



FASTTRACK+ PROGRAMME
Q3 2025 REPORTING CYCLE

2025 EXTERNAL EVALUATION BRIEF FOR FASTTRACK+ IN DR CONGO: SUMMARY

Accelerated Foundational Literacy & Numeracy Programme — North Kivu
Province (Mugunga & Nyiragongo) · November 2024 – October 2025

IMPLEMENTING ORG

AREAi — Aid for
Rural Education
Access Initiative

LOCAL PARTNER

PAWA — Pamoja na
Watoto Foundation

TARGET POPULATION

1,000 IDP/refugee
children, aged 5–14

LANGUAGES

French & Swahili

Executive Summary

In one of the world's most severe and protracted humanitarian crises, AREAi — in partnership with the Pamoja na Watoto Foundation (PAWA) — delivered the FastTrack+ MVP Prototype to displaced children in North Kivu Province, Democratic Republic of Congo. This brief synthesises evidence from the FastTrack+ Endline Report (Q3 2025), an independent pre-post evaluation using the ASER standardised assessment.

Over a 12-week intensified delivery cycle of 150 contact hours, learners made substantial, statistically coherent gains in both literacy and numeracy. The share of children at the lowest literacy level (Beginner) collapsed from **65% to 6%**, while word-level readers — the principal indicator of functional decoding ability — rose from **1 in 10 children to nearly 1 in 2**. In numeracy, Beginner-level learners fell from 61% to 12%, and children performing two-digit operations tripled from 16% to 48%.

These outcomes were achieved despite forced IDP camp closures requiring complete mid-cycle restructuring — demonstrating that TaRL-based competency grouping, bilingual Swahili–French instruction, and offline edtech reinforcement produce rapid foundational learning gains even in severe crisis conditions.

2024-25 CYCLE

1,725
children assessed at baseline

1,037
matched impact cohort (baseline + endline)

84
facilitators trained & retained (49M | 35F)

252
Talking Book kits across 84 clusters

10% → 47%

WORD-LEVEL READERS AT ENDLINE

Nearly 1 in 2 children could read at word level after 12 weeks — up from 1 in 10 at baseline (+37.7 percentage points).

1. Programme Background & Context

The FastTrack+ MVP Prototype was implemented in the Democratic Republic of Congo — one of the world's most severe and protracted humanitarian crises. North Kivu Province, where the programme operated, has experienced decades of armed conflict, mass displacement, and cyclical school closures.

CRISIS SCALE

In 2024 alone, 540 schools closed in North Kivu, leaving nearly 795,000 children without access to education by 2025 (UNICEF 2025). Early 2025 conflict saw nearly 900,000 people abruptly displaced from IDP camps into host communities (OCHA 2025).

FastTrack+ is an offline technology-enabled, self-assisted accelerated foundational skills programme designed by AREAi and adapted — for the first time — from its English-language origin to French and Swahili for use in a Francophone conflict-affected context. The programme integrates three evidence-based methodologies:

- **Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL):** learners grouped by actual competency level, not age or grade.
- **Mavis Talking Book and Pen:** offline audio-enabled digital learning tool requiring no electricity or internet.
- **Mother Tongue-Based Literacy:** Swahili used as a cognitive bridge to formal French instruction (translanguaging).

2. Evaluation Objectives

This brief synthesises evidence from the FastTrack+ Endline Report (Q3 2025) against the programme's stated prototype objectives. The evaluation assesses:

Effectiveness — did FastTrack+ improve foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes for displaced children?

Innovation — did the localized edtech tool demonstrate acceptability and utility?

Relevance — was the programme appropriate to the needs of displaced refugee children in DRC?

Fidelity — was the adapted methodology implemented as designed in a novel, fragile context?

Equity — were learning gains distributed equitably across learner subgroups and facilitator types?

Sustainability & Scalability — does the evidence support broader replication and scale?

3. Evaluation Methodology

Design. The evaluation uses a pre-post (baseline–endline) design, supplemented by qualitative data from facilitator observations, learner feedback, and process monitoring records. The assessment instrument was the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) standardised tool — a globally recognised, one-on-one oral evaluation of foundational literacy and numeracy competencies, enabling direct comparison across learning levels.

Assessment framework. Literacy: Beginner → Letter Recognition → Word Reading → Paragraph Reading → Story Reading. Numeracy: Beginner → One-Digit → Two-Digit → Subtraction → Division.

Sample & attrition. 1,725 children were assessed at baseline across Mugunga and Nyiragongo IDP communities (941 girls, 784 boys). Of these, 1,037 children (60.1%) completed both baseline and endline assessments. All impact findings are restricted to this matched cohort to ensure comparability.

