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Experiences of Implementing the International Development Early Learning Assessment (IDELA) tool with Children with Functional Difficulties in Homa Bay and Turkana Counties, Kenya: A Qualitative Study

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List of abbreviations

CFM Washington Group/UNICEF Child Functioning Module

DID Disability Inclusive Development

ECDE Early childhood development and education

FGD Focus group discussion

IDELA International Development and Early Learning Assessment

KICD Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development

LMIC Low and middle income countries

MoE Ministry of Education

MoH Ministry of Health

NCPWD National Council for Persons with Disability

OPDs Organisations of persons with disabilities

PP1 Pre-Primary 1

PP2 Pre-Primary 2

TSC Teachers Service Commission

UDPK United Disabled Persons of Kenya

Acknowledgements

Executive summary

Background

There is an urgent need to scale up early childhood development and education (ECDE) services in low and middle income countries (LMICs), particularly for children with functional difficulties. To do this effectively, tools that can reliably measure early childhood learning and development for all children, including those with functional difficulties, are essential. The International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA) is a standardised assessment of early learning and development which has been validated for use in LMICs. It is administered to young children, including those with mild to moderate functional difficulties. This report shares learnings from a qualitative study of the use of the IDELA, with enhanced disability inclusive adaptations, in two Kenyan counties.

Study design and methods

Four focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with 24 assessors in Homa Bay and Turkana Counties in December 2022. All the FGDs were conducted in English and Kiswahili. The discussions were audio recorded, and the anonymised transcripts generated from the audio recordings analysed thematically using NVivo software Release 1 (Windows).

Key findings

Assessors were able to implement most of the adaptations appropriately while children, including those with functional difficulties, reportedly enjoyed the activities. Assessors had challenges assessing children with multiple functional difficulties. Assessors suggested greater emphasis on certain points during IDELA training, the involvement of caregivers and others to support children with functional difficulties, and the use of stories, visuals, and associated activities to improve the assessment process. The study emphasises the importance of careful planning and consideration of local contexts, such as language and cultural diversity, for successful implementation of the IDELA. The study also highlights the need for further investigation into the feasibility of using the IDELA assessment tool for children with multiple functional difficulties and recommends the inclusion of additional real, context-specific objects for children with visual functional difficulties. Finally, the study highlights challenges of working with translators, and the importance of exploring strategies to minimise language barriers and other related challenges when using IDELA in refugee settings.

Conclusion

The study highlights the value of developing and using disability-inclusive adaptations when assessing young children using the IDELA, and the broad feasibility of the use of these adaptations by assessors working with children in Kenya. The identification of various

challenges with the adaptations and their use is not unexpected and provides an opportunity to continue to refine both guidance and practice.

Introduction

Measuring early childhood learning and development

Early childhood development and education (ECDE) is a necessary and central component of child development that has been recognised as a global development priority through the inclusion of a dedicated target (4.2) and indicator (4.2.1) within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [1], [2]. To measure achievement of this target and indicator effectively, tools that can reliably measure early childhood learning and development for all children, including those with disabilities, are essential.

Many tools have been developed to measure early childhood development. They include the Caregiver-Reported Early Child Development Index (CREDI) [3], Developmental Milestones Checklist (DMC) [4], Bayley Scales of Infant and Toddler Development and the Early Childhood Development Index, among others [5], [6]. A systematic review that assessed 34 tools suggested use of 12 key considerations to identify those that were applicable to different contexts within low and middle income countries (LMICs), including study, population tested, validity, reliability, cultural adaptability/translation, target age, administration method, domains, battery, accessibility, language and country/institution [7].

The International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA) is one such assessment of early childhood development and learning, validated for use in a range of LMIC settings [8]. The tool is designed for use with children aged 3.5 to 6 years and has been used by more than 120 entities in 78 countries, including Kenya [9], [10]. It measures progress against stages of child development rather than relying on teacher assessment of academic improvement and includes adaptations for children with mild to moderate functional difficulties – an important focus in this project.

This report shares learnings from a qualitative study of the use of the IDELA, with enhanced disability inclusive adaptations, in two Kenyan counties. This qualitative study was nested within the impact evaluation of an inclusive early childhood development and education intervention project in Homa Bay and Turkana Counties in Kenya. The next two sections describe this intervention project and impact evaluation, after which we present the rationale, objectives and research questions for the qualitative study itself.

Promoting inclusive early childhood development and education in Kenya

In response to the challenges of disability inclusion in pre-primary education in Kenya, the Kenyan Ministry of Education (MoE) and a consortium of international development organisations (Sightsavers, Humanity & Inclusion, the Institute of Development Studies, Leonard Cheshire International and Sense International) worked together to develop an intervention project to promote effective disability-inclusive ECDE practices in Kenya. The

consortium includes practitioners and researchers working in the areas of ECDE, special educational needs and disability, educational psychology, social anthropology and epidemiology in Kenya and Europe. The project has also worked closely with a wide range of stakeholders, including the MoE, Ministry of Health (MoH), County Ministries of Education and Health, Teachers Service Commission (TSC), Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), Kenya Early Childhood Development Network, United Disabled Persons of Kenya (UDPK), National Council for Persons with Disability (NCPWD) and other local organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs). The project has been funded by UK AID as part of the Disability Inclusive Development (DID) programme.

The intervention project has collaboratively developed affordable and contextually appropriate inclusive ECDE approaches to improve learning, educational and developmental outcomes for all children, but specifically for children with disabilities. Interventions include: training of caregivers, teachers, school-based inclusion teams and community members on how to support children with disabilities; improving accessibility of buildings and structures to provide conducive learning environments for children with disabilities; development and use of training manuals; learning and play materials to support children with disabilities, among others. All activities were conducted in close collaboration with OPDs. These interventions are being piloted in six selected pre-primary schools in Homa Bay County, and three schools in Turkana County (in and around the Kakuma refugee camp).

Intervention impact evaluation

A cluster non-randomised trial is being used to evaluate the impact of the intervention project on children's developmental scores and educational outcomes. The trial design required enrolment of children entering the first year of ECDE (Pre-Primary 1 or PP1) at each of the nine intervention schools, as well as nine matched control schools, for two consecutive school years (2021/22 and 2022)1. A total of 1,756 children were enrolled in the study from these 18 schools.

At enrolment, each child's parent or caregiver completed a brief interview, covering demographics, household composition and asset ownership. The Washington Group/UNICEF Child Functioning Module (CFM) was also administered. Using the recommended cut off points, this identified 19.9 per cent of enrolled children in Homa Bay and 8.8 per cent of enrolled children in Turkana as having functional difficulties [11].

Children are then assessed using the IDELA which is specifically designed to track progress at population level and is very useful in measuring the impact of project interventions. The

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1 In order to make up for learning interruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Kenya made use of adjusted/compressed school years in 2021 and 2022. The 2021 school year ran from July 2021 to March 2022, and the 2022 school year from April to November 2022.

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tool was administered to children at study enrolment and at the end of the second year of ECDE (Pre-Primary 2 or PP2).

The IDELA consists of 24 core play-based assessment items covering four domains: motor development, emergent literacy, emergent numeracy and social-emotional development. Overall assessment scores, along with scores in each of the four domains, can be used to assess progress in learning and development over time, and to understand sub-group variations. Although the IDELA includes guidelines to enable assessment of children with mild to moderate learning difficulties [9], it is possible that children with more complex or severe disabilities would have been excluded. Consequently, members of the project consortium worked in consultation with Save the Children to enhance existing guidelines [12], to enable assessment of children with a broader range of disabilities.

These enhanced guidelines and adaptations covered both general adaptations in line with Universal Design for Learning (such as patience, providing breaks, using interpreters), and more item- or disability-specific adaptations (for example, using eye movement to provide answers if mobility is constrained). Additional specific recommendations were made against each task. This could be substituting one task for another that measured the same developmental outcome – for example, the drawing task that measured fine motor control could be replaced with a task involving buttoning a shirt. In a few instances, the guidelines advised that certain tasks be omitted for some children with particular impairments. For example, the task that involved folding paper following verbal instructions was recommended to be omitted for children who were blind, and that this should not affect their final score.

These guidelines and adaptations were incorporated into the training content provided to the assessment team, and item-specific guidance and adaptations were additionally programmed into the digital data collection application. During training, assessors were guided on how to work with parents/caregivers, for example, explaining to them that they should help the child to understand the task but not provide answers for the children. Assessors were advised that individual assessments would be likely to take more time when working with some children with disabilities and that the children would be likely to need more breaks. Project staff were on hand to provide support for assessors when they had questions or challenges.

Further information on study design, along with sample composition and distribution, is available in the impact evaluation's baseline report and summary available online [13].

Study rationale and objectives

Analysis of the IDELA data collected during the baseline assessments indicated that assessments had been completed by the large majority of children with functional difficulties (91%). Assessments completed with children with functional difficulties were no more likely to contain missing data, or to be incomplete. While the data showed that children with

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functional difficulties performed more poorly in the assessments in one county, there were no differences in performance on the basis of functional difficulty in the other county [14].

However, this assessment data was by nature quantitative, and despite the collection of field notes, little detail was available about exactly when and how adaptations were being made during assessments, or about how and why decisions about adaptations were being made. For this reason, a small, qualitative study was designed to provide greater insight into these issues.

Additionally, by the time of the qualitative study presented here, the assessment team had completed two rounds of baseline data collection, and one round of endline data collection, conducting 2,330 IDELAs, including 384 with children with functional difficulties. This presented an excellent opportunity to better understand the assessors' experiences with these assessments and the enhanced disability-inclusive adaptations.

The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How did assessors and children with disabilities experience the IDELA assessment, with the enhanced disability-inclusive adaptations?

   – What challenges were encountered, and how were these resolved?

   – Which items did assessors feel worked well, or less well?

2. How did assessors understand and implement the guidelines around the disability-inclusive adaptations?

3. What suggestions did assessors make to further strengthen and support the use of this tool?

Methods

Study design

The study used an exploratory qualitative design consisting of four focus group discussions (FGDs), two each in Homa Bay and Turkana Counties.

