

## **Elimu-Soko: Pioneering Government-Led Educational Innovation in Rwanda**

Non-state actors play a pivotal role in driving innovation in education in low- and middle-income countries. Whereas NGOs, private enterprises, and community groups can experiment with new approaches and tailor programs to local needs, governments often face resource constraints and bureaucratic challenges that hinder the development and implementation of innovations.

However, governments have a critical role to play in ensuring equal access to and quality of education, and in shaping education policies. When non-state actors are involved in designing education interventions, it is therefore essential that they align with government priorities. Interventions that align with government priorities and are integrated into national education systems have a higher likelihood of long-term success and scalability, and are therefore [more likely](#) to create sustainable change.

This blog explores the Elimu-Soko initiative, a groundbreaking case study that demonstrates the potential for government-led educational innovation.

### **An education initiative focused on government ownership**

Elimu-Soko is an education marketplace for innovations funded by Hempel Foundation and first piloted in Rwanda. The initiative originated from a strategy review by the Hempel Foundation, which elevated scale as a primary focus for the foundation to address the rapidly escalating learning crisis. It aims to test and develop cost-effective and scalable learning interventions with a proven potential for impact at scale, with a particular focus on putting the government in the driving seat. Government ownership not only ensures alignment with national priorities but also fosters sustainable impact, making it a cornerstone of the Elimu-Soko initiative.

During the Rwanda pilot, which took place in 2022-2023, Hempel Foundation and the implementing partner, Rising Academy Network, worked with the government to provide teacher training to 40 schools across the country, addressing a key bottleneck to advancing foundational learning.

### **A marketplace for governments and innovators**

While Hempel Foundation was contemplating how to most effectively support efforts to address the learning crisis, they were also aware of the plethora of education innovations available in the market. [A mapping by Brookings Institution](#) provides a catalog of nearly 3,000 global education innovations, 86 percent of which were implemented by non-state actors. However, Brookings found that these actors often innovate on the margins of formal education systems, with limited visibility to actors who could make systems-wide changes.

“There are lots of innovations out there demonstrating good results, but they are not necessarily on governments’ radar” said Casper Thulstrup, Head of International Strategic Development & Quality at Hempel Foundation, in an interview with the Education Finance Network. “Most government resources are tied up in salaries and other fixed costs, and there is limited bandwidth to absorb what’s out there in other countries, which makes it challenging to infuse innovations in government systems.”

To address the gap between available innovations and governments’ need to find solutions to the learning crisis, Hempel Foundation partnered with Dalberg Advisors, a consulting firm, to establish an

education marketplace, bringing together governments and education innovators. A key principle for the initiative was that interventions must address the government's specific priorities, and that governments would commit resources to implement any pilots, with a view to scaling up after the pilot phase had identified an effective model.

### **Elimu-Soko pilot launched in Rwanda**

This education marketplace, named in Kiswahili as Elimu ('education') Soko ('market'), was launched with a virtual event in December 2021 with participation of the governments of Tanzania, South Africa, and Rwanda, education innovations, and education sector experts. During the event, governments shared their challenges in scaling innovations within their public education systems, and innovators shared their difficulties around accessing governments.

Following this event, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Hempel Foundation and the Rwandan government in March 2022. Subsequently, an in-depth analysis was conducted to identify the specific challenges in Rwanda's education systems and to pinpoint the solutions needed. The analysis revealed that a significant barrier to foundational learning in Rwanda was the inadequate skills of basic education teachers. As a result, teacher training was identified as the proposed solution.

### **Challenges around government systems and capacity**

Hempel Foundation and Rwanda's Basic Education Board jointly developed a tender document for a service provider. They initially intended to use the government's procurement system but ultimately chose a compromise that aligned with government criteria while handling contracting separately to avoid delaying the pilot. A review panel was established consisting of representatives from the government's education and procurement departments, as well as members from Hempel Foundation and Dalberg. Together, they agreed on assessment criteria, reviewed and discussed the proposals, conducted interviews with potential providers, and finally selected the provider to deliver the intervention.

Once the preparation phase was concluded, the selected service provider, Rising Academy Network, needed to be onboarded. In parallel, the participating schools were identified, selected, briefed, and coordinated. To align with the principles of government ownership, this process would ideally fall under the government's purview. However, despite the government's good intentions, limited capacity and competing priorities within the ministry posed a challenge. To overcome this constraint, Hempel Foundation stepped in to provide funding for a dedicated staff member from the Rwandan Education Board who assumed responsibility for overseeing the coordination and implementation of the initiative.

