



CDSC4ECD ENDLINE EVALUATION

CBO Capacity Building Evidence Brief



Community Driven Systems Change for Early Childhood Development

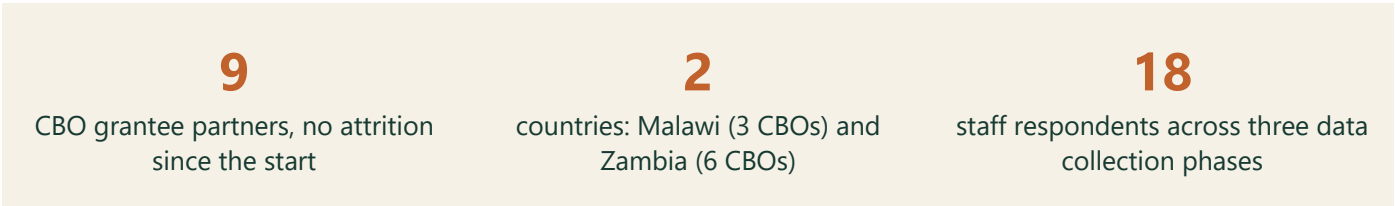
Kaoma, Kalabo, Mongu and Senanga district

Baseline 2023 | Endline 2026

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Community based organisations deliver most ECD services; their own capacity is rarely the thing evaluated

Across Sub Saharan Africa, governments hold formal responsibility for early childhood development but mostly provide policy direction rather than direct delivery. Community based organisations (CBOs) fill much of that gap, drawing on deep contextual knowledge to identify problems and mobilise locally relevant solutions. Firelight Foundation invested specifically in strengthening the organisational and technical capacity of nine catalytic CBOs delivering community driven ECD work, capacity that is usually assumed rather than measured. This evaluation asked a direct question: did that capacity investment change how CBOs plan, lead, deliver and sustain their work, and for whom did it change most? It draws on a retrospective pre and post design, in which CBO staff rated their own organisation's capacity both at the initiative's start and at endline, triangulated with focus group discussions, stakeholder mapping, and a desk review of community action plans.

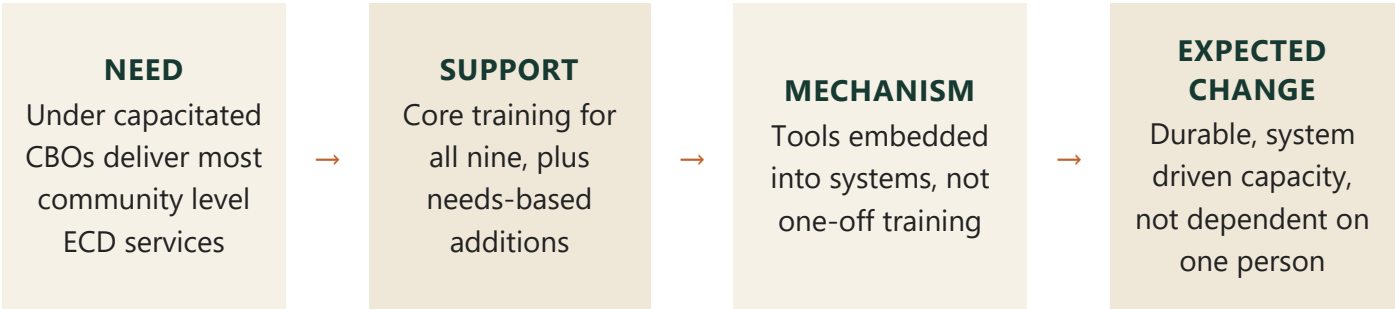


This brief summarises what changed in CBO capacity, what the evidence says drove that change, and what it means for Firelight and its partners going forward. It draws on the full CBO Capacity Support Report; see that report for detailed tables, qualitative excerpts and statistical tests.

WHAT WAS DONE

A differentiated, needs based capacity support model, not one size fits all training

Capacity support was not delivered uniformly. All nine CBOs received a standard core package, ECD understanding, resource mobilisation, networking, monitoring and evaluation, child protection and safeguarding, the CDSC approach, and financial management, then received additional, tailored support where their own needs differed.



Training design was deliberately layered beyond technical skill transfer. Safeguarding training aimed to shift CBOs toward proactive risk assessment. Monitoring and evaluation were framed explicitly as a tool for community accountability, not donor reporting. The inclusion of both global and indigenous ECD knowledge avoided the perception of an imported framework, instead documenting local child rearing practices alongside the Nurturing Care Framework.

Because CBO capacity was not the initiative's original focus, no true baseline exists. The evaluation therefore used a retrospective design: at endline, CBO staff rated their own capacity both at the initiative's start and at the time of evaluation, triangulated with qualitative data to validate the pattern of change.

