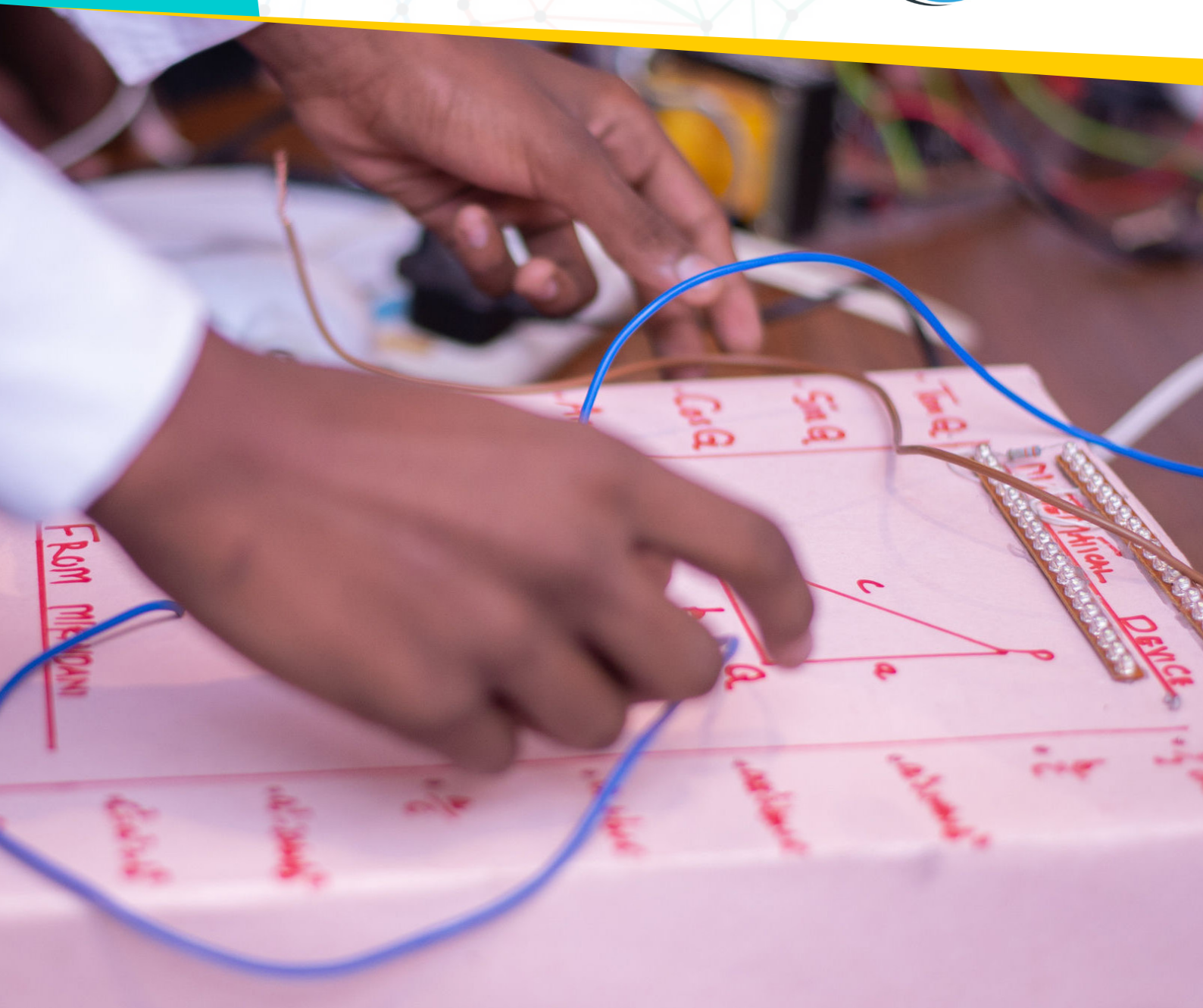


BRIEF  
FEBRUARY 2020



REGIONAL  
EDUCATION  
LEARNING  
INITIATIVE



# The Regional Education Learning Initiative

The interplay of top-down and bottom-up strategies to improving learning outcomes



# INTRODUCTION

Top-down, bottom-up, and incremental approaches are usually applied to the implementation of policies (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Top-down strategies refer to a more linear, unitary and rational process where decisions are from the top, sometimes made by those at the head of institutions, while the bottom-up approach is relatively communicative and emanates from those who are the likely recipients of the policies or decisions, and are often those closest to the implementation process and have the greatest bearing to the outcomes of policies or programs (Darling-Hammond, 1990; Haddad & Demsky, 1995). Even though these approaches have been solely applied to the policy process, they can also explain implementation mechanisms within education programs that have expansive in nature and seeks to influence policy outcomes in a particular educational skill area—learning outcomes.

