

School Readiness Initiative in Malawi



What are the reasons for getting involved?

In Malawi, Early Childhood Education (ECE) is not mandatory. Nevertheless, it is a key priority of the Government, guided by the National Early Childhood Development Policy. The Government is aiming to ensure that all eligible children have access to quality Early Childhood Development (ECD) services by 2030. ECD services are provided through Community Based Care Centers (CBCCs) or specialized ECD centers. Unfortunately, due to a lack of finances and technical resources the ability of the ministry to monitor progress in the sector is limited. In FY2018/2019 a share of the total budget and GDP, the allocation to ECD stands at 0.05% and 0.01%, respectively. Even though the government is spending more on education than most low-income countries, Early Childhood Education is only seeing a small share of that. From the total education budget allocated in FY18/19, only 0.2% of the education budget was allocated to ECD, while basic/primary education received 47.8%, secondary education 11.5% and higher (tertiary) education 35.7%.

Over the past decade, Malawi has more than doubles enrolment of children in CBCCs. However, nationwide the overall enrolment is still below 50%. There are significant challenges regarding quality of service provided at ECD centers including infrastructure, trained caregivers and insufficient supply of stimulation, learning and nutrition interventions. Around half of the trained caregivers are volunteers and have not received a training in ECD. Often these caregivers have insufficient materials and do not follow any curriculum. Due to the limited resources from the Government, quality assurance is inadequate. The trained caregiver to child ratio stands very high at 1 caregiver to 92 children. In primary grade, this ratio is even higher at 115 children to 1 teacher.

Another problem in Malawi is the lack of access to ECE services. In 2017, 11,600 ECD centers including CBCCs were open. But 55% of the children eligible for ECE services don't have access and hence are often not school ready when starting in primary school. As highlighted by many studies worldwide, these learners are often traumatised, because they cannot keep up with the pace and requirements of the formal learning situation which could be the major contributing factor to high repetition and dropout rate in early classes in primary school. According to a World Bank report of 2016, an average 25% of new entrants to primary education repeat their first grade.



Source: ECD Budget Brief 2018/2019

<https://www.unicef.org/esa/media/3876/file/UNICEF-Malawi-2018-2019-ECD-Budget-Brief.pdf>

Source: Education Budget Brief 2018/2019

<https://www.unicef.org/esa/sites/unicef.org.esa/files/2019-04/UNICEF-Malawi-2018-Education-Budget-Brief.pdf>

What does the programme include?

Since 2011, Roger Federer Foundation is active in Malawi strengthening the quality of Early Childhood Education in vulnerable communities and establishing early learning as a national priority on the political agenda. In May 2020, the School Readiness Strategy was rolled out in vulnerable rural communities in Malawi in 19 Districts. The over-all goal of the project is the secure a good start into primary education for vulnerable children to access quality pre-primary schooling. The initiative will run from May 2020 until April 2026.

The transition from early childhood education to primary school is a big step for all children and how these transitions are prepared and done have great implications on the child's overall likelihood of learning and performance through primary school and beyond. With the SRI Initiative, it should enable children to make a smoother transition to primary school and get a better start in their formal education. Innovation and a systemic approach lead the way: every stakeholder has to accept their responsibility for school readiness and when it comes to imparting knowledge, we rely on digital and self-guided learning tools, the so-called Early Learning Kiosk, which we developed together with local educators and pedagogical experts based on existing national content. For us, as for our long-term local partners, the new programme was like setting off for new horizons, as the Early Learning Kiosk had yet to be developed. To date, this includes an early education course, an app for monitoring children's development, and a toolbox with numerous tools for teachers to use in their classrooms daily. Our Early Learning Kiosk programme in Zambia served as the reference programme. There, we had already successfully upgraded over 2,000 community schools with a didactic course using the same digital approach. Nonetheless, it was initially difficult to explain to partners and government officials what we were up to. But we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the relevant ministries at an early stage, laying the foundation for cooperation at the national level.

In order to improve the learning environment in the CBCC centers, an inventory analysis was made with the owners and a school development plan was worked out on how the institution can meet the official quality standards in the foreseeable future. Through the established exchange among the day care centers, inspiration and mutual coaching also took place on how to improve the day care centers in a cost-efficient way. As a result, numerous improvement measures were implemented.

What has been done so far?

- Currently in Phase I until 2022
- In 15 districts in 900 ECD centers
- Who has it reached so far: 20,429 pre-primary children, 1,076 pre-primary caregivers, 247 primary schools and 446 early grade teachers