WHAT CHANGED

Gains were consistent and often universal; resource mobilisation and staff retention lag

Across nearly every measured domain, technical application, service delivery reach, networking and community action planning, the initiative produced consistent, often near universal, gains across all nine CBOs. Where an indicator did not reach full agreement, resource mobilisation, or showed a real ongoing risk, staff turnover, the evaluation traces this to structural constraints rather than weak implementation.

Indicator	Before → After	Share of CBOs	Interpretation
SYSTEM AND TECHNICAL CAPACITY			
Strong leadership role in ECD coordination	None → 9 of 9 CBOs	100%	Universal
Use root cause analysis and action planning tools	None → 9 of 9 CBOs	100%	Universal
Address all five Nurturing Care Framework components	None → 9 of 9 CBOs	100%	Universal
Sustainably mobilise locally raised resources	None → 8 of 9 CBOs	89%	Weakest system outcome
SERVICE DELIVERY REACH			
Median families reached (0 to 6 years)	250 → 698	n/a	Significant in Zambia, $Z=2.20$, $p<0.05$
ECD centres constructed or supported	18 → 50	n/a	32 centre increase, both countries
Children reached in ECD centres	1,663 → 2,147	n/a	29% Malawi, 29% Zambia enrolment growth

Indicator	Before → After	Share of CBOs	Interpretation
Median volunteers collaborating with CBOs	35 → 120	n/a	More than tripled
NETWORKING AND STAFFING			
CBOs networking with peer CBOs	Minority → 9 of 9	100%	Universal at endline
CBOs networking across countries	0 → 4	n/a	New cross border exchange
Zambia CBOs losing some trained staff	n/a	6 of 6	100%, widespread turnover
Median staff count, all 9 CBOs	5 → 5	n/a	Held steady despite turnover
COMMUNITY ACTION PLANS AND SUSTAINABILITY			
CBOs whose plans reflect 2+ CDSC concepts	n/a	9 of 9	Universal, both countries
CBOs with Strong Readiness (4.0 to 5.0)	n/a	7 of 9	Both underperforming CBOs in Zambia
Meaningful engagement rated High, Malawi	33.4% → 93.4%	n/a	p<0.001, significant

Figures combine both countries where a common measure exists; see the abridged report for country specific detail.

WHY CHANGE HAPPENED

Skills stuck when they were embedded in tools and systems, not delivered as one off training

This evaluation cannot claim a controlled experiment; it relies on CBO self-report against a retrospective baseline. But the consistency of the pattern across capacity areas, quality ratings, and qualitative accounts from CBOs and Firelight staff points to a specific mechanism: capacity stuck where it was paired with a standardised tool or product, and was more vulnerable where it depended on one trained individual.

KEY FINDING

Sustainable capacity building is achieved when skills are embedded into organisational systems and tools, not delivered through one off training alone.

Illustrative pathway, monitoring and evaluation:



The same pattern recurs elsewhere. Networking moved from a minority practice to universal participation once it was structured into deliberate exchange visits and peer learning platforms rather than left informal. Computer skills improved across all nine CBOs even though formal training reached only five, plausibly because digital practice diffused informally through the same networking channels. Where a capacity area depended more heavily on one trained person, resource mobilisation and technical documentation, gains were real but less consistently embedded.

Staff turnover is the clearest test of this mechanism. Every Zambia CBO and two of three Malawi CBOs lost at least one trained staff member, yet overall staff numbers held steady in both countries. Organisations that had embedded skills into implementation frameworks and required internal skill transfer retained their capacity to operate; those relying on a single expert were more exposed.

WHAT HELPED AND WHAT CONSTRAINED PROGRESS

Layered training and peer exchange drove results. Resource dependence capped them.

ENABLERS

- A deliberately layered training design addressing power, accountability and sustainability, not only technical gaps
- Deliberately structured peer exchange visits and cross country networking, not left to happen informally
- Capacity support paired with implementation frameworks and products, not training delivered to one person alone
- A requirement that trained staff pass skills to colleagues, reducing single person dependency
- Dosage tailored to need rather than delivered uniformly across CBOs

BARRIERS

- Resource mobilisation is the one system level outcome without universal positive agreement
- Widespread staff turnover among technically trained personnel in both countries
- Programme manuals and guidance documents do not always reliably reach frontline caregivers
- No dedicated funding stream exists to sustain CBOs as organisations, separate from the programmes they implement
- Written action plans in both countries rarely name a single formally designated coordinator

These constraints are largely structural rather than a failure of training design. The evaluation is explicit that closing them requires organisational and financing decisions, not only further skills training.