Study location

Homa Bay County is one of the more economically deprived counties in Kenya [15]. Located along Lake Victoria in Western Kenya, the county's economy is based heavily on small-scale agriculture and fishing. The dominant language in the area is Luo. Most households depend on small-scale farming or fishing.

Turkana County differs markedly from Homa Bay. Located in the far North-West of Kenya, the area is arid, and is home to a large refugee camp (Kakuma) and settlement (Kalobeyei). Kenyan residents in the area are largely semi-nomadic pastoralists. Residents of the refugee camp and settlement come from many surrounding countries, including South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and others. As refugees, they are not entitled to work in Kenya, and rely largely on support from the United Nations (UN), remittances from family members overseas, and small-scale entrepreneurial activities. Due to these factors, the area is extremely economically deprived, with most households living in extreme poverty [16], [17].

The FGDs were conducted in Homa Bay town while the IDELA assessments had been conducted in schools spread across different sub-counties. In Turkana, the FGDs were conducted in Kakuma, while the IDELA assessments had been conducted in and around the Kakuma refugee camp, in Turkana West sub-county only. For this reason and from here henceforth, we refer to the two areas as Homa Bay and Kakuma, respectively.
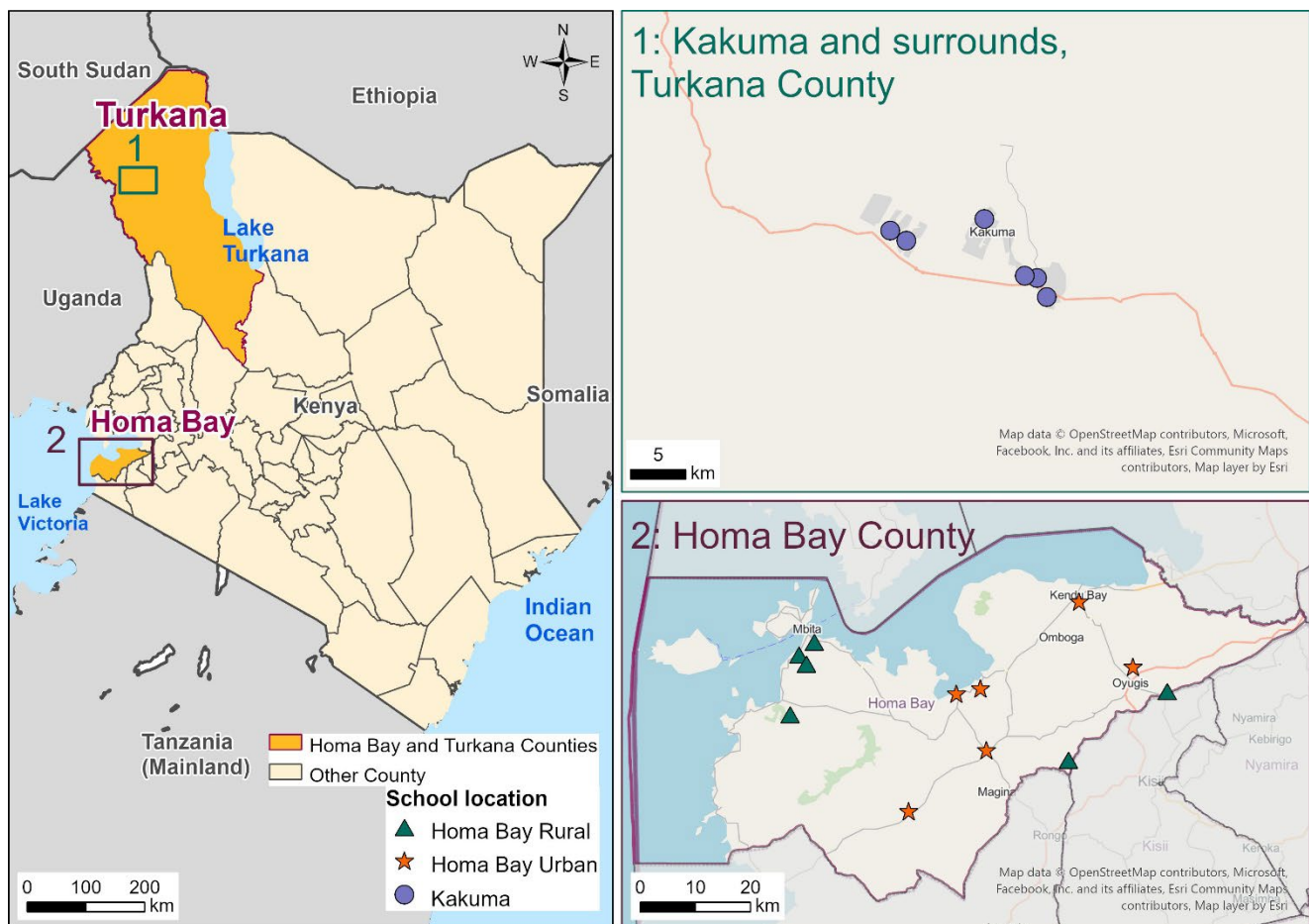
Figure 1: Location of study schools

Study sample

Twenty-eight assessors who were involved in conducting IDELAs for the impact evaluation were invited to participate in the FGDs. These assessors had participated in IDELA data collection exercise conducted in the 18 schools in both Homa Bay and Turkana Counties in October and November 2022. Before this round of data collection, assessors had participated in theoretical and practical training which ran between three and five days, and covered tool administration including adaptations for children with disabilities, safeguarding and other logistical considerations. Similar training had been provided prior to the two previous rounds of IDELA data collection in 2021 and 2022, that some of these assessors had also participated in. Details of the training and how data was collected is available elsewhere [14].

A total of four FGDs were conducted, two each in Homa Bay and Kakuma. Five to seven assessors participated in each FGD. These FGDs were conducted in English and Kiswahili and lasted between one and two hours.

Data collection

A structured FGD guide was developed to steer the discussions. It focused on perceptions and experiences of assessors in implementing IDELA, including preparation processes, topics that worked well and those that did not, challenges encountered and how they were resolved, how adaptations were understood and implemented, as well as suggestions for improving the IDELA tool and assessments in general.

Data collection took place in mid-December 2022, shortly after completion of the third round of IDELAs for the impact evaluation. Focus group discussions were conducted in a neutral venue, by an external consultant, so that participants would not feel pressure to participate, and would be able to speak openly.

Data management and analysis

Focus group discussions were audio recorded and used to generate anonymised verbatim transcripts in English. This study employed a dual qualitative analysis approach. We conducted thematic analysis to uncover recurring themes and patterns in the data, providing insights into participants' experiences and perspectives. Additionally, we used framework analysis to categorise data based on predefined concepts derived from our research objectives. This combined approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of the qualitative data, facilitating a nuanced understanding of the research questions and findings. Data analysis was carried out using NVivo software Release 1 (Windows) [18].

Ethical considerations

Local research and ethical approvals were obtained from the Strathmore University Ethical Scientific Review Committee (reference number SU-IERC1019/21) and the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) of Kenya (licence number NACOSTI/P/23/24281). The FGDs were conducted in a suitable, comfortable and private environment by an external research consultant, which ensured the assessors spoke freely. Study participants were provided with information about the study before any consent to participate was sought. This included the purpose of the study and methods to be used, the purpose and process of audio recording, and the right to abstain from or to withdraw from the study. Before the interviews began, the researcher obtained signed informed consent forms from all participants. Each participant was issued with a copy of the consent form. Assessors were reimbursed for their transport and time.

Results

We present our findings in four sections. The first section summarises the characteristics of research participants. The second describes the assessors' more general experiences with using the IDELA tool, including challenges encountered, followed by a section on how assessors identified children with functional difficulties, as well as how they implemented the IDELA adaptations for these children. The final section summarises suggestions made by the assessors for enhancing the IDELA assessments for children with functional difficulties.

Characteristics of research participants

Thirteen assessors participated in the research in Homa Bay, and 11 assessors participated in Kakuma. In both regions, just under two thirds of assessors were female. In Homa Bay, five of the assessors (38.5%) were trained teachers, meaning they had experience in conducting assessments with children. This was slightly lower in Kakuma (n= 3 (27.3%)). Assessors in Homa Bay had greater levels of experience in conducting IDELAs for the impact evaluation, with 12 (93.5%) having participated in all three rounds of assessment. In Kakuma, by contrast, only 4 (36.4%) assessors had been present for all three rounds, while 7 (63.6%) had participated in a single round only. This is due to the far greater levels of mobility in the Kakuma context, resulting in substantially higher staff turnover. Participant characteristics are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Characteristics of research participants

	Homa Bay (n=13)	Kakuma (n=11)	Total (n=24)
Sex			
Male	5 (38.5%)	4 (36.4%)	9 (37.5%)
Female	8 (61.5%)	7 (63.6%)	15 (62.5%)
Trained as teachers			
Yes	5 (38.5%)	3 (27.3%)	8 (33.3%)
No	8 (61.5%)	8 (72.7%)	16 (66.7%)
Level of IDELA experience			
1 round of assessment	1 (7.7%)	7 (63.6%)	8 (33.3%)
3 rounds of assessment	12 (92.3%)	4 (36.4%)	16 (66.7%)

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Experiences and challenges with using IDELA

This section presents experiences and views of the assessors before (preparation activities) and during the actual IDELA assessments, as well as challenges encountered. It also highlights the differences encountered in the assessments of children with and without functional difficulties.

Engagement with school administration

Preparation for IDELA assessments involved notifying the schools and confirming that appropriate spaces were available for the assessments. If no suitable spaces were available, assessors worked with the school administration to identify alternatives, as indicated in the next section. The school administration also assisted with other necessary preparations to ensure readiness for the assessment.

Upon arrival at the school, assessors introduced themselves and sought consent from the school administration to conduct the assessments. Once a suitable location for the assessments was identified and set up, school staff provided support with the identification and location of the children to be assessed. Overall, maintaining positive relationships with the school administration teams was important in ensuring that assessments could be conducted at schools, at the appropriate times.

