

The Madrasa Early Childhood Programme: 25 Years of Experience

A Project of the Aga Khan Foundation



An Aga Khan Development Network Series

Cover photograph: Classroom in Nakasozi Madrasa Pre-School, Kampala, Uganda, by Zahur Ramji, 2008.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

2	Lessons in Development: An Aga Khan Development Network Series
4	Foreword
6	Introduction
10	Milestones of the Last 25 Years
13	First Steps: 1982 to 1989
29	Regional Expansion and the Creation of Madrasa Resource Centres: 1990 to 1995
37	Enhancing Quality and Going to Scale: 1996 to 2001
47	Measuring Impact and Cost
55	Expanding the Scope: 2002 to 2008
73	Confronting Challenges and Embedding Reflective Practices
82	Key Insights and Lessons Learned over 25 Years
85	Future Steps

LESSONS IN DEVELOPMENT: AN AGA KHAN DEVELOPMENT NETWORK SERIES

This publication is the first in a new series that will highlight lessons and best practices that have emerged from programmes of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). The purpose of the series is to share knowledge about successful programmes in the hope that it will aid governments, international aid organisations and local NGOs in the design, implementation and scaling up of development programmes. “Success” is defined as having had a positive impact on the overall quality of life.

AKDN agencies have been experimenting with, and implementing, innovative solutions to development challenges for over 40 years. They have worked in over 30 countries and in a variety of contexts, both urban and rural, during conflict and peacetime, and in ultra-poor environments and economies in transition. In AKDN’s experience, the most successful programmes do not become successful overnight – or even after a few years. The programmes with the greatest impact usually undergo a process of evaluation and refinement that may take several years.

One such programme is the topic of this booklet: the Aga Khan Foundation’s Madrasa Early Childhood Programme (herein referred to as the Madrasa Programme), which operates in the three East African countries of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Beginning as a pilot project at the request of the Muslim community in Mombasa, Kenya, it has gone on to help establish over 200 community pre-schools and teach over 67,000 children. Research findings demonstrate that the Madrasa approach makes a real difference in children’s cognitive development and later success in school.

By discussing the development of the Madrasa Programme over the last 25 years and documenting the steps taken to maintain quality, relevance and impact, the AKDN hopes to offer the information and tools needed for the replication of similar programmes elsewhere in Africa and beyond.

Facing page: A regional impact study (1999-2005), which drew upon external technical assistance from researchers at Oxford University, as well as others, found that the quality of the teaching and learning environment in Madrasa pre-schools was higher than in non-Madrasa pre-schools, and that the quality of the pre-school environment promoted children’s cognitive development.



FOREWORD

I have no problem at all remembering my initial meetings 25 years ago here in Mombasa with the Ummah leadership – with leaders of the Aga Khan Foundation, and with others of you who shared what was then an innovative insight. You shared a conviction that the way in which children are educated in their earliest years is a key which can unlock the doors of opportunity for the rest of their lives.

A deep concern for knowledge – and the best ways of sharing knowledge – goes back to the very roots of the Islamic tradition. When we think of our proud educational traditions, however, we often think first about the great universities and libraries which became centres of Islamic culture down through the centuries – including in our time the Aga Khan University which now has teaching centres in eight different countries. Or we think of schools which prepare students for university life – as our Aga Khan Academy programme is designed to do.

But we sometimes give too little attention to the schools which prepare young children for life itself – in all of its holistic dimensions. And yet the evidence accumulates steadily showing that an investment made in the earliest, pre-school years can bring enormous dividends as a child proceeds from one level of education to another.

We have particularly strong evidence that this has been the case for the Madrasa Programme in this community – and in the other communities and the other countries to which these concepts now have spread. From the seed that was planted here in the Coastal Region some 25 years ago – when Bi Swafiya Said received her grant from the Aga Khan Foundation – the East African Madrasa Programme has grown to include 203 pre-schools, with nearly 800 teachers, reaching some 30,000 households and serving more than 54,000 children. This is truly an inspiring story.

It is also important to note some additional distinctions concerning this programme. One is the Programme's pluralistic, inclusive approach – embracing Muslim and non-Muslim children alike – and helping all of them to learn important lessons about diversity. Indeed, it is good to see that parents of different faiths are represented on the School Management Committees.

It is striking that modern neuro-sciences have demonstrated that long before the age of 6, children are aware of the different cultural backgrounds amongst each other in their classes. It is thus before that age that pluralism can be instilled as a life value.

Another point worth noting is the rigour with which quality has been assured – with strong Madrasa Resource Centres helping to set goals and standards, and rewarding their achievement through a school graduation programme. The progressive nature of this programme is also evident in the fact that women have played such a large part in its success – and that young girls make up such a significant part of the pre-school population. And I would point out as well that the programme's success has occurred largely among poor, rural populations – where both the needs and the obstacles are often greatest. Our challenge now will be to ensure the Programme's sustainability – and its replicability.

We gather today, then, in a spirit of enormous gratitude – to the Pioneers who led this effort, the Ummah and Jamat leadership, the donor community, the government leaders who have been involved, and so many dedicated volunteers – from the very beginnings of the programme right down to the present day. In the end, the story of the Madrasa Programme has been a story of personal commitment.



Mombasa, Kenya, 1982

And we know that the story must go on. The dream will continue to unfold. And the work which all of you have been doing will continue to resonate in the thousands of lives you have touched and shaped – and in the lives of their children and grandchildren.

*His Highness the Aga Khan
at the Commemoration of the 25th Anniversary
of the Madrasa Programme,
Mombasa, 14 August 2007*

INTRODUCTION

“Many early childhood programmes are initiated without the understanding of the communities’ actual needs or consideration of culture, religious beliefs or traditional values. As a result many communities do not participate in the programmes as fully as expected.”

*Bi Swafiya Said, First Trainer, Director and Co-Developer
of the Madrasa Programme*

In the early 1980s research suggested that it was important that particular attention be paid to the lives of young children, since it became increasingly clear that events during the early years (proper care, health, nutrition and education) provided the foundation for children’s later success in school and life. Research on early childhood interventions, particularly in relation to pre-school education, demonstrated the highly positive long-term impact of an early childhood experience of quality. As this research gained attention from international foundations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as from a variety of donor agencies, people began to turn their focus to the need to support and invest in young children and their families.

Within East Africa, these concerns were being expressed by the Muslim community in Mombasa, Kenya. There was a recognition of and concern about the fact that Muslim children were being increasingly marginalised due to the fact that they had limited and sometimes blocked access to primary schooling.¹

During a visit made by His Highness the Aga Khan to East Africa in 1982, Muslim leaders from the Coast Province of Kenya requested him to help them address their worries about their children falling behind in education – which therefore affected their future life opportunities. A study done by the Aga Khan Foundation found that quality pre-school education for three-to-six year olds was critical to their future development. In 1986, after nearly five years of planning and consultation with a variety of stakeholders, the first Madrasa Pre-school opened its doors with four staff members and four children. Within two weeks, the enrolment increased to 30 students. This one centre has evolved into what is known today as the Madrasa Regional Early Childhood Programme (more simply known as the Madrasa Programme). In 2008, 203 pre-schools owned and operated by communities in Kenya, Zanzibar and Uganda had a combined enrolment for the year of more than 10,000 children with equal numbers of girls and boys – and this is only part of what the Regional Programme now does.

In essence, the Madrasa Programme has grown from a local pre-school involving a few families and teachers to a regional initiative involving hundreds of communities. The Programme has set in motion a rich cascade of activities and changes far beyond the impacts on individual children



and families. These include the creation of locally registered training and resource centres, research and evaluation processes, policy and planning efforts and child advocacy work.

Telling the story of the Madrasa Programme is important in its own right. However, the story also offers useful lessons for those involved in social development. It is the story of effective programming focused on work with communities to improve their young children's development early on to ensure better opportunities throughout their lives. Importantly, it demonstrates the critical role of integrating into the development process "the importance of culture as a resource for the community, giving people pride in the value of traditional spaces and institutions ... the traditional madrasa rather than being perceived as an outmoded and archaic space, has now been re-invigorated, reformulated and given a new direction".²

This publication uses findings from previous evaluations of the Programme, as well as insights and lessons learned between 1999 and 2004 from the Effectiveness Initiative, a joint project between the Consultative Group

Beginning as a pilot project with one initial community pre-school, the Madrasa Programme has spawned the establishment of over 200 community pre-schools, affecting tens of thousands of children. Research findings demonstrate clearly that the Madrasa approach makes a significant difference for children's cognitive development and later success in school.

Key Insights and Lessons Learned

For full list, see pages 82 -83.

on Early Childhood Care and Development and the Bernard van Leer Foundation.³ The Initiative reviewed the underlying principles and practices for “Effective ECD Programmes” based on an international study of 10 acclaimed projects across different regions of the world. Each programme was recognised as “effective” for having enhanced the development and welfare of young children and their families for a minimum of 10 years. The Madrasa Programme was among the projects selected that contributed to the identification of key concepts and processes associated with effectiveness.

A set of key insights and principles have emerged from the Madrasa Programme’s 25 years of work, based on findings from the Effectiveness Initiative, as well as external and internal evaluations and reflections. These and other “lessons learned” are highlighted in side boxes throughout the publication and summarised on pages 82-83.

Development practitioners may recognise many of these as applying to broader “best practices” in social development as highlighted in, for example, “The Next Ascent: An Evaluation of the Aga Khan Rural Support Program, Pakistan” undertaken by The World Bank (2002) or Alan Fowler’s “The Virtuous Spiral: A Guide to Sustainability for NGOs in International Development” (2000), amongst many others.⁴ In other words, while there are specific technical issues related to best practices for ECD programmes, given the context and aims of the Madrasa Programme, there are also more general challenges and issues that continue to be addressed and which the Foundation hopes are of interest to a wider array of development practitioners and agencies.

Facing page: Children play between classes at Nurul Ismayila Madrasa Pre-school (Unguja Island, Zanzibar).



MILESTONES OF THE LAST 25 YEARS

1982-1983	His Highness the Aga Khan visits Mombasa, Kenya, to meet with local Muslim leaders
1984-1985	Formation of local leaders as oversight committee <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bi Swafiya Said hired as first Director, Trainer, Community Mobiliser
1985-1986	The Madrasa Pre-school Model created <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of first integrated curriculum with local imams • Initial training of teachers and start-up of first pre-school
1989	MRC Kenya established
1990	MRC Zanzibar established
1993	MRC Uganda established
1993-1994	AKF carries out an internal review of the Programme <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Around 30 Madrasa pre-schools operating across the region
1995	Scaling-up of the Programme <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrated Curriculum and Madrasa Pre-school Model revised significantly and agreement reached on testing a “two-year” timeframe for training and support • MRC Trainers joined by new Community Development Officers; everyone goes through a series of professional development and training sessions • Regional Researcher hired, planning for new study on impact begins • Regional Office and Regional Advisory Committee established
1997	Steps begin to be taken to ensure the comfort and learning of non-Muslim children in the pre-schools, in recognition of their increasing enrolment
1998	First of the associations for graduated Madrasa pre-schools established
1999	External evaluation reviews the scale-up of Madrasa approach

- | | |
|------|---|
| 2000 | The mini-endowment scheme is developed; piloting begins in 38 schools |
| 2002 | <p>Madrasa Programme staff incorporate additional aspects into the Madrasa Pre-school Model</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Piloting begins to incorporate Health and Nutrition, Parenting, HIV/AIDS; transition to early primary within the Madrasa Model and Curriculum |
| 2004 | <p>Outreach to new geographic areas initiated</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MRCs work with local leaders and groups in the new areas in order to build their capacities to adapt and implement the Madrasa Model |
| 2007 | <p>25th Anniversary Celebration in Mombasa, Kenya, with His Highness the Aga Khan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many of the Muslim leaders who were originally present at the first meeting in 1982 in attendance |
| 2008 | Adaptation of the Madrasa Pre-school Model and Training of Trainers for other AKDN ECD programmes beyond East Africa, including Egypt and Afghanistan |

kenya tanzania uganda
Students benefited: 67'916



FIRST STEPS: 1982 TO 1989

“I feel that success in the MRC is due to several things. First there is involvement of the community...we don’t tell them what to do but engage them in discussion to solve their own problems. They see the MRC has advice and ideas, that it supports them. It takes them time to come to realise and value this approach...they take our guidance with appreciation, and respect our ideas and the fact that we listen to their problems.”

Hajara Ndayidde, former Director, MRC Uganda

Madrasas have long existed in East Africa to provide Muslim children with Quranic instruction. (see Box 1). However, prior to the establishment of the Madrasa Early Childhood Programme, the majority of these children were disadvantaged in terms of secular education – beginning with very poor access to quality mainstream educational opportunities.

In Kenya during the early 1980s, early childhood education was seen as an important key for admission to government primary schools due to the required entrance exams for children starting Grade 1.⁵ The few Muslim children who did reach primary and secondary school tended to perform badly. Parents realised that the limited and inadequate early education subsequently limited future employment opportunities.

Children who attended pre-school (often sponsored by Christian churches) were simultaneously enrolled by their parents in traditional Quranic classes leaving little time for leisure and play. In addition, exposure to two different curricula – one based on Christianity and the other on Islam – caused confusion.

At this time in Mombasa, Kenya, in addition to the problem of curricular confusion – and perhaps far outweighing it – was the sense of mistrust towards Western education. By the time Christian missionaries arrived in East Africa during the late nineteenth century, Islam had already been well established in the coastal areas, mainly through trading activities with the Middle East. Colonial conversion efforts through secular education came into conflict with the established Quranic schools, and as a result, Western education was not readily embraced.

However, to the extent that the coastal Muslims in Kenya became increasingly concerned about the educational disadvantage of their children, they began to seek ways to access Western education while simultaneously preserving their values and identity. Realising that quality secular education could help prepare their children for a better future, leaders from the primarily Sunni Muslim communities envisioned creating something new, but their communities lacked adequate resources – whether human, financial, or in terms of previous experience in the field. In 1982,

Facing page: Liwatoni Pre-school in Mombasa, Kenya, the first Madrasa Pre-school, opened its doors in October 1986. Since the mid-1990s, it has operated independently of the Madrasa Programme, offering the community active learning methods in both pre-school and primary sections.

BOX 1: WHAT IS A MADRASA?

The word “madrasa” is Arabic, and is related to the verb *darasa*, which simply means “to study”. In its most basic meaning, a madrasa is thus a place where one studies. The application of the term therefore has as many meanings as that of the English word “school”. Many of the earliest madrasas were what would be referred to today as colleges. An inventory for a madrasa in Egypt in 1045 shows that it possessed 6,500 books on a multiplicity of subjects, including astronomy, architecture and philosophy. In the eleventh century, the Saljuq Turks established an intricate network of madrasas that were particularly effective for producing capable public servants. These madrasas taught religion, the sciences, public administration and governance. In some regions, two cognate institutions existed side-by-side – a madrasa for teaching purely religious subjects, and a *dar al-ilm* for teaching the rational sciences, particularly those of the Greek tradition. Meanwhile, in South and Central Asia, many Sufi orders established madrasas where grammar, poetry, literature, logic, math, the religious sciences, Arabic and Persian were taught. At the time of British colonial rule, madrasas in South Asia began to focus more exclusively on a narrower set of religious subjects, leaving instruction in more general areas to government schools. Meanwhile, madrasas in much of the Arab world, Indonesia and Malaysia continued with their earlier practices and thus have a more inclusive curriculum even today. In some countries, a distinction is made between madrasas, which are for higher education, and *maktabs*, which are similar to English grammar schools, and which concentrate on teaching basic reading and writing skills to youngsters through means of Quranic instruction. Meanwhile, in East Africa, the term “madrasa” is commonly used for Muslim schools that may cater to children of a wide range of ages. In Indonesia, a distinction is drawn between madrasas, which are religious day schools, and *pesantrens* or *pondoks*, which are Muslim boarding schools.

Historically, in Muslim societies, education was highly valued, and so madrasa tuition was often heavily subsidised by generous sponsors. The large numbers of students attending classes, particularly in the classes of popular teachers, led to the development of the tradition of “*mustamlī*” – announcers with booming voices who would loudly repeat what a soft-spoken teacher said so that students sitting in the back could take accurate notes!

Madrasas have long existed in East Africa. The famous fourteenth-century traveller, Ibn Battuta, who voyaged along the East African coast from Aden to Mogadishu, Mombasa and Kilwa, mentions that the Muslim community had its own madrasa.

As in most world cultures of the Middle Ages, female education in the formal school system was rather uncommon in many Muslim societies, though it certainly did exist. It is only in more recent times, however, that female enrolment has increased dramatically in madrasas, and in places like Indonesia, the United Kingdom, and East Africa, female enrolment can often equal or even exceed male enrolment.

With exciting advances in teaching pedagogy, increased contact and cooperation among Muslims from a wide variety of ethnic, linguistic, cultural and interpretive backgrounds, and new thinking about curriculum content, the twenty-first century holds tremendous potential for re-imagining the evolving role of madrasas and education in Muslim societies.

these leaders requested assistance from His Highness the Aga Khan, Imam (spiritual leader) of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, to work with them and their communities to find a solution. Following a meeting, it was decided that the Mombasa leaders would assess the local needs of their communities and propose an appropriate course of action. Their efforts were supported by the Aga Khan through technical assistance and funds provided by the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF).

This agreement set a process in motion. Beginning in 1983, a dialogue between local Islamic communities and AKF East Africa resulted in an assessment of the Islamic communities' needs and resources following which a survey was conducted of all the primary schools in Mombasa. It was discovered that the 10 schools with the worst performance had predominantly Muslim students. Visits were made to local communities where it was observed that (a) many Muslim children were attending pre-school in order to enrol in a good primary school, but parents complained that the only options were in often expensive, Christian-run pre-schools; (b) each village had a madrasa used for classes for older children in afternoons and evenings after they returned home from secular primary or secondary school, and which was thus empty during the mornings; and (c) villagers said there were secondary school graduates in the village who could become pre-school teachers.

