Engeza: delivering lasting impact through technical assistance

Project completion summary

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Executive Summary

Foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) remain among the most urgent education priorities across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Governments and development partners are investing in large-scale reforms, but these investments do not automatically translate into improved learning. Among other factors, system-level decisions around curriculum, teaching and learning materials, language of instruction, teacher preparation, assessment, and procurement often play a large role in determining whether reforms succeed. These decisions are technical, context-specific, and time-sensitive. When they are not well supported, programmes risk embedding weaknesses that are difficult to correct later.

Engeza was established to respond to this challenge. It was launched by the Gates Foundation in April 2024 as a two-year technical assistance fund mechanism for foundational learning, and managed by edt, which provided technical, managerial, and financial oversight.

Engeza was designed as a rapid-response mechanism, delivering on-demand technical assistance to large-scale foundational learning initiatives across SSA, that were led by, or closely aligned with, government priorities and grounded in evidence. Its purpose was to **provide targeted, short-term support to governments and development partners at points where better technical input could strengthen the quality and impact of existing or planned investments**. The programme was demand-led, but it was also actively managed: edt supported outreach, request shaping, provider identification, assignment design, quality assurance, and learning.

Over the course of the programme, Engeza approved and delivered **16 assignments** to completion across **12 countries**: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Ethiopia, Burundi, Eswatini, and Namibia. The **World Bank** was the primary requestor, accounting for 13 funded assignments, while **three government-submitted requests from Benin, Namibia, and Rwanda** were funded. Ministries of education were also actively engaged in implementation across all assignments.

Assignments primarily focused on interventions with direct classroom-level relevance, particularly teaching and learning materials (TLMs) review and development, and book procurement. Additional support was provided in areas including evaluation, research and strategic design of FLN initiatives.

Demand was concentrated in West and East Africa, with assignments delivered across both Anglophone and Francophone contexts. To respond to this demand, Engeza established a **database of more than 450 technical assistance (TA) providers** and mobilised a mix of SSA-based and international experts, including two Africa-based organisations, to deliver specialised technical support. Clients consistently reported high levels of satisfaction with the quality and relevance of TA provided.

Evidence from Engeza shows that **short-term technical assistance can be catalytic when it is timely, well scoped, technically credible, and aligned with government-led reform priorities**. The programme helped shape large-scale investments, improve the quality of teaching and learning materials, support national strategies, strengthen procurement processes, build government capacity, and generate resources of wider value to the foundational learning sector. For example:

- In Nigeria, Engeza supported the development and piloting of a teaching and learning materials review tool connected to a World Bank education initiative valued at $554 million and projected to benefit approximately 9.5 million students.
- In Senegal, the programme supported the development of 298 books across eight national languages.
- In Namibia, it helped develop a national roadmap for foundational numeracy, with government commitment to implementation.

The programme also offered important lessons:

1. **Demand-led technical assistance does not happen organically.** Governments and partners may have significant needs, but Engeza demonstrated that sustained outreach to clients, relationship brokering, and active stakeholder engagement were essential to encouraging them to proactively seek support and generating a strong pipeline of requests.
2. **There is a need to build and strengthen an Africa-based TA provider ecosystem.** Engeza demonstrated the value of Africa-based expertise, which is growing, but the pool of providers with specialised skills in high-demand areas – particularly teaching and learning material (TLM) development, book procurement, and instructional design – remains limited. French-speaking expertise in both literacy and numeracy is particularly challenging.
3. **Relatively small, targeted TA investments can significantly influence larger foundational learning programmes** by improving their quality and effectiveness, informing decision-making, and unlocking additional financing. Examples of catalytic impact achieved through Engeza include: developing books to support children's learning at home and at school; improving the quality of TLMs prior to mass printing; strengthening book procurement systems to ensure that books are more likely to reach classrooms; evaluation to inform further implementation; developing strategic plans for literacy improvement; and developing practical tools and resources to support FLN reform globally.
4. **TA fund management is a critical technical and operational function.** It requires sufficient resourcing and specialised expertise. Engeza demonstrated that effective TA delivery depends on a staffing model that combines project management, technical advisory, communications, and monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) capabilities.

> This balance is essential for ensuring delivery quality, operational efficiency, and effective risk management.

The implications are clear. Future TA mechanisms should be designed as strategic instruments for system reform. They should target interventions where technical input can improve the effectiveness of larger investments; invest deliberately in demand generation and government ownership; use mixed delivery models that balance regional expertise and specialist capacity; build provider markets over time; and ensure fund managers have the technical and operational resources required to deliver quality at pace

1. Why catalytic technical assistance matters

With global Official Development Assistance (ODA) under pressure and education budgets tightening, ensuring that limited investments deliver meaningful results has become more important than ever. Catalytic technical assistance plays a critical role in this context – shaping how resources are used, strengthening systems, and building the conditions for sustained improvement. By targeting key constraints – whether in policy, delivery, or workforce capability – it helps ensure that scarce funding is directed to the interventions most likely to improve foundational learning outcomes, turning modest investments into lasting impact.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, governments and development partners are investing in foundational literacy and numeracy because early-grade learning is central to improving children's later outcomes – and wider education system performance. Children who do not acquire foundational skills in the early years are more likely to fall behind throughout their schooling, and education systems struggle to recover lost learning later.

