HOW TO BRING ABOUT SYSTEMIC CHANGE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERACY

LESSONS FROM SAVE THE CHILDREN

RWANDA, 2012-2017

Date: October 29, 2018

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Save the Children (SC) considers early childhood development and early grade reading to be essential for higher-order learning. The foundations of childhood literacy do not begin in primary school but at birth. Learning happens in and out of school. It includes a range of actors and institutions such as parents and the community, not just teachers and schools. SC is also committed to the importance of initiating change at a systems-level through evidence-based advocacy, partnership, and other sustainable solutions.

This learning paper reflects on Save the Children's journey to bring about systemic change for an improved literacy environment in Rwanda through its five-year flagship program called Advancing the Right to Read (ARR). ARR was a program of complementary interventions that had the overarching goal of promoting and sustaining literacy development for children ages 0 to 9 in Rwanda. Each intervention focused on a different aspect of early childhood literacy. The programs targeted different age groups, generating evidence around best practice for children thorough evaluations of those projects and using findings to advocate for change. Through this work, SC sought to build awareness and understanding, strengthen capacity, and advocate for policy consensus among government and civil society, embedding the ideas of ARR into national systems for sustainable change.

This learning paper draws on existing program documents, evaluations, and stakeholder interviews to reflect on SC's approach to effect systemic change in Rwanda. The following 8 learning areas are highlighted in the paper:

1. **Planning for systemic change.** If SC wanted to bring about systemic change, its approach needed to reflect the context of Rwanda. One way they did this was by conducting a political economy analysis (PEA) at the beginning of, and midway through, the project. The PEA informed the development of SC's Advocacy Strategy. If offered a sophisticated mapping of the education sector and how decisions were made and how change happens. Showing the way that the education system operated helped reveal systemic gaps in implementation and accountability that became focal areas for SC.

2. **Working with government.** SC recognized that it would be more effective if it could harmonize its work to the government's own terms, preferences, and timelines. Sometimes this meant working with government officials on issues that weren't always within the purview of ARR, such as offering their technical guidance at a working group. But the idea was to convey a sustained commitment to education and related to issues while showing that SC cared about the interests and needs of officials.

3. **Working in an underdeveloped sector.** When ARR started, there wasn't a lot of government focus on early childhood development and early grade reading. SC had the opportunity to shape the conversation and have an impact. At the time there were few partners focusing on this area and there were many gaps. This was an opportunity to help build capacity and expertise. ARR staff members collaborated with local partners, mentored government officials, and trained up its own team of Rwandan nationals.

4. **Enhancing the role or the private sector.** The Rwandan Children's Book Initiative was an initiative of SC that aimed at promoting a culture of reading in a context where high quality, age-appropriate books written in the local language were not common. SC learned that publishing was a business and that those working in this business needed to make money if the sector was going to thrive. They needed to convince publishers to invest in producing a variety of high-quality books. RCBI gave local

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publishers confidence that people would buy their products. SC stimulated an initial demand for these books by promising to buy them. SC then encouraged development partners to procure books from local publishers rather than making their own. SC also positioned itself as the go-between between the government and private sector. SC inserted itself into this dialog, creating a bridge so that government and private sector could work more closely together. RCBI also empowered children's book publishers and other actors in the book industry to establish what would become the Rwandan Children's Book Organization (RCBO), a local entity focused on promoting books and a culture of reading in Rwanda.

5. **Using evidence to advocate for systemic change.** SC undertook a number of research studies of ARR, including ethnographic studies, randomized controlled trials, budgetary analysis, the policy analyses, and more. SC's research agenda was done with and through working with government. Evaluation of the Literacy Boost program included a partnership with Stanford University as well as a high-ranking government official as a co-investigator. Such strategies improved government buy-in and also ensured that findings from this study would reach key officials. Evidence from ARR was also a powerful tool when SC worked with development partners. They offered powerful and substantive depictions from the field that gave SC credibility as knowing what was happening on the ground. ARR also produced a number of position papers that helped to offer a roadmap of evidence that was helpful as stakeholders in the sector developed strategic plans.

6. **Crucial to the success of ARR's work on the ground was its collaboration with a local organization called Umuhuza.** Umuhuza was a grassroots, community-based organization with strong relationships, social capital, and the types of local knowledge that was needed to facilitate effective collaboration with communities and local government authorities. The executive director of Umuhuza was a well-respected figure in Rwanda who was championed ARR's cause both on the ground and at the highest levels of government. The organizations participated in joint advocacy at local and national levels. Umuhuza had a strong role at the local level. It was particularly effective in working with local level government so that ARR could have 'trickle up' effects to improve implementation.

