



Final report on Phase I of ALEF evaluation Comprehensive analysis of testimonials database 2023¹

Summary

ALEF, Adult Learning and Empowerment Facilitators (ALEF) collaborates with NGO partners in low-income countries to conduct a literacy program known as the Empowerment Groups. This evaluation focuses on statements made by participants in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Togo and Uganda, whose programs are financed directly by ALEF. Together they reach an estimated 5,200 participants, of whom 87 percent are women.

International development agencies tend to make claims about the positive outcomes of literacy—for example, better health, empowerment and poverty reduction—without examining how positive outcomes may be generated. This study aimed to answer two main questions:

1. To what extent can changes described by participants be directly attributed to specific aspects of ALEF’s program?
2. What strategies used by ALEF appear to bridge the gap between skills like literacy and numeracy and positive outcomes like empowerment?

This study coded and analyzed a database of 455 testimonials made voluntarily by individuals or groups in response to the question of whether anything in their lives has changed as a result of participating in the program.² The main finding was that “new information from a specific ALEF lesson” co-occurred with positive changes in participants’ lives related to improved health, income generation and farming, as well as ability to detect when one is being cheated, call out deception, and stand up for one’s rights. Lesson topics were also associated with increased confidence (for both men and women) and increased power of decision-making (particularly for women).

Women described many areas of change as an outcome of ALEF lessons: standing up for their rights to land, inheritance, and education; fighting sexual abuse and patriarchy; becoming financially independent; and sending their children (including daughters) to school. Many reported improved communication and respect between spouses, and some men reported greater awareness of women’s work and health. Improved cultivation or animal husbandry strategies were tied both to ALEF lessons and to group empowerment based on income-generating projects like leasing a field to grow beans or raising guinea pigs.

The relevant ALEF topics—and the way they are explored in people’s own languages—resonate with participants, as evidenced by comments like these:

I’m so grateful to CACI for thinking about people like me. [#61, Uganda]

[T]outes les leçons presque ça touche sur ma vie.

Almost all of the lessons touch on my life. [#246, DRC]

¹ Evaluation conducted by Carol Benson and Erina Iwasaki of MLE International (<https://mle-international-org.squarespace.com/>)

² This study used Dedoose qualitative data analysis software (www.dedoose.com)



MLE INTERNATIONAL
MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION FOR ALL

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1.0 Introduction

This report covers the first phase of a two-part evaluation of a literacy program known as the Empowerment Groups created and supported by ALEF, Adult Learning and Empowerment Facilitators, in collaboration with local NGO partners. ALEF is a Swedish non-profit organization founded in 2010 that is religiously and politically unaffiliated. The ALEF program uses the home language or L1 as the basis for learning and discussion: Ifè in Togo and Benin, Luganda in Uganda, Mashi and Kikongo in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Oromo in Ethiopia, Maninka in Guinea, and Kurmanji in Iraq. The focus of this evaluation is on the three countries – the DRC, Togo and Uganda – whose programs are financed directly by ALEF. Together they reach an estimated 5,200 participants, of whom 87 percent are women.

This first phase of the evaluation describes our comprehensive qualitative analysis, supported by some quantitative measures, of a database of testimonials from participants about what has changed in their lives as a result of the program. These were collected from individuals and groups by literacy coaches in the three focus countries and reported to ALEF and its partners throughout 2023.

1.1 Background on ALEF

The ALEF approach involves participants in reading a text, engaging in a discussion and then co-writing a text during each class meeting. Course content is designed to address themes relevant to participants' lives. Throughout three course levels, participants work on their literacy and numeracy skills and begin to learn an additional language like French or English. ALEF's overall goal is for people to gain knowledge, insights and skills to do the following:

- take control of their own finances and health and improve their own living conditions;
- understand and defend their rights and act to change the mechanisms of poverty, discrimination and oppression;
- gain access to decision-making processes, community services and shared platforms;
- use their mother tongue in writing for various purposes, thereby preserving their cultural heritage and identity.

This goal, expressed as an indicator of success, is:

Adults [will be] able to use reading, writing and numeracy to take charge of their lives, economically as well as socially, carry out income generating activities, claim their rights and fulfill their duties, and participate in decision-making processes in the family, in the local community and on a national level.¹

ALEF characterizes its programs as creating the conditions for change in people’s lives as a “first step out of poverty, oppression and exclusion.”² How this is done depends to some degree on the local NGO partners’ organizational aims and an analysis of participants’ wants and needs, which ALEF has taken into consideration for each collaboration. Table 1 summarizes characteristics of the local NGO partners and the three country contexts.

Table 1: Partner organizations involved in ALEF Empowerment Groups

Country	Partner	Organizational focus	Context	Plan post-level 3
DRC South Kivu province	ACDC Association congolaise pour le développement communautaire (Some groups run by sub-partners)	Women’s empowerment and literacy, capacity building and economic autonomy in their communities. http://ascodeco.org/ https://en.alef.org/kongo-kinshasa-adeck	Mashi language Armed conflict, corruption, weak infrastructure	That all groups transition into independent savings coops after level 3
Togo Plateaux region	Acatbli Association chrétienne pour l’alphabétisation et la traduction biblique en langue Ifè	Developing Ifè language, and literacy/ empowerment; also doing Bible translation https://www.acatbli-ife.com/fr/bienvenu https://en.alef.org/togo-benin-acatbli	Ifè language Subsistence agriculture, low school attendance	That participants continue to a level 4 course on sustainable agriculture and create agricultural coops
Uganda Entebbe region	CACI Change African Child International	Improving economic oppor- tunities for women and girls; also doing vocational training https://cacinternational.org/services/adult-literacy/ https://en.alef.org/uganda-caci	Luganda language Urban and semi-urban	That groups that continue to meet after level 3 for study or coops will receive support

ALEF has been providing financial and technical resources to the Empowerment Group programs in the DRC and Uganda since 2013, and Togo since 2011. Of the three major partners, ACDC and CACI are secular organizations, while Acatbli is faith-based. Following the ALEF approach, these partners co-construct with ALEF the course content, lesson plans and materials for their target groups. The local NGOs are the implementers; they train, employ and supervise personnel, organize and monitor the groups, buy and distribute course materials, and administer all aspects of the program. In the DRC and Uganda, a number of groups are run by sub-partners that are responsible for employing facilitators and enrolling participants.

¹ From *ALEF Strategy, Method and Approach* (n/d)

² See Home page at <https://en.alef.org/>

While the lesson topics may differ, the thematic areas covered by all three programs are broadly the same: family, health, rights, equality, household economy, entrepreneurship/income generation, civic participation and community cooperation. Agricultural topics are covered in the DRC and Togo but not in Uganda, where most groups meet in urban areas.

The program has three levels. Groups of 15 to 25 participants meet for two hours twice or three times per week during a period of seven or eight months. The first year, at level 1, participants learn basic reading and writing in the L1 (Mashi in the DRC, Ifè in Togo and Luganda in Uganda). The second year, at level 2, participants learn the four basic mathematics operations and apply numeracy to daily life. Also at level 2, an additional language or L2 (Swahili in the DRC, French in Togo, English in Uganda) is introduced through short oral dialogues. The third year, at level 3, participants read and write longer L1 texts, hold discussions on human rights, learn to read and write in the additional language to work with common documents, and create an income-generating association.

An essential aspect of the ALEF program is its use of people's home languages, or L1s, which allow people to make important connections between oral and written communication. There are other reasons that L1s are important. The ALEF program is designed for adults with no or low literacy and numeracy skills whose intersectionality³ has characterized their experience of discrimination and disadvantage across society, including how they access or attempt to access formal education. Intersectionality refers to overlapping individual and group characteristics such as language, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status and remote rural life. These adults speak non-dominant languages, or languages that are not always valued in formal settings, and they lack opportunities to learn high-status dominant languages like French or English.⁴ The ALEF program gives people the opportunity to express themselves freely and meaningfully, to see their own languages in written form, to understand that they have a right to learn in their own languages, and to develop pride, confidence and self-esteem through their own languages.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the ALEF program in countries is the approach, which is inspired by Paulo Freire (e.g. 1974) and the REFLECT⁵ method that grew out of his work, as well as a combination of synthetic phoneme-grapheme teaching (known in Sweden as *ljudningsmetoden*) and whole language (*läsning på talets grund*). The group leader, who has received a two-week intensive course in how to apply the method, learns not to lecture participants but rather to guide discussions so that they arrive at conclusions and make decisions as a group. The first part of a lesson involves working with a text about someone facing a dilemma, problem or debate relevant to participants' lives. Literacy and numeracy lessons are explored using the text. The next step is for the participants to discuss the text, prompted by the facilitator to talk about whether they have experienced a similar situation, why it might happen and what could be done. The third step is for participants to create their own text based on the discussion. They may dictate

³ Intersectionality is the interconnected nature of social factors pertaining to an individual or group that underlie discrimination or disadvantage (Crenshaw, 2017; see also Meer & Müller, 2017).

⁴ We use the term non-dominant instead of "minority," as so-called minority languages are often spoken by millions of people (Kosonen & Benson, 2013).

⁵ REFLECT, or Regenerated Freirian Literacy through Empowerment and Community Techniques, uses facilitated group learning with components of discussion and action (see e.g. Dyer & Choksi, 1998).

their text to the facilitator at level 1, or write it collaboratively or individually at higher levels. These texts are used for additional reading practice and to reinforce important discussion points.

1.2 Background on this evaluation

The dataset used for this analysis contains 455 statements made by participants and collected by literacy coaches during monthly visits to the Empowerment Groups. These statements are known by ALEF as testimonials, because they were made voluntarily in response to a question asked in their own languages about what they feel has changed in their lives as a result of the program. The assumption is that these testimonials provide documentation and insight into both general and specific aspects of ALEF’s program that contribute to its aims of improving people’s lives.

The goals of this phase of the evaluation are thus to:

- Offer insights for ALEF and its partners regarding how the program may be contributing to improving participants’ lives within and across course sites and countries.
- Provide ALEF with systematic, valid and credible data on participants’ literacy and empowerment experiences that support its continued work and funding.
- Suggest areas of inquiry and strategies that contribute to Phase II of this evaluation and to future monitoring and evaluating of the program by ALEF and its partners.

An additional goal of both phases of the evaluation is to provide data and analyses that can be published and will contribute to international research on L1-based adult literacy. The field of international development has been critiqued for its portrayal of literacy as an either-or proposition and for its focus on discrete skills. There is also a tendency for development agencies to make claims about the positive outcomes of literacy—for example, better health, empowerment and poverty reduction—without examining how positive outcomes may be generated. Further, empowerment may be portrayed as an individual outcome rather than seeing it as a communal or community process. Evaluative information on ALEF is likely to provide documentation of how positive outcomes can be brought about and how they can potentially spread to a whole group or community.

2.0 Methodology of this study

2.1 Overview

For this study of the testimonials database, the following steps were taken:



We began by developing a series of research questions and checking them with ALEF staff. Based on our discussions, we narrowed down our questions to focus on those that could be answered using the testimonials. (Some questions will be brought back for phase II.)



We conducted literature reviews on adult literacy, empowerment and programs to provide the academic and international development background for the evaluation. Meanwhile, we began drafting an academic article based on the literature, data and methodology.



We reviewed and agreed to ALEF's ethics policy and were sent the testimonials database, first in incomplete form and later as a completed 2023 database.



After reviewing the literature and reading some testimonials, we drafted a list of codes relating to changes that participants might mention. With a student intern, we read and coded a selection of testimonials, collaboratively refining the codes. ALEF staff helped with another code revision. During the analysis, we added a few more codes and revisited all testimonials. (See Annex A for the final code list, and Table 2 for the codes related to the research questions.)



We signed up for accounts on Dedoose.com, a qualitative data analysis software. We determined that for optimum use we would need to input each testimonial as a separate file. We put individual and group testimonials into two separate projects; a second student intern helped input the data. Along with the first intern, we agreed on what the codes meant and how to identify relevant excerpts in each testimonial.



We used the Dedoose software to look for interesting patterns and salient themes in the data. We met with ALEF staff again to check understandings and review other possible relationships to explore. We also explored ways to visualize the findings.



We pulled the results together to answer the research questions and demonstrate what the testimonials can say about ALEF's program. We also looked at implications for phase II of the evaluation. Finally, we prepared a presentation for ALEF's board with preliminary results.

