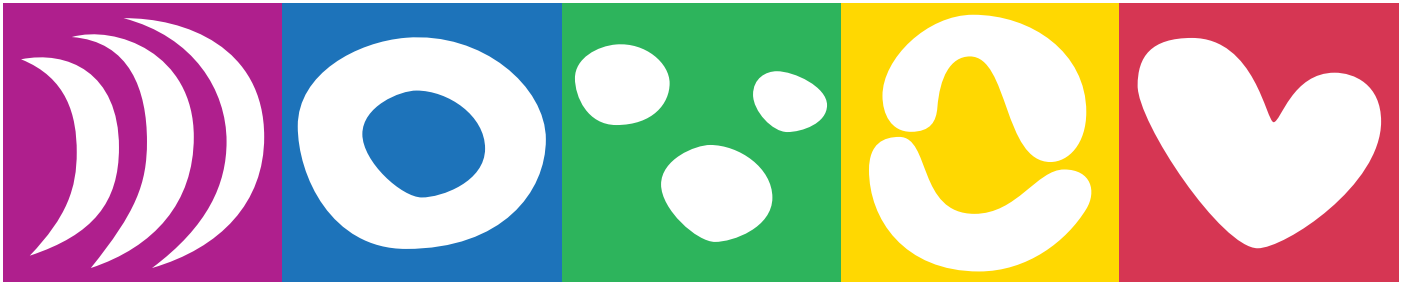# Effective government engagement strategies

Insights from the Play Our Part Community of Practice

Advancing Learning through Play in Early Childhood Education

Who are we:

The **LEGO Foundation**-funded **Play Our Part (PoP)** initiative is a community of practice made up of three early childhood education (ECE) implementers - **VVOB - Education for Development**, **Plan International**, and **Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO)** - working to strengthen Learning through Play (LtP) instruction and holistic learning in schools and centers. The initiative uses a multi-level approach, engaging schools, government institutions, and communities.

Engage in our Resource Package:

Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), as PoP's Learning and Design Partner, authored this research package to consolidate implementation findings into credible recommendations and guidance for those implementing— or considering implementing—ECE and LtP programs. PoP implementing partners contributed findings and insights from their programs, with support from the LEGO Foundation. We invite you to explore these resources and join us in bringing the LtP vision to life.

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Why is government engagement important for LtP integration?

Implementing Learning Through Play (LtP) programs in new contexts is complex, requiring careful planning around program design—such as approaches to teacher professional development—while also taking into account broader systemic and contextual factors, including how LtP fits within the existing education ecosystem and cultural norms. Governments, as key custodians of ECE delivery and key drivers of policy and resource allocation, are essential thought and scaling partners in steering toward a shared Learning through Play (LtP) vision. Strategic and well-considered engagement with government stakeholders is therefore essential to building an enabling environment for LtP—strengthening the sustainability and scalability of effective approaches and laying groundwork for potential government ownership of implementation.

Effective strategies for engaging governments to advance LtP remain underexplored. To help address this gap, IPA, as the learning partner for the PoP initiative with programs across Zambia, Rwanda, and Uganda, examined how government and policymaker engagement contributed to strengthened enabling environments for LtP in each country's ECE system. This brief shares key findings and practical recommendations for implementers looking to enhance government partnerships in LtP integration.

Research Approach and Methodology

Study Design

To better understand how LtP programs can collaborate with governments to improve the LtP enabling environment, IPA:

1. Reviewed existing literature on effective government engagement approaches to identify established principles of what works and to guide the development of government stakeholder interview tools to reflect on engagement experiences.

2. Consulted PoP programs staff to gain insights into their engagement strategies and thus refine questions to be asked of government stakeholders focused on specific engagement approaches.

3. Interviewed government stakeholders in Rwanda, Zambia, and Uganda to identify valued engagement approaches and areas where further support is needed.

Literature Review Process

For the literature review, IPA prioritized peer-reviewed literature, briefs and resources focused on advocacy, communication, and government engagement in early childhood education, with a regional emphasis on Uganda, Rwanda, and Zambia. The scope was expanded to include relevant sources from sectors such as public health and civic engagement. Grey literature was consulted to supplement the limited academic research and broaden the evidence base by incorporating insights from global frameworks for designing, measuring, and evaluating public sector engagement.

Key Principles from Literature

While the stakeholder interviews (described in the next section) provide our primary study insights, the literature review revealed key principles of government engagement that align with and and enrich the more granular findings from our consultations. These summarized takeaways from the literature are as follows:

- **Multi-stage, multi-level involvement:** Effective engagement across an initiative's lifecycle requires multi-stage, multi-level involvement from stakeholders.

- **Balanced engagement approaches:** A combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches strengthens engagement and exposure, balancing high-level policymaking with grassroots buy-in.

- **Strategic timing considerations:** Research on effective engagement strategies is limited, as many perceived successes align with policy windows rather than standalone approaches.

