ALL CHILDREN READING, EKITABU: GRANTEE JOURNEY

As the digital revolution spread across Africa, more and more devices were supplied to schools. Yet growth in hardware was not being matched by useful and accessible learning content. It was this challenge that led to the creation of eKitabu in 2012. Established in the U.S. but based in Kenya, eKitabu offers over 350,000 eBooks and digital content to 14 African countries through an app and e-library that are available offline and comply with open standards.

In 2016, Kenya's Ministry of Education (MoE) approached the EdTech startup to create accessible content for the country's new digital literacy program, which involved the rollout of more than a million tablets and laptops to learners in primary schools across Kenya. According to MoE data, deaf children made up more than half of all learners with disabilities in Kenya's public school system, so adapting learning materials for Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) was flagged as a top priority. As a result, eKitabu developed a solution to help the deaf community and local content creators integrate KSL videos into early-grade digital reading materials and produced visual storybooks in support of Kenya's new inclusive education policy.

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GRAND CHALLENGE PARTICIPATION:
Launched in 2011, All Children Reading: A Grand Challenge for Development (ACR) is a partnership of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), World Vision, and the Australian Government that advances EdTech innovations and research to improve reading outcomes for marginalized children in low-resource contexts. As an awardee of All Children Reading: A Grand Challenge for Development (ACR), eKitabu has developed video storybooks for literacy and has brought digital content to more than 1,500 schools across all 47 counties in Kenya and 13 African countries.

Through the ACR grant, eKitabu will collaborate with Rwandan development partner organizations, former ACR awardee Benetech, education organizations from the public and private sector, and the government to widen access to books in accessible formats. eKitabu will also work with teachers, community members, and caregivers to bring awareness to accessible ICT and how children with disabilities can actively participate in education using accessible digital books.

Each story has a title, a body, questions, and a glossary for you to learn.

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SUSTAINABILITY: In 2017, as Studio KSL was in development, ACR announced its Sign On For Literacy Prize, which sought innovations to increase literacy outcomes for deaf children in low-resource settings. ACR gave eKitabu an opportunity to leverage the Prize to take Studio KSL even further, launching an equivalent in Rwanda. It has produced storybooks in both Rwandan and Kenyan Sign Language as resources for deaf children and their parents. The project led to employment for deaf youth and generated valuable research. Through ACR, eKitabu has been able to scale both in terms of formalizing e-book creation and producing creative commons license learning materials, which are now part of the Global Digital Library.

KEY LEARNINGS:
- ACR's prioritization of people living with disabilities cemented eKitabu's ability to develop learning material for deaf children.
- The opportunity for private businesses to apply for ACR grants was pivotal to the success and sustainability prospects of eKitabu.
- eKitabu designated impact as the focus of its innovation and inclusivity a key factor in design.
- A cost-effectiveness analysis helped eKitabu to expand its sales and make a case for more resources.
- Close communication with the USAID Mission and ACR funding contributed to securing collaboration with the in-country government.
- eKitabu has benefitted from improvements in the ACR approach to monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL).

eKitabu has had three ACR projects as follows:

USAID ACR GC BOOK BOOST: ACCESS FOR ALL CHALLENGE, 2018

- **PROJECT NAME:** Driving Local Development of Born Accessible[1] Titles in Kenya
- **CHALLENGE & SOLUTION:** eKitabu aimed to catalyze an accessible e-book chain in Kenya to create a library of open-source, accessible digital titles, adapting its open standard-based toolkit for local content developers.
- **LOCATION IMPLEMENTED:** Global
- **TECHNOLOGY USED:** Assistive Technology, Software/Apps
- **AMOUNT AWARD:** $162,000
- **STATUS:** Winner
- **COLLABORATORS/PARTNERS:** Digital Literacy Trust

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USAID ACR GC SIGN ON FOR LITERACY PRIZE, 2019

- **PROJECT NAME:** Studio KSL
- **CHALLENGE & SOLUTION:** eKitabu launched Studio KSL to help the deaf community and local content creators integrate sign language videos into early grade readers and produce visual children's storybooks in support of Kenya's new inclusive education policy. Investing to set up Studio KSL and streamlining production with deaf actors was intended to lower the cost of producing quality visual storybooks and help to document regional differences in Kenyan Sign Language.
- **LOCATION IMPLEMENTED:** Kenya
- **TECHNOLOGY USED:** Assistive Technology
- **AMOUNT AWARD:** $250,00
- **STATUS:** Finalist
- **COLLABORATORS/PARTNERS:** Deaf Ability Initiative and The Kenya Society for Deaf Children

USAID ACR GC BEGIN WITH BOOKS, 2020

- **PROJECT NAME:** Open Books Malaw
- **CHALLENGE & SOLUTION:** eKitabu aimed to scale work begun in Kenya and Rwanda through ACR's Book Boost and Sign On For Literacy prizes by implementing the Open Books Malawi initiative. The project is expected to deliver a total of 270 books, including 220 in Tumbuka and 50 in Malawian Sign Language, to the Global Digital Library, which already houses more than 120 accessible African e-publications digitized by eKitabu.
- **LOCATION IMPLEMENTED:** Malawi
- **TECHNOLOGY USED:** Software/Apps
- **AMOUNT AWARD:** $250,00
- **STATUS:** 1st Place, Winner
- **COLLABORATORS/PARTNERS:** Juárez & Associates, Malawi National Association of The Deaf (MaNAD), Malawi and Institute of Education (MIE).