7. **Harmonization and complementarity between stakeholders.** While SC spearheaded the focus on early literacy in Rwanda, they did not do it alone. Instead they worked closely with other partners, including individuals and groups who shared their commitment. SC sought to create consensus and unity of like-minded actors to help achieve progress together. One key way of ensuring that NGOs harmonized their work on ECD was through a coalition of civil society organizations working in the education sector. SC consistently led the ECD working group during ARR. Initially there was some reluctance among actors to the prospect of signing onto advocacy pieces. Over time, however, working in collaboration was done in a way so that shared concerns were addressed. Successful advocacy in this way allowed some of SC's positions to become the position of civil society as a collective. It means that a successful civil society effort thus became a 'win' for SC, too.

8. **Systems strengthening through capacity building.** In Rwanda, as elsewhere, a key aspect of advancing an advocacy agenda is by developing working relationships with officials at national and local levels. Establishing trust and rapport were required for genuine collaboration to take root. SC invested a great deal of time to build the capacity of individuals in the Rwandan workforce to develop an understanding of literacy issues. One challenge to SC's goals of systemic change was the very high

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turnover of key government personnel. Frequent turnover impacted the delivery of programming, slowed decision making, and impeded the efforts of SC and its partners to bring about systemic change. The ouster of a key staff member often functioned as a reset button to the relationships that SC had worked so hard to build. This was particularly a challenge in the education sector, where key government officials were sometimes replaced by officials who didn't have an understanding of early literacy or its significance.

The lessons learned above from the ARR experience informed the following recommendations for facilitating strategic change more broadly:

- Develop a clear Theory of Change at the beginning of the program, one which highlights the centrality of achieving systemic change as part of an overall program.

- Develop a high-quality PEA or situational analysis to understand local social, political, and economic context.

- Ensure programs are flexible enough to focus on identifying and addressing gaps as they emerge.

- Build a research and advocacy agenda at the beginning of the program rather than on an ad hoc basis.

- Make sure the management structure and personnel decisions are conducive for contributing to systemic change.

- The skillset of staff members must be creative and autonomous, empowered and incentivized to make decisions that can to opportunities for advocacy and strategic change.

- Collaborate with NGOs and development partners to advance collective interests. Even though SC was a catalyst for a focus on early learning, it did not do it by themselves. Rather, it joined forces with key influencers to distill a message that could advance collective interests, concerns, and ideas for change.

- Go the extra mile for government to demonstrate a genuine partnership committed to seeing the realization of shared goals

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INTRODUCTION

The scientific evidence around early childhood literacy is clear: The mastery of early age literacy skills is necessary for higher-order learning. But governments rarely focus on pre-reading skills development and early grade reading with the sense of urgency that it deserves. Systemic change is often hindered by a range of technical and political complexities. Even when evidence points to promising interventions, this is often insufficient to bring about the types of changes that can improve learning. Efforts to improve early grade literacy face competing interests. They can be less visible compared with other inputs such as building classrooms or adding ICT infrastructure. Results from early childhood development or early grade reading may not come quickly enough for government officials who are under pressure to demonstrate change quickly.

Save the Children (SC) considers early childhood development (ECD) and early grade reading (EGR) to be essential for higher-order learning. The foundations of childhood literacy do not begin in primary school but at birth. Learning happens in and out of school. It includes a range of actors and institutions such as parents and the community, not just teachers and schools.

The purpose of this learning paper is to reflect on Save the Children's journey to bring about systemic change for an improved literacy environment in Rwanda through its five-year flagship program called Advancing the Right to Read (ARR). It draws from existing program documents, evaluations, and stakeholder interviews.[1] The first section provides a brief overview of ARR. The paper then turns to consider how factors like program planning and response, collaboration and partnership, and the production of evidence shaped SC's efforts to promote strategic change. The paper concludes by offering a set of recommendations for others who hope to engage in systemic change.

ADVANCING THE RIGHT TO READ (ARR) IN RWANDA

In early 2012, Rwanda's education system was in the midst of a learning crisis. On one hand, the government received international recognition for its efforts to expand and extend access as quickly as it did. Primary level enrolment had surged and gender parity had been achieved. But on the other hand, there was a growing concern that while more children were in school, quality was extremely low.