In response to this assessment, AKF launched the Early Childhood Education Project (later renamed the Madrasa Programme) – a move that, over time, was to have a far-reaching impact on the Ummah (Islamic community) in East Africa. At the outset, however, despite the shared community concerns and goals around which the programme aspired to develop, there was no shortage of challenges.

Establishing trust

Although leaders from the Muslim Ummah had requested support from His Highness the Aga Khan, some local religious and community leaders were initially sceptical about the project. Among their concerns was the issue of a Shia Muslim Imam assisting the development of schools that would teach primarily Sunni Muslim children. As a result, establishing trust and credibility among all the various leaders involved became a major challenge in setting up the Madrasa Programme.

This required two things: first, that the goals of the Madrasa Pre-school Programme be communicated clearly to all involved and consistent with what was needed to help Muslim children enter and succeed in secular primary schools. Second, the individuals leading the work would be local people from the area, widely respected and known to the communities.

Consensus

A programme is most effective when people build consensus around issues that can help them to cut across barriers or boundaries. Young children and their holistic needs offer an especially good focus. Similarly, faith – in the case of the Madrasa Programme, Muslim faith – brings people together and provides another platform around which people build consensus.



Establishing trust and credibility among the various leaders involved was a major challenge in setting up the Madrasa Programme. Bi Swafiya Said, a local, well-respected Muslim woman trained as a primary teacher, was identified to join the project as its first Director.

To address these issues, local leaders who could shepherd the entire process were selected. Lutf Maherali, a highly respected member of the Mombasa Ismaili Muslim community, was asked to chair what was then the Early Childhood Education Project Committee (known as the Early Childhood Committee)⁶, which consisted of well known individuals from various Muslim communities. As this committee got underway, a search also began for someone who could lead and nurture the Programme. The project leaders were clear that this individual must be accepted by the parents of the school children as well as the local imams (religious leaders), and that it be someone who could successfully promote this educational initiative. Bi Swafiya Said, a local, well-respected Muslim woman trained as a primary teacher, was identified and she agreed to join the project as its first Director.

The committee and Bi Swafiya (after she was hired) also worked hard to convince traditional madrasa teachers that the new pre-school would not dilute the religious content, but integrate religious and secular components so that Muslim children could be admitted and succeed in primary school.

The dialogue with the Muslim community continued for over three years before the first pre-school was created. Despite these efforts, even as the first Madrasa Pre-school was being established, many people remained sceptical.

The Madrasa Programme was able to move forward when it harnessed the motivations, values and practices of the people participating in the effort. The innovation came in finding ways to integrate Muslim values into classroom practice, creating an environment where secular learning could be offered in a context that was not at odds with Muslim ways of thinking or behaving in the East African context.

The question of how best to provide both religious and secular education simultaneously for Muslim children while preserving their values was already something that Bi Swafiya had long thought about. In 1982 she began working with her first grandson, who was enrolled in a nursery school, creating songs, stories and rhymes that incorporated Islamic values and beliefs and experimented with how to teach the Arabic alphabet. She was hoping to start her own Islamic pre-school upon retirement. The offer to be involved in the Madrasa Programme came at the right time.

Bi Swafiya was hired as the first Director of the pilot initiative but also served as the trainer, curriculum developer and community organiser. Although she had begun to create some pre-school activities as a result of working with her grandson, in the early days Bi Swafiya found the task very challenging. Having never worked in ECD, she had to learn on the job. After spending time with mentors and trainers in AKF-supported projects in India and the United Kingdom, Bi Swafiya became well grounded in programming for young children and took on the task with enthusiasm.

As a result of her commitment and Lutf Maherali's diplomacy, along with the Madrasa Programme's performance, suspicions and fears were gradually overcome in the community. For all those involved, it would quickly become apparent how the programme was developing the Ummah's future leaders. Soon more and more traditional madrasas would open their doors, requesting assistance from the Madrasa Programme to develop and support their own integrated pre-school.

Identifying pilot communities

With a local volunteer committee and Bi Swafiya as Director in place, the time had come to select the first handful of communities in which to pilot the programme. The starting point in working with communities was assessing their interest and readiness to identify not only its problems, but also its strengths and weaknesses. It was also important that the

Investment in People

Effective programmes are people-centred. In the Madrasa Programme, children are placed at the centre: their development and experiences are of primary concern. But others stand at the centre as well: the parents; the teachers and others who work in the programme; the community; the families of those who participate; and the religious and secular leaders and institutions heading the effort. It is a programme built with and around people it serves.

Muslims living in coastal Mombasa had strongly held goals for their children focused on religious training and traditions. At the same time, broader societal forces were also making demands, both economic and cultural. The Madrasa Programme worked with communities to find an appropriate response to these multiple expectations and demands at the outset of the Programme.



Bi Swafiya Said, better known as *nyanya* (grandmother in Swahili) of the Madrasa Programme.

Key Staff

The nucleus of a successful development effort is built on people. Too often we think in terms of setting up systems and implementing programmes. But at the core is the work done by pivotal people, people who have the ability to make relationships, establish rapport with a wide variety of stakeholders, and create a situation where there is mutual credibility and respect between stakeholders and programme planners and staff throughout the life of the project. In its inception, the Madrasa Programme was fortunate to find two such pivotal people, with complementary skill sets – Bi Swafiya Said (above) and Lutaf Maherali.

community believe in the long-term benefits that would accrue as a result of the intervention and be willing to support its pre-school.

The participatory approach of the Madrasa Programme emphasises local management and ownership of the pre-schools, as well as long-term benefits for the children and their families. It therefore appealed to the longstanding tradition of community self-help in the region. The process of working with communities made it possible for them to take decisions on their own behalf from the very beginning, and ensure that ideas were discussed and needs defined before implementation began.

Opening the first school

The first Madrasa Pre-school was set up at Liwatoni Mosque. Bi Swafiya met with the management committee at the mosque and explained the idea for the Madrasa Pre-school. She had three meetings with the committee before the pre-school opened. The first led to an initial agreement to set up a pre-school while two subsequent meetings were to help interview teachers. This was followed by the preparation of a classroom and an office for Bi Swafiya (transformed from a storeroom). The pre-school was soon ready with furniture and toys. Bi Swafiya then organised two parent meetings, both of which were poorly attended. It was therefore unclear what to expect in terms of children's participation in the pre-school.

At long last, on 2 October 1986, the first Madrasa Pre-school opened. It began with four children and four adults: the Chairman Lutaf Maherali with his camera, the head teacher Hanifa Sheikh (see Box 2), her assistant teacher and Bi Swafiya. One of the four children was Bi Swafiya's grandson, and another one was the sister of Bi Swafiya's assistant.

Bi Swafiya approached the low attendance as a challenge and began a door-to-door campaign in the area. Within two weeks the number of children increased to 30, the targeted goal. Over several years Liwatoni Mosque doubled up as a classroom and a small resource centre where teachers would be trained.

Creating a new curriculum

In addition to identifying pilot communities and establishing credibility therein, the Madrasa Programme was faced with the challenge of creating a curriculum that was grounded in Islamic knowledge, values and practices and that also provided children with the skills they needed to gain access to primary school. The premise of the curriculum was that Islam is a way of life, not an additional subject in the syllabus. Therefore the curriculum and children's experience of it needed to enhance the full development of

BOX 2: HANIFA SHEIKH

Born in 1967, and the mother of two boys, Hanifa was the first Madrasa Pre-school teacher. In her own words, Hanifa states that as the project was growing, so was she – socially, professionally and personally.

Hanifa's childhood was difficult. Her mother died when Hanifa was very young. Her father remarried and her new stepmother insisted Hanifa do all the housework and cooking. Morning chores made Hanifa late for school, so she often ended up using the few coins she had which were meant for snacks to pay the fine for arriving late. Despite these difficulties she remained in school and completed Form IV at Jaffery Academy.

Initially, Hanifa envisioned running her own business where she could be her own boss. Her elder brother offered to take her to England for beautician training so that she could return to Mombasa and open up a beauty parlour. This plan became a driving force in Hanifa's life and, as luck would have it, a training school for beauticians opened in Mombasa, bringing her dream even closer within reach. Or so it seemed. While Hanifa's brother was negotiating with the manager of the beautician school he saw an advertisement at Liwatoni Mosque to the effect that a new pre-school programme required a young Muslim lady to be employed as a teacher.

Hanifa's brother persuaded her to pursue the teaching opportunity. Not wanting to disappoint him, she applied for the job. However, during the course of the interview, she feigned a stomach ache and excused herself for fear of actually getting the job and missing out on her dream of starting her own business. The interview panel was not put off by this. To the contrary, Hanifa had made such an impression that she was subsequently offered the position.

Once she took up the job she came to like and appreciate the work in no time. By December 1986, after only two months on the job, she confessed to her brother how much she enjoyed teaching. As head teacher at Liwatoni, Hanifa conducted on-the-job training for the other teachers, though she herself had very little experience. With time, Hanifa became confident in her work. When Bi Swafiya announced that an assistant would be needed in the Resource Centre that was being created, Hanifa accepted the position immediately.

What has the project done for her? Hanifa explains that she has gained a lot, "I grew up with the project. I moved from nowhere to somewhere... I received a lot of training and exposure, which have become the backbone of my professional growth." Hanifa goes on to say: "I became stronger and gained confidence. Before joining the Madrasa Programme I could not speak in front of people. Today I can address a crowd of 300 people confidently."

Hanifa is now Head Teacher of Jaffery Academy, which she attended as a child.

the child within the traditional, cultural and religious values of the family and the community.

It was also important to base the methodology on principles consistent with an understanding of the ways in which young children learn. This meant that the curriculum would adopt the principles and methods of child-centred active learning. Unlike traditional “chalk and talk” exercises that produce empty repetition, these activities would emphasise the importance of play and of “doing” in every sense – seeing, listening, smelling, touching and tasting. For example, after listening to a story, children could work in pairs to draw a picture about the text. They would have to talk and listen to each other and they would have to use their hands to touch, discuss and draw pictures.

Local women selected to be Madrasa Pre-school teachers have received training, mentoring and exposure which have become the foundation of their professional and personal growth. Not least of all, they report an increased confidence in themselves and their ability to address large groups within the community.

The process of developing the Madrasa Curriculum involved the adaptation of the existing programme (the Perry Pre-school Curriculum developed



by the High Scope Educational Research Foundation⁷). This Curriculum was easily modified to be more culturally appropriate. With technical support from AKF, Bi Swafiya developed the curriculum and the overall approach together with communities and religious teachers. She held a workshop with a group of 15 *maalims* (teachers in Quranic schools) to identify what religious and cultural values, norms and practices of the local communities they thought should be included in the content of pre-school programmes from an Islamic perspective. The Swahili word “*maalim*” comes from the Arabic “*mu’allim*”, which means teacher. The *maalims* were experienced teachers in Quranic schools, and thus their input was of great value. In response to Bi Swafiya’s appeal, the *maalims* actively assisted in identifying age-appropriate content within the concepts of *Qiraa*, *Tawheed*, *Seera*, *Akhlaq* and *Hadith* (See Box 3). As a result of the consultation process, more and more *maalims* began to support the programme.

Local Cultures and Values

“I had recognised that the ECD strategies applied in the African communities needed a change to capture the local socio-economic, cultural and religious contexts. On being employed I saw this as an opportunity to actualise this thinking.”

Bi Swafiya Said, First Director, MRC Kenya

BOX 3: ISLAMIC CONCEPTS AND THEIR APPLICATION TO CHILDREN AGE 3-6

Qiraa refers to the reading of the Muslim sacred scripture, the Quran, and thus involves the learning of the Arabic alphabet. In the Madrasa Pre-school this is done in an active manner where children sound out the letters, match sounds and letters to pictures, build words using their local languages, and finally start reading small excerpts from the Quran.

Tawheed refers to the Oneness of God, who is known as Allah. Lessons on this subject inculcate in students the wonders of God’s creation and the importance of daily prayers. The distinction between God’s creation and man-made things is made through taking walks around the school, stories and drawings. Children also learn about the prophets, many of whom are shared with the Judaeo-Christian heritage, and how they inspired people.

Seera involves relating stories from the life of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) such that he becomes a loved and cherished presence in the life of the child. Children are made aware of the Prophet’s qualities, such as kindness to animals, his trustworthiness, and his concern for the sick and poor.

Akhlaq and *Hadith* involve the teaching of values, morals, good behaviour and the Islamic etiquette through the medium of the Prophet’s sayings. Principles of hygiene such as the washing of hands before and after meals are reinforced in practical ways at the classroom level during snack time and after visiting the washroom. Thanking Allah before and after a meal is an example of the practical principles taught under this rubric.

The Early Childhood Education Project Committee along with its later iterations⁸ has been an important dialogue partner at each step of the curriculum development and revision process. The Committee's task has been to ensure that the emerging Curriculum speaks to local customs, traditions and cultures.

The integrated Madrasa Pre-school Curriculum encourages early literacy and numeracy skills, and learning in co-operation with peers to solve problems in age-appropriate ways.

The resulting first edition of the integrated Madrasa Pre-school Curriculum brought together local Swahili culture, including language, songs and stories with key values and teachings from Islam, and contemporary pre-school methodologies and content. It promoted culturally relevant early learning and social development for pre-schoolers. In particular, it encouraged early literacy and numeracy skills, socialising with and learning how to work with peers, learning religious customs and rituals, and engaging in active exploration and problem-solving in age-appropriate ways. In the late 1990s, Madrasa Programme staff worked with ECD resource persons to update this first edition. A lively acronym was created at that time for



the revised curriculum: MAMACHOLASU, which represented the five dimensions (Materials, Manipulation, Choice, Language and Support) of the Curriculum.

As noted above, the Madrasa Pre-school Curriculum has been revised continuously as the Programme has evolved. New content has been included, additional guides and resource books for teachers have been created, and more activities have been developed to help children learn. In addition, the materials have been translated into relevant local languages including Swahili and Luganda.

At first, the integrated Curriculum and the concept of child-centred learning were new for parents and others in the communities. Indeed, it was new to almost everyone and required flexibility and adaptation by the teachers, parents and even staff of the donor agency supporting the effort. Yet this new approach to preparing young children for the world was able to take root effectively and move forward. The relationships established in the four initial years of planning that formed the foundation were based *on shared concerns and aspirations* (the deep desire to raise children using Muslim values), nurtured with *mutual credibility* and *respect* (from the tireless efforts of committed individuals) and, later, formalised by a clearly defined and agreed upon agenda.

Getting Madrasa schools off the ground

The role of the Madrasa Pre-school has always been to facilitate the development of a healthy, creative personality as well as the skills and abilities that would enable Muslim children to thrive in a pluralistic society while retaining their moral, spiritual and cultural identity. From the beginning, there was particular concern that these pre-schools be made available to Muslim children from families with very limited incomes. As a result, establishing and equipping the community ECD centres was kept at a reasonable cost to make the pre-schools affordable. This was done through using local resources for learning materials such as shells, home-made dolls, teacher-made puzzles and games. In addition, furniture and other materials were kept simple and playground equipment was constructed rather than purchased.

One of the challenges included finding an appropriate setting. The first pre-schools were set up in existing spaces usually used by the Quranic teacher in or next to the local mosque. A small grant (around US\$ 1,000) was provided by AKF to make changes in the infrastructure to accommodate the pre-school and to purchase or construct basic materials and equipment. However, there were sometimes complications because of the multiple uses



The first edition of the Madrasa Pre-school Curriculum brought together local Swahili culture, including language, songs and stories, with key values and teachings from Islam, as well as contemporary pre-school methodologies and content.

BOX 4: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A MADRASA PRE-SCHOOL

Children who live close by arrive at the pre-school on their own, while others are accompanied by a parent or older sibling. They are excited to come because they know there will be toys and people to play with, interesting materials and activities they can engage in with others, or on their own, and adults who are warm and caring. The classrooms are colourful, with pictures of things and places representing the local culture. The Arabic, English and Swahili alphabets are on the wall (Luganda is used in Uganda). The rooms are full of things that the parents and children have made or contributed. Madrasa pre-schools generally have one teacher for every 15-20 children and there are usually two teachers in a class for 30-35 children.

As the children enter the room, leaving their shoes outside the door, they greet their teachers, who quickly check to see that they come with their faces washed, fingernails and hands clean and have no signs of illness such as fever. Children store their belongings and join others sitting in the morning circle. The teacher begins the day with a greeting, prayer, singing and exchange of news. This is followed by small group time for 20 minutes, which is designed to enhance children's understanding and experience of one of the four religious topics in the curriculum: *Qiraa*, *Tawheed*, *Seera*, and *Akhlaq* and *Hadith*.

The children then plan what they are going to do during “work” time. They have many options. Classrooms are set up with designated areas where everything is labelled in Arabic, Swahili and English (and Luganda in Uganda). By naming objects children become familiar with the core languages and common words in their environment. Children also learn the words associated with the object – a precursor to reading.

One area is filled with pieces of wood of varying sizes and shapes, sticks, empty pop cans and other objects that children use to construct a building or truck or any structure that inspires their imagination. The children play out events that involve their construction – perhaps a lorry is built for taking things from the *shamba* (a small plot of land worked on by families to grow food and other crops) to town or a bridge is built to cross over a



local river. There is a reading station where children can either explore books on their own or have an adult read to them. Another area is for playing “pretend”, set up with miniature versions of local cooking vessels or other objects used for preparing food (e.g., utensils for grating coconut, pounding millet), a play cooking fire/stove as well as dress-up clothes and home-made dolls, where children can role play what it means to be part of a family. The sand and water areas are often located outside the classroom and are filled with discarded plastic bottles, strainers, funnels that can be used to pour, sift, measure or carry out experiments of what floats or sinks. Still another option might be an arts corner where there are materials with which the children can express themselves through painting, drawing, colouring and pasting. In addition, play tables are set up with puzzles, peg boards, laces and beads and string.