2.2 Research questions

This study uses the testimonials dataset to explore if and how the ALEF program achieves its aims according to participants in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Togo and Uganda. We undertake a systematic qualitative analysis of participants' individual and group statements to provide insights for ALEF and its implementing partners on how the program may be contributing to improving participants' lives. Comparing testimonials across sites and across countries, the analysis provides ALEF with valid and credible evidence of its contributions. The central question is:

RQ 1. To what extent can the changes described by participants in their statements be directly attributed to specific aspects of ALEF's program?

We further address the internationally relevant question of how literacy courses may create desired effects like empowerment, autonomy, resilience and other development-related goals:

RQ 2. What are the strategies or mechanisms used by ALEF that appear to bridge the gap between literacy and numeracy skills learning and globally positive outcomes like empowerment?

RQ 3. Is there evidence that positive outcomes can be facilitated, and if so, how?

We also developed a set of specific questions whose answers might be found in the testimonials to guide the coding and analysis of the database, as shown in Table 2. We have combined them with references to our codes, which are listed in full in Annex A.

Table 2: Specific research questions and associated codes

Theme and questions	Means of verification
<p>Perceived impact of ALEF literacy courses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do participants perceive the impact of ALEF courses on their daily lives? • In what ways do they believe literacy, numeracy, and L2 skills have improved their personal and professional circumstances? 	<p>Code 5 Learned literacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5a For fun/enjoyment 5b To get information 5c Reading-specific 5d Writing-specific 5e Cell phone use <p>Sub-codes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2a (Financ.) Due to numeracy 2b (Financ.) Due to literacy 4c (Lessons) Learned an L2
<p>Self-efficacy and confidence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do courses contribute to the participants' feelings of self-efficacy and confidence? • In what ways do their developing literacy skills affect their perceptions of themselves? 	<p>Code 3 Confidence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3a Behaviors, attitudes 3b Interpersonal social skills
<p>Women's empowerment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do courses contribute to female participants' autonomy and ability to take control of their lives? • How do courses contribute to male participants' willingness to see women as having rights and as worthy of fair treatment? • Do participants report greater willingness or interest in sending their girls to school? (In sending their girls and boys?) 	<p>Code 6 Women's empowermt.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6a Auton. decision-making 6b Asserting rights 6c Girls/children's education
<p>Health of themselves and their families</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do course participants report positive changes in their health as a result of the program? • Do course participants report positive changes in the health of their families? 	<p>Code 1 Health improvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1a Health of self 1b Health of children, family
<p>Income generation and/or employment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do participants believe that improved literacy skills contribute to improvements in income generation or better employment opportunities? 	<p>Code 2 Improved finances</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2a Due to numeracy 2b Due to literacy 2c Due to new information 2d Group income generation 2e Due to getting a job
<p>Civic engagement and leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there evidence that course participants are more engaged in their communities? • Is there evidence that ALEF courses lead to willingness to take on leadership roles? 	<p>Code 7 Civic engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7a Community involvement 7b Asserting rights 7c Public communic. skills 7d Taking a leadership role
<p>Social support networks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do participants report an improvement in their social support networks? • How does the support of participants' groups contribute to their motivation and success in literacy courses? 	<p>Sub-codes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2d Group income generation 4b Got or gave help to group 7c Public communic. skills 7d Taking a leadership role

Relationship with literacy facilitator

- What positive changes are reported by participants as a result of support from the ALEF facilitator?
- How does facilitator support contribute to participants' motivation and success in literacy courses?

Sub-code:

4a Got help from facilitator

2.3 Nature of the data and limitations

The data used for this analysis is a collection of 455 statements collected by ALEF through its local partners during 2023 and systematized by an intern according to date and place of collection, age and sex of the participant, and course level (1 to 4). It should be noted that there are only 3 levels in the ALEF program; some groups continue to meet and are designated level 4. Of them, 303 statements were made by course participants individually and 152 collectively.

The statements were collected by literacy coaches during their monthly visits to each group. As part of each visit, coaches regularly ask participants for testimonies of life changes resulting from participation in the project. In DRC, coach reports are submitted through direct input to Kobo, an online platform accessible by both ALEF and the partner NGO, which means that the database includes all reports made in DRC about life changes due to course participation. In Uganda and Togo, coaches submit reports to the local project management, who include a selection of testimonials in their monthly and annual project reports to ALEF, which means that some filtering was done before ALEF received any statements. The database analyzed here includes all testimonials received in 2023 by ALEF from the three country programs, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of the testimonials data

Country and course level	Individual statement			Group statement
	Women	Men	Total	
DRC 2084 enrollees				
Level 1	78	2	80	34
Level 2	16	7	23	19
Level 3	60	2	62	14
Level 4	-	-	-	5
DRC total	154	11	165	72
Togo 1264 enrollees				
Level 1	11	4	15	0
Level 2	13	3	16	1
Level 3	-	-	-	0
Level 4	3	9	12	1
Unspecified	6	3	9	0
Togo total	33	19	52	2
Uganda 1875 enrollees				
Level 1	28	5	33	21
Level 2	11	6	17	7
Level 3	14	2	16	14
Level 4	2	0	2	11
Unspecified	10	8	18	25
Uganda total	65	21	86	78
Total	252	51	303	152

2.3.1 Representativity of the data

We compared ALEF's Group and Participants Statistics 2023 to determine the representativity of the database in terms of overall number of individuals, numbers of women/men, and numbers by country. Group testimonial counts were excluded from this calculation.

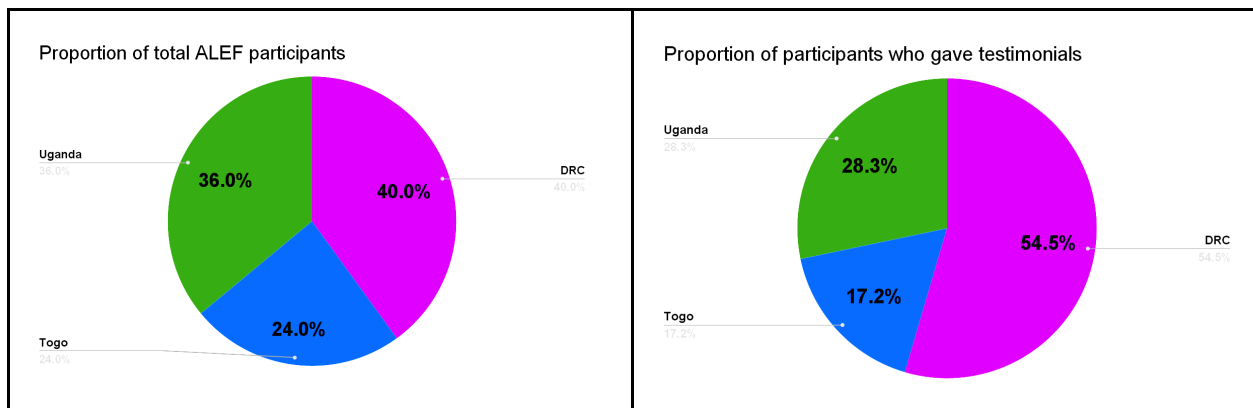
Overall: A total of 5,223 adults were enrolled in the Empowerment Groups across DRC, Togo and Uganda. The number of total individual testimonials collected ($n=303$) represent 5.85% of the total number of participants. Based on sample size calculation, we can expect a 5.46% margin of error with a 95% confidence level in terms of representativity of the findings.⁶

⁶ A lower margin of error (e.g. 2-3%) would require a larger sample size of between 887 to 1,645 individual testimonials; this could be considered for future data collection, but given time limitations would not be necessary. Calculation tools at <https://www.checkmarket.com/sample-size-calculator/#sample-size-margin-of-error-calculator> and <https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/calculating-sample-size/>

Women/men: In DRC, 97% of participants were women ($n=2026$), 76% in Togo ($n=957$) and 82% in Uganda ($n=1535$). The individual testimonials reflect a very similar gender distribution: 93% in DRC ($n=154$), 63.5% in Togo ($n=33$) and 83% in Uganda ($n=65$), with women slightly underrepresented in the DRC and Togo testimonials.

By country: DRC is represented by 165 individual testimonials out of 2084 total enrollees (8%), Togo by 52 out of 1264 (4%), and Uganda by 86 out of 1875 (5%). We attempted to check geographical distribution, but due to many differences in the spellings and names of course sites we were unable to get a reliable figure. Figure 1 compares the proportion of ALEF participants by country in 2023 with the proportion of participants who gave statements. Both Togo and Uganda are underrepresented: 24% of participants are from Togo, represented by 17% of the testimonials, while 36% of participants are from Uganda, represented by 28% of the testimonials. The DRC is overrepresented, with 40% of total participants represented by 54% of the testimonials. This was to be expected, since ALEF received all of the DRC testimonials via the Kobo reporting software (see below), while the other testimonials were gleaned from the partners' monthly reports.

Figure 1: Representativity of testimonials by country



In sum, the testimonials data have good representativity for overall numbers of participants and for women, but are slightly limited in what they can conclude with certainty about any of the ALEF country programs.

2.3.2 Ethics

ALEF's policy, shared by its implementing partners, is to collect data only with the express, informed consent of each participant. The testimonials data comes from informal interviews conducted by coaches during their monthly class observations. Coaches recorded the name, sex and age of each participant offering a statement; the names were removed by ALEF staff when the database was created. The location and level of the class are identified, which means that sensitive information could potentially be traced back to participants. However, ALEF stores the database securely and limits access to staff. For this study, we agreed to the same standards to protect the privacy and safety of participants.

2.3.3 Data collection and limitations

There are a few limitations regarding how the data can be interpreted due to the manner in which statements were collected and reported.

First, the literacy coaches were given the following instructions in English (Uganda) or French (DRC and Togo):

Testimonies

Ask if anyone has made a change in their life as a result of the course. (Might be relating to family, business, employment, education...) Note the sex and age of the person, and the change they have made. If a group of people, or the study group as a whole has taken some collective action, you can note this here as well.

(Source: ALEF instructions for Uganda coaches)

Since statements were elicited by coaches in the L1, and since each of the L1s is linguistically quite distant from English or French, it is not possible to know exactly what was said or how. However, we can be relatively certain that the message was communicated effectively, because most statements talk about a life change, and many go further to link the change to new learning and/or participation in the course.

Participants responded in the L1, which would have allowed them to express themselves freely. Literacy coaches reportedly translated each statement on the spot into French (in the DRC and Togo) or English (in Uganda) and recorded it either as hand-written notes to be digitalized later (in Uganda and Togo) or directly into the Kobo survey software on tablets (in the DRC). The immediacy of the note-taking in all cases makes it likely that the participant's meaning was captured accurately. The limitation here is that some nuances or details may have been missed in the translation and note-taking process, since to our knowledge no recordings were used.

Further, the statements are not written in the first person, as a directly quoted testimonial might be, but rather in the third person singular (she, he) for individual statements and plural (they) for group statements. This gives the impression that coaches did not directly quote the speakers, but rather paraphrased what they said. ALEF staff explained that they had developed this strategy with the coaches to disrupt a pattern that people are familiar with from religious gatherings, where the concept of testifying means offering gratitude to God. The coaches have been encouraged to write what course participants say, and since most statements address a change related to attending the program, we can be reasonably sure that at least the main ideas were captured.

Finally, while the database includes all testimonials received by ALEF from the three countries during 2023, it does not contain every testimonial gathered by the coaches except in the case of DRC, where coach reports are submitted into Kobo and go directly to the partner NGO and ALEF. Those from Uganda and Togo were submitted to the local NGO management, which included a selection of testimonials in their monthly and annual project reports to ALEF.

3.0 Literature review

Literacy can be conceived in a narrow way as a set of discrete skills that allow people access to written communication, particularly in a language they speak and understand well. Literacy can also be seen in a broader way as social practice that is meaningful in a certain linguistic and cultural context, where the use of written communication may be integrated into people's lives in diverse ways. This latter view is consistent with the idea that literacy is not an either-or proposition, where someone is either literate or illiterate, but rather exists on a continuum of skills and practices. Even people who have not had access to formal education are likely to have interacted with written communication in some way depending on their exposure to it, such as on seed packets, road signs, clothing, and products.

