School Readiness Initiative in Zambia

What are the reasons for getting involved?

Zambia started relatively late in developing the Early Childhood Education (ECE) sector. Historically the Zambian government participation in ECE has been minimal. Since a couple of years, the political environment has changed and become dynamic and more focus has been given to education. Nevertheless, the relative share of the education sector budget is at its lowest level in five years at 15.3% in 2019 from 20.2% at peak in 2015. Several challenges continue to negatively impact the education sector’s performance. Like any other sector, the education sector is not being spared from the difficult operating environment, which has seen the country’s GDP contract by an estimated 6.5% in 2019. In terms of the proportion of GDP allocated to education, Zambia is in the upper ranks of African countries.

In 2019, 0.13% of the education budget was allocated to early childhood education (ECE). The consistent under resourcing of the ECE sector is worrisome. This trend implies that children are enrolling in Grade 1 with no ECE experience resulting in low school attendance and performance. These learners are likely to repeat a grade, drop out of school, or be in constant need of remedial or special education. This state of affairs perpetuates inefficiencies in the education system. In 2019, the UNICEF Budget Brief report indicated that nationwide, 32% of the Grade 1 entrants had gone through Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres, which is quite low compared to other countries in the region. Furthermore, there is a big gap in the provision of preschool learning between rural and urban areas. The quality remains a major challenge as only a small minority of ECD teachers are properly qualified and they are teaching in urban government ECD centres. Thus, it comes as no surprise that community schools are particularly dragging behind in offering quality ECD service. Nevertheless, curricula have been developed, ECD teachers trained, and some ECD centres built.

On a positive note, Zambia’s ECD sector has experienced significant growth in the number of ECD centres and enrolments in the last four years. For example, the number of ECD centres increased from 1526 centres in 2014 to 2258 in 2017.

Source: UNICEF Education Budget Brief 2019
What does the programme include?

Since 2011, the Roger Federer Foundation (RFF) has been actively working in Zambia focusing on improving the quality of education in 470 community schools and enabling access to Early Childhood Education in vulnerable communities. In addition, RFF launched a community teacher capacity building initiative “iAct” in 2017 to increase the interactive teaching skills through self-guided learning in more than 2000 community schools all over the country. In line with the Sustainable Development Goal 4.2, the Foundation will fully focus in the upcoming strategy 2019-2026 on preschool education in community schools and a successful start into primary school.

The School Readiness Initiative of the Roger Federer Foundation will enhance not only the children’s readiness for school but also the schools’ readiness for the children. The initiative will mainly focus on providing access to quality ECD services. The initiative will establish ECD centres in rural community schools, increase the capacity of ECD teachers, sensitize on and engage relevant stakeholders such as parents, communities, Parents Community School Committees, school inspectors and other government representatives for matching children’s needs in early learning, and mobilize them to ensure that schools and ECD centres are in a better position to accommodate the youngest learners. A Child Monitoring Systems will track the development of children and respond to their individual needs in the domains of language, numeracy, physical, socio-emotional and cognitive development. The start of the comprehensive country initiative is scheduled for May 2019 and will last until April 2026. Direct beneficiaries will be ECD children in 2000 community school in targeted provinces and districts, throughout Zambia.

What has been done so far?

- Currently on Phase I
- Who is involved: 12,000 vulnerable children and 800 ECD and Grade 1 teachers from 400 community schools from 16 districts located in four provinces
- The initiative has enabled underserved children to have access to early learning. This has contributed to an increase in the enrolment rates in ECE supported by parents and the entire community.
- A total of 974 teachers were enrolled on the ‘KnowHow’ course (by 2021)