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Piloting new social emotional learning tools in Somalia

A case study for Somalia Bar ama Baro (BAB) Project

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Piloting new SEL tools in Somalia: A case study

Largely stated, social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve personal and academic goals, maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and resolve conflicts peacefully . Evidence drawn from some countries in the Northern and Western hemispheres shows that SEL and soft- skills programming holds potential to mitigate the adverse effects of toxic stress, foster positive emotion regulation, develop social skills and improve learning outcomes across diverse and marginalized groups .

However, little is known and documented about the practicalities of direct work in partnership with governments to determine if and how SEL frameworks complement, interact, or compete with local religious, cultural and educational values. How can SEL frameworks' understanding be locally achieved, owned, and championed? Furthermore, what lessons can we learn from introducing SEL frameworks during the design of alternative/accelerated

education curriculums? Can learning be applied to future updates to the formal, primary curriculum?

Such was the case when Creative Associates International, working as an anchor organization for Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) and Harvard EA-SEL Lab, introduced tools for localizing SEL into the Somali national accelerated basic education curriculum supported by the five-year Bar amma Baro (“Teach or Learn” in Somali) education program (BAB) funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development. The BAB project utilized two specific tools from the INEE toolkit: Identify Local Needs and Learn about Skills.

The Somalia case study revealed a range of practical considerations for embarking on this work, uncovering distinct tensions between host government and donor government requirements and expectations, particularly as it pertains to the feasibility and realities of a continuously challenging operational context.

The challenges and discussions held offer practitioner-researcher insights about real-world experiences exploring how aid organizations can navigate the demands of western industry standards and the drive to develop strong national systems.



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Somalia and the BAB project

Somalia has emerged from years of civil conflict and is undergoing economic and societal rebuilding. Conflict and climate shocks continue to be major challenges. Overall, the country continues to witness growth alongside a continuing humanitarian crisis. In 2020, Somalia's population was estimated at 16 million, with 75% of the population being under the age of 35. The country has made progress in the institutionalization of the education system despite consistently low enrollment and retention rates. Approximately half of school aged children are out of school.

There is a great need for a comprehensive and reinforcing set of solutions sensitive to the complexity of Somalia's implementing environment to address the large out-of-school school-aged population. These solutions should be an integrated part of a broader, transformative reform agenda and need to meet the specific mental health and psychosocial needs of children and young people who have missed out on education or had their education interrupted by conflict, crisis, poverty, and marginalization.

While the education system has made noteworthy strides in recent years, namely the endorsement of the formal national curriculum in 2017, significant capacity gains are still required to advance the national reform agenda and to serve the populations' educational demands through federally supported systems. The five-year USAID BAB program was designed to support this effort through both direct service delivery to out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY) and capacity building support to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education (MoECHE) to build their regulatory capacity and outreach efforts engaging education and civil society partners.

During the first two years of implementation, BAB focused on supporting the MoECHE to develop an Accelerated Basic Education (ABE) National Policy and Curriculum Framework. This framework directly aligns with the Somalia National Curriculum Framework (2017) and ensures that the accelerated basic education subsector is harmonized, is part of the formal education system and is a direct

modification of the formal primary cycle.

The ABE National Policy and Curriculum Framework constitutes the foundational shared vision upon which implementation and sustainability will be built. A goal of the BAB project has been to ensure SEL is integrated within the framework and subsequent teaching and learning materials, so that the unique mental health and psychosocial needs of children within ABE are met.

Introducing and Localizing SEL Framework

SEL is often viewed as a western concept and import. As such, introducing the concept to the MoECHE was an important initial learning opportunity for the Creative team. The team faced the challenge of translating overly technical language from English into appropriate local languages, which caused significant confusion and hesitation among MoECHE directors who viewed SEL content as an additional subject the West sought to impose on Somalia. Some directors saw it as an imposition that failed to acknowledge the developed and landmark formal school curriculum framework of 2017, which included many life skills and SEL components already.

For example, the term "mindfulness" gave the MoECHE pause, as it was interpreted as a Western ideal and practice. Discussing the term within the BAB team prior to MoECHE meetings and finding a locally accepted alternative could have been immensely helpful. For instance, using the term "reflection" instead of "mindfulness" can convey the same meaning and has reference within guiding cultural and religious text, such as the Quran. In addition to the term "mindfulness," the MoECHE had specific concerns with selected relaxation techniques that required bodily movement. These movements would not conform with the ideals for girls' education in a highly religious and culturally traditional society.

Despite these initial reservations, weekly engagement between the key MoECHE Directors and BAB at the ABE Task Force meetings provide a forum

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to build up trust based on evidence and reference to their own curriculum. Recommendations from these meetings led the MoECHE to agree that SEL, in alternative terminology, could be included in the ABE policy and ABE curriculum framework.