When “work” time is over all children participate in cleaning up and putting things back where they belong. Then they are brought together to share their experiences, telling the teacher and the other children what they did during the work time. This is followed by a time for washing up using Islamic hygiene practices, and having a snack together. After that a learning activity is conducted, led by the teacher that helps children to understand new concepts related to early literacy and maths development and to gain new skills in thinking and reasoning. This time may also be used to tell stories about the Prophet and for learning prayers and songs. Before the school day ends, children also have a chance to play outdoors in the playground. The children leave around noon. Everyone is exhausted but happy – children and teachers alike. Children have had opportunities to learn more about their environment, both culturally and physically. They have had a chance to play with peers and learn how to be respectful members of a community. Teachers see the ways in which the children are gaining new skills and they use this progress as the basis for planning an even more effective environment in the days that follow.

After school ends the teachers discuss their plans for the next day. Periodically, they sit together and plan parent meetings that are generally held in the evening at least twice a term. During these meetings, the local nurse might come to talk about what to do when children have fevers or how to know when they should be taken to a health clinic.

See enclosed DVD



“Work” time



Outdoor play



A day in the life of a Madrasa pre-schooler involves various activities. Here, a student expresses herself in the arts corner:

of the facilities with Madrasa pre-schoolers in the morning, traditional madrasa children in the early afternoon and primary school students in the late afternoon. Pre-school teachers needed to set up and disassemble all the furniture, learning spaces, wall charts, books and other classroom equipment and supplies every morning, which was a time-consuming task. Over the years, while some pre-schools have continued to operate in mosques, many of them have built or acquired their own space to avoid these difficulties faced by the first set of pre-schools.

As time went on more was learned about the successes and the areas for improvement in regard to community support. Specific requirements were made regarding the membership of the School Management Committees (SMCs), e.g., the need for a minimum of three women per committee to be elected out of a total of around eight members to ensure parents' perspectives and involvement. The members included parents of children attending the pre-school but also other trusted community members or leaders. With training and support the SMCs developed greater self-confidence. Lessons from the Effectiveness Initiative studies demonstrated that effective social programming is linked to the level of self-confidence nurtured in participants. In its study of the Madrasa Programme, it reports that it is now not uncommon to hear SMC members make statements like, "We are responsible for our own activities" and "This is our programme, helping our own communities".

As noted, one of the tasks of the SMCs was to identify a young woman from their community to teach in the new pre-school. During the first decade or so, many of these young women had often only completed Grade 8 or possibly Grade 10. Virtually none had any formal training that would prepare them to be pre-school teachers although all had taken care of young children in their homes and their extended families. Almost all needed to seek the blessings of their fathers (or husbands) to accept the job. In a traditional society, teaching was one of the few occupations open to many East African Muslim women, and teaching in a Madrasa Pre-school was seen as safe and relevant for their future roles as mothers. There have been times when husbands have felt their wives were spending too much time working in the pre-school, a problem which also had to be addressed.

AKF sent Bi Swafiya (the Director) for early childhood training and visits to other Foundation programmes for young children early on. Her experiences helped her to have a better understanding of what it means to work with pre-school-aged children, train and mentor teachers and to understand the challenges she was going to face. From the start, teachers involved in the first pre-schools learned while on-the-job

and as they learned, some were gradually able to take on the work of training others.

The training in the Madrasa Programme has always involved an introduction to theory combined with opportunities to apply that theory in the classroom under the regular guidance of a mentor trainer. This has provided trainees with the opportunity to work with children at the same time as learning about child development and being introduced to the curriculum. This was particularly important in view of the fact that many had not finished secondary schooling. The modelling and mentoring by Bi Swafiya gave the trainees new skills and knowledge along with increasing confidence in themselves.

The first teacher training classes were held in Liwatoni Mosque where the original Madrasa Pre-school was offered. Once there were 10 pre-schools underway, training included a series of classroom-based workshops and seminars combined with practical sessions, where Bi Swafiya, and later her assistant, observed the teacher in her own setting and provided feedback. The content of the training was developed before the training began, but as it became evident that new topics were required, they were added to the training syllabus.

In those initial years, Bi Swafiya was learning and working through a variety of challenges as the Madrasa Pre-school approach was piloted and refined alongside the trainees. Everyone was learning and problem-solving together.



School Management Committees (SMCs) in the Madrasa Programme are required to have a minimum of three women elected out of a total of eight members to ensure parents' perspectives and involvement. SMC members often express their sense of ownership in managing the pre-schools: "We are responsible for our own activities... this is our programme, helping our own communities."



From the start, teachers involved in the first pre-schools learned while on-the-job and as they learned, some were gradually able to take on the work of training others.



REGIONAL EXPANSION AND THE CREATION OF MADRASA RESOURCE CENTRES: 1990 TO 1995

By 1989, a solid three-month teacher training programme had been developed in Mombasa. This training process helped to ensure a similar philosophy and approach during the early period of expansion. To this day, new staff and community teachers undergo a combination of training sessions held at the training centre, with regular follow-up and on-the-job training that includes mentoring in the schools. Trainers share their reflections of what has been observed during a visit to the classroom and, where necessary, actually demonstrate strategies for the new teachers.

To the extent that training processes were evolving (see Box 5) and the first clusters of Madrasa pre-schools were becoming established in Mombasa, other communities in East Africa were hearing about the Programme. In 1989, community and religious leaders in nearby Zanzibar heard about this integrated approach to pre-school education and expressed interest in visiting the Programme and replicating it in Zanzibar, whose population is more than 95 percent Muslim.

Facing page: Outdoor playtime for students at Mulkul Chake Chake Pre-school on Pemba Island (Zanzibar).

BOX 5: THE EVOLUTION OF TRAINING IN MOMBASA

1990: A three-month full-time training course in the Mombasa training centre.

1991 to 1992: The training period is increased to four months.

1993 to 1995: Six months of full-time training course offered – in essence, an equivalent of 10 weeks of class work within the six months, complemented by observations of the trainees as they worked in their pre-schools.

1996 to 2006: A two-year training period that began with a month-long initial orientation introducing the basic concepts of active learning, demonstrating how to set up an appropriate learning environment and showing how to develop low-cost classroom materials. Thereafter teachers-in-training went to the Madrasa Resource Centre in Mombasa twice a week and received in-school support once a week for 78 weeks.

2007 to date: The MRC in Mombasa schedules the trainings to coincide with regular school holidays. The trainees come together for three-week sessions in April, August and December for a total of nine full weeks. This schedule allows teacher trainees to complete their training over one year as opposed to two years which reduces training costs and travel expenses. MRC staff are also able to concentrate on other activities during the school term.

Creation of Madrasa Resource Centres

With 14 community pre-schools implementing the Madrasa approach and demand growing from other Muslim communities, AKF began to discuss with Bi Swafiya and her local Committee options for expansion. The decision was made to set up an institutional base, which could serve as a training and resource centre. The centre would support the increasing number of schools in Mombasa, and serve as a key point of contact for what was happening on the ground with those beyond the programme. In time, the centre became the base from which support could be provided to other countries. As a result, the teacher training moved from Liwatoni Mosque to a more central location. The building chosen was refurbished, providing large rooms for training and a resource library consisting of books and locally made materials that could be used in the future training of teachers. In 1989 the first Madrasa Resource Centre (MRC) was registered as a local civil society organisation in Kenya.

Things developed quickly in Zanzibar. In 1989, during his visit to Zanzibar, His Highness the Aga Khan was approached by Muslim leaders with a request to start an Islamic University. While the idea was discussed, local leaders were encouraged to start thinking about pre-school education as an important investment in their communities. It was suggested they visit Mombasa and meet with the people who had started the Madrasa Programme.

The leaders agreed and a delegation was sent to Mombasa to learn about the experience of integrated Islamic pre-schools. The idea was enthusiastically adopted and, soon after the visit, five teachers were sent to Mombasa for training. Two Muslim leaders volunteered to establish pilot schools in Zanzibar Stone Town. An office in Stone Town was rented and renovated and the Zanzibar MRC began operations in 1990 with a handful of pre-schools. As in Kenya earlier, there were some who expressed concerns and scepticism as the programme was being introduced. However, through dialogue, fears were allayed and communities started joining the programme. In fact, communities began to approach the MRC requesting support and training to establish a pre-school. The MRC did not need to convince traditional madrasa communities of the importance of the pre-school in the same way they did in Mombasa. People could see what was happening in Mombasa and word of mouth, particularly through strong endorsements from parents whose children had been attending the pre-schools in Mombasa, helped spread the programme.

The third MRC was established in 1993 in Kampala, Uganda and, like the other MRCs, it emerged out of discussions between local communities,

Ismaili Muslim leaders and senior staff from the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) institutions. A team from Mombasa, including Bi Swafiya and Muslim leaders, was sent to Uganda to discuss the idea. After extensive discussions, the Muslim leadership in Uganda selected a team, including a woman from the Ministry of Education, to visit Mombasa to learn more about the programme. Their observations convinced them that the programme could work very well in Uganda. Three pilot pre-schools were identified within Kampala District, each one working with one of the three main Sunni Muslim communities which, at the time, had very little interaction with each other. AKF and the Muslim leadership therefore felt it was important to work with all three rather than only one or two.

A group of teachers from the three communities was selected, two from each school, to go for training in Mombasa for six months. Unlike teachers in Mombasa and Zanzibar, the Ugandan teachers were not from Swahili backgrounds and did not speak Swahili fluently. As a result, there was considerable learning by all. Further adaptation of the Madrasa Curriculum to the Muslim communities and cultures in this new area of operation

In Mombasa, new staff and community teachers undergo a combination of training sessions, held at the Madrasa Resource Centre, and regular follow-up and on-the-job mentoring in the schools. During various workshops, the participants discover new classroom reading materials and learn how to make use of local, low-cost materials for creating teaching/learning aids.





To help teachers implement the integrated Madrasa Pre-School Curriculum, local MRC staff (**above**, in Zanzibar; **facing page**, in Kampala) assist them in making low-cost materials for their classrooms.

began to be introduced. After the training, teachers started implementing the ideas and were monitored by Bi Swafiya. Some of those trained became the first staff of the MRC Uganda.

As MRCs were established and registered in each country, a volunteer national board consisting of local educators, Muslim leaders and businessmen and businesswomen continued to be set up to oversee their work.

Across the region, at the time the MRCs were created, demand for pre-school education was growing. The vast majority of the pre-schools in the region were privately owned and run, or set-up by local community organisations or faith-based organisations. At the same time, governments had (or were putting into place) requirements for registering pre-schools, although many remained unregistered. The MRCs soon found themselves spending considerable time advocating for simpler, more transparent processes and procedures for their communities' pre-schools, including persuading governments to have



lower fees to register non-profit, community pre-schools than those that were private and for-profit.

In 1995, a volunteer Regional Committee was created by the Aga Khan Foundation to oversee and advise the new regional structure; it also has clear links to the three national boards through the inclusion of their National Board Chairs. The Committee also includes East African Muslim leaders and AKF representatives as well as regional and international experts in ECD, maternal/child health and Islam. This mechanism enables the MRCs and their boards to work in tandem, provides for the cross-fertilisation of ideas and problem-solving approaches, and enables linkages beyond East Africa. It also allows for the reflection and grounding of the MRCs on a set of agreed core values, methodologies and philosophy, which have been critical to the credibility and growth of the Madrasa Programme.

Given the diversity of the Muslim Ummah in the three countries, and indeed across the world, from the very onset, the Madrasa Programme



BOX 6: THE EVOLUTION OF EXTERNAL FUNDING SUPPORT

During the initial years, AKF was the only source of funding for the Programme. This was important not only to allow for the early piloting but also to establish trust between the communities, the Madrasa Programme and AKF. By 1992, other donor agencies started to support the MRCs and their work with communities. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) was amongst the first. It has since provided critical funding which has helped to develop, refine and expand the work of the MRCs over the years. Another early donor was UNICEF in Kenya. By the mid-1990s after all three MRCs were established and plans for expansion were being developed, other donor agencies began to support the MRCs including the European Union, The World Bank, the Government of Kenya, the Bernard van Leer Foundation and the Rahimtulla Trust (located in Kenya). Since then, Comic Relief, the Ford Foundation and other sources including APAX, the American Embassy in Kenya, Barclays Bank in Kenya and Apex Africa have all supported one or more of the MRCs and the Regional Office. Since around 2004, USAID has provided considerable funding support to all three MRCs and has particularly encouraged their efforts to expand outside their primary areas of work. And, in 2006, Johnson & Johnson began supporting the Zanzibar MRC and then later other regional efforts related to strengthening their work in health, nutrition and working with parents. Finally, some individuals have also provided support to the Madrasa Programme as well as to specific Madrasa pre-schools.

made it clear that it would not promote any one interpretation of Islam over another. The MRCs therefore do not involve themselves in the promotion of a specific theology. Instead, they provide the framework and support for setting up and operating the local pre-schools and for using teaching methodologies that encourage children's active participation and thinking. By working with local religious and other community leadership, they ensure that the core values and universal Islamic principles are followed.

Within this agreed philosophy and set of goals across the three MRCs, each has developed its own characteristics based on local needs and opportunities. For example, Swahili is the language of instruction in Mombasa and Zanzibar; however, the materials used in the MRC Programme in Uganda are in Luganda. With the expansion of the MRCs to northern Uganda and to the North-eastern Province of Kenya, materials are being further adapted and translated into other languages as well.

Creation of a Regional Office

While common core principles and a regional advisory committee helped to facilitate and oversee the expanded structure of the Madrasa Programme, there was an increasing need to provide direct technical assistance and to support coordination as well as collaboration amongst the three MRCs in East Africa. The mechanism for this support was a Regional Office, created in 1995. The role of the Regional Office has been to oversee development of activities and structures that can address issues of quality in pre-school programming; strengthen the relationship between the MRCs, the pre-school SMCs and the wider community in each country; address issues that are common to all three MRCs, such as upgrading the curriculum, consolidating the teacher training process, and attaining recognition and certification of teacher training processes; serving as an interface with donors; and handling public relation issues resulting from the programme's increasing profile within the broader social development community.

The mandate of the Regional Office has been to bridge diverse perspectives by working with and across the country teams to maximise the sharing of ideas. Specific activities include: organising cross-site visits, training senior MRC staff, refining the curriculum, co-creating materials, enhancing teacher training processes and creating new systems for monitoring and evaluation. Forums are held two to three times a year in which the Regional Office, the MRC Programme Directors and their senior trainers and the Community Development Officers come together to discuss key programmatic issues of concern. There are also data collection mechanisms that the Regional Office has been putting in place in the three countries to ensure that the positive outcomes for MRC children are substantiated with evidence, and thoughtful study and review. The goal of all these activities is to strengthen the MRCs' approaches to early childhood programming.

By bringing together the three relatively independent MRCs, the Regional Office works to optimise the efficiency and coherency of the overall approach and methodology of the Madrasa community-based pre-schools. A particularly important outcome of bringing staff together across the MRCs has been the regular exchange of ideas and lessons learned through meetings, discussions, training and assessment sessions, which in turn have encouraged a *culture of reflection*. Between 1999 and 2002, both external and internal evaluations would conclude that the improvements in quality and scale that took place in the Madrasa Programme during its second phase of development were largely due to this ongoing reflection and mutual support.⁹

Culture of Learning

A programme takes root and expands when there is a multi-directional flow of learning, exchange, activity, giving and receiving. When the systems set up to support the programme mesh well, there emerges a productive synergy rather than competition for funds and time and energy. Learning applies both to individuals and the programme as an "organism". It includes learning from each other in the programme, clear management structures without strict hierarchies, learning from mistakes, and learning as an organisation that leads to revising structures in order to support the ever-evolving needs of the programme.



The MRCs provide the framework and support for setting up and operating the local pre-schools and for using teaching methodologies that encourage children's active participation. Within this agreed philosophy and set of goals across the three MRCs, each curriculum has developed its own characteristics based on local needs, customs and opportunities, as seen in this classroom in Kikuuta (Kampala).



ENHANCING QUALITY AND GOING TO SCALE: 1996 TO 2001

In 1994, AKF staff undertook an internal review of the MRCs and identified some of the main issues facing the programme at that time. These included (a) the need to address the pre-schools' financial sustainability, while also ensuring that they were community-owned and managed and were providing high-quality early learning experiences, and (b) the need to strengthen the MRCs' capacities to develop, implement and monitor the Madrasa Pre-school Programme on a larger scale in order to achieve sustainability. As a result of the review, major changes were made in relation to the curriculum, programme implementation, management and operations to address these needs (see below). In addition, the Regional Office was established to drive this next stage of development and to facilitate the exchange of ideas and lessons on a regular basis.

Clarifying “community-owned and managed” in the evolving Madrasa Model

When the project began, the primary goal was to mobilise communities in support of young children. The process of entering and working with communities created public spaces where there could be dialogue regarding how best to respond to the needs of the young children in the community, as well as how to form and support effective schools. As traditional madrasas joined the project, School Management Committees (SMCs) were created, consisting of members of the local community affiliated with a given madrasa. The role of the SMC was to ensure that the pre-schools were of high quality and well managed. An additional responsibility of the SMC was also to engage in activities that would make the Madrasa pre-schools self-sustaining.

The internal review of the Madrasa Pre-school Model showed that its structures had not been sufficiently supported. A number of the pre-schools were headed (or owned) by individuals rather than an active committee. The broad and deeper community ownership aspired to by the Programme had not yet been attained. Members of the MRC staff and national committees were often active in working with the School Management Committees, and staff from the MRCs made regular visits to support the teachers in their work. However, there was insufficient time and little, if any, explicit training and systematic follow-up in place for the SMCs to help them develop the necessary range of management skills.

In response to this challenge, the MRCs created a new staff position: the Community Development Officer (CDO). The team of CDOs in each MRC became responsible for taking the lead in mobilising communities and building the capacities of local committees to manage and oversee the financial and programmatic aspects of their pre-schools. They worked in close coordination with the existing technical teams of Early Childhood

Facing page: Some Madrasa pre-schools have started to collaborate with local health centres to carry out regular growth monitoring of children. Often parents bring younger children from the homes as well.

