in 1996 to 8.4 million in 2013. As the education system struggled to absorb these learners, the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) introduced the 2007 Thematic Curriculum, officially adopting local languages as the medium of instruction in government schools from Primary 1 to Primary 3. This policy was supported by extensive international research showing that to effectively learn to read in a second language (such as English) learners should first be taught reading skills in their local language. The policy is also recognition of Uganda's immense linguistic diversity, with more than 50 indigenous languages.

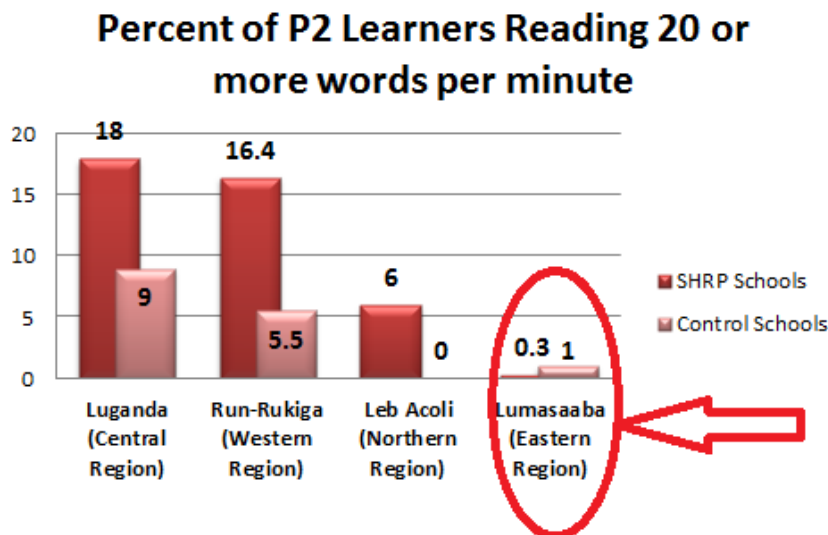
To support these efforts, USAID introduced the USAID/Uganda School Health and Reading Program (SHRP). The program’s theory of change is that by assisting the development of 12 local language orthographies, training teachers in reading best practices through Teachers Colleges and developing and distributing instructional materials through NCDC, the quality of education will improve and reading achievement for more than 1 million learners will be accelerated. To measure progress toward this goal, SHRP collects yearly Early Grade Reading Assessment data from Primary 1 to Primary 4 learners in 12 local languages and English to answer the question, “Is reading achievement increasing in Uganda?”

**What was the main challenge or opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?**

Overall, SHRP has seen significant gains in reading achievement in program schools compared with control schools. Additionally, data from multiple language groups show that learners understand more of what they are reading in the local language than in English, and that learners who can read more words correctly in their local language could also read better in English.

Still, increases in reading achievement were not as high as hoped. A learner reading check introduced during the support visits at schools also showed many learners not performing at an expected level.

In one of the 12 languages, Lumasaaba, very little gain was found in reading achievement. (See exhibit below.) When SHRP presented these reading results in a working group meeting of the Basic Education Department, an official from the NCDC took the low reading levels of Lumasaaba-speaking children to heart. She is from the Mt. Elgon region herself, and Lumasaaba is her mother tongue. She spoke passionately at the meeting, saying she was “trying not to shed tears” at the findings.



Because SHRP is working on the ground and our staff interact with officials from the Ministry of Education and Sport (MOES) every day, the idea quickly sprang up between the NCDC official and the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) team to conduct some action research. They headed to the Mt. Elgon region for a week to learn why children were not reading in the Lumasaaba language. Ideally, the team reasoned, they would learn lessons that could benefit reading instruction in all languages.

As part of an internal continuous learning and adapting cycle, the M&E team at SHRP, with the Uganda National Examinations Board, collects data using the Early Grades Reading Assessment in 12 local languages every October. From December to March, the team conducts a series of brainstorming, discussions, and analyses to dig deeper into the results. We look for patterns to tell us more about the orthographies themselves, the pre-reading skills and prior exposure to text of learners entering Primary I, contextual challenges to teaching reading, and characteristics associated with high- and low-performing learners, teachers, schools, and language groups.