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1   "Born accessible" refers to building accessible books right from the beginning, and building the process into current eBook production workflows, instead of taking apart and updating books post-production to make them accessible.

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Key Learnings

ACR helped eKitabu to scale both in terms of formalizing e-book creation and producing creative commons license learning materials, which are now part of the Global Digital Library. The founders of eKitabu believe that they would not have come this far without ACR funding. The USAID mission in Kenya introduced eKitabu to the USAID Grand Challenge. Their application was successful, and they were awarded funding in the Book Boost Challenge in 2018, emerging as the winner of the competition. Book Boost did indeed give eKitabu a real boost in terms of formalizing the process that they used to create eBooks. It also enabled eKitabu to develop a toolkit for local publishers and authors in Kenya and Rwanda that documented and formalized the internal process, resulting in an open-source, accessible e-publishing toolkit: toolkit. ekitabu.com. The Book Boost grant also enabled eKitabu to explore opportunities in sign language video, which was accelerated under the 'Sign on for Literacy' challenge of ACR in 2019. ACR was thus successful in serving as an incubator for new technologies and new capabilities in organizations like eKitabu.

ACR's prioritization of people living with disabilities cemented eKitabu's ability to develop learning materials for children with learning difficulties. In building capabilities to achieve impact in literacy, particularly with children with disabilities, ACR had an explicit priority to include children with disabilities, which very much resonated with eKitabu. eKitabu's Studio KSL, supported by ACR, has about 20 sign language storytellers and signers who are deaf young people in their early 20s, mostly in Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Malawi, who produce the learning materials, typically in partnership with local disabled persons organizations. The studio is now continuing to operate on a sustainable basis.

> " With ACR's help, the top three priorities for eKitabu in the past few years have been software development, team growth, and country expansion."
>
> — CASE STUDY INTERVIEWEE

The opportunity for private businesses to apply for ACR grants was pivotal to the success and sustainability prospects of eKitabu. The project implementers stated that eKitabu has greatly benefited from the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model of ACR, backed by its strong donors and implementing institutions (USAID, the

Australian Government, and World Vision). This unique combination in ACR has strengthened eKitabu in terms of sustainability and scale, especially making a difference in African countries that require strong partnerships with the government for innovations to achieve scale-up.

eKitabu has made impact the focus of innovation, and inclusivity a key factor in design. The design philosophy in eKitabu has been that 'when you design your project for people on the margins, your project works better for everyone.' Inclusive education with a special focus on disabled groups has enabled eKitabu, with its partners of local and international publishers (e.g., African Storybook, Cambridge University Press, Gallup Press), to deliver content to over 1,500 schools across Kenya and 13 other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, including Rwanda. eKitabu has reached scale across all 47 counties in Kenya. eKitabu is now in the process of securing private sector investment from funders in the U.S. to achieve its main priorities of software development, team growth, and country expansion. eKitabu currently has revenues from a number of contracts with various agencies and device manufactures, including UNICEF, Microsoft, and over 70 publishers within and outside Africa. According to the implementers, partnering with ACR has augmented eKitabu's value proposition, enabling them to build relationships with key people, get advice, and connect with them to enhance impact. The eKitabu team also believes that investing in staff with the right skill set and retaining them has aided them to scale their operations and live up to their expectations.

Cost-effectiveness analysis helped eKitabu to expand its sales and make a case to attract more resources. In one of the cost-effectiveness analyses conducted in the past by the implementers, under a project in DFID's Girl's Education Challenge, eKitabu was able to reduce the costs of delivering a set of curriculum materials by over 95 percent. The team is now interested in doing a relatively large-scale quantitative study that looks at not only the impact, but also the cost-effectiveness with solid economic and econometric analysis behind it.

Improvements in ACR's approach to monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) have benefitted eKitabu. In the first collaboration with ACR in round 2, there were no components for MEL explicitly in the design, but from round 3, ACR incorporated MEL into project design. The ACR's encouragement that eKitabu focus on impact, particularly for children with disabilities, is perceived to have been of great benefit to the project. The performance-based milestone approach was also described as very effective in keeping projects on track and increasing the productivity of the company.

> " We appreciate ACR GCD as it helped us to build relationships with people, get advice, connect on values, connect on impact, connect on aspirations, and even on uncertainties or hard problems to resolve."
> — CASE STUDY INTERVIEWEE

The team now plans to undertake a relatively large-scale quantitative study that looks not only the impact, but also cost-effectiveness with a solid economic and econometric analysis behind it. Substantial work has been put into designing a Randomized Control Trial that involves people with disabilities, especially children with disabilities, for whom it is particularly difficult to design and implement effective development programs.

