From data to action: Showing the power of citizen-led assessments in education

Introduction

In a recent webinar hosted by the WAPEQ Hub, education stakeholders from across West Africa and beyond convened to discuss the role of Citizen-Led Assessments (CLAs) in driving foundational learning improvements. At the heart of the conversation was the recognition that traditional assessments often overlook the most vulnerable learners, particularly those in underserved and rural communities. CLAs, through their grassroots, participatory approach, are providing a transformative model for inclusive, data-driven educational reform.

One truth remains constant in a rapidly changing educational landscape: data drives change. But for data to truly serve its purpose, it must reflect the real lives, learning, and challenges of children in the communities where they live. This is the transformative promise of CLAs, a grassroots approach that brings the people's voice into education measurement, accountability, and reform.

Across West Africa and beyond, CLAs have emerged as a credible and community-rooted solution to assessing and improving foundational literacy and numeracy. Unlike traditional, top-down evaluation models, CLAs begin in homes, involve local actors, and translate data into concrete action. The approach empowers communities, reveals hidden learning gaps, and sparks local solutions that respond directly to learners' needs.

Understanding CLAs: Principles and methodology

At their core, CLAs are participatory, inclusive evaluations conducted primarily at the household level to capture a fuller picture of children's learning, both in and out of school. They rely on a low-cost model powered by trained community volunteers, often teachers, youth, or other local actors – who are equipped to administer simple yet rigorous tools designed to assess foundational reading and numeracy skills in children aged 5 to 16. These tools are developed in both major national and local languages of the implementing countries, ensuring cultural and linguistic relevance. The assessments are conducted one-on-one and orally, allowing even the youngest or most marginalised learners, such as those who are out of school or experiencing learning difficulties, to participate fully and demonstrate their competencies.

CLAs are built on accessibility, inclusivity, and community ownership. They go beyond data collection by offering instant feedback to parents and guardians in clear, easy-to-understand formats, empowering them with insights into their children's learning levels and practical next steps. Results are also communicated widely through community town halls and advocacy forums, mobilising local

stakeholders, parents, religious leaders, school heads, and civil society groups around a common goal of improving learning outcomes. In some contexts, school-based surveys are included to triangulate data and strengthen links between household learning and formal education systems. By embracing a multi-sectoral, citizen-led approach, CLAs foster collaboration across communities, governments, and development partners, turning data into grassroots action and shaping education policies that are grounded in real learning realities.

Case studies and impact stories

The LEARNigeria Remedial Programme (LRP) stood out among the case studies presented. Implemented in Northern Nigeria, LRP offered a 25-day intensive learning camp for children in grades 3 to 5. Using Grade 2-level texts and 90-minute structured sessions, literacy outcomes improved dramatically, from 71% of learners at beginner level to 34%, with 7% reaching story-reading level. In numeracy, recognition of three-digit numbers increased from 23% to 41%.

Another initiative, the KOYA Project, targeted children with limited access to digital and broadcast learning platforms. Through SMS-based lessons and printed materials, the programme recorded a 33.5% improvement in literacy and 35% in numeracy among 3,134 participating pupils.

A grassroots example from Ngogo LGA, Kano State in Northern Nigeria, underscored the catalytic potential of CLAs. A group of dedicated teachers and community volunteers formed a grassroots coalition, motivated by assessment findings. They volunteered to teach children during school breaks. This initiative, once volunteer-led, has since attracted external funding and evolved into a structured, community-driven project now expanding across the state. It is a testament to how data from CLAs can spark grassroots innovation and lead to sustained impact.

Making CLAs credible and replicable

Despite the success stories, the path to implementing CLAs is not without challenges. Ensuring credibility and replicability across diverse contexts requires deliberate effort, such as:

- Inclusive design: CLAs must reflect multicultural realities and offer every stakeholder, from local chiefs to mothers, a seat at the table.
- Standardisation and language relevance: Tools must be clear and standardised while being translated into local languages like Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo in Nigeria. This is done with the support of language experts and teachers.

- Verification and quality control: Supervisors must be present during data collection, and enumerators must be thoroughly trained and monitored to avoid inaccuracies. Feedback loops further reinforce trust and accountability.
- Partnerships with national institutions: Working with bodies like the Bureau of Statistics, the National Demographic, and the Census Bureau to enhance the legitimacy and scale of assessments.

Inclusivity and empathy at its core

Citizen-led assessments (CLAs) offer a fundamentally different approach to measuring learning outcomes compared to traditional, government-led assessments. While state assessments typically focus on in-school populations and formal settings, CLAs extend beyond the classroom walls to reach every child, including those who are out of school. Conducted in households, they provide real-time, formative feedback to parents, empowering families to better support their children's learning journeys.

This inclusive design makes CLAs more responsive to urgent and localised educational needs. By involving community members and using tools adapted to local languages and contexts, they not only collect data but also build trust and ownership within the communities.

Moreover, CLAs distinguish themselves through their ability to assess with empathy, especially in fragile and conflict-affected areas. In regions like Mali, where children may be displaced or dealing with trauma, the CLA approach is sensitive to emotional and psychological well-being. Enumerators are trained to create safe, comforting environments and allow children to remain near caregivers during assessments. This thoughtful method ensures that data collection is humane, respectful, and accurate, and enables a clearer understanding of the real learning conditions for vulnerable children.

In essence, CLAs are more than just assessments; they are community-led tools for change, grounded in equity, empathy, and action.

Driving policy and collective action

The ultimate goal of CLAs is not just to assess but also to act. Data gathered through these assessments is used to design remedial learning programmes, influence curriculum revisions, promote inclusive education policies, and fuel advocacy at the community, state, and national levels.

By disaggregating data by region, gender, or economic status, CLAs provide precise insights that guide targeted interventions. From shaping education budgets

to designing teacher training programmes, the ripple effects of CLA data are seen in every corner of the education ecosystem.

Conclusion: Data as a catalyst for transformation

Citizen-led assessments demonstrate that the people closest to the problem are often closest to the solution. By turning data into dialogue and dialogue into action, CLAs are reshaping how we understand and solve the learning crisis. They are not just about numbers but also stories, communities, and sustainable change. In moving from data to action, CLAs are proving that when citizens lead, education systems follow.