

## 5. Uwezo citizen-led assessments: Inspiring debate about children’s learning and holding governments accountable

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### Abstract

In many developing countries, measuring progress towards achieving global education goals has focused on visible indicators such as infrastructure, teachers, books and enrolment. No doubt school enrolment levels have been rising over the years. The assumption has been that having children in school will, automatically, lead to learning. This assumption has led to an invisible problem of children being in school and not learning. Inspired by the *Annual Status of Education Report* (ASER) in India since 2005, and now covering 13 countries across three continents under the People’s Action for Learning (PAL) Network, citizen-led assessments shift the focus from inputs to learning outcomes. This chapter draws from the Uwezo citizen-led assessment movement in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania to illustrate how citizen-led assessments are structured, how they differ from other assessments, where they are conducted, what they assess, how they are conducted, who assesses, when, what tools are used and on what scale. The chapter demonstrates the benefits of evidence from citizen-led assessment, and how it is utilised to inspire debate about learning and hold governments accountable.

### Introduction

Barbara Trudell’s chapter on ‘Globalisation and curriculum in African classrooms’ (Trudell, this volume) alludes to the different international assessments such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). She argues that these assessments are mainly suitable for developed countries and not low-income or middle-income countries. She asserts that while the influence of globalisation on formal education curriculum, including globalising assessments, is flaunted as being critical to a prosperous global future, it fails to appreciate the fact that learners are not homogeneous and that learners in developing countries experience a different reality. If learning is to be ‘inclusive and equitable’ as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on education envisages (United Nations, 2015), then curriculum and assessment ought to put into consideration the local reality.

This chapter focuses on an assessment that originates from the Global South, implemented in the South, by people in the South. For several years, progress towards achieving ‘Education for All’ (as defined by the six education goals agreed by 164 participating countries at the Dakar World Forum in 2000, and effectively replaced by the more comprehensive SDG 4 since 2015) has, in many developing countries, focused mainly on visible aspects of education such as the numbers of classrooms built, teachers recruited, textbooks purchased and children enrolled in school. As a result of this focus, school enrolments are very high in most developing countries and many are almost achieving universal education for all. The sad reality, however, is that many children are in school but are not learning – not even the basics of reading and counting. In most countries the assumption is that children are in school and that, therefore, they are learning. For most countries, schooling is the same as learning. The challenge has been to visualise the fact that schooling and learning are not the same and that children are often in school but not learning. Citizen-led assessments were started, mainly, to visualise this learning crisis and present it in a very simple language; and to make the people responsible, especially government, accountable and take action.

In this chapter, I will describe what drove the development of citizen-led assessment, originally in India, how the methodology evolved and gained in influence, and how citizen-led assessments were gradually set up in other countries, eventually forming the global People’s Action for Learning (PAL) Network. I go on to draw on my own experience working at Uwezo in East Africa to explain the principles of citizen-led assessment and why they are important, before explaining why using citizen-volunteers as the assessors, which is often contentious, is critical to its success. The chapter shares the dynamics of the relationship with governments in the three countries, and how assessment evidence can generate intended and unintended results. The chapter shows the impacts of citizen-led assessments to date and how the assessments are evolving to reach more unreached children, including those in refugee contexts. Finally, the chapter illustrates the future challenges for citizen-led assessments, such

as ensuring rigour and comparability of assessment data within and across countries, broadening and deepening the assessment to produce evidence in other critical areas of children's learning beyond literacy and numeracy, and the need to utilise assessment data to make connections to concrete actions to improve children's learning.

## The evolution of citizen-led assessment: ASER in India

In 2005 India's largest NGO, Pratham, realised that there was a problem: children's learning levels were low, but there was no evidence for this which could be presented to government and the different actors. They therefore developed a simple literacy and numeracy tool and mobilised citizens in villages, across all districts in India, to undertake a household survey of learning. Within 100 days India had the results of its first ever *Status of Education Report*. That gave birth to the ASER (*Annual Status of Education Report*). The word aser means 'impact' in Hindi; if any country is to be proud of its education system, it is important to know the impact that its education system is having on the lives of children, including the acquisition of basic skills which are important to survive in the real world.

