



Students using Tusome instruction material.  
Photo by Faith Njoki Njung'e/USAID Kenya

# A Journey to Self-Reliance

## Successfully Scaling and Transitioning Kenya's Tusome Early-Grade Reading Program

### BACKGROUND

Ten years ago, Kenya faced a serious education challenge that threatened to hinder the country's ambitious development goals and the full potential of its future workforce. Standardized tests showed that fewer than 10% of primary school-age children who had reached Grade 2 were reading at the national grade-level benchmarks in Kenya's official languages of English and Kiswahili.

Investment in education provides clear returns for global development. Better instruction leads to improved learning outcomes, which lead to

more employable graduates, better health outcomes, and improved national development indicators.<sup>1</sup> A child's first three years of school, in particular, are highly predictive of future academic performance. Children who do not learn to read within those first years of schooling are more likely to repeat classes and drop out of school altogether.<sup>2</sup>

The Kenyan government recognized a pressing need for a cost-effective, high-impact and scalable approach to improve students' foundational literacy and numeracy skills. In 2011, it partnered

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development, "USAID Education: All Children Reading," September 11, 2017, [www.usaid.gov](http://www.usaid.gov).

<sup>2</sup> Gove, A. and P. Cvelich, *Early Reading: Igniting Education for All. A report by the Early Grade Learning Community of Practice*, Research Triangle Institute, 2010, [www.rti.org](http://www.rti.org).



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## TUSOME IS AN EXEMPLAR IN HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY DESIGN, IMPLEMENT, SCALE AND SUSTAIN AN EARLY-GRADE READING PROGRAM—AND, ULTIMATELY, HOW TO SUPPORT PARTNER COUNTRIES IN THEIR JOURNEY TO SELF-RELIANCE.



Ministry of Education Secretary, Dr. Belio Kipsang, distributing Tusome books to Grade 2 pupils of Kieleeleni Primary School in Mbooni East Sub County, Makueni County. The books are distributed at a ratio of 1:1. Photo by Faith Njoki Njung'e/USAID Kenya

### PROGRAM OUTCOMES

**7.4 MILLION KENYAN STUDENTS** IN GRADES 1-3 REACHED WITH THE TUSOME PROGRAM

OVER **70,000 KENYAN TEACHERS** RECEIVED EVIDENCE-BASED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

OVER **24 MILLION LEARNING MATERIALS** DISTRIBUTED TO SCHOOLS SINCE 2014, MAKING KENYA THE ONLY COUNTRY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA WHERE **EVERY CHILD HAS A TEXTBOOK†**

OVER 20,000 PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS, 5,000 PRIVATE SCHOOLS, AND 1,500 LOW-COST PRIVATE SCHOOLS ACROSS KENYA ARE USING THE TUSOME PROGRAM

NEARLY **66% OF GRADE 2 STUDENTS NOW READ AT GRADE-LEVEL** IN ENGLISH AND KISWAHILI

PHASED **TRANSITION OF PROGRAM** TO KENYAN GOVERNMENT.

† Textbooks under the Tusome program are developmentally-appropriate, and culturally-relevant learner books. They include color illustrations, a deliberate departure from the black and white print books previously available to early grade students.

with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Department for International Development (DFID) in the development of the Primary Math and Reading (PRIMR) Initiative that was implemented by RTI International. The PRIMR initiative sought to improve literacy and mathematics outcomes for Grade 1 and 2 students in 1,384 primary schools in Kenya.

The impacts of the PRIMR initiative were overwhelmingly positive. When it concluded in 2014, students in PRIMR-supported schools were nearly **three times** more likely to read at the national benchmark than students in non-PRIMR supported schools.

To ensure all students in Kenya could benefit from the initiative, the government decided to scale the literacy component of the PRIMR initiative to a five-year, nationwide effort under a new name: Tusome.

### LET'S READ!

Tusome, which means “let’s read” in Kiswahili, is unique to other early-grade reading programs in two significant ways: (1) its strong evidence-based approach and (2) its ability to be implemented cost-effectively at a national scale.

Nearly five years after the program launch, researchers from the ResilientAfrica Network at Makerere University, the University of Nairobi, and Catholic Relief Services, with support from LASER PULSE at Purdue University, conducted a one-year study to document the key elements of Tusome’s success and lessons learned. Researchers used stakeholder interviews, focus group discussions and on-site observations to examine Tusome’s successful implementation, on course to become an increasingly self-reliant, government-owned education program. They also assessed how the program maintained a high impact on student learning outcomes, generated sufficient commitment, and built the right capacity at scale.

### KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

The successful transition of Tusome’s management and implementation by the government is attributed to (1) employing a gradual release to system-level ownership, (2) strategically planning for regional inequities and vulnerable populations, (3) institutionalizing the core program elements within existing systems, (4) engaging key stakeholders, and (5) capacity strengthening across the system.

#### 1. Gradual release to system-level ownership

Transitioning the NGO-led program to the Kenyan government involved a phased approach, with incremental

**“WITH EACH SUBSEQUENT TRAINING, YOU WOULD SEE A DIFFERENT ASPECT BROUGHT IN, AND DIFFERENT TEAMS, UNTIL EVENTUALLY WE WERE TRAINED ON SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION DELIVERY AND MATERIALS, AND [EVERYONE] GOT ON BOARD FULLY.”  
—COUNTY EDUCATION OFFICER**

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benchmarks, jointly designed by RTI and the Ministry of Education. Initial funding was fully covered by USAID, after which program costs were met by the government of Kenya. To date, the Government of Kenya has taken over the financing of printing and distributing Grade 1 books. The program’s final stage will be fully funded by the government.