Physical environment

Even with full support of the school administration, finding a conducive environment to conduct the assessments was a challenge. While true in both areas, this was particularly problematic in Kakuma. Across both areas, schools had very limited indoor space. In some schools, the school administration and teachers created space within the library or empty classroom if available, while in others, assessments were conducted outdoors. When assessments were conducted in places where the children being assessed could see others playing outside, this created distractions. When assessments were conducted in locations visible to others, they sometimes attracted an audience. These challenges increased the difficulty and duration of assessments and may have had a disproportionate impact on assessments with children with difficulties with behaviour or concentration.

> "I would like to suggest that the setting of the assessment be done correctly. Most of us find it challenging to get a proper setting in the schools. There are a lot of distractions." IDELA assessor

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Relationships with parents and identification of children

During baseline assessments, assessors obtained informed consent from caregivers and completed a caregivers' questionnaire in advance of doing an IDELA with a child. Although parents were requested to come to schools on particular days allocated for this purpose at the start of the data collection period, they were not always able to do so. This placed assessors under considerable pressure on days allocated for IDELA assessments as they had to balance between administering assessments and obtaining informed consent from parents. This also affected the assessments in that assessors had to work slightly longer on some days.

> "I feel that the baseline data collections are perhaps the most challenging for me. This is mostly because of the consenting process. Not all parents come on the first day. They trickle in on the other days so one has to do IDELA and fit in time for the consenting process. This is very problematic." IDELA assessor

Assessors also struggled with the initial provision of inaccurate data by parents, due to perceived benefits of enrolling their children into the study. For example, some children who were not enrolled in study schools were brought to study schools and registered for the study by their parents. In other instances, parents provided incorrect grades/classes of the children for them to be selected for the assessments. This created a challenge during the IDELA assessments, as the assessors struggled to identify or locate children. In some cases, they learnt while preparing for an assessment that a particular child did not actually meet the study's eligibility criteria i.e., being a learner at a school or in a studied grade. This was largely due to the parents' wish to receive small financial incentives provided as transport reimbursement to caregivers of the participating children.

> "Parents, especially in Kakuma, tend not to be very open. Or because of the incentives they receive, they can give you a lot of false information. For instance, in one school, we had requested for PP1 parents but it's the PP2 parents that came. It also gave us a lot of problems in identifying the children afterwards because the parent has probably brought a child that does not learn in that school. The child is probably registered in a different school but because they've heard that there are incentives, they bring their learners so when you follow up later, you don't find them in that school. The dishonesty is a bit of a problem." IDELA assessor

In Kakuma, additional challenges exacerbated difficulties with identifying the correct children for assessment, and then locating them. During registration, some parents and caregivers had provided children's official names, which differed from the names the children commonly used and responded to. In the context of very large class sizes, this led to identification

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difficulties. Additionally, some children in Kakuma did not attend school regularly, meaning that they could not be reliably located.

> "Apart from language barriers, we went to XX [name] school to conduct an assessment but didn't find any children. When we asked the other kids, they told us that the children we were looking for had gone herding…to add on that, the first day we went to XX [name] school, we didn't get the children. When we asked the teachers why there were no children in school, they told us that it's because there was no food offered in school on that day and that they would come to school the following day because there would be food. And true to that, when we went to school the following day, we found the children." IDELA assessor

Length of the IDELA tool

In Kakuma, assessors reported that the length of the tool was a challenge, leading to fatigue and exhaustion among children, and decreased interest and concentration towards the end of the assessment. As a result, assessors had to provide more breaks than planned to allow children to rest and regain their energy, creating a challenge in balancing the need for breaks with the data collection schedule.

> "From my experience, the tool itself is too long for the children who are in Kakuma. It's a bit challenging to have a child concentrate throughout the assessment. However, we try and give the child a break of some seconds or minutes before we continue with the assessment". IDELA assessor

Assessors with more experience reported being able to administer the tool more efficiently. In addition, assessments in Kakuma faced more significant translation and language barrier challenges, which further prolonged the duration of assessments. This is discussed in more detail below.

Language and translation

Varying linguistic context of assessments

The nature and extent of assessment challenges related to language varied notably by area, in line with the very different linguistic contexts of Homa Bay and Kakuma. In Homa Bay, the majority of the residents speak Luo, with some being able to supplement this with the national languages, Swahili and English. In Kakuma, over 15 languages and dialects are spoken, reflecting the diversity of the population, and many young children arrive at school with little or no familiarity with Kiswahili or English. In preparation for data collection, the IDELA was translated into Kiswahili and Luo. Due to difficulties in identifying translators, the

tool was not translated to many of the languages used in Kakuma. Instead, assessors who spoke some of these languages were able to directly translate these questions when conducting the actual assessments. This was practised during training sessions and role plays which increased the confidence of assessors in administering the tool in their local languages.

Suitability of existing translations

Additionally, assessors noted concerns about the translations of the tool that had been prepared in advance of data collection and programmed into the tablets. The translations were identified as too formal, and not aligned to local variations in language, making them challenging for younger children to understand. The assessors suggested the use of a team of translators who could translate the tool using locally used words to make it more understandable to the children.

> "Translations in IDELA tool are very formalised. For example, the Swahili translations are very formalised versions of Swahili. Like a phone is translated to (local dialect) and such terms are very difficult for a very young child to understand. It's the same case with Arabic. A young child cannot understand the translations. Perhaps, if time allows, you can have it translated to a more localised version of the same language. So, if it's the Luo language, you can get a few people who know the localised version of the language. Then we can have both versions, the localised and the formal version." IDELA assessor

Translation of specific terms

Assessors reported that some words used in the assessment did not exist in certain local languages or carried different meanings from the intended ones. These instances posed particular challenges when working with younger children in Homa Bay. One example was the term 'animal', which was not clear to children when translated into Luo.

> "While administering the baseline…most of these kids are still young. There are terms that generally…almost all kids that go to school know the term animal. But a child that has just started school might not know the term. So, if you translate it to Luo, the meaning that comes out is wild animal. The other meaning that comes out in translation refers to domestic animal. There's no term that specifically refers to animal…when it comes to asking about the animals, I don't think there's a version of it that they'll be able to comprehend. If the word is new to them, however much you try to translate it, they will not understand." IDELA assessor

Another example provided is that in one language used in Kakuma, the equivalent word for both "toe" and "leg" was the same, which led to confusion during the assessment.

> "In Kakuma where there are many languages spoken, you'll find that in a certain language, there is no specific term for toes…the toes, legs and feet are the same thing. So, if you tell a child to touch their toes in the local language, they end up touching their knees because they don't understand." IDELA assessor

Identifying the appropriate language for assessment

In Kakuma, ensuring that children were being assessed in a language they understood and were comfortable using was a persistent challenge. Assessors emphasised that challenges were not just due to the number of languages used in the area, but also the presence of regional dialects. With young children, it was not always immediately apparent whether a child could understand the language or dialect being used by assessors, which might result in switching languages during an assessment.

> "You may ask a question in a different language, like Arabic. And Arabic is spoken differently in different countries. So, the child might not understand the Arabic you speak because he/she speaks a different Arabic. So, one would have to translate it to a local language. The kid might take a while to process what's happening." IDELA assessor

Assessors advised that it was important to ensure that the assessment team included enough assessors comfortable with the various languages and dialects used by children in the area. The assessors also suggested that the tool be translated into different dialects beforehand so that the translations could be reviewed and agreed upon prior to the actual assessment.

> "The tool should be translated in many languages because here in Kakuma, we use Arabic, Kiswahili, English and other languages. This will help because translating the words to the local languages is a challenge to the assessors." IDELA assessor

Assessors noted that language barriers were more pronounced for younger children, who required more translation support than older children.

Use of other individuals as translators

In some instances, when assessors faced language barriers, they were able to identify other individuals to assist in translation on an ad hoc basis. Individuals identified to support with

translation at various times included teachers, other school employees, older siblings and parents. However, assessors reported that they found it challenging to identify individuals who would be able to translate, and that they struggled to assess up front the impact that a particular translator might have on how the assessment was administered. Assessors expressed concerns that the use of untrained translators would impact how questions were asked, the number of prompts used, and the instructions given to the children.

> "We had to use impromptu translators because there were very many indigenous languages [in Kakuma]. For example, an assessor would be speaking the Dinka language, but the child would be speaking the Nuer language. And we couldn't have an assessor for every indigenous language. So, in one case, we had to take a watchman from the school who speaks Nuer. However, a challenge arose when administering the item that involved numbers… So, whenever I asked the child to identify a number, the gateman would answer in their local language. So, instead of relying on the gateman's translation, I relied on the child's expression... Also, sometimes having teachers around to translate was a bit intimidating." IDELA assessor

> "We had to get translators for the Arabic speakers. However, the translators were not trained, so, we were not sure whether or not the meaning of our questions were lost…with regards to translation and using the parent or the teacher to help in translating, we cannot be too sure that the translations were correct. Perhaps they said the opposite of what the child did, just to favour the child." IDELA assessor

In some instances, the teachers and parents who acted as translators tended to assist or coach the children to get the right answers, which would skew the assessment outcomes.

> "Sometimes, the teacher would try to probe a bit too much, so as an assessor, you had to keep telling him/her not to probe. If it's a question that does not need probing…for example, the numbers… item number five [child is required to identify numbers shown to him/her on pre-printed grid], if they are asked to identify a number but they are not able to do so the first time, even though the teacher would be probing, you would move on. This is because it would be clear to you that the child does not know. IDELA is an assessment of what they know and what they don't know." IDELA assessor

The assessors suggested that the translators should be trained on the IDELA administration beforehand to avoid over-probing, being harsh to the child, or providing incorrect translation in attempts to favour the children.

Relationship between language and length of assessment

Unsurprisingly, challenges with language increased the amount of time required for assessment. When translators were used, this substantially increased the duration of administering the tool, which led to fatigue and reduced cooperation of the children.

> "I don't prefer that third person [translator] as that is time consuming and the child will be very tired … what I may advise is training more assessors who talk different languages like in the camp which has so many languages. Maybe if we have so many assessors who speak all the languages available, that may make it easy, if we found that a child is speaking Somali so we can easily call in the assessor from Somali. That can be easier than bringing in a translator to cut the time that is being wasted when translating." IDELA assessor

The assessors suggested assessing the children with language barriers at a different time, perhaps towards the end, to reduce time pressure. They also suggested adding a comments section to the tool to capture additional information on questions that required translation, as well as other general comments relating to translations and language.