Stakeholder consultation to identify culturally sensitive terminology proved essential. "Social Emotional Learning" was replaced by "Learning and Life Competencies" (LLC). The team deliberately selected LLC instead of SEL to emphasize how life skills and learning reinforce each other. The competencies intersect with all subjects and enhance students' understanding of subjects and develop in increasingly complex contexts throughout the syllabus. From the government perspective, this approach provides the foundation for young people's skill development, which they can apply in all subjects as well as throughout life. Learning and Life Competencies became one of the four main competencies integrated throughout the ABE framework:

- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Learning and life competencies (SEL)
- Culture and heritage

Learn About Skills

Working shoulder to shoulder with the MoECHE, the BAB project employed the Psychosocial Support (PSS)-SEL Toolbox and specifically the Localizing Tools Learn About Skills

and Identify Local Needs in our design of the LLC framework.

The Learn About Skills tool is an inventory of 24 concrete SEL skills and 30 dimensions of wellbeing designed for implementers to use with education and relevant stakeholders to become familiar with specific skills and features of wellbeing that support positive outcomes for children and youth.

In developing the curriculum framework, the BAB team compared the anticipated outcomes from the formal Somali curriculum with the Learn About Life Skills domains and outcomes. The Learn about Life Skills tools provided the framework for global evidence and helped all stakeholders, including the MoECHE, to see where intended outcomes overlapped. For example, within the Somali National Formal Curriculum, peer relationships and family relationships were separated. However, placed next to the Learn About Skills domains, these specific types of relationships were able to fit within the domain of "social" (see results below). These definitions and the working framework (see table below) were presented at the ABE Task Force meeting demonstrate the shared definitions, and to provide a sequence for these domains based on the new ABE curriculum being designed.

Pstraints, COVID 19 restrictions and staff capacities, our BAB team was limited to applying questions outlined in this tool, and only conducted one focus group discussion within a scheduled seven day ABE Teacher Training of Trainers. Participants included representatives from

| LLC Domain | Desired Skills |
|------------------------------|---|
| Thinking and learning skills | Creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, digital literacy, learning to learn, higher order thinking skills, organization, goal setting, self-management, managing stress, perseverance, resiliency |
| Social skills | Communication, collaboration, emotional development (self-awareness, empathy, self-esteem); social responsibilities, including respect, tolerance, rights; establishing and maintaining positive relationships; coping with peer pressure |
| Life skills | Promoting healthy behaviors; understanding and practicing gender equality, child rights and protection; contributing to family, community |
| Career skills | Professional motivation, goal setting, life planning, negotiation, management, leadership, teamwork, business skills |

MoECHE and the BAB project's local partners.

Thirty individuals were present (24 male, six female) with 17 participants from the MoECHE (two female, 15 Male). Four worked at the federal government of Somalia (FGS) level, 10 worked at the state government level, and three worked at the district government level. These participants worked in curriculum development or teacher management and development offices, and included Regional Education Officers (REOs), District Education Officers (DEOs), head teachers, and teachers. The remaining 13 participants were selected by BAB's local partners.

On the third day of the TOT, the LLC content and the PSS-SEL Toolbox were introduced with the objective of gaining honest feedback on specific questions. Consent from all participants was obtained and participants were split into five groups with an hour to discuss one specific contextual question on education in Somalia. Groups were to discuss viewpoints, record answers, and present in plenary. The responses for each group can be found in the table on the other page.

The participants appreciated the questions and facilitated discussions. However, throughout the focus group discussion the BAB team were keenly aware of the limitations of these findings. Due to project delays and adaptations to COVID, the BAB project was faced with the competing demands of producing curriculum ready for the start of the school opening and using the Identifying Local Needs

tool in a more robust and meaningful way with diverse stakeholders. That said, while only having opportunity for a small stakeholder group, the process of talking through these questions proved highly valuable as one step in an iterative process. The responses from these questions helped guide the early development of the Learning and Life Competency content for ABE textbooks. The BAB team continues to work with the MoECHE to revise and print these curriculum materials.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Overall, the Identify Local Needs and Learn About Skills tools benefited the planning, design and contextualization of the PSS-SEL inclusion within the ABE Curriculum Policy and Framework development. However, specified time, resources and dedicated planning are required for successful implementation, especially in the first phase of project implementation.

- Project timelines and resources: Delays in project implementation (e.g., startup delays, COVID 19) make it difficult to find adequate time for implementing additional activities during a tight timeline. The timeline to develop the ABE teaching and learning materials was compressed from inception. Ensuring adequate and meaningful consultation with representative stakeholder groups such as families, children and school staff proved difficult. This