Education Trainers in each Centre. Together, these joint teams supported communities to improve the quality of the learning inside the pre-schools and also create the needed local support and management system to run them. Over time, CDOs and Trainers have learned to support one another and often step in to assist with aspects of each other's work.

School Management Committees (SMCs) consist of members of the local community affiliated with a given madrasa. The SMC's role is to ensure that the pre-school offers high quality education, is well managed and engages in activities that make it self-sustainable.

The complementary work by these new duo technical teams in the MRCs was further reinforced when the MRCs established for the first time a clear written "contract" that was signed by each SMC (in the presence of the wider community) and the MRC. The contract spelled out expectations and contributions from both sides. The MRCs articulated the training and follow-up support they would provide over the proposed timeframe, and communities and the SMCs agreed to specific contributions and support for the pre-school such as rehabilitation, selection of suitable local women to be trained as teachers, etc. As SMC members begin to implement what they learn, CDOs make regular on-site visits to support the institutionalisation of these school management practices.



As noted previously, extensive training for the teachers happens as well and it too was revised and updated during this period (see Box 5). All of these changes to the Madrasa Model put the MRCs more firmly on the road to establishing and/or strengthening effective local support systems with the leadership capacities needed to run a quality community pre-school. Additional improvements continue to be made.

Pre-schools “graduate” to greater independence

During the initial period of expansion in 1996-2001, the two main driving forces for the idea of graduation were that (a) the MRCs planned to reach new communities on a yearly basis and each one required intensive training and mentoring. There was, therefore, an issue of how many communities MRC staff could support at any one time, and (b) the MRCs were keen to promote the idea of communities sustaining their own pre-schools over a period of time which they hoped would result in decreasing levels of direct and intensive input from the MRC staff, and in improved local support structures.

The interest to work at a larger scale led the Regional Office and the MRCs to think through what training systems and structures were needed that would enable both teachers and SMCs to operate eventually more independently. The model was updated and re-worked, and planning progressed to scale up the model to a growing number of interested communities. It was estimated that a period of two to three years was required to enable a Madrasa pre-school to be established, with trained staff and SMC members, and be functioning fairly independently. This timeframe became part of the new contracts with communities; the end result was “graduation” from the Madrasa Programme.

A monitoring tool was developed in order to help the MRC staff, the SMCs, parents and the teachers gauge more objectively whether communities were making progress in terms of the quality of the pre-school learning environment, the functioning of the SMCs, the involvement of parents and communities in supporting their local pre-school and the integration of local cultural and religious values and practices. The tool, the Madrasa Pre-school Evaluation Instrument, was adapted from an existing one. It is used twice yearly with the active participation of the teachers and the SMCs. The SMCs and teachers use the results to develop plans for the following six months for the pre-school, thereby building in continual reflection and assessment. This tool seems to encourage discussions around quality that reflect the core elements of the Madrasa approach. Thus, instead of judging quality by looking only within the classroom, it enables other stakeholders to understand their own roles in creating a quality and sustainable pre-school (e.g., SMCs regularly paying teachers’ salaries).¹⁰

Community Motivations

“...Immediately after we joined the Programme, things started taking a better shape. Salaries were fixed, fees determined, the school management committee was taught responsibilities. The spirit of voluntarism and participation was also awakened among the community members.”

*Fatuma Mwagodzero, Al-Khairiya
Pre-school Teacher*

Local Ownership

“Community awareness activities in ECD, especially in the rural areas, have been able to prove to the communities that they can be owners of their own ECD programme, they can be decision-makers, managers and financiers of their own programme.”

*Madat Ahamed,
Former Chair of National Committee,
MRC Uganda*

The two to three-year process of supports and monitoring progress led to graduation based on agreed levels for each of the main areas. However, internal and external reviews indicated that the timeframe was unrealistic, particularly in the poorer communities. By 2000-2001, while many of the initial groups of pre-schools had graduated, the MRCs and local communities realised that a number of schools had slipped backwards after a few months. Almost all of them required some form of ongoing support, particularly in terms of local fund-raising or income generation and for developing community-level support structures to replace the MRC support. Similar to the lessons from AKF's Rural Support Programmes in Pakistan and India, it became clear that working resource-challenged communities took time. They required stages of “graduation” or independence rather than it being seen as a one-time event.

Since 2003, the MRCs have used a five-stage model of support (See Box 7) that begins with intensive and frequent training and follow-up. This gradually decelerates over a four-to-six year period. In this way, based on mutually defined goals and processes, partnerships are created between the community and the MRC, formalised through the contract. For the MRCs this was an important reality check on how long it would take to work with economically deprived communities so that a whole range of skills and capacities were present amongst more than just the teachers or one or two SMC members. The Madrasa approach had moved beyond its initial focus on what happened in the classroom alone as a measure of success, quality and eventual sustainability.

As communities have learned about what helps their schools to function better, the Programme has adapted itself to meet those emerging needs and contexts. For example, it was discovered that even after schools graduated they wanted to continue to be part of the larger Madrasa Programme effort. They wanted to stay connected with the MRC and through it to seek support from their peers. This led to the creation of Graduate Pre-school Associations in each country by the maturing pre-schools themselves through their SMCs. These Associations, registered as independent civil society organisations, have increasingly taken on roles such as collaborative fund-raising, review of pre-school quality and management of mini-endowments. The other local structure that emerged in 2003 as schools began to graduate were the Community Resource Teams (CRTs) made up of the appointed head teacher, a second recognised lead teacher and a local person trained to be the Community Mobiliser. While still fairly recent, these local Community Resource Teams hold some promise as a concrete bridge between the pre-school and the MRC technical staff. The MRCs train these CRTs over a period of at least two years beginning well before graduation and extending through the post-graduation support period.

The training, both centre-based and on-site, provides attention to the development of group facilitation skills for conducting parent/community meetings, proposal writing for seeking funds, mentoring skills to support

Facing page: AKF staff in East Africa regularly visit the MRCs to discuss achievements and challenges and to provide technical support. Here, MRC Uganda staff are updating their work with AKF programme staff.



new teachers, tools for organising community support for school activities, guidance regarding income-generating projects, and creating linkages with other community service providers. Some teams also take the lead on the parenting programmes after training and modelling by MRC staff.

In Zanzibar and Uganda, there is a variation on this initiative. Parent Support Groups are created in addition to the CRT, consisting of 10-15 parents whose children attend the pre-school. The parent groups meet regularly to discuss issues pertaining to different aspects of children's performance in the pre-schools, and to monitor school quality. The group assists in sustaining parent involvement and facilitating community ownership.

Testing community mini-endowments

During the scaling-up period, the MRCs explored ways to increase the likelihood of longer-term financial sustainability of the pre-schools. One pilot initiative developed related to establishing and managing community-based mini-endowments (see Box 8) for a sample group of those pre-

Participatory Leadership

Leadership in the Programme has been a crucial element of its success. But as in many dimensions of effective programming, leadership goes beyond the notion of merely identifying an individual to direct and lead. There has been a strong emphasis on leading by example and mutual support. The Regional Office plays a leadership role by working with and supporting the MRCs. At all levels, rather than training only one or two key individuals, teams are trained using collaborative approaches that embrace multiple forms of leadership.



Once communities decide to commit themselves to the project, a School Management Committee is elected (with a minimum of three women), and a partnership agreement is signed with the MRC to formalise the process of working together to establish a Madrasa Pre-school. The contract clarifies the terms and conditions of interaction, including benefits and penalties, all of which are aimed at setting up a quality pre-school.

schools. The scheme was set up to begin once schools graduated when a one-off grant was provided by the Madrasa Resource Centres (US\$ 2,500). For those communities which raised additional funds, the MRC matched these funds (one-to-one) up to an additional US\$ 2,500. In theory, if the full amounts were matched, the community would have around US\$ 7,500 in its endowment fund. These funds were then pooled and invested using mechanisms agreed upon by the communities. The aim was for each pre-school to receive regular dividends to cover a portion of their recurrent costs, particularly teachers' salaries. These then supplemented the fees paid by parents as well as income from other financial sources such as donations from individuals in the community. Since the pre-schools set and kept their fees at a level to make them affordable for most families in the community, they were often insufficient to cover the full costs, especially for teachers' salaries.

In 2000, 38 graduated schools from the three countries participated in the pilot scheme. Their funds were pooled within each country and invested in ways chosen by the communities. As soon as the mini-endowment pilot scheme got underway, certain considerations became obvious. First, it was necessary to choose investments that were in accordance with Islamic principles and ethics, the interpretation of which could differ among communities. It was also difficult to help communities understand how investments work, particularly when the investments were initially losing rather than earning money. MRC staff spent considerable time with communities and indeed learning themselves about endowments. Committees were set up to oversee the management of the mini-endowments within each country and members included community and Madrasa Programme representatives as well as others with investment experience. A Regional Endowment Advisory Committee was established to provide periodic guidance and support to the national committees and included membership from each of the national committees. With the encouraging results and the continued interest of communities at the end of the pilot period, the mini-endowment scheme was extended to the remaining pre-schools which successfully graduated, raising the total to 149 communities.

As to how the funds are invested in each country, Uganda has largely put them in Treasury Bills, which have generally provided sufficient income to ensure regular payment of dividends to its member schools. The result was a high percentage of teacher salaries being paid. Many communities in Zanzibar also began opting to invest in Treasury Bills. In Kenya, the Association decided to explore investment in rental property which has been fairly positive. The experience in Kenya has created interest among other Graduate Associations in Uganda and Zanzibar to look into this option.

BOX 7: THE FIVE PHASES TOWARDS GRADUATION OF THE MADRASA PRE-SCHOOLS

Phase 1: Contact

The activity cycle starts with the MRC's Community Development Officers meeting with community leaders. Discussions are held to identify and prioritise communities' needs for their children. MRC staff interact with communities to create awareness of the importance of early stimulation, children's needs and rights, how young children grow and develop, the roles of parents and the community in the growth and development of young children, as well as the benefits of educating young children. Once it is accepted that education – particularly pre-school education – is critical in solving some of the problems in the community, specific discussions begin on how the community can establish a quality pre-school. At this point MRC staff work with community members and leaders to understand the resources available and the different expectations of starting a pre-school. Through the discussions, the roles and responsibilities of the community and the MRC are clarified and agreed upon.

From the start, communities are made to understand that they own the project. The process activates community commitment and willingness to establish a quality pre-school. Through it, communities gain awareness of their responsibility and ability to make a difference in the lives of their children, which leads to the development of their capacity through new knowledge, skills, and practices while encouraging greater self-reliance.

Phase 2: Contract

Once communities decide to commit themselves to the project, a School Management Committee is elected (with a minimum of three women), and a partnership agreement is signed with the MRC to formalise the process of working together to establish a Madrasa pre-school. The contract clarifies the terms and conditions of interaction, including benefits and penalties, all of which are aimed at setting up a quality pre-school. The MRC agrees to provide an incentive grant of around US\$ 1,000 to improve the learning environment; support two years of training for the SMC members, teachers and parents; work with the community to evaluate periodically the quality of the pre-school; and provide ongoing mentoring and support. The community agrees to provide space for the pre-schools with a toilet and a playground, identifies women to be trained as teachers, and agrees on school fees as well as salaries for teachers. The SMC then begins the process of registering the pre-school and opening a bank account.

Phase 3: Implementation

This phase involves, among other tasks, constructing or rehabilitating classrooms and other crucial structures necessary to create a quality teaching and learning environment; training and mentoring teachers; as well as training and supporting the School Management Committees. Once implementation is underway, communities and MRC staff jointly evaluate the pre-schools every six months. At the end of each evaluation, they agree on the progress made and set up objectives to improve the performance of the school before the next evaluation. This process is critical in ensuring that communities understand elements of quality pre-school education and placing the onus on communities to manage quality pre-schools. After two to three years of intensive training, support, monitoring and evaluation the pre-school graduates.

Phase 4: Graduation and certification from the MRC

The MRC and SMC evaluate the extent to which the schools meet the criteria for community involvement, a quality teaching and learning environment, and responsible management as set out in the contract. Madrasa pre-schools that meet quality standards are certified and graduated as are teachers and school managers. Parents are recognised for their participation. Once graduated, schools usually become members of their local Madrasa Graduate Association, which is managed by its membership.

Phase 5: Post-graduation support for sustainability

The MRC gives ongoing support to the teachers and the communities of the graduated schools by mentoring and providing in-service courses for the teachers and additional training for SMCs, the Community Resource Teams and Graduate Association members.¹¹

Sustainability

“The mini-endowment has been a major factor of retaining teachers. One pre-school, Hidayat Islamiya of Mwanyanya on Unguja Island, had two of its teachers leave, but when they heard about the disbursement of the dividends they rejoined because they felt sure of getting their salary even if a good portion of their salaries came on a quarterly basis.”

*Communication with Najma Rashid,
Madrasa Regional Coordinator*

The progress of the schools’ endowment funds is encouraging, and has resulted in the somewhat unique phenomenon of low-income schools contributing to and assisting in the management of their own long-term investments. Formal reviews of the endowment programme and feedback from Graduate Associations, schools, parents and teachers have indicated that while the endowments are small, and the amount of income generated from them even smaller, these funds are important for Madrasa schools, especially those in poorer communities.

Given the utility of the endowments to schools, and the relative success in fostering community ownership of them, the MRCs seek to strengthen community management of endowments. A number of the newer Madrasa community pre-schools that have joined and graduated since the end of the pilot are exploring how they might raise funds and join the mini-endowment schemes in each country. In this connection additional follow-up studies will be undertaken to look more carefully at what communities are receiving and how they are utilising these funds.

BOX 8: IMPACT OF THE MINI-ENDOWMENTS

Wakiso Muslim Nursery School

“In the beginning, we thought the scheme was not real but when we started getting dividends, then everything changed. We have managed to do so many things that were challenging to us before. The first couple of dividends that we received were used to increase the teachers’ salaries. The teachers’ salaries have increased from an average of Uganda Shillings 25,000 (around US\$ 15/month) at the start of the endowment to 60,000 (nearly US\$ 37/month) now. This is because we have...supplementary income to cater for the other school needs and thus the fees can be used to increase the teachers’ salaries. Also in cases where the parents run behind in paying their fees, the dividends have been used to pay the salaries. This means that we are always up to date in paying teachers.”

“An improvement in the classroom structure and materials has been one other area where the dividends have been very productive for the school. We have been able to procure a carpet and a cupboard, painted the classroom, fixed doors, arranged the fence and made an extension to the classroom structure. There has been an improvement in budgeting and planning at the school. The disbursement of dividends on a quarterly basis has meant that we do have a plan and quarterly dividends, and that as soon as the cheque is received, the money is used as planned. This ensures that the development of our school is always on track.”



In Zanzibar, Tanzania, community members come together, with the assistance of the Zanzibar Madrasa Resource Centre, to build and manage quality pre-schools for their children.



MEASURING IMPACT AND COST

Over the last 20 or more years, research and programme evidence has deepened understanding of and strengthened the rationale for the critical importance of investing in young children – well before the time they reach school.¹² Quality ECD programmes have been shown to have particular importance for children from disadvantaged backgrounds whether through marginalisation due to poverty, race/ethnicity, gender or other reasons. While these findings are important, both the Madrasa Programme and AKF felt it was critical to undertake a rigorous study to determine whether the enhanced curriculum and approach made a difference to children's outcomes.

Establishing a research agenda, and improving monitoring and evaluation systems

Between 1995 and 1996, a regional researcher was hired to set up a study examining the impact of the pre-school programme on children's cognitive and social development, including their readiness for primary school. The researcher carried out other studies and collaborated with and helped to build skills and understanding of MRC staff, including the newly appointed Monitoring and Evaluation Research Liaison Officers (MERLOs). The intent of adding MERLOs within the MRCs was to enable each national office to undertake basic data collection and maintain local documentation systems for its own reflection and reporting as well as to feed into regional research tasks. It also permits a more coordinated approach to data systems and collection throughout the region.¹³

Around the same time, AKF worked with the Madrasa Regional Office to think about a new impact study which would be wider in scope and draw upon external technical assistance from researchers at Oxford University¹⁴, as well as others. This study aimed to go beyond earlier research that had only looked at children in Kenya during the initial years when the programme was being established. The earlier study had found that Madrasa graduates consistently ranked among the top pupils in Grade 1. It also found that they generally appeared in the upper 20 percent in the subsequent classes up to Standard 4.¹⁵

The new "Madrasa Pre-school Programme Impact Study" was regional in scope and looked at a total of 906 children. It used a pre-test/post-test quasi-experimental design with an intervention group (children enrolled in Madrasa pre-schools) and two comparison groups (children from other nearby pre-schools – either community or government sponsored but with children from similar backgrounds) and children with no pre-school experience. The inclusion of a pre-test with all three groups of children was critical to help establish the starting point from which children's progress was then measured (e.g., the degree of change or growth by

Facing page: The regional impact study (1999-2005), which drew upon external technical assistance from researchers at Oxford University, as well as others, demonstrated that pre-school experience has a significant and positive influence on the cognitive development of children as well as their readiness for primary school.



How does the Madrasa Pre-school experience make a difference in learning achievement?

children in each group). The other two comparison groups were important in understanding whether and to what extent the Madrasa pre-school experience differed in terms of child outcomes. The children selected were just entering pre-school (ages three or four in most cases). The four basic research questions were:

1. Does pre-school experience make a difference in the cognitive development of children?
2. Does the type of pre-school provision make a difference in the cognitive development of children?
3. What is the quality of the teaching and learning environment provided for pre-school children?
4. Does the quality of the teaching and learning environment influence the cognitive development of pre-school children?

The researchers looked at measures of cognitive development related to language, early number and non-verbal reasoning skills, all of which contribute to “school readiness”. Children’s age, parent’s education and occupation and basic data from the pre-schools were collected; the quality of the pre-schools was assessed and interviews/focus groups were conducted with parents and teachers. The results from the study (1999-2005) across all three countries demonstrate significantly improved cognitive outcomes for children. They also identify areas for further strengthening – e.g., how teachers supported children’s learning in the areas of early science concepts.