## What is RELI

The Regional Education Learning Initiative (RELI) started as the active implementation of a vision for improved learning outcomes in East Africa. Following the initial discussions held by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) and an international donor, RELI was conceptualized as a collaborative coordinated by different actors within the East African education sector, ranging from civil society and

research organizations. Totalling 70 as of December 2019, the RELI member organizations work together on a shared platform, exchanging knowledge on what works to improve learning outcomes within the region (RELI, 2017). The goal of RELI remains to empower its members to become active and influential organizations who collectively champion improved learning for children across East Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (RELI, 2017, 2018). At the onset of the program RELI objectives included; better coordination and alignment; improved learning outcomes; policy influence; and thematic principles of good practice. Membership was a nd still remains by invitation only and brings together a diverse, energetic and impactful group of organizations, with a particular focus on education for marginalized and vulnerable populations. RELI is co-managed by APHRC as the Regional Hub, its donor with the support of a dynamic team of professionals in Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL), communications as well as experts from the education sector (RELI, 2019).

The need to collaborate with and among each of the 70 organizations. At the onset of RELI, collaboration was an immediate need owing to two main factors; that all the organizations were championing for improved learning outcomes in East Africa, and apart from the organizations being funded by the same donor, they are bound by the agenda of SDG 4 (to ensure inclusive and equitable quality



education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all). The initial presentation of RELI at the 2017 Regional Convening was met with a lot of skepticism, with some of the organizations expressing fear over sharing of data, understanding RELI as additional workload to their projects and the fear of losing their identity as individual organizations. However, as the “groundswell” and the “bottom up” approach gained momentum, organizations owned RELI and became willing to share information, to trust and to learn from each other. Collaboration was made possible when organizations understood the idea behind learning, and that the success of RELI required learning and collaboration to achieve transformation. Moreover, the work of the MEL experts who spent a lot of time working with individual organizations, enabled the process of building the voice of these institutions and allaying fears about them losing their authenticity within the RELI fraternity. The process of collaboration also grew out of better country and thematic group planning and actions and better organization at the Support Team (ST).

## The Evolution of RELI using top down and bottom up approach

At its initiation, RELI was largely driven by its top coordinating organ made up of the co-lead organizations (its donor and APHRC), and only towards the end of the first year (early 2018) was the leadership expanded to include other members, with representation based on member-states, MEL mentors, communication experts, and the Principal Investigators (PIs).

This gave rise to the support team whose mandate was to provide joint leadership and steer RELI beyond the objective of its inception phase towards a more collaborative approach. The first year of the RELI program was oriented around a

more or less centralized organized platform, where members had been grouped into several thematic groups: Teacher Development (also called Learner-centered Teaching in Kenya), Values and Life skills, Flexible and Adaptable Teaching, Learning, Equity and Inclusive Education, with the Accountability Cluster becoming stronger towards the end of the 2018-2019 programming year. In the same year, the Policy Engagement and Communication thematic group in Kenya joined with the rest of the groups in Kenya, since it was necessary for them to pick up on issues emanating from all the other thematic groups, while Flexible Teaching and Adaptable Learning merged with Equity and Inclusion. It was necessary to have a more linear approach at the start of RELI in order to be able to align issues, synchronize programming at various levels, organizations, experts, to be able to think individually and collectively towards a purpose.

However, by the second year, it was clear that there was momentum towards a more bottom- up driven process. The switch to this approach can be attributed to five key issues: first, the leadership and the center of RELI became grounded in the thematic groups; secondly, there was the urgency for the agenda to be grounded at country level; thirdly, there was a need for a more participatory leadership approach that included a wider support team comprising of the MEL mentors and communication experts; the internalization of the importance and the need to collaborate with and among each of the 70 organizations; and finally, was the steady rise of member- driven Special Interest Group (SIGs) agenda that emerged out of the member need to learn across the region that uniquely complemented the regional learning areas (values and life skills and Teacher Centered Learning) and lastly better understanding of RELI, more so as a member-driven initiative, aimed at improving their programming and learning outcomes.