Assessors' views of assessment items

Assessment items that assessors felt worked well

In identifying assessment items that they felt worked well, assessors focused on those that were clear and not confusing for the children, as well as those that were easy to administer. In both counties, the use of demonstrations, real objects and activities in questions were reported to work well, as the children could easily understand and follow the instructions. These questions were also relatively easy to administer, even for children with whom the assessors faced a language barrier.

> "Item 14 [assessor requests child to touch his/her head or toes after practising with him/her] was easy for most of them. The one that included playing a game with the child…touching their head, touching their toes…item two [child is tasked to identify the biggest or smallest circle and stick from pictures provided to them], about comparison by size and length. They were able to compare because they could see the items…activity 24 [child is asked to hop on one foot following demonstration by the assessor] …hopping…all the children knew how to do it…the items are physical. Like item two is physical. All the child has to do is point on the smallest and the biggest circle…the other reason is that for activities such as hopping, they do that on a daily basis, so they are used to it." IDELA assessor

Assessors reported that children responded well to questions related to writing, drawing, identifying circles and sticks, and sorting cards. These activities were engaging and captured the interest of the children, as indicated by their positive response to the questions.

> "I noticed that the children were really looking forward to the writing and drawing exercises. They would light up when it's time for these exercises. There's a child who did three drawings within two minutes and wanted to keep drawing. They were very excited about it…." IDELA assessor

The question on friends was found enjoyable by children with and without functional difficulties, as it engaged the children by showing an interest in their lives. Additionally, most children responded positively to the question on the foods purchased at the market, although challenges were reported for children with communication difficulties or those who were unable to visit markets due to mobility or other limitations.

> "Activity, addition and subtraction…the one about the picture of a bicycle and apples [child is required to figure out how many bicycles or apples there would be in the provided pictures if some are added or taken away]. They also responded well in activity 9, the one about friends [child is asked to provide names of friends he/she likes to play with]. They would list so many friends...there was also the one enquiring about what they would buy from the market." IDELA assessor

The cat and mouse story was generally well received by most children, who found it engaging and kept their attention throughout the assessment. However, some children with cognitive difficulties struggled to follow the story or respond to the associated questions.

> "My people (children) really enjoyed story-telling sessions. Nearly 99 per cent of them got all the questions correct… I think it's just the curiosity of wanting to know about the cat and the mouse." IDELA assessor

The assessors reported that children with relatively older siblings were able to respond to more questions because they had learned from them.

> "The children who had siblings found it very easy because they got to learn [from them] while playing with each other." IDELA assessor

Assessment items that assessors found challenging

When responding to the questions about items which worked less well, assessors shared examples of items which they had found challenging to implement for various reasons, as well as of items that children found challenging to complete correctly. We present these categories of response separately.

Implementation challenges

One of the questions that presented a challenge to the assessors was the question on print awareness. This was because the children were often distracted by the pictures in the book and wanted to go through the whole book before proceeding to answer the question.

> "In item 16, print and awareness, the assessor is supposed to give the child a story book so that the child can show him/her where to start reading from. But the children usually get attracted to the pictures in the story book and would want to see everything that's in the book. It's a distraction." IDELA assessor

Another challenge that emerged from the FGDs was the difficulty that almost all children faced in identifying their country, due to the similarity between the words "county" and "country". Furthermore, the assessment found that children in refugee settings often closely associated themselves with their country of origin rather than their current location.

> "From the learners I assessed, only five per cent could identify a county or a country. In Kakuma, the children identified themselves with their state of origin. So, if you asked them what country they lived in, they would say Congo or Rwanda because that's where they are more familiar with. This was especially with those who had just arrived." IDELA assessor

More challenging items

Assessors identified a number of items which children found particularly challenging. It should be noted that for an assessment to be able to measure variation or change over time, it is essential that children are not all able to complete all tasks successfully, particularly at baseline. Consequently, the challenges described here are informative, but not necessarily problematic.

For children who had just started schooling, first letter sounds were a challenge because they had not come across them. Some children in Kakuma were not aware of the alphabet letters as they had not yet been taught. Additionally, some teachers in the Homa Bay rural schools and Kakuma camps did not use these sounds in teaching.

In addition to the above, the task of completing a puzzle was equally challenging for children in Kakuma because they were not exposed to puzzles and were therefore hesitant to engage with it or found it difficult to solve if they tried. It did, however, emerge from the assessors that some of the children with cognitive/intellectual difficulties were quite good at the puzzle and enjoyed the task.

> "Some of the activities that are challenging to these kids are activities like puzzles. Most of the kids don't know how to tackle the puzzle because they are not exposed to such activities at their homes." IDELA assessor

Equally challenging was the socio-emotional awareness task, as described below.

> "Some questions were too hard for the kids, especially those in PP1. The questions about how they felt. They were not answering those questions very well. They would simply look at you and expect you to answer them." IDELA assessor

Assessors also reported that children in Kakuma faced a challenge with the task on conflict resolution. According to the assessors, it was not common for the children in this area to be trained on how to solve conflicts.

> "Conflict solving... It's hard because most children in camp are not taught about problem solving in school. The parents also don't give special teachings to them at home. So they don't know what is right and what is not right." IDELA assessor

The exercise on touching toes and the head sometimes confused the children given that the instructions for the actual task were different (opposite) from the instructions during the practice session main questions, as elaborated in the quote below.

> "… entails telling the child to touch their head, touch their toes…When practicing, they do the right thing but when it comes to the exercise, they don't get it right since they have to do the opposite. Also, most of them don't manage to solve the puzzle." IDELA assessor

Differences in responses between children with and without functional difficulties

Assessors reported that differences in responses between children with and without functional difficulties depended on the kind of difficulty the child had.

> "It depends on the difficulty of the child. If it's physical, they might not be able to do the hopping activity and if they have a speech problem, they might not be able to answer questions...a child without a disability can count and subtract using the beans, very fast. But a child with a disability might take time to do the activity." IDELA assessor

Generally, the children with difficulties were mentioned to be shy in their responses and some lacked confidence in responding well to the questions and needed to be reassured throughout the assessment period. The assessors mentioned that while the children without difficulties were consistent in their answers, those with difficulties could answer some questions rather well and fumble with others.

> "I would say the main difference between the two would be the pace with which the IDELA tool could be administered... children living with some kind of disability tend to be shy, fearful or very cautious about what they say. And if they are new in school, they would be very avoidant. Therefore, you cannot administer IDELA at the same speed as with a learner who doesn't have any kind of disability." IDELA assessor

> "I think that children without any challenges are a bit consistent. Children with these challenges could answer some questions but fumbled with others." IDELA assessor

Children with communication and language delays faced challenges during the assessment, as some had difficulty being audible and providing clear responses. This could result in inaccurate scoring compared to children without functional difficulties who were able to communicate more effectively.

> "When they communicated, they did it properly. But at times they could not communicate. There was no in-between. They could also give more mature answers than the children living without any difficulty…like kids with developmental challenges could either give very irrelevant or quite mature answers than what you expected." IDELA assessor

> "I can say a child with a low voice, for example, can give out answers that are not clear but a child that's sharp and loud will give out clear answers."" IDELA assessor

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Children with functional difficulties sometimes required more time to comprehend and respond to the questions.

> "Children with disabilities take time to respond to the questions, unlike those without disabilities." IDELA assessor

Some needed more time due to difficulties with materials. For example, children with upper mobility impairment, and specifically those who could not move their fingers independently, struggled to move or count the beans. This was especially the case where there were not enough big sized beans to go around, and the assessors had to use the small sized ones.

> "Most of the beans that we had were too small in size and it was somehow difficult for them to count. I would suggest that something bigger or artificial beans, which are bigger in size, be used so that it's easy for the child to count." IDELA assessor

> "Like in the question of counting, addition and subtracting, like the question of the beans. Selecting the beans... a child without disability can do that very fast unlike the child with disability. It may take time for the child to pick the beans and count them." IDELA assessor

Similarly, the puzzle task was challenging to some children as it involved moving items around. However, one exceptional child was able to execute it in less than a minute and in a better manner than others.

> "Item 8, the puzzle [child is to solve a 4-piece jigsaw puzzle], took her... She was slow so I took my time with her but the puzzle was the only item that took her less than a minute to complete and this got me surprised. The other children who didn't have any disabilities and couldn't solve the puzzle but she did it so well and so fast. That's the only thing that stood out with her". IDELA assessor

Some children with difficulties were very particular with the materials provided and expressed preference for specific items, such as certain coloured pencils. As expected from young children, they sometimes got overly engaged with the provided materials and did not want to move to the next activity. For instance, some were overly excited with the pictures in the story book since they wanted to see all of them before moving on.

> "There was a child that didn't want to take to take the pencil. I think he wanted colour pencils or a pen and wanted a specific colour. The teacher brought the colour pencils and he insisted on only using the red one". IDELA assessor

The assessors also mentioned an instance where one of the children with difficulties tried to eat the materials provided.

The assessors highlighted that creating rapport allowed children with functional disabilities to be more comfortable and less shy.

> "I would say that their responses would depend on the assessor. However, children with disabilities are shy when they are in the presence of someone they are not familiar with. But once the rapport has been established, they become more responsive." IDELA assessor

Implementation of adaptations for children with functional difficulties

This section reflects assessors' experiences with making use of the guidelines and adaptations, from the point of identifying that a child may have functional difficulties/additional needs, to selecting, and implementing, the appropriate adaptations. We also present assessors' reflections on how well the adaptations worked, and on the support available to them throughout the process.

Identification of children with functional difficulties

The assessors encountered children with various functional difficulties during the IDELA assessments, including those with visual and hearing impairments, communication and language delays, cognitive delays, upper and lower mobility impairment, challenging behaviour, and some with multiple difficulties. These difficulties were largely identified from the information obtained from caregivers during administration of the CFM tool. However, during interactions with children assessors sometimes became aware of difficulties that had not been disclosed by caregivers. In these cases, information was sometimes obtained from school disability records, teachers, and direct observations, such as a child who was limping or using a wheelchair. It is worth emphasising that some difficulties were not immediately apparent, and were only recognised during the administration of the IDELA tool, as explained below.