The analysis of the data took into account the children’s age, gender and their parent’s education and highlighted the following findings:¹⁶

- Pre-school experience (both the Madrasa Pre-school and the comparative pre-schools) had a significant and positive influence on the cognitive development of the children as well as their readiness for primary school. In other words, all children with pre-school experience were ahead of children who stayed at home.
- When comparing the type of pre-school provision, the study found a significant difference in the cognitive development for Madrasa pre-school children over non-Madrasa pre-school children. So, while any pre-school experience was important, the positive effects of the Madrasa Programme were stronger.
- The study also found that the quality of the teaching and learning environment in Madrasa pre-schools was higher than in non-Madrasa pre-schools, and that the quality of the pre-school environment mediated children’s cognitive development.



- There was no significant gender effect on cognitive performance. In other words, girls and boys did not differ greatly in terms of changes in early language and number concepts. Other research, especially studies of older students, often finds significant differences in scores.

From 2007 to 2008, a new study tracked a sample of Madrasa Pre-school graduates who were now in primary school (Standards 1- 6) and compared their performance and success to two groups of peers – those with pre-school experience and those with none. Results continue to be analysed but preliminary review of data (2008) related to repetition rates of students is very interesting. *In Uganda, students who had any type of pre-school experience had much lower repetition rates than those who had not attended pre-schools.* The difference in Uganda was about half for students in Standard 1 (3.7 percent compared to 7.8 percent) alone with rates being lower throughout the primary grades. This finding is important given that overall rates of repetition found in the region are a cause of concern and priority for governments. The data also suggests that more children started school and progressed at the appropriate age. There are

An initial study, undertaken in the mid-1990s, found that Madrasa Pre-school graduates in Mombasa consistently ranked among the top pupils in Grade 1. It also found that they generally appeared in the upper 20 percent in the subsequent classes up to Standard 4.

considerable additional costs associated with such inefficiencies in education systems. Interestingly, the lower repetition rates for children with pre-school experience continued throughout primary school. Further analysis is being done on teachers' ratings of the children.

What do these findings mean for the Programme and for others involved in programme and policy developments in the East African region? First, given the recent policy developments across the region that have begun to suggest government's desire to see pre-school access and quality increase, such findings help to demonstrate the value in doing so. In particular, the improved school readiness and lower repetition rates are important because they show that investment could lead to higher efficiency in their systems.

The Madrasa Pre-school approach promotes children's opportunities to engage with a variety of learning materials that they themselves choose. This gives a strong push away from teacher-centred "chalk and talk" methods as the primary approach for the learning process with young children.

Second, the results demonstrate clearly that quality does matter in terms of child outcomes. The Madrasa Pre-school approach promotes children's opportunities to engage with a variety of learning materials that they themselves have chosen and to interact with both their peers and the adults (pre-school teachers) throughout the pre-school day in activities that promote their early language, numbers and social skills. This gives a strong push away from teacher-centred "chalk and talk" methods as the primary approach for the learning process with young children.



BOX 9: INTERVIEW WITH NAIMA SHATRY, MADRASA PRE-SCHOOL GRADUATE

Naima was born in 1985 and brought up by a single mother who was supported by extended family members, including Naima's grandparents. She was one of the first students at the Liwatoni Pre-school, after which she attended Aga Khan Primary School, Sheikh Khalifa Secondary School, and at the time of the interview she was in her first year of studying for a Bachelor of Medicine degree at the University of Nairobi.

She stated that, apart from her family, the greatest influence on her life was her pre-school experience. "My success in both academic and social life is particularly founded on my pre-school experience at Liwatoni. My two teachers made learning fun. They handled us in a very personal way. We were like their children not their pupils. They were our second parents and I can remember that at the end of each day we were not eager to leave pre-school for home. It was our second home."

Naima remembers her pre-school experiences: "I was very happy with the way the teachers blended the learning of numbers and letters with Islam and the reality of life. Not only did this help me in understanding life with God and in God, but also God in our lives. This has continued to enable me to interpret life religiously and religion from a life perspective. Such integration makes knowledge emotionally real and sensible. I also remember the many colourful play and learning materials in and outside the classroom, but I think *the human aspect is what made all the difference in our enjoyment of play and learning.*"

"While the classroom may be full of materials, the most important thing is the human environment created by a friendly and trustworthy adult (teacher). This is what we had at Liwatoni and this has become rarer as I proceed with my education.... pre-school gave me the impetus to learn and to live. The pre-school teachers were committed to us children. It is still a lesson to me that commitment goes beyond working and becomes part of one's life when you are truly committed. My joy in studying to be a medical doctor is that I will be able to help people. To help someone is a gift. Not everyone has the privilege of assisting someone."

Costing Study

In 2006, AKF funded a costing study that was linked to an African Regional Conference, where discussions related to ECD programmes were included. (See Box 10)

The study indicated that costs across MRCs vary along a number of dimensions (e.g., teacher training and building/facility construction), in part due to some differences in costs in each of the three countries but also because there were slight differences in the location and frequency of follow-up workshops with teachers as well as in-classroom support, for example. A case in point is that infrastructure and set-up costs were influenced considerably by the choices communities made in terms of whether they only needed to rehabilitate classrooms or build new structures. Community contributions (at 2006 levels) were between US\$ 1,800 and US\$ 3,500 for rehabilitation and between US\$ 4,000 and US\$ 8,000 for new structures. All communities received a US\$ 1,000 initial incentive grant from the MRCs to assist with rehabilitation and purchasing core teaching and learning materials.

Leaving out optional supports (e.g., costs for feeding programmes) and based on average enrolment figures for each country, the total direct costs associated with the five-phase implementation of the Madrasa Programme in one community were US\$ 6-12 per child per month, of which 27-50

BOX 10: COSTING STUDY: SETTING UP AND RUNNING MADRASA PRE-SCHOOLS

Costing Study: Setting up and Running Madrasa Pre-schools

AKF commissioned a study in 2006 in response to questions about the costs of the Madrasa community pre-schools.¹⁷ The costing study attempted to provide a snapshot of the different kinds of costs associated with using the MRC approach, while working with 15 new communities at a time, and taking them through the five phases (assuming a five-year period) outlined in the previous chapter. The costs include:

- *infrastructure and set-up costs*: the initial capital expenditure related to facility set-up and support to a lean staffing structure at the MRC country offices;
- *direct costs*: community mobilisation, teacher training, mentoring/supervision;
- *indirect costs*: general expenses, operational costs, MRC administrative and programme staff salaries;
- *the community's contribution* (cash and in-kind), which is usually hidden even though it is considered to be essential.



percent came from community contributions. The total overall unit costs (direct and indirect as well as initial set-up costs) for one community were US\$ 14-22 per child per month with community contributions totalling around 20 percent of these overall costs.

Since the study was finalised, the MRCs with the support of the Regional Office have been looking at ways to reduce costs and become more efficient. For example, in Kenya the MRC has changed the way it organises its training sessions to reduce costs: instead of having teachers come to the Centre twice weekly over the two years, they now have the pre-school teachers come daily during the three-week holiday period. The MRCs continue to look at how to streamline their costs. Lastly, the costing study was not able to take into account the additional reach of the infrastructure and personnel across the MRCs through efforts such as training of other teachers, trainers and outreach.

The total direct costs associated with the five-phase implementation of the Madrasa Programme in one community are US\$ 6-12 per child per month, of which 27-50 percent comes from community contributions.



EXPANDING THE SCOPE: 2002 TO 2008

During the early years, the primary focus of the Madrasa Programme remained setting up and supporting community-managed pre-schools. However, across the region, MRC staff began to reflect on and explore how they could address other demands and problems affecting young children and their families in their communities. This was in response to the needs and issues faced in communities and also due to their increased exposure to other ECD programmes in the region and internationally.

As a result, the MRCs incorporated two additional aspects to complement the pre-school services provided in their core communities: incorporating components such as nutrition and health as well as parenting supports and initiating specific activities to ensure the continuity of children's learning. In addition, and largely due to the increasing requests the MRCs were receiving to expand the range of services and supports, they began to involve themselves more and more in what they referred to as "outreach work" to new geographic areas as well as by implementing a wider range of services and becoming involved in policy dialogue and networking.

Broadening the supports offered in Madrasa pre-schools

Based on their experiences on the ground with families and their links to other ECD programmes and researchers, MRC staff came to the conclusion that they needed to do more to strengthen and attend to other issues and the needs of children and their families. The staff called this "moving from Early Childhood Education to Early Childhood Development".

The Madrasa Curriculum began to evolve when it became apparent that many of the children attending the pre-schools had health and nutritional needs that were not being met; that children with special needs were present in some of the pre-schools but the teachers were not always equipped with the knowledge of how best to support them; and that parents and others who raise children needed support in their role as the primary caregivers. Basic health and nutrition information and activities were incorporated more clearly into the curriculum, and, in addition, there was an increasing emphasis on working with parents. The new additions to the Curriculum and the approach have been carried out through much piloting in each country, followed by the exchange of experiences within each MRC and at the regional level as well as internal and external evaluations of the work.

One of the dilemmas facing the MRCs was trying to decide what was meant by "integrating" additional or more health, nutrition and parenting activities. There were different views about this and indeed it is a question for many pre-school programmes that would like to have a more "holistic" approach with their children. An evaluation in 2007 provided important

Evolving Processes

Allowing room for new ideas and innovative strategies has been crucial to the Programme's success. After an initial phase, the Madrasa Curriculum evolved – from Early Childhood Education to Early Childhood Development – when it became apparent that many of the children attending the pre-schools had health and nutritional needs that were not being met; that teachers were not always equipped with the knowledge of how to support children with special needs; and that parents needed support in their role as primary caregivers.

Facing page: The Madrasa Programme incorporates proper nutrition during the school day (enriched porridge prepared by parents in the community) to help ensure the continuity of children's learning.

feedback and suggestions from the piloting work including that parents seemed to be strongly supportive and positive about the organised sessions and information on young children's health and nutrition. At the same time, the evaluators pointed out that in large part the information on children's growth was under-utilised if used at all (including sharing the same with the local health facilities). Not surprisingly, they recommended improving coordination with local health facilities and workers to avoid duplication. For example, they suggested leaving the growth monitoring to health workers rather than to pre-school teachers while the pre-schools could offer their space for this important activity in order to increase chances of parents coming with their small children.

Below and facing page: In addition to providing quality education that improves children's cognitive development, the Madrasa pre-schools have, since 2002, collaborated with local staff from nearby health facilities to promote better health and growth among their students.

The MRCs and Madrasa pre-schools decided to focus their efforts on health promotion and increasing collaboration with local staff from nearby health facilities. As a result, a larger number of children benefit from vitamin supplements, de-worming, school-based immunisation and growth monitoring conducted by the local community health workers or nurses. Health screening by teachers remains an important part of the school



routine, and the basis for parent-teacher discussions as well as professional referrals.¹⁸ To support what happens in the school, local public health or other resource persons assist in leading parenting sessions.

An example of this new work comes from Kenya where, beginning in 2004, the MRC piloted a pre-school feeding programme in nine communities. In 2007, it expanded to an additional 34 communities bringing the total to 43 communities with a feeding programme. The agreement reached with communities was for parents to collect a small amount of funds from all the pre-school children's parents each week (5-10 Kenya Shillings) during the first year. The MRC procured and distributed the enriched porridge flour and sugar while parents took turns preparing the porridge. The money collected from parents accumulated during this year and was left unused. At the end of the year, the collected funds formed a "kitty" for the pre-school to use to purchase the necessary flour and sugar. As parents continued to contribute, the funds were replenished. A year later, 25 of the 43 communities were able to continue their feeding programmes on their own.

Another example relates to the shift to improve attention to children with special needs and the issue of HIV/AIDS. The MRCs had noticed the need for pre-school teachers to have a better understanding of how to work with children who face different challenges. As a result, they worked with local specialists to train the MRC staff and pre-school teachers on how to support children with special needs. In addition, they began considering how to address the issue of HIV/AIDS within their communities. Again, they sought out experts and those working in this area to help them think about and incorporate information and practices for the Madrasa Programme.

The MRCs also acted to encourage greater parental involvement with their children and in the life of the pre-school. Parent workshops, parent-teacher meetings and some home visits were organised and covered topics such as providing information on how children develop and the kinds of support they need from adults including through singing songs and sharing traditional stories, helping them to work on "everyday" mathematics such as counting, sorting and going to the market with parents where they watch weighing and the use of money.

An evaluation of the parenting work in Uganda has indicated that there appears to be more mutual support among parents as well as individual contributions to the life of the school and the development of the children. The health, hygiene and nutrition of many children (and even some parents, according to teachers) have improved directly because of these programme additions. The evaluation report on this work indicates that the





Above and facing page: Parents take turns to prepare an enriched porridge made of flour and sugar (procured and distributed initially by the local MRC, sustained subsequently by money collected from the parents), which is then served in the classrooms. Having a nutritious snack during the day helps students concentrate better.

parent programme has led to increased enrolment and improved fee collection (from 30 percent to 80 percent) in several schools and to the elimination of corporal punishment in some homes.¹⁹ The emphasis on parents also has led teachers to engage more parents directly in school activities such as making/renewing materials for the classroom and helping with snack preparation as well as making home visits to discuss individual children's performance or problems with his/her parent(s) and working with the parent and child when they make the move to primary school.

In all three countries, a major challenge has been to involve fathers more actively in school affairs (see box on facing page). While both parents are encouraged to participate, it is most often the mothers who get involved and attend the parent meetings. In an effort to change this, Uganda has put emphasis on fathers' involvement by asking the imams and Muslim women leaders to help disseminate related information after the Friday lunch prayers.

Supporting children's transition to primary school

The second shift for the MRCs was to begin to address explicitly children's transition from pre-school to primary school. The motivation for this came about as a result of observing children's experiences when they entered the primary school and the experiences of Grade 1 teachers receiving students from the Madrasa pre-schools. These children entering primary school were accustomed to a child-centred active learning methodology where they were engaged in activities that allowed them to explore their environment, ask questions and discover the world, while being guided and supported by the teacher.

Walking through the door into primary school, they were faced with a very different reality. They were expected to sit quietly in rows, often in very crowded conditions, and follow the instructions of the teacher, without asking questions or speaking. The wide variety of learning materials such as storybooks, blocks, puzzles and other things were no longer available. The formal teacher-centred "chalk-and-talk" atmosphere within the primary school was somewhat of a "shock" compared with how they had experienced learning in the Madrasa Pre-school. Parents could see what was happening to their children who, while in pre-school, were always ready to go to school and looked forward to each new day. Now the children were asking to return to pre-school rather than stay in Grade 1.

Leveraging Local Strengths

In Nanlinya, MRC Uganda staff have worked closely with the local Imam on his skills and knowledge in mobilising parents—particularly fathers—on issues related to ECD. The Imam collaborates with the parenting programme that is led by the local Community Resource Team. He selects relevant verses from the Quran and prophetic traditions, which he uses as an entry point for the discussion with parents. Information related to the identified topic is disseminated at the Khutuba (sermon) on Friday. Parents are encouraged by the Imam and women leaders to stay behind to discuss the topic. The Imam also visits parents in their homes to talk directly with fathers and uses social gatherings as an avenue for sharing information. Because of this work, fathers' involvement in ECD has been reported to have increased in the pre-school and in homes.





The challenge of transition into primary school existed in all three countries, and MRC staff in collaboration with the Madrasa pre-school teachers decided to try to address the problem. Over the years, their understanding of this issue and how to approach it has evolved tremendously. For example, initially MRC staff and the pre-school teachers wanted to work on transition to assist the children who had been through their Madrasa pre-schools. Meetings and short workshops were organised with Grade 1 teachers and primary head teachers to help them understand better the experiences and learning methods the Madrasa Pre-school children had been through. This useful but somewhat limited answer to improve the situation broadened out in interesting ways across the three countries.

In some cases (especially in Uganda but also in Kenya) parents began approaching the MRCs to request that they establish primary schools, using the same methodology and approach being taken in the pre-school, at least for the early primary years. The MRC staff members and their National Boards were concerned about taking on this new challenge, which would require additional human, material and financial resources.

In Uganda, parents decided to take action on their own. Thirty-five of the MRC school communities in Uganda established their own primary schools. This fact alone is testimony to the perceived benefits of Madrasa Pre-schools.²⁰ The MRC Uganda staff realised that not all parents would have the resources to create their own schools and decided to assist where they could – and to find other local partners such as AKF’s school improvement programmes operating in the same or nearby areas to work with these fledgling community primary schools.

In time, all three MRCs began to broaden their links and to work with the lower classes of the primary schools that receive Madrasa and other pre-school graduates. The aim was to improve the transition for the children from Madrasa pre-schools as well as the other children who were entering Grade 1 regardless of whether they had been through pre-school or not. (See Box 11 for transition efforts that evolved over the years in Kenya.) Similar to the other MRCs, Zanzibar MRC has been working with lower primary classes on the two islands of Zanzibar as well as more recently in southern Tanzania. In Tanzania (and Zanzibar) the Ministries of Education have been making changes so that two years of pre-school are formally included in the basic education cycle. While the specifics are being worked out in terms of implementation, it offers the MRC in Zanzibar new opportunities to engage with government on these critical issues.

The MRCs have incorporated in their approach to transition the development of materials and training activities that address the issue of children’s move from pre-school into primary school, or even those going from home to Grade 1. This work is built on the premise that to help children prepare for school is a two-way process in which the schools also have to be made ready to receive young children. These activities are critical because they address the problems faced by MRC pre-school graduates making the transition into Grade 1, a more formal setting with large classes (going well above 80 in many places in the region following the Free Primary Education policies) and only one teacher.

A new integrated curriculum

When the Madrasa Programme began, the term “integration” referred to the incorporation of religious values, knowledge and practices into secular pre-school education. The developmentally focused pre-school curriculum has further integrated components of food and nutrition, health, as well as moral and psychosocial development, safety and well-being.