## Thematic group leadership

In the 2018-2019 program year, the thematic group leaders and members took on a more vigorous approach to their work. This vigor was driven by the realization that a lot of focus was on the thematic groups and that they were driving the agenda for the respective countries of Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania (APHRC, 2018; RELI, 2017, 2018, 2019).

The vigor was largely driven in part, by a better understanding of the roles of the thematic groups, as was clarified and discussed with these leaders in one of the Support Team leadership meetings held in Nairobi in February 2018. The shared communication and understanding between the overall leadership of RELI and the thematic group leads signified a process that is characteristic of a bottom up approach where those closest to the implementation process should have the greatest contribution, and subsequently the greatest impact on what the outcomes of programs should be (Haddad & Demsky, 1995).

More so, a greater engagement of the thematic groups and their leaders after the communicative process has enabled RELI to learn that in any program, there are groups who matter the most, and who are in close interaction with the intended recipients of our work (Twersky, Buchanan, & Threlfall, 2013). If they are not engaged fully and we do not tap into their experiences we may lose insights of those for whom the programs were intended to benefit—in this case the children in East Africa. For even greater impact of RELI there is still need for greater engagement among the thematic groups at country-level.

The urgency of a stronger country leadership and a focused agenda. With the end of the first year, RELI gained stability and the understanding that it is critical for countries to lead the Network alongside the thematic groups. To this end, the country-level leadership in the three countries—Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania—went through a process of role clarification, much like the thematic groups (APHRC, 2018; RELI, 2018). This invigorated the leadership, and as a result became better organized, and well-placed to take advantage of the resources within the RELI platform to get better results from the different countries.

In the 2018-2019 program year, there emerged a dynamic leadership in the national groups, spurred by the election of the respective leaders. Of significance was the emergence of an innovative leadership style incubated in Tanzania, with a leadership team tasked with discussing issues and ideas before sharing with the wider group for input (RELI, 2018). This rich mix of issues around country leadership, and the need for a focused agenda, enabled more members to step into leadership roles and build the groundswell. This in turn enabled learning and transformation from the national to the regional level.

Country and thematic leaders have taken their position as 'bottom- uppers' who have responded to the urgency of the issues affecting learning outcomes at both national and thematic levels. This has been through the analysis of the context of their countries and the multiplicity of actors involved at the local level (Sabatier, 1986) on a problem or issue. In 2019, the countries became autonomous with country hubs established in Kenya and Tanzania. The importance of this approach is to spur engagements within

countries by grounding the leadership, resources and decision-making at that level. Despite the growth that has been experienced within the country teams, there are areas that still need attention including; availability of time by all players, commitment to lead, verve needed to follow up on tasks, and monitoring of the kind of support needed to effectively deliver on the tasks at that level, as well as inform future planning and resources allocation.

