



UNIVERSALISING PRESCHOOL IN ZANZIBAR



Like other African countries, Zanzibar, a semi-autonomous part of the United Republic of Tanzania (henceforth, Tanzania), is moving towards the establishment of a universal compulsory preschool system. The Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MOEVT) (separate from Tanzania mainland's Ministry) is taking a practical approach to this task, building on all existing preschools, government and non-government, while planning to draw in particular on the success of its key partner, the Madrasa Early Childhood Programme-Zanzibar (MECP-Z). Yet despite the interest in this holistic model, which stresses the full range of children's developmental needs, there is considerable pressure on the ground for a narrow focus on academic preparation in the preschool years.

Considering the gains so far, evaluating the suitability of the MECP-Z model and assessing the soundness of the current government trajectory, we suggest possible modifications to their strategy. First, strategy 1, which emphasises the expansion of the number of government preschools, as is currently taking place in response to the MOEVT directive to primary schools. Following this, strategy 2, an additional plan for meeting the needs that remain and considers the wider replication of MECP-Z supported preschools. Under this strategy, Zanzibar could potentially benefit from all the strengths of a community-owned and supported preschool system, but with the level of backing from government that would make such a system more viable. This would be a genuine government-community partnership, allowing communities the level of control and ownership that would be more likely to ensure their continued involvement. With a clear set of government standards, and with the requirement communities meet these in order to qualify for the government subsidies, government would still retain the level of control and responsibility needed to ensure the system contributed to the overall strength of Zanzibar's school system.

Preschool Education in Zanzibar

No minimum standards.

While there is as yet no integrated early childhood policy in Zanzibar, policy directives on preschool are clear. The 2006 education policy (ZEDP) commits Zanzibar to 12 years of basic education starting with two years of preschool for 4 and 5 year olds, integrated into the formal system. ZEDP draws on MKUZA I and II development plans which acknowledge the critical importance of holistic approaches

to early childhood care and development and call for a conducive, child friendly environment for preschool. Despite these plan requirements, Zanzibar has no framework of minimum standards for preschool, a critical gap to fill for ensuring quality, coherence and progress.

Inconsistent quality of education.

Since 1991, the MOEVT has established a few model preschools in each of the ten districts but has otherwise assigned responsibility for preschool establishment to individual communities, encouraging partnership with NGOs and religious organisations as well as private individuals. In recent years, it has also directed primary schools to set up preschools as part of their facilities. Currently over half of the estimated 600 preschools in Zanzibar are community preschools (including over 81 MECP-Z supported preschools); about 20% are government-run preschools, and the remainder are private. There is considerable variation in quality even within these categories, and preschools run the gamut from warm, developmentally appropriate environments for young children to more academically focused programmes. Running parallel to this preschool system are the many hundreds of Quranic Madarasas, which most children in Zanzibar attend, starting at 4 or 5.

Limited access, specifically within rural and low-income households.

Net enrolment of 4 and 5 year olds in registered preschools was estimated at 17.9% in 2012; gross enrolment was 26.5%. Numbers go up considerably when unregistered preschools are included: approximately 38% of entering government primary students were estimated to have attended either a registered or unregistered preschool. A mapping study by MECP-Z puts this number higher, at 46%, including the EAC/RISE radio instruction programme that serves many children in more remote areas. Even these more optimistic figures show over half of Zanzibar's children still need access to preschool.

Disparities in access to preschool are large and are both location and income-based. According to the MOEVT, rural children make up only 18% of those in preschool. There is also a serious gap between the lowest income quintile and the rest of the population, with all of the growth in preschool enrolment taking place in other quintiles.

Increasing pressures widen the learning gap.

Zanzibar's school system is currently undergoing changes, which have implications for preschool. Standard 7, which has until now been the last year of primary, is about to be eliminated, despite generally poor performance of Standard 7 students in final Primary School Leaving Exam (PSLE). Students will soon go straight from Standard 6 into secondary school. This increases the pressure on the remaining primary classes, and at each level, expectations are being pushed down a year. This pressure is being felt in preschool, where according to many teachers, it is increasingly expected that children should learn what they used to learn in Standard 1. The weight of international evidence indicates that an earlier start in academic instruction gains children nothing over the long term and may even interfere with their ultimate skills and comprehension. This pressure will not solve Zanzibar's achievement gap – what is needed is not earlier instruction and an intensification of curriculum, but better instruction at the right age.

Children start school later than recommended.

Although Zanzibar policy mandates an entry age of 6 for Standard I, with 4 and 5 year olds attending preschools, in fact most children start later. The great majority of Standard I children are 7 or 8, and there are far more 6 year olds in preschool than 4 year olds. This is ascribed by many to a lack of awareness on the part of parents. In fact, studies indicate that parents are very aware of what their children face in Standard I, and prefer to keep them out until they are older. Teachers by and large

agree with parents on this, feeling that 6 year olds are unready for Standard I demands. To date, MOEVT has turned a blind eye to older children in Standard I.