Many children entered primary school unprepared to learn and then left unable to read. One study found that 13% of Primary 4 students could not read any word of a Primary 2-Primary 3 level text written in Kinyarwanda; 13% could read less than 15 words correctly in one minute; and 40% of Primary 4 students could not answer half of the comprehension questions relating to a passage they just read.[2] Further, while more children were entering school, many did not finish their studies. Primary completion rates declined from 77% in 2011 to 61% in 2014 while repetition and dropout rates increased.

Prior to ARR's work in Rwanda, interventions focused on early childhood education and early grade literacy in Rwanda were relatively rare. The government did not focus on this issue. Teachers had little training in this area. There were no locally produced, age-appropriate, language- and context-relevant books for children to read. Most communities were not sensitized to the importance of ECD or EGR.

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In response to this set of conditions, Save the Children launched Advancing the Right to Read (ARR) in 2013. ARR was a program of complementary interventions that had the overarching goal of promoting and sustaining literacy development for young children in Rwanda. Each program focused on core aspects of early childhood literacy related to age groups 0 to 3, 4 to 6, and 7 to 9. ARR generated evidence around best practices for children through evaluations of those projects and using findings to advocate for change in policy and practice.

The Theory of Change for ARR is shown below. The six change agents depicted below were seen as important to achieving the program goals across the 0 to 9 age range.

Save the Children approached its work with ARR through four pillars:

1) Closing the gap in early childhood care and development services by supporting family learning for parents and children aged 0 to 3 and by increasing the quality and coverage of both center-based services and parental support for children aged 4 to 6;

2) Improving the teaching of reading in early grades of primary schools (Primary 1–3) by providing teachers with training and ongoing support in effective reading instruction;

3) Developing a culture of literacy and learning out of school in which families and communities understand the value of literacy, and create and sustain opportunities to practice and enjoy reading together; and

4) Creating a rich, literate environment, which guarantees that children have access to high-quality, local-language reading materials.

These pillars, in turn, formed the basis for the implementation of ARR's projects including:

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- **First Steps (0 to 3 years):** Increasing parent understanding and skills to support their young children's early childhood development: physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, language and communication, and healthy practices.
- **Early Literacy and Math Initiative (ELMI) and First Read (4 to 6 years):** Providing teachers and parents with tools and strategies to support the development of emerging literacy and math skills for young children so that they are ready to learn in school.
- **Literacy Boost (7 to 9 years):** Supporting teachers of early primary grades with strategies to teach literacy skills effectively and helping parents, local leaders and the wider community to skill development.
- **Mureke Dusome (7 to 9 years):** Fostering partnerships between schools and communities to improve literacy outcomes for children.
- **Rwandan Children's Book Initiative (RCBI):** Improving the quality and supply of age-appropriate Kinyarwanda children's books and stimulating the demand for these books.

The projects reached children from ages 0 to 9 years. Projects were disbursed across different districts in Rwanda, each focusing on a specific age-band. The projects were implemented independently of one another, but the overall aim was to offer a comprehensive approach of ways to promote early childhood literacy. ARR program officers, along with its local partner, Umuhuza, worked directly with stakeholders in the education system from the village to the national level, ranging from children and parents to national government officials to actors in the country's nascent children's book industry.

Throughout ARR, Save the Children sought to initiate systemic change through evidence-based advocacy, partnership, and other sustainable solutions. SC developed strong collaboration and engagement with the Government of Rwanda to test the impact of interventions to figure out what works best. The data generated from these projects were then used to build awareness and understanding, strengthen capacity, and advocate for policy consensus among government and civil society, embedding the ideas of Advancing the Right to Read into national systems. Below is a selection of outputs or results that help to illustrate how ARR shaped policy and priorities in Rwanda related to promoting children's literacy skills development from birth through early primary:

- Save the Children's parenting manual for caregivers of children aged 0 to 3 contributed to the development of a National Parenting Manual.
- ARR contributed to the government's creation of a National ECD coordinating body.
- Save the Children contributed to a revision of Rwanda's ECD Policy to include strategic focus areas on parenting education and school readiness.
- Save the Children's investment in education and district budget analysis studies helped to increase a focus on pre-primary education and equity in budgeting.
- Save the Children ECD staff helped to develop and implement the pre-primary and primary school National Competence Based Curriculum (CBC), which includes SC materials.
- ARR programming influenced both investment in and the design of other large-scale, multi-year early grade reading projects that were implemented across the country.
- ARR program implementation, evidence, and advocacy helped instigate and inform a largescale ECD donor investment expected in 2018.
- ARR contributed to a massive shift in the children's book industry in Rwanda. By the end of 2017, a total of 258 local publishers, illustrators, writers, designers, and editors were supported in their

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efforts to create high-quality age-appropriate children's books in Kinyarwanda. This led to a total of 549 new titles for children, including gender sensitive and inclusive titles.

