

Supporting Early Childhood Development in Malawi Mid-Term Report- March 2024

We are excited to present the first update on Temwa's new Early Childhood Development (ECD) project in Nkhata Bay North, Malawi. This innovative three-year initiative seeks to transform early childhood education in the region by bolstering community-operated preschools. The report outlines the achievements accomplished during the initial six months of the project, which began in October 2023.

Project overview and aims

The majority of primary school students in Nkhata Bay North lack access to formal education until the age of 6. Temwa's previous Community Literacy education project revealed that this gap results in children entering primary school ill-prepared, with limited literacy and numeracy skills. Consequently, they often struggle to engage with the curriculum, leading to high dropout rates. This disparity disproportionately affects young girls, whose education is frequently deprioritised, leading them to abandon school to assist with household chores.



Government investment in Early Childhood Development (ECD) is minimal, with less than 1% of the national budget allocated to support it in 2021-2022. Privately owned preschools are prohibitively expensive for most community members, the majority of whom live below the poverty line. Additionally, existing community-run preschools in the area suffer from inadequate resources and poor management.

In response to this issue, Temwa's new three-year project aims to support 30 community-led preschools. Some of these will be newly established, while others are currently inactive or are struggling to operate effectively. The project will ensure that all preschools will meet national minimum standards and provide a vital foundation for formal education, addressing the educational gap in these communities.

We are already supporting thirteen preschools, five of which are newly established and eight were already existing but needed a large amount of support. This has hugely exceeded our expectations of five preschools fully operating in the first year. The project is proving incredibly popular among community members, who are seeing the vital impact of early childhood education.

Early Childhood Development Achievements

We are proud to report that, in the first six months, this new project has already begun strengthening early childhood education services through the following achievements.

Outcome 1: Improved access to preschool services for children aged between 3-5

This project will ensure that children living in our catchment areas will be able to access well-equipped preschools. Our monitoring has shown that extreme poverty means that very few community-run preschools exist and, of those that do, most do not have the resources to create a conducive learning environment for children.

Temwa will support new and existing preschools by working with communities to set up or improve school management committees, provide resources such as furniture and learning materials to help broaden their reading and writing skills, as well provide toys to develop social skills.

In the first year of the preschool operating, Temwa will work with communities to provide one daily meal of porridge to ensure children are sufficiently nourished in order to learn. In the following years, where possible, they will be linked to Temwa's agriculture projects to provide a food supply independently and sustainably.

Situation Analysis

In September, the team conducted a thorough situation analysis to assess the availability and quality of ECD services in the catchment area surrounding the 10 primary schools Temwa supported in our previous education project.

Across the 10 schools, there were only 21 preschools operating in a catchment area of over 60 villages, meaning at least 30% of children have no access to any preschool facility. Our monitoring found these existing preschools to be of a very low quality, with 80% of the caregivers (volunteer teachers) not being trained and almost 60% having no basic academic qualifications. Most preschools are using improvised spaces to operate in, such as churches and community centres. Community participation has also been limited, with little involvement from local governance structures.

Our monitoring also found that when children who have attended a preschool enter primary school, they significantly outperform their peers who did not.

There is a growing interest among communities towards early childhood development, with an increase in preschools being established in recent years. Many parents recognise the importance of early intervention in education, and have tried to enrol their children in primary school early due to the lack of preschools.

Initial monitoring visits

In November, monitoring visits found that some preschools were already making preparations to begin operating. Four schools, Chikwina, Bunga, Chilibwe and Usisya, have started preparations for establishing 7 new preschools in addition to the already existing ones. These communities have already formed committees, identified provisional spaces to operate, and appointed caregivers. They have also agreed to conduct awareness campaigns, taking advantage of community gatherings such as funeral ceremonies and religious gatherings. The monitoring exercise also established that communities had plans to construct permanent buildings for the preschools. 5 of the preschools were committed to start construction in July 2024.



As of March 2024, the project is supporting 13 preschools. Five of these are newly established: Chisyombi, Msambia, Chisomo, Chikwina, and Khomala. The other eight were already existing, but were previously struggling to operate properly due to a lack of materials, management, and training for their caregivers.

A particular success story is the Kawanda preschool, located in Bunga, which was originally established in 2015 but closed in 2019 after issues with sustainability. Following inception meetings with Temwa in October, the community agreed that they should reopen the preschool, and successfully did so in December. A management committee has since been established, and caregivers identified. The committee has now formulated a resource mobilisation plan in order to ensure the preschool is successful. The community has agreed that every household contributes MWK 1,000 to support the caregivers, and a further MWK 500 towards their feeding programme.