Large-scale foundational learning reforms require a series of technically demanding decisions. Governments and partners need to decide how curricula should be structured; how teaching and learning materials should be sequenced; how language of instruction should be handled in multilingual classrooms; how teachers should be prepared and supported; how assessment should inform improvement; and how materials should be procured and distributed. These are not peripheral decisions. They shape whether investments reach classrooms in ways that improve teaching and learning. When reforms have weaknesses in their design or implementation processes, investments in foundational learning underperform.

Technical assistance can help governments and partners make these decisions well. It can bring evidence to bear on practical design choices, support interpretation of data, strengthen implementation plans, and provide specialist expertise where national systems or programme teams do not have immediate access to it. Engeza was created to provide this kind of targeted support.

The programme's design was deliberately catalytic. It did not aim to replace government systems or deliver full programmes. Instead, it supported activities that were close enough to classroom practice to influence teaching and learning, while being sufficiently upstream to shape larger investments. Assignments typically lasted between one and 12 months and were intended to address targeted technical needs within ongoing reforms.

Technical assistance is most valuable when it is available at the point of decision. If it arrives too late, it can only diagnose problems after they have already been built into programme design. One of Engeza's strengths was ensuring intervention at the right time, with the right expertise. It made sure that any programme it contributed to was evidence-based, technically

sound, and in alignment with stakeholder needs before it was implemented at scale, improving the programme's chances of having an impact at a large scale.

It was also significant that Engeza operated only in contexts where there was clear government buy-in and existing funding or programmes in place. This ensured that its technical assistance could directly shape reforms that were already approved and set to be implemented, increasing the likelihood that its insights would be applied in practice rather than remaining theoretical.

This positioning matters. In a constrained funding environment, the quality of investment is as important as the quantity. A relatively small technical input can influence the effectiveness of a much larger programme if it improves the design of teaching materials, strengthens a procurement process, supports a national strategy, or helps governments make better use of evidence. Engeza was built around this premise: that catalytic technical assistance can improve the quality and impact of foundational learning reforms by strengthening key decisions before they are implemented at scale.

Catalytic technical assistance

- is targeted to a specific decision or implementation challenge
- is aligned with government priorities
- is delivered while there is still time to influence design
- brings specialist expertise that is not otherwise readily available
- strengthens the quality of a larger investment
- ensures that there are strong, co-created, and co-owned tools, capacity, and decisions that continue to shape implementation.

2. What Engeza achieved

Engeza provides evidence that short-term, targeted technical assistance can influence system-level reform when it is well timed and closely linked to government and partner priorities.

2.1 Portfolio overview

Over two years, Engeza received 55 requests for support. Four were withdrawn because funding was secured elsewhere or technical assistance was no longer prioritised by the requesting organisation. Of the remaining 49 assessed for eligibility, 16 were approved and funded. This level of demand was significant relative to the fund's financial scope and demonstrated clear interest in targeted technical assistance for foundational learning.

Engeza assignments were implemented across 12 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. More than half of country-specific assignments took place in West Africa, including in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, and Senegal. East Africa accounted for assignments in Ethiopia, Burundi and Rwanda, while Southern Africa included Eswatini and Namibia. Two assignments were not tied to a single country, contributing to regional learning and tool development.

Geographic and linguistic reach

Country-specific Engeza assignments were implemented across 12 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. More than half of country-specific assignments took place in West Africa, including Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria and Senegal. East Africa accounted for assignments in Ethiopia, Burundi, and Rwanda, while Southern Africa included Eswatini and Namibia. Two assignments were not tied to a single country, contributing to regional learning and tool development.

- Assignments across West, East, and Southern Africa
- 57% in West Africa
- 29% in East Africa
- 14% in Southern Africa
- 47% Anglophone, 37% Francophone, 11% multi-country/pan-African, and 5% Lusophone

This spread is important because the technical assistance market is not uniform across languages. Identifying high-quality technical expertise in Francophone and Lusophone contexts proved more challenging in some specialist areas, particularly where strong subject expertise and language capability were both required.

In thematic terms, the largest share of approved assignments focused on the **review or development of teaching and learning materials**. Six of the assignments sat in this category. **Book procurement** and **evaluation/data collection** each accounted for three assignments. Other areas included:

- monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning
- foundational learning programme development and strategic planning
- pre-service and in-service teacher training
- the development of practical resources.

This thematic spread shows that foundational learning reform requires support across several connected areas. Improving outcomes is not only a question of producing more materials, training more teachers, or collecting more data. These elements need to work together. Engeza's assignments frequently addressed the links between curriculum, materials, language, teacher preparation, procurement, and implementation.