- SC's work through the Rwandan Children's Book initiative led to the establishment of the first publishing sector collective in Rwanda, whose publishers went on to win government tenders.
- ARR programming and advocacy influenced the development of a new National Literacy Policy and National Book Development Policy.
- SC co-authored a widely distributed think piece for UNICEF on the role of caregiving in Rwanda.
- SC highlighted the relationship between the home environment and early literacy through a high profile think piece for UNICEF and presentations of research findings to policy makers within Rwanda's government.

But these tangible contributions to systemic change above, as notable as they are, tell only a partial story when it comes to understanding the process through which these changes occurred. The rest of this learning paper discusses the processes and strategies that SC used to foster systemic change in early childhood literacy.

WHAT DID SAVE THE CHILDREN LEARN ABOUT SYSTEMIC CHANGE?

Save the Children's commitment to systemic change was at the core of the ARR model. This commitment meant that SC was not only focused on delivering good results to the beneficiaries with whom it worked; rather, SC sought to elevate ECD and ECR on a broader level. This section turns to examine what Save the Children learned about systemic change throughout the process of ARR.

1. Planning for systemic change

If SC wanted to bring about systemic change, its approach needed to reflect the context of Rwanda. One way they did this was by conducting a political economy analysis (PEA) at the beginning of, and midway through, the project. A PEA is a situational analysis of the formal and informal gatekeepers and processes through which decisions are made and change happens.

The PEA provided a sophisticated mapping of the education sector and how decisions were made. It helped identify the key individuals, institutions, and incentives through which that change would most likely occur. The PEA offered guidance about how to navigate Rwanda's policy environment, to understand how government works, who is influential, and how different agencies interact. This was particularly helpful for SC staff members at the beginning of the program so that they could understand the complexity and nuances of the education system and the ECD space. SC staff used the PEA as a reference guide in technical working groups or when making comments on policy drafts.

The PEA informed the development of SC's Advocacy Strategy. Within each of SC's four pillars listed in the section above, the Advocacy Strategy was used to map out advocacy activities, objectives, purposes/outcomes, and goals. Activities included implementing a research agenda, developing coalitions, meeting policymakers, and capacity-building efforts.

The PEA helped SC to deploy its staff members, programming, and advocacy efforts in alignment with the incentives of government leaders and policy architecture. The PEA showed that for government officials, incentives and accountability were driven by performance contracts. In practice, this meant sometimes

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prioritizing immediate positive results based on short-term measurable investments. While this can be effective in some areas of educational development like building classrooms, early childhood education is a long-term investment. It can take several years for children to become fully literate, several more years to become proficient at higher levels of intellectual skill, and it may take many more years to see the results of these efforts in the surrounding contexts, such as in evidence of economic growth. If ARR was going to be effective, the PEA suggested that SC needed to recognize what motivated government so that it could adapt its approach to advocacy for strategic change accordingly.

The PEA allowed SC to identify other influential actors and institutions, both in and out of government, that SC would need to be aware of as it planned its work. It mapped out key development partners and NGOs that were actively engaged in early grade literacy or ECD. It also reviewed key institutions and incentives within relevant sectors, such as working groups, national literacy initiatives, and so on.

Showing the way that the education system operated in practice revealed systemic gaps in implementation and accountability. It was in these areas that SC was then able to focus. For example, the University of Rwanda College of Education was the institution responsible for pre-service teacher training. However, the PEA showed that the university was not actually linked to policy and planning with the Ministry of Education. SC sought to strengthen this link by having university representatives participate in the education sector working groups. The university also played a key role in revising the teacher training curriculum so that it better aligned with the new national competency-based curriculum that the government had introduced.

The PEA also showed the specific ways in which policies were funded. The PEA showed that the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning was the entity who allocated funding to the Ministry of Education. Thus, up to a point, lobbying efforts to the Ministry of Education were a moot point if ECD policies were never sufficiently funded. What SC did, then, was to identify organizations who could influence the finance ministry's funding decisions. For instance, members of SC targeted the Global Partnership for Education, because they knew that GPE was an influential institution to Rwanda's finance ministry. With SC's support, GPE lobbied the ministry for government funds dedicated to pre-primary teacher salaries.