> "In cases of children with hearing disability, when you ask them a question, they'll probably look at you or give an irrelevant answer. If this happens repeatedly, you'll probably ask the teacher whether the child has a problem…for vision impairment, there were cases where the child would get very close to the book to be able to see, and this way, you will know that they have a problem with their eyes." IDELA assessor

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"I was using a soft voice and I realised we did not understand each other. At first, I thought that she wasn't concentrating but later on when I raised my voice, I realised that we were on the same page. That's how I realised that she had a hearing problem. I later confirmed it". IDELA assessor

"I tried talking to him and the teachers had more knowledge about him. When I asked, they told me that the child had both visual and hearing impairment…for the other one, I identified it myself. I have some basic skills in disabilities [working with children with disabilities] so I noticed how she walked and the drooling." IDELA assessor

Selecting adaptations

The IDELA assessors used various factors to make decisions on the appropriate adaptations to adopt. First, they referred to the guided adaptations provided for the various functional difficulties and their training. They also consulted with other assessors and supervisors to determine the best adaptations given the available materials. However, a number of assessors found it challenging to access some of the materials for adaptations. In some cases, the adaptations were advised based on the child's specific difficulties and what they were able to do. When some children refused the adaptations, assessors tried different approaches, starting with administering the tool as is, before attempting any adaptation when necessary. For situations where the functional difficulty was not immediately recognisable, the assessors adapted after interacting with the child and determining the best approach.

"We have adaptations for such scenarios in the tool. It's not that hard. All it requires is more attention and concentration and the consent of the child's disability and familiarity with the adaptations in the tool. But in most of the cases, it's hard to find the adaptation materials. Some of the materials that are mentioned in the adaptation are really hard to get. So, we use whatever we can get. Like for the hopping item, I used the ball instead. It was nice. The child was really participating, and it was good." IDELA assessor

"First of all, we consider what is available, what can be done or what can replace the item. The tool also gives different kinds of adaptations that one can apply. That's what I used to decide on the kind of adaptation to use. Like for the hopping item, there were balls in the ECD school, so I had to go to the teacher and ask for a ball. For the other one where they had to touch their head and toes, I used the eyes. The tool tells us to use eyes to look up and down so that's what I did." IDELA assessor

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> "Identifying adaptations is much easier if it is done on a per needs basis, especially if you are dealing with a child whose difficulty is not easy to see. Maybe it's developmental difficulty or visual but not too obvious because they are probably not wearing glasses, or maybe they are not wearing any hearing aid. In such a case, you can only adapt as you go on with the assessment. But if the child has a mobility issue, if he's maybe using a walking device or is in a wheelchair, you can decide, before starting the assessment, what adaptations to use on maybe item 8 [solving the jigsaw puzzle], item 24 [hopping on one foot], item 22 [drawing a picture of a boy or girl] and item 23 [folding paper as assessor demonstrates]. So, you can plan with the team leader on how to go about the assessment." IDELA assessor

Implementing adaptations

After identifying children with functional difficulties, assessors proceeded to administer the tool using the adaptations developed for the specific functional difficulty. Particular experiences with implementation of these adaptations are described below, detailing what worked well, and where challenges were encountered. Assessors' reflections on effectiveness of adaptations are presented in the following section.

Mobility impairment

For children with upper mobility impairment, the adaptations included use of eyes (looking up and down) in place of touching head and toes for item 14 on inhibitory control, and use of bottle tops instead of beans to enable the child to grasp them better. In one instance where a child had a broken hand, the assessor offered to move the beans as guided by the child for the emergent numeracy questions.

> "We got an assessor who spoke her language, we pre-selected the adaptations…and the item where one had to choose between sticks and circles. I think we used cards. For the one where she had to touch her head and toes, we used the eyes. We asked her to look up and down instead of touching her head and toes. It went well, but we had to do a lot of reassurance." IDELA assessor
>
> "There was a child who had a broken hand, so for item number 3…sorting and classification [sorting and classification of picture cards of stars and circles by colour and shape], I had to sort it for them and also move the beans for them" IDELA assessor

Adaptations for children with lower mobility impairment included touching head and knees instead of head and toes, and use of balls instead of hopping for item 24 that was testing for gross motor development.

> "When it came to the adaptations, he could not hop because he had a problem, so we had to adapt and use the ball. I didn't really want to assume he could not hop so I had to ask him if he could do it or not. But he said he couldn't, so we had to adapt by making a ball out of socks…an actual ball was not provided so we had to improvise. He enjoyed it. He could smile while doing it and was still there when we went for the endline. He came and even said hi to us. He felt included." IDELA assessor

In some instances, the assessors skipped activities that the children could not do instead of using the appropriate adaptation, for example, for one child that had cracked feet.

> "I don't know if I can identify if it as a disability, but there was this kid who had a problem with her feet. They were cracked, so she couldn't hop. I had to skip that activity." IDELA assessor

Another adaptation was listing the foods the children ate at home for those who never went to the market.

Hearing impairment

The adaptations for hearing difficulties included getting closer to the child, speaking slowly, clearly and loudly and augmenting voice with gestures as explained in the quotes below.

> "I had a child with hearing impairment. It was mild though. The adaptation I used was raising my voice and using a lot of gestures. I also needed to be closer to the child and very careful in capturing his attention. He was very bright and very active. The interaction was okay. I didn't have to have those special materials." IDELA assessor

> "I too had an experience with a child who had a hearing problem. I realised that the child could take a longer time answering questions and would try to move closer to be able to hear whatever I was saying. So, when I went there the second time, I had to be closer to him for him to hear." IDELA assessor

Visual impairment

The adaptations for children with visual impairment included bringing the materials closer to the child and giving them more time to read and respond. The photos and letters in the tablet were also enlarged by zooming in to enable the child to see them well. There was, however, one child with a visual difficulty as prescribed from a medical note who declined to use the adaptations, preferring to be assessed like the other peers who did not have any functional difficulties.

> "There was a child who had visual difficulties. I was given the diagnosis from the doctor, but I can't remember whether it was cataract… I can't remember exactly what it was. When we started the IDELA, we tried using the adaptations but surprisingly, the child refused. He insisted that he had to be assessed like all the other children. So, we had to hold the stimuli close for him to be able to see instead of using the adaptations. We also gave him a bit more time when he was trying to read through the letters. He had to come very close to the stimuli." IDELA assessor
>
> "I zoomed the photo of the bike so that he could see it well. He had a problem with his eyes." IDELA assessor
>
> "We could not administer IDELA on the one who had very low vision because he also had hearing challenges, but for the others that I encountered who had low vision, I had to have the booklet very close to them. It would really be helpful to have books with larger print, larger fonts, coloured writings…for the book, the prints are small." IDELA assessor

Communication and language delays

Some children had speech/articulation difficulties that made it difficult for the assessors to understand what they said or meant. In such cases, the assessors engaged the support of parents or any other person who could understand what the child was saying to help bring out the message. In instances where some children spoke quite softly and in an unclear manner such that they could not be understood, the assessors adapted by moving close to the children and giving them sufficient time to respond. The assessors also checked for understanding by having the child repeat back what was said or explain what was said to him/her, especially during the story where they ensured they broke down the story and checked for understanding after every step.

> "I had a challenge. She was unable to talk and I had to go too close to her in order to hear what she was saying. And this was not allowed. And the assessment took a really long time, one and a half hours." IDELA assessor

Cognitive delays/mental challenges

Some children had cognitive challenges and required more time to comprehend what the assessors were telling them in order to respond to the questions. In such a situation, the assessors practised patience and allowed the children more time to respond. For children with short attention spans or unable to concentrate on the activities, the assessors allowed breaks during the assessment and made an effort to make the process interesting to maintain the child's attention.

"I think the child had a mental disability. She could only answer what she wanted to answer and leave the rest of the questions unanswered. This made the assessment take a lot of time. I think her mother also had a mental problem. The CFM didn't show that this kid had a problem; neither did the teachers tell us about it." IDELA assessor

"In the IDELA, there is no adaptation for a child who is mentally challenged. He was able to understand some of the questions and even give answers, but he needed extra time. We had to come up with new ideas on how to make him concentrate. He would at times want us to go get him his tea or would want us to accompany him to go get it. We had to do this before continuing with the assessment." IDELA assessor

Challenging behaviour

Some children demonstrated challenging behaviour, including being uncooperative, rolling on the table, putting the stimuli in his/her mouth, as well as being aggressive with the assessors and other people. In cases where the behaviour was triggered by a specific activity, the assessors switched to a different one that would calm the child, or they paused the assessment until the child calmed down. The assessors also practised patience with the children and took time to play and sing with them. At times, it was necessary to get support from parents, teachers or other assessors to reassure, calm and manage the child. Throughout the assessment, the assessors remained calm and were patient with the children.

"Referring to the question about challenging behaviour, I encountered two. One of them was a very aggressive young girl. It was during the endline assessment. She's probably in PP2 now. The girl would just break out in rage during the assessment, throwing things everywhere, leaving the assessment room…she could even slap someone." IDELA assessor

"Yes, I had a child who had special needs. We interacted and the child was settled. The teacher and the caregiver talked to him. The caregiver had to step out for a while so I was left with the child. He then climbed the table and started rolling on top of the table. But the teacher came and talked to him and he relaxed. However, during the assessment, it reached a point where the caregiver could not be able to understand anything that the child was saying because he was only mumbling. He seemed to be having some eye problem and multiple disabilities. I also couldn't understand what he was saying. He even started eating the stimulus pack and so we had to stop the assessment." IDELA assessor

Multiple difficulties

During the assessments, the assessors encountered children with multiple difficulties in both counties, but they found it challenging to assess them, even after holding consultations among themselves and with their supervisors. Assessors did not find the adaptation guide sufficiently detailed on how to assess children with multiple disabilities, as it was not designed with these cases in mind.

