School Readiness Initiative in Namibia

What are the reasons for getting involved?

There is a recognised lack of finances and quality in the area of early education in Namibia. Only 2% of the education budget is spent on this education sector. 94% of its funding comes from parents through fees paid to private institutions. The state's investment in education per child in secondary schools is 46 times greater than at the early education level. In 2017, the budget per child for each year of early childhood education was only 25 Swiss francs. Public preschools can therefore only accept 45% of the children. As a result, 55% of the children either stay at home and go straight to 1st grade. Or they are in private preschools with minimal quality control and where there is hardly any curriculum-based instruction. There are currently some 3,000 registered daycare centres taking care of 100,000 children a year before they enter primary school. However, there is no exact data available on how many of them offer age-appropriate, quality instruction. Nationwide, 4,516 teachers are registered as working in the private early education sector, but only 63% of them are adequately trained. The quality of the instruction and the child-friendliness of the learning environment therefore often leave something to be desired, especially in institutions in poorer communities. As a result, many children are not ready for school when they start primary school, but there are no exact figures about this. However, over 20% of first graders repeat the 1st grade, at a cost of 14 million Swiss francs. Their performance in later grades remains low and the dropout rate is high. In addition, parents are not always able to find school places near their home or wait to have their children start school until a suitable place becomes available.

In Namibia's favour, however, the policy level is further along and working in the right direction. Early childhood development is seen as crucial for social change in Namibia's Fifth National Development Plan, which has set the goal of ensuring that Namibian children from birth to 8 years of age should have a secure educational foundation through access to pre-schools by 2022. The government of Namibia has set itself the goal of accommodating 80% of children ages 5 to 6 in preschool classes and ensuring that at least 60% of preschool teachers are qualified by 2021-22. At the political level, this commitment is encouraging, but there is a significant gap in the funding and training of professionals.
What does the programme include?

In January 2018, we started the two-year start-up phase of the first School Readiness Initiative in Namibia as part of our new strategy. We have a vision: Within eight years, we want to achieve school readiness in the sense of the Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 for 70% of the children in Namibia and systematically improve school readiness nationwide. This 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 iAct 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 three relevant ministries at an early stage, laying the foundation for cooperation at the national level. The start-up phase was carried out in four regions of Namibia, reaching 10,000 children. 150 private daycare centres and 54 public primary schools took part and were organised into a total of 71 learning groups. After the Early Learning Kiosk was developed in the second quarter of 2019, the teachers at the daycare centres, the preschools, and the first-grade teachers met almost weekly to learn and complete the early education course on the tablet. They also worked on processes to provide for better transitions to primary school. 302 teachers have completed the course, 50% more than planned. 89 teachers were introduced to the use of the newly developed app to monitor children's development. In all 150 daycare centres, teachers were motivated and coached to hold regular parenting events, supported by a manual for parents' workshops included in the kiosk. In order to improve the learning environment in the daycare centres, an inventory analysis was made with the owners and a school development plan was drawn up as to how the institution might meet the official quality standards in the foreseeable future. The established exchange among daycare centres also provided inspiration and mutual coaching, such as how the daycare centres can be improved in a cost-effective way. As a result, numerous improvement measures have been implemented.

What has been done so far?

- Active in 7 regions in Namibia.
- Currently on Phase II
- Total number of children reached so far: 19,400
- SRI has been implemented in 583 learning institutions comprising of 189 public primary schools and 394 ECD centres in vulnerable communities
- An average of 97% or teachers and educarers that registered on the course on the KnowHow app completed as well the self-guided course by December 2020
- All pre-primary teachers have been trained on the Continuous Child Development Assessment (ChildSteps app) in February and early March 2020