2. Working with government

Equipped with the PEA and an advocacy strategy, SC worked with government to enact systemic change. SC recognized that systemic change required working within government, and also harmonizing their approach to be on the government's terms, preferences, and timelines. At the beginning of the program, SC and its local partner, Umuhuza, spent considerable time seeking government advice, guidance, and engagement through all aspects of program planning. Having this buy-in was one way that it sought to develop trust and build rapport at an early stage.

SC sometimes worked with government officials on issues that weren't always within the purview of ARR. This meant staff members offering their technical guidance at a working group on issues like teacher development or lending their expertise to other government-led initiatives. The idea was to convey to the government SC's sustained commitment to the education sector and to show that SC cared about the interests and needs of officials. In doing so, it strengthened working relationships with the individuals and groups that ultimately contributed to ARR success.

ARR utilized interventions and an approach to literacy that was highly contextualized. To be sure, the tenets of ARR programs like Literacy Boost were borne from global evidence on ECD and ECR. But the materials used for the work in Rwanda were modified and adapted to fit the Rwandan context. This was done as a way to ensure that programs and metrics were best able to reflect the local context. The practice of emphasizing contextual grounding was also looked at favourably by government, who were keen to

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emphasize the unique aspects of Rwandan culture and the need to develop home grown solutions to improve the country.

Part of working with government meant being responsive to their needs and timetable. Some of the funders that supported SC's work were amenable to the changes, allowing SC to pursue opportunities that came up over the course of the project. For example, when the government began to develop their new competency-based curriculum, SC dispatched one of its high-level program staff members to offer their input at a retreat. Such instances were difficult to anticipate, and they sometimes delayed some of the outputs that SC staff would ultimately be held accountable for from their managers or funders. But this strategy also meant that SC had the chance to contribute to high level meetings.

3. The challenges and opportunities of working in an underdeveloped sector

SC found that the Rwandan government was supportive of efforts to promote early literacy. It saw literacy as a key building block for the country's broader social and economic development project. However, the government had competing demands and limited resources. The government gave a great deal of attention to issues that often seemed more directly and immediately related to economic growth. Thus, a key part of SC's advocacy was convincing government and communities of the importance of early childhood cognitive development, and that the stunting of brain development would also delay the country's broader national goals.

Since there wasn't a lot of government focus on ECD and ECR, SC had the opportunity to shape the conversation and have an impact. SC had a particularly huge influence in shaping the enabling environment in the ECD space. At the time there were few partners focusing on this area and there were many gaps. SC saw this as an opportunity. For instance, they were able to engage in policy and systems influence at all levels of government. They highlighted the importance of parenting education for children ages 0 to 3 and 4 to 6. SC also worked to ensure that emergent literacy and math techniques were incorporated into the curriculum for teacher training colleges.

The PEA also identified systemic gaps that would be barriers to improving early childhood literacy. For example, through the process of doing the PEA, SC discovered that the university system had no formal graduate level training program that specialized in literacy issues. This gap was an opportunity for SC to help build capacity and expertise in the country. It collaborated with local partners, mentored government officials, and trained up its own team of Rwandan nationals. In this way, SC helped to develop an appreciation for and general institutional understanding of literacy issues in the country. Thus, even long after ARR came to an end, the hope was that a knowledgeable cadre of advocates would be diffused among other organizations and government institutions for years to come.

4. Enhancing the role or the private sector

One of the challenges SC faced was how to promote a culture of reading when high quality, age-appropriate books written in the local language were exceedingly rare. SC knew that the best books would be written by Rwandans, capable of writing in accurate Kinyarwanda on local themes that would appeal to children. Yet up until SC's work with actors in the local book sector, there had been a lack of Kinyarwanda-language books with high-quality writing, editing, illustration, and publication. The supply shortage was particularly noted in books targeted to younger ages (0 to 9), since this is the age range in which children are expected to become literate in Kinyarwanda.

The Rwandan Children's Book Initiative (RCBI) was an initiative of SC. It had an impact on raising the profile of issues related to the Rwandan publishing sector and libraries, stimulating interest, and contributing to

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change. RCBI gave local publishers confidence that people would buy their products. SC stimulated an initial demand for these books by promising to buy them. SC then encouraged development partners to procure books from local publishers rather than making their own.