Many current definitions of literacy find ways to incorporate digital technology, even if those most likely to benefit from literacy classes are often those least touched by digital technology. Meanwhile, the assumptions regarding broad, positive outcomes of literacy for all people, especially women, are still in place, with no substantiation. On its literacy-related website updated in January 2024, UNESCO defines literacy this way:

Beyond its conventional concept as a set of reading, writing and counting skills, literacy is now understood as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world.⁷

This definition suggests that literacy is not only a set of skills but also includes social and even virtual interaction, aligning more with what scholars have found. Literacy must be understood as a social practice beyond the simple act of decoding basic text; it is linked to various dimensions of one's life, which may be psychological, social, cultural, and economic (Stromquist, 2009). The inclusion of technology-related skills is understandable, though it seems unlikely that the vulnerable groups targeted by adult literacy programs would be exposed to or need digital communication, with the exception of mobile phones. This study of participants' testimonials could yield information regarding the relevance of technology; ALEF surveys suggest that about 80 percent of participants have a mobile phone in the household.

Researchers point out that there are wide-ranging assumptions made about the positive outcomes of literacy, yet little evidence to substantiate them (Stromquist, 2009). Indeed, UNESCO follows up the above definition on its January 2024 site with the following paragraph, which suddenly treats literacy as an either-or proposition and claims that the presence of literacy offers great promise to low-income people:

Literacy empowers and liberates people. Beyond its importance as part of the right to education, literacy improves lives by expanding capabilities which in turn reduces poverty, increases participation in the labour market and has positive effects on health and sustainable development. Women empowered by literacy have a positive ripple effect on all aspects of development. They have greater life choices for themselves and an immediate impact on the health and education of their families, and in particular, the education of girl children.⁸

⁷ <https://www.unesco.org/en/literacy/need-know#:~:text=Beyond%20its%20conventional%20concept%20as,rich%20and%20fast%2Dchanging%20world>.

⁸ Ibid.

Despite the lack of evidence provided, this paragraph does suggest some means by which people's lives change through literacy. One point is that literacy expands (individual) capabilities; another is that literate women can expand their life choices and those of their families. While there is no strict causation between literacy and improved life conditions, studies have shown some undeniable correlations related to empowerment (Stromquist, 2009). For example, in Stromquist's (2009) meta-analysis of studies linking literacy with empowerment, it was found that empowerment was primarily reported in psychological dimensions, such as increased self-esteem and confidence, across various literacy programs regardless of content or duration of participation. Although cognitive, political, and economic empowerment were also reported, they were not as consistently experienced as psychological empowerment. For instance, cognitive empowerment depended on program content and design as well as their opportunities to continue developing their literacy practice beyond program completion. Similarly, while literacy could have a positive influence on political engagement, it did not guarantee systematic collective action. Rather, it would often lead to changes in household dynamics, or increased participation in elections or community decision-making. Additionally, economic empowerment could not be inherently conferred to literacy programs without supplemental access to income-generating activities. On the positive side, literacy programs are reported to have an overall effect on women's empowerment in terms of increased decision-making and self-esteem.

ALEF's approach suggests that the gap between literacy and empowerment needs to be bridged in an explicit way, both through choice of lesson topics and through a participatory methodology. ALEF lessons take up various aspects of their participants' lives related to health, agriculture, income generation and domestic issues, all of which are relevant to their daily lives and explored through group discussions. If the testimonials draw attention to certain topics or discussions generated about them, this would suggest that systematic, intentional choice of lesson content is an important piece of the empowerment puzzle. Further, if the testimonials provide any insight into the way lessons are conducted, for example if they mention group discussions, this could provide further evidence that empowerment involves more than the learning of basic reading, writing and numeracy skills. Studying the effects of ALEF's approach could enhance international understandings of empowerment, which is still often used as a buzzword (Cornwall & Bruck, 2005) even though it is a "fuzzy concept" (Eyben & Napier-Moore, 2009) and "lacking a clear definition" (Hennink et al., 2012). Such research may identify distinctive features of ALEF's approach and offer insights to inform the design and implementation of adult literacy programs.

There is a further way that this study of ALEF's programs may contribute. According to Milana (2018), both international organizations and national governments have long seen adult learning in general—and literacy in particular—as a cure for societal injustices, yet they link adult education to improvements in the economy based on simplistic understandings about human capital development. They miss key aspects of social justice such as the need to distribute resources equitably, the creation of opportunities for people to do things they value (Sen, 1985; Nussbaum, 2011), and the idea that moral values are just as important as skills (Milana, 2018:11-12). This critique suggests that adult education programs need to address social justice issues as well as skills, rather than presuming that skills like reading, writing and calculating will automatically have a trickle-up effect on individual work and the economy. This study of ALEF participants' testimonials may provide examples of how social justice and moral values are brought into literacy lessons in a way that responds to this critique.

Finally, there is no question that language, in particular the L1, plays an essential role in literacy and learning. As summarized in Robinson (2016), the L1 is the most efficient language for connecting spoken and written meanings, particularly when literacy participants have little access to dominant languages. The L1 is important for cultural identity and self-esteem, particularly for people from marginalized groups. This connects clearly to Stromquist's (2008) point that self-esteem is linked to self-efficacy, which is the belief that one has choices and power over one's situation, and predicts social action. For this study of the ALEF testimonials, we may look for mentions of a connection between learning in one's L1 and gaining the confidence to take action in the home or community. It is also useful to look for references to the discussions, where participants share ideas and plans for action.

As a final note, we found support from at least one specialist for using data like ALEF testimonials to explore empowerment:

Data on empowerment is typically based on self-report. One analyst calls this evidence "prone to cognitive illusion and social desirability responses, particularly when no baseline data are collected" (Abadzi, 2003). This could be so when subjects respond to 3 structured survey items, but is much less likely to emerge when they produce non-assisted responses as is the case in open-ended or in-depth interviews (Stromquist, 2009:2-3).

"Non-assisted responses" would characterize these testimonials, where participants responded freely to coaches' questions about anything that might have changed in their lives as a result of the course. Their statements are thus likely to provide evidence and definition of the links between literacy and empowerment, along with other potentially positive outcomes.

4.0 Findings and discussion

Our data analysis was guided by the primary research questions outlined in the methodology section above, along with the set of specific questions shown in Table 2. We begin with the overall findings showing how the codes were applied and distributed, then break down the most significant results to determine how the research questions may be answered. Annex A provides a complete list of the codes that were applied to the database.

4.1 Overall findings by country, sex and code

This section looks at the overall application of codes for the individual and group testimonials, and then breaks them down by sex and country to notice differences between female and male participants and between the three countries represented in the data.

4.1.1 Overall code application to the individual and group testimonials

The first step is to examine how often the codes were applied to both individual and group testimonials. To demonstrate the trends in code application, all sub-codes are combined with the larger code category for ease in interpretation.⁹ Figure 2 juxtaposes the results for the individual testimonials with those for the group testimonials.

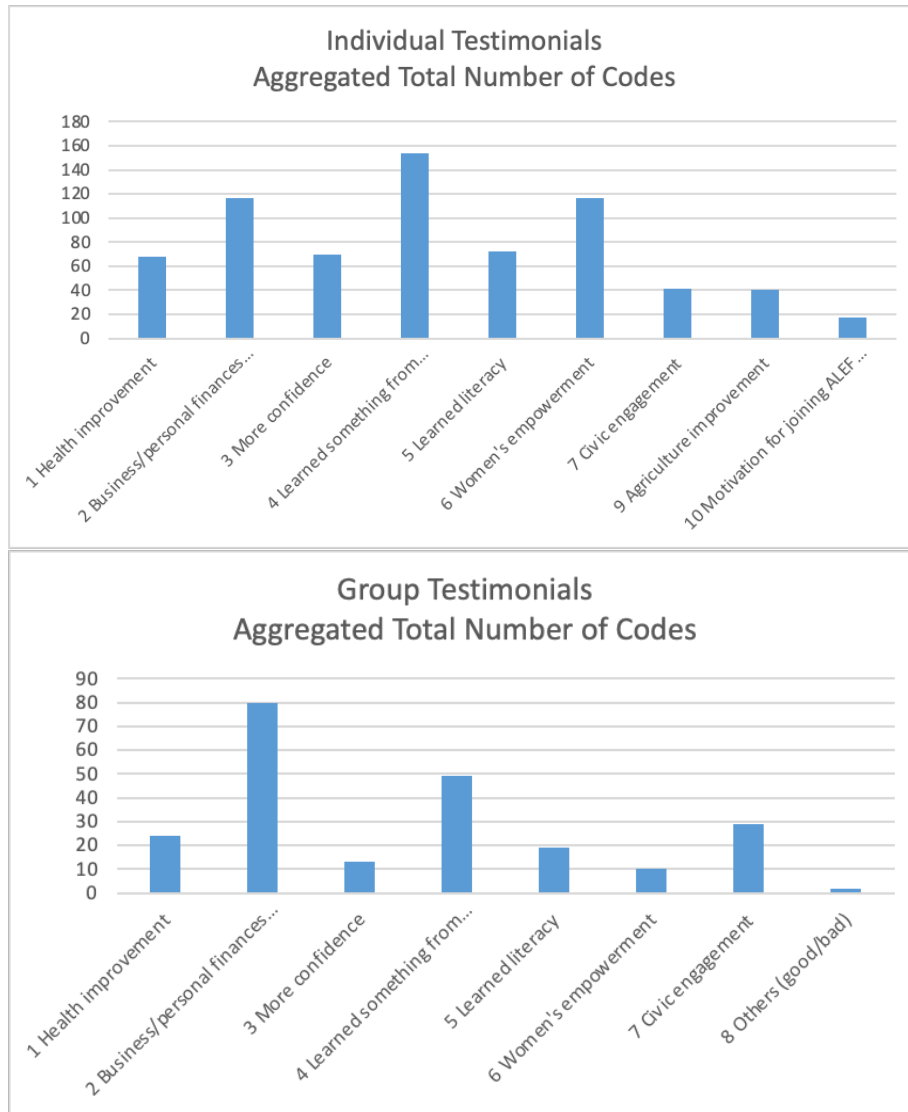
⁹ The "number of mentions" is higher than the number of testimonials due to the fact that more than one excerpt can be coded in any one testimonial. This difference would not significantly change any trends reported in the overall data.

As shown in Figure 2, the individual testimonials were most often coded for change due to having learned something in a particular lesson (code 4), followed by improved business or personal finance, women’s empowerment, and improved health. The high occurrence of code 4 ($n=154$ mentions) appears to indicate that participants see a link between the content of an ALEF lesson or group discussion and a certain improvement in their lives. This already appears to provide strong evidence of the relevance of ALEF lesson topics and potentially the positive effects of ALEF’s approach.

The group testimonials in Figure 2 primarily highlighted changes stemming from improved business or personal finance (particularly through group empowerment for income generation), followed by instances of learning from specific ALEF lessons and civic engagement.¹⁰ This underscores ALEF’s group-oriented approach to empowerment as extending beyond the teaching and learning of basic literacy skills. ALEF’s Empowerment Groups are often encouraged to initiate a collective savings fund, where members contribute small amounts to kickstart income generation activities such as soap-making in Uganda, purchasing livestock, seeds, and fertilizers in the DRC or acquiring land for group agricultural activities in the same country. In the DRC, participants commonly referred to this initiative using keywords (as translated by the literacy coaches) like “*cotisation*,” “*coopérative*,” and “*épargne*,” while in Uganda, terms like “savings fund” or “income-generating activity” were prevalent. There were limited mentions of such collective savings initiatives in Togo. In this regard, ALEF aligns with research emphasizing the need to supplement literacy programs with access to income-generating activities to facilitate economic empowerment, particularly in low-income countries.