Moreover, with time, it has become clear that integration plays an essential role not only in the types of services provided, but also in how a programme



The Madrasa Programme emphasises parent involvement in various school activities. In addition to preparing school snacks, they attend regular parent-teacher meetings (**facing page**) and receive home visits from teachers (**above**) who, for example, work with them to ensure their child’s smooth transition to primary school.

functions and delivers these services. The Curriculum, adapted at various times over the years, has become a kind of fabric upon which the stories and hopes of the people participating have been embroidered to create a richer experience for all those involved, both young children and adults. (See Box 12 for an outline of the Pre-school Curriculum and related package of materials that have been created.)

Outreach and adaptation

For well over 10 years, the three MRCs have organised a variety of outreach and replication efforts to meet the increasing demand from other pre- and primary school teachers, local and international NGOs working in ECD in these three countries and governments. These include:

Organising training courses in (a) ECD for non-Madrasa teachers, (b) community mobilisation and training SMCs, and (c) Training of Trainers (TOT). The demand for these courses has grown as the work of the MRCs has become recognised and as people have understood how the Madrasa pre-schools and teachers operate. Fees are charged for the training courses to cover the costs and provide a small amount of income for the MRCs. Some courses are short-term (5-10 days) while others run during scheduled holidays or weekends over the course of a year. For those successfully finishing the latter, the MRCs provide a certificate of completion. Over the years, well over 2,000 non-Madrasa teachers and nearly 1,300 government teachers and officials have received MRC training and support.

Since 2007, the MRC Uganda has created short courses for tutors from two Primary Teacher Training Colleges. It focuses on updating and strengthening the knowledge, skills and capacities of the tutors who train those wanting to become (lower) primary teachers at the Primary Teacher Colleges as well as the associated sub-regional Coordinating Centres that provide practising teachers in-service training. The target areas include child development, child-centred active learning, support for children transitioning between pre- and primary school, classroom management and techniques for parental involvement.

Consulting on early childhood programming and community mobilisation with other NGOs. Local NGOs have seen the ways in which the MRCs work with communities to establish and maintain the Madrasa pre-schools. The process leads to community ownership of a programme and is applicable to a range of social development activities, whether it is to support young children and their families, or to promote nutrition and health, or to support economic development activities and/or rural development. Thus far some 21 NGOs including the African Medical and Research Foundation, the International Red Cross, the Norwegian

BOX 11: THE EVOLUTION OF MRC KENYA'S WORK ON EARLY TRANSITION

Targeting Standard 1 Teachers (1996 to 1999)

The initial transition workshop in 1996 targeted Standard 1 teachers in Mombasa from 30 primary schools nearby the Madrasa project pre-schools. Invitations were sent through the Ministry of Education (MoE) to give it more credibility. Ministry supervisors and AKF School Improvement Project staff in Mombasa were also invited.

The workshop addressed the common practice of primary schools in the early and mid-1990s of giving admission exams to children. Most parents were not happy with the experiences the children went through during these exams and often complained about them to the MRC staff. MRC staff gave the Grade 1 teachers a mock “exam” as soon as they arrived for the workshop as a way to give them a sense of what children might feel. Afterwards, the MRC staff and primary teachers discussed ways of making the entrance exam a better experience for children. MRC staff also introduced Active Learning concepts. These workshops continued in 1997 and 1998. Topics were added, such as how children learn, the effects of positive and negative labels, acknowledging feelings and the integrated curriculum. Invitations were extended to head teachers because teachers felt this would help ensure support when they returned to their school.

Making Day One More Positive (1998 to 1999)

The content was further expanded: focus was given to what teachers and primary schools could do to help make the initial days of Grade 1 more positive and thus improve this early transition period. Teachers were taken through an activity in which they were asked to imagine that they were visiting Mars where the inhabitants were all blue (to reflect school uniforms) and spoke in a language that they could not comprehend (relating to instances where a child's first language is often not the same as what is used in Grade 1). Again, the activity allowed teachers to experience and think about how young children entering Grade 1 might feel. Teachers then discussed how to organise their classrooms to enable a more positive entry for children.

Expansion (2000 to 2001)

The geographic reach of the workshops was extended in 2000 to two other districts, namely Kwale and Kilifi. Eight schools in Kwale and four in Kilifi were invited to join the 36 schools from Mombasa District. In 2001, MRC Kenya concentrated even more of its efforts on addressing the needs of those in Kwale and Kilifi since more communities from these areas were being mobilised to establish their Madrasa pre-schools.

On-site Transition Workshops (2002 to date)

Transition workshops are now conducted on-site in Mombasa, Kwale and Kilifi. These have continued with the MRC increasingly ensuring joint delivery of the workshops with local government counterparts at the district level. Three participants come from each school including their head teacher, the Grade 1 teacher and another teacher. Throughout the years, pre-school teachers (Madrasa pre-school teachers and others operating nearby) have also been included. These “school teams” sit together during two or three days to discuss early transition issues and to develop plans that they implement and on which the local district education teams follow up. Staff from the MRC serve primarily as resource persons trying to avoid duplicating the responsibilities and roles of their government counterparts.

BOX 12: OUTLINE OF THE INTEGRATED MADRASA PRE-SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Part I: Supporting Early Childhood Development

- The Child
- The Teacher
- Transition
- Inclusive Education
- The Integrated Approach
- Planning and Assessment
- Play as an Avenue to Learning
- The Learning Environment
- The Madrasa Pre-school Daily Routine
- Involving Parents and other Stakeholders

Part II: Essential Learning Experiences at the Madrasa Pre-school

- Islam
- Mathematics
- Language and Literacy
- Interacting with and Caring for the Environment
- Social and Emotional Development
- Creative Arts
- Health Education
- Music (Songs, Poetry and Movement)
- Physical Education

Other available materials include:

1. Teacher Training Manual
2. Parent Support Manual
3. Community Resource Team Manual
4. School Management Committee Manual
5. Teachers' Idea and Resource Book with Local Songs, Stories, and Rhymes

Refugee Council, Save the Children, Plan International, the Kenya Medical Research Institute and the UN children's agency, UNICEF, have contracted the MRCs for training in how to work with communities and set up community-based ECD centres.

Adapting the Madrasa Pre-school approach in new geographic locations.

Across the three countries, as donor agencies and governments began to learn about the Programme and observe what the MRCs had been able to accomplish in both rural and urban communities, requests and funding for replicating and adapting the approach increased. In Kenya, the MRC received funds to support adaptation of the Madrasa Pre-school approach in one district in North-eastern Kenya as well as in Lamu and Malindi districts in the Coast Province. MRC staff began with exchange visits, meaning MRC staff would visit the new districts and leaders from North-eastern would travel to Mombasa. The MRC also began to work with professionals in the new districts, training them on the processes of community mobilisation and implementation of the Madrasa Pre-school Curriculum.

For well over 10 years, MRC outreach activities have included ECD training courses for non-Madrasa teachers. More than 2,000 non-Madrasa teachers and nearly 1,300 government teachers and officials have received MRC training and support.



Networking

A core factor in effectiveness is the ability of a programme to nurture the relationships it forms with other organisations, agencies and government. Networking, participation in other local efforts and communication with regional and governmental agencies help a programme to make inroads into the larger contexts affecting young children and their families. They allow the programme to have an impact on the policy and delivery systems of relevant national and local governments as well as organisations. These partnerships lead to the creation and implementation of culturally appropriate services for young children and their families.

In Uganda, the MRC began to work in the north, providing MRC Uganda with a new set of challenges, since the local language(s) of the northern districts is not Luganda. This has meant that the MRC team has had to have materials translated and needs to work through interpreters while conducting its training and support activities. It has also started work in the West Nile region.

The MRC Zanzibar had for many years received requests to expand to the mainland of Tanzania. While they had organised training for a local NGO's ECD programmes in 2000, this was restricted to a limited set of activities. By 2006-07, they took the decision to work with another AKF programme that was starting up in southern Tanzania, in accordance with the interest of the local government officials and the need expressed by communities.

Across the MRCs there was initially some hesitation as well as concern regarding outreach work in new geographic regions. One fear was whether the new work would reduce staff capacity in their "core" schools and thus result in the dilution of quality. However, since then, they have come to realise that they could find appropriate ways to train and support those working farther away and that this could be done without the MRC taking direct responsibility for the work on the ground. This work has led to new opportunities, but it also has required MRC staffs to learn a new set of skills including adapting their approaches and strategies to new contexts in partnership with the key actors concerned, negotiating contracts and budgets, and dealing with time constraints and their staff work schedules. This has obliged the MRCs to think about how to manage and balance their core activities with those related to outreach.

Training for maalims in active learning methodologies. MRC Kenya began working with *maalims* as the first Madrasa pre-schools were being established. At first the aim was to receive input in terms of the Islamic beliefs and practices that should be integrated into the Curriculum. As the pre-schools were established and the *maalims* began to see how children responded to the teaching/learning methodology, they became interested in learning more about the techniques being used to promote children's learning. As a result, training workshops were developed for interested *maalims* to develop a more active learning approach in their teaching. The MRCs do not touch on theological issues. Instead, the training helps the *maalims* appreciate the philosophy of and pedagogy associated with active learning, and how these methodologies can be used in traditional madrasas. Over the years, *maalims* have been offered training in areas



of child development, active learning, communication, record keeping and material development.

While the training of *maalims* first began in Kenya, MRC Uganda has begun to explore a partnership with the Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC), which has its own Department of Education. In addition, MRC Uganda has developed materials and training for imams in their core communities. The imams use the materials to discuss issues related to ECD after Friday prayers.

Extending outreach through partnerships with government. An important part of the outreach undertaken by the MRCs has been made possible through various joint initiatives with the local and even national governments in all three countries. Across the region, MRCs have been actively involved in the development of national policies related to the well-being of young children. Kenya, Uganda and Zanzibar have only recently started to formulate policies related

Inclusiveness and respect for diversity have helped to shape the work of the Madrasa Programme. In Uganda, where the Programme resides mainly in the diverse, urban neighbourhoods of Kampala, non-Muslim children (like the one pictured above) make up 22 percent of total enrolment, reflecting the percentage of non-Muslim families living in these areas.



to young children in general and specifically in relation to the government's role in pre-school provision. Through consultations and participation in task forces, the MRCs have contributed to policy discussions and directions.

In support of Kenya's new ECD policy, MRC Kenya has been collaborating with government and other civil society actors in the ECD sector, including a local coalition group of Coast Province ECD stakeholders, to facilitate policy implementation. In Uganda, MRC staff served on two key national task forces (one for the national curriculum and one for the training framework) in order to help advance the government's work on an ECD policy. Participation in these task forces coincided with MRC Uganda's own curriculum review process. As a result of this process and the MRC's participation in the task force, the Madrasa Curriculum has helped inform the government ECD learning framework. In Kenya and Uganda a policy framework is in place and AKF and MRC staff participate in joint review and monitoring missions during the annual sector reviews. This has served

as a good opportunity to disseminate MRC work to a wider audience and has led to demand for MRC support services in other geographical areas, particularly the West Nile and northern regions of Uganda and the North-eastern Province of Kenya.

Zanzibar is also developing early childhood policies. The process is raising awareness about what the Zanzibar MRC has to offer, prompting the request by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training to work with them to spearhead the ECD policy development process. This has included helping to organise a series of policy dialogues with communities as well as national level workshops. The MRC's input has been recognised by government and Teachers College officials, one of whom referred to the inputs from MRC staff as “awakening them from sleep” and “opening their eyes”.²¹

Besides their role in policy development, MRCs have worked with governments to strengthen the capacity of personnel at all levels to deliver quality ECD services. In Uganda, MRC has begun to work with more than 150 government primary teacher trainers at different levels to strengthen the delivery of ECD services at pre-school and lower primary levels. In Kenya, MRC works with the District Centres for Early Childhood Education (DICECE) in the training of pre-school teachers. This helps to synchronise MRC's work plans with the District plans in their areas of operation.

Participating in the creation and development of ECD networks in each country and beyond. The MRCs have participated in various forms of local and national ECD networks. These networks bring together government ministries, local councils and civil society organisations to influence policy, share knowledge and skills, develop mechanisms to enhance technical support, as well as advocate for greater attention to and investment in young children and their families. The Working Group on Early Childhood Development (WGECD), linked to the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), is one of the key networks in the region. The Madrasa Programme staff have, through presentations at the WGECD conferences and by sharing MRC materials and reports, been able to disseminate to a much wider audience of ECD peers and governments over the years. One example is the costing study, referred to in the previous chapter, which was funded by AKF in 2006.

Summary

Within the Madrasa Programme, “outreach” has come to mean going beyond the direct and familiar work with interested nearby



Above and facing page: As part of their outreach work, the MRCs train *maalims* in active learning methodologies and work with local imams on their skills and knowledge in motivating parents – particularly fathers – to participate actively in their children's development and education.

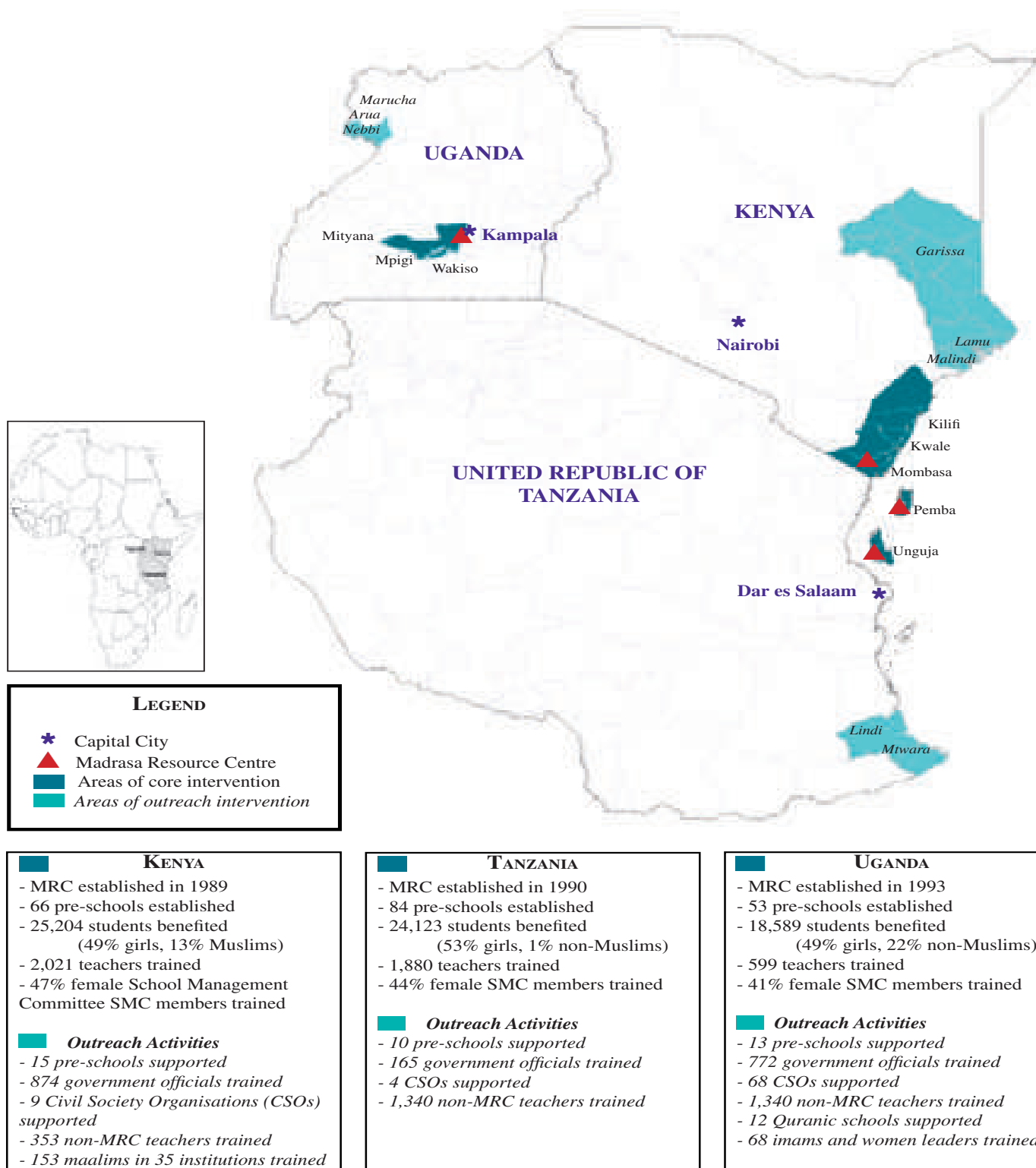
communities. MRC staff have gained invaluable new knowledge and skills and have had to reflect further on what they believe are the essential elements of their approach which could be relevant for other contexts.

On the other hand, the growing interest and demand of these outreach efforts has meant dealing with new challenges such as balancing the pressures of sometimes uncertain donor support, particularly for their core work to the 203 communities with Madrasa pre-schools, with the development of additional outreach activities. This challenge is one that continues to be addressed by the three MRCs and the Regional Office, and links directly to issues related to sustainability of the MRCs themselves as well as that of the pre-schools with which they work. It has also required the Madrasa Programme to think about its purpose and long-term strategy. (See facing page for map and summary of MRC activities.)

In each of the three countries, the MRCs have used the Madrasa Curriculum to inform the development of national ECD policies. In Zanzibar, the MRC's input has been recognised by government and Teachers College officials.



MADRASA RESOURCE CENTRES (CORE AND OUTREACH)



All figures are cumulative as of October 2008



CONFRONTING CHALLENGES AND EMBEDDING REFLECTIVE PRACTICES

There have been many exciting and positive outcomes from the work of the Madrasa Programme over the years. However, without doubt, the Madrasa Programme staff have also encountered various difficulties. Dealing with these has not always been easy but the general view of the Madrasa Programme staff has been to use these moments as opportunities for learning and improving their work.