The results of the ASER assessment were appalling. Among 7- to 14-year-olds, only about half of them could read a primary Grade 2-level story (the level expected of a 7- to 8-year-old). About 35 per cent of 14- to 17-year-olds could not complete a division task of three digits at primary Grade 2 level. The government initially rejected the ASER findings, claiming, among other criticisms, that Pratham did not have the mandate to carry out such a learning assessment. This did not stop Pratham from continuing to conduct the learning assessment every year, and every year they produced a national report on the status of education which they communicated widely, and which received widespread media coverage and public debate. By 2008, the ASER Centre was established as a specialised, independent unit within the Pratham network to conduct this work. Because of the growing public interest in the ASER, the government eventually began to pay attention. A discussion started happening in parliament and action was taken. For example, in 2011 the new Five-Year Plan of India was announced, stressing the measuring of learning and improvement of basic skills among the nation's children. By the end of 2015 almost all states had done their own state-level assessment of learning, spurred by the ASER.

## The spread of citizen-led assessment to other countries beyond India

The success story of the ASER citizen-led assessment approach inspired several other countries across the world. In 2008 Pakistan and East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) were introduced to the methodology by the ASER Centre in India. The Pakistani citizen-led assessment initiative was named ASER Pakistan and it conducted its first pilot assessment in 2008. The East African initiative, hosted by a regional organisation, Twaweza East Africa until 2019,<sup>1</sup> was named Uwezo (meaning 'capability'). Uwezo conducted its first pilot assessment in Kenya in 2009. Following the success of this pilot, the assessment was rolled out in Uganda and Tanzania in 2010, and other countries in Africa also became interested in the approach. Representatives from Mali visited Uwezo Kenya to learn about the approach, and Mali conducted its first pilot in 2011 under the name Bèekunko (meaning 'the concern of everyone'). Senegal followed with a visit to ASER Centre in India and began its own citizen-led assessment initiative, Jàngandoo (meaning 'to learn together'), in 2012. In Nigeria, another citizen-led assessment initiative named LEARNigeria (Let's Engage, Assess and Report Nigeria) was born in 2015, having been introduced to the approach by Uwezo. LEARNigeria is implemented by the Education Partnership Center based in Lagos. In 2014, Latin America came on board with a pilot in Mexico, having been inducted into the citizen-led assessment methodology by India. The initiative in Mexico is known as *Medición Independiente de Aprendizajes* (MIA), meaning 'independent measurement of learning'.

To date, citizen-led assessments have been embraced in 13 countries on three continents. The major strength of the citizen-led assessment approach is that it is not a mere duplication of the methodology in a given country. Countries learn about the approach and adapt it to their unique contexts.

Table 1 summarises the different citizen-led assessment initiatives as of March 2020.

1. As of 2020, Uwezo East Africa is now operating as three independent entities in Uganda (Uwezo Uganda), Tanzania (Uwezo Tanzania) and Kenya (Usawa Agenda).

**Table 1:** Citizen-led assessment initiatives around the world (as of March 2020)

S/N	Name of the initiative	Country	Year of first (pilot) assessment
1	ASER Centre	India	2005
2	ASER Pakistan	Pakistan	2008
3	Uwezo Kenya (now operating as Usawa Agenda)	Kenya	2009
4	Uwezo Tanzania	Tanzania	2010
5	Uwezo Uganda	Uganda	2010
6	Bèékunko	Mali	2011
7	Jàngandoo	Senegal	2012
8	MIA (Medición Independiente de Aprendizajes – 'independent assessment of learning')	Mexico	2014
9	LEARNigeria	Nigeria	2015
10	IID (Institute of Informatics and Development) and BRAC	Bangladesh	2015
11	TPC Mozambique	Mozambique	2016
12	ASER Nepal	Nepal	2016
13	VIdA (Valoración Intersubjetiva del Aprender – 'intersubjective assessment of learning')	Nicaragua	2017

Source: PAL Network: <http://palnetwork.org/>

In summary: citizen-led assessments have a history of 15 years to date, across 13 countries, are conducted by over 600,000 volunteers, and are administered in over 30 languages, including English, French, Portuguese and many other local languages. In those 15 years, citizen-led assessments have assessed over 8.5 million children in literacy and numeracy.

As the citizen-led assessment movement grew into a large and powerful family, operating in isolation became undesirable. In 2014 the countries embracing citizen-led assessment united together under a single umbrella body, the PAL Network. The network is headquartered in Nairobi and ensures that the countries are focused on the one major goal of bringing learning to the centre of education policy and practice, as well as ensuring that there is learning across the countries. Recently, there has been growing interest from other countries to join the PAL Network citizen-led assessment movement, including the Dominican Republic, Peru, Eswatini and Indonesia. Botswana has also been a member of the PAL Network since 2018 doing citizen-led action to improve learning. By March 2020 it had not yet started implementing citizen-led assessments.

