"There is no point in monitoring a demotivated teacher":

Insights from baseline studies on Public Agency in education in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda

Brief No. 1

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What is the Public Agency experiment at Twaweza?

At Twaweza our Theory of Change and significant component of our work focuses on improving real opportunities for citizens to engage, and promoting constructive responsiveness from public authorities. We are calling this public agency: spaces and processes in which citizens and authorities jointly shape decisions for the future of their communities and countries.

Going from theory to practice, we developed in 2016 an experiment in public agency around a salient issue in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. This means primarily supporting, challenging and facilitating our district implementing partners, as they are embedded in the local environment and relationships; but also making use of data, insights, and information in new, locally-relevant ways. We are also deliberately – and to the best of our ability – applying the principles of adaptive learning and adaptive management to this pilot.

The entire process is one of high-stakes learning for the organization, and adaptive management principles (and tools) mandate embedding learning along the way to ensure thoughtful and regular fine-tuning of the design and implementation, as well as higher-level learning and reflection on core hypotheses related to accountability relationships between citizens and government. You can read more about our trajectory so far in this document.

Our learning plans include internal monitoring and a lot of feedback at the various levels of implementation, as well as an external pre- and post- assessment focusing very much at the community and school level, conducted by an independent party. In this brief, we present the summary of the independent baseline research conducted by independent teams in each of the 3 countries.

Public agency in education at a glance

In Tanzania and Uganda, we chose teacher absenteeism as the issue of focus; in Kenya, we also added pupil absenteeism. The issues intersect both the education and governance domains, and they are visible and pressing at the community, district/county and national levels. They have the potential to galvanize various actors around it, and are correlated with improved learning outcomes for children. We want to bring about a change in teacher absenteeism by enhancing spaces and processes in which citizens and authorities jointly shape decisions for the future of their schools and communities.

The pilot in each country takes place in 2 districts; they have begun in mid-2016, and continue through the first half of 2017. A summary of intervention components is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Public Agency pilot summary

	Tanzania	**Kenya**	**Uganda**
Districts	Ilemela & Mvomero	Baringo & Kilifi (Counties)	Moyo & Kabale
Focus issue	Teacher absenteeism (from school and class)	Teacher & pupil absenteeism (from school and class)	Teacher absenteeism (from school and class)
Main intervention components	An independent verification of teachers presence through classroom spot-checks, with local civil society and parents, combined with administrative data, will allow for selection of "most present" teacher in each participating ward. The selected teachers will be recognized publicly locally, at district level, and nationally.	An independent verification of teachers and pupil presence through classroom spot-checks, with local volunteers and parents representatives, combined with administrative data, will allow for selection of "most present" teacher and 'best performing school in pupil attendance'' in each participating ward. The selected teachers and school will be recognized publicly locally, at school, ward and county levels.	An independent verification of teacher presence through household visits (and checking of children's workbooks) and school spot-checks will allow for selection of "most present" teacher in each participating ward. The selected teachers will be awarded at the community.

Focus on baseline: methods

In each country an independent research company was contracted to conduct the baseline. The terms of reference were identical for the 3 countries, although the selected entities presented different strengths. Nevertheless, in all three countries the methods followed were broadly the same, as were the analytical steps. Methodological summary is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of methods and analysis across the three countries

	Tanzania	Kenya	Uganda
Participants	Teachers, head-teachers, students, parents, Village and Ward Executive Officers, Ward Education Coordinators, and District Education Officers	Teachers, head teachers, students, Board of Management, Education officials, BoMs, PAs, Ward Representatives, MCAs, community representatives including religious leaders	Teachers, head teachers, parents, students, School Management Committees, Local Council III Chairpersons, District Education Officer/Inspector of Schools, District Council Speakers
Methods	Facilitated mixed workshops (group discussions), and key informant interviews	Focus group discussions, key informant interviews, quantitative surveys	Focus group discussions, key informant interviews
Number of respondents	514 in total, including 29 Village and Ward Executive Officers and Ward Education Officers; 183 parents; 11 head teachers; 190 teachers; 99 students; and 2 key informant interviews with District Education Officers	1109 individuals, including 720 quantitative individual surveys with parents; 22 FGDs and 36 mini-FGD (teachers, parents, students); and 42 key informant interviews with officials.	436 in total, including 34 FGDs (teachers, parents, students), 21 in-depth interviews with parents, and 12 key informant interviews with officials.
Analysis	Grounded theory; using NVIVO 10 software	Thematic analysis, using NVIVO 10 software; SPSS for quantitative data	Thematic analysis, using NVIVO 10 software

