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STATE OF THE EVIDENCE UPDATE:

# Soft Skills Measurement

Part of the USAID Learning Series: Youth Workforce Development in 2022: What Have We Learned?

After four years advancing learning through its Youth Workforce Development Learning Agenda, USAID initiated a process in 2022 to review new evidence related to the learning questions. In addition to a desk review, consultations were also held with stakeholders involved in youth skills development, employment, and entrepreneurship programming in low- and middle-income countries. The **State of the Evidence Updates** each offer a short synopsis of learning around some of USAID’s current learning agenda themes.

This particular State of the Evidence Update focuses on the most recent evidence in the measurement of soft skills, answering the following two questions: 1. What are the most effective ways to measure soft skills outcomes, including self-report assessments, use of observations, or other items such as situational judgment or anchoring vignettes? 2. What instruments are most effective for working with adolescents of different ages?

**“All measures have psychometric quality only in reference to a specific group of youth, in a specific time, and in a specific place.”**

- Participant of the 2022 USAID YouthPower Learning PYD Measurement Roundtable

In the past five years, there have been considerable advancements in the measurement of soft skills in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). A USAID [Technical Brief](#) from 2017 summarized key lessons, challenges, and adaptations needed for soft skills measurement. Since that time, USAID’s contributions to the field have included the development of [new indicators](#) for the attainment of soft skills, as well as a [policy brief](#), a [how-to note](#), and a [curated set of resources](#) for soft skills measurement. USAID has also co-chaired a Soft Skills Measurement Working Group,<sup>1</sup> a group of international organizations that work together to advance learning around the measurement of soft skills.



## CONTEXT MATTERS

Among its learning priorities, the working group has emphasized that **context matters**. Recent literature has underscored that the fundamental constructs and definitions for soft skills must [align with the cultural context](#). Knowing the cultural context helps us understand: *Are we measuring the right skills?* For example, people living in rural Tanzania [view social and emotional skills differently](#) from the definitions that have been [developed and tested in western, industrialized nations](#). In one effort to align soft skills measurement with cultural context, the Brookings Institution is working on a [global initiative](#) to develop regionally-appropriate assessment tools for use by formal education systems (from the primary to early secondary grades) across [Asia](#) and [Sub-Saharan Africa](#).

<sup>1</sup> The Soft Skills Measurement Working Group is led by USAID and the International Youth Foundation and currently consists of over two dozen members who meet regularly to share information about new tools, approaches, and lessons in soft skills measurement. For more information on the SSMWG, contact Rebecca Pagel at [rpagel@usaid.gov](mailto:rpagel@usaid.gov).

Assuming that the right skills are being measured, contextual factors— from country-level factors all the way to the learning environment— influence both youth’s skills attainment and how those skills could be measured. **Environmental factors** such as conflict or natural disaster, for instance, may impact youth’s understanding of self-efficacy, perseverance, or goal-setting. The INEE has an entire [measurement library](#) that includes measurements for youth’s soft skills in crisis contexts. Similarly, the **learning environment** also may explain why youth may or may not exhibit changes in soft skills over time. In fact, the evidence is showing that “safety, a sense of connectedness, and friendly and encouraging learning environments are important conditions for SEL and soft skills development ... but the evidence base on these environments, what they look like, and how to foster them, is limited.” (USAID 2021) A recent analysis [recommends five existing measures of the learning environment](#) that are useful for understanding the influence of the learning environment on skill attainment: two tools that measure students’ own perceptions of the learning environment, two classroom observational tools, and a mixed methods tool that uses a combination of classroom observation and surveys for teachers and directors. At present, there are no side-by-side assessment tools for the individual learner’s attainment of skills and the state of the learning environment together. In that regard, we have yet to learn whether our understanding of the learning environment helps explain any individual skills outcomes that are being observed.

**Student identity and background** can also affect the validity of soft skills measurement tools. To date, the international evidence has focused largely on **age segmentation** considerations in measurement activities and related adaptation of tools. An [earlier stock-taking of soft skills measurement tools](#) found that most tools have been developed for youth ages 15-19, followed by those for early adolescents ages 10-14. Since then, USAID’s efforts have focused mostly on those same age bands. A recent USAID [Youth Soft Skills Assessment tool](#) measures soft skills for youth ages 15-19 in lower-resource environments across different cultural contexts. Drawing from nearly 300 instruments designed to measure cross-sectoral skills, it was first field tested in Uganda and Guatemala. In addition to this tool, Room to Read also developed [assessment tools specifically for adolescent secondary-school girls](#) of the same approximate age ranges— those in grades 6 to 12—in select countries across Asia. [World Learning developed tools](#) in several languages for youth spanning ages 16 to 36 years. So far, these international works have yet to document the experiences of measuring different soft skills among youth of different socio-economic backgrounds, learning needs, and educational experiences.<sup>2</sup>



## METHODOLOGY MATTERS

In addition to these contextual factors, assessment **methodology** also matters. Most USAID implementing partners rely on **student self-reporting** for measuring soft skills, as it is relatively inexpensive and easy to administer. However, given the [inherent biases](#) found in self reporting, researchers have been exploring alternative ways of measuring soft skills, such as the use of **task-based assessments** like simulations, [role plays](#), [Open Badges](#), [game-based assessments](#), [virtual reality](#), or [stealth assessment in digital games](#). USAID and its partners have experimented with two such performance-based methods, but with inconclusive results:

- **Anchoring Vignettes:** We’ve learned that [anchoring vignettes](#)— that is, asking participants questions about given scenarios—may help [correct for response bias](#) for certain soft skills constructs, and may [improve the cross-cultural comparability](#) of self-reported skills. But so far this evidence is limited, and has experienced [mixed results](#). In cases where anchoring vignettes have not improved cross-cultural comparability, they may be useful for confirming youth’s engagement and comprehension of other survey tools. (USAID 2021)
- **Third-Party Assessments:** Developers of the USAID Youth Soft Skills Assessment tool who used a program staff assessment tool as a supplement to youth self-reporting found that [the third-party assessments did not add analytical value](#) to the self-reporting method. More importantly, the self-assessment performed better once they simplified its structure and item wording. Similarly, Room to Read found that [using a parent survey was not useful](#), since parents were not aware of the full range of their daughter’s experiences.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, a recent systematic review finds a gap in literature on soft skills measurement instruments that are appropriate for [college student peer mentoring](#) programs. A [systematic review of social communications measures for adolescents with disabilities](#) showed a number of shortcomings in commonly used assessment tools for young students with disabilities in the US.



## IMPLICATIONS

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Given these complexities, measuring soft skills requires a greater understanding of the different tools and approaches that can be adapted to meet different circumstances—and how that adaptation can happen in a cost-effective manner. The Room to Read team, for instance, spent over five years (2015-2020) to develop, test, and utilize its adolescent life skills assessment. Such challenges only underscore the importance of **who is doing the measuring**. If USAID seeks to prioritize [locally led development](#), that priority naturally extends to the localization of data collection and research—including soft skills measurement. Toward this end, USAID has started to make inroads into meaningfully engaging youth as partners and co-creators in measurement processes, including surveys led by youth for youth such as this [Quality of Life Assessment in Tanzania](#). The Agency is also supporting youth-led and youth-serving organizations to [build local capacity in youth-focused research](#).

Moving forward, this body of evidence is a clear call for USAID to further advance the democratization of soft skills measurement. USAID is now in the process of forming a **SEL Measurement Taskforce**; the inclusion of youth-led organizations and researchers from the global south in this task team will be an important priority. Only through these localization practices will we ultimately understand what works in building the soft skills of different youth across different cultures, identities, learning environments, and skills requirements.