Key issues and opportunities faced by the Madrasa Programme have helped to shape its work. Some of these include:

- Dealing with gender barriers – particularly for girls and women in the communities in which the Programme has operated.
- Finding ways to tackle issues related to inclusiveness and respect for diversity (e.g., due to the mix of Muslim and non-Muslim children, or the anti-bias work and awareness-raising around children with special needs).
- Developing local capacities and leadership in the new civil society institutions that have been emerging out of the programme, including the local registered pre-schools and the associations for graduated pre-schools that now help support and manage their growing network of community pre-schools.
- Ensuring the growth and development of the three Madrasa Resource Centres as viable and relevant institutions.

Changing gender dynamics

The Madrasa Programme has made numerous inroads and made possible remarkable changes related to the expectations and perceptions of women and men where it has worked.

“Women were previously not listened to. They were objects to be seen and used but not to be heard. Now they have gained in confidence and status in the community and in their families. In the community they have become advisors... The community now has trust in them.”

Hajara Ndayidde, former MRC Uganda Director

From the early days the Programme has had to consider how to overcome a number of challenges related to gender. For example, during her initial months on the job, the first Director, Bi Swafiya, was making a visit to a local mosque to talk about the Programme. According to local custom, she was not allowed to address men directly. So, during their conversation, a curtain was placed between her and the all-male committee. It took time and patience, but as the committee gained respect for Bi Swafiya and what she was able to do for the community, they agreed to remove the curtain and discuss things with

Responding to Challenges

Challenges are part of the dynamics of an effective programme. Challenges can make a programme stronger; if there is an ethos of learning and growing together; and a willingness to make mistakes and change. What is important is the way the challenges are perceived by staff and the community.

Facing page: The developmentally focused Madrasa Pre-school Curriculum integrates components of food and nutrition, health, as well as moral and psychosocial growth, safety and well-being.



For 25 years, the Madrasa Programme has worked to overcome critical gender barriers in East Africa by ensuring the equal participation of girls and boys in the classroom.

her face-to-face. Today women and men are employed at all levels across the MRCs and are elected to serve on the School Management Committees as equal participants and open discussion amongst them is now the norm.

The programme has appealed to young women from the very beginning. It has given them a career option as early childhood educators. For many of them, particularly in rural communities, it remains one of the only options for working outside the home. Although pre-school teaching may have been one of the few options for young women, it has turned out to be a very significant one.

“What I remember was the look on the faces of some of the teacher trainees when they first came for the training. The initial fear and trepidation soon became laughter, joy and motivation! You could see the transformation in their eyes in a matter of weeks. Bi Swafiya’s empowerment of these trainees was amazing. She was truly a role model.”

Yusuf Keshavjee, Member of the first Madrasa Regional Committee and Chairman of the International Task Force for the Madrasa Programme

Interestingly, with more men becoming involved in the MRCs and with the more recent work to reach out to fathers, new testimonies are beginning to emerge in terms of how these men have become role models, demonstrating how men can promote positive early care and education practices with young children at home and in the community.

Sendiwala Abdul Hakeem is a Community Development Officer at MRC Uganda. Reflecting on how his work and training at the MRC has influenced his personal life, he states:

“I make sure that I give a hand to my wife in handling some of the domestic work like fetching water, washing of clothes and carrying our baby as my wife conducts other duties, this was not the case before. I have now become a “consultant” on parenting in my community...I always challenge parents never to administer corporal punishments to children. In addition, I discourage poor family relationships in my community especially where husbands severely beat up their wives. I am looked at as an advocate of children and women. ... As a father, I talk to my children to find out their likes and dislikes. In so doing I have found that my children are closer to me.”

Growing diversity

Since the initial focus of the programme was specifically to work with young children from disadvantaged Muslim communities, a somewhat unexpected development has been the trend of a growing mix of Muslim and non-Muslim students in the pre-schools, particularly in Uganda and Kenya.

Looking at enrolment in the 203 core pre-schools, what becomes evident is that the proportion of non-Muslim children tends to reflect the percentage of non-Muslim families living in the pre-school's neighbourhood. The proportion has increased most as the MRCs have expanded work in Uganda and Kenya to areas beyond the initial target communities. As Zanzibar's population is largely Muslim (more than 95 percent), the number of non-Muslim children enrolled is very low.

When asked why they have enrolled their children in these faith-based pre-schools, the parents often state that these are the best and most affordable pre-schools in the community. Some have also commented that their children learn to appreciate their own faith better as a result of attendance. In addition to Christian children attending the Madrasa pre-schools, there are also now a few Christian teachers in Uganda and Kenya.

This unexpected result has engendered much discussion and reflection by the Madrasa Programme staff and is helping to shape their work. Programme staff are looking at what needs to be done to address more explicitly the

Removing Social Barriers

An important outcome of the Madrasa Programme is its success in helping to remove social barriers, not only the curtain that blocked many women from essential communication with male decision-makers, but barriers to participation of parents in their children's lives, of children in their communities and of individuals and groups within the Madrasa Programme in their understanding of how to make a difference in addressing social concerns.

added diversity of the students and their families within their “community pre-school” approach. Their increased outreach work targeted to broader ECD efforts in each country has also influenced MRC staff’s reflection on what aspects of their work are applicable to quality ECD programming and what are the critical aspects needed to ensure relevance to specific communities (in the case of the MRCs – Muslim communities).

Throughout, the MRCs have expressed strong support for the need to situate their work within the broader societies in which they operate. All three East African countries have multiple languages, cultures and religions, and it is therefore critical that children as well as their teachers and parents learn to respect and understand their own culture and religious values as well as those of others.

The Madrasa Programme has appealed to young women from the very beginning. It has given them a career option as early childhood educators. For many of them, particularly in rural communities, it remains one of the only options for working outside the home.

Madrasa Programme staff are aware that more reflection and work will be needed in order to address issues of diversity and pluralism in the coming years. This would include weaving these aspects even more into the Curriculum and encouraging training and dialogue with communities.



Stronger communities increasing actions for children

Over the 25 years, the input and involvement of parents and communities have helped to shape the pre-school education. When the Community Mobilisation Officers joined the MRCs, they worked very hard to strengthen the management and leadership capacities of communities to oversee their pre-schools. The Community Resource Teams and Associations for Graduate Pre-schools have also emerged. The level of ownership and pride within communities and these structures is evident – as seen in the following quotation.

“MRC has brought success to our school that we couldn’t expect in such a short time. The number of our children has moved from 15 to over 90. MRC has educated us to be self-sustained in any project we intend to run or operate for the future of our communities.”

Abdul Karim Ibrahim, member of the Kitintale Muslim School Committee (speaking to the UK Ismaili, 2007)

On the other hand, as communities come together to establish their pre-schools, tensions can arise and problem-solving is often required. The MRCs’ role is to help facilitate, support and encourage communities to work through the different problems in setting up and subsequently running and maintaining pre-schools. The story of women in Gasi village illustrates what sometimes occurs. (See Box 13)

The establishment of the Community Resource Teams (see section on “Enhancing Quality and Going to Scale”) as well as the Graduate Associations are both viewed as additional support mechanisms for the longer-term sustainability of the pre-schools. The MRCs recognise that more work is needed to build the capacities of these groups so that they can, for example, help with areas such as fund-raising, managing their mini-endowments or the refresher training of school management committees.

Developing the technical, organisational and management capacities of MRCs

Nurturing learning: The Madrasa Programme has always strived to be a learning organisation. That the project has evolved considerably, both in content and structure, reinforces this. With each new phase of development, the Madrasa Programme has emphasised two fundamental practices. The first relates to extensive monitoring, evaluation and internal reflection of its activities. The second has to do with nurturing the ability of all those involved to take time for reflection, which allows for personal and professional growth.



In a classroom at Khairat Nursery School in Gasi (Box 13) the teacher works directly with the children and communicates at their level. This community-built school is part of the MRC Kenya project. Constructed in 2002, it has two classrooms with 48 children and five teachers. There are nine School Management Committee members, six of whom are women.

“We are open to suggestions and even criticism. It is what makes us develop. We have to accept each other for mutual learning for better programme implementation and development.”

Shafique Sekalaala, MRC Uganda Director

Developing and strengthening their monitoring and evaluation processes and system have been key activities of the MRCs over the last 15 years. As a result staff have gained new skills in thinking about their efforts. For example, when they assist in gathering the data there is often discussion

BOX 13: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN GASI VILLAGE

Gasi was an administrative outpost of significance during the colonial period. With Kenya's independence in 1963, and the shifting and reshuffling of the former colonial administrative set-up, Gasi was marginalised and reduced to a local chief's centre. The local residents struggled to survive in spite of declining economic opportunities.

When MRC Kenya mobilised the village to set up an integrated Madrasa Pre-school in 2000 the men were in the forefront in accepting the Programme and implementing it. A School Management Committee (SMC) was elected comprising mostly men, with three women representatives. The pre-school began in a traditional madrasa (Quranic class), which meant they shared the same spaces, using them at different times. No sooner had the school started than there developed squabbles over the shared use of the classrooms. The older children from the Quranic classes destroyed the learning materials of the pre-school children, and frustrations were felt on all sides. Interventions by the MRC Director did not help.

Dissatisfied with the situation, the women in the SMC took the initiative of identifying an alternative site for the pre-school. They also realised teachers' salaries were paid irregularly and there was a dwindling school enrolment. The village women mobilised, pulled together resources, and came up with a mud and wattle two-room building to serve as the pre-school for the village.

The women each donated either two bundles of dry coconut leaves for thatching the roof or 100 Kenyan shillings (KES). The walls were plastered with mud and sand obtained from a nearby pit. The women each donated four gallons of water or 10 KES. Final plastering of the walls and floors with cement and actual thatching of the roof was done by men hired to do the task, though with some difficulties.

Using part of the start-up grant money provided by the MRC, the new school was finally completed in November 2002. The school has since improved, enrolment has increased by 30 percent and teachers have been paid regularly.

on why they are gathering information and how it can help them answer questions they have about their own work. The results obtained are of immediate use to them in their day-to-day work.

In addition, time for reflection is built into the Madrasa Programme. Staff come together monthly in each MRC – sometimes with the Regional Coordinator or Researcher present – to share their experiences and report on their work, challenges and progress in communities. The meetings are more than a “reporting in”. They provide staff an opportunity to exchange with each other what is happening across communities. This allows them to identify gaps or problems but also provides opportunities for people to develop problem-solving skills and consider new ideas. Staff have a commitment to this process, which they see as leading to stronger services and ultimately to the overall development of the children being served.

Periodic meetings are organised at other levels for the Regional Coordinator and Researcher, the MRC Directors and other Senior Trainers, Community Development Officers and Monitoring Officers. During these sessions they

Time for reflection is built into the Madrasa Programme. Staff come together monthly in each MRC to share their experiences and report on their work, challenges and progress in communities. These meetings provide staff an opportunity to exchange with each other what is happening across communities, and allow them to identify gaps or problems in a way that develops problem-solving skills and capacity for innovation.



Commitment

An effective organisation is one in which all those involved continue to grow. Taking this approach helps those involved to see their work as personally fulfilling. It helps to build commitment and dedication to the project rather than to see work simply as the carrying out of a contractual agreement.

discuss, exchange ideas and work together on curriculum development and revision, review their approaches or pilot initiatives underway and plan for new areas of work. The meetings provide critical peer mentoring and support, for example when new Directors are appointed. The Chairs of the three MRC National Boards also come together two or three times a year to discuss with the Regional Coordinator and the Chair and Vice Chair of the Regional Committees a range of other management issues.

Balancing the MRCs' core work with outreach and expansion: Over the years, as the MRCs have broadened their work beyond their “core” communities, they have had to learn, sometimes with much worry and stress, how to ensure the completion of the growing array of activities at the level of quality they desire. More importantly, as demands from communities and also governments or other NGOs and donor agencies have increased, the MRCs have felt pulled in different directions.

Among NGOs in general, these tensions are not uncommon. Some of the requests that come in would clearly allow for professional development and learning by the MRCs. However, the resources to take up the work are not always available. Policy discussions on national ECD guidelines, curriculum or training are yet another set of important opportunities which the MRCs understand must not be missed. In addition, the MRC staffs themselves have identified new opportunities that they wish to pursue as a result of their growing interactions with NGOs, government colleagues and ECD programmes, such as providing technical assistance and training to new ECD initiatives that AKF is supporting in Egypt.

The great variety of demands have forced the MRCs to keep reflecting on what their vision and aims are as an institution: Should they only support marginalised Muslim communities? Or should they also share lessons and experiences of their approach with others beyond their core constituency? What of their aspirations of becoming known as leaders in quality and culturally relevant ECD programming?

The ways in which the Madrasa Programme assesses and then balances the different opportunities and requests have been discussed at all levels, beginning with MRC staff and on up through to their National Boards and the Regional Committee. Their ideas for going forward are outlined in the next chapter.

Developing new leaders in the MRCs: In each of the countries where the Madrasa Programme was established, the initial heads of the MRCs served as critical catalysts for getting the new programmes



Kampala

up and running and then well-established and respected. Across the three MRCs, women were selected as the first leaders and they have been exemplary on many levels. The evolution of the MRCs and the development of the Regional Office, as well as growth of other ECD programmes in each country, created opportunities for movement of staff within the MRCs and beyond.

As with other organisations, when the time came for change, selecting new Directors to follow the often dynamic and well-respected “trail-blazers” was not easy and often raised anxieties. To address this, mentoring and regular assistance from the Regional Office Coordinator and peer MRC Directors in the other countries began to happen on a regular basis. Over the years, this and other systems began to be put into place to help develop new leaders within the MRCs. But there was considerable debate in recent years when it became clear that the strongest candidates to succeed two of the MRC Directors were in fact men who had served as ECD trainers for a number of years in the MRCs. However, the controversy soon faded away once they took over and others could see that they promoted and demonstrated in their daily practice the core values and principles of the programme.

In sum, the MRCs have grown as organisations. They have done this by taking root and spreading in an organic way, that is, by encouraging new communities to adapt an entire process from inception, by building ownership, deepening skills and competencies across levels of staff and through a willingness to change and evolve. Put differently, the MRCs have viewed sustainability as comprising at least three main components: (a) technical, which relates to the quality and relevance of the programme; (b) organisational, which links to the clarity of mission, presence of systems, leadership and other material and human resources that are brought to bear on the work; and (c) financial, which includes the capacities and systems to mobilise and manage resources preferably from an ever-widening set of sources of funding.

The following pages present a full list of key insights and lessons that the Madrasa Programme has amassed over the last 25 years.



Pemba

Above and facing page: The Madrasa Programme has shown that ECD programmes are more likely to be sustained over the longer term when they draw upon available resources, particularly the strengths of local cultures and values.

Key Insights and Lessons Learned over 25 Years

Quality early childhood programmes positively influence the lives of children from marginalised or disadvantaged communities. The most effective ones enable children to develop sound foundational skills in literacy, numeracy and reasoning as well as help them gain critical social and problem-solving skills that will assist them in their daily interactions with peers and adults in their communities and beyond. ECD programmes are more likely to be sustained over the longer term when they draw upon available resources, particularly the strengths of local cultures and values.

Key people make a difference. The strength of a programme lies in the people who are involved. Investment in people is at the core of the MRC; it enables the hand-over from one generation of “leaders” to the next, an important aspect.

Clear, shared beliefs are crucial if a programme is to survive over time. Two have characterised the Madrasa Programme from its inception to the present. The first is a strong belief in active learning methodologies. These have been proven to greatly enhance the quality of the learning experience for children in marginalised Muslim communities. The second is a deep belief in and commitment to community ownership. Each Madrasa pre-school has been set up to function self-sufficiently and independently, while benefiting from a larger network of supports. Each community that has established its pre-school remains the owner of that programme.

Communities will come together to address concerns related to the well-being and future of their children. In the Madrasa Programme, each community is encouraged to reflect on its strengths and challenges, to consider how best to leverage its local resources and to decide where and how to set up its local pre-school. The Programme’s operational framework is therefore based on the social conditions, values and expressed needs of the community. This framework has resulted in the creation of a pre-school system that is economically, socially and culturally appropriate.

Successful programmes tap into people’s passions and motivations at both individual and community levels. At the individual level, the Madrasa Programme is built on the human and spiritual philosophy of service to Allah and community. In terms of community motivations, it taps into the spirit of unity, hard work and volunteerism that is strong in East African cultures. These elements inspire participation and commitment to ensure the success of the Programme.



Mutual accountability that is built on trust amongst donors, community members, programme implementers and supporters is essential to ensure relevance and to permit growth and evolution. The Programme understands that building trust and accountability is an ongoing and conscious process.

Systematic training, mentoring and follow-up support keep a programme vital. In the Madrasa Programme, teachers, community leaders and management committees learn and grow, as their programme evolves. All stakeholders benefit through group training exercises and ongoing in-school and in-community support.

A simple but comprehensive system of reflective practice is fundamental to ensure quality. The Madrasa Programme places strong emphasis on integrated and participatory monitoring, evaluation, reflection and feedback. Based on the belief that each staff person contributes to the programme, assessment exercises, regular exchanges and joint problem-solving sessions enable ongoing capacity-building and professional development.

Sustainability is rooted in ownership. The Madrasa Programme is committed to finding mechanisms that support each pre-school's ability to sustain itself. It does this by working with communities to identify local resources, keep motivation high, manage the pre-school locally and engage multiple stakeholders in the Programme's development.

Processes in a programme evolve over time and long-term investment is required of donors and other stakeholders, particularly when working in marginalised or resource-challenged contexts. Establishing effective and relevant local organisations requires a vision and long-term willingness to invest funds and provide technical support. In the Madrasa Programme, the processes of mobilising communities, training teachers, and monitoring and evaluating pre-schools have changed over time and are constantly under review. It is important to allow room for trying new ideas, sharing and reflecting on experiences, and evaluating innovative strategies.