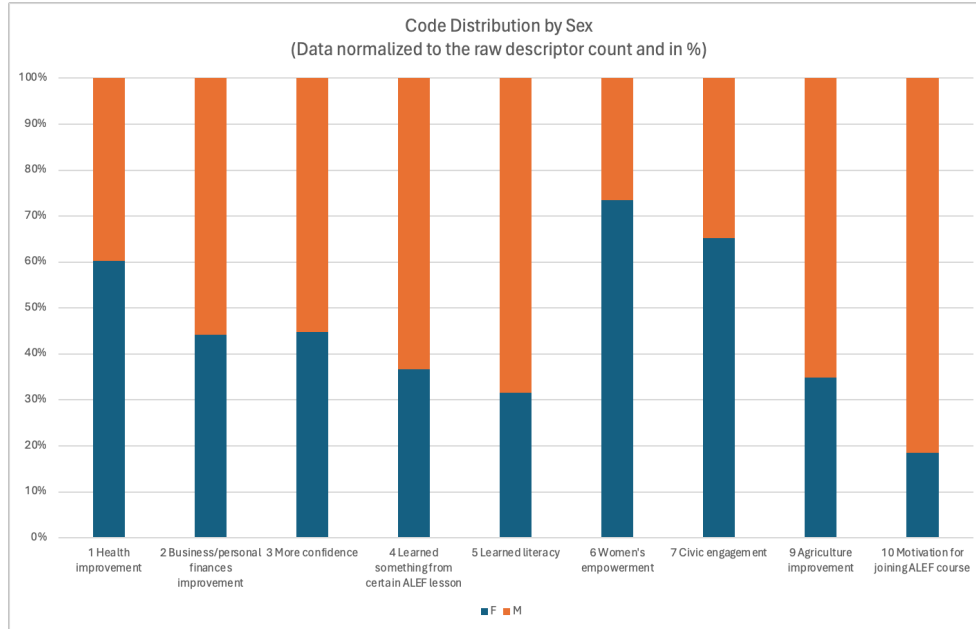
¹⁰ Note that we did not re-code the group testimonials for 5e “Cell phone use,” 9 “Agriculture improvement,” or 10 “Motivations for joining ALEF course” as we did not expect them to be significant; however, we retained code 8 “Others (good/bad)” in case any interesting topics were raised by the groups.

Figure 2: Overall code application for individual and group testimonials



The next step is to look at code occurrences by sex to see how women and men may have differed in describing how the course has changed their lives. Since women as the majority of ALEF participants supplied the majority of testimonials, we normalized the code distribution based on the ratio of women to men, as shown in Figure 3. Interestingly, the testimonials by women (coded in blue) were coded mostly in three areas (women’s empowerment, civic engagement, and health improvements), whereas men (coded in orange) were in five areas (motivation for joining the course, literacy, learning something from ALEF lesson, agriculture improvement and improved finances).

Figure 3: Overall code distribution by sex for individual testimonials

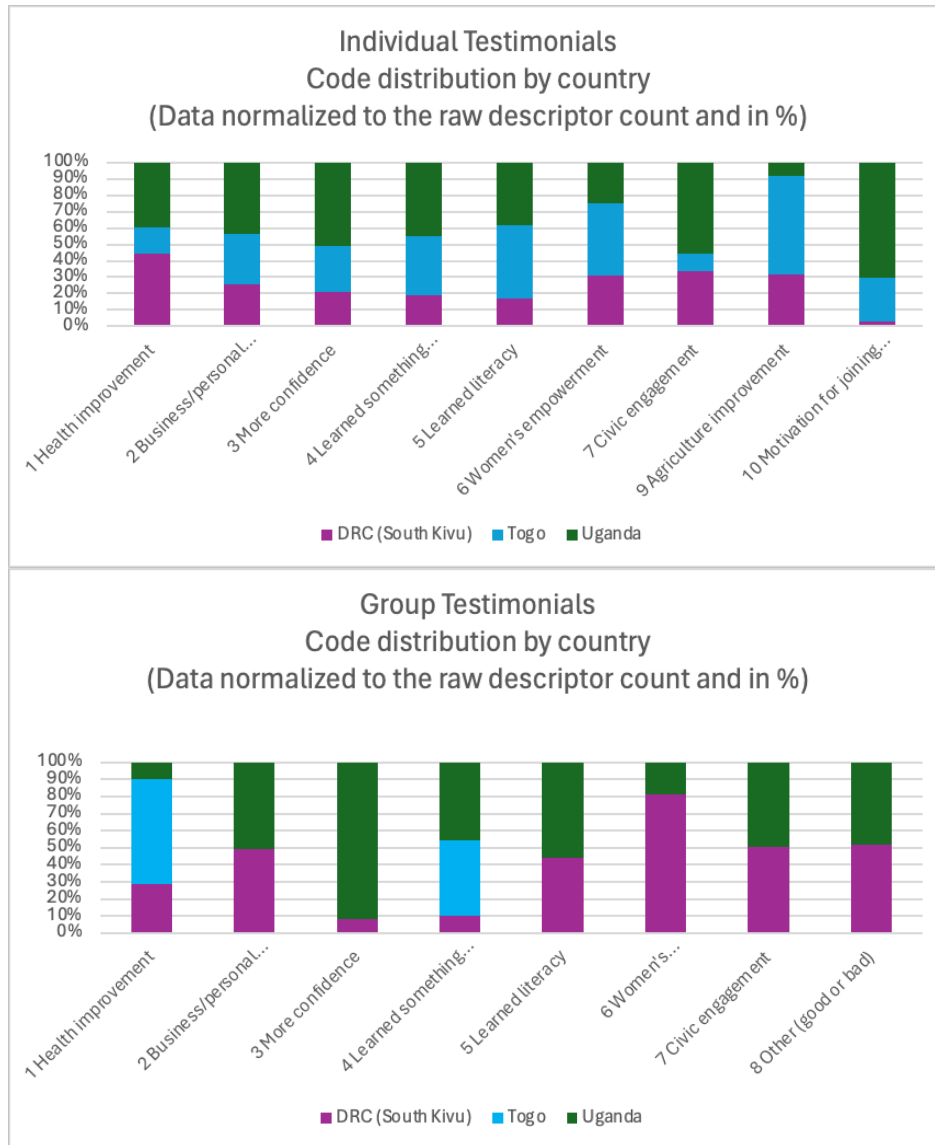


The final step in exploring the overall distribution of codes is to look at code occurrences by country to see how the three countries compare. Figure 4 provides a comparative view of codes by country among the individual and group testimonials. Like the code distribution by sex, Figure 4 uses normalized data based on the proportions of testimonials from the three countries: DRC (in magenta), Togo (in blue) and Uganda (in green).

From the individual testimonials, participants from the DRC report most on health improvement, followed by civic engagement, women’s empowerment and agriculture improvement. Those from Togo report most on agriculture improvement, followed by literacy and women’s empowerment. Finally, those from Uganda report most on their motivations for joining ALEF, followed by civic engagement and increased confidence. Differences between countries may be explained by differences in people’s lifestyles, course topics, NGO approaches, or other factors. Some of these differences may appear in further analyses below, or may remain as questions to explore with further data in the second phase of the larger evaluation.

From the group testimonials, those from the DRC report most on women’s empowerment, while those from Togo report most on health improvement and learning from specific ALEF lessons, particularly agricultural knowledge. Groups from Uganda report most on gaining more confidence.

Figure 4: Overall code distribution by country for individual and group testimonials



4.2 Perceived impact of ALEF courses on participants' lives

Given that the central aim of this study is to identify distinctive features of the ALEF program influencing its participants, our analysis looked at code 4, or change due to having learned something from a certain ALEF lesson. As mentioned in the previous section, this code (including sub-codes) exhibited the highest frequency of occurrences ($n=154$) and demonstrated the strongest co-occurrence with the thematic codes associated with areas of empowerment (i.e., health improvement, business/personal finance improvement, literacy improvement, women's empowerment, civic engagement, and agricultural improvement). These are shown in Table 4 with the sub-codes, which provide even more insight into how the lessons create positive change in participants' lives. As indicated in red, the most significant life-changing aspects learned from a lesson or discussion were new information about business/personal finances ($n=21$) and the importance of education for children, particularly girls ($n=17$). It also seems clear from the green

cells that lessons were seen as significantly contributing to participants' health and the health of their families, as well as business, agriculture and confidence/empowerment in general.

Table 4: Number of co-occurrences between code 4 and areas of reported improvement in the individual testimonials

Code	4 Learned from lesson	4a Help from facilitator	4b Help to/ from group	4c Learned an L2
1 Health improvement	4		1	
1a Health of self	10	1		
1b Health of children, family members	11			
1c Due to new information	4	1		
2 Business/personal finances improvement	5		2	
2a Due to improved math/numeracy	7			1
2b Due to improved literacy	3			1
2c Due to new information	21	1		
2d Group empowered for income generation	2			
2e Got a job				1
3 More confidence	9			1
3a Behaviors/attitudes/emotions	1		2	
3b Interpersonal social skills	2		1	
6 Women's empowerment	9	1	1	
6a Greater autonomy in decision-making	5	1		
6b Asserting (human, women's) rights	9	1	1	
6c Girls' and kids' education	17			
9 Agriculture improvement	7	1	1	
TOTALS	126	7	9	4

Key: **Red**=over 15 co-occurrences, **green**= 6-14 co-occurrences, **blue**=1-5 co-occurrences

For the group testimonials, we also looked at code co-occurrence with code 4, the highest being with code 2 “Business/personal finances improvement,” (total $n= 12$ co-occurrence), specifically code 2d “Group Empowered Income Generation” ($n=7$ co-occurrences). The table is not listed here as there were no other significant co-occurrences to report.

This section has contributed some trends in the coding that address the research questions regarding **perceived impact of ALEF literacy courses**:

- How do participants perceive the impact of ALEF courses on their daily lives?
- In what ways do they believe literacy, numeracy, and L2 skills have improved their personal and professional circumstances?

Overall, the coding shows that participants perceive ALEF courses to have a positive impact on their lives. They report changes due to acquisition of more accurate knowledge related to health, education, and agriculture; change of negative behaviors (self and family members); ability to detect when they are being cheated, to call out deception, and stand for their rights; improved business and personal finances; increased confidence (for men) and increased power of decision-making (particularly for women). Only participants in Uganda highlighted how acquiring English as a L2 expanded their access to English-speaking clientele within their small businesses. One individual even noted securing employment opportunities directly attributed to their proficiency in English communication. Each area of influence/impact on participants will be substantiated below with more details and supporting quotes, selected from the co-occurring codes for purposes of triangulating results.

4.3 Perceived changes in confidence, self-efficacy, and women's empowerment as a result of participation in ALEF course

As mentioned above, matters on women's empowerment were reported by 73.4% of women and 26.6% of men. Women's empowerment, much like the term "empowerment," often suffers from unclear definitions. The lack of specificity often risks instrumentalizing women's empowerment in favor of individualistic and rational notions of choice and economic growth;¹¹ it omits that women's empowerment is about transforming society as a whole (Eyben & Napier-Moore, 2005). The following sections substantiate the meaning in the three countries as described by the testimonials.

4.3.1 Areas of women's empowerment as reported by women

Women have described the following areas of change as an outcome of learning something from ALEF lessons: claiming/standing up for her own rights and calling out deceitful and corrupt practices (for themselves and others); health improvement for themselves and their households; becoming financially independent; prioritizing and affording children's education; and improved relationships between couples and households. Many women report that their empowerment affected their surroundings, alluding to the transformative effect women's empowerment has for societies.

These areas of transformation are significant as UN Women (Azcona et al., 2023) report that in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2023, 38.7% of women are subject to extreme poverty, 54.6% suffer from moderate to severe food insecurity, 31.4% between the ages of 15-24 are not educated, employed or in training (vs. 20.1% of men), and women face on average 668 deaths per 100,000 live births. They are also prone to gender-based violence. In DRC, 35.6% of women ages 15-49 report having been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the 12

¹¹ The simplistic idea is that if we invest in women, poverty will be reduced and women will in turn contribute to a nation's economic growth.

months; those figures are 26.1% in Uganda and 12.7% in Togo (UN Women Count Datahub, 2023)¹².

Excerpts below illustrate some of these areas. Some report the direct influence of specific lessons, discussions or texts covered in class empowering them to take action. Quotes involving health and children's education are not listed here as they are listed under their respective sections.

Standing up for their rights:

- *related to political consciousness*

X âgée de 30 ans... La leçon qu'elle a beaucoup aimé parlait d'une fille qui s'est rendue au vote mais car elle ne savait ni lire ni écrire pour cela on a choisi pour elle un candidat qui n'est pas de son choix. X dit que "comme les élections se rapprochent dans notre pays, je vais me forcer en fait à ne pas subir tel que la fille étudiée dans le groupe, comme [je] conna[is] déjà écrire [m]on nom et d'autres noms et les lettres." Elle sera capable de voter pour son candidat de choix.