2.2 Who requested TA?

The majority of requests came from development partners – notably the World Bank, which accounted for 13 of the 16 approved requests. This reflects its central role in financing large-scale foundational learning reforms at a time when bilateral (USAID and FCDO) funding was reduced.

In addition, 17 requests – three of which were approved – came directly from ministries of education. There were also approved requests linked to the Gates Foundation, UNICEF, and Engeza's own knowledge management work, as well as a joint consortium involving FCDO, USAID, and the Rwanda Education Board.

Although only a small number of requests were submitted directly by ministries, these partner-led requests were typically developed in close collaboration with governments, aligned to government priorities, and implemented with government involvement.

2.3 What the TA delivered

Engeza's technical assistance focused on a small number of high-impact areas, primarily supporting activities close to the classroom and strengthening the quality and implementation of existing programmes.

- **TLM development and review**
  The largest share of support focused on reviewing and developing teaching and learning materials, including strengthening content quality, aligning materials with evidence-based pedagogy, and preparing resources for large-scale rollout.

- **Programme design**
  TA supported the design and refinement of foundational learning programmes, including strategic planning and the development of coherent, evidence-aligned approaches to literacy and numeracy reform.

- **Procurement systems**
  Targeted support was provided to strengthen book procurement processes, including improving specifications, processes, and systems to ensure quality materials could be produced and distributed at scale.

- **Evaluation and data collection**
  TA contributed to programme evaluation and data collection, enabling governments and partners to generate evidence on programme effectiveness and inform decision-making.

- **Teacher training and pre-service reform**
  Support was provided for teacher training and pre-service reform, particularly to align teacher preparation with new curricula and instructional approaches.

2.4 Evidence of impact

Engeza's impact is best understood through how relatively small, targeted inputs influenced larger programmes, improved quality, and – in some instances – were subsequently able to be adapted for use in other countries and programmes.

- **Nigeria – strengthening TLM quality at scale**
  Engeza supported the development and piloting of a teaching and learning materials (TLM) review tool, providing an evidence-based framework to assess material quality. This was directly linked to a large World Bank-financed education programme,

ensuring that materials used at scale were aligned with effective teaching practice. The tool has since been taken forward by the World Bank, refined, and reused in multiple countries including Liberia and Mozambique, demonstrating its value as a practical, transferable resource. It has also been modified by the Prevail Fund to support its portfolio review, demonstrating its value as a practical, transferable resource.

- **Senegal – large-scale multilingual materials development**
  Technical assistance supported the development of 298 children's books across eight national languages, contributing to a major national multilingual education reform. The work tested multiple production approaches, including the use of AI-assisted methods, generating both high-quality materials for classroom use and lessons that informed wider practice. The books are now positioned for large-scale distribution through World Bank financing.

- **Namibia – system-level reform through a national roadmap**
  Engeza supported the development of a national roadmap for foundational numeracy, aligning priorities across policy, materials, and delivery. The roadmap has been adopted by government, with a dedicated task force established to oversee implementation, providing a clear foundation for sustained system-level reform.

- **Other examples:**
  - **The Gambia – strengthening procurement capacity:** TA strengthened government capability to manage textbook procurement, embedding tools and processes that will shape future purchasing and improve material quality.

  - **Ethiopia – redesigning pre-service teacher training:** Engeza's work informed the redesign of pre-service teacher training, aligning it with a new curriculum and contributing to improved preparation of new teachers across the country.

  - **Rwanda – improving curriculum accessibility:** TA adapted curriculum materials across five subjects to make them usable for early-grade learners learning in English, simplifying content and aligning it with learners' language levels so teachers could actually use them in the classroom.

2.5 Nature of impact

Engeza's impact is largely indirect but system-level. Rather than delivering programmes itself, it strengthens the quality and effectiveness of existing investments and reforms led by governments and development partners.

- **Indirect but system-level impact**
  Technical assistance was targeted at specific, high-leverage technical gaps – such as teaching and learning materials, procurement, and programme design – but always within ongoing national reforms. This meant that impact came not from stand-alone outputs, but from shaping how systems function in practice, including how materials are developed, how programmes are designed, and how decisions are made.
- **Influencing large-scale programmes**
  TA was typically embedded within existing or imminent large-scale initiatives, particularly those financed by governments and the World Bank. This positioning was critical: it ensured that outputs and recommendations were not theoretical, but directly fed into programme design, rollout, and implementation decisions. Impact was strongest where TA was aligned to funded reforms with clear pathways to adoption and scale.
- **Strengthening inputs that reach millions**
  Rather than working at the level of delivery, Engeza focused on strengthening the inputs that underpin system performance – materials, teacher preparation, and procurement processes. These are the components that are reproduced and distributed at scale, meaning that improvements at this level have the potential to affect national systems and large student populations.
- **Triggering follow-on investment and reuse**
  Engeza's TA often acted as a catalyst for further investment. Assignments contributed to unlocking additional funding, informed the design of larger programmes, and led to continued engagement by partners. In multiple cases, development partners built on initial TA by commissioning further work or scaling the approaches introduced.
- **Contributing to global public goods**
  A consistent feature of impact was the development of practical tools and resources that extend beyond individual assignments. The report highlights strong demand from governments for standardised, evidence-based tools that can be adapted rather than developed from scratch. The TLM review tool developed in Nigeria is a clear example: initially used to systematically review materials within a national programme, it has since been taken up, adapted, and applied in multiple countries. In this way, TA contributes not only to country-level reform, but to a broader pool of shared resources that strengthen practice across systems.

