

# Learning Memo: PlayLabs and Government Engagement

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## Introduction

Kenya Play Project (KPLAY) is a holistic, systemic, gender responsive approach to introducing and scaling Learning Through PLAY with Technology (LTPT) in Kwale and Kilifi Counties in the coastal region of Kenya. Aligned with Kenya’s new national Competency Based Curriculum (CBC), KPLAY will provide actionable methodologies to help teachers build the STEM and soft skills required by the CBC and for Kenya’s vision for its future.

KPLAY is implemented by IREX in Kenya, in partnership with humans who play (HWP) and is funded by Lego Foundation. The overall goal is to equip teachers as LTPT experts and champions, and to create a Kenyan-owned LTPT scaling model for coastal Kenya. KPLAY’s expected outcomes are: teachers gain skills and knowledge and apply LTPT in the classroom, school leaders understand benefits of LTPT and allocate resources for its integration in the classroom, trained coaches provide ongoing support to teachers, and parents and community leaders support LTPT in schools and advocate for it at county level.

The project has made great strides in its pilot year establishing the necessary relationships and collaborations with stakeholders as well testing out capacity building approaches for teachers. In this year, KPLAY has successfully worked with 11 schools (including one special needs school), trained, and supported 71 teachers and 22 School leaders. At least 4,000 children have had the opportunity to experience learning through with technology. In addition, the project successfully established steering committees, a platform that brings together education officials from the Ministry of Education, Teacher Service Commission and the Kilifi and Kwale County Governments departments of Education and ICT. The steering committees also led the decision making on 100 schools for project implementation in 2022 and provided guidance on the community groups to collaborate with for the community engagement.

One prototype PlayLab has also been established in Kwale County with a second planned for January 2022 in Kilifi County in collaboration with the Aga Khan foundation’s Tusome na Kucheza (TUKU) Project.

In this second Learning Brief, the project outlines learning from the process of designing and piloting the PlayLab and from engagement with government stakeholders in 2021. The learning has been derived from observations of activities and feedback collected in the process of engagement with teachers, school leaders and government stakeholders. This learning will be critical in informing activities in 2022 considering the planned scaling up to 100 schools and more rigorous community engagement.



Image 1: Prototype PlayLab at Jomo Kenyatta Primary School



Image 2: Kilifi County steering committee

# PlayLabs

PlayLabs are customized school-based spaces for playful interactions and creativity. They contain context appropriate LTPT resources that speak to girls and boys. PlayLabs, whether in-doors or outdoors, fixed or mobile will be child centered and have values of playfulness experimentation, curiosity, collaboration and connection to the community. PlayLabs serve as a resource for teachers trained in LTPT, providing them with a space to test playful learning approaches with special attention to how girls and boys react and interact with the activities therein.

Teachers, once satisfied with the outcomes of experiments in the PlayLab will be able to take the activities to the classroom giving their learners the opportunity to experience the joy and rigor of LTPT. The KPLAY Theory of change identifies three key pillars to the PlayLab:

1. **The educators:** Teachers play the crucial role of facilitating, encouraging, fostering, guiding, and structuring the learning experiences for students. The PlayLab is a tool to ensure that they are equipped to implement transformative learning in their schools.
2. **The activities:** Curriculum activities are carefully crafted to facilitate learning and enable CBC Competencies. Specific attention must be paid to ensure they structure constructivist learning with peers on meaningful projects.
3. **The spaces:** The physical PlayLab space defines what is possible. If students are to become actors of their own learning, develop creative skills and agency and work in group and much more they must have access to child centered play enabling spaces.

In addition to the three pillars above, the project recognizes the critical role that parents, and the community will play in the ownership and sustainability of the PlayLab. Community engagement is already a strategy the project will be upscaling in 2022. This is to ensure that parents and community leaders are sensitized and empowered to appreciate the role of play in learning and thus support the same in the targeted schools. This support includes ensuring that the PlayLab continues to function even beyond the project's direct support.

Consequently, the PlayLab set up process includes a community engagement strategy that will see parents and community members participate in cleaning, painting and refurbishing works and resourcing with local making and tinkering materials as a demonstration of ownership of the space.

## Designing the PlayLab

The design challenge for KPLAY PlayLab was to ensure that the PlayLab was a space that fit the contexts of the two counties where the project is being implemented. Kwale and Kilifi Counties are largely rural areas with schools having limited infrastructure. Schools are already stretched in terms of high enrollment vis a vis the number and size of the available classrooms. In addition to this, the project considered the following when designing the PlayLab.