### **Results from the Rwanda pilot**

The Elimu-Soko pilot in Rwanda was designed to improve teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical skills through Rising Academies' FasterReading and FasterMath curriculum materials, interactive digital professional development content, ongoing peer-learning, and teacher observation and coaching supported by a mobile app.

Forty primary schools participated in the intervention, with half of the schools piloting FasterReading and the other half piloting FasterMath. Across the pilot schools, Rising Academies worked with approximately 18,000 students, 260 teachers, 40 school leaders, 30 Sector Education Inspectors, and 7 District Education Officers.

Based on knowledge tests completed by teachers at the start and end of the six-month pilot, the pedagogical knowledge of teachers participating in FasterMaths (who were assessed on knowledge of teaching foundational math) increased from 48% to 64%, and that of teachers in FasterReading (who were assessed on knowledge of teaching foundational reading) increased from 33% to 39%.

Assessments of student learning, which compared results of treatment classes with control classes, showed math proficiency rates in FasterMath classes that were 11 percentage points higher at proficiency level 2, 12 percentage points higher at level 3, and 8 percentage points higher at level 4. Reading proficiency rates in FasterReading classes were 25 percentage points higher than those in the control group at Letter level, 21 percentage points higher at CVC level, and 10 percentage points higher at Word level. *(See description of proficiency levels at the bottom of the page.)*

In summary, the pilot demonstrated significant improvements in both teacher pedagogical knowledge and student learning outcomes, thereby validating the effectiveness of the Elimu-Soko model.

### **Lesson learned: The importance of time and alignment in scaling innovations**

A key lesson learned from the Rwanda pilot was that implementing an initiative designed not as a mere project or program, but as a testing ground for a solution intended for government scaling, needs time.

Casper Thulstrup explained: “In an initiative like Elimu-Soko, you need clarity on what type of evidence is needed to trigger a government decision, and you need to build in several iterations of testing to arrive at a point where the government can make an informed decision as to whether they wish to scale the intervention.

“In each iteration, you test, learn, and adjust your approach. In the first iterations, you can’t assess the intervention’s actual results or potential for scaling. You get some indications as to whether it looks promising, but then you need to go through another iteration of testing, learning, and adjusting. Just finding the core of what it is you are hoping to scale comes out of the first six to twelve months. You then need to build a solid monitoring and evaluation framework that provides the evidence that the government requires to make the decision to scale up.”

This iterative process is crucial for accumulating the type of evidence needed to inform government decisions on scaling. It's not just about the initial results; it's about refining the approach over multiple cycles to arrive at a model that is both effective and scalable.

Another lesson learned was the importance of aligning the decision-making process with the budget cycles of the Finance Ministry. “Expecting results from the pilot in February and hoping for the continued intervention to be incorporated into the government's budget decisions in April is unrealistic,” said Casper Thulstrup.

Understanding the financial calendar of the government is not just a logistical necessity but a strategic imperative. It ensures that the initiative is not only effective but also financially sustainable in the long term.

### **What's next for Elimu-Soko?**

While the Rwanda pilot has generated promising indications of improved learning outcomes, a final decision from government on provision of scale up support is still pending but should be taken by end of 2023. While awaiting this decision the Hempel Foundation has decided to extent it's support to Elimu Soko in Rwanda, which enable Rising Academies to continue its work until June 2024.

Meanwhile, Hempel Foundation is looking for more partners in eastern Africa to participate in Elimu-Soko. Another pilot is in the planning phase in Zanzibar, where learnings from the Rwanda pilot are put into practice.

“We now have a better idea of what the process of testing and refining the intervention and getting it ready for scaling up looks like,” said Casper Thulstrup. “As funders, we need to align our good intentions with the reality in each specific context, and truly understand the system we're working within.”

The Elimu-Soko Rwanda pilot has brought valuable lessons around what it takes to test, refine, and deliver a scalable education innovation aligned with government priorities and under the government’s leadership. For funders, innovators, and government actors, it exemplifies the power of learning, adapting, and working in synergy to unlock better educational opportunities for all.

*Hempel Foundation, Brookings Institution, Rising Academy Network, and Dalberg are all Education Finance Network members.*

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*Proficiency levels explained:*

*Math proficiency levels. Level 2: Able to identify numbers to 20, and able to do addition and subtraction to 10. Level 3: Know place value of two-digit numbers, and able to do addition and subtraction within 20. Level 4: Know place value of three-digit numbers, and able to do addition and subtraction within 100.*

*Reading proficiency levels. Letter: Able to identify and write English letters. CVC: Able to identify and read three letter words. Word: Able to read four and five letter words and to comprehend simple passages.*