SUSTAINABILITY AND INSTITUTIONALISATION

Seven of nine CBOs show strong sustainability readiness; obligation and continuity lag

Sustainability readiness was measured across five indicators: transparency, inclusion, predictability, obligation and continuity. Seven of nine CBOs reached Strong Readiness overall. Both CBOs that scored moderate or low readiness are in Zambia; Malawi's three CBOs scored high on every single indicator, a notably higher, more uniform result that the evaluation itself flags for independent verification given known response bias risk at this scale.

7 of 9

CBOs with Strong Readiness
(4.0 to 5.0)

8 of 9

high on transparency, inclusion,
predictability

6 of 9

high on obligation and
continuity, the weaker
dimensions

Institutionalisation showed genuine but uneven progress:

- Government recognition is now universal. All nine CBOs are recognised by government as a legitimate ECD partner, and meaningful engagement scores rose significantly in both countries ($p < 0.001$).
- Concrete linkages exist: a CBO chair on a Constituency Development Fund committee in Zambia, Ministry of Education alignment, and a government payroll pilot for CBCC caregivers in Malawi, though CBOs describe that pilot as moving slowly.
- No dedicated funding stream exists to sustain CBOs as organisations, separate from the programmes they implement, the risk both CBOs and Firelight named as most pressing.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Five lessons for future CBO capacity strengthening

1

Sustainable capacity is embedded, not delivered

Sustainable capacity building is achieved when skills are embedded into organisational systems, tools and continuous learning processes rather than delivered through one off training. CBOs maintained functionality despite staff turnover because skills were institutionalised in practical tools.

2

Coordination matters more than headcount

The effectiveness of stakeholder engagement depends more on coordination, role clarity and integration than on the number of actors involved. CBOs with clear coordination mechanisms showed stronger, more sustained implementation outcomes.

3

Peer exchange closes gaps training alone cannot

Peer learning and exchange platforms are effective mechanisms for strengthening organisational capacity. CBOs consistently adopted new practices and tools through exchange visits and networking, including digital skills that spread despite limited formal training.

4

System maturity looks like less reliance on the CBO

System maturity is reflected in reduced reliance on CBO intermediation and stronger direct linkages between communities and formal systems. As communities accessed services directly through government structures, CBOs transitioned into facilitative roles, a sign of strengthened systems, not reduced impact.

5

Undefined leadership creates diffuse accountability

Clear leadership roles are essential for coordination and accountability. Where leadership responsibilities were not explicitly defined in action plans, implementation oversight was diffused, even where a leader was functioning actively in practice.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN NEXT**Twelve actionable recommendations, five shared priorities**

The full report sets out twelve actionable recommendations, each with a responsible entity, timeline and priority, tracked through a management response matrix. Five priorities cut across all recommendations:

1. Institutionalise knowledge transfer

- Embed capacity building outputs into standardised tools, M&E systems, safeguarding policies and SOPs, so gains do not depend on any one person.

2. Establish continuous mentorship

- Move beyond one off training toward structured coaching, refresher sessions and on the job learning that reinforce skill application over time.

3. Transition capacity building to government

- Progressively shift training and supervision responsibilities to government systems to support institutionalisation and scalability.

4. Diversify resource mobilisation

- Link CBOs to public financing, private sector actors and community contributions, reducing donor dependency and closing the weakest capacity gap.

5. Formalise and scale peer learning

- Continue structured exchange visits and cross country learning platforms, one of this evaluation's most consistently positive findings.

A NOTE ON METHOD AND LIMITATIONS

How to read confidence into these findings

This evaluation used a retrospective pre and post design, not a true baseline. Because CBO capacity was not the initiative's original focus, no baseline measurement exists; at endline, CBO staff rated their own organisation's capacity both at the initiative's start and at the time of evaluation. This is a recognised, defensible approach for retrospective evaluation, but it carries memory related risks, including memory distortion and social desirability bias.

Small sample sizes, nine CBOs total, limit statistical power. Several capacity domains show a ceiling effect, where self-ratings began close to the scale's upper limit, leaving little room for statistically measurable further gain despite real, qualitatively evidenced improvement. Where the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test did not detect statistically significant change, this brief treats that as a methodological limitation rather than evidence of no change, consistent with the source report's own interpretation.

Quantitative findings were triangulated with qualitative data from capacity support focus group discussions, an online capacity questionnaire, stakeholder mapping, and a desk review of community action plans. The evaluation was cleared by the University of Zambia Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Review Board and Malawi's National Committee on Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and Humanities.

Source

Participatory Endline Evaluation, CBO Capacity Support Report. Impact Managers for Firelight Foundation, April 2026.