### *ICT Capacity of the Schools*

Technology capacity of the schools is very low with limited access to devices and internet connection. The design process therefore began with an overall assessment of space and access to ICT in the schools to determine opportunities to leverage and challenges to overcome. During the assessment it was established that:

1. All public schools in the project have Government issued Tablets (teacher facing and learner facing). However, majority of the teachers did not feel confident to use them as the training they had received from the Government was not sufficient. Further many of the tablets are not functioning because of lack of maintenance.
2. 9 out of the 11 Schools had access to a projector. One public school's projector had broken down and the private school requested support to purchase one.
3. Only 5 schools had a laptop issued by the Government.
4. Each school had a room they identified as the ICT room where learners went to use the tablets issued by Government. This room in most schools also had storage and a charging station for the tablets.
5. Only 4 out of 11 of the public schools and the one private school had some access to Wifi even though the connection was either weak or unstable.

The Project provided each school with a laptop and a Mifi device to enable the schools participate in the hybrid trainings. These become a starting point for the tech aspects of the PlayLabs for schools that had no prior access to the same. Furthermore, the hybrid teacher workshops have been a platform to build digital skills and confidence among teachers and school leaders.

In 2022, the Project has planned as part of its capacity building activities, digital skills readiness sessions to build teacher and school leader skills and confidence for working with ICT.

#### **Alignment with CBC**

Another consideration for the project was alignment with CBC. In developing the LTPT Curriculum, the project has already determined that the content in the project and materials in the PlayLab will foster activities that focus on 4 main competencies:

1. Creativity & imagination
2. Collaboration & communication
3. Problem solving & Critical thinking
4. Digital Literacy

### **Selecting a PlayLab Model**

In considering all these, the project therefore considered four main models for the PlayLab to cater to the various context that the project is likely to encounter. These four models are:

1. PlayLab Lite; has largely no-tech and offline materials making it ideal across all the schools irrespective of their access to internet and ICT gadgets. The focus of this PlayLab would be making and tinkering with very limited aspects of technology.
2. PlayLab Classic; contains all the items of the PlayLab lite but increases the extent of the use of technology. This includes use of computers (for upper primary Grades 4 to 6) and tablets (for lower primary Grades 1 to 3) with software for creative coding mainly using Scratch and Micro bit and Make Code software.
3. PlayLab Plus - contains all items of the PlayLab classic but includes high tech items such as low-cost 3D Printer and Tinkercad Software that are used with the computers provided.
4. PlayLab On the Go: Pushcart – A mobile lockable cart designed to hold some materials from the PlayLab including making and tinkering materials, Lego Blocks, a laptop and Mifi device. Ideal for a school that has no extra space to dedicate for renovation to a PlayLab. It is mobile and therefore can be moved from class to class.

After considering these four models, the project decided to pilot the PlayLab Lite and the PlayLab On the Go.

These were identified as ideal for the rural settings. Schools will have the option of the PlayLab Lite or the PlayLab On the Go depending on the space available to them. The PlayLab prototype at Jomo Kenyatta included both models for demonstration purposes.

### **Piloting the PlayLab at Jomo Kenyatta Primary School in Kwale County**

With the design completed, the project selected Jomo Kenyatta Primary School in Kwale County to host the PlayLab Prototype that would host both the PlayLab room and the PlayLab On the Go. Jomo Kenyatta Primary School is a low-fi school in a semi-urban setting, with a dedicated ICT room where the Government issued tablets are charged and used from. The process of the PlayLab was as follows:

#### **Community engagement**

Following consent by the school's Headmaster, the project hosted a community engagement session in the school targeting the Board of Management (BOM). The BOM has community members nominated by the County Government and Parent Association representatives. During the half day meeting, the BOM was sensitized on the project and specifically the PlayLab and how it is anticipated to improve learning and delivery of the CBC Competencies. The BOM was also sensitized on the critical role they would play in setting up and sustaining the PlayLab.

Overall, the BOM members expressed their appreciation that their school had been selected for the PlayLab and they expressed that they viewed it a great gift to their school. The BOM Chair shared that from the presentations he felt he had a better understanding of CBC and was beginning to see the benefits it provides and can better sensitize community members on the same.



*Image 3: KPLAY Training Associates explains the PlayLab to BOM Members at Jomo Kenyatta Primary School*

The Chairman of the Parents Association committed to sensitizing other parents in the school on the PlayLab and the role it would play in learning at the school. Regarding sustainability, the members also shared that the school already has a lot of support from private sector and sees that the PlayLab would be another area they can support. This is in addition to mobilizing contributions from parents every year. The parents agreed that they would participate in the setting up of the PlayLab and would volunteer their time and skills in clearing and cleaning up the room and support the painting work.