An effective programme has multiple benefits, reaching far beyond those who are its primary focus. The Madrasa Programme, while designed around child outcomes, is rich in benefits for the teachers, parents, communities, governments, supporters and the larger society that it serves. If a programme's processes are healthy and rich, the outcomes spread with a multiplier effect that yields high returns on its social, human and financial investments.





FUTURE STEPS

“MRC is like a mustard seed that grew into a big tree. In 20 years time we would want to hear children proclaim that their life was shaped by MRC. MRC has taken the developmental opportunity to the doorsteps of the community to enable the marginalised to say ‘we are’.”

Madat Ahamed, Former Chair of National Committee, MRC Uganda

The Madrasa Programme Curriculum, pedagogy and impact research have elicited international interest. The programme has demonstrated how innovative initiatives can emerge from local communities and contribute to a global understanding of how to address the well-being of children in a meaningful way. According to periodic external evaluations, the Programme has been a successful and exemplary ECD programme that has pioneered a holistic approach to child development that is contextualised within the cultural heritage and traditions of the communities in which it works.

Facing page: Madrasa Pre-school playgrounds utilise old tyres (low-cost, easily available and childproof) to provide students with swings, jungle gyms and other means to enjoy their recreational breaks.

BOX 14: EXCERPTS FROM THE SPEECH OF A MADRASA GRADUATE AT THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION, 2007

Fathi Basheikh, a final year student at Moi University studying for his Bachelors in Business Management and majoring in Finance and Banking, spoke at the Madrasa Programme’s 25th Anniversary Celebration in 2007. He attended Rayyana Madrasa Pre-school and was amongst the first groups of children who benefited from the integrated curriculum.

He began by saying that the pre-school provided him with a “doorway to gain both religious and secular education, each without compromising the other”.

“Through the feeding programme at the school, a sense of sharing and belonging to a people was created in us and so were the virtues of tolerance and co-existence with members of other sects, faiths and ethnicities. To this day we keep in constant touch with our former classmates. The [Madrasa] Programme... taught us the virtues of honesty, dedication and perseverance. The availability of the various resources including the best teachers and academic aids enabled us to develop our senses and proper judgment to the fullest. Grounded in the value of our culture and religion...the Madrasa Programme created the perfect stepping stone... the Programme boasts of a number of professionals – doctors, engineers, bankers and many others. The programme has proven its worth, and taken us to where we are. I attribute my success to the virtues I learnt at that early age.”



At the Madrasa Programme's 25th Anniversary Celebration, His Highness the Aga Khan shakes hands with Sheikh Rajab Sumba (former mayor of Mombasa), one of the many leaders from the Muslim Ummah across the region with whom he had first discussed the idea of the Programme.

During the lead-up to and after the Madrasa Programme's 25th Anniversary Celebration in July 2007, a number of conversations and discussions took place amongst MRC staff and their National Boards, with the Regional Committee and AKF. His Highness the Aga Khan attended the celebration and shared his thoughts about its accomplishments as well as its future. Significantly, many of the same leaders from the Muslim Ummah across the region with whom he had first discussed the idea of the Programme were also present as was Bi Swafiya, better known now as “nyanya” or the Madrasa Programme's “grandmother” in Swahili, and Lutaf Merali, two key initiators of the Programme.

The day's events were indeed a celebration and helped to catalyse planning regarding the future, which later led to the development of a new strategy for the Madrasa Programme. This last chapter highlights these briefly.

The new strategy for the future of the Madrasa Programme is grounded firmly on the core principles underlying the Madrasa Programme's ethos and vision. These include the following:

- Assurance that the programme and its activities are demand-driven and consistent with government education frameworks. The programme is premised on building strong relationships and trust with and within marginalised communities as well as promoting volunteerism to support children's education and development.
- A commitment to quality and innovation in all activities and a sound intellectual underpinning to interventions.
- A commitment to child-centred pedagogy and the development of "best practices" that lead to real learning outcomes for children in literacy, critical thinking and social development.
- A commitment to pluralism and inclusiveness, and ensuring cultural relevance of interventions.
- A long-term perspective centred on the promotion of self-reliance at community level and the commitment to achieve sustainability of interventions.
- Intent to achieve a meaningful impact on people's lives and to understand the nature of that impact through research.
- A commitment to replicating the successes of the Programme so that they benefit a wider population in a manner which is cost-effective.

The MRCs will expand and deepen their work in early transitions by providing training and support to lower primary grade teachers in the vicinity of Madrasa pre-schools to improve early transition and ensure continuity of learning for children.

The main areas of work planned for the future are discussed below.

Consolidating and disseminating lessons from work with the core communities

The MRCs view as essential the need to retain their focus on the 200 or so core communities, as these are the places where innovations are tested and where the Programme's reputation is based. As such, the Madrasa Programme will focus on enhancing and maintaining quality to ensure optimal learning outcomes for children by supporting children's holistic early childhood development. The focus will continue on what happens in the pre-schools but will also expand and improve the work to support parents in their role as children's "first teachers".

The MRCs will expand and deepen their work in early transitions by providing training and support for lower primary grade teachers in the vicinity of Madrasa pre-schools to improve early transition and ensure continuity of learning for children. They will also increase efforts to document and disseminate their strategies and approaches to achieve high quality early childhood development, including improving the cost-effectiveness of the overall approach.

Strengthening the intellectual underpinnings of the overall Programme

A basis for all the future work lies in the Programme's ability to enhance continually its approach and understanding of developing and implementing



quality ECD programmes. The Madrasa staff will do this through (a) curriculum development and enhancement, (b) research and (c) capacity building of staff and its systems.

Part of this endeavour will also include working with others to ensure that greater insight and programme design can be drawn from the latest thinking and research on child development. Its links with sister agencies of the Aga Khan Foundation such as the Aga Khan University's new Human Development Programme, the Institute of Educational Development (IED) and the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations (ISMC) all offer opportunities for mutual learning. In addition, relationships and links will be continued or established with other institutions such as the Early Childhood Development Virtual University based in Victoria, Canada, Oxford University and University of London, with whom dialogue has been initiated and partnerships explored in areas such as research, capacity building and professional upgrading of MRC staff as well as curriculum enhancement.

Below and facing page: Within the countries, MRC-trained teachers are already prized as highly skilled in the use of active learning methods and resourceful in material development. All three MRCs are pursuing discussions with government to attain formal accreditation for their training courses.





Expanding research

The research component of the Madrasa Programme has been a powerful tool in assessing the impact of the interventions, in contributing to national and international policy discussions and in designing new activities. This work will be expanded in the future. Areas identified as priorities include (a) ongoing assessment of effectiveness, costs and quality of the programme and MRC work more generally; (b) tracking student transition from pre-school and the home environment into primary schools; and (c) understanding the evolution of sustainability, including how communities perceive and use their endowments, amongst other areas.

Growth and recognition as a training and resource organisation for ECD

With the ECD policy framework and service standard guidelines in place or being agreed to across the region, the long-standing issues of accreditation for the MRCs as training institutions is now gaining attention. All three MRCs are



The future of the Madrasa Programme is grounded in a commitment to child-centred pedagogy and the development of “best practices” that lead to real learning outcomes for children in literacy, critical thinking and social development.

pursuing discussions with governments in the three countries and expect to work through the registration process in the coming year or so.

An important motivation for finalising their registration as training institutions in each country is that once this is achieved, their pre-school teacher training courses will be formally acknowledged. This will help the MRCs’ own strategy of expansion for their work, including the work with Madrasa pre-schools and that related to outreach. Within the countries, MRC-trained teachers are already prized as highly skilled in the use of active learning methods and resourceful in material development.

Moving beyond geographical boundaries

Geographically, the Programme will expand in two ways: by taking on and integrating new Madrasa schools and by building the capacity of other actors to replicate the Madrasa approach in new geographical areas.

Taking on new Madrasa schools: In view of the existing (and still growing) demands, each MRC will review and analyse the core schools within its remit to determine whether there are some additional schools that should be taken on and when this should occur. New schools will be taken on gradually – the MRCs recognise that they must be willing and able to make a long-term commitment to the communities in which the schools are based. This expansion will ensure that the MRCs are not overlooking core constituencies within their current geographic areas of focus.

Outreach to additional geographic areas: The focus for outreach activities will initially be aimed at deepening existing outreach interventions in the West Nile Region (Uganda), North Eastern Province (Kenya) and Mtwara and Lindi districts (Tanzania). These are all regions where links with other existing or planned AKDN activity can be utilised and, importantly, where there is a mixed population with a significant marginalised Muslim population. In these areas, the MRCs will identify and work with governmental or non-governmental partners interested in early childhood development. The MRCs will seek to develop these groups’ capacities and strengthen their structures through training in the key elements of the Madrasa approach as well as providing mentoring and supervision to them as they implement and refine the model in their identified communities.

While the main geographic expansion over the next years will focus on the East African region, the Madrasa Programme will also begin the process of expanding beyond it, seeking first and foremost to work with established and interested AKDN programmes to build their capacity to deliver quality early childhood development programmes for disadvantaged Muslim communities. Initial exchange and training has already been conducted with the AKDN work

in Cairo, and considerations are underway for how to adapt the Programme in Mali, Mozambique and Afghanistan. The Programme will also seek to respond to requests for assistance from other countries, focused again on building the capacity of identified local teams and support structures.

Continuing dialogue and partnerships

Finally, the Madrasa Programme will continue to strengthen its dialogue with governments, development partners and civil society organisations. The aim in all activities focused on dialogue with governments is to support positive and inclusive policies on early childhood development across East Africa. Each MRC will pursue opportunities for national-level scale through partnerships with government. This work will include their continued involvement in technical working groups and other policy fora in order to influence the development, refinement and implementation of early childhood development policies. In order to do this more effectively, high quality process documentation and communications material will be developed, highlighting the lessons and approaches of the Programme.

The aim in all activities focused on dialogue with governments is to support positive and inclusive policies on early childhood development across East Africa. Each MRC will pursue opportunities for national-level scale through partnerships with government.



NOTES

- ¹ During the 1980s and 1990s many children were asked to take an entrance “exam” before enrolling in Grade 1 of the government education systems in East Africa. This often unofficial but widely used practice kept numbers of entrants down and favoured those children who had gone through even a short time in pre-school. Children without pre-school experience tended to be shy with the examiner and hesitant to respond to questions. Once Free or Universal Primary Education policies were in place from the late 1990s onwards, such entrance exams were largely banned and no longer used (within the government system).
- ² Nanji, A. (1999), Presentation on the Madrasa Programme at the Conference on Africa, Islam and Development, Edinburgh, UK.
- ³ Zimmerman, R. (ed.) (2004), *Stories We Have Lived, Stories We Have Learned*. Bernard van Leer Foundation, The Hague.
- ⁴ The World Bank (2002), “The Next Ascent: An Evaluation of the Aga Khan Rural Support Program, Pakistan”, Washington, DC and Fowler, A. (2000), “The Virtuous Spiral: A Guide to Sustainability for NGOs in International Development”, Earthscan, London.
- ⁵ See Note 1.
- ⁶ In later years, the Early Childhood Education Project Committee evolved into the National Committee and Board for the Madrasa Resource Centre in Kenya.
- ⁷ Hohmann, M. & Weikart, D. (1995), *Educating Young Children: Active learning practices for preschool and child care programs*, High Scope Educational Research Foundation, Ypsilanti, Michigan.
- ⁸ This Committee later evolved into the National Board of the Madrasa Resource Centre in Kenya. Similar Boards were created for the other two MRCs in Zanzibar and Uganda. In 1995, a Regional Committee was created to link the three National Madrasa Resource Centres and their Boards and was expanded to include other regional and international Muslim leaders and Early Childhood experts.
- ⁹ Brown G., Brown J., and Sumra S. (1999), “The Madrasa Resource Centres and their community-based pre-school programme”. Nairobi: Aga Khan Foundation. Morgan, P., Muigai, S. (2000), “CIDA programme evaluation: The work of the Aga Khan Foundation in the education sector in East Africa.” Report submitted to the Canadian International Development Agency Partnership Branch.
- ¹⁰ Across most African countries, families, local community and/or faith-based organisations (e.g., mosques, churches, women’s groups) as well as national NGOs have the primary responsibility for financing pre-school education. Governments generally take responsibility for setting frameworks and guidelines for pre-school curricula, training of pre-school teachers and registration and supervision.
- ¹¹ Mwaura, P. and Bishara T.M. (2008), “Madrasa Early Childhood Development Program: Making a Difference”, Chapter 20 in Garcia, M., Pence A. and Evans J.L. (eds.) (2008), *Africa’s Future, Africa’s Challenge: Early Childhood Care and Development in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Washington, DC: World Bank.
- ¹² Engle, P.L., Black, M.M., Behrman, J.R., Cabral de Mello, M., Gertler, P.J., Kapiri, L., et al (2007), “Strategies to avoid the loss of developmental potential in more than 200 million children in the developing world.” *The Lancet*, 369, 229-42. The Consultative Group on ECCD (2007). “A Global Call to Action for Early Childhood”, Coordinators’ Notebook, no 29.
- ¹³ Initially the MERLOs were considered part-time positions. The individuals working also served as either a Community Development Officer or ECD Trainer. Since 2008, the positions have been made full-time.
- ¹⁴ Professor Kathy Sylva provided guidance and technical assistance beginning at the design stage and continuing through the analysis and writing-up stages; Dr Lars-Erik Malmberg provided technical assistance and mentoring particularly at the analysis and writing-up stages.

- ¹⁵ Wamahiu, S. (1995), "The impact of the Integrated Madrasa-Nursery Intervention program on the later school success of Muslim children in Mombasa: The tracer study continued." AKF, Nairobi.
- ¹⁶ Mwaura, P., Sylva, K. and Malmberg, L-E. (2008), "Evaluating the Madrasa Pre-school Programme in East Africa: A quasi-experimental study" (forthcoming in the International Journal of Pre-school Education) and Malmberg, L-E., Mwaura, P. and Sylva, K. (2008), "Effects of an education intervention on cognitive development among East African pre-school children: A flexibly time-coded growth model." (unpublished manuscript prepared for publication).
- ¹⁷ Shireen I. (2006), A Costing Model of the Madrasa Early Childhood Development Programme in East Africa, for the Aga Khan Foundation.
- ¹⁸ See "An Assessment of Madrasa ECD Health and Nutrition Activities" by Kibua, G. (2007), for a detailed review of the MRCK's health and nutrition interventions.
- ¹⁹ Brown, J. & Brown, G. (2008), Evaluation of the Regional Madrasa Programme (draft).
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.



“... It is our hope that future leaders in East Africa – in all the senses of the word – will emerge from the Madrasa Programme, and that the potential of the Programme will come to be recognised as a bridge-building catalyst that generates understanding among communities.”

Dr. Farouk Topan, Chair of the Madrasa Regional Committee, July 2007, speaking at the Madrasa Programme’s 25th Anniversary Celebration

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Co-funding

The Aga Khan Foundation Canada and Canadian International Development Agency provided financial support towards the development of this publication.

Publication and DVD Credits

This publication was co-authored by Judith Evans and Kathy Bartlett (Co-Director, Education Programme, Aga Khan Foundation). Shafique Virani contributed key sections. The Madrasa Resource Centres, Regional Office and Regional Committee all commented and sent valuable information, as did many others, such as previous AKF staff.

Photographs by Zahur Ramji, Jean-Luc Ray, Gary Otte and Christopher Little.

Printing by Rosseels Printing Company, Belgium, 2008.

DVD produced by Rockhopper TV with funding from the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development.

Facing page: MRC Uganda staff travel this dirt road to reach Kikuuta Pre-school, to support and mentor Madrasa-trained teachers and take note of progress and challenges in the community.

About the DVD

The DVD includes three films related to the Madrasa Programme:

“Introduction”: This seven-minute film provides a regional overview of the Madrasa Programme, with particular focus on what a “typical” day is like in a Madrasa Pre-school.

“Talking Walls”: This seven-minute film developed for the United States Agency for International Development looks at how the Madrasa Resource Centre in Kenya works with the local community to establish its pre-school, the training of local women as teachers and the use of the Madrasa Pre-school Curriculum in the classroom.

“Creating Confidence”: This 20-minute film was part of a BBC series called “First Steps”. Using the work of the Madrasa Resource Centre in Uganda, it looks at the importance of pre-school education for helping young children prepare for later learning and life.

Lessons in Development is a new series of publications that has emerged from the programmes of the Aga Khan Development Network. The Madrasa Early Childhood Programme is a project of the Aga Khan Foundation, which is one of the Network’s nine development agencies.

The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is a group of private, international, non-denominational agencies working to improve living conditions and opportunities for people in some of the poorest parts of the developing world. The Network’s organisations have individual mandates that range from the fields of health and education to architecture, rural development and the promotion of private-sector enterprise. Together they collaborate in working towards a common goal – to build institutions and programmes that can respond to the challenges of social, economic and cultural change on an ongoing basis. The Network brings together a number of agencies, institutions and programmes that have been built up over the past 40 years, and in some cases, date back to the early twentieth century. AKDN agencies conduct their programmes without regard to the faith, origin or gender of the people they serve.

The Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) is a private, non-denominational development agency that seeks sustainable solutions to long-term problems of poverty through an integrated, community-based participatory approach that reinforces civil society and respects local cultures. In addition to its role as a funding agency, AKF involves itself actively in the planning and execution of its programmes in support of national and local governments, and sectoral priorities. In East Africa, AKF works primarily in five major areas: education, rural development, health, civil society and the environment. Its efforts are undertaken in concert with those of its sister AKDN agencies, whose mandates range from microfinance, water and sanitation to housing and large-scale economic infrastructure. In every undertaking, the overriding goal is to assist in the struggle against disease, illiteracy, ignorance and social exclusion through implementation of innovative solutions to development. Central to all these efforts are inclusive, community-based development approaches, in which local organisations identify, prioritise and implement projects with the Foundation’s assistance.

A K D N

A G A K H A N D E V E L O P M E N T N E T W O R K

1-3 Avenue de la Paix, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland

Telephone: +41 22 909 72 00 *Facsimile:* +41 22 909 72 91

www.akdn.org