| Group | Question | Group Responses |
|-------|---|--|
| 1 | What does it mean for a child to be successful in Somalia? | -Good parental support -A child with respect and responsibilities -A child who is confident and hardworking -A child who received a quality education -A child with focus and goals -A child willing to help the nation and individuals |
| 2 | What skills or qualities do children learn at home that help them in schools? | -Train to respect parents and elders -Teach patience/resilience -Train to sharing with others and sharing skills -Teach needed skills at home -Should be well organized/management of time -Cleanliness -Culture that is acceptable |
| 3 | What is already happening at home or schools to help children gain skills? | Home -Responsibility -Cooking and cleaning -Respect to elders and parents -Management skills -Self precautions -Helping others School -Punctuality -Cleanliness -Responsibilities/management -Respect -Conflict and stress management How to help -Teachers and parents role models in giving children practical life skills -Delegation of duties to the children like becoming class monitor -Sharing responsibilities at home like cooking, washing, fetching water |
| 4 | If schools were to improve, what changes do schools need? | -Teachers who understand their learners -Teachers with knowledge and skills to teach -A child who gains good competencies to live with others -Teachers and learners with focus and willingness to work together -Good management of schools by teachers -High level of discipline |
| 5 | How do caregivers and teachers manage stress or conflict with children? | -Being aware of the conflict or stress -Teacher or caregiver should investigate the cause of the conflict -Solving school disputes at the school level -Solving school-related stress by supporting the learner on the subject and condition at the school -Provide opportunities to listen and build trust during stress at home by being a friend to him/her -Follow to find out if the stress has been overcome at school or home -Motivate the child on all aspects both at home and school |

was further exacerbated by limited resources for project staff to meet with groups from diverse locales. In addition, given insecurity, COVID and moving populations, it was difficult to arrange and deliver meetings and content.

- Local ownership of SEL integration within Teaching and Learning Materials: Due to delays previously mentioned, BAB was unable to integrate the BAB developed LLC content into the first cohort of students' teaching and learning materials. Translation issues and fears that the materials were not appropriate for the context led the decision with the MoECHE to hire a team of local consultants instead of the international BAB team to design and contextualise a separate LLC curriculum book for Level 1 and 2 and content for Level 3 and 4. While not ideal, this compromise enabled LLC content to be integrated within ABE Levels 3 and 4 and serves as a steppingstone for further LLC discussions and integration into the level 1 and 2 materials. The BAB team continues to work closely with MoECHE curriculum supervisors to seek integration of LLC content into ABE TLMs during the revision process for Level 1 and 2 for future cohorts. However, the time required to do this should not be underestimated. Local ownership and decision making is paramount, even if it comes at the price of increased delays and adaptation of planning.

- Trust building: Project delays placed pressure on the BAB team to begin negotiating and developing ABE TLM materials quickly. While time constraints are always present in projects, the value of building trust between project teams and the MoECHE when presenting new – or newly termed - concepts cannot be underestimated. Building trust takes time, however it does lead to increased understanding and the ability to embed concepts into the ways of working. The BAB team highly recommends building significant time for preliminary stakeholder workshops into project planning.

- Understanding the role of international players: As highlighted, curriculum content must be owned by national ministries. It is therefore essential that organizations or implementors such as Creative Associates stress their role as a facilitator, not an imposer of Western frameworks. This role requires a balance of providing evidence-based approaches with specific contextual examples. The BAB team achieved most success in discussing SEL with the MoECHE when specific examples from the Somali nation-

al curriculum were highlighted. The curriculum already had important SEL concepts within it, and it was the BAB team's role to help translate these concepts into local realities. It is also essential to note the BAB team's critical role in transparently relaying these issues and associated delays with the donor, advocating for the time and project adaptations needed.

- Language too technical -The Learn About Skills tool uses language that was often advanced and difficult to translate. The MoECHE and Curriculum Department supervisors found the terminology in translation difficult, confusing, and unreliable. Translations of the tools must be done carefully and ensure that they reflect the intended meaning, so as not to confuse or frustrate stakeholders. The INEE/EASEL Lab team has begun making revisions to the tools based on a Plain Language Review and will continue working with translators to ensure that the tools can be more widely accessed and understood.

- Examples from different contexts – The tools could benefit significantly from more diverse examples around lessons, priority skills and concepts related to SEL and life skills. Perspectives and examples should be included from the Global South, and especially from diverse spiritual and cultural contexts. The INEE/EASEL Lab team has already incorporated feedback from field testing in the revised versions of the tools which now feature more examples from the different field testing sites across contexts in the Global South and with diverse spiritual and cultural traditions.

About the Authors

Creative Associates International served as an Anchor Organization during the field-testing phase of the INEE PSS-SEL Toolbox. This case study describes how the organization used the Toolbox to support their work, including the process, stakeholders involved, and lessons learned. The case study was developed by the following team:

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About Creative

Creative Associates International works with underserved communities by sharing expertise and experience in education, elections, economic growth, citizen security, governance and transitions from conflict to peace.

Based in Chevy Chase, MD; Creative has active projects in nearly 30 countries. Since 1977, it has worked in nearly 90 countries and on almost every continent. Recognized for its ability to work rapidly, flexibly and effectively in conflict-affected environments, Creative is committed to generating long-term sustainable solutions to complex development problems.

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