In each country a detailed baseline report was produced; they are available upon request from info@twaweza.org. We are using them to reflect on our design and implementation, as the granularities unearthed in each setting allow for very specific insights and adjustments. However, there are also striking commonalities across the settings. Here, we present a summary of findings across the three countries.

Focus on baseline: Seven core insights

1. **There is great defensiveness from within the education system to discuss teacher absenteeism as an issue.** Across the board, teachers as well as Head Teachers (and often also District-level officials) insist that absenteeism is not a problem. In many cases, pupil absenteeism is brought up as a contrast and a "much bigger" problem. The position is that teachers are either present, or absent with a valid reason (there are interesting nuances across the countries in what people consider to be valid reasons). It turns out that the defensiveness has a real basis: teachers and head teachers often do work in very difficult conditions and environments. Often their basic needs are not met – and we mean basic: food, housing, water, regular salaries. In contrast, other stakeholders pointed out that in comparison to other people (even other civil servants), teachers have it better: at the very least they have a civil service job, and the hardships endured by others in the community are often perceived to be greater. Moreover, as we know, the reassurances that absenteeism isn't a problem contradict what data shows: Service Delivery Indicators, and also our own Uwezo data clearly show high levels of teacher absenteeism.

2. **Across the board, there is a sense that the education system itself has failed its teachers, and teachers are overall demotivated**. Overall there is little appetite for accountability, particularly given the hardships (real and perceived) as discussed above. In this context, a very clear message was that simply more monitoring (or other kinds of punitive approaches) will do nothing to change the behavior of a demotivated teacher.

3. **Even though the system is seen to be failing its teachers, almost paradoxically the various actors cooperate to keep the status quo going** – the system may be failing, but it's still better than having no system at all (and presumably no job). Relationships within the system seem to rest on a web of complicity, not a sense of responsibility or accountability. So teachers cover for each other, head teachers cover for their teachers, all produce data to show that there is no real problem. Since everyone cooperates this way, there is little appetite for exposing anyone or any component.

4. **In the eyes of many teachers and head teachers, parents and communities have reneged on their responsibilities to send children to school, to follow up, to pay fees when required, to contribute food, etc.** Their absence is particularly felt in areas where pupil absenteeism is high. Conversations with parents as part of this fieldwork do confirm that for the most part, they are either checked out (do not feel is their responsibility or their place to act vis-à-vis the schools), or if they do want to act, really don't know what to do (beyond the actions that are already in their parental sphere, such as giving children breakfast before school). We don't yet know enough about what would truly motivate them to participate more, and the Public Agency pilot needs to explore this in greater detail.

5. **At the very local level, it does seem to be all about relationships and respect**: teachers and head teachers don't expect that the education system will be overhauled, but they do expect their neighbors and fellow community members to demonstrate appreciation for their role, and offer support, when needed.

6. The baseline research explored understanding the issue along three dimensions: who has the responsibility to act, who has the power to act, and who has the incentive or interest to act.
    a. **When asked who has the *responsibility* to ensure teachers (and pupils) are present and teaching, fingers are always pointed somewhere else.** There were nearly zero statements of

ownership in these discussions: no one spoke about what I *can do*; everyone spoke about what someone else *should do*, and it was always in very abstract terms.
   b. **When asked who has the *power* to act (to ensure teachers are present), people did speak about themselves and the power they have.** Many of the statements here started with "I can…" (E.g. from a head teacher, I can check on whether my teachers are actually in the classrooms). Interestingly, no one felt they were powerless, although their power sphere may be small. Even students expressed this sentiment, with statements such as "I can make sure I am in school on time."
   c. **When asked who has the *interest* or incentive to act, the finger pointing started again,** and again no one claimed interest directly for themselves.
   d. The above triad is fascinating, and holds across the three countries: respondents feel they have at least some power, but they seem to have neither the interest nor do they feel that it is directly their responsibility to act.

