

Unravelling the Enablers for Literacy and Numeracy for Children : Lessons from Kenya, Nepal, and Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Many children go through multiple years of formal education without acquiring basic Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) skills. Evidence from People's Action for Learning (PAL) Network has shown that schooling does not equal learning. Before COVID-19, 617 million children and adolescents worldwide did not have the foundational skills of which 202 million were from Sub-Saharan Africa (UIS, 2022). PAL Network initiated the 'My Village' project to respond to this learning crisis by supporting all children of primary school age in a village to be able to read and do basic math.

My Village project, which is being piloted across Kenya, Tanzania, and Nepal, employs a multi-pronged approach to foster learning among children. The first is learning camps that follow the accelerated learning pedagogy, which emphasizes beginning with the learners at their level (identified through one-on-one assessment), regardless of their age or grade. A total of 225 learning camps are currently supporting 12,621 children across the three countries. Secondly, short theme-based messages are used to complement the learning sessions and aid parental engagement. The third approach of community libraries focuses on encouraging a culture of reading among children and sustaining the learning gains. Finally, life skills sessions are incorporated to develop socio-emotional competencies of children that in turn enhance their ability to learn.

This paper will present the status of learning outcomes of children using results from the baseline assessment conducted in 291 villages across Kenya, Tanzania, and Nepal, reaching more than 39,000 children. Gender disaggregated data from baseline assessment will be presented to explore the role of gender in the realization of foundational learning outcomes. Based on the experiences from the project, including the monitoring data from learning camps, the paper will provide effective strategies and key determinants for enabling FLN skills in all children.

Keywords: Learning outcomes, Foundational Literacy and Numeracy

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BACKGROUND

Evidence from PAL Network has shown that schooling does not equal learning. Many children go through multiple years of formal education without learning the basics of reading and math. Before COVID-19, 617 million children and adolescents worldwide did not have Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) skills of which 202 million were from Sub-Saharan Africa (UIS, 2022). In Kenya, Citizen-Led Assessments by Uwezo, have shown that almost 50% of school aged children are unable to read and comprehend a simple text of grade two level. My Village project responds to this learning crisis by supporting ALL children of primary school age in a village to be able to read and do basic math.

MY VILLAGE: A LEARNING VILLAGE

My Village is a three-country pilot of PAL Network's "Whole Village" approach to support a million learners in the next five years. The community intervention leaves no child behind—children learn to read if they do not know how to read, they read to learn if they have mastered reading. Currently, the project is being piloted in 100 villages each across Kenya, Nepal, and Tanzania.

The four components of the My Village approach include—
(1) Accelerated Learning Camps: My village learning camps follow Accelerated Learning Pedagogy (ALP), focusing on individualized learning based on learners' levels, regardless of age or grade. Children undergo assessments to determine their learning levels, enabling appropriate grouping and facilitating level-appropriate activities. Periodic assessments



Exhibit 1. My Village project implementation through learning camps.

(2) Short Messaging Service (SMS): This component complements face-to-face sessions and promotes community participation. Weekly messages include learning exercises and activity instructions, based on camp themes and children's exposure.

(3) Community Libraries: In selected villages, children are supported to access reading materials through community libraries to help children cultivate a reading culture and sustain learning gains. The three implementing countries have adopted the most feasible model as per the needs of the children. For instance, in Nepal 50 movable libraries (books in a bag) have been set up. The Tanzania team has mapped the community spaces and will work with schools to conduct library/book reading sessions. In Kenya, the teams distributed story booklets among households as a resource pack, whose use is being monitored before moving to the community reading space.



Exhibit 2. Moving Libraries in Nepal.

(4) Life Skills Sessions: The life skill sessions are conducted in select villages with children in the age group of 12-17 years. The conceptual framework of life skills for the project is focused on three pillars: i) Communication; ii) Problem-solving; and iii) Collaboration. Further, an assessment tool was prepared to assess children across these three pillars.

PAL Network has also partnered with researchers to conduct A/B testing of the pilot to find and evaluate the most effective pathways to optimize the program.

BASELINE ASSESSMENT METHODS

The baseline assessment aimed to establish the starting point of the project's intervention, gathering valuable data on the existing conditions of FLN skills among primary school-aged children in the targeted villages. The assessment was pegged at a grade 2/3 level, and the language of assessment used was Kiswahili in Kenya and Tanzania, while Nepali was used in Nepal.

Sampling and Preparation: To ensure representative data, county/district and village sampling were meticulously carried out in each of the project's target countries. A common assessment tool was developed, while contextualizing it to suit the specific circumstances of each country. Additionally, a set of contextual questions was formulated to gather information about the villages, households, parents, and children, providing a comprehensive understanding of the local context.