SC learned that publishing was a business and that those working in this business needed to make money if the sector was going to thrive. They needed to convince publishers to invest in producing a variety of high-quality books. SC connected with publishers on all levels. Their idea was that this would encourage the creation of new books. In order to do this, SC needed to build the capacity of publishers, authors, and illustrators. Books needed to be interesting and exciting. It would need to create diverse types of books for children across the 0 to 9 age range, including baby books, pre-primary books, fiction and non-fiction, math books, concept books, tactile books, flip-flap books, hard cover books, books promoting gender and inclusion, books about Rwandan culture, and more.

One of the key tasks was to engage government, because they were the biggest buyers of children's books in the country. SC engaged with government to try to make their tendering processes more flexible so that they could have more books to review and could also position themselves to approve new books more quickly.

SC also positioned itself as the go-between between the government and private sector. The local book industry was having difficulties engaging with the procurement processes, and yet they didn't know how to speak to government to improve this system. SC inserted itself into this dialog, creating a bridge so that government and private sector could work more closely together. Central to their approach was the introduction of book quality criteria for assessing books. One of the reasons this collaboration may have been more successful in Rwanda than other places was the nascent status of the book industry in Rwanda at the time. Whereas in other settings there may have been massive corporate resistance to changing books or working with the private sector. But because there was so much work to do and room for improvement, both government and the private sector were amenable to change.

RCBI empowered children's book publishers and other actors in the book industry to establish the Rwandan Children's Book Forum (RCBF). RCBF was a private and independent entity that later became a nationally recognized civil society organization called the Rwanda Children's Book Organization (RCBO). The initiative began as an activity under RCBI to bring together children's book actors on a regular basis. It worked in collaboration with the government and development partners to promote books and the culture of reading in Rwanda. Some of the activities RCBO initiated through RCBI were book awards. It issued awards for Best Author, Best Illustrator, Best Designer, and Most Favorite Book. RCBO also advocated for book publishing coordination in different ways. RCBO lobbied for development partners work with local publishers rather than making books themselves. Different organizations now work with the local publishing industry to increase the number and quality of children's books that are then purchased and distributed in the whole country. The idea was that if all development partners work together and buy different titles for the same implementation areas, the number of books available for children would increase.

The book industry was also sustained by a policy framework. Until recently, there has been an overall absence of legal and institutional frameworks for the publishing sector and for the expansion of a network of community libraries. However, a National Policy for Library Services has recently been created, and a National Book Development Policy is also under development. With assistance from SC, the National Book Development Policy is expected to support the functioning of a stronger publishing sector in Rwanda, producing a regular supply of Kinyarwanda language supplementary reading materials.

5. Using evidence to advocate for systemic change

One important part of SC's advocacy strategy for systemic change was through research and the production of evidence based policy and practice. Through the five years of ARR, SC undertook a number of

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research studies. These included ethnographic studies, randomized controlled trials, budgetary analysis, the policy analysis found within the PEA, and more. Many of the research studies contributed to position papers that were then shared with government. Some of the research done by SC focused on understanding the effectiveness of ARR programs, while other research was done on an advocacy level.

SC's research agenda was done with and through working with government. Perhaps the most visible example of this was that the research for Literacy Boost was done in partnership with researchers at Stanford University. Working with an elite university added a degree of cache to SC's work. It was also strategically important for SC and Stanford to involve members of government from the outset. One official in the education sector was a co-investigator for Literacy Boost. This strategy improved government buy-in and also ensured that findings from this study would reach key officials.

Evidence was also a particularly powerful tool when SC engaged with development partners. Studies such as an ethnography of home-based literacy practice were particularly influential for the actors in the sector. They offered powerful and substantive depictions from the field that gave SC credibility as knowing what was happening on the ground. Supporting advocacy with evidence was one way of bolstering SC's credibility in the education sector. The position papers were particularly helpful for working with development partners. They offered a roadmap of evidence that was helpful as stakeholders in the sector developed strategic plans. The position papers also functioned as tools that could brief new officials or development partners on key issues related to early literacy or ECD.

SC's approach to research focused on understanding challenges and then applying these lessons in the field. SC shared research with officials in government offices. But they also used research results as the basis for inviting officials to the field. The idea was to show officials what parenting education, improved classroom environments and teaching techniques looked like in practice. Through this process, it showed how solutions could be reached.

6. Local partnership

Crucial to the success of ARR's work on the ground was its collaboration with a local organization called Umuhuza. When the partnership began, Umuhuza was a well-respected but small community-based organization, known primarily for its work with families on peace education. By the end of the program, Umuhuza grew its capacity to work across the country and deliver large scale programming. Umuhuza is now well recognized by the government and other actors in the education space. It co-chairs the ECD working group under the National Early Childhood Program. It extended its mission beyond peace education to early childhood development and community literacy. It now uses its local knowledge and technical expertise to collaborate with other international organizations.