## Participatory leadership approach that included a wider support team

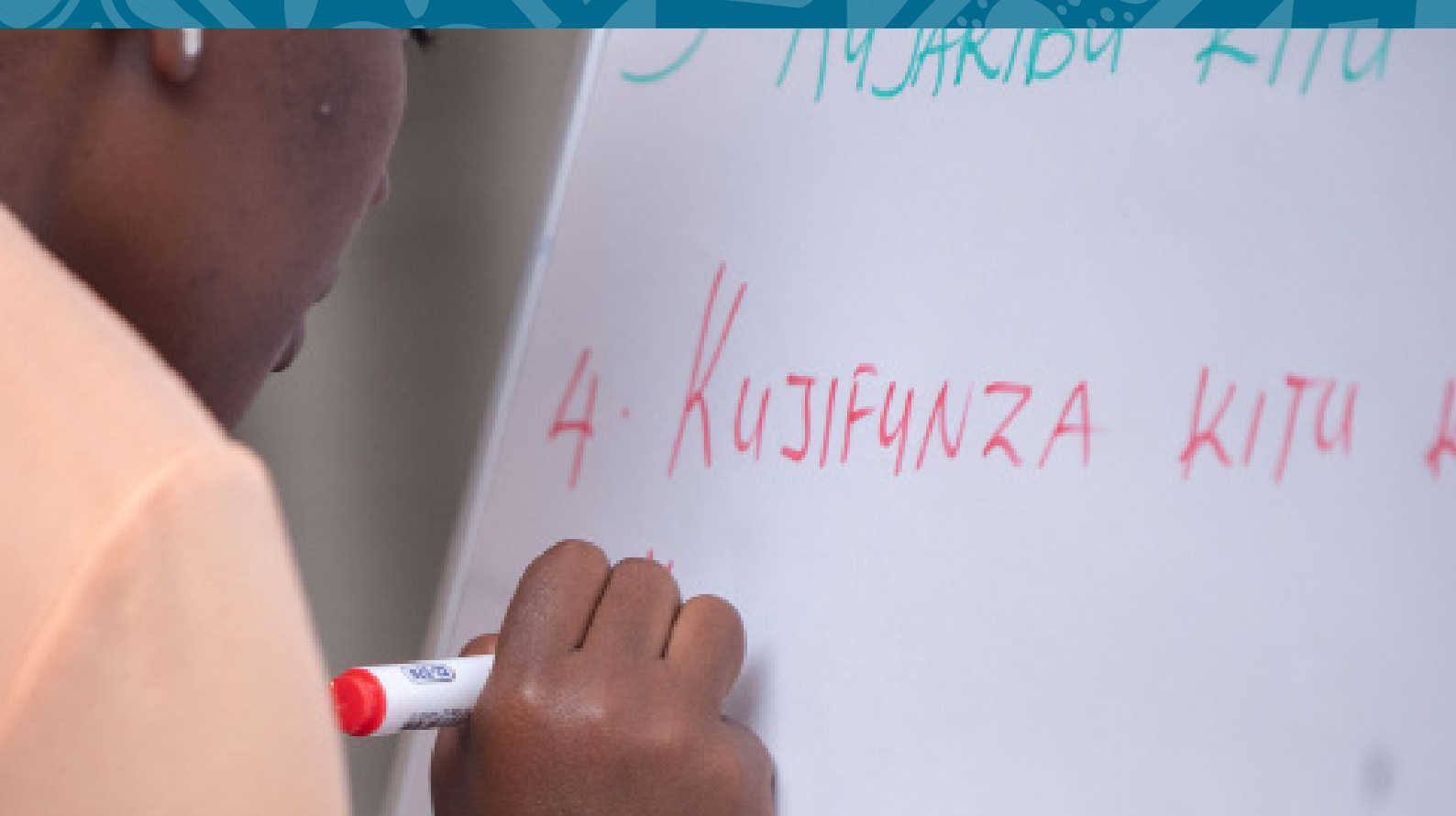
The incorporation of new members into the Support Team (ST) enhanced the discussions and brought wider consensus to the decisions made. For instance, through the participation of the MEL mentors, the learning agenda was better understood by the team, and it became easier to speak to it, beyond the ST. The communication team of experts catalyzed discussions on the RELI Vision, and half way into the second year, it was clear that RELI had crystallized into three main pillars; transformed organizations, a knowledge hub, and policy influence.

This served to anchor the objectives of RELI as crafted at the onset of the program. The participatory approach and the inclusion of more RELI members into the decision-making organ of RELI, enabled wider participation across RELI and thereby giving room for articulation of and listening to issues. In addition, inclusion of members allowed for the shift from a more linear process of leadership to one that is more cyclic; with greater contributions from the roots, thereby necessitating a constant shift in roles from listeners to initiators of innovative ideas and back. In the third year of RELI it would be helpful to show how the ST can foster better collaboration, so that work flows across the team for better efficiency while allowing for cross pollination of ideas from the bottom up.

## Emergence of Special Interest Groups (SIGs)

At the onset of RELI there were both thematic groups and regional clusters grouped according to the various programs of work that were being implemented by each organization (see table 1). In 2017, there were hardly any SIGs, while at the Regional convening in 2018, there were a couple of SIGs—significant among them being the SIG on Secondary Education. The rationale for having the SIGs was that there were RELI members who wanted to work on key issues of special interest to sub-populations, whose content was not exclusively covered by the thematic groups, within the countries.