> "I don't think the adaptations are well suited for a child with multiple disabilities. I can give an example of a learner in XX who had both visual and hearing difficulties, and we could not find a way to use the adaptations. We therefore couldn't assess the child…no he could see. He couldn't hear neither could he speak. He also didn't understand sign language. We also couldn't find anyone who could help us communicate with him, so we had to leave without assessing him." IDELA assessor
>
> "I remember in a certain school, there was a child who could not sit or talk…I think the child had three difficulties, so we were not able to assess her…when it was time for the assessment, we were told that there was no point of doing so due to her disabilities. Also, like R2 said, issue of children with disabilities is such a big deal in the society. Some of the kids were only brought to school for the IDELA assessment. They don't go to school on other days." IDELA assessor
>
> "I think I have come across two children, but we never assessed one because of he had both visual and hearing impairment. We tried to brainstorm on how we could do the assessment but we didn't succeed..." IDELA assessor

Perception of assessors on how the adaptations worked

The study gathered views from the assessors on the perceived effectiveness of the adaptations made. It emerged that some of the adaptations worked well and made it possible to complete the assessment. However, this was not always the case, and some children could not perform the adaptations as guided. The quotes below show the range of feedback from the assessors regarding the adaptation for the various functional difficulties and their suggestions. One of these included the need for a comments section in the programmed tool, which was added in the most recent round of data collection.

> "We had two pupils in XX school whom we tried assessing but could not. They couldn't speak, neither could they do anything we asked them to do. The only thing they were capable of doing was eat whatever food we gave them. then for the second assessment, they were not in the system so we didn't assess them…Just to add something…when you are doing this thing on your tablet, you'll try doing it the normal way. If the child is unable to do the activity, you'll go back to the adaptations. If the adaptation also doesn't work, you'll try something else. At the end, you'll have to record whatever adaptation you used." IDELA assessor

For children with communication difficulties, tasks that did not involve talking worked out well.

> "The topic that worked well [for children with communication difficulties] is that … touching … because she cannot talk, you just do the activity…hopping it has worked well, for identifying the shapes that compare size goes well, at the same time numbering, counting numbers on the same after and administrating of identifying parts of the body, head toes, that exercise also worked well with her." IDELA assessor

Some assessors felt that the adaptations worked but took time, and this may have affected the results as the children got tired and lost concentration. This may have affected the responses.

The fact that the assessment had a specific number of prompts affected the responses from children, especially on the topic about sounds.

> "The topic about sounds was a challenge because I was not allowed to repeat. I felt like the child might have performed a bit poorly because of this… the rules of administration allow us to only probe once, so at times you have to leave the questions at that for standardisation purposes". IDELA assessor

For children with cognitive delays, questions on emotional awareness and memory function were challenging, unlike puzzles and other activity-based activities that were relatively easier. Hence, the assessors suggested specific adaptations for children with functional difficulties, especially in terms of the questions asked and the number of required steps, such as in the folding paper exercise.

Similarly, one of the assessors mentioned that the adaptations on looking up and down instead of touching head and toes was challenging to administer and it required clarity on the intended act.

> "I can mention one…the item which involves changing the inhibitory control and telling them to look up and down was a bit challenging. I don't know if there is a different way it can be done? Like, it's confusing because one's not sure whether the child has to move their head up and down or just the eyeballs. We tried having one girl move their head up and down, but she had some difficulty doing that so we allowed her to just move her eyeballs." IDELA assessor

Support received during assessments

The study further examined the kind of support received by the assessors during the IDELA assessment. The responses showed that they were significantly supported by their fellow assessors, supervisors, school administration and teachers, learning support assistants (in Kakuma), siblings to the assessed children, friends, parents and other staff.

The kind of support received from other assessors and supervisors included decision-making on the right adaptations to adopt for the various functional difficulties. This included directing children with functional difficulties to assessors who had the strongest backgrounds and experience in working with these children. Similarly, the assessors practised cooperation and teamwork especially in cases where some children had specific preference for a particular assessor, based on gender or prior experience in assessing the same child (since IDELA had also been implemented at baseline for some children), which enabled a comfortable working relationship between the child and the assessor.

> "Some kids with disability don't feel comfortable talking to the assessor that's supposed to assess them. So, at times, we swap and let them be assessed by someone they are comfortable with. In addition to that, the child might be speaking Kiswahili only, while the assessor only speaks Arabic. In such cases, we also swap and let the child be assessed by an assessor who understands the language they are speaking". IDELA assessor

> "Yes, from an assessor. There was a child in XX who had multiple disabilities. We tried the adaptations, but some didn't work. We were in the company of an assessor who had experience dealing with people with special needs. This assessor helped in assessing the child". IDELA assessor

> "There was an incident where this young girl, who was being assessed by a male colleague, refused to continue with the assessment. I talked to her, and she agreed to talk to me instead of the other assessor". IDELA assessor

> "There were some children who would not speak to male assessors, and it would take some time for one to realise this. So, once in a while, one would bring on board a fellow assessor to help." IDELA assessor

Teachers and learning support assistants (in Kakuma) played a significant role in supporting the assessment process by aiding the identification of children, mobilising children with difficulties who were not always in school for the assessment and creating rapport between the assessors and children by virtue of their presence during the assessment. Some children with difficulties were quite attached to their teachers and preferred them to explain/ask them questions. Other children could only respond to their teachers, which made their presence and support of teachers to the process quite necessary. The teachers were also conversant with strategies to calm down children with functional difficulties and ways to maintain their attention. They therefore played a critical role during the assessments.

> "The biggest support I can allude to, especially with learners with functional difficulties, was from the teachers. Because the teachers understood the learners, they helped us build a rapport with them. For instance, there was a certain learner who would get angry when one calls her by her official name. When we inquired from the teachers, they told us that the only way we could get her to talk to us was by addressing her differently. There was also a case where the teacher alerted us that the child needed certain playing materials in order to perform certain tasks. We had no idea that the child couldn't bend to a certain level until the teacher told us. She told us that we needed to have a hula-hoop or a ball." IDELA assessor

Siblings and friends, mostly in the same age group, accompanied the children during the assessments, which gave them a sense of security and comfort when engaging with the assessors.

> "There was another kid who can't talk to you without their siblings being around them, at some point we have to go and look for their siblings to come and seat beside so that we can do the activity with them." IDELA assessor

Parents, on the other hand, supported the assessors in various ways, from availing details about the child(ren), facilitating the registration of the children, ensuring the availability of their children for assessment, offering translation – especially where there was significant variation in dialects, to providing an enabling/favourable environment through their presence that allowed children to be cooperative during the assessment. The parent at times further supported the assessor in asking questions and clarifying the responses given by the child, especially those with communication difficulties. Despite this critical role, the assessors found it challenging to ask some questions in the presence of the parents/care givers.

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"There were some children who had special needs. For example, there was one who had communication difficulty…he was able to hear and understood the questions, but he could not communicate well. Although I was able to understand some of the things he was trying to say…I required the presence of caregiver for me to have an accuracy of whatever that the child was talking about. Therefore, we did the entire assessment with the caregiver." IDELA assessor

"There are children who refused to consent. Like the one in XX school who forced us to have the mother around. He didn't want to be away from his mother though he was interested in the assessment. Whenever I asked him a question, he would look at his mother before answering. I had to give him time and when I did, he gave out correct answers. He even managed to talk about how his father makes him sad and this was hard for the mother to hear. So, apart from the parents, there should be someone else available that can help in such situations." IDELA assessor

Assessor suggestions for strengthening disability-inclusive IDELA assessments

This section summarises suggestions made by the assessors to enhance the use of the IDELA with disability-inclusive adaptations. We first share suggestions regarding the overall approach and organisation of the assessments, and then those related to enhancing the training process, and ensuring assessors feel confident and prepared for their work. This is followed by the suggestions relating to resources and materials to facilitate disability-inclusive assessment, and finally the suggestions for further adjustments to assessment items.

Improvements to overall assessment process

Assessors proposed receiving information about the children to be assessed and the functional difficulties to expect among each of them in advance of the assessments. This would allow for a consideration of the relevant adaptations in advance and provide time to ensure relevant materials for adaptations were available.

"Use of information that we have gotten, maybe from the Education Data Collection. This would help us know in advance, the difficulties that these children could be having, before we actually go to the field. This would also help us know the kind of materials needed for specific teams that would be assessing specific children in specific schools." IDELA assessor

The assessors indicated that additional functionality in the data collection tablets would be helpful. They would like to be able to select the disability in a drop-down list at the start of the assessment, so that relevant adaptations would automatically be presented. They further proposed the need to add a comments section to the tool to capture additional information/inputs regarding the adaptations and how they worked out.

> "We had a child with intellectual disability and the questions were different. Even for the item where they touch their head and toes, we used a ball. So, I don't think the hopping activity is a problem to children with disabilities because for them, the question is asked in a different way...such questions are not in the tablet. There are instructions given on what to do in case a child has a certain disability. But I would suggest that the questions be included in the tablet, such that after I key in that the child has a disability, the question pops up immediately." IDELA assessor

It was further suggested that there is a need to have a pool of experts trained and available to support the IDELA assessments. The pool would comprise expertise in sign language or persons with the ability to communicate with children who cannot hear. Given that children with disabilities tended to be shy, where possible, including assessors with disabilities during the assessments would allow the children to relate with them more comfortably.

> "There should be people who are experienced on how to deal with children with disability…those who are trained in specific areas, like visual impairment, hearing impairment and even physical disabilities. It would also be good to have colleagues who have disabilities." IDELA assessor

Improvement to training process

Feedback from more experienced assessors (those having conducted several rounds of IDELA assessment) indicated that they would value additional training on adaptations, while acknowledging that newer assessors might need to instead focus on challenging aspects of the standard IDELA. They also emphasise the value of including pilot data collection in the training.

> "Because we are the same people who've been doing it and are now familiar with the tool, we could perhaps focus a little bit more on the adaptations. For the other side, because they have different teams every time, we can focus more on role playing, especially for items 13 [child is required to repeat a sequence of numbers after the assessor] and 14 [child is to touch head or toes based on instructions and demonstrations by assessor]. Also, we could give more time to the pilot training so that we are able to identify the challenges and address them before we go to the field." IDELA assessor

Secondly, some assessors questioned whether the time duration set aside for the training was adequate, and suggested a longer period to ensure that the section on adaptations is accorded sufficient time. Assessors requested significantly more coverage of adaptations for cognitive delays.