### ***Sourcing Materials***

Partners humans who play and KPLAY Team had together worked to finalize a list of local materials for use in the PlayLab for making and tinkering. These include modelling clay, paints, tape and glue guns, plain papers, pencils and marker pens. Partners hwp helped source materials that were not locally available in Kenya including Micro Bits, 3D Doodlers, Mortars and Lego Blocks. However, these materials from hwp will only be used in the prototype to demonstrate what is possible in the lab. In rolling out to all schools the focus will be locally available materials to ensure that the local community can easily sustain the lab beyond the project period. The KPLAY team is also working with Lego Foundation to secure donations for Legos for the PlayLabs. In addition to the materials, the team sourced local vendors to build the PlayLab on the go, tables, and cushions and handwoven floor mats for floor sitting.

### ***Renovating the PlayLab***

The room identified for the PlayLab at Jomo Kenyatta Primary School was given a facelift by painting the walls, windows, and doors. Further the room was cleared out of old materials and old broken-down desktop computers. One of the walls was painted white to serve as a projector screen. Some inspirational posters were also put up on the walls as well as the KPLAY Branding. A commemorative plaque was also placed at the entrance of the room.

### ***Launch of the PlayLab***

The PlayLab was launched in the presence of community members, parents and learners of Jomo Kenyatta Primary School, officials from the County Government's Department of Education and representatives from the Ministry of Education and Teachers Service Commission at County Level. The Chief guest was the County Director of Education from the Ministry of Education, Mr. Martin Cheruiyot. Guests had an opportunity to view the PlayLab and see a demonstration of how the space is used with learners working on the collaborative spaces, on the making and tinkering station as well as working on creative coding projects.

## **Summary of Learning and next steps**

The experience of setting up the PlayLab Prototype was very key for the project in preparation of setting up the same in 100 schools in 2022. The proof of concept particularly the process of parent and community engagement was critical. The project worked to fully document the process of setting up the PlayLab for training of CBOs and parent groups in readiness for them to lead the setup of the same in 2022. The following learning was derived from the PlayLab Prototype process:

1. Community engagement will be pivotal in ensuring the sustainability of the Project results especially the PlayLab. The Community is better placed to identify ways to keep the facility running as demonstrated by Jomo Kenyatta's BOM. The community engagement can also be a platform for the school and education officials to conduct sensitizations on CBC and the importance of play which can yield great benefits for learning outcomes in the school.
2. A demonstration to the community that materials in the lab are available locally is critical for the sustainability of the project. humans who play (HWP) prepared a guidebook that contains step by step instructions on how to set up a PlayLab. The information therein can also give insights into alternative materials and activities that can be accomplished in the PlayLab.
3. Building efficiency will be critical for the project to achieve all 310 PlayLabs in targeted schools by 2024. Part of this is expected to be achieved through training of community-based organizations to set up the PlayLabs hence the documentation of each step of the process.
4. It is critical to maintain the same quality and standards for all PlayLabs regardless of KPLAY Staff presence and location. Therefore, community and school leader training and vetting of local vendors is vital. This is also an area of close collaboration with the CSOs to oversee the process at zonal level.

The KPLAY Project will be collaborating with Aga Khan Foundation's TUKU Project to set up a prototype PlayLab in Kilifi County in January 2022. This prototype will be particularly focused on demonstrating how the PlayLab would promote playful learning with technology among girls.



# Engaging with Government

The project has worked rigorously in engaging the Government structures and agencies at National and County levels. The intention is to have Government champions advocate for LTPT scaling across Kwale and Kilifi and its inclusion in national curriculum. This includes the championing of LTPT approaches integration in county-level teacher professional development programs. Consequently, efforts have been made to engage Government Officials and structures at National and County level to ensure their buy in, alignment of activities to overall objectives at County and National Level and compliance to Government policies.

Government officials of Kwale and Kilifi county government, and the county MoE offices, expressed that they welcome play into education, but they need evidence LTPT works in schools. In meetings with these officials throughout the year, the project shared updates on the progress of the project and welcomed their feedback on approaches and results.