3. What does a demand-led model look like in practice?

While the need for technical assistance was significant, Engeza showed that this need did not automatically translate into demand. The demand-led model did not operate passively: demand had to be actively generated, shaped, and converted into implementable assignments. This reflected both the novelty of a TA-only mechanism and the fact that many stakeholders were unfamiliar with how targeted technical assistance could add value alongside large-scale programmes.

In practice, the model combined responsiveness with active demand shaping. Requests were prioritised where they were clearly defined, aligned with ongoing reforms, and had a realistic pathway to uptake. Where these conditions were not met, requests required substantial support to refine – or were not taken forward. As a result, a demand-led model depended not only on expressed need, but on the ability to translate that need into focused, implementation-ready demand.

Demand was also uneven. Requests clustered in contexts with active reform programmes, strong intermediary networks, and existing relationships – particularly in West and East Africa. This created a 'snowball effect', where early engagement reinforced further demand, while other contexts remained harder to reach despite evident need.

3.1 The need to generate demand

Demand required sustained and deliberate effort. Outreach was essential to build awareness, explain the model, and demonstrate its value. Engeza used a combination of events, networks, communications, and direct engagement to create visibility and develop a pipeline of requests.

Intermediaries played a central role. Gates Foundation staff, consultants, and World Bank counterparts acted as relationship brokers, helping to identify opportunities, connect stakeholders, and refine requests. Where these actors were actively engaged, requests were more clearly defined and more likely to progress to implementation.

At the same time, uneven familiarity with the model shaped demand. Many stakeholders were not used to a TA-only offer and required support to understand what to request and how to frame it. This was reflected in the quality of submissions: a significant proportion lacked clarity, alignment, or readiness, particularly in the early stages.

Together, this experience shows that demand-led does not mean passive. Effective demand-led mechanisms require active outreach, strong networks, and ongoing support to translate need into viable, high-impact demand.

3.2 Demand quality varied

The overall volume of demand masked significant variation in quality. Of 55 requests received, only 19 proceeded and 16 were taken to completion, indicating that a large share of demand did not meet the threshold for implementation.

Requests were declined for several recurring reasons. A number fell outside Engeza's thematic scope or did not align with its criteria, particularly where proposals focused on areas such as EdTech without a clear link to improving foundational teaching and learning. Others lacked sufficient clarity to enable scoping, with applicants not specifying the type of technical assistance required, the intended outcomes, or how the support would connect to an existing programme.

Even where requests were broadly aligned, many were not implementation-ready. Developing viable assignments often required substantial follow-up to refine scope, confirm objectives, and ensure feasibility within the available timeframe and resources. In some cases, this process did not lead to a workable proposal.

A further constraint was limited follow-through. Some applicants did not respond to requests for additional information or did not continue engagement during the scoping process, meaning that potentially viable demand did not progress.

Overall, this pattern highlights that generating demand is only part of the challenge. A demand-led model also depends on the ability of requestors to articulate clear, aligned, and implementation-ready needs – something that often required active support, particularly in the early stages of engagement.

3.3 Government-led TA in practice

In practice, most technical assistance through Engeza was government-aligned but not government-originated. The majority of funded requests were submitted by development partners – particularly the World Bank – but were developed in close collaboration with government counterparts and embedded within government-led programmes.

Direct requests from ministries were comparatively few, and where they were received, they were less consistently implementation-ready. Many lacked clarity on scope, outcomes, or how

the support would connect to an existing reform, requiring significant refinement or not progressing at all.

This highlights an important distinction: government ownership did not depend on who submitted the request. In many of the most effective assignments, ownership was strong because the work was aligned to government priorities and delivered in partnership with ministries, even where the initial request came through an intermediary.

The implication is that a government-led model requires early investment in supporting ministries to articulate their needs clearly. Without this, even well-founded demand is unlikely to translate into implementation-ready technical assistance.

3.4 Patterns in demand

Demand was shaped less by abstract need and more by where active delivery programmes, funding, and networks already existed. The strongest and most consistent demand came through World Bank-linked programmes, reflecting its central role in financing large-scale foundational learning reforms at a time when other major actors were either less aligned or operating through their own mechanisms.

Geographically, demand clustered in West and East Africa, where large-scale reforms, existing relationships, and strong intermediary networks provided clearer entry points for support. These patterns were reinforced by the regional knowledge, language capabilities, and networks of both the Gates Foundation and edt's Fund Management team.

Thematically, requests concentrated in a set of high-demand areas – particularly teaching and learning materials, curriculum-related work, and evaluation – where technical gaps within large programmes were most visible and actionable. However, this reflects where demand was most clearly articulated and aligned with Engeza's offer, not the full range of areas where technical assistance is valuable. Other themes either saw lower demand or did not meet the criteria for support.

