



UNICEF Education Learning Case Study

Somalia

Teaching at the Right Level

October 2025

In Somalia, access to quality education has been severely weakened by decades of civil war, ongoing insecurity, and recurrent droughts and floods. Efforts to expand access to a standard pre-primary curriculum in public schools began only recently, and only one in three children is enrolled in primary school. Many children spend their early years in Quranic schools, leading to delays in entering the formal system. As a result, nearly three-quarters of children are older than the expected age for their grade. Gender disparities remain significant: for every 10 boys in primary school, only 8 girls are enrolled. This gap widens in secondary school where only 7 girls are enrolled for every 10 boys.

Given the high number of out-of-school and overaged children, efforts to strengthen foundational learning through both formal and alternative education pathways are critical, with out-of-school rates reaching 65 per cent at primary and 75 per cent at secondary. In 2024, working with government and local partners, UNICEF piloted a programme called Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), an evidence-based approach that focuses on grouping children by their actual learning level rather than by age or grade. This helps children develop the foundational skills they need to catch up with learners of their age. Children attend a daily one-hour TaRL session in addition to their regular literacy (Somali) and math classes, with remedial lessons tailored to each group, helping them reach Grade 3 level expectations.

The pilot was implemented in two contexts. In central and southern Somalia, more than 12,000 children living in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and participating in Accelerated Basic Education (ABE) completed four months (one semester) of TaRL across 120 Temporary Learning Spaces. In Somaliland, TaRL was integrated into the formal public school system, reaching more than 6,750 children over a period of eight months (two semesters).

In both settings, teaching and learning materials were developed with Ministries of Education. Master Trainers were selected – from the Ministry of Education in Somaliland and from Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) partners in IDP camps in the central and southern regions – and trained to provide both initial instruction and ongoing mentoring to teachers.

In total, 130 teachers in Somaliland and 500 ABE teachers in the central and south regions were supported. With technical support from Africa Educational Trust and TaRL Africa, children were assessed at baseline, midline, and endline to monitor progress and to ensure they were grouped according to their actual levels in reading and mathematics. Both pilots demonstrated strong learning gains.

RESULTS

- 18,750 children (47 per cent girls) studying at the equivalent of Grade 3 level improved their foundational reading and mathematics skills through TaRL after just eight months of daily one-hour courses.
- 45 Master Trainers (32 in the central and southern regions, 13 in Somaliland) trained and mentored 630 teachers (130 formal schoolteachers in Somaliland and 500 ABE teachers in the central and south states).
- Overall learning gains: In the central and southern regions, children in IDP camps improved their literacy and numeracy proficiency by an average of 20 percentage points by the end of the pilot. In Somaliland, children in formal schools improved by more than 40 percentage points in both literacy and numeracy. Despite significant gender gaps in Somalia, girls and boys achieved nearly equal learning gains.
- Reading outcomes: In the central and southern regions, the share of children unable to recognize letters decreased from one-third to just 1 per cent. Those able to read a story increased from 7 per cent to one-third. In Somaliland, the proportion of children with grade-level reading skills more than doubled, reaching 75 per cent by endline.
- Mathematics outcomes: In the central and southern regions, children who are unable to recognize two-digit numbers decreased from one-third to just 1 per cent.

Those able to do division rose from 1 to 16 per cent. In Somaliland, no children remained at beginner level by end line, and more than half were able to do division compared to just 6 per cent at baseline.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Improving learning outcomes in crises: The pilot in central and southern regions demonstrated that TaRL can significantly enhance literacy and numeracy for children affected by conflict and displacement, including those residing in IDP camps.
- Embedding in government systems is key: TaRL is more sustainable when led by Ministries of Education. In Somaliland, Master Trainers remain active, and the Ministry of Education has developed a plan to scale the approach (planned for the 2025-2026 academic year). In contrast, in the central and southern regions, progress has been harder to sustain due to reliance on NGO funding for teachers and master trainers. A new initiative led by one of the Central-South's state Ministries of Education aims to address this gap and further expand TaRL.
- Ongoing mentorship and enabling environments matter: The pilots reaffirmed global evidence that mentorship is critical for supporting teachers in changing their classroom practices. They also highlighted the importance of adequate learning environments – such as manageable teacher-student ratios – to ensure quality delivery of TaRL.

NEXT STEPS

UNICEF is supporting Ministries of Education in both pilot locations to further embed TaRL into national systems and scale it to additional schools and learning spaces. Expanding the use of TaRL will help reach a wide range of learners – including those who are overage or returning to school after dropping out – to build the foundational skills needed to progress in education and improve future livelihood opportunities. Looking ahead, UNICEF will also work with Ministries of Education to identify opportunities for integrating digital tools into TaRL delivery. This will help make interventions more cost-effective and efficient over the medium and long term, while continuing to prioritize quality and inclusion.

Cost effectiveness: UNICEF invested US\$1.5 million (US\$80 per child) to train 630 teachers in TaRL, enabling more than 18,750 children to strengthen their foundational learning skills.

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