X 30 years old.... The lesson she enjoyed most was about a girl who went to the polls but because she couldn't read or write, they chose a candidate for her who wasn't her choice. X said "as the elections are approaching in our country, I will force myself in fact not to be like that girl, as I already know how to write my name and other names and letters." She'll be able to vote for her candidate of choice. [#399, DRC, Level 1]

- *related to challenging patriarchal deceit*

X témoigne qu'après la mort de son père, son frère aîné, voulait s'approprier tous les champs d'héritage. À partir des instructions, elle avait revendiqué une partie de terre comme héritage.

X testifies that after her father's death, her elder brother wanted to appropriate all the inherited fields. Following instructions [from a lesson], she claimed a piece of land as her inheritance. [#326, DRC, Level 1]

X s'est rendu compte aussi que son mari la trichait quand elle lui remettait de l'argent pour faire le dépôt sur son compte puisqu'il ne faisait pas le dépôt de la totalité de l'argent qu'elle lui remettait. Aujourd'hui pour éviter tout, elle-même se charge du dépôt de son argent sur son propre compte qu'elle a ouvert.

She also realized that her husband was cheating her when she gave him money to deposit in her own account since he didn't deposit the total amount she gave him. Today, to avoid that, she takes care of depositing her own money into her account. [#173, Togo, Level 2]

- *related to sexual abuse*

X, âgée de 25 ans, à été violée par un garçon. Elle ne dit rien à ses parents. Après 3 mois, elle [n'a plus] ses règles. [Elle a] parlé à ce garçon. Il refuse, X garde le secret. Après 9 mois, elle accouche d'un enfant. Elle garde son enfant chez elle. Quand elle a compris les instructions concernant la fille qui a été violée, elle a dénoncé le secret à ses parents et elle dit "Je veux dire à mes parents à propos de ce garçon car je comprends les instructions à tirer." Dans le groupe, quand les parents réussissent à comprendre l'information directe, ils vont se plaindre chez le garçon. Les parents du garçon paie l'amende de la valeur d'une vache pour la famille de la fille. À présent, l'enfant arrive à l'âge de la scolarisation. Quand l'année scolaire va ouvrir la porte, l'enfant y sera car il est déjà inscrit. La fille trouve bon d'être en groupe.

X, 25, was raped by a boy. She says nothing to her parents. After 3 months, she no longer gets her menses. Talks to the boy, but he refuses and X keeps it a secret. After 9 months, she gives birth to a child. She keeps the child at home. When she understood the instructions concerning the girl who was raped, she tells her parents the secret and says, "I want to tell my parents about this boy too, because I understand the instructions." In the group, when the parents succeed to understand immediately, they go to the boy's home to complain. The boy's parents pay a compensation for the value of a cow to the girl's family. Now the child has reached school age. When the school year opens, the child will be enrolled. The girl finds it good to be in a group. [#343, DRC, Level 3]

¹² <https://data.unwomen.org/countries>

X who was a cleaner in a nearby school, after covering lesson 27, said she reported to her supervisor at her place of work that there was a colleague who was harassing her [with] sex demands. During the discussion she opened up and participants encouraged her to report the man to her supervisor, which she did and the man was taken to the disciplinary committee and warned. [#42, Uganda, Level 1]

- *related to improving the community* (see also section on civic engagement and leadership)

[S]ome of the women members understood the need to expose the difficulties and defend the rights in their village, and so 5 women mobilized and sensitized the others to meet the Customary Chief and Chiefdom... to plead their case following the water shortage in their locality... which since its existence had never had water flowing to the entity. [#247, Uganda, Group Testimonial, Level 3]

Improved couples relationships and household dynamics:

X âgé de 35 ans, marié, mère de 6 enfants montre qu'avant d'entrer dans le groupe à 4 naissances, son mari était très ivre. Après qu'elle soit entrée dans le groupe, elle commence à expliquer à son mari la leçon apprise en arrivant sur la leçon qui parle de Rugomba qui gaspille tout son argent dans la boisson. Il a été touché lorsque sa femme lui narre à propos de la leçon. La grande surprise du mari il dit à sa femme, "Vraiment j'ai perdu beaucoup grâce à l'ivresse." Il laisse toutes les surcharges à la dame et le monsieur jure que jamais il ne restera plus dans la boisson pour gaspiller son argent et laisser ses enfants souffrir avec la mère. À présent, l'homme et la femme commence à mettre les idées ensemble. Quand il amène l'argent, il demande comment faire les deux ensembles.

X, 35 years old, married, mother of 6 children shows that before joining the group after having had births her husband was a drunkard. After she joined the group she began to explain to her husband the lesson learned about Rugomba who wastes all his money on drinking. He was touched when his wife told him about the lesson. The big surprise was the husband says to his wife: "I really lost a lot due to drunkenness." He leaves all the profits to X and he swears that he will waste money again by drinking and let his children and their mother suffer. These days husband and wife plan things together. When he brings money home, he asks her what they should do together. [#378, DRC, Level 3]

X est ménagère... de 32 ans. Elle vient au cours avec son mari. Ce dernier à l'habitude de se saouler, ce qui entraine la dispute entre lui et sa femme et malheureusement, il la frappait. Mais aujourd'hui grâce aux causeries éducatives dans les groupes d'études, ils ont changé de comportement et ils s'entendent actuellement très bien dans leur foyer.

X is a 32-year-old housewife. She comes to class with her husband. He used to get drunk, which led to arguments between him and his wife, and unfortunately he hit her. But today, thanks to the educational talks in the study groups, their behavior has changed and they now get on very well at home. [#190, Togo, Level 1]

Gaining financial independence from their husbands:

I joined the empowerment group with a lot of expectations and I am grateful that so far I am not disappointed. From learning how to hold a pencil, to learning sounds and how to write them, slowly by slowly I have learnt to write my own name, have learnt how to socialize through group sharing sessions, have been inspired to start up a small restaurant business cooking only lunch meals for my customers and not rely entirely on my husband. [#80, Uganda, Level 1]

X testified having gained many ideas from the lesson topics ever since she joined the empowerment study group that helped her to start an income generating activity. She started growing vegetables last year after lessons, in level two, that empowered her to do so. Before she joined the empowerment group she used to wait upon her husband to beg for some money to buy herself all she needed and at times she was disappointed because the husband's income was small, yet they had a large piece of land. When she joined the empowerment study group her life changed and she started backyard vegetable gardens which supplemented the family's diet. Her husband encouraged her to grow more vegetables for sale and supported her on clearing the land. She now sells her vegetables to middlemen who supply vegetables in the city markets. She joyfully narrated how she has started to contribute towards their children's school needs from the profit she makes in her business. [#21, Uganda, Level 3]

Public speaking and confidence:

X, 38 years old... said that she used to miss out on development programs because she could not read nor write. Sometimes she had an idea on a specific matter but could not speak out just because she was a shy primary two drop out. She had an inferiority complex. She joined level 1... in 2020, and everything became history. She said the rich benefits of the program were already manifesting. "I can now count money, write and read a simple sales agreement. I have also gained confidence unlike before when anyone would frustrate me with English." She added that through group discussions from level one to three, she gained self-esteem and freedom to seek for answers. She enjoyed level 3 stories especially on the UN Human rights document. She has been empowered to tackle social challenges. [#412, Uganda, Level 3]

Women's empowerment is far more than the women's individual choice and action. It is about transforming embedded social processes (e.g., patriarchal structures and ideologies) that have hindered women's participation and choice. For this reason, we also coded certain men's comments into women's empowerment as a means to triangulate whether they also reported any changes related to women.

4.3.2 Reports of changes in men's attitudes

Men's reports related to women's empowerment are important to cover as it suggests that ALEF lessons cover topics that concern them or have them realize and then change their attitudes in ways they used to treat women. They are also indicative of some degree of societal transformation.

In the testimonials, some men reported becoming aware of the importance of educating girls, division of chores at home, discussions and planning with their wives about pregnancy, their children's education, business, and their own interpersonal relationships and dynamics. Here are a few examples:

Becoming aware of gender inequality and treating girls and boys equally as a consequence:

Y est cultivateur... Il est âgé de 43 ans et n'accordait pas d'importance à l'éducation scolaire des filles. Grâce à ce programme, il a compris que les filles et les hommes sont égaux sur le plan éducatif. Par conséquent, il a inscrit ses filles à l'école formelle et a commencé les démarches pour leur établir leur acte de naissance.

Y is a farmer ... He is 43 years old and did not attach any importance to girls' school education. Thanks to this programme, he realised that girls and men are educationally equal. As a result, he enrolled his daughters in formal school and began the process of obtaining their birth certificates. [#198, Togo]

Y âgé de 45 ans a écrit son testament pour éviter les problèmes dans sa famille, en associant son épouse et les chefs locaux. Suite aux instructions et à la discussion, il n'a pas oublié les filles et son épouse. Un acte qui a surpris son village.

Y, aged 45, wrote his will to avoid problems in his family, involving his wife and local chiefs. Following instructions and discussion, he did not forget the girls and his wife. An act that took his village by surprise. [#402, DRC, Level 2]

Support for their wives' health (full excerpts below under improved health):

- One man in Togo learned that it is important to accompany his pregnant wife for prenatal care, and when he did, they were both treated for an infection. [#197]
- Another man in Togo learned about women being overworked, and now helps his wife to fetch water, reducing her workload so she does not fall ill so often. [#164]

While men's reports on women's empowerment are less numerous than the women's, it is evident that certain men learned about gender equality and being supportive husbands for their wives in

ALEF lessons and group discussions. This may be an effect of the carefully attention placed on giving enough space for women to speak in presence of men in group facilitations as prescribed in ALEF's trainers' manual¹³. Finally, many men report building confidence with public speaking skills and voicing their thoughts. One man from Uganda stated how "[h]e was always ashamed and didn't want his children to know that he was not educated." It is possible that the ALEF group discussions allow certain men to learn to express themselves and be more vulnerable with their feelings and emotions.

4.3.2 *The education of children, especially girls*

As part of our consideration of women's empowerment, we included sub-code 6c for all mentions by ALEF participants of sending their girls or any of their children to school. There were over 30 testimonials by individuals and one group testimonial that mentioned sending their children to school. The group mentioned how their income-generating project, the sale of fertilizer, helped many of them send their children to school, and that theme was echoed throughout the individual testimonials through business and agricultural projects like raising guinea pigs or savings groups. Quite a few individuals mentioned having discussed the importance of education in ALEF lessons and sharing that information with their husbands so that they now send their children to school. There were 13 specific mentions of sending girl children to school, and a few mentioned specific children. Of these, there were explicit comments about how in the past girls were not considered worth educating, and many of the women participants said that is why they themselves had not been given the opportunity. This testimonial from a woman in Uganda, one of the few written in the first person, is a poignant example:

I grew up in a village where education for a girl child was regarded as wastage of resources, so I was denied the chance of going to school... I am grateful that I can sit down with my 4-year-old daughter and we do homework together, something I never knew, and my daughter is happy that I can now help her without going to the neighbors for help. [#80, Uganda, Level 1]

There is also evidence that ALEF lessons about children's right to an education have had a positive influence on female participants, and in some cases they speak with their husbands:

X âgée de 28 ans montre qu'elle faisait la discrimination dans la scolarité des enfants en scolarisant seulement les garçons. Maintenant comme elle a suivi les instructions, jamais elle ne le fera plus. Prochainement quand l'inscription va débiter elle portera les filles pour qu'elle soit enregistrée.

X, aged 28, shows that she used to discriminate in children's schooling by enrolling only the boys. Now that she's followed the instructions, she'll never do it again. Soon, when enrollment starts, she'll take the girls so they can be registered. [#293, DRC, Level 1]

X est cultivatrice... Pour cette rentrée scolaire, son mari a pris soin de s'occuper de la scolarité de ses enfants. Ce qu'il n'a jamais fait et ceci grâce au cours d'alphabétisation et causerie éducative portant sur le droit à l'éducation scolaire des enfants.

X is a 36-year-old farmer... For this new school year, her husband has taken care of his children's schooling. This is something he has never done before, thanks to literacy classes and educational talks on children's right to education. [#191, Togo, Level 1]

¹³ The trainers' manual states in the 'Stage 4: Participatory Discussion' instructions that "[i]t is the facilitator's job to make sure that speaking time is distributed fairly. For example, if $\frac{3}{4}$ of the group are women, then women should be speaking about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the time and one or two men should not be allowed to dominate the conversation."