These patterns were also shaped by key constraints. Language remained a limiting factor, particularly in Francophone contexts where demand was high, but the pool of suitable expertise was smaller. Demand also depended on the presence of an existing programme pipeline – without this, even strong needs were less likely to translate into requests. Finally, network reach mattered: countries and programmes connected to active intermediaries and relationships were far more likely to generate demand than those outside these networks.

3.5 Implications

- **Demand generation should be a design feature, not an input**
  Engeza's experience shows that unmet need does not automatically translate into demand. Generating high-quality requests requires sustained outreach, clear positioning, and active relationship brokering to help partners identify and articulate priority needs.

- **TA mechanisms must support request formulation**
  Many requests required significant refinement to become implementation-ready, with unclear or poorly specified proposals slowing delivery. Effective TA facilities therefore need structured processes and hands-on support to help partners define scope, objectives, and alignment with ongoing reforms.

- **TA mechanisms must actively broker relationships**
  Intermediaries played a critical role in connecting demand with supply, shaping requests, and aligning them with reform priorities. Strong relationship-brokering capacity is essential to build trust, navigate contexts, and generate a viable pipeline of work.

- **TA mechanisms must balance accessibility with readiness**
  While low-barrier entry points support demand generation, insufficiently defined requests absorb time and limit efficiency. Mechanisms should combine open access with clearer requirements, ensuring requests are both inclusive and sufficiently developed to move quickly into delivery.

4. Localisation: a capacity-building agenda

Engeza was explicitly designed to strengthen the role of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)-based expertise, with a key objective to increase the use of local providers in technical assistance delivery. This aligns with a broader localisation agenda: technical assistance should draw on expertise that is closer to the systems, languages, and contexts it supports. However, implementation revealed a gap between intent and reality. While there is a strong and growing base of SSA-based expertise, the depth and availability of highly specialised skills is still uneven, particularly in priority technical areas.

The experience therefore reflects a practical tension: localisation is both necessary and achievable in part, but not yet fully realisable across all areas of technical assistance. In practice, delivery required a more blended model, combining SSA-based providers with international expertise to meet quality and capacity requirements.

4.1 What Engeza delivered on localisation

Engeza moved beyond a narrow focus on localisation as a principle by building and actively using a broad, practical ecosystem of technical expertise. Central to this was the creation of a **database of more than 450 technical assistance providers**, drawing on both targeted outreach and open calls to identify talent across SSA and globally.

This provider pool deliberately combined **individual consultants and organisations**, enabling flexible deployment models. Individual consultants were often used where highly specialised expertise was required, while organisations were brought in for more complex, multi-component assignments or where coordinated delivery capacity was needed.

While international expertise remained important, Engeza made consistent efforts to **prioritise and include SSA-based providers wherever possible**, both to strengthen contextual relevance and to support the development of regional capability. This resulted in a mixed delivery model, often pairing SSA-based and international providers to combine deep technical expertise with local knowledge.

In practice, localisation under Engeza was therefore not about substitution, but about **composition** – building teams that reflected the realities of available expertise, while deliberately increasing the role and contribution of Africa-based providers within technical assistance delivery.

4.2 Actual provider profile

In practice, Engeza's delivery model drew on a relatively small but diverse pool of providers. A total of **24 technical assistance providers, including repeat providers, were engaged** across 16 assignments, including **19 individual consultants and five organisations**.

This profile reflects a deliberate balance between **individual and organisational providers**, aligned to the nature of the work. Individual consultants were used most frequently, particularly for assignments requiring highly specialised expertise. Organisational providers were engaged in more complex or multi-component assignments, often alongside individuals, where broader technical coverage or coordinated delivery was needed.

The provider base also comprised a **mix of SSA-based and international expertise**. Overall, international consultants accounted for the majority of those engaged, with SSA-based providers representing a smaller but significant share. This reflects both the availability of specialised skills and the requirements of specific assignments.

In practice, delivery often relied on **complementary team structures**, combining SSA-based providers with international experts. This approach enabled assignments to draw on contextual knowledge and local engagement alongside deeper or more specialised technical expertise. In several cases, mixed teams were essential to meet the full range of technical requirements, particularly in areas such as teaching and learning materials, evaluation, and procurement.

Taken together, this profile highlights a pragmatic model of delivery: rather than a fully localised provider base, Engeza operated through a **blended ecosystem**, balancing geography, capability, and delivery structure to meet demand while maintaining quality.

This experience should not be read simply as a failure to localise. It shows the practical complexity of technical assistance markets. Some assignments required highly specialised skills that were difficult to find regionally at the time of delivery. Others required combinations of literacy, numeracy, language, assessment, evaluation, curriculum, or procurement expertise that could not be sourced from a single provider. Some also required French-language expertise in specialist areas where supply was particularly limited.