1,037

matched cohort

2 IDP communities

4 learning centres

941 girls · 784 boys at
baseline

60.1% completion

ATTRITION NOTE

An attrition rate of 39.9% (688 children) reflects the extreme contextual instability of eastern DRC — including IDP camp closures, population relocations, and ongoing conflict disruptions. This is consistent with humanitarian education programme norms in active conflict zones and was partially compensated through staggered assessment windows.

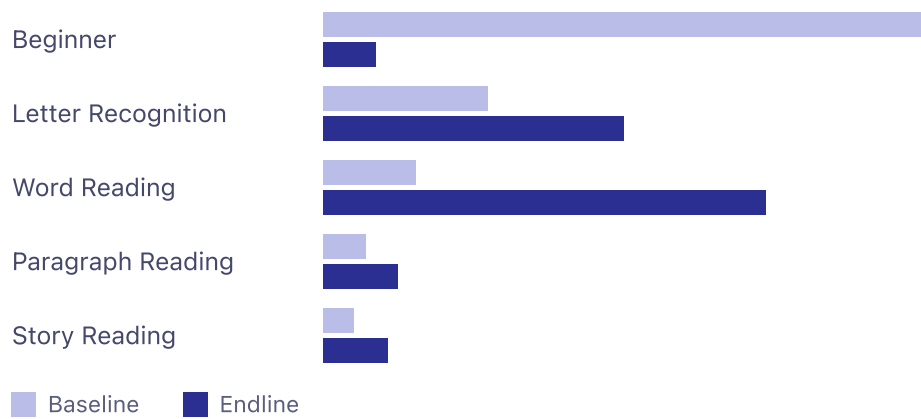
4. Key Findings

4.1 Literacy Outcomes

FastTrack+ achieved substantial and statistically coherent improvements in literacy across all competency bands within a 12-week intensified delivery cycle (150 contact hours).

LITERACY BAND	BASELINE (%)	ENDLINE (%)	CHANGE (PP)
Beginner (cannot identify letters)	65.28	5.59	–59.69
Letter Recognition	17.45	32.21	+14.76
Word Reading	9.74	47.44	+37.70
Paragraph Reading	4.44	7.91	+3.47
Story Reading (highest)	3.09	6.85	+3.76

SHARE OF CHILDREN AT EACH LITERACY BAND — BASELINE VS ENDLINE



HEADLINE FINDING

The proportion of children at the lowest literacy level collapsed by nearly 60 percentage points. Word-level reading rose from 1 in 10 children to nearly 1 in 2 — the programme's most impactful outcome, demonstrating that TaRL-based competency grouping, combined with bilingual instruction and edtech reinforcement, produces rapid foundational literacy gains even in severe crisis conditions.

4.2 Numeracy Outcomes

Numeracy gains mirrored literacy trends, with the largest movement recorded at the lower and mid-levels of the competency continuum.

NUMERACY BAND	BASELINE (%)	ENDLINE (%)	CHANGE (PP)
Beginner (cannot identify numbers)	60.66	11.50	–49.16
One-Digit Operations	17.74	16.10	–1.64
Two-Digit Operations	16.01	47.80	+31.79
Subtraction	5.50	18.90	+13.40
Division (highest)	0.10	5.70	+5.60

The One-Digit category showed a marginal decline, consistent with expected progression: children who were at this level at baseline moved up into the Two-Digit band. Division, while still the weakest domain, registered a 57-fold increase from near-zero, indicating meaningful upward movement at the advanced end of the continuum.

4.3 Equity Analysis: Community-Based vs. School-Based Facilitators

A disaggregated analysis of learning gains by facilitator type reveals a significant and consistent performance differential that carries important programmatic implications.

LITERACY BAND	SBF BASELINE	SBF ENDLINE	CBF BASELINE	CBF ENDLINE
Beginner	61.48%	7.04%	78.85%	0.44%
Letter Recognition	18.27%	31.85%	14.54%	33.48%
Word Reading	10.62%	46.05%	6.61%	52.42%
Paragraph Reading		+1.11 pp gain	0.00%	11.89%
Story Reading	3.95%	8.27%	0.00%	33.48%

EQUITY INSIGHT

Community-based facilitators (CBFs) consistently outperformed school-based facilitators (SBFs), particularly at advanced literacy levels. CBF learners began with deeper deficits (78.85% at Beginner vs. 61.48% for SBFs) yet achieved dramatically superior story-reading outcomes (33.48% vs. 8.27%). In numeracy, CBFs led in Two-Digit progression (52.42% vs. 47.78%), while SBFs showed stronger performance in Subtraction and Division. Community proximity, rapport, and instructional flexibility — enabled by the TaRL approach and Talking Book — can compensate for and even surpass formal teaching backgrounds in foundational learning contexts.