Training and Tools: Detailed training materials were prepared for both trainers and volunteers to facilitate the baseline assessment process. A total of 409 volunteers residing in the sampled villages were engaged in the assessment. The volunteers underwent a two-day training program, which included theoretical and practical sessions, enhancing their mastery of the assessment process.

Coverage and Completion: The baseline assessment was conducted over a period from October 2022 to early January 2023. In total, 291 villages were surveyed across the three countries. The assessment reached 22,323 households, and 39,028 children were assessed in the process.

Exhibit 3. Project Reach at Baseline.

Country	Villages	Households	Children
Kenya	98	2,377	4,352
Nepal	94	9,280	16,680
Tanzania	99	10,666	17,996
Total	291	22,323	39,028

KEY FINDINGS

Gender Disaggregated Reach: Overall, slightly more girls than boys were reached through the baseline assessment. However, in Nepal, there were more boys reached compared to girls.

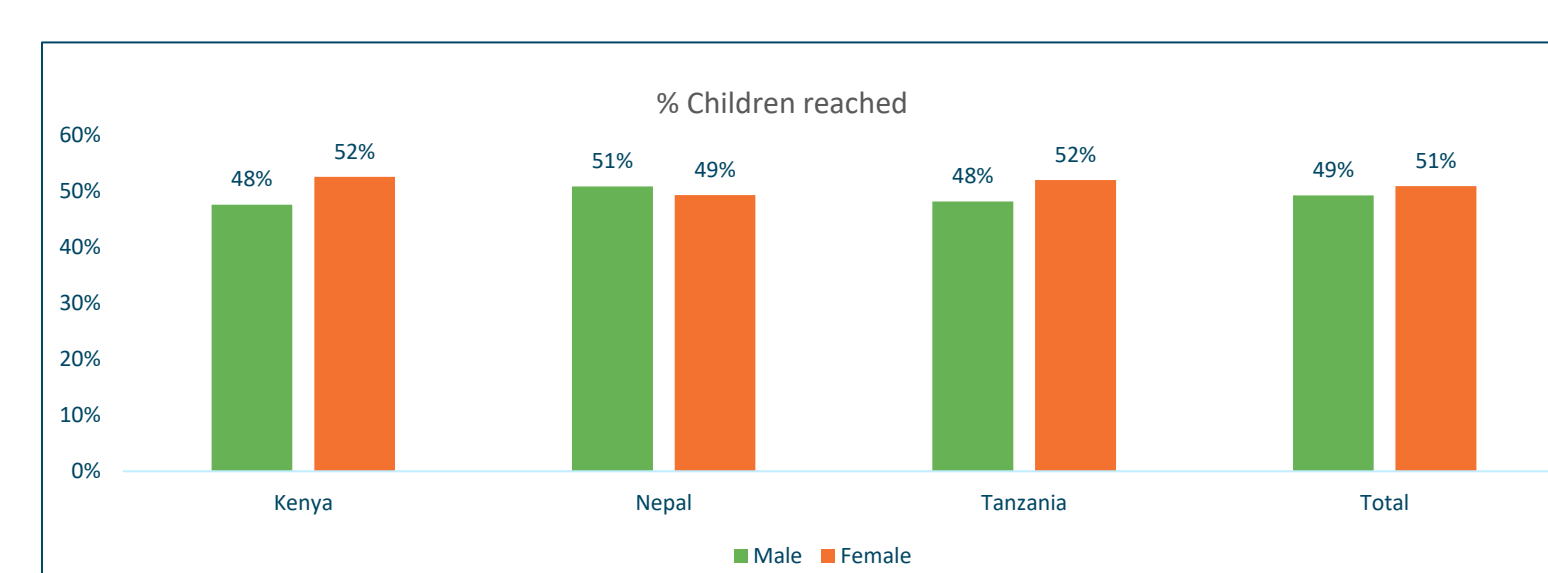


Exhibit 4. Percentage of children reached disaggregated by gender

Literacy and Reading Levels: The baseline assessment revealed that more than half of the children required support to acquire basic literacy skills. Specifically, in Nepal, a significant proportion of children (64%) were in need of intervention to improve their literacy levels. In Kenya and Tanzania, more girls than boys demonstrated the ability to read a story (Exhibit 5).