Some men report their willingness to finance their children's education:

Y paid a lot of attention because this lesson answered his biggest worry and desire as an individual. With the help of his group leader, Y took a bold step of opening up a savings account in an equity bank to start saving his money and promised to fill in his children's school pay slips when they start attending school. [#74, Uganda, Level 2]

One report from Togo also shared how becoming literate allowed mothers to support their children's homework at home:

X est ménagère... âgée de 36 ans. Grâce à ce programme, elle arrive à suivre et aider son fils du cours primaire dans la formulation des lettres et les petits calculs.

X is a housewife aged 36 years. Thanks to this programme, she is able to follow and help her primary school son with the shapes of letters and small calculations. [#199, Togo]

Six group testimonials report that they all send their children to school after joining the Empowerment Groups and three groups report being able to engage in the school communities as they became literate. Reading children's report cards was less daunting and they felt less ashamed to interact in these spaces.

This section has contributed some findings that address the research questions regarding **self-efficacy, confidence** and **women's empowerment**:

- How do courses contribute to the participants' feelings of self-efficacy and confidence?
- In what ways do their developing literacy skills affect their perceptions of themselves?
- How do courses contribute to female participants' autonomy and ability to take control of their lives?
- How do courses contribute to male participants' willingness to see women as having rights and as worthy of fair treatment?
- Do participants report greater willingness or interest in sending their girls to school? (In sending their girls and boys?)

Based on the testimonials described above, there is no doubt that both women and men develop feelings of self-efficacy and confidence through ALEF lessons and group discussions. They have a heightened awareness and understanding of their rights, particularly women who gain the ability to act on them. Many seem to apply the lessons learned from the ALEF lessons and group discussions to their daily lives as the content is relevant to the participants' daily lives and struggles. It is clear from the testimonials that participating in ALEF lessons and group discussions raises the awareness of the importance of their own children's schooling.

4.4 Reported improvement in health as a result of participation in ALEF course

4.4.1 Improvement in participants' own health

15 participants spoke about lessons that changed their own health for the better. They discussed topics ranging from the use of mosquito nets to prevent malaria, pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, and hygiene/preventing illness. It seems that the information in the lessons made a big difference in the case of malaria prevention, because many said they had nets but did not use them:

X always spent a lot of money in the clinic due to malaria. She had the mosquito nets but found sleeping under them uncomfortable. Through the study, she realized that her discomfort was cheaper than the money. [#33, Uganda]

There were more serious and poignant testimonials, like this one on pregnancy, nutrition and birth spacing, which also demonstrates that groups can support and empower participants:

X, a mother of two, shared her life experience as to what she went through in both pregnancies during a discussion on breastfeeding (lesson 8). She said that she got her first pregnancy, which she wasn't prepared for, as a teenager at the age of 15 years, and out of ignorance she immediately got pregnant again just three months after the delivery of the first child. It was such a challenging time as the first born was just 3 months and her body turned extremely weak hence not only failing to look after the first child but also failed to look after herself, resulting in a number of complications which nearly led to a miscarriage. During the discussion on unwanted pregnancies in lesson 5, she did not contribute to the discussion but opened up later in lesson 8 which was about nutrition for a pregnant woman. She told members that in lesson 5 she feared to speak thinking that others would laugh at her. She was so relieved after being comforted by the participants. She promised to help other teenagers by giving them advice and sharing her life experience. X gained confidence and is one of the active participants during discussions. [#6, Uganda, Level 1]

4.4.2 Improvement in the health of participants' families

Some of the participants who talked about changes in their own health also talked about improved health of their families, with mosquito nets again being the most often mentioned. Other aspects of family health mentioned by 25 participants included diarrhea, bathing and sanitation, and immunization of children. More than one person mentioned eye-opening lessons on preventing illnesses that they had previously blamed on witchcraft, for example:

X âgée de 35 ans, mère de 7 enfants...qui a montré sa joie d'avoir reçu les instructions dans le manuel surtout en ce qui concerne la leçon numéro 2 pour ne pas manger de nourriture froide. Auparavant, elle mange seulement de la nourriture froide souvent chaque matin et ces enfants souffrent chaque moment de la maladie. Elle pense que ce sont des voisins qui empoisonnent ces enfants, parce que chaque semaine elle donne à ces enfants les médicaments en disant qu'ils sont empoisonnés. Mais grâce aux instructions reçues dans la leçon numéro 2 elle n'osera plus de manger ou de donner de la nourriture froide à ses enfants dès aujourd'hui. Elle a montré son mari lui aussi cette leçon qui montre les mauvais de la nourriture froide dans nos familles et son mari aussi a pris la décision de faire inscrire dans le groupe d'autonomisation.

X is a 35-year-old mother of 7 children... who has shown her joy at having received the instructions in the manual, especially with regard to lesson number 2 on not eating cold food. She only eats cold food every morning and her children suffer from illness every moment. She thinks that the neighbours are poisoning the children, because every week she gives them medicine and says that they are being poisoned. But thanks to the instructions she received in lesson 2, she no longer dares to eat or give cold food to her children from now on. She also showed her husband this lesson that shows the bad of cold food in our family and her husband also made the decision to enroll in the empowerment group. [#207, DRC, Level 1]

There are also indications that lessons help men understand health challenges of their wives, as these two examples indicate:

Y âgé 39...a compris à travers sa participation au cours d'alphabétisation qu'il n'est pas bon de laisser sa femme seul au retour du champ faire toutes les tâches ménagères. Ainsi, il l'aide à puiser néanmoins de l'eau. Ce qui diminue les tâches de sa femme et par conséquent, elle ne tombe plus régulièrement malade.

Y, aged 39... has understood through his participation in the literacy course that it is not a good idea to leave his wife alone to do all the household chores when she returns from the field. So he helps her to fetch water. This reduces his wife's chores, and as a result, she no longer falls ill regularly. [#164, Togo, Level 1]

Y est un cultivateur... âgé de 47 ans et ne savait pas qu'il était important d'accompagner et de soutenir sa femme dans son état de grossesse. Avec l'éducation des adultes, il a compris qu'il est important d'accompagner sa femme dès fois dans la consultation prénatale. La fois dernière qu'il a accompagné sa femme à l'hôpital, le médecin les a recommandés de suivre un traitement ensemble contre une infection leur permettant de trouver des solutions à leurs maladies afin d'avoir des enfants naissants en bonne santé.

Y is a farmer aged 47 years old and did not know that it was important to accompany and support his wife during her pregnancy. With adult education, he has understood that it is important to sometimes accompany

his wife to the prenatal consultation. The last time he accompanied his wife to hospital, the doctor recommended that they undergo treatment together for an infection, so that they could find solutions to their illnesses and have healthy babies. [#197, Togo]

A final testimonial shows how particular ALEF lessons support people who are taken advantage of and who do not always have access to correct medical information:

X said that before she joined the empowerment class she used to visit public/government hospitals but would always pay money to attending nurses to secure a slot for her to meet doctors in the hospitals not knowing she was paying a bribe. Until lesson 16, that talks about bribes in hospitals and through a discussion, X learnt she was not supposed to pay bribes. She testified that she learnt how to properly give prescribed medicine to a sick person in [the] right quantities and time. She no longer keeps medicine for a full year in her house after learning that it could be harmful to her life. [#30, Uganda, Level 1]

This section has contributed findings that address the research questions regarding **perceived impact of the ALEF course on health**:

- Do course participants report positive changes in their health as a result of the program?
- Do course participants report positive changes in the health of their families?

Participants clearly link specific lessons to positive changes in their own health and the health of their family members, primarily their children. They most often mentioned the connection between use of mosquito nets and preventing malaria, but a wide range of health benefits were reported, including gaining understanding of how healthcare providers like hospitals and clinics work. Perhaps the most striking change reported by participants involved learning about causes of illness and realizing that they previously blamed forces outside their control. There were also cases where both men and women reported greater understanding on the part of men for the health of their pregnant or overworked wives.

4.5 Reported improvement in income/employment as a result of participation in ALEF course

4.5.1 Improvement due to numeracy and literacy

Among the individual testimonials in this category, change due to improved numeracy was most often mentioned, as in these examples:

X who owns a banana stall in K market used to make losses in her business without knowing where exactly the problem was coming from. She was poor at calculations and used to fail to give back actual change to her customers. From the lessons covered so far, she realized she would give a lot of change to customers who bought bananas from her and would forget those that asked for credit promising to pay because she never had a book to record her daily sales. After covering several lessons on addition and subtraction, she started recording her daily sales and has realized some progress in her small business. [#28, Uganda, Level 2]

Grâce aux instructions reçues dans le groupe d'alphabétisation et autonomisation des adultes : X commence à exercer l'activité de vente de poissons, farine, savon,.. Elle fait scolariser ses enfants moyennant l'intérêt qu'elle gagne. Elle connaît bien calculé l'intérêt (calcul d'entrée, dépenses et solde).

Thanks to instructions received in the adult literacy and empowerment group: X began selling fish, flour, soap, etc. She sends her children to school with the profit she earns. She knows how to calculate the profit (entry, expenses and balance). [#448, DRC, Level 3]

She begged her husband to get someone to run the business as she continued to attend empowerment group study meetings. After completing level 2, XX took over the business and is proudly using the calculator. She feels she now can operate a bigger business as she keeps records business given the knowledge she has so far acquired. She has used part of her savings and started a vegetable kiosk. [#15, Uganda, Level 3]

Improved literacy was mentioned by only a few participants, used for writing a shopping list or filling in bank slips in Uganda. This may be a reflection of the paperwork needed there as opposed to the other two countries. One participant described a number of reading, writing and mathematics skills:

She said the rich benefits of the program were already manifesting. “I can now count money, write and read a simple sales agreement. I have also gained confidence unlike before when anyone would frustrate me with English”. She added that through group discussions from level 1 to 3, she gained self-esteem and freedom to seek for answers. She enjoyed level 3 stories especially on the UN Human Rights document. She has been empowered to tackle social challenges. [#421, Uganda, Level 3]

Of the group testimonials, only a few mentioned change based on numeracy or literacy skills, though some mentioned keeping records to calculate their profit. Two groups mentioned learning to keep financial records as supporting them in their income-generating groups, and this pair mentioned literacy related to banking:

Xa and Xb... testified that after learning how to fill in a bank slip (lesson 31 in level 2) these two women who sell vegetables in K market opened a joint account in a market Sacco where they had been saving their little profits. [#449, Uganda, Group Testimonial, Level 3]

4.5.2 Improvement due to group empowerment for income generation

This discussion of group empowerment is well supported by the group testimonials, which were most coded for “group empowerment for income generation” after “learned something from ALEF lesson.” Interestingly, all group testimonials in this category were from the DRC and Uganda, perhaps reflecting their long experiences with ALEF’s lessons and approach vs. Togo’s relatively new integration of ALEF programming.

Groups in the DRC reported organizing to raise guinea pigs, hens, rabbits, goats and pigs. They sometimes managed to save money to start small businesses, to lease land to farm vegetables, and to build small buildings to store and sell grain.

Groups in Uganda reported small businesses and poultry raising. Many of the groups reported starting savings groups immediately after lesson 6, level 1. One group testimonial about creating small businesses appears to be from a larger meeting of level 3 groups:

Through sharing, participants learnt new skills such as weaving mats, making liquid and bar soaps and many others. Participants realized that they should work together in groups to achieve more support from their communities and benefit from government programs. Level 3 groups in K and S have already registered their CBOs [community-based organizations] following the guidelines they learnt from the last lessons in level 3. [#144, Uganda]

Some groups are organized and able to make a big difference in members’ lives, like this level 3 group in DRC:

Après avoir eu tout les instructions dans les niveaux 1 et 2 ils ont resté dans le misère ou dans la pauvreté. Mais un temps ils ont confirmé d'appliquer les instructions reçu. Le groupe a commencé à identifier les projets très facile et qui peut produire vite, dont les participants sont vu qu'il faut faire la culture ensemble. Alors les participants ont loué un champ de 100 000fc pour une dure de 3 ans, dans ce première année ils ont cultivé des haricots volubile dont le récolte est de: 35 mesures d'haricots équivalent 227500fc parceque une mesure d'haricot coûte 6500 fc. Nous avons pris la décision d'avoir notre champ propre car l'homme c'est la décision.