> "I would suggest that the training be done for a longer period of time, not just a week, so that we can be able to learn more about the disabilities. I remember that during the previous training, the puzzle was really difficult to interpret so it took us two days to solve it. So, if the training would happen for a longer period of time, we would be able to effectively help the children." IDELA assessor

> "There was also a child in XX who was mentally challenged. She was so excited about doing the assessment and it was great thing only that… I think some of the activities should be modified. The counting activities are very easy for these other children to do but not a child who's mentally challenged. They would say anything during the assessment. However, they were very interested in the IDELA so an adaptation should be made for kids who are mentally challenged." IDELA assessor

Assessors also requested specialised support and training in working with and communicating with young children with functional difficulties. For instance, given that the children were still young and those in PP1/2 have not learned sign language yet, training assessors on how to optimise communication with children through the various ways is necessary.

> "I want to build upon what I already said, about specialists. I would rather we have a communication expert than a specialist. The kids we are dealing with have not yet learned sign language so we can't talk to them in sign language. So, we should have communication and psychology experts, have a session with them to help us communicate with such kids better." IDELA assessor

> "I want to talk about the training of teachers. I think that it affects the results of this research. For the assessors, we could have facilitators who are vast with sign language to help with that. Perhaps a specialist in special education could take us through the basics for maybe a day or two days… A specialist would also help us know how to deal with kids who can't speak sign language yet and how to communicate with them." IDELA assessor

Finally, as indicated previously, assessors experienced challenges when needing to rely on untrained translators to support with translation during assessments. Consequently, assessors suggested that it would be valuable to identify potential translators and include them in training. This would be particularly important in the Kakuma area where assessors struggled with the large number of languages and dialects in use.

> "I think it would be very important to have interpreters come in, maybe towards the end of the training, just to get the feel of what IDELA is. We want them to know that IDELA is specifically meant to assess the literacy level of the child. That the child does not necessarily have to give the right answers." IDELA assessor

Additional resources and materials

To enhance the administration of the tool among children with functional difficulties, assessors proposed a number of additional materials. It is important to note that some assessors disagreed with some of these suggestions, as they felt they already had a lot of materials to manage, and that integrating additional ones would not be easy.

For children with upper mobility difficulties, the assessors proposed having the puzzle in a frame whereby the child pushes the pieces around without having to move them. They felt that this would support children with upper mobility difficulties and would also resolve challenges where there was not enough space to place the puzzle for the child to undertake the task. Assessors also proposed the use of an abacus in the counting exercise rather than beans. This is because abacus pieces did not need to be picked up but could rather be moved around. For children with upper mobility constraints, assessors also proposed the use of moulding clay in place of drawing, especially where the child is unable to draw.

"I can mention one learner who could not move her fingers independently. When it came to the item involving counting of beans, she could not pick them out individually. She had a lot of hard time picking them out. So, maybe…there's this playing material…I don't remember the name…is it called an abacus?... It will help them to count. Perhaps he can explain to us how it works. Also, instead of having the pieces of the puzzle independently, we can have it the same way the traditional puzzles are…the pieces can be moved within the frame. This would be easier for those who cannot move their fingers". IDELA assessor

"I don't think what xx has said applies only to children who need adaptations. Like for the sliding puzzle…some schools don't have much resources. One might not have a table to put the puzzle on and might be forced to put in on the ground. I think the sliding puzzle would be a plus to this exercise". IDELA assessor

The assessors proposed that in some questions, real objects may enhance the administration of the tool for children with functional difficulties, especially the visually impaired. In item two, on comparison by size and length, they suggested showing and giving the children with visual difficulties the real items so they can employ other sensory abilities to respond.

"I think it also depends on the materials that you have provided to the child. They would have to be compatible with the kind of disability the child has. If the child is visually impaired and you expose them to physical items, they would use their sense of touch. So, if you don't have such materials then you might not get correct responses". IDELA assessor

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> "The bigger and the smaller one, the longer and the shorter one…a real item could have been more helpful because the child could be able to touch". IDELA assessor

Another suggestion was to provide wooden pieces with different textures for the exercise on shape identification in order to support visually impaired children who might struggle to see the images printed on the page. The assessors proposed that cards or pieces of wood with different textures may be appropriate for the sorting and classification activity.

> "Item 3…the stars and the circles. Here, they are divided into two colours, yellow and red. We already have the physical cards. So, if we could cut the shapes out and have them in different textures, it could help those with visual difficulties to sort them out… And the item of shapes…the adaptations require us to have wooden pieces…is it the shapes or the letters…anyway, it would be good to have them in advance, as part of the stimulus pack." IDELA assessor

> "Item 4, for shapes identification…especially for children who have visual difficulty. We cannot ask them to identify the shapes on the chart. They need to feel the shapes in order to identify them… for identification of shapes, we could have the actual shapes, not just the pictures. That would really help." IDELA assessor

On item 7, on addition and subtraction, use of wooden shapes would add value.

> "Yes, item 7… the additional and subtraction items. We had a bicycle and an apple and the child needed to subtract and add. Perhaps we could use shaped wood of the objects instead of pictures. This would make it easier for the child to add or subtract." IDELA assessor

During some assessments with children with and without functional difficulties, assessors made use of additional milk and biscuits when children became impatient, bored or disinterested. This was done to maintain their interest to continue. Having some extra milk and biscuits available for this purpose was felt to be helpful.

> "A child can say they are tired and that they want to go play. I have experienced that in XX school. So, if the child wants to play with a friend, I call the friend and ask them to play then later ask them to finish up the assessment and entice them with milk. I had the same experience in XX. I called the girl's friend, gave them milk and asked both of them the questions. It was a challenge to us but the milk really helped". IDELA assessor

"Some demand incentives. They would ask for incentives for them to speak…although it's supposed to be given to them after the session, one would have no choice but to give them when they demand for it. Others would also take the incentives and then decide that they don't want to participate anymore, so you'll just have to let them go." IDELA assessor

Other adjustments to assessment questions

Assessors suggested a number of additional changes or adjustments to assessment items. It is important to note that these suggestions are shaped by the experiences of the assessors in administering the tool, and their understanding of the objectives of particular assessment items. It must be emphasised that in some instances, suggested changes would impact item validity. Nonetheless, they are still presented here as reflective of the experiences of the assessors.

Assessors suggested the need to increase the variety of possible adaptations for items that can be employed to meet varying situations. For instance, one of the adaptations required a shirt to be buttoned, whereas a shirt with buttons was not readily available for that purpose.

"There was an adaptation that involved the child buttoning a shirt…I'm trying to find it…here were cases where we had to improvise the adaptations. I think that the adaptations should be varied, because for example, a shirt that has buttons might not be available." IDELA assessor

To support children with the visual impairment, there is need to further increase the size of pictures and letters.

"In order to make the tool easier for children with disabilities, maybe we could enlarge the pictures and letters in terms of size so that it's easier for a child who's maybe short-sighted to see what's on the paper." IDELA assessor

Assessors also raised concerns about the font used in the number identification item, which made the number '1' look very similar to number '7'. They suggest using an alternative font.

"There is a concern in item number 1. They have a challenge identifying number one because of how it's been written. They would think it's number seven…we could remove the head and the tail." IDELA assessor

One assessor explained that for some children, the cat and mouse story was too long and complex. They suggested that the story could be shortened into a photo story, thereby ensuring the child is able to effectively follow and comprehend it.

> "I would like to emphasise on item 20 [assessor narrates a story and asks the child questions from it], the one about the story. The story should be paraphrased. Previously, I could read a line and ask the child to repeat what I had just said. If you read the whole story then ask questions, the child might only be able to remember one or two things from the story. So, perhaps the story can be modified into very few statements that a child can memorise or maybe use pictures to make the child have a deeper understanding of what's being talked about. That was the biggest gap I had. Perhaps my colleagues will give their views as well." IDELA assessor

The assessors also proposed showing the children pictures of various animals and having them point to the ones that they know instead of mentioning animal names. Finally, they proposed the use of colourful numbers and letters to make the exercise more interesting to the children. This is given the fact that children tended to like colourful items, including coloured beans, that really excited them and helped them to stay engaged.

> "Because the children like colourful things, perhaps they would enjoy more if the numbers and letters were in some colourful pieces." IDELA assessor

For item 12 on conflict solving, the assessors proposed showing pictures to ensure the children comprehend the question appropriately, given that most did not understand it, nor did they answer correctly.

> "Item 12, solving conflict, like children are fighting over then a picture can show more length. You may ask the child what we can do for them because, through picture a child can know but through words cannot that's the reason most of them were not answering these questions." IDELA assessor

> "Item 12, solving of conflicts. I recommend that a picture of people in a fight be used to elaborate on the question". IDELA assessor

Another assessor proposed to reduce the number of paper folding steps in question 23 because it was hard for the children with difficulties to follow and undertake all the steps.

> "I also want to comment on the activity in item 23, about folding of paper. This activity was difficult for most of the kids so, I would suggest that they be allowed to fold the paper only twice, vertically and horizontally. They don't have to do the third and fourth step." IDELA assessor

As indicated previously, the question about the country/county where the child lives caused some confusion. Assessors suggested revising this to ask about the location where the child currently lives. This would minimise the confusion with country of origin, especially among refugee children.

> "For the bio data of the child when you are asking, is that the first step? How old are you? Are you a boy or a girl? Identifying of all those. I think this question of saying which country are you living for children to get it is very hard…maybe we can replace that with something different, at least where we are at the moment "ni wapi" where, at least the child can identify where are we, but if we say which country are we in, is very hard. Even for him or her to identify the location that he is living currently is a bit harder so for background questions I think that's all about." IDELA assessor

> "Maybe during the first step when we ask the child about their age and gender for the bio data of the child, we could replace the question about the country they come from with a question on where they are currently living in. This would be easier for them to identify." IDELA assessor

Several suggestions were made regarding assessment length. Experience showed that the children enjoyed questions with accompanying activities. Hence, the assessors felt there is need to add activities to questions that were challenging to children with disabilities, including those with a socio-emotional dimension. They also suggested incorporating breaks between sections as a strategy to maintain the attention of the children.