7. The possibility of how to bring about change in the above "dysfunctional equilibrium" was explored across the three countries as well.
   a. In Tanzania, there was discussion around the "seeds of change." In essence, not asking for behavioral overhauls, but identifying and encouraging (nudging) various actors to do what they are already doing, but a bit more, and a bit better. Also, it was felt that recognition (and respect) for the effort teacher and head teachers make was very important as well, above and beyond any material rewards.
   b. In Uganda, there were interesting concrete examples as to what was seen to work in the past and suggestions to revive these practices. Among the top were providing meals to teachers at school, having the head teacher fetch the salaries from distant district centers to avoid teachers taking days off to travel (though teachers were less fond of this as it could mean delays or even missing salaries), and providing housing for teachers – if a teacher lives nearby, attendance improves. This last point on housing was unanimously noted across the three countries.
   c. Kenya research focused a lot on contrasting pupil with teacher absenteeism, focusing on whether one or the other is perceived to be the biggest issue. The main insight is that it's important to not finger point to one actor when many are implicated, and to start where there is a felt need: if people respond better to the issue of pupil absenteeism, then that should be the entry point (though not the final point).
   d. In all countries, there seems to be appetite for "joint" action at community level. On the other hand, it is unclear how much of this is talk, reflecting an ideal which people hold in their mind, and how much is real enthusiasm and willingness to take part. E.g. in Tanzania, the terms "cooperation" and "collaboration" were used repeatedly, and yet no one could give an example of what it looks like, or how to do it.

Insights into action: Five points to take on board

Promoting accountability becomes very challenging in this context of a defensive posture fueled by real (and perceived) hardships, combined with the normalization of absenteeism. So what do the above insights mean for our pilots in the three countries?

1. **We need to be really careful to not be dismissive of the hardships (and related defensiveness) of teachers and head teachers – there is too much evidence of the real hardships endured.** The engagement has to contain both elements of recognizing their lived realities, as well as pushing (gently) on the power and responsibility they are entrusted with.

2. **Initiatives might do well to not only acknowledge the hardships and include even small but practical components which truly will make teacher's work and lives a bit easier.** This was brought up in Tanzania in particular, around daily needs of the teachers, and interactions with community. For example, ensuring the teachers have water at the school, so that neither they (nor, as is more common, the children) spend school time fetching water.

3. **Recognition of effort seems to be the right starting point** – in all three countries, our initiatives hinge heavily on rewards (which are low in monetary value but high on visibility). It is an important challenge for our teams to get the balance right between rewarding but of course also monitoring – and therefore generating credible data upon which to reward. Across settings, teachers noted that the rewards must be fair; there is already enough favoritism in the system, and if the initiative is seen to be partial to a particular group or influenced by powerful individuals, it will lose credibility fast.

4. **But go beyond the starting point – clearly linking recognition of effort to performance.** This will invariably be challenging, as beyond interest in the rewards there aren't many insights in the baseline studies to suggest there is appetite to examine and motivate on performance. Twaweza needs to think through how to promote accountability (not only rewards), perhaps experimenting with various approaches across the contexts.

5. **There is one common thread when focusing on possible action: a strong expressed preference for doing things jointly, collaboratively.** This may well be the classic free-rider problem: people prefer not to put effort into public goods, hoping someone else will do it on their behalf. However, it's worth exploring more, as it may rest on a deeply-seeded notion of identity being a communal rather than an individual characteristic, and therefore the "blame" as well as the effort are to be shared across a number of actors. At least ideologically, people across stakeholder groups seem to respond well to the notion of community ownership of a problem. On the other hand, various analyses have suggested that there isn't a strong culture of organizing and collective action in East Africa (though of course this varies across contexts within East Africa). The Public Agency pilots would do well by explicitly examining, discussing, and describing what might possibly spark these communal tendencies into collective action, and linking collective action with accountability behaviors. This would be a significant contribution to understanding accountability and citizen participation in this part of the world.