Nous avons encore deux ans et demi d'exploitation. Chaque membre a eu deux mesures d'haricot apporté chez lui.

After receiving all the instructions in [levels] 1 and 2, they remained in misery or poverty. But at some point they agreed to apply the instructions they had received. The group began to identify very easy projects that could produce quickly, and the participants saw the need to grow crops together. So the participants leased a field for 100 000fc for a duration of 3 years, in this first year they cultivated voluble beans whose harvest is of: 35 measures of beans are equivalent to 227 500fc because a measure of beans costs 6 500 fc. We made the decision to have our own field because man is the decision. We still have two and a half years to run. Each member has brought home two measures of beans. [#205, DRC, Level 3]

As for the individual testimonials, there were over 25 that mentioned information from ALEF lessons that supported their income-generating projects, many similar to those described by the groups. One is particularly poignant:

X who completed level 3... started a small business of selling vegetables in her community while in level 2. Since she had already learnt how to calculate her profit and keeping records, she has seen her business grow. She now owns a big stall that sells foodstuffs and charcoal in her community. She said she started with little money to buy vegetables and her business kept growing slowly and later a good Samaritan who admired her commitment gave her five hundred thousand shillings to boost her business. She praises the empowerment group program for all her achievements. [#62, Uganda, Level 4]

This section has contributed findings that address the research questions regarding **perceived impact of ALEF literacy courses on income generation, finances or employment:**

- To what extent do participants believe that improved literacy skills contribute to improvements in income generation or better employment opportunities?

The testimonials continue to provide strong evidence that information from the lessons supports positive change, in this case savings groups or projects for income generation. What can be added here is that in addition to new information, what some call “*instructions*” of the lessons, the act of participating in groups appears to empower members to use their new skills, organize themselves, think creatively about how to earn income in their communities, and keep records to support their projects.

4.6 Reported changes due to agricultural information

We did not code for agricultural information at the beginning, but when coding improved finances due to new information (2c) and something learned from an ALEF lesson (4) we noticed references to farming. When we went back and coded agricultural references, we found 40 testimonials. Over half were from the DRC, mentioning the raising of small animals like guinea pigs, information about using animal droppings for fertilizer, composting, anti-erosion strategies, planting trees, and raising green beans, sweet potatoes, and cabbage. These two testimonies describe how lessons helped them:

X nous témoigne que grâce à la leçon étudiée aujourd'hui, elle a déjà observé plusieurs changements : construction de compostage, multiplication d'engrais locaux pour le vendre aux autres membres agriculteurs. Elle produit actuellement des haricots et des maraîchers qui aident la communauté proche de chez elle.

X tells us that thanks to the lesson she studied today, she has already seen several changes: building compost, multiplying local fertilizer to sell to other farmer members. She now produces beans and small gardens, which help the community near her home. [#384, DRC, Level 1]

X, âgée de 33 ans, montre déjà un changement car elle a fait le compostage à partir des instructions réussies dans le groupe. Elle a utilisé la construction avec 4 arbres, les foscanes aux alentours une composte de 1m.

Elle a fait le mélange de Bechet cendre, bouse, herbes, labou les déchets des cobayes. Elle a mis un arbre au milieu de s'avoir si sa composte se décompose comme si la saison sèche versé de eaux pour que sa trouve la décomposition.

X, aged 33, is already showing a change as she has made the compost from the successful instructions in the group. She used the construction with 4 trees, the foscans around a compost of 1m. She mixed Bechet ash, dung, grass, ploughing the waste from the guinea pigs. She put a tree in the middle to see if her compost would decompose, as it was the dry season [she] poured water over it. [#366, DRC, Level 3]

Among participants in Togo, 14 mentioned change due to agricultural information, particularly the combination of poultry and fertilizer for vegetables like soybeans. There were only three mentions of agriculture from Uganda, where participants are in semi-urban areas, but they mentioned change related to raising chickens, pest control and fertilizer, and planting in lines. Testimonials from all three countries mentioned the lessons and/or discussions as having made a difference in their practices.

4.7 Reported changes in civic engagement and leadership as a result of participation in ALEF course

Like the women's empowerment example above related to fighting for access to water for their community in Uganda, there are several other examples, especially from Uganda and the DRC. They are mainly related to public health matters, calling out deceitful and corrupt practices, and land procurement issues:

Participants narrated how bars in their area were in a total mess since many had no proper places of convenience, hence compromising the hygiene of these places and the health of the revelers. They reported the issue to the local council office in their area and the chairman promised to address the matter. The participants said they were ready to move to higher authorities in case the local council failed to handle the issue. They wondered why such places were even operating. One participant raised the issue as they reviewed the lessons they had already covered. This is lesson 20 in their booklets. [#49, Uganda, Level 1]

Ils ont fait écrire une lettre aux autorités en place qui interdisent aux hommes qui prennent abusivement le boisson fortement alcoolisé, et de ne pas commencer le fête de mariage a 5h00 du matin dans [leur région]. They wrote a letter to the local authorities forbidding men who drink heavily from alcoholic beverages from starting their wedding celebrations at 5 o'clock in the morning in [their region]. [#441, DRC, Level 4]

There was also a testimonial of a group in DRC who stood up against the priest of their village who was making the church followers work for his own profit and even had the followers pay if they missed a day of this communal work [#251, DRC, Level 2].

This section has contributed findings that address the research questions regarding **perceived impact of ALEF literacy courses on civic engagement and leadership:**

- Is there evidence that course participants are more engaged in their communities?
- Is there evidence that ALEF courses lead to willingness to take on leadership roles?

There is some evidence that course participants are more engaged in their communities and some groups took on leadership roles. However, a more longitudinal and specific study targeting civic engagement and leadership may be needed to determine how widespread and effective these actions are, and if they are attributable to the influence from ALEF courses. Their sustainability is also an interesting question that the local NGO partners might address.

4.8 Reported changes due to social support networks as a result of participation in ALEF course

The most apparent reported changes due to social support networks are activities related to group income generation. Many empowerment groups have started savings groups that helped them generate more income. As mentioned, earlier group testimonials mentioned improvement due to group empowered income generation 7 times. Some individual and group testimonials reported how the empowerment groups provided the participants a sense of belonging, solidarity and a space for emotional support and trust:

[X says] the group has grown into a relationship that is not breakable and can rely on it for any form of support, and she regards it as a family, something she lacked in her life. X said she was no longer stressed and her blood pressure greatly reduced since she became part of the group where she freely shared her personal challenges and got free advice on how to go about her situation through discussions. The group members supported her financially and morally when she lost her mother, something she never expected to have received if she had not joined the study group. [#135, Uganda]

Social interactions in the groups helped participants to develop working relationships. These people were living in the same area but had never thought of interacting with each other. They met new friends who have encouraged them to learn and complete the course. The participants built trust. [#143, Uganda]

Group leaders have developed a brotherhood relationship with one another where in case one falls sick and cannot attend lessons, another one in a nearby group can stand in for her so that the group members don't lag behind in their learning. [#126, Uganda]

There is also a heartwarming quote from a group that did some community outreach activities:

There was teamwork and togetherness among group leaders and participants where group leaders visit each other, especially neighboring groups, and have encouraged their participants to come up with different drama skits to present to fellow group members in order to learn how to speak in public. [#100, Uganda]

This section has contributed findings that address the research questions regarding **perceived impact of ALEF literacy courses on social support networks:**

- To what extent do participants report an improvement in their social support networks?
- How does the support of participants' groups contribute to their motivation and success in literacy courses?

From all three countries, there is a wide claim by numerous participants that belonging to the empowerment groups improved their business and personal finances. However, we found that only participants in Uganda overtly report on having a sense of belonging and building new relationships and trust. Perhaps more research on the relationship between group learning and belonging as drivers for empowerment would be interesting to pursue further and in other ALEF contexts.

4.9 Additional points observed

4.9.1 Perceived impact of literacy skills

We found it striking that so few of the testimonials mentioned literacy skills specifically. When reading, writing or calculation were mentioned, these skills were a means to an end, like improving bookkeeping or avoiding being taken advantage of by others.

“Reading for enjoyment” was not well represented at all in the testimonials, which could have various explanations; it seems that among these vulnerable groups literacy skills should have a

purpose, especially where few L1 reading materials exist in their surroundings. There was one inspiring example:

A good Samaritan who operates a supermarket in the area found the group reading story books. He was impressed and pledged to support the group by offering to buy a local Luganda newspaper twice in a week. This was a great encouragement to the group. They were very happy to have gained access to printed information in their local language. The project leader told the members of the reading club that if reading and writing skills are not constantly practiced they can get lost and encouraged them to practice writing as well. [#12, Uganda, Level 4]

There is a sense of pride related to literacy that is inherent in many testimonials. Some mentioned helping their children with schoolwork, as in this example:

Grâce à ce programme X arrive à suivre et aider son fils du cours primaire dans la formulation des lettres et les petits calculs.

Thanks to this program, X is able to keep up with and help her primary school son with his lettering and small calculations. [#199, Togo]

This woman provides evidence of an important change in attitude toward read and written materials, in this case health and school records:

She is rather happier that now she sees value in keeping her documents she would get from hospital as well as her children's report cards that they bring back from school, for she now sees value in them but before joining the empowerment program she would gather all of them and use them to light her charcoal stove leaving no trace of medical records and studying records for her and the entire family. [#111]

4.9.2 Perceived impact of L1 use and L2 learning

There were no mentions of L1 use in the group testimonials, but there were a few in the individual statements about each language. Some of them also mentioned learning an additional language.

The three testimonials specifically about Mashi in the DRC included the following, which mention three different aspects of literacy in the L1:

- A man who by learning to read in Mashi discovered that a receipt for a goat supposedly written by a client in Mashi was not what should have been written. [#325]
- A woman who can now read messages in Mashi on her husband's cell phone, which impressed the husband very much. [#381]
- A woman who was elected president of her community church group, which had gone five months without a leader, because she is able to read and write phrases from the Mashi Bible. [#386]

There were four mentioning Ifè in Togo. Two mention the advantages of reading and writing in Ifè for better running their small businesses. Three touch on the aim of reading the Bible in Ifè, which may be one of the only written materials in their environment and is an expressed aim of ALEF's local partner, as in this example from a male participant:

Y est...cultivateur de profession âgé de 32 ans, il s'est inscrit au cours d'alphabétisation parce qu'il n'a jamais été à l'école. Avec ce programme il est déterminé à apprendre à lire et à écrire et aussi son ambition est pouvoir lire la bible en ifè et améliorer sa capacité d'interprète à l'église.