While this iterative process begins with internal collaboration, the M&E team quickly shares findings and follow-up questions and hypotheses with other facets of the program and the MOES. This collaboration is institutionalized internally through a culture of sharing and openness and monthly technical meeting and externally through working group meetings. SHRP staff, alongside USAID representatives, are regulars at monthly ministry working group meetings, including the M&E Working Group, the Basic Education Working Group, and the Teacher Education Working Group. Through our strong relationship with officials in the Basic Education department, SHRP regularly shares technical evidence and engages in deeper discussions that often lead to M&E for further learning or adaptations in policy implementation. It was through this broader CLA process that the M&E team, with NCDC officials, found an opportunity to work together to try and solve the Lumasaaba puzzle.

**Describe the CLA approach or activity, explaining how the activity integrated collaborating, learning, adapting culture, processes, and/or resources as applicable.**

To execute effective collaboration with the MOES, SHRP conducts all program activities through different bodies of the Ugandan education sector: Materials are developed hand-in-hand with (and owned by) the NCDC; teachers are trained at Primary Teacher College venues through the Teacher/Tutor, Instruction Education and Training department; and the large-scale Early Grades Reading Assessment is supported and now adopted by the Uganda National Examinations Board. During training and support supervision visits to schools, the program works in teams comprising SHRP staff, Teachers College staff, and district-level inspectors and education officials. Through this integrated approach, SHRP is able to collaborate, learn, and adapt for the long term on a broader, policy-based national level, as well on more direct, implementation- and operations-based district and local levels.

Through our climate of continuous CLA with the MOES, sharing the findings from the Mt. Elgon visit led to more conversations that showed these issues were also affecting learners in other parts of Uganda. None of these changes happened because a table of outside experts held a meeting to



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



brainstorm research ideas. Instead, positive change that is improving the quality of education in Uganda resulted from an organic, continuous, and sustainable process.

This CLA activity was initiated by a culture of openness. SHRP did not try to hide what could be seen as a failure or shortcoming (i.e., little evidence of reading progress in the Lumasaaba language) but instead exposed the problem, sharing it with partners in USAID and the MOES and looking for ways to dig deeper. Since the program's inception 2012, both SHRP and USAID have put a great deal of work into building strong relationships with officials in each department of the MOES. This allowed for honest conversations in working groups and between individuals that led to continuous learning and improvement.

The program's approach to CLA revolves around its theory of change: If teaching in mother tongue/local language, training teachers in best practices, and supplying reading materials for every learner are not resulting in more learners reading, how can we better implement these activities? Internally, this process has led to a number of adaptations, most recently the overhaul of our support supervision approach, expanding its reach to support more teachers while making it more cost-effective. In this case, our M&E director worked with the official from NCDC to develop hypotheses as to why Lumasaaba learners might be underperforming. By undertaking action research and going to the field to dig deeper into the findings of our randomized controlled trial through on-the-ground interviews and observations, SHRP and NCDC were able to share learning and recommend a way forward in a timely manner, while the conversation was still fresh.

**Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources, implementation challenges or obstacles, and enabling factors)?**

The implementation of this CLA activity hinged upon relationships with national- and district-level officials and an internal SHRP structure built upon field assistants working in schools in each district. These conditions were mandated by USAID from the beginning of the program—that all work be conducted through and with the system to ensure lasting, sustainable results. Creating this climate with transparency and without excessive facilitation payments was challenging but has paid off.

Ongoing support from the RTI home office allowed the SHRP team to send Early Grade Reading Assessment data back for new analyses to try and learn more about reading in Uganda. Both RTI and USAID continuously encouraged and enabled SHRP to explore the gaps in Lumasaaba and other findings to understand more about the context in which we are working. Through its M&E contractor in Uganda, The QED Group, USAID has conducted multiple trainings with SHRP staff on how to implement CLA to improve programs and outputs.