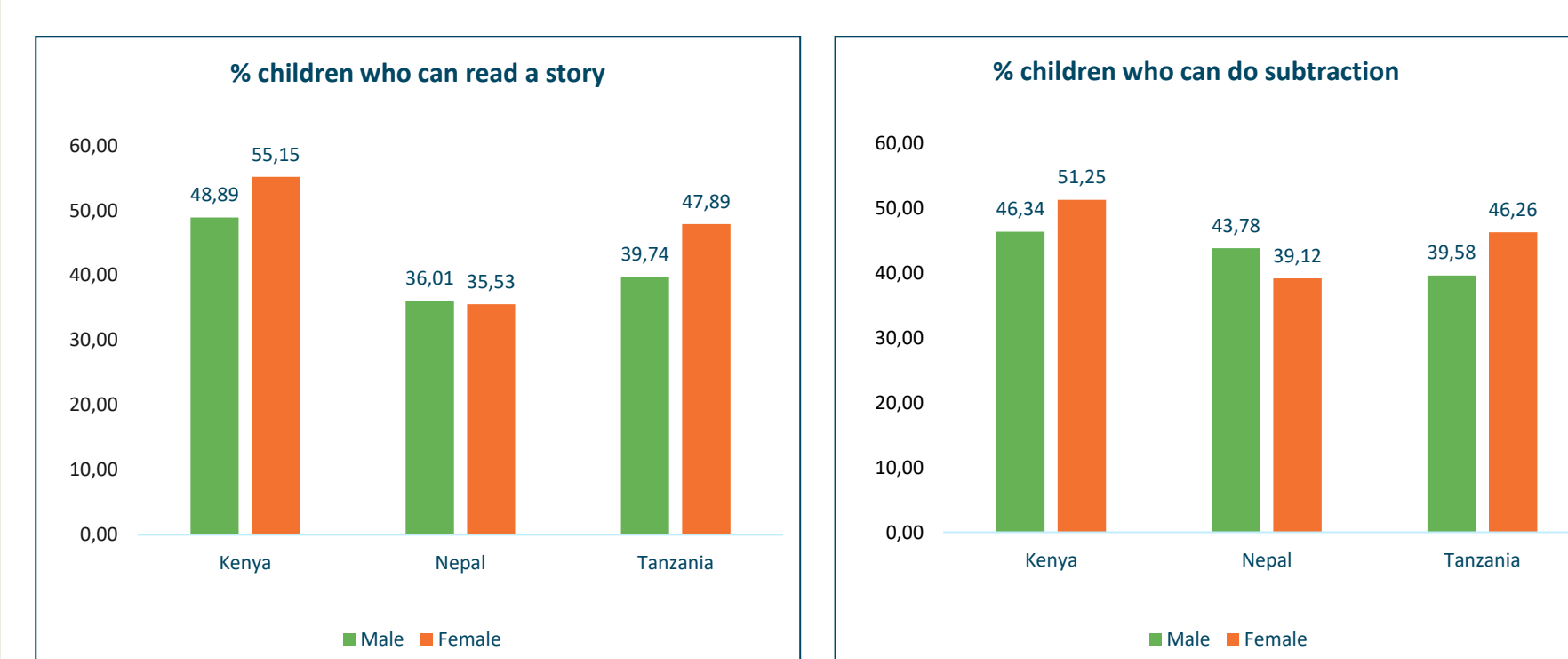


Exhibit 5. Children who can read a story by gender

Numeracy Levels: More than half of the children in Nepal and Tanzania struggled with subtraction, especially when it involved regrouping. In all countries, the number of children who could do subtraction was lower than those who could do addition. Notably, in Kenya and Tanzania, more girls than boys demonstrated proficiency in subtraction. In contrast, in Nepal, boys outperformed girls in both addition and subtraction (Exhibit 6).