## Case study: Uwezo citizen-led assessment in depth

In this section I will use my experience at the Uwezo East Africa citizen-led assessment initiative to demonstrate how these assessments are conducted. I will also show how evidence from the assessments is used to bring learning to the centre of policy and public debate and to hold our governments accountable for children's learning.

Uwezo citizen-led learning assessment, previously a programme of Twaweza East Africa until 2019, and now operating as three independent entities, has been conducted regularly in three countries – Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania – since 2009. The programme works with thousands of citizen-volunteers in thousands of households in these three countries to generate evidence on the actual learning levels of children aged six to 16 in early grade reading and numeracy. In the last seven years Uwezo has reached and assessed over 1.5 million children across Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania.<sup>2</sup>

2. Some Uwezo learning assessment reports can be accessed via the following links:  
<http://twaweza.org/uploads/files/East%20Africa%20Report%202015.pdf>  
[www.twaweza.org/uploads/files/Uganda%20Report%202016%20Web%20Pages.pdf](http://www.twaweza.org/uploads/files/Uganda%20Report%202016%20Web%20Pages.pdf)  
[www.twaweza.org/uploads/files/Uwezo\\_EA\\_Report-EN-FINAL.pdf](http://www.twaweza.org/uploads/files/Uwezo_EA_Report-EN-FINAL.pdf)

The idea of Uwezo is simple: parents send their children to school because they expect them to learn. They want them to learn to read, write, count and to acquire many other skills that are needed to thrive in the world. Therefore, instead of asking for the opportunities that the education provides to children such as the number of classrooms, the number of teachers or the number of textbooks, Uwezo asks one major question: 'Are our children learning?' To answer this question, Uwezo, like other citizen-led assessment programmes, works on five main principles (also refer to Nakabugo, 2016).

1. **Assess basic skills including reading and simple arithmetic** because these are believed to be the foundations of learning. If children cannot read, write and count, it is very difficult for them to acquire higher skills.
2. **Assess children orally, one on one.** Most conventional assessments are undertaken using pencil/pen and paper. However, these assume that children already know how to read and write and that they are familiar with the language of assessment – but many children cannot read and/or understand the official languages. In the case of citizen-led assessments, the assessor enters the household and asks the child to perform primary Grade 2-level reading and arithmetic exercises orally, and records the results in a standardised survey booklet. Citizen-led assessments avoid making the assumption that all children can read. Learning and assessment ought to be equitable and oral assessments give all children a level playing field.
3. **Assess children in their homes.** Citizen-led assessments believe that home is the best place to find a good representation of all children. In developing countries, where dropout rates and absenteeism are quite high, the only place where it is possible to find most of the children is in the household. Assessments that are done at school assess those children who are at school on a certain day. In addition, assessing in the household has the advantage of engaging parents and guardians in conversations about the learning of their children.
4. **Work with local volunteers to assess children.** The local volunteers must have a minimum of four years of secondary education and are recruited from their communities. With this minimum qualification, the recruited individuals are trainable and able to conduct the learning assessment and the household survey. As will be elaborated later on, the involvement of local volunteers has the advantage of working with individuals who can speak the children's local language, thereby breaking the language barrier to an extent. In addition, these local volunteers can continue the debate about

learning in their communities long after the assessment has been completed.

5. **Communicate the assessment findings regularly.** Uwezo believes that research which is not communicated to the relevant audiences is unhelpful. Uwezo communicates the assessment findings in public and policy forums to influence policy and practice.

## The strengths and challenges of undertaking learning assessments using citizen-volunteers

Over the years, citizen-led assessments have been criticised for using local volunteers (instead of teachers or professional researchers) to undertake the learning assessments. At Uwezo, our argument is that volunteers are part of the community in which the assessment takes place; they are citizens who are concerned about children's learning. Citizen-led assessments demystify learning as a concern of teachers alone and make it a concern for everyone, and ordinary citizens need to acquire a basic understanding of what constitutes learning so that they are able to support it. By participating in the assessment, and doing it in the households, we assume that the volunteers themselves as well as the parents in the assessed households acquire this basic understanding of learning (Mugo et al., 2016).

Furthermore, citizen-led assessments are intended to be as independent as possible. Since assessment is done in the communities in which schools are located, the intention is to minimise the possibility of teachers assessing the children they teach, to reduce bias. This is the main reason Uwezo recruits relatively independent volunteers at the community level (two per village) and rigorously trains them in basic research and assessment principles to conduct the household survey and learning assessment. In addition, since the training of volunteers takes place on weekdays, working with non-teachers ensures that teachers do not miss classes because of the learning assessment. Uwezo wants to ensure that teachers are in school and teaching.