> "Because the tool takes a long time, I would suggest that the questions be divided into sections. So, the child could have a break after completing each section. Also, for it to be more interesting, we could maybe think of other activities that would be interesting for the children, even on topics such as socio-emotional issues." IDELA assessor

Others suggested that the number of questions for children with functional difficulties can be reduced to minimise the required time for the assessment. One question proposed for removal, particularly for children with cognitive difficulties, was question 13 on short-term memory.

> "However, adaptations should be made for activity 13, the one testing the memory [child is required to repeat a sequence of numbers after the assessor]…perhaps we should have a one-digit number, then two, then three because as it is, they don't understand it. But I would say that they did the other activities very well." IDELA assessor

Some of the children with functional difficulties rarely go out into the environment and neighbourhoods, making them unaware of their surroundings. This posed challenges for questions asking them to name items they encounter in the market, or animals. It was suggested that the question about animals could focus on domestic animals that they commonly encounter or are familiar with at home.

> "There was a question that needed the child to tell us about the animals that they knew. Some of these kids are not even allowed to step out of their doors... Therefore, they might not even be aware of these animals. Perhaps we could use something they can relate with…like the domestic animals. They might be able to recognise those ones." IDELA assessor

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that assessors saw the value of conducting the IDELA assessments in as disability-inclusive fashion as possible. Through their experience in conducting these assessments, they were able to share various more general observations and reflections about the assessment process. They were able to explain how they had approached conducting assessments with children with functional difficulties, from identifying the presence of a difficulty, to selecting and implementing the most appropriate adaptations. They shared thoughts around how various assessment items and adaptations worked, as well as the individuals and resources they drew on for additional support. They also provided suggestions for how future assessments might be strengthened. In this discussion section, we will now identify a number of themes which have cut across much of the content already shared.

Relationships and communication

The study highlighted the importance of strong relationships with multiple school and community stakeholders in enabling the assessment of children, and particularly children with functional difficulties. The school administration provided support towards the IDELA assessment by assisting the assessors with the necessary coordination with the parents or caregivers and their children. These relationships were important in order to be able to

complete any assessments, but they became particularly crucial for the assessment of children with functional difficulties. School administration and teachers were able to provide important information and support in the assessment of children with functional difficulties, drawing on their particular knowledge of a child's needs.

Clear communication with parents was also essential to ensure that accurate information was obtained about children – including whether the child had a functional difficulty. Caregivers, siblings and others could also provide important support during assessments, whether by providing information about a child's needs, providing interpretation or facilitation, or even providing an anxious child with reassurance and comfort. The findings suggest that assessors would value further training and guidance on how to involve and support these individuals during assessments.

Stronger and closer collaboration with stakeholders in local government and organisations of people with disabilities could enhance the administration of the assessment. Both groups have close connections with their communities, and drawing on their local knowledge more effectively during initial planning stages could bring to light some of the context-specific challenges that only became clear to the team as assessment administration began. While good relationships were established and maintained, a more systematic approach to the involvement of these groups would be of benefit in the future. For example, including qualified service providers and representatives of OPDs during training would allow assessors to ask direct questions of local experts and could address some of the issues that they raised.

Language and translation

A second strong and recurring theme was the challenges related to language. Particularly in Kakuma, the large number of languages and dialects in use posed challenges both in the preparation of translated materials in advance, and also in ensuring that the assessment team would include assessors fluent in all appropriate languages. Assessors reflect on the 'confusion' caused during some assessments by difficulties with translation, emphasising the importance of preparing in advance for work in as many languages as possible. The examples shared by assessors during these discussions will support appropriate preparations for the remaining assessments in these areas.

Assessors adopted various strategies to manage these challenges. In Kakuma, one approach was the ad-hoc inclusion of various individuals as translators, ranging from teachers to school staff to family members or siblings. Assessors had a number of concerns about this approach, in terms of the accuracy of translation, the extent to which translators would adhere to relevant limits on prompts and repetition, and whether they might skew assessment results in favour of the children. Assessors suggested the identification of potential translators in advance, and their inclusion in relevant parts of the IDELA training. Of course, this would have substantial resource and logistical implications. In future studies, additional time and emphasis for understanding the linguistic context of assessment might

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be recommended. Further work to better understand approaches to assessment in refugee contexts, or other areas with extreme linguistic heterogeneity, may also prove valuable.

Some of the examples of language-related challenges that were shared also highlight the importance of ensuring that translation is done with an understanding of the underlying construct being assessed by each assessment item. While assessors raised concerns about the appropriate translation of the term 'knees' in one item, the item would work equally well if children were told to touch their toes, feet, or legs – as long as all children were given consistent instructions clearly. Similarly, whether the term 'animals' referred to domestic animals, wild animals, or other groups of animals, should not really matter, as long as all children were provided with a broadly consistent and familiar category in which to name items. These examples highlight the importance, wherever possible, of working through translations in advance.

Language is again an issue that impacts on all assessments but would have a disproportionate impact on the assessment of children with functional difficulties. Children with difficulties in the domains of communication or language would be particularly disadvantaged by an assessment not in their home language or administered by an assessor not fluent in that language. Children with socio-emotional or behavioural difficulties might also be particularly disadvantaged by an assessment made longer due to language difficulties or the need for the support of a translator.

Assessor skills sets, training and support needs

Findings on challenging items, and experiences in making use of adaptations highlight some key considerations in relation to the knowledge and experience of assessors, and their training and support requirements.

The responses provided by the assessors on questions that worked or did not work, and the suggested changes may indicate that some of them were not fully aware that the IDELA assessment provided a baseline for future comparison. For example, some appeared to be unaware that a young child just starting school is not expected to know the letter sounds, but that the question remains useful to measure progress as the child continues with learning. Support from more experienced assessors, with relevant expertise in early childhood development, could provide advisory oversight to the assessors and help them understand the appropriate adaptations for children with functional difficulties.

Assessors also highlighted areas for additional attention during training. These include additional time on the adaptations, and on broader issues of communication with children with various functional difficulties. More experienced assessors suggested that new assessors would also benefit from additional attention to role plays of challenging questions, and from additional time allocated to piloting assessment. This was evident in Kakuma where length of the tool was identified as an issue, probably in part because higher assessor

turnover meant that more assessors had less experience with implementing the IDELA. This is important for researchers working in refugee settings to pay attention to.

Selection of the exact venue to conduct assessments needed more attention. It was evident that emphasis was needed during training of assessors in selecting conducive locations for conducting the assessments. Despite existing limitations within the school, assessors need more support in reducing the number of distractions for the children. This could be by selecting assessment locations that are not visible to other children or ensuring that the children being assessed face away from other children during assessments.

It is worth noting that a longer training period would have budgetary implications. Crucially, assessors also emphasised that including assessors with disabilities as part of the assessment team would play an important role in helping children with functional difficulties feel more at ease.

Adjustments to guidelines, adaptations and materials

Assessors provided numerous suggestions for further adjustments to guidelines, adaptations and materials, to strengthen the administration of disability-inclusive IDELA assessments. The importance of appropriate contextualisation of assessment items is clear: for example, for refugee children, asking about the name of the area where they currently live or their country of origin might be more appropriate than asking about the name of the county or country where they currently live. For children with disabilities who may not be familiar with going to the market, asking them about foods they encounter at home might be more appropriate.

A number of assessor suggestions relate to the use of 'real' objects for various assessment items. This had in fact been considered previously but had been dropped as assessors were found to struggle with managing the necessary materials. However, this study has found that this was experienced as a significant gap when assessing children with certain difficulties. Therefore, it may be necessary to reconsider the use of real objects and identify strategies to support assessors in managing these additional materials.

Finally, the assessors felt that the enhanced guidelines and adaptations did not provide adequate guidance for the assessment of children with multiple complex disabilities. Therefore, it is recommended that in future, more consideration is given to whether the IDELA tool and associated disability-inclusive guidelines are appropriate for use with children with complex disabilities, or whether more appropriate alternatives are available. Further investigation is needed to explore the feasibility of using the IDELA tool with children with multiple disabilities, and to develop more elaborate guidelines for assessing these children using the tool. This will ensure that the IDELA tool is inclusive and can effectively assess all children, regardless of their disabilities.

Limitations and suggestions for further work

A central limitation of this study is that it relies on the content of discussions with the assessment team. Additional data, for example, from observation or video-recording of assessments with children with functional difficulties, might yield further insights. While assessors are able to reflect on how children responded to assessment items, it would also be informative to hear from children directly about their experiences with the assessments.

The results presented here are broadly positive about the feasibility of using the IDELA with children with a range of functional difficulties. But the study is not able to engage with questions about whether or how the adaptations impact on the validity of the tool itself. Further quantitative analysis of the data from the assessments conducted by this team of assessors to date may be able to provide some insight here. Further work to directly measure the implications of various adaptations on tool performance will also be essential.

Conclusion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first qualitative research study into the views and experiences of assessors conducting IDELA assessments with children with functional difficulties in a resource-constrained context or in a refugee context. The findings show that implementation of the IDELA with enhanced disability-inclusive adaptations in these settings was feasible, but also highlight areas where further improvements can be made, as well as areas where further learning would be beneficial.

Overall, assessors' contributions indicated that they saw value in assessing children with disabilities and had enjoyed the opportunity to contribute to this. Their responses indicated that they had engaged closely with the training and guidance around disability-inclusive assessment and had drawn on these during their work. There is evidence that assessors sought support from each other, team leaders, teachers and others, to ensure that their work was as inclusive as possible. There is also evidence that they engaged creatively with the guidelines and adaptations provided, making contextually appropriate adjustments when needed. This is extremely encouraging.

At the same time, it is clear that assessors would have valued additional training, support and resources in support of disability-inclusive assessments. In this study, assessors were expected to be able to correctly identify the presence of functional difficulties, and then to appropriately select adaptations that would make the assessment accessible, without impacting on the ability of the assessment to accurately measure underlying constructs. This is an unrealistic expectation in the absence of extensive specialised training and experience. Consideration of strategies to support assessors in making these decisions is needed. Reflection is also required on the level of resourcing that is necessary to support disability-inclusive assessment – to accommodate longer training, support for assessors, additional

materials, and additional time to conduct assessments with children with functional difficulties.

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