SC's partnership with Umuhuza was vital for many reasons. Umuhuza was a grassroots, community-based organization with strong relationships, social capital, and the types of local knowledge that was needed to facilitate effective collaboration with communities and local government authorities. The executive director of Umuhuza was also a well-respected figure in Rwanda. She was able to champion ARR's cause both on the ground and at the highest levels of government.

The organizations participated in joint advocacy at local and national levels. Umuhuza had a strong role at the local level. It was particularly effective in engaging with local level government so that ARR could have 'trickle up' effects to improve implementation. Working together, SC and Umuhuza would feed lessons learned to inform national officials of the situation in the field and provide technical support for what could be done. Umuhuza was also instrumental in working with local officials to ensure that district level performance contracts included a focus on early learning.

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7. Harmonization and complementarity between stakeholders

While SC spearheaded the focus on early literacy in Rwanda, they did not do it alone. Instead they worked closely with other partners, including individuals and groups who shared their commitment.

SC sought to create consensus and unity of like-minded actors to help achieve progress together. One key way of ensuring that NGOs harmonized their work on ECD was through the Rwanda Education NGO Coordination Platform (RENCP). RENCP was a coalition of civil society organizations working in the education sector. SC consistently led the ECD working group during ARR. They also chaired and co-chaired RENCP, enabling them to become visible in the sector and to help champion issues around early childhood development and literacy. SC reached out to others to sign onto position papers. Initially there was some resistance among actors to the prospect of signing onto advocacy pieces. Over time, however, working in collaboration was done in a way so that shared concerns were addressed. Some of the positions of SC became the position of civil society as a collective. SC also took evidence through its position papers and research to present to development partners such as DFID and UNICEF. The key, though, was their strategic positioning. SC didn't seek to simply advance their own agenda to donors and government. Rather, they worked to ensure that early childhood development and literacy issues became an agenda shared by other stakeholders and then collectively advanced their ideas together. This approach was likely more successful than a go-it-alone strategy. The collective advocacy of RENCP led to a shared voice of civil society when it came to ECD and early literacy. A successful civil society effort became a 'win' for SC, too.

One of the challenges was that a number of actors and projects entered the literacy space in Rwanda. Whereas Save the Children under ARR was the leading organization doing work in the ECD sector in Rwanda, it was not the only organization working in early grade reading. For example, a USAID-funded program called Language, Literacy, and Learning (L3) was initiated nationwide at around the same time as ARR was launched. In many ways, it complemented the work of ARR's Literacy Boost program by promoting the Kinyarwanda curriculum in schools. However, its delivery mechanism to teachers provided scripted audio sessions rather than training teachers on how to integrate literacy activities into their lessons. The discrepancy between the two approaches caused some confusion for teachers exposed to both programs. To mitigate this challenge, Save the Children agreed with L3 to jointly meet with school leaders to better communicate the complementarity of the two approaches.

8. People matter: systems strengthening through capacity building

In Rwanda, as elsewhere, a key aspect of advancing an advocacy agenda is by developing working relationships with officials at national and local levels. Establishing trust and rapport were required for genuine collaboration to take root.

The importance of investing in people was necessary to promote systemic change. As noted above, SC worked to build the capacity of individuals in the Rwandan workforce to develop an understanding of literacy issues. Perhaps the best example of this was one of the deputy director generals of the Rwandan Education Board, the implementing arm of the Ministry of Education, who later went on to become the Director General. He was one of the few people cited by development partners as a strong advocate for literacy development. SC worked closely with him in all phases of ARR, from advising on project implementation and strategy to serving as a co-investigator on some of SC's research studies.

One challenge to SC's goals of impacting systemic change was the very high turnover of personnel at national and local levels. Frequent turnover impacted the delivery of programming, slowed decision making, and impeded the efforts of SC and its partners to bring about systemic change. For example, in 2015, half-way through ARR programming, the Kinyarwanda specialist at REB, who was a key person in approving Kinyarwanda storybooks endorsed by RCBI and had worked with RCBI since its inception, unexpectedly resigned. Through significant RCBI engagement and capacity building, he had developed a solid

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understanding of story writing styles and the importance of creativity and imagination required to make a beautiful children's book. When he left, the books were given to other subject specialists, many of whom had never been exposed to children's literature. For this reason, some creative writers and illustrators became reluctant to submit their storybooks to REB fearing negative feedback. In the case of the Director General above, he was replaced with another official in 2018. While this change happened following the end of ARR, the government let go of a strong advocate of its early grade reading work as well as someone who knew the program quite well. This had implications on potential replication and scaling up of program activities. These types of personnel changes also had the effect of delaying policy implementation. Turnover has significantly slowed the finalization and approval of the National Literacy Policy. Interest in creating this policy started with one minister and permanent secretary in the Ministry of Education. However, since this time, these individuals have been replaced twice.