Close communication with the USAID Mission and ACR's funding contributed to securing collaboration with the in-country government. eKitabu's journey with ACR began when a USAID Mission introduced the organization to the GC. eKitabu stated that they have greatly benefited from the relationships with the USAID education officers in the countries where they work. USAID was able to provide credibility with local governments, as projects were in alignment with the Mission objectives. Working on a formal ACR project has contributed immensely to the organizations' credibility and has set relationships off on the right foot.

eKitabu managed to secure good relationships with the Kenyan government by keeping impact and mutual goals at the center. One of the founders commented that "*ACR seemed to be conceived on the idea that public private collaboration is necessary for sustainability and scale. And that resonated well with what we see in education.*" Being based in Kenya also helped. In the opinion of the founders and directors, effective engagement with government takes patience, persistence, and a good understanding of the local context. They added that it is important to have respect for government officials and to recognize the work they have been doing for the

betterment of its citizens and concluded that if the government is approached with evidence on impact, there will always be a room for partnership.

Key Achievements and Sustainability Prospects

eKitabu is geared towards building literacy in contexts with limited access to infrastructures, such as power and connectivity. It holds long-term potential for improving literacy across education systems in lower income countries, and especially for children with special needs.[2] A Digital Literacy Trust report (2018) reported high enthusiasm for reading among children using eKitabu.[3, 4, 5] The major achievements mentioned in the evaluation document of Studio KSL are:[6]

- Launched Studio RSL through piloting in Rwanda: Prototyped Studio RSL with the national WFD member, Rwanda National Union of the Deaf (RNUD) in May 2019, resulting in two complete RSL storybooks and clear next steps to produce 20 more RSL storybooks and to support RNUD to create a digital version of their RSL dictionary.

- Produced and distributed a steady stream of Studio KSL storybooks: Completed 50 Studio KSL storybooks, packaged in EPUB. In the process, documented 400 KSL signs to build glossaries of key vocabulary for each storybook.

- Promoted Studio KSL storybooks as a resource for parents of deaf children and the deaf community in Kenya: Engaged with 151 parents of children who are deaf during parents' visiting days at four primary schools for the deaf.

- Increased employment opportunities for deaf Kenyans through Studio KSL: Employ 15 young adults who are deaf in Studio KSL. They inspire us to plot new, creative projects and they deepen commitment to eKitabu's progress in becoming a more inclusive workplace.

- Built a foundation for research on the impact of local sign language video storybooks: Piloted a sign language communication assessment tool developed by partner Royal Dutch Kentalis, adapting the tool for KSL, including filming the video stimuli with plans to harmonize assessment tools across deaf education projects in East Africa, and set the stage for larger scale research.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, eKitabu supported continued learning for millions of children in Kenya. After the government closed all schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) requested that eKitabu support deaf students by developing sign language videos to support early grade literacy for deaf children. In a further response to COVID-19, eKitabu rapidly built on these materials and produced Digital Story Time, a daily 30-minute broadcast for children and families. The program reaches four million households via eKitabu's Youtube channel, eKitabu's website, and EDU Channel TV (a channel operated under KICD as part of Kenya's Ministry of Education).[7]

eKitabu has shown positive signs of sustainability. The founders and implementers of eKitabu believe that the initiative will continue to grow after ACR funding concludes. However, eKitabu staff acknowledge that the end of funding may initially slow the expansion of the initiative. eKitabu sees the key to sustainability as stemming from sizable private sector revenue (through sales and purchases), and the organization's ability to attract funding from other donors such as UNICEF, as well as on-going collaboration with governments in countries of operation.

This grantee journey is one of four that provides detailed studies of a grantee that demonstrates key learning about thematic priorities for the meta-evaluation: scaling and sustainability, partnering with USAID Missions, and using MEL to support acceleration and scaling. Evidence was largely qualitative and collected through in-depth interviews with grantees and USAID, and from secondary sources, including project reports, documents, and public information, such as grantee websites and media articles.

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2   https://docs.edtechhub.org/lib/WGYWI78R/download/VSHQLALL/Chuang_Koomar_2020_EdTech%20Companies%20Focused%20on%20Classrooms%20and%20Teachers%20in%20sub-Saharan%20Africa.pdf

3   https://docs.edtechhub.org/lib/WGYWI78R/download/VSHQLALL/Chuang_Koomar_2020_EdTech%20Companies%20Focused%20on%20Classrooms%20and%20Teachers%20in%20sub-Saharan%20Africa.pdf

4   https://www.ekitabu.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Technology-for-Inclusive-Education-Pilot-Report-31-AUG-2018.pdf

5   The study included insights from surveys and interviews on content and device utilization during an eKitabu initiative. After the completion of the pilot, each pupil spent 2 hours per week reading (compared to 0 hours at the beginning of the pilot as they previously did not have access to any storybooks).

6   ekitabu Final Report: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tpRgtCELfAEjZVqsRxPagXk7vyvjb9U3/view?usp=sharing

7   https://www.edu-links.org/learning/pivoting-pandemic-ekitabu-provides-sign-language-video-content-students