Most importantly, the volunteers speak the local languages of the children and the parents. This is critical to ensure easy communication between the volunteers, the children and their parents. William Savage's presentation at the 12th Language and Development Conference underscored the power of listening and being listened to. Referencing Wheatley (2002, 2005), Savage noted: 'Listening creates a relationship. We move closer to one another (Wheatley 2002: 91) ... If we can speak our story and know that others hear it, we are somehow healed by that (Wheatley 2005: 218).'<sup>3</sup> This is also very important in research. Once the research subjects are part

3. Savage, W. Facilitated advocacy for sustainable development: An approach and its paradoxes. Unpublished paper presented at the 12th Language and Development Conference, Dakar, 28 November 2017.

of the conversation and notice they are being listened to, they feel part of the research and are likely to respond without hesitation. In the context of a learning assessment, working with local volunteers who speak the language of the children makes it possible for the assessment to be administered in a conversational tone to ease tension with the children and make them comfortable.

There have, however, also been several challenges working with volunteers. The first has been to convince policymakers and researchers that citizen-volunteers can assess and generate reliable and valid results on children's learning. Fortunately, an independent study undertaken by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) on the validity and reliability of Uwezo assessment using Uwezo volunteers compared to an expert rater confirmed 'high levels of agreement in scores' between the different assessors (ACER, 2015: p. 10). Furthermore, the Uwezo learning survey has been found to 'provide a better coverage of populations and specifically of hard-to-reach poorer areas than the international standardised household surveys' (Carr-Hill, 2017: p. 249): a finding which further confirms Uwezo assessment validity.

Another challenge has been the retention of volunteers, especially young volunteers who are always on the move looking for employment opportunities. At Uwezo, we have realised that where it is possible to find qualified, settled and mature community members, who are interested in education and willing to volunteer their time, it is these individuals who should be given first priority as they can be trained and retained easily. Furthermore, in remote areas, finding qualified volunteers within the same village is often a challenge. Sometimes recruitment of volunteers for a given surveyed 'enumeration area' (a defined geographical area, made up of a village, part of a village, or several villages combined) goes beyond the boundaries of the village in cases where there are no qualifying volunteers.

Finally, volunteering in the context of the Uwezo learning assessment is not free. There are associated costs, including providing modest funds to cover volunteers' expenses such as transport and refreshments while in the field. Given the large scale at which citizen-led assessments are conducted (requiring 60 volunteers per surveyed census district), these associated costs can be relatively high.

## The influence of Uwezo citizen-led assessments at global and national level

Uwezo's message, over the years, that 'schooling isn't leading to learning' (Uwezo, 2017) has gained traction nationally, regionally and globally.

At the global level, SDG 4 on education was instituted on the basis that the 2000–15 Education for All and Millennium Development Goals agendas had put much more focus on access than on quality. Many children were (and still are) in school and not learning. However, significantly, in late September 2017, the *World Development Report 2018: LEARNING to Realize Education's Promise* was published and its opening sentence was: 'Schooling is not the same as learning' (World Bank, 2018: p. 3). This was the core of the message that Uwezo, since 2009, inspired by India's ASER and in collaboration with other citizen-led learning assessments around the world under the PAL Network, helped to demonstrate and amplify.

Evidence from citizen-led assessments indicating that children were in school and not learning even the basic competences of reading and arithmetic contributed a great deal to bringing the issue of access plus learning to the centre of education discourse as espoused in SDG 4. Furthermore, evidence from Uwezo assessments focused attention on improving learning outcomes, especially early grade reading, in the three East African countries where it is implemented. The different interventions by developing partners in partnership with government, such as the USAID/RTI-funded Uganda School Health and Reading Program (SHRP)<sup>4</sup> and the DFID-funded Strengthening Education Systems for Improved Learning (SESIL),<sup>5</sup> draw from the available assessment evidence, such as Uwezo's, to justify investing in improving the foundations and early grade learning.

At the national level, Uwezo citizen-led assessments have helped to hold governments and key stakeholders accountable for children's learning, albeit with mixed negative and positive reactions to the assessment findings that have resulted. It has not been unusual for government officials to make statements such as the following, in reaction to Uwezo assessment findings that indicate that many children are not learning to read and count.

