Regional Education Learning Initiatives (RELI) - Reflections from the communications strategy meetings

By Catherine Asego

''This will be a hard stop as I have to be on my way to the airport by exactly 4:30 pm and it will largely be driven by you'. Those were the words of Ms. Ndumba, giving us an indication of how the sessions would be - fast-paced, intense and heavy on member participation. As RELI members collectively put their thoughts together and put pen to paper, discussions on the direction each country team would be taking in engaging policymakers and other partners in the education arena became clear.

The exercise commenced in earnest when the support team members and representatives of the countries convened in Nairobi in October last year, to deliberate on the communication needs of RELI as a regional entity, and agree on how best to communicate both internally and externally. Thus, the country-level meetings were a follow- up to the regional meeting held earlier in the year with the hope that the country teams would customize their own communication needs. At the regional meeting, the objectives agreed upon were that: 75% of RELI members would be applying learning systems by April 2021; external individuals and organizations engage with co-created knowledge on the Knowledge Hub by April 2021 and; RELI actively engages in the EAC Educational Consultative Forum by April 2021.

This year, we hit the ground running with the first meeting convened in Kampala, Uganda on January 21 at the Luigi Giussani Institute of Higher Education (LGHIE). Passion rent the air as group members argued their positions and justified why their objectives should make it to the top list of priorities for the country. Uganda settled for the following broad objectives:

1. The Ministry of Education and Sports Uganda (MOES) establishes unit costs for primary and secondary education in public and government-aided schools for all learners by 2021.
2. The Ministry of Education and Sports develop minimum standards on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) provision in Uganda by 2021.
3. RELI contributes to the implementation of the National Teacher policy by 2021[1].

In Tanzania, things were no different, except for the date of the meeting which was on a Saturday – a shift from the culture of working solely on weekdays-, showing their commitment and urgency in ensuring their collective voice was heard in the advancement of the RELI learning agenda. Ken Oulu – the country's Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) mentor was there to ask the hard questions and make us think deeper. The following objectives were finally agreed upon by the Tanzanian team:

1. RELI Tanzania has structured engagement with the ministry of education and ministries identified by RELI Tanzania leaders by April 2021.
2. RELI Tanzania engages with other education networks and stakeholders in Tanzania in the next by April 2021.
3. RELI institutions adapt and improve on their learning systems by April 2022.
4. RELI Institutions in Tanzania built and benefit from synergies by 2021.

The final stretch was in Nairobi, Kenya with the team eager to learn from their own thematic group expertise as well as from their counterparts in Tanzania and Uganda. Team Kenya did not leave anything to

[1] National Teacher Policy aims to provide a framework to professionalize and standardize the teaching profession and enhance the development and management of teachers.

chance, with the group of the day – The Omnibus – clearly outlining four policies they wanted to influence, outlining the different stages each process was at. With the thought-provoking expertise from the learning curators, Andiwo and John no stone was left unturned. The following objectives made it to the Kenya communications strategy:

1. RELI would contribute to the review process of policies and guidelines (APBET registration guidelines[2], [3]NACONEK Strategy) on the education of children in marginalized areas (urban poor, arid, and semi-arid areas).
2. RELI strengthens collaborations with the Teachers Service Commission, the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development and the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology to influence teacher development and curriculum design by April 2021.
3. To actively engage in providing technical support for the implementation of the following policies- School re-entry and the relevant policy guidelines; Trainees and learners with disability; Language of Instruction, Parental Engagement guidelines.

The communication strategies have accompanying action plans which, if implemented, will catapult the engagement aspirations of the different thematic groups and RELI members as a whole at both the national and regional levels.

In conclusion, **RELI Members are engaging policymakers, education partners and practitioners at different levels**. However, planning for that engagement and making it intentional, that is, by having a strategy will give them clear guidance especially on the policy asks and messages needed to communicate effectively.

Opportunities for regional clusters to collaborate and identify unifying communication needs exist. For instance, in Uganda, the Teacher Development and Life Skills groups are keen on engaging on the national teacher policy, specifically issues related to the professional development of teachers, assessment of life skills, and teaching methodologies. Their counterparts in Kenya are seeking joint partnerships with the Teachers' Service Commission (TSC) on teacher professional development and initiating an assessment of values and life skills across East Africa.

RELI brings together diverse people with different expertise, strengths, and clout in the education and development sector. Having this knowledge of who already has a seat on the education roundtables makes it easier for members to plug into already existing structures, systems and have greater Impact.

The role of knowledge curators and RELI members – catalysts, MELs and communications leads- cannot be overemphasized. Over the course of the exercise, they played a pivotal role in shaping the agenda (owned by members) and asking the difficult questions that made it much more fulfilling.

Policymakers and education partners want to look good – if we can make them look good through generating evidence and supporting them to achieve their work plans, why not do it for the benefit of the millions of learners across East Africa.

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[2] Aimed at operationalizing the APBET policy framework, provide guidance on regulations, and facilitate the establishment, registration and provision of quality education in these institutions

[3] National Council for Nomadic Education in Kenya is a semi-autonomous government agency that aspires to meet the education needs of the Arid and Semi-Arid Land areas, pockets of poverty regions and Urban Informal Settlements of Kenya.

Planning leads to effectiveness in how we collaborate and work together – RELI Tanzania developed a RELI Calendar of events that will enable members to plan ahead and fully participate in the RELI events. This provides members with an opportunity to better synergize their work with RELI activities.

Ownership of the RELI Communications strategies at the country levels is paramount to the success of joint policy engagement efforts.