The ouster of a key staff member often functioned as a reset button to the relationships that SC had worked to build. This was particularly a challenge in the education sector, where key government officials were often replaced by officials outside the education sector who often didn't have an understanding of early literacy or its significance. One way SC dealt with the unpredictability of the sector was through the position papers they had already prepared. This was seen as a help in responding to new people coming in to get them up to speed on some of the key issues facing the sector and solutions to these.

CONCLUSION

This learning paper sought to reflect on Save the Children's experience of trying to enact systemic change to improve early grade literacy in Rwanda. The five-year program utilized multiple approaches and strategies to shape policy and priorities to improve early grade literacy. To be sure, there were aspects of SC's experience in Rwanda that were likely specific to the country, e.g. a post-conflict context, an extremely low starting point of education quality, strong political will to improve, and a system of accountability driven by performance contracts. Part of SC's approach was to identify these context-specific factors and adapt ARR accordingly. In other settings there will surely be similar and different opportunities and constraints that programs like ARR would need to incorporate into its planning. What the case of Rwanda does well, however, is illustrate a proactive effort to contribute to systemic change through the approaches elaborated upon above.

The lessons learned from the ARR experience informed the following recommendations for facilitating strategic change more broadly:

- **Develop a clear Theory of Change at the beginning of the program,** one which highlights the centrality of achieving systemic change as part of an overall program. Having this emphasis articulated at the beginning of the program shaped SC's priorities, decision-making, and resources allocation through the five years of the program.

- **Develop a high-quality PEA or situational analysis to understand local social, political, and economic context.** The PEA was a launching point for the advocacy trajectory project. It identified points of entry of key individuals, institutions, and incentives that were necessary for SC to be aware of to best target its approach. To be sure, the PEA was an investment by SC. Other organizations may not have the resources to carry out such an extensive assessment. But what is crucial for all programs seeking to contribute to systemic change is to develop a working understanding of the drivers of change so that advocacy efforts can be best placed.

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- **Find the gaps.** SC was committed to improving children's literacy through systemic change. However, it was flexible enough to adapt its strategy to address genuine policy gaps that it identified through the PEA and through sustained engagement within the sector.

- **Build a research and advocacy agenda at the beginning of the program.** Many programs do research and advocacy, but they are often ad hoc and opportunistic rather than proactive and strategic. Planning a research agenda at the beginning of the program allowed SC to link their research and advocacy strategy to the theory of change from the beginning. It led to position papers that SC could use as advocacy tools with development partners and government throughout the duration of the program.

- **Make sure the management structure and personnel decisions are conducive for contributing to systemic change.** Internal structural SC processes can be challenging. Organizations rely on funding, and funders have expectations. There is some inherent tension between investment in systems and implementation of programs, and between evidence generation versus advocacy activities. It wasn't always easy to make the case to respond to an opportunity, one which didn't necessarily or directly align with performance indicators that SC would be evaluated on. One unique feature of ARR was the alignment between the operational and advocacy side of ARR, enabling the program to take hold of opportunities that presented themselves much more easily.

- **Skillset of people.** Key to the success of ARR was its ability to recruit highly capable and qualified staff. They were also creative and autonomous. They were empowered to use critical thinking skills to make decisions that led to opportunities for advocacy and strategic change. Managers had advocacy targets, for example, and they were empowered to use the strategies that they thought best to reach these targets.

- **Collaborate with NGOs and development partners to advance collective interests.** Even though SC was a catalyst for a focus on early learning, it did not do it by themselves. Rather, it joined forces with key influencers to distill a message that could advance collective interests, concerns, and ideas for change.

- **Go the extra mile for government.** ARR had a specific focus, but in order to realize their aims, SC need to demonstrate to government that it was a partner who was committed to seeing the development of the education sector more broadly. Lending their expertise at opportune moments, attending sector-wide working groups, and building relationships with key officials was an important strategy for building the political capital needed for SC to advance their aims.

FURTHER READING

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