- 'We don't trust Uwezo methodology and use of unqualified volunteers,' Ministry of Education representative speaking at the Uwezo Tanzania (2012) report launch event on 17 December 2013.
- In October 2017, the state minister for sports in Uganda slammed the sixth Uwezo Uganda assessment report, which showed that upper primary school pupils lacked Primary 2 (second year of primary education) level literacy and numeracy competences (Uwezo, 2016). He described the report as 'malicious since the assessment parameters were not systematic and their credibility was questionable' (Kugonza, 2017).

4. See <https://www.educationinnovations.org/p/uganda-school-health-and-reading-program-shrp>

5. See <https://sts-international.org/portfolio/strengthening-education-systems-for-improved-learning/>

In some instances, however, the Ugandan government has referenced Uwezo findings when it has suited it. In March 2015, the Uganda National Teachers' Union (UNATU) announced that they would go on strike unless a promised ten per cent pay rise was included in the next budget. On 15 May 2015 they finally made good on their threat, announcing that the strike would start the following Monday, 18 May. The start of the strike coincided with the release of the Uwezo report, which showed that Uganda had performed poorly in literacy and numeracy learning outcomes across the region. This prompted the education ministry to scoff at UNATU's strike threats, urging the teachers to show value for the money they were already receiving (Talemwa & Nangonzi, 2015).

With the government using Uwezo assessment results as a basis for criticising teachers, teachers themselves have sometimes gone on the defensive claiming that 'Uwezo assessment is an abuse to teachers – I have not met a single teacher who confirms that the assessment was done in their school' (chairperson of a teachers' union). Such statements are made despite the fact that Uwezo assessment is done in the household and not at school.

Nevertheless, governments have been receptive to Uwezo findings on several occasions.

- While launching Uwezo Kenya's 2012 learning assessment report on 23 July 2013, which had indicated that many children completed primary schooling without the basic literacy and arithmetic competencies (Uwezo Kenya, 2013), the director general of Kenya Vision 2030 applauded the report as an accurate yardstick of the country's state of education. He cautioned thus: 'We do not have a choice, we must succeed in achieving Vision 2030 and education is a vital foundation' (Obala, 2013).
- While launching Uwezo Uganda's eighth assessment report on behalf of the minister of education and sports on 19 November 2019, which indicated that the number of primary school-going children who could read and count had dropped in the last three years (Uwezo, 2019), the director of education standards agreed that 'the government first concentrated on ensuring every child is enrolled in school which later caused overcrowding that has affected the quality of learning' (Ahimbisibwe, 2019). She assured that the report findings would be used to feed into Uganda's education sector's five-year strategic plan that was being developed.

## Conclusion: The future of Uwezo citizen-led learning assessments

This chapter has discussed the strengths of citizen-led assessments, particularly the strength of working with local volunteers who speak the language of the children being assessed, and the advantages of doing the assessment in the household (Mugo et al., 2016).

However, the assessments are also faced with some limitations that we are continuing to grapple with and to address. For example, much as Uwezo claims that when assessment is conducted in the household it is possible to reach all children, the truth is that there are some populations who do not live in conventional households. These include children living on the streets, children in foster homes, children in refugee settlements and also children in boarding schools. Over the years, Uwezo has been trying to close the gap, and to widen the reach and inclusion of different children in the assessment. For example, in 2017, Uwezo Uganda with support from the Humanitarian Emergency Refugee Response in Uganda (HERRU) and DFID Uganda, implemented the first ever pilot citizen-led assessment in refugee settlements in four refugee-hosting districts in Uganda (Uwezo, 2018). This new initiative again underscores the power of language in assessment: when assessing in a refugee settlement, it was critical to work with local refugee volunteers who spoke the language of the children.

Other challenges facing Uwezo citizen-led assessments include the current inability to assess children with severe disabilities, such as deaf people and blind people or those with mental illness, due to lack of capacity to do this. The narrow focus on basic literacy and numeracy is also an acknowledged limitation. We are exploring and developing the possibility of including assessment of selected soft and emotional skills and everyday adult knowledge into future Uwezo assessments. Finally, ensuring the comparability of assessment results within and across the three countries of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania is an issue we are continuing to refine. These three countries implementing Uwezo citizen-led assessments in East Africa have different education contexts, and work with different curricula. Therefore, trying to compare findings across these countries requires ensuring that the assessment tasks follow the national curriculum of that particular country such that when a claim is made that Primary 3 children (in the third year of primary) are not able to read a Primary 2-level story, the story in question is at the level of that country's curriculum so that valid comparisons can be made.

These developments will take shape in the future given the appropriate funding, and will help refine the citizen-led approach to assessment.

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