- **Evidence-based credibility:** Well-curated evidence—including mixed methods research and experiential knowledge—enhances credibility of new approaches, broadens accessibility and deepens stakeholder engagement with the program subject. As much as possible, evidence generated should be tailored to the context or policy landscape.

Research Findings and Recommendations: Effective Government Engagement Strategies

Our interviews surfaced key government engagement approaches that were highly valued, as well as areas where officials are seeking deeper support and collaboration to strengthen LtP implementation. Based on these insights, we offer recommendations for other LtP implementers to use to improve government engagement and LtP integration as a result.

Accompanied School Monitoring and Learning Visits

Government stakeholders highly valued implementers engaging them in school monitoring visits, as these strengthened their oversight of on-the-ground implementation, improved administration of quality LtP delivery, and enhanced their understanding of LtP approaches. In Zambia and Rwanda, government stakeholders perceive that accompanied visits strengthen accountability and policy alignment, while Ugandan government stakeholders have expressed a desire for more involvement in future monitoring to support building officials' supervision skills.

In a similar vein, government officials valued opportunities to see LtP applied in different settings, particularly through exposure to how colleagues and implementers in other regions/countries apply LtP. They explain this exposure broadens their perspective and enables them to identify best practices for adaptation within their own contexts.

Recommendation: Plan to involve officials in monitoring and learning visits

Engage governments in school visits to enhance oversight to LtP programs and expose them to examples of LtP practices working well. This can help stakeholders better understand and embrace LtP while building a foundation for monitoring responsibilities to transfer to the government more permanently should the LtP program prove to be effective.

Providing Technical Input for National Frameworks

Government officials have appreciated implementer support in providing technical inputs into national education frameworks, ensuring alignment with policy and effective LtP implementation. Officials recognize the technical value implementers bring that helps the government adapt frameworks to evolving educational needs, and integrate LtP methods where it can improve teaching. Participation as a critical friend in policy review meetings and reflection workshops is seen as valuable, fostering collaborative engagement and stronger coordination with partners.

Recommendation: Align LtP interventions with the national curriculum and policies and participate in policy platforms

Make yourself available to support framework reviews, and engage within policy discussions where there is a platform so that you can help strengthen the LtP environment in a way that incorporates your valuable experience. While this can be challenging to plan sufficiently for, setting aside time and resources from the outset within program budgets and work plans increases the potential for meaningful collaboration and technical exchange with government stakeholders.

Evidence and Data Sharing on LtP Implementation and Effectiveness

Governments valued implementation data from PoP programs but seek more evidence and engagement from across the sector to help guide decision-making. Government stakeholders from all three countries would like more regular exposure to implementation data and aspire to see long-term, comparative research to justify investment in LtP and understand its effectiveness at different education levels. More specifically in Uganda and Zambia, the stakeholders desire more intervention cost-effectiveness data to better prioritize LtP funding.

Recommendation: Share Evidence on LtP with stakeholders to improve awareness

Regularly share with government stakeholders LtP research findings across the sector and within the country, to provide them with greater exposure on the successes and challenges in implementing LtP. Where possible, for more mature and tried program designs, strengthen their access to cost-effectiveness data to help inform policy and funding decisions.

Supporting Teacher Professional Development (TPD)

Governments recognize the role of NGOs in strengthening TPD and seek continued support for capacity-building. In Zambia, officials value and seek further training for teachers, policymakers, and technical staff to enhance their expertise in administering LtP training and providing professional support for teacher development. Furthermore greater understanding on how to deliver LtP approaches for vulnerable groups, such as children with disabilities is desired. Ugandan government stakeholders emphasize a desire to have TPD designed to harmonize and fit into their existing training structures to ensure sustainability of the approach. Finally, Rwandan and Zambian stakeholders have expressed a desire for more NGO-provided Teaching and Learning Materials (TLMs) that build teacher awareness and capacity to implement LtP, as current supplies do not meet the growing demand.

Recommendation: Plan for long-term TPD to be practical and adaptable for integration into Government Training Structures where feasible

To support sustainability and scale, seek opportunities to embed LtP TPD into existing government-led progressional development systems. Align both the content and timing of training with national training frameworks—such as pre-service and in-service training—while identifying and addressing delivery gaps. Close collaboration with government stakeholders during the planning process will help ensure that LtP approaches are relevant, feasible, and more likely to be adopted at scale.

Program Coordination and Planning

Governments seek greater involvement in program coordination to align initiatives with national priorities. Rwandan stakeholders emphasize vetting NGO programs before implementation to align objectives and ensure compliance. Zambian government stakeholders have expressed desires to have interventions expanded in more underserved areas and improving ECE budget transparency to make the most of collective efforts and prevent duplication.

Recommendation: Strengthen Government Involvement in Implementation and Coordination

Actively engage government officials in project design choices such as site and location determination to improve program acceptance. Provide them with a transparent platform to reflect on achievements, challenges and necessary iterations to share ownership. Additionally, collaborate with government stakeholders to pilot new approaches, scale successful interventions and expand programs into underserved areas not yet reached by government initiatives.