Challenges with Universalising Preschool

The MOEVT's plan for universalising preschool involves a continued reliance on the existing variety of preschool solutions, and an expectation that communities will carry on taking a great part of the responsibility for this phase of basic education. In parallel, MOEVT is mandating the establishment of new government preschool classrooms within all primary schools. But even here, although government will pay teacher salaries, communities will be expected to cover all other costs, including construction if there is no spare classroom and all recurrent expenses for learning materials and supplies. To cover these costs, fees will be charged that are considerably in excess of the fees routinely charged for the primary grades. To staff these classrooms, MOEVT plans to draw on the pool of currently redundant and unemployed primary school teachers, with a preference for those who have experience in lower primary.

MECP-Z is key to the government's plan to universalise preschool, having been identified as Zanzibar's "best practice", and an ideal model to scale up because of its active learning approach, community ownership, cultural relevance, and cost effectiveness. Initially, MECP-Z, under the *Watoto Kwanza* project, will work in partnership with the government to establish 100 new preschools (50 by January 2015), with primary schools serving as the nucleus for preschool "clusters" that include both the new preschool classes and other preschools in the vicinity. MECP-Z will train new community preschool teachers, who will assist in the government preschools, as well as provide the assigned primary teachers with targeted pre-primary professional development. These trainings will be government recognised and delivered through government Teacher Training Institutes (TTI) as well as by MECP-Z. This project will, in effect, be the initial focal point for an MECP-Z-MOEVT partnership around the more general design, delivery, and management of contextually relevant and cost effective pre-primary education in Zanzibar – an opportunity to develop and test a pre-primary classroom model.

There are, however, a number of concerns around the planned "scaling up" by government of the MECP-Z model, among them a lack of clarity about exactly what this scaling up might involve. Although the MOEVT is keen to partner with MECP-Z to increase access and quality of pre-primary education, the Ministry explicitly rejects the notion of direct duplication of the model, planning rather to incorporate suitable elements. It is unclear what this might imply however. An important question is whether the value of MECP-Z lies in its separate elements or more in the way they work together. In the context of a number of current realities, the concern is whether the MOEVT may inadvertently sacrifice the very strengths it seeks to build on.

Critical among these constraining realities is the pressure for children to enter Standard I with academic skills beyond the pre-literacy and pre-numeracy more generally seen as appropriate for preschool children. This undermines the capacity to provide a well-rounded programme that addresses the range of developmental needs. Also of concern is the plan to use redundant teachers with no preschool experience to fill positions – many of these teachers, even according to MOEVT, see this as a hardship posting and lack the enthusiasm and commitment that are critical to working with young children. In combination with the higher curricular expectations, this could result in a reliance on the drill-oriented methods these teachers are more used to. Both these concerns run counter to MECP-Z practice. In the absence of clearly articulated standards for preschool, there is a significant worry that the objectives of this important phase of education will be distorted by other pressures – with implications for young children and for the overall success of the school system.

Another concern is that the current roll out of preschool includes no measures to respond to the needs of the lowest income households. Even in government preschools, fees will be charged that, while not high, are out of reach for the poorest, as is evident from the current preschool enrolment profile. There have been good gains in expanding access, but this will come to a halt (recent declines in GER suggest this is already happening) if the needs of the poorest are not taken on board. This concern is accompanied by another equity issue – the fact that the plan relies on a large number of community teachers who remain unpaid, working in parallel with salaried government teachers, an unsustainable system over the long run. For genuinely universal access to preschool, equity issues are critical to address.

Building a Sustainable System

What follows here is a proposal for an expanded reliance on a supported community preschool system, ideally developed in partnership between MOEVT and MECP-Z.

Without question, the government is to be applauded for pragmatically building on available resources and opportunities in the effort to universalise preschool. However, the financial sustainability of the preschool system over the long run must be considered. The current roll out of preschool (as exemplified in the *Watoto Kwanza* project now being implemented through the Public Private Partnership between MECP-Z, MOEVT, the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), Dubai Cares, and communities) is predicated on some important cost saving factors. These are the use of redundant primary teachers, unpaid community teachers, and existing classrooms (Strategy 1A in the table below gives a broad estimate of the recurrent costs for teachers under this plan and the start-up costs for building and equipping classrooms – the two most significant costs of establishing and running a viable preschool system.). However, the pool of redundant teachers and unused classrooms will not last long. If long-term demographic realities are taken seriously, the actual cost of depending on government preschools as the backbone of the system is clearly unrealistic. As shown in Strategy 1B, preschool teacher costs would rise to almost 10% of recurrent education spending and building the necessary classrooms would cost an estimated 27 billion Tanzanian shillings (Tshs). Resources on this scale are not available, and expansion plans are likely to founder.

| | Strategy 1A | Strategy 1B | Strategy 2 |
|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Recurrent salary/stipend costs | 4.4 bln Tshs | 6.6 bln Tshs | 2.4 bln Tshs |
| As % of recurrent education spending | 6.5 % | 9.7 % | 3.5% |
| One time start-up costs | 0 Tshs | 27 bln Tshs | 6.7 bln Tshs |

Instead, we are suggesting a system of community schools subsidised by government to fill the remaining need, with both a teacher and a construction subsidy to make the current community model more widely practical (Strategy 2). The teacher stipend would be 50,000 Tshs a month, about 25% of a full teacher salary; the construction grant to communities would be 5 million Tshs per classroom. This would be far more sustainable and affordable for government than continuing a long-term government preschool expansion and, at the same time, would provide the support needed to make community-owned options feasible, with fees that allow access to the poorest.