4.3 Where regional expertise added value

Where SSA-based providers were engaged, their contribution went beyond simple participation in delivery: they shaped how technical assistance worked in practice. Their strongest value lay in bringing a **grounded understanding of system realities** – how ministries operate, how reforms unfold over time, and what is feasible within existing constraints. This meant that outputs were more closely aligned to how systems actually

function, particularly in work focused on teaching and learning materials, implementation processes, and classroom-level change.

Language capability was another defining strength. In multilingual contexts, and especially in Francophone settings, SSA-based providers were often essential to ensuring that technical work – whether material development, assessment design, or guidance – was both accurate and usable. This was not just a matter of translation, but of adapting content to specific linguistic structures and education practices.

Equally important was their ability to navigate relationships. SSA-based providers were **often better placed to engage ministries as partners** rather than as counterparts, helping to build trust, maintain momentum, and support more collaborative ways of working. This was particularly evident in assignments where sustained engagement and co-development were critical to delivery.

The strongest results came where these strengths were combined with complementary expertise:

- In **Senegal**, ARED (Associates in Research and Education for Development) brought deep knowledge of national languages and local systems, while international support added specialist inputs on areas such as book production and licensing.
- In **Nigeria**, pairing a local consultant with international experts ensured that the TLM review tool was both technically robust and grounded in system realities.
- In **Ethiopia**, a local organisation led delivery, with international experts providing quality assurance and methodological support, strengthening the final outputs without displacing local ownership.

Across these examples, the pattern is consistent. SSA-based expertise added most value not when it replaced international input, but when it was positioned at the centre of delivery – shaping the work, with external expertise used selectively to complement and strengthen it.

4.4 Current market constraints

Alongside the clear strengths of SSA-based provision, Engeza's experience also exposed consistent constraints in the current market. These were not simply about overall supply, but about the availability of specific types of expertise in the places where demand is highest.

Across assignments, the most persistent challenge was the depth of specialised technical expertise. While there is a strong and growing base of practitioners with implementation experience, fewer providers (particularly within the SSA-based pool) had the advanced technical skills required for more complex work. This was most evident in areas such as numeracy, where specialist expertise was limited, and in highly technical components of

literacy programming, including language analysis and the design of scoping and sequencing frameworks. Similar gaps emerged in evaluation, particularly for work involving rigorous data analysis, instrument development, and large-scale programme evaluation.

These constraints were magnified in Francophone contexts, where the intersection of language and technical expertise further narrowed the available pool of specialists. In practice, there were relatively few providers – either SSA-based or international – who combined strong technical capability with the ability to work fluently in French, particularly in numeracy. This created bottlenecks in delivery and limited flexibility in provider selection.

There were also operational constraints linked to how expertise is structured within the market. Many assignments required team-based delivery models, bringing together complementary skill sets across multiple domains. However, expertise was often dispersed across individual consultants rather than housed within organisations, making it more time-intensive to assemble and coordinate effective teams. This reduced responsiveness and, in some cases, placed greater demands on fund management to facilitate coordination.

Taken together, these constraints highlight a structural issue: the challenge is not simply identifying providers, but **bridging the gap between existing expertise and the level, combination, and location of skills required for high-quality technical assistance**.

4.5 What localisation requires

A central lesson from Engeza is that localisation cannot be achieved through procurement choices alone. While there is a clear policy direction across the sector to increase the use of SSA-based providers, the experience of implementation shows that **this ambition depends on a deeper, more deliberate process of market-building.**

At its core, this means moving beyond selecting from an existing pool of providers to actively shaping that pool. Identifying talent requires a broader, more intentional approach – combining open calls, targeted outreach, and network-based sourcing to surface providers who may not sit within established international pipelines. A more diverse and visible provider base is a necessary condition for localisation, but it is not sufficient on its own.

Engeza's experience also highlights the need to invest in **capacity building as part of technical assistance design.** In several high-demand areas (notably numeracy, language analysis, and evaluation), there were clear gaps in technical depth. Addressing these gaps requires structured opportunities for skills development, practical learning, and exposure to specialised work. If TA hubs and funders are serious about localisation, they need to play a role in building the pipeline of expertise, not just drawing on it.

One of the most effective approaches in practice was the use of **pairing models**, which combined SSA-based and international providers on the same assignments. These arrangements supported delivery while also creating opportunities for peer learning and skills transfer. Over time, this kind of embedded learning approach can help strengthen the depth of expertise within the SSA-based provider pool while maintaining quality in the short term.

There is also a longer-term requirement to build **technical communities**, as opposed to just individual capability. This includes shared tools, common standards, and spaces for collaboration across practitioners, helping to move from fragmented expertise towards a more cohesive and scalable market.

The implication is clear: localisation is not a passive outcome of good intentions or procurement rules. It requires an **intentional strategy** – one that combines broader sourcing, deliberate capacity building, and structured approaches to learning and collaboration. Without this, the gap between ambition and delivery will persist; with it, the pool of SSA-based providers can expand in both size and capability over time.