Towards the end of Year Two (July 2019), there were close to eight SIGs—Secondary education, African philosophy and education, Teaching at the Right Level, Privatization and the Right to Education, Technology in Education, Pastoralist Education, Language and Instruction, and School Leadership. These SIGs had significant following, as they articulated specific issues relevant to education challenges affecting children in East Africa. The emergence of SIGs in the second year of RELI was a sign that members were ready to adapt the network to work for them, from the bottom up.



# CONCLUSION

RELI continues to give member organizations an opportunity to collaborate and co-create evidence, which RELI members collectively use to influence policies around the education of children in East Africa. In addition, RELI members have had an opportunity to learn together, and this learning has been effective when RELI members at thematic group or country level come to the realization that they are the only ones who can contextualize and rationalize the evidence. Collaboration and co creation signaled that RELI could effectively stand on her feet with a wider supportive and included base, supporting the top.

In order for RELI members to have felt comfortable to take up leadership roles from the bottom up, it was important to have the requisite capacity to do so. It is this gap that the MEL mentors readily filled to enable the 70 member organizations

to benefit from capacity building on Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) which has enabled them improve their project models and systems. This has allowed the members of RELI to readily step into new roles, share learning widely within their networks in order to learn from others, and subsequently transform their organizations.

The future of RELI as an innovative learning platform is to harness the “power of the bottom” through thematic group learning, grounded in country spaces, to influence what happens at the top—not only in the leadership RELI but also at the policy level in East Africa and beyond. Within the short period that the RELI program has been running, many other similar interest groups have emerged with learning platforms and an urgency to bring evidence to bear on the practice of actors on various issues affecting the education sector in the region.

Table 1: The Regional and Thematic Clusters in 2017

Countries	Teacher Development	Flexible and Adaptable Learning	Life-skills	Accountability
Uganda	Enabling Teachers as professionals	Quality of education of children who are marginalized	Development and assessment of life skills	
Tanzania	Teacher/ Head teacher and the Quality of teaching	Inclusive education: girls' education. Gender parity, marginalized	Youth Development/ mentoring, and life skills	Accountability and Right to education
Kenya	Learner centered teaching and learning	Equity and Inclusive education	Values and life skills	Policy engagement

**Notes:** The Flexible and adaptable teaching and learning was merged and became part of Equity and Inclusion in 2018

Accountability and Right to education in Tanzania allowed other RELI members to join the group

Policy engagement thematic cluster was dissolved in the Country convening in 2018 and a vast majority joined the Equity and Inclusion cluster.

# REFERENCES

1. APHRC (2018). [Support team meeting minutes May 2018].
2. Darling-Hammond, L. (1990). Instructional policy into practice: "The power of the bottom over the top". Educational evaluation and policy analysis, 12(3), 339-347.
3. Darling-Hammond, L. (2000). Teacher quality and student achievement. Education policy analysis archives, 8, 1.
4. Haddad, W. D., & Demsky, T. (1995). Education Policy-Planning Process: An Applied Framework. Fundamentals of Educational Planning 51: ERIC.
5. RELI. (2017). Regional education learning initiative (RELI) convening report. Retrieved from Nairobi:
6. RELI. (2018). Regional education learning initiative (RELI) convening report. Retrieved from Nairobi:
7. RELI. (2019). Regional education learning initiative (RELI) convening report. Retrieved from Nairobi:
8. Sabatier, P. A. (1986). Top-down and bottom-up approaches to implementation research: a critical analysis and suggested synthesis. Journal of Public Policy, 6(1), 21-48.
9. Twersky, F., Buchanan, P., & Threlfall, V. (2013). Listening to those who matter most, the beneficiaries. Stanford Social Innovation Review, 11(2), 40-45.



**African Population and  
Health Research Center**



REGIONAL  
EDUCATION  
LEARNING  
INITIATIVE

## About the African Population and Health Research Center

The African Population and Health Research Center is the continent's premier research institution and think tank, generating evidence to drive policy action to improve the health and wellbeing of African people.

### Author

Dr. Benta Abuya



APHRC CAMPUS, KITISIRU, NAIROBI, KENYA



INFO@APHRC.ORG



@APHRC



WWW.APHRC.ORG