4.4 Innovation: Mavis Talking Book and Pen

The bilingual (Swahili–French) Mavis Talking Book and Pen proved to be a highly accepted and effective learning tool in the DRC context, demonstrating strong uptake with no electricity or internet dependency.

- 252 kits distributed across 84 learning clusters (3 kits per cluster)
- Learners described the tool as a "personal tutor", sustaining learning motivation beyond scheduled sessions
- The tool's offline multilingual audio functionality proved essential for children from diverse linguistic backgrounds
- Parents reported increased engagement with education as they observed their children using the interactive device independently

TECHNICAL NOTE

Durability and audio quality limitations were identified under field conditions. AREAi has flagged the need for hardware upgrade to support multi-language variability, better audio encoding, and learner progress tracking features in the next iteration.

4.5 Process Fidelity

Despite significant contextual disruptions — including forced IDP camp closures requiring full programme restructuring mid-implementation — the core FastTrack+ model was maintained with high fidelity:

- Attendance rates exceeded 80% throughout the delivery period
- Learning intensity was increased from 4 to 5 days per week (2.5 hours/day) to compensate for the shortened 12-week delivery window (originally planned as 24 weeks)
- 84 of 95 recruited facilitators (88.4%) were retained through the full cycle
- Competency-based grouping (TaRL clustering), bilingual instruction, and Talking Book integration were maintained throughout
- Weekly facilitator monitoring, field visits, and observation checklists provided real-time adaptive management

5. Implementation Challenges

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	MITIGATION APPLIED
Contextual / Security	IDP camp closures and M23 conflict activity forced complete site restructuring; travel routes disrupted	Rapid pivot to host community schools; rerouting through Rwanda; visa-on-arrival entry
IPO Recruitment	No prior AREAi presence in DRC; identifying a credible local partner was complex	Rigorous screening process; PAWA selected based on track record, community ties, and pre-existing network
Curriculum Adaptation	Complex linguistic and cultural barriers in translating content from English to French/Swahili for crisis-context learners	Expert-led translation by native speakers; pre-testing with teachers, learners, and community leaders before rollout
Technology	Device durability issues in harsh conditions; audio quality limitations; ongoing technical support not embedded	Kits allocated per cluster for shared use; plan for next-gen hardware with better audio, offline tracking, and dialect support
Training	Language barriers affected initial facilitator training quality; dependency on AREAi team limited local autonomy	Master trainer cascade model introduced; PAWA's multilingual staff served as bridge; structured language support mechanism planned for future
Attrition	39.9% of assessed children unavailable at endline due to displacement and insecurity	Staggered assessment windows; endline restricted to matched cohort for analytical integrity

6. Lessons Learned

A

Bilingual translanguaging is a programme strength, not a compromise

The Swahili-to-French bridge model was transformative in a multilingual displacement context. Leveraging learners' first language accelerates conceptual acquisition and reduces the affective barriers that monolingual instruction creates for displaced children.

B

Community-based facilitation outperforms formal teaching in FLN contexts

CBFs achieved stronger literacy outcomes in advanced bands despite beginning with weaker learner cohorts. Their proximity to learners, cultural resonance, and informal pedagogical strategies — reinforced by the Talking Book — generate superior engagement and learning momentum, with implications for facilitator recruitment at scale.

C

Offline edtech sustains engagement beyond the classroom

Children continued practising with the Talking Book and Pen outside session hours — an indicator of intrinsic motivation rarely reported in crisis education contexts. In eastern DRC, electricity and internet connectivity cannot be assumed at any learning site.

D

Adaptive delivery in conflict contexts requires embedded flexibility

The camp closure crisis tested the programme's resilience. The rapid restructuring — new sites, new community partners, revised timelines — was operationally successful, enabled by a local implementing partner with established community presence. IPO selection and partnership depth matter more than speed.

E

Expert-led localisation is non-negotiable

Simple translation of English materials into French and Swahili was insufficient. Effective adaptation required native-speaker recordings, cultural relevance review by local teachers, and pre-testing with end-users. Its omission in future expansions would risk pedagogical effectiveness.

7. Recommendations

7.1 Programme Level

- **Curriculum refinement:** prioritise continuous co-development with local teachers, language experts, and community representatives in each new country context; embed learners' lived experiences and familiar settings into all content.
- **Technology upgrade:** commission next-generation Talking Book and Pen hardware with improved audio quality, multi-dialect support, offline progress tracking, and greater device durability.
- **Facilitator training architecture:** institutionalise the master trainer cascade model and invest in a formal multilingual facilitator pool in each country of operation.
- **CBF-centred design:** restructure future delivery to prioritise community-based facilitators as the primary delivery vehicle, with SBFs in a supporting role.