Council officials visit

By February, we were pleased to demonstrate to visiting council officials the tremendous progress being made. During the official's monitoring visits, they visited preschools in Chikwina: Chisyombi and Chikwina preschools, where they observed the changes made in recent weeks and made recommendations to improve. They highlighted in particular the importance of Temwa's Community-Driven Approach to the project, which they saw as empowering the community's efforts and assisting plans for the future, rather than dictating the nature of the preschools themselves.

Improvements included ensuring that all of the caregivers received equal quality of training, and that preschools should focus efforts towards building larger structures in order to divide children into age-appropriate classes. Following the visit, Chisyombi preschool is now preparing to construct a larger building by 2025, and the community have already mobilised 5,000 bricks to be used for the project. The preschool's committee and Chiefs are currently developing a resource mobilisation strategy to purchase the remaining materials.

Outcome 2: Early year caregivers' skills and knowledge increased to deliver high quality ECD services

Preschool caregivers require thorough training and support in accordance with Malawi's national guidelines. However, a severe lack of government funding means these opportunities are very limited. Temwa is ensuring that the project's caregivers are trained by professionals specialising in ECD training. They will also be supported to deliver quality education to the children through adequate teaching materials, creating a flourishing educational environment. While the caregivers are volunteering their time, they will benefit from a small monthly allowance to cover key costs.

Caregiver Training

In February, 26 caregivers (2 from each of the 13 operating preschools) underwent training conducted by council officials. This training, spanning five days, equipped the caregivers with essential skills necessary to deliver preschool services to national standards. Sessions focused on activity planning and implementation, crafting play and teaching materials utilising locally accessible resources, and advocating for and safeguarding children's rights. Attendees were tasked with identifying specific activities to enhance children's learning and creativity, such as singing, playing football, and drawing.

Considerable emphasis was placed on establishing a safe environment within the preschools. Participants extensively discussed child development stages, addressing safeguarding concerns, and the significance of social inclusion. The caregivers emphasised the importance of integrating children from diverse social and economic backgrounds, as well as varying levels of ability, recognising the benefits for the classes as a whole. While the advantages of mixing age groups were deliberated, consensus favoured separate

classes for each age group to facilitate quicker progress and sustained engagement with age-appropriate activities.

The conclusion of the training delved into practical guidance on creating books, toys, charts, and other materials utilising locally available resources. Each caregiver received instruction on developing weekly and daily activity plans and engaged in role-playing exercises to practise activity facilitation.

The training concluded with each caregiver producing action points, such as creating playing areas and separating classes by age group. Throughout, the caregivers demonstrated their dedication to improving their practices and shared their previous experiences in order to develop.

Following the training, caregivers have already been observed implementing standard practices. In Good Hope preschool and Chisyombi preschool, caregivers have already started making playing materials and planning their activities in advance.



Outcome 3: Preschool children's academic and personal development increased in preparation for primary school

Preschool attendance will develop children's confidence and basic literacy skills required to perform well in primary school. In turn, this will improve their academic progress in these earlier years, reducing the number of drop-outs. Temwa will monitor the children's progress in their first year of primary school to track the benefit of early intervention.



Now that the caregivers have been properly trained to conduct sessions, they can begin properly assessing and recording the progress of each individual child who attends. Previously, the existing preschools did not have the capacity to record the development of key skills in order to ascertain if a child was ready for primary school. Now caregivers will be supplied with proper files to keep records and track children's performances. As the project moves into the second half of the first year, we look forward to updating you on these developments.

Outcome 4: Improved community participation in the running of targeted preschools

Existing community-run preschools generally lack strong organisational structures, without vital representation among key community stakeholders, or proper sustainability plans. Our ECD project will support the establishment of community management structures for the preschools, creating accountability and ownership. These structures will address issues or challenges that may arise within the preschools.

Our community awareness events will promote the importance of education and the need to enrol children into preschool. Radio jingles will reach people who may not be able to attend the events due to other pressing priorities such as farm work.

Inception Meetings

In October, inception meetings were held with 30 communities, spanning the catchment areas of 10 schools in Nkhata Bay. The meetings briefed community stakeholders on Temwa's new project, and identified the key roles each stakeholder would play in the project. Participants discussed the findings of the situation analysis conducted in September, and agreed that there has historically been a lack of accessibility and community participation in delivery of ECD services.

By the end of the meetings, participants agreed to hold community discussions to reflect on how they can contribute to promoting accessibility, quality and community participation for ECDs. They will identify activities and resources needed to improve the current status of ECDs in their respective communities. This will include identifying ways the community can mobilise their own resources and lead on implementing activities themselves.

For example, Bweteka currently supports a catchment area of 4 villages but previously had no active preschool. According to the teachers at the primary school, less than 5% of children enrolling at the school have previously had any form of formal learning. They find that parents frequently try to enrol the children before the minimum age of 6.