Y is... a 32-year-old farmer by profession, he signed up for the literacy course because he had never been to school. With this programme he is determined to learn to read and write, and his ambition is also to be able to read the Bible in Ifè and improve his interpreting skills in church. [#148, Togo, Level 1]

There were four individuals and some groups from Uganda mentioning literacy in Luganda. These two men mentioned what they like to do with their L1 literacy:

[Y, an orphan]... has never attended any level of education which made him unable to read and write. He is so appreciative to the empowerment group project because as per now he can even write his name, read and write some words in Luganda. [#72, Uganda, Level 1]

[Y] says he could hardly read any word in Luganda before, but after undergoing training for the last 6 months he can now read some words in the local newspapers and on a TV screen. His dream is to be able to take on Bible readings at church. [#109, Uganda, Level 1]

This [group of women] formed a reading club. They meet in their free time to read the story books and other reading materials especially [town name] newspaper that is written in Luganda language. They continued with their weekly savings which they use to boost their businesses. They requested for more English lessons. [#418, Uganda, Level 3]

Another testimonial from Uganda is quite detailed about how the ALEF course offers L1, L2 and literacy in general for “people like her”:

X says she never had a chance of going to school. Having grown up in a society where educating a girl child was viewed as a waste of time and girls were only raised for marriage, X was always taught how to do house work and gardening but not how to read and write. At the age of 16 years, X was married off to a village local council leader. One day in a village meeting her husband asked her to write the names of people who had attended the meeting. X told him that she did not know how to read and write. She didn't even know how to write her own name. For all the years she has lived with that shame and always wished she could learn at least how to write her name. Currently X is overjoyed with the fact that her long lost dream of learning how to read and write has finally come to life with the empowerment group program and she promised to be a good participant and set an example for all her grandchildren not to lose faith in education. “Being a lady who washes clothes for people to earn a living, I find many customers who are willing to give me clothes to clean but I cannot properly communicate with them due to language barrier and the only language that would be easily used is English but I also don't know it. By the time the empowerment project came to our community I was looking forward to getting a private person to pay so they can teach me how to read, write and more so how to speak English, so that I can be able to communicate with my customers.” She was very happy and looking forward to learning more and the fact that **lessons are conducted in their mother tongue made it easy to understand**. “I'm so grateful to CACI for thinking about people like me.” [#61, Uganda, Level 1]

It appears that participants in Uganda may perceive the L2 as more important or useful in their everyday lives than those in the other two countries, as English was the only L2 mentioned by name, and participants like this one thought it would help business:

Working in a market with 30% of the customers being English speakers, I always found it challenging to communicate with the customers who cannot speak Luganda but would love to buy food items from my stall so I had resorted to chasing them away in a haste for I could not understand them and if they insisted I could sell food items to them at low prices for not knowing how the different prices are said in English. After being part of the empowerment program for two years now, I'm very grateful that I have learnt how to express myself with customers both in Luganda and some little English through the lessons and some of the customers are impressed that I'm changing for the better. This has kept my customers coming back to buy from me making my business grow. [#112, Uganda, Level 2]

4.9.3 Perceived impact of literacy on mobile phone use

We went back late in the analysis process to code for IT-related uses of literacy. We did not find any mentions of mobile phones in the group testimonials, but there were at least five individuals who mentioned them in connection with the ALEF course. The most frequent mention of cell phones was to make calculations after learning business literacy and numeracy skills, for example:

X est commerçante âgée de 41 ans. Elle arrive dès maintenant à faire des calculs à partir de son appareil téléphone. Ceci lui a facilité les opérations lors de son commerce sur les denrées alimentaires. En essayant de calculer le prix du sac de maïs acheté et son transport, elle a réussi à fixer le prix de vente du bol de maïs lui permettant de générer des bénéfices.

X is a 41-year-old trader.... She can now make calculations using her telephone. This makes it easier for her to trade in foodstuffs. By trying to calculate the price of a bag of maize and its transport, she has managed to set the selling price of a bowl of maize, enabling her to make a profit. [#186, Togo, Level 2]

They also reported using their cell phones to read amounts like bank balances:

X âgée de 33 ans témoigne que son mari se trouve à K pour la recherche de survie. En lui envoyant l'argent au téléphone, elle commence à déchiffrer le montant envoyé sur Airtel Money grâce aux leçons de calcul apprises dans le groupe.

X, a 33-year-old, testifies that her husband is in K in search of survival [income]. When he was sending her money over the phone, she began to decipher the amount sent on Airtel Money, thanks to the calculation lessons she had learned in the group. [#351, DRC, Level 1]

Finally, one participant reported being able to read text messages, which made her husband very happy:

X, aged 27, testifies that after following the literacy instructions in Mashi, she was able to read a message on her husband's phone. He told the facilitator that he didn't believe his wife could read a message. Her husband was very appreciative of the work done by ALEF. [#381, DRC, Level 2]

We anticipate that mobile devices and other forms of information technology will be of growing importance in the future, so the implication for the phase II evaluation is to explore how ALEF and its partners are responding to participants' needs in this area.

5.0 Conclusion

This first phase of the ALEF program evaluation was intended to answer three overarching research questions:

1. To what extent can the changes described by participants in their statements be directly attributed to specific aspects of ALEF's program?
2. What are the strategies or mechanisms used by ALEF that appear to bridge the gap between literacy and numeracy skills learning and globally positive outcomes like empowerment?
3. Is there evidence that positive outcomes can be facilitated, and if so, how?

5.1 What the testimonials can say about the ALEF program

Based on the individual and group testimonials from the three countries, it seems clear that a number of changes in people's lives can indeed be attributed to the ALEF program. Participants themselves link positive changes in health, income generation, agricultural practices and confidence/women's empowerment to specific lesson content and discussions. There are also many references to group membership as contributing to support, confidence and learning.

From the testimonials, we can say that the following aspects of ALEF's program are reported to make a difference:

- Lesson topics: The content of the lessons is so frequently referenced that we can say with relative certainty that participants find the topics highly relevant and helpful,

especially for changes related to health, education of their children, income generation, agricultural practices and rights-based issues.

- Discussions about lesson topics: Participants often refer to the theme-based discussions, which they have clearly used to process the new information, share experiences and ideas and build community within the group.
- Facilitators: Participants position their course facilitators as teachers knowledgeable about the topics, as advisors and even advocates who sometimes physically accompany individuals or groups to seek justice.
- Groups: Participants overwhelmingly experience their groups as supportive, offering solidarity and a safe space as well as an opportunity to pool resources for savings and income generation.

Our analysis of the testimonials suggests that the most significant aspect of ALEF's program is the topics of the lessons, which provide information and the stimulus to discuss actions in participants' own lives and in their communities. It appears that the relevance of these topics—and likely the way they are explored as issues for debate and discussion rather than as prescribed solutions to life's problems—resonates with participants. The fact that participants can explore and discuss the lessons in their own languages is part of this relevance, as evidenced by comments like these, both coincidentally written in the first person:

I'm so grateful to CACI for thinking about people like me. [#61, Uganda]

[T]outes les leçons presque ça touche sur ma vie.

Almost all of the lessons touch on my life. [#246, DRC]

Regarding the larger question of how literacy contributes to empowerment, the testimonials provide strong evidence that the ALEF program helps participants to apply their literacy and newfound knowledge, improving their confidence and giving them problem-solving skills. It is interesting that the ALEF program is called “empowerment groups” and that participants' testimonials tend to refer more to theme-based outcomes like improved health than to literacy or numeracy skills. This seems to indicate that the explicit aim of the ALEF program to empower is clearly seen and experienced by participants as their own aim, going beyond the learning of basic skills. Even participants at level 1 mention the support of their groups, which appears to grow even stronger by levels 3 and 4, when testimonials describe a strong feeling of belonging.

5.2 Implications for phase II of the evaluation

This phase I evaluation using the testimonials database has established the main characteristics of what the ALEF program offers participants and how they perceive that they are benefitting from the program, both individually and in groups. It has also provided us with some directions of inquiry for the larger evaluation in phase II.

Related to the four key aspects of the ALEF program just mentioned above, we propose going into more detail in the following ways:

- Lesson topics: It would be interesting to do a content analysis of the lessons, looking at how topics are chosen, how they are developed and seen by partners to represent relevant issues in people's lives, how regional differences might be accommodated, and how gender and other cross-cutting issues are represented. Participants and facilitators might be asked if there are topics or skills they would like the curriculum to include or exclude, and why. Connections between the L1 and local cultural values could be explored.
- Discussions about lesson topics: Because participants credited not only the lessons but also the discussions, it could be useful to observe discussions and/or find ways to ask participants and facilitators about how discussions give space to each person, how safe they feel in sharing personal concerns, and what (if anything) might be improved.
- Facilitators: We would be interested in learning more about the background of facilitators, their motivations for doing this work, how they are trained, and how they see their role. They could be asked how they build trust with participants. Because the ALEF approach requires a different paradigm or way of seeing teachers as facilitators and not knowledge-holders, we wonder if some groups or facilitators themselves have difficulty accepting the approach. Related to motivation, we would like to know more about how important their stipends are to them, if they have less material motivations, and whether they see their service as sustainable long-term.
- Groups: We would like to interview stakeholders about how classes transform themselves (or evolve) into groups for savings or income generation, and what they perceive as the conditions under which these groups function optimally. It would be interesting to examine how sustainable these groups are, if they change over time, and if participants continue to attribute their existence and success to ALEF's influence.

There are some further questions that could be explored with the testimonials themselves before delving deeper:

- What are participants' motivations for joining the ALEF program? We would like to go back and see if it is worth asking participants why they joined, what efforts they have to put into attending (e.g. missing other important work or finding childcare), and if regular attendance is difficult. We understand that attendance is an issue in some places, and would like to understand the challenges for participants.
- What kinds of responsibilities are participants taking on as officers or leaders of their groups? There are some indications in the testimonials of their roles, but we would need to go back to those testimonials to understand their tasks, if they mention them.
- Do some groups have difficulty empowering themselves? How long might it take to develop the trust needed, perhaps to level 3 or 4? We did not detect any negativity in the testimonials, but there are some references that might be re-coded for challenges. One coach commented on a group that appeared to be dependent on the facilitator for addressing their issues; it could be useful to re-explore the mentions of the facilitator accompanying individuals or groups to solve a problem. This would provide background for interviewing

coaches about the delicate balance of facilitators between supporting/advocating vs. taking control of difficult situations.

- What is the relationship between agricultural topics like cultivation and animal husbandry and income generation? This question could be followed up with partners

Further questions for phase II that are suggested by our findings:

- How are ALEF participants using IT, e.g. SMS, mobile money transfer and social media, and how do these uses call for or practice literacy and numeracy skills taught in the current curricula for each country?
- What is available to read in the L1 in each locale, and what are people writing in the L1? What happens to the texts that the groups create, and can they be used more broadly to promote self-made materials?
- How much need do participants have for the L2, orally and in writing?
- How do participants develop critical thinking skills, the ability to state problems and discuss solutions, and ways to make group membership safe for sharing? Are these skills also part of the ALEF curriculum, or are they naturally developed as groups evolve?

Finally, regarding monitoring and evaluation tools, we would like to review the tools and methods that ALEF and its partners are currently using and how they work. For example, it might be helpful to discuss with ALEF and partners the current methodological (and logistical) limitations of the testimonials and brainstorm possible ways to address them in realistic ways.

5.3 Implications for international literacy and empowerment programs

From this study of the testimonials we had hoped to find evidence that would inform the scholarly literature with regard to the connections between literacy and empowerment. We have been able to identify a number of elements that participants perceive as important, such as numeracy in addition to literacy, the development of lessons around topics relevant to participants' lives, and the learning and discussions in people's home languages.

Due in part to the methodological limitations of the testimonials data, we find that the phase II evaluation will be important for exploring in more detail the mechanisms by which empowerment is brought about, and how participants learn to engage in debate, reasoning, and problem-solving in collaborative, participatory spaces and guided by their facilitators. This study has clearly shown that participants appreciate and have seen very positive changes in their lives through their experience of the ALEF course.

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Annex A: ALEF Testimonial Coding Categories

Code #	Category	Examples
1	Health improvement	
- 1a	Self	
- 1b	Children, family	
- 1c	Due to new information	Getting health care, using/storing medicine, nutrition, sanitation (e.g. 7, 8, 24, 44)
2	Business/personal finances improvement (numeracy)	
- 2a	Due to improved math/numeracy	Record-keeping (e.g. 39)
- 2b	Due to improved literacy	Signing name, getting refunds, signing land titles and sales agreements (e.g. 71)
- 2c	Due to new information	How to grow vegetables, prevent pests, start/manage a business (e.g. 18, 37)
- 2d	Group empowered for income generation	Group savings plan (e.g. 38)
- 2e	Got a job/employment	
3	More confidence	
- 3a	Confidence as related to behaviors, attitudes, or emotions	
- 3b	Interpersonal social skills	Ex. addressing interpersonal conflict (e.g. 34, 44)
4	Learned something from a certain ALEF lesson (note number)	
- 4a	Got personal help from ALEF teacher	
- 4b	Got or gave help - classmates	Some mention sharing important health or farming info with group
- 4c	Learned language (English or French)	

5	Learned literacy (reading & writing)	
- 5a	For fun/enjoyment	
- 5b	To get information	
- 5c	Reading-specific	
- 5d	Writing-specific	
- 5e	Cell phone use*	Enables money transfer, loans
6	Women's empowerment	
- 6a	Greater autonomy in decision-making	Relative to spouse, males in family
- 6b	Asserting (human, women's) rights	Relative to inheritance, spousal abandonment and abuse
- 6c	Girls' and kids' education	
7	Civic Engagement	
- 7a	Community involvement	Returning/teaching concepts to your community (e.g. 48, 50, 96, 100)
- 7b	Asserting (human, civic) rights	Learning about and taking action (e.g. 15, 52, 53)
- 7c	Public communication skills	(e.g. 36, 83, 99)
- 7d	Taking on a leadership role	
8	Other (Good or Bad)	
9	Agriculture improvement*	
10	Motivation for joining ALEF course*	

*=added later and re-coded all individual testimonials