The financial resources available to SHRP through USAID funding enabled the M&E team to conduct a weeklong visit to the Mt. Elgon region. The costs of this learning activity included the car and driver to travel to and around the region, accommodation, and costs to cover meals and incidentals. There was no additional cost attached to the collaborative conversations with MOES officials that preceded the visit, nor the changes to our training approaches that followed.



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



One challenge the team found when visiting the schools is what field assistants and district officials considered characteristics of “good teachers.” When our M&E director asked on the last day, “Can you show me a really good teacher?” the field team took her to see a teacher who, while loud and animated, employed the same call-and-response approach to “teaching” reading as the other teachers they observed that week, with the class responding as a choir.

**With your initial challenge/opportunity in mind, what have been the most significant outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?**

The team found that in Lumasaaba speaking schools, teachers were not giving learners an opportunity to read individually, with a partner, or in small groups. These were steps in the teacher’s guidebook, but teachers were skipping them. When learners did have a chance to give an answer, it was as a whole class, repeating in chorus what the teacher had just read. The team knew that, because learners did not have a chance to practice storing and recalling letter sounds and vocabulary words on their own, they were not retaining these reading skills.

The team also found a low morale among teachers, who were transferred frequently and got little support from head teachers and tutors from the Teachers College. A number of the teachers complained that they and their families had been uprooted and moved to a new school during the first weeks of that school year. Many had never been observed teaching by their head teacher or the Coordinating Centre Tutor appointed by the Primary Teachers College.

The program, with the MOES, took immediate steps to respond to these lessons learned. A refresher training of teachers in May emphasized the “You do” step of the lesson plan, which gives learners the opportunity to reinforce what they have just been taught by themselves or working with fellow classmates. During support supervision, staff, with district officials, began co-teaching to help teachers make individual and small group reading activities a regular part of lessons.

MOES officials in Kampala are taking further steps to limit unnecessary teacher transfers while program staff began working with deputy principals at the Teachers Colleges to put better monitoring and management systems in place to make sure Coordinating Centre Tutors are regularly visiting and supporting teachers.

**What were the most important lessons learned?**

Moving forward, SHRP will continue to support teachers with professional development on creating opportunities for independent and small group reading, as well as working with the MOES and district governments to better manage teacher transfers and classroom visits. SHRP will also probe deeper into weak spots we find in our technical evaluations. We will work to include more staff and MOES officials during the learning stage. This is one of the big lessons we want to share with others: If you want your partners and the governments and communities you are working with to buy into the changes you are trying to implement, it is imperative that key allies from these groups become



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



part of the collaboration and learning processes early on. It is easy for programs, especially when time and resources are limited, to push ahead and conduct a single yearly evaluation, report this information, and move on with programming. A key component of the CLA framework that SHRP is working to incorporate in our program culture is to “pause and reflect” on where we are and what we can do differently.

What worked, and what other programs should consider, can be found in the details. Do not just publish a report of findings—share them with your stakeholders and, most important, use your evidence as a basis for further conversations. Do not simply hold a large, expensive, one-time event—work within the system, sharing lessons learned at ministry venues that already carry weight in the country in which you are working. Identify your allies in the contexts in which you are working in—work closely with these people, and they will champion changes and adaptations when it is time to introduce them. Do not hide the ugly parts of your findings, either—use them as an opportunity to learn and change.

### **Any other critical information you’d like to share?**

By collaborating with MOES officials to dig deeper into small gaps in the reading results of one language, we learned some big lessons for all languages and strategically changed how we support the education sector technically, systematically, and in policy implementation. The result of USAID’s investment through the SHRP program will not only be structural improvements to reading education, but a shift in the culture of the MOES toward CLA.

Through the leadership of both SHRP and USAID/Uganda, every stakeholder has a seat at the table, and the perspectives of everyone from Primary I teachers in rural schools to top MOES officials are valued. This attitude toward CLA at all levels has been contagious, and SHRP is only half-way through its work as a program. We look forward to all there is to do as CLA becomes a more integral part of the education sector’s approach to improving the quality of education in Uganda.



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