- **Attrition mitigation:** embed psychosocial support components to address trauma-related attendance barriers for displaced children.

7.2 System & Scale Level

- **East Africa expansion:** leverage the DRC pilot as proof of concept for expansion into Tanzania, Uganda, and Rwanda — prioritising contexts with established refugee operations and education infrastructure.
- **Government integration:** align FastTrack+ with national FLN frameworks and refugee education strategies; pursue UNHCR and host-ministry endorsement to embed FastTrack+ as a complementary, rather than parallel, system.
- **FastTest deployment:** roll out AREAi's AI-powered oral assessment tool across all sites for real-time learning level tracking, formative assessment, and programme adaptation at scale.
- **Research & evidence:** commission comparative studies across programme contexts (DRC vs. Nigeria) to identify context-specific moderators of effectiveness and build a replicable evidence base.

7.3 Policy & Donor Level

- **Teacher support systems:** move beyond one-off training towards sustained mentoring and communities of practice for FLN facilitators — particularly in refugee and rural contexts.
- **Digital equity in policy:** edtech policy for displacement settings must address data privacy, affordability, and offline-first infrastructure so benefits reach the most marginalised learners.
- **Mother tongue instruction:** national FLN policies across Africa should formally incorporate first-language instruction as a rights-based and evidence-based strategy.
- **Cost-effectiveness research:** fund comparative cost-effectiveness analysis across FLN intervention models to enable governments to maximise learning per dollar.

8. Conclusions

The FastTrack+ MVP Prototype in eastern DRC represents a significant achievement in education in emergencies. Operating for the first time in a Francophone conflict-affected context, with a newly adapted curriculum, a novel edtech tool, and a local partner with no prior working relationship, AREAi and PAWA delivered measurable, substantial foundational learning gains for some of the world's most marginalised children — in one of the world's most operationally challenging environments.

The evidence supports the following conclusions:

- FastTrack+ is **effective in a crisis context outside its country of origin**, demonstrating transferability of the core methodology when adapted with appropriate rigour and local expertise.
- The bilingual translanguaging model is a **genuine pedagogical innovation** — not merely a logistical accommodation — and should be treated as a core programme feature.

- Community-based facilitation, guided by TaRL methodology and enabled by offline edtech, delivers **equivalent or superior learning outcomes** to formal school-based instruction in displacement settings.
- The 12-week intensified delivery model suggests an evidence base for a **compressed, high-frequency instructional model** that may have applicability beyond crisis contexts.
- Significant operational, technological, and logistical lessons have been documented and are **actionable in the next phase** of East Africa regional scale-up.

EVALUATIVE JUDGEMENT

FastTrack+ meets the threshold of effectiveness, relevance, and operational feasibility as an accelerated foundational learning intervention in fragile and conflict-affected settings. The evidence warrants investment in programme consolidation, technology enhancement, facilitator capacity building, and contextually sensitive multi-country expansion — with appropriate monitoring and evaluation systems embedded from the outset.

9. Programme Summary Reference

PARAMETER	DETAIL
Programme Name	FastTrack+ MVP Prototype
Lead Organisation	AREAi — Aid for Rural Education Access Initiative
Implementing Partner	PAWA — Pamoja na Watoto Foundation
Geography	North Kivu Province, DRC (Mugunga & Nyiragongo communities)
Implementation Period	November 2024 – October 2025
Target Group	Out-of-school IDP/refugee children, aged 5–14 years
Languages	French and Swahili
Learning Centres	4 (Ecole Uhamisho le Héros, CS Safina Kivu, Collège Saint Junior, CS Tumaini)
Children Assessed (Baseline)	1,725 (941 girls, 784 boys)
Evaluation Cohort (Matched)	1,037 (completed baseline + endline)
Facilitators Trained	84 retained of 95 recruited (88.4% retention)
Talking Book Kits	252 distributed across 84 learning clusters
Delivery Intensity	5 days/week × 2.5 hrs/day = 150 hours over 12 weeks
Assessment Tool	ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) standardised instrument
Core Methodology	TaRL + Mavis Talking Book and Pen + Mother Tongue-Based Literacy
Funding Stage	MVP/Prototype (pre-scale)
Next Phase	East Africa expansion (DRC, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda)



Authored by AREAi | www.areai4africa.org | FastTrack+ Programme | Q3 2025
This evaluation brief is derived from the FastTrack+ Endline Report (2025). For full data and annexes, contact AREAi directly.