**1. Strategic planning for regional inequities and vulnerable populations**

The government worked with RTI to engage local Curriculum Support Officers (CSOs) and instructional coaches to provide teachers with continuous professional development and coaching in their own schools and communities.

In addition, to ensure that vulnerable populations would benefit from Tusome, the government incorporated Special Needs Education training for teachers in the program and adapted learning materials to meet the needs of students and teachers with visual and hearing impairment. The program also incorporated gender-sensitive pedagogy to address gender stereotypes in its instructional content.

**2. Institutionalizing core program elements within existing systems**

The Tusome program was made a national priority within the Ministry of Education, with governance and oversight by the Minister of Education. This ensured common understanding from the highest level of the education system. The coaching support provided by RTI-recruited tutors was filled under Tusome by Ministry CSOs who worked at the county-level. This change institutionalized a key PRIMR intervention of coaching within the existing human resources of the Government of Kenya education system.

Additionally, the Ministry of Education also hired more staff to handle administrative duties, freeing up CSOs to spend more time coaching and supporting teachers. Finally, Primary Teachers Training Colleges incorporated the Tusome pedagogy in their pre-service teachers program to ensure the new cadre of primary school education professionals were familiar with the Tusome approach.

**3. Engaging key stakeholders**

Continuous engagement of education stakeholders at the national, county and community levels was a core element of Tusome’s success. Each actor in the education system had a clear expectation of what students



The Tusome early grade reading program strengthened families ability to support children’s reading development. Photo by Faith Njoki Njung’e/USAID Kenya

should learn, as well as an understanding of their role in the process.

Tusome involved key agencies to work on the scale-up with the Ministry of Education—including the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development, Kenya National Examinations Council, Kenya National Union of Teachers, the Kenya Institute for Special Education and the Teacher’s Service Commission. Additionally, focal persons within each of the 47 counties in the country were engaged to support implementation at the county level.

Tusome established a Youth Fund to empower existing youth groups to promote literacy activities within their communities. Over 20 youth groups were awarded financial grants to sensitize parents and other community-level stakeholders in their counties on the program and how they can participate more actively in their children’s learning.

**4. Capacity strengthening across the system**

Across the education system, national student benchmarks for reading in both Kiswahili and English were communicated. Clarity on the expected student learning benchmarks and continuous coaching and training strengthened teachers’ and headteachers’ pedagogical capacity.

## KEY LESSONS LEARNED

The Tusome early-grade reading program provided some key lessons to consider when scaling an education program:

### SCALE

- Assess for any contextual issues contributing to attrition of key education personnel to identify mitigation measures early.
- Integrate Special Needs Education and adapt materials for learners with disabilities early in the program.
- Engage local publishing stakeholders early to determine areas of mutual collaboration.

### COMMITMENT

- Identify key actors in the education sector and engage them throughout the course of program implementation.
- Promote the development of joint annual work plans with all education stakeholders.
- Encourage quarterly or semi-annual reviews tracking progress and institutionalizing results with stakeholders.

### CAPACITY

- Engage gender specialists early in the process to assess and mainstream gender considerations into future literacy programs.
- Integrate teacher training with instructional material inventorying to ensure adequate teaching and learning material are available throughout the year.

The Tusome program supported the Government of Kenya's ability to use Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to make evidence-based decisions. With dashboards that aggregated real-time data on student performance and teacher monitoring, the Ministry of Education was able to make evidence-based programmatic changes. With real-time data on student performance and teacher monitoring, the Ministry of Education was able to make evidence-based programmatic changes and helped ensure the pedagogical and instructional elements of the program met quality standards .

Additionally, the government facilitated a culture of accountability through emphasizing the use of a scripted teacher's guide to deliver high-quality, evidence-based lessons in English and Kiswahili, as well as data-driven coaching and supervision of teachers. CSOs were equipped with computer tablets with an open-source software called Tangerine®. The software helped CSOs to coach teachers more strategically. This important tool strengthened the capacity of county-level education officers to track the performance of learners in the county, while also keeping teachers and CSOs accountable.

The program also developed the capacity of Kenyan education bodies to improve, supply and distribute new literacy materials. The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development and the Kenyan Publishers Association developed new leveled reader frameworks, and the Kenya National Examinations Council developed new reading benchmarks and national early-grade reading assessments.

## CONCLUSION

The Tusome early-grade reading program has been successfully implemented and is on course to become a self-reliant, government-owned education program. Its pedagogical approach, instructional materials, and data-driven instructional coaching made a significant impact on student learning and educational equity. Its ability to develop a process for a gradual release to system-level ownership, strategically plan for regional inequities and vulnerable populations, and institutionalize core program elements within the existing systems, all contributed to the program's sustained impact on student learning outcomes. Its continuous engagement of education stakeholders at the local, county and national levels helped generate sufficient commitment to ensure the program implementation at scale. Finally, communicating national benchmarks of learning outcomes and the use of ICT to track student performance and make evidence-based programmatic changes not only supported fidelity of the program's implementation but also built the right capacity to support government ownership.

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