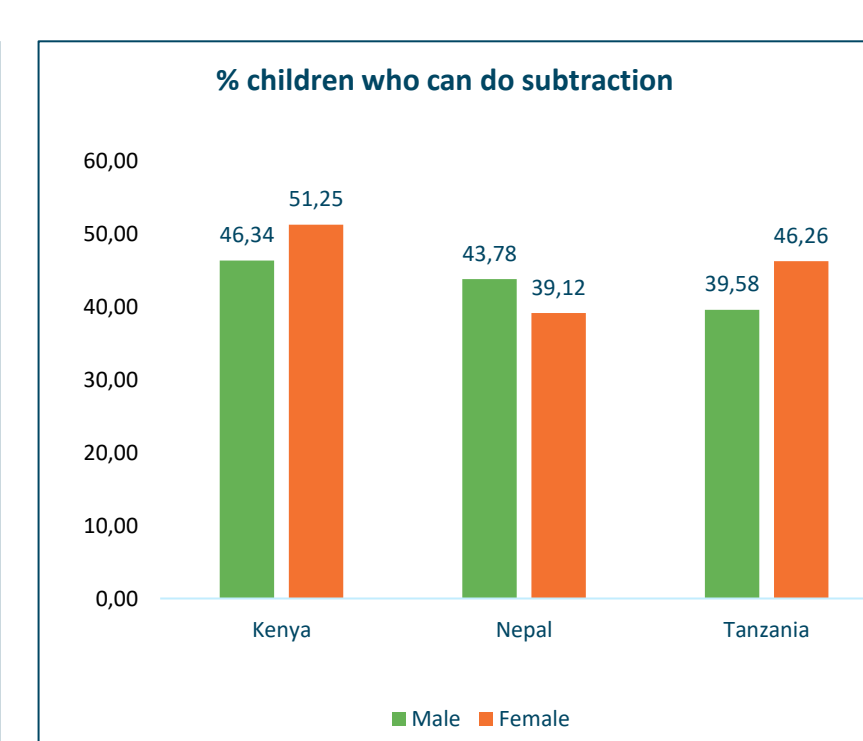


Exhibit 6. Children who can do subtraction by gender

LEARNING CAMPS SNAPSHOT

The project has established learning camps, which serve as focal points for implementing the multi-pronged approach to foster learning among the children.

Development and Contextualization of Learning Camp Materials: To ensure the effectiveness and relevance of the learning camps, a comprehensive set of learning materials was developed and contextualized for each country. These materials include reading volunteer handbooks, story booklets, picture cards, charts, and data recording sheets.

Training of Trainers and Volunteers: Training activities commenced towards the end of November 2022 to adequately prepare the facilitators for their roles in the learning camps.

Progress of Learning Camps: A total of 255 learning camps are currently operational and serve as centers for promoting literacy and numeracy skills among 13,064 children, with the support of 463 dedicated volunteers across the three countries.

Exhibit 7. Reach of Learning camps (as of 20th June 2023).

Country	Camps	Volunteers	Children
Kenya	86	86	1,417
Nepal	121	281	5,830
Tanzania	48	96	5,817
Total	255	463	13,064

Monitoring Tools: To ensure the effectiveness and quality of the learning camps, an array of monitoring tools have been developed. Some of the key monitoring tools include the classroom observation form, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) form, Key Informant Interview (KII) form, Parental Engagement Tool, Project Management Team (PMT) Engagement Tool, Volunteer Feedback Tools, Monitoring Frameworks, and reporting templates.

Exhibit 8 offers a snapshot of the implementation status of learning camps in Kenya, focusing on the progress made by learners after 20 days of camp. It reveals that after 20 days of camp, 75% of the learners demonstrated progress by at least one competency level. Among the learners tracked from baseline to post-camp 2, 22% of them attained proficiency levels in foundational literacy and numeracy skills.

Exhibit 8. Learning Camp Impact: Progress Snapshot in Kenya.

Baseline levels	Tracked Learners from Baseline	Progress in learning camps					Dropped from the camp	Total Progressed by at least one level after Post Camp 1
		Beginner	Letter	Word	Para	Story		
Beginner	136	9	44	18	62	2	3	126
Letter	192	1	28	110	46	4	3	160
Word	225		7	59	103	51	10	154
Para	172			8	56	103	5	103
Total	725*							543
								75%

Key	
Improved	Green
Stayed same	Yellow
Learning loss	Red

*Tracked 725 learners, monitoring and data validation is still ongoing.

CONCLUSION

The baseline findings and monitoring data from learning camps have been instrumental in shaping the project's interventions and highlighting the urgency of addressing the existing challenges in FLN skills. The project has encountered several challenges during implementation, such as the high turnover of volunteers and the recruitment of volunteers in rural areas. Accessing some remote communities with challenging terrains has also posed logistical challenges. Identifying suitable locations for learning camps and managing implementation costs have been significant considerations for the project team. Despite the challenges, the project has also identified numerous opportunities. Diverse learning spaces, with community support in providing spaces for learning camps, have been available in most locations. Moreover, local administration support and knowledge/skills building among volunteers have contributed to the success of the project's interventions. Notably, the project's positive impact is evident in Tanzania, where 24 out-of-school children have re-enrolled, and youth volunteerism in Kenya has been emphasized through a leadership fellowship program.

As the project progresses, continuous data collection and analysis will enable the project team to refine and optimize the My Village approach further. In conclusion, the 'My Village' project's multi-pronged approach, shows promise in addressing the learning crisis and fostering FLN skills in primary school-aged children, ultimately transforming communities and villages for the better.