## County level engagement

County level engagement was launched in March 2021 through a forum that brought together officials from the MoE and TSC working at County Level together with officials from the education officials from the Department of Education and ICT in both Kwale and Kilifi Counties. The Steering Committees were then established in each county and have been meeting on a quarterly basis to review project data and planned activities and advise on other stakeholders to engage including private sector and interest groups such as the Primary School Heads Association, Private School Association among others. The Committees, with the support of Sub County Directors of Education from the MoE led the selection of schools for the Pilot in April 2021 and more recently for the upscaling in 2022. Further, the Committees have advised the project on potential Community Based Organizations (CBO) for engagement in 2022 and will be involved in reviewing results of their proposed projects and results.

The Committees have been very instrumental in the success of the pilot year providing much needed knowledge on the context of Kilifi and Kwale Counties especially where school selection is concerned. Moreover, while the project was awaiting the formal partnership letter from the Ministry of Education's head office, the Committees continued to support the project ensuring that some activities continued in the interim so that the project was not halted.

The committees will play a critical role in the development of sustainability and scaling strategies in Kwale and Kilifi County and further provide learnings that can be replicated at National Level.



Image 4: Kwale County steering committee meeting

## National level Engagement

The process of National Level engagement began early in the implementation process with the submission of a request for partnership to the Ministry of Education in January 2021. This was followed by two presentations made to various levels of decision making in the Ministry. The first presentation was made in May 2021 where the IREX team made a presentation before the Technical Committee which is chaired by the Directorate of Policy and Partnerships. In this presentation, the project addressed questions about IREX, the goal of the project and the gap it seeks to fill in the education sector. After this, in July 2021, IREX presented again before the Senior Management of the MoE and representatives from the Directorate of Special Needs Education, Directorate of Policy and Partnership, Directorate of Primary Education and the Directorate of Quality Assurance. The formal partnership letter from the Ministry of Education was received in September 2021.

The National Level Working group, like the County Steering Committee, is a key platform for engagement of Government Stakeholders at National Level. The Steering Committee will review project results as well as review international best practices for playful learning with technology. This will enable them make informed decisions about scaling the project Nationally and integration of the LTPT approaches in Teacher Professional Development.

With the formal partnership with the MoE confirmed, the project is now ready to set up the National Level Working Group with full participation of the Ministry. The project will be requesting the Ministry of Education to serve as the convener of the Working Group since they have an oversight role over the agencies expected to be members. These include Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), Teacher Service Commission (TSC) Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) and Centre for Mathematics Science and Technology Education in Africa (CEMASTE). The working group will also include other private sector collaborators in enabling quality education these include Aga Khan Foundation and STEM Impact Center. In addition, the working group will welcome the participation of Teacher training institutions including universities such as Kenyatta University.

As part of the preparations for the establishment of the working group, the project hosted three (3) officials from the Ministry of Education from the Directorate of Policy Partnership and Directorate of Special Needs Education. These Officials had the opportunity to observe project activities particularly integration of LTPT in a special needs school, Kinango School for the Deaf and viewing of the site of the PlayLab prototype, Jomo Kenyatta Primary School. During their visit, they also advised on the process to follow for the establishment of the working group and expressed that they did not envisage any challenges with the request of the MoE acting as convener of the Working Group.

### **Summary of Learning and next steps**

The process of Government engagement is critical for the project to maintain access to the schools and teachers as well as to ensure that the results are meaningful to County and National level education goals. This informs sustainability and relevance.

The project appreciates the collaboration it has received from Government and other stakeholders in 2021 and has derived the following learning from the experiences:

1. The process of government engagement requires regular follow up and communication with the related officials. The project intends to keep the MoE Officials informed of progress through the KPLAY Newsletter that is published at least once every quarter.
2. The project must also stay in tune with local education policy. As learned early in the project, the county Government is responsible for the Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE) while the MoE is responsible for Primary Education. This therefore greatly influenced the constitution of the Steering Committee. KPLAY's primary target is Grades 3 to 6. However, the project had to widen coverage to include Pre-Primary 1, Pre-Primary 2 and Grades 1 and 2 so as to reach the target number of teachers per school and not to overwhelm the school's human resource capacity.

Among the next steps from 2022 is to establish the National Level Working group with the Ministry of Education. Two meetings are planned, in February and September 2022. The County Level Steering Committees will continue to meet quarterly. In addition, the KPLAY has had to include an additional layer of government engagement that was not envisaged earlier on. This new level of engagement is with the sub-county directors of education. This engagement is critical because of the supervisory role they have on schools and the CSOs. The sub-county directors already supported the project in school selection and KPLAY intends to hold quarterly meetings with them to discuss progress of the project and ways to support CSOs in their KPLAY co-facilitator role.