5. Shaping quality technical assistance through design and delivery

Quality in technical assistance is often attributed to the strength of individual experts, but Engeza's experience shows that this is only part of the picture. Consistently high-quality delivery depended on how assignments were designed from the outset – how needs were defined, how providers were selected and matched, and how delivery was managed over time. In practice, quality was not something that emerged at the point of delivery; it was built into the processes that structured the work from the beginning.

5.1 Selection and matching

An important factor in designing for quality was how providers were selected and matched to assignments. Engeza did not rely on availability or strong CVs alone; instead, it applied a structured approach to identify providers whose expertise, experience, and context fit the specific requirements of each assignment. This included defining clear technical needs during scoping, setting out expectations through detailed terms of reference, and shortlisting candidates based on their ability to deliver in the relevant country and implementation context.

This matching process was critical. In many cases, success depended not just on technical knowledge, but on a provider's ability to work within government systems, respond to evolving needs, and collaborate effectively with other stakeholders. The deliberate alignment between assignment requirements and provider capability was therefore a key driver of quality from the outset.

5.2 Evidence from delivery

Overall, Engeza's delivery record points to consistently strong quality. Client feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with most respondents reporting high levels of satisfaction with both the technical outputs and the relevance of the support provided.

- In **Namibia**, the TA directly produced a national roadmap for foundational numeracy, with the government establishing a task force to take forward implementation. The value here was not just in the analytical quality, but in producing an output that was clear, actionable, and owned by the Ministry. Outputs were described by ministry officials as "exceptional quality and very useful", directly informing the development of the national numeracy roadmap.
- In **Senegal**, TA contributed to the development of nearly 300 multilingual children's books for use within a national literacy reform. The critical factor here was alignment: the work was embedded within a funded World Bank programme and linked directly to planned procurement and distribution at scale. Quality was demonstrated through fit with system processes: materials were not only technically sound, but designed to meet government standards and be used in classrooms.
- In **Ethiopia**, the assignment focused on pre-service teacher training, with outputs feeding into the national Education Transformation programme. What drove quality in this case was the combination of technical depth and system alignment: recommendations were grounded in curriculum reform needs and designed to be integrated into existing training structures. As a result, they were taken forward within a national programme, rather than remaining standalone outputs.

At the same time, delivery challenges provide an equally important lens on quality. In more complex assignments, particularly evaluation work, there were cases where provider expertise was not initially well matched to requirements, or where coordination across multiple providers introduced additional risk. In these instances, quality depended on the ability to **adjust course during delivery**, including bringing in additional expertise, refining roles, and strengthening oversight.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that quality technical assistance is characterised by outputs that are **practical, aligned to system priorities, and capable of being taken forward within existing delivery mechanisms**. It also depends on delivery models that can respond to emerging issues and adjust course where needed.

5.3 What drove quality

Across assignments, several common factors emerged as central to achieving high-quality outcomes.

First, **strong stakeholder relationships and structured engagement processes** were critical. The assignment lifecycle included multiple opportunities to confirm that the right provider profile had been matched to the work, from initial scoping through to provider selection and onboarding. Regular check-ins between the TA provider, Engeza's Fund Management Team, and the TA requestor meant that issues could be identified early and addressed quickly, supporting course correction before they affected delivery.

Third, quality depended on **flexibility in delivery**. Assignments often required adaptation in response to changing contexts, evolving needs, or new information. The ability to adjust scope, approach, and timelines – while maintaining focus on outcomes – was a key feature of effective delivery.

Finally, the role of **funder–fund manager collaboration** was a defining enabler. Ongoing technical dialogue, joint decision-making, and active portfolio management helped ensure that assignments were well-targeted, aligned with strategic priorities, and supported throughout delivery.

Engeza's experience shows that high-quality technical assistance is not simply the result of strong individual experts. It is the outcome of a system that combines rigorous scoping, careful matching of providers to assignment needs, adaptive delivery, and active oversight throughout the assignment lifecycle.

Where these elements were in place, technical assistance was both high quality and impactful. Where they were weaker, even strong technical inputs required additional support to achieve the intended results.

6. What it takes to run an effective TA mechanism

Engeza's experience highlights that the effectiveness of a technical assistance mechanism depends as much on how it is run as on the quality of the assistance itself. Delivering high-impact TA requires a coherent operational model, combining technical, managerial, and relational functions – and cannot be treated as a purely administrative exercise. For funders, this has clear implications: achieving quality and scale requires deliberate investment in how TA mechanisms are designed and managed.

6.1 TA fund management is a technical function

A central lesson is that TA fund management should be understood as a technical function, rather than simply an administrative one. When people hear 'fund manager', the assumption is often that this role is limited to financial oversight, moving resources in and out of projects. In practice, Engeza demonstrated that the role is far broader and more hands-on.

It encompassed the full assignment lifecycle: generating demand through outreach; working with partners to shape and scope requests; identifying and matching appropriate providers; overseeing delivery and quality assurance; and managing relationships across stakeholders. Each of these required judgement, technical understanding, and continuous engagement.