However, with the facilitation and support through the ECD project, the community has come together to set up the Good Hope preschool which is currently being run from the village church. A committee was elected and, at the start of January 2024, the preschool opened with over 30 students, but has since increased its intake and now has 69 students. This is a real success story for the project and is very much driven by the support and dedication of the Temwa Education team, local Chiefs and the preschool committee pictured here in front of the church.



Action Plans

In November, Temwa facilitated the development of community action plans aimed at improving the accessibility and quality of ECD services, as well as community participation. The activity was conducted in 10 schools and involved Parent-Teacher Associations, Chiefs and Child Protection Officers from the surrounding communities.

The participants set realistic targets based on improving access, quality, and community participation. They identified the relevant stakeholders and timeframes for each target. These included the number of new preschools to be established, the election of new committees for each preschool, and the formation of bylaws to encourage attendance. These meetings will ensure that each individual action plan is driven by each community's specific priorities, with their full participation.

For example, Chisyombi preschool was set up by the community in Chikwina in 2021, but has struggled with a shortage of caregivers and playing and teaching materials. Having been identified as a preschool needing support, the community held meetings to develop an action plan. Already, the community has recruited another caregiver, developed a



food programme for the children, and mobilised 5,000 bricks to build a better structure for their preschool. They have also identified a piece of land where they plan to grow maize and soya beans to sustain the feeding programme.

Project Challenges

As with many projects Temwa has delivered, challenges are encountered. Below is a summary of the key challenges that have come to light in the first 6 months of this project:

ECD Preschool Structures

The project's objective is to establish dedicated structures or buildings for all preschools. However, in these initial stages, some existing or supported preschools are operating in borrowed spaces, such as churches, which is not a sustainable solution in the long term. This becomes particularly challenging as the need for furniture and educational materials like books arises. Communities are currently exploring avenues to secure funds and materials for constructing permanent structures in the future, although this process is expected to take considerable time.

Retention of Caregivers

Another challenge that has emerged concerns the ongoing retention of caregivers. The expectation is that parents of children attending each preschool should contribute a nominal fee, from which a modest wage could be paid to the caregivers. This practice aims to ensure their retention, as past experience has shown that, without payment, caregivers would swiftly seek other opportunities. However, some preschools are facing a dilemma where parents struggle to afford the full fee for their children, leaving school committees short of funds to compensate the caregivers.

Temwa is collaborating with school committees to underscore the crucial need for finding solutions to address this issue. Without trained caregivers, the preschools are at risk of failing to deliver an adequate level of education. Although it is still early in the process, some proposed solutions include implementing staggered preschool fee payments and encouraging community members to contribute excess food instead of monetary donations.

Community stories

The importance of educational opportunities

Pelisha Kaunda lives in Jumbo Village, with her son and daughter-in-law, 6 nephews, and 2 grandchildren. Pelisha's own education was very disrupted: "I dropped out of school due to early pregnancy and did not get the chance to go back".

Since then, Pelisha and her classmates from Chikwina Secondary School formed an alumni group where they made a plan to start a preschool in the community. The preschool started in 2016, and usually registers over 50 children a year.

However, the preschool currently lacks adequate teaching and playing materials, and furniture. They share the space with the community's church, making it difficult to decorate the space appropriately, and often classes are disturbed.

Pelisha hopes that the new ECD project will help provide the preschool with appropriate teaching materials. The school has a small farm, so she also would like to be trained on organic farming methods in order to harvest enough food to support the children.



The community is already mobilising resources and labour in order to begin constructing a permanent structure for their preschool. Pelisha wants to see even more community engagement through the project's awareness raising: "Community members need to be aware of the importance of ECD."

"I want to help these children who I know will grow up to be teachers and nurses to help back their community just like I am doing today".

Improved quality of early childhood education

Alufeyo Nkhoza, aged 26, supports his wife and two children through fishing. He currently works at the preschool situated by Nthembo Primary School, where he attended a meeting with Temwa to discuss how the ECD project might benefit the community.

Alufeyo has been concerned about the attendance rates of children at the preschool. When the school year started, they registered over 80 children but this number has since halved. He has found that parents struggle to contribute the small fee used by the preschools for food, firewood, and transport. The preschool also lacks playing and teaching materials, eating and cooking utensils, and proper sanitation such as hand-washing basins.

Alufeyo hopes that the ECD project will provide support with properly trained caregivers, ensuring that they are motivated and committed. He also hopes he will be able to deliver more effective lessons now that the children will be separated into age groups.

"I am looking forward to the training as this will help on how I can relate with children, strengthening my skills as well as learning important skills a care-giver is expected to have".

In the long term, he hopes the community will mobilise to construct a permanent building for the preschool, in turn reducing the preschool's fees which currently help cover their rented building.