The quality of technical assistance was therefore not determined solely by the providers engaged, but by how effectively the fund management function could guide, coordinate, and support the work throughout.

6.2 Lessons in staffing

The initial staffing model proved too lean for these requirements. While designed on the assumption that fund management would focus primarily on coordination, implementation revealed a much more intensive need for technical engagement, particularly in shaping requests, reviewing outputs, and supporting delivery across assignments.

This points to the need for a more deliberately structured capability within TA teams. At a minimum, this includes:

- **programme design and scoping capability**, to translate broad requests into clear, actionable assignments
- **technical expertise in core thematic areas**, allowing for meaningful engagement with both providers and clients

- **provider management and quality assurance**, including selection, onboarding, and ongoing oversight
- **stakeholder engagement and facilitation**, particularly with governments and development partners
- **monitoring, evaluation, and learning**, to track performance and inform adaptive management
- **linguistic diversity**, for effective communication and adapting content to specific linguistic structures and education practices.

In practice, no single team can hold all specialist expertise internally. Effective models therefore combine a core team with strong baseline capability and **flexible access to specialist advisers**, who can be deployed as needed to strengthen delivery in priority areas. This blended approach is better suited to managing both the range and depth of technical assistance required.

6.3 The importance of the inception phase

Establishing a TA mechanism requires a dedicated inception phase. For Engeza, approximately three months were needed to put in place the foundations for effective delivery.

This included developing assignment processes, drafting templates and tools, defining roles and responsibilities, and establishing systems for quality assurance. While resource-intensive upfront, these elements proved critical to ensuring consistency, clarity, and efficiency throughout implementation. Without this initial investment, the mechanism would have lacked the structure needed to manage assignments at pace and maintain quality.

6.4 Designing the request process

The design of the request process involves an inherent trade-off between accessibility and readiness. Engeza adopted a light-touch approach to encourage demand and reduce barriers to entry, particularly in the early stages of implementation.

However, this also resulted in a higher volume of requests that were insufficiently defined or not yet ready to progress. This created additional demand on fund management capacity, as significant effort was required to clarify and refine submissions.

The experience suggests that TA mechanisms need to strike a balance: maintaining openness to generate demand, while introducing sufficient structure to ensure that requests are adequately developed, aligned to priorities, and ready to move into delivery.

6.5 MEL and communications as core functions

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), alongside communications, emerged as core functions rather than supporting activities. While Engeza developed a MEL framework, it was not consistently used as an active management tool, limiting its potential to inform real-time decision-making and portfolio development.

At the same time, communications played a critical role in generating demand, building visibility, and positioning the fund with key stakeholders.

Going forward, a more structured approach is needed: one that enables systematic tracking of demand, clearer insight into patterns across requests and assignments, and stronger capture of learning at portfolio level. Strengthening both MEL and communications will allow TA mechanisms to move from reactive delivery towards more strategic, evidence-informed portfolio management.

7. Design principles for future TA mechanisms

Drawing on Engeza's implementation experience, a number of design principles emerge that are relevant for funders seeking to maximise the impact of technical assistance mechanisms. These principles reflect a shift from viewing TA as a set of expert inputs, towards understanding it as a structured, demand-led system that must be deliberately designed to influence outcomes.

1. **Target specific decision points, not generic support**
   Technical assistance is most effective when it is directed at clearly defined moments – such as material review prior to procurement, or the design of programme components – where timely inputs can shape larger investments and delivery processes.

2. **Invest in demand generation and shaping**
   Demand does not arise automatically, even where the need is clear. Effective mechanisms invest in outreach, relationship-building, and structured scoping support to help partners identify priorities and translate them into actionable requests.

3. **Define 'government-led' pragmatically**
   In practice, many of the most effective assignments were initiated or mediated through development partners, but closely aligned to government priorities and systems. The quality of engagement, ownership, and follow-through is more important than the formal origin of the request.

4. **Build and strengthen the provider roster**
   Localisation depends on deliberate effort to identify talent, expand the pool of available expertise, and strengthen capability over time. This requires a proactive approach to sourcing and developing providers.

5. **Use mixed delivery models**
   Combining individual consultants, organisations, and paired teams allows mechanisms to respond to different types of technical need. In particular, pairing approaches can strengthen delivery while supporting longer-term capability.

6. **Resource fund management properly**
   Delivering high-quality TA requires sustained technical and operational input across the assignment lifecycle. Lean models risk constraining both quality and responsiveness, particularly as assignment complexity increases.

7. **Design for catalytic impact**
   Technical assistance should be aligned to existing programmes, focused on high-leverage gaps, and timed to influence key decisions. Outputs need to be practical, implementable, and positioned for uptake.

8. **Build and share reusable knowledge**
   Tools, guidance, and methods developed through TA assignments represent valuable assets. Capturing and sharing these in a structured way extends the reach of individual assignments and supports wider system learning.

Taken together, these principles underline that effective TA mechanisms require intentional design across demand, delivery, and learning. When these elements are aligned, technical assistance is more likely to influence system-level change and contribute to sustained improvements in practice.

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