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Community action to improve early childhood practices and environments in Malawi, Tanzania, and Zambia

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Since 2010, Firelight has provided support to community-based organizations (CBOs) across Malawi, Zambia, and Tanzania to explore, build and sustain community-based approaches to early childhood development and care, in ECD centers, in homes and the community at large .

The CBOs worked with their communities to establish and/or strengthen ECD centers – including building basic infrastructure, creating supportive learning environments, and training ECD caregivers – to serve the needs of children from birth to age 5 and of their families. The organizations also explored and supported empowering parents and caregivers in the home. Through counselors and community outreach workers, they provides information and recommendations to parents and primary caregivers to encourage cognitive stimulation and social support to young children, through sensitive and responsive parent-child interactions.

In addition, all of the organizations recognized the need for holistic programming that serves children's and families' multi-faceted needs, and thus also implemented a variety of other supporting programs and services along with their ECD programs. These included savings and loans groups to promote families' economic empowerment, feeding programs to provide basic nutrition to children at ECD centers, voluntary counseling and testing for HIV and AIDS through community health activities, and income-generating activities to sustain some of the expenses involved in running the ECD centers.

As we've said throughout this series, Firelight's support for systems change for children and youth has been transforming over the past few years – from what might be called "community-based" to true "community-driven" and from what might be called support for "community programming" to support for true "systems change." And our support for CBOs working to improve early childhood practices and environments was not true community-driven systems change. But that's our fault – not the fault of the communities. And we wanted to share what happens when communities DO have agency, so that we can all begin to see how powerful true community-driven systems change can be.

In this initiative, 23 CBOs were supported and their work included support almost 50,000 children, parents, caregivers and community members and 77 ECD centers across the three countries. And what the CBOs achieved was impactful and meaningful – for the community, for families and for the young children themselves.

What support did Firelight provide?

Throughout the period, Firelight supported all of the CBOs with -

- Grants for program and organizational needs
- Technical support, including an introduction to both the Madrassa Early Childhood Program developed by the Aga Khan Foundation and the Care for Child Development Curriculum developed

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- Learning and evaluation support and capacity enhancement
- Assessment and evaluation frameworks
- Local, national and international learning cohorts and communities of practice

What did the CBOs do?

In Zambia, CBOs engaged in and supported (amongst other things) -

- Home visits to support mothers in parenting skills and counseling to strengthen the capacity of families to meet the health, social, and cognitive needs of children from birth to age 3
- Improving the skills and knowledge of parents in appropriate nutrition/infant feeding practices, farming, parenting, entrepreneurship and savings and health
- Learning through play at their ECD centers
- Renovating infrastructure and providing teaching and learning materials
- Training for in-home caregivers on creating stimulating and responsive environments for young children
- Raising awareness among community stakeholders about the importance of ECD

In Tanzania, CBOs engaged in and supported (amongst other things) -

- Training and supporting parents in parenting, early stimulation and early learning, protection, and economic strengthening
- Capacity building on extended breastfeeding and complementary feeding, play and interaction and early diagnosis and prevention for HIV and AIDS
- Facilitating health sessions at local clinics for parents and distributing information and education materials to parents about the importance of food and nutrition, birth certificates for children, and regular check-ups at clinics
- ECD center infrastructure development facilitating development of play and earning materials also for the center and home
- Parents' livelihoods through microfinance groups
- Children ages 3-8 years old who are living with disabilities, including those who are affected by and infected with HIV and AIDS by targeting their conditions at home, at school, and in the community
- The mobilization of parents and community members to establish community-based early childhood and early primary schools

In Malawi, CBOs engaged in and supported (amongst other things) -

- Promoting the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV

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- Training for ECD caregivers, teachers, ECD center management committees and volunteers, and improvement of ECD center infrastructure to improve the quality of learning and care at ECD centers (CBCCs)
- Facilitate development of low cost play and learning materials at ECD Centers
- Economic strengthening through village savings and loan groups to improve livelihoods of target households
- Improve food security and nutrition of children by training parents and caregivers in farming and contributing food and farming supplies
- Awareness-raising and advocacy about ECD with key stakeholders

What worked well?

- The ability of the CBO and the community to truly identify and support highly vulnerable families and children.
- CBOs tackling similar issues were given an opportunity to learn and grow together, which they found very meaningful.
- The CBOs' holistic approach to ECD center quality and family-based care was deeply impactful because they looked at what was happening both within and outside the ECD center, within and outside the home.
- The CBOs grounded their work in ECD national policies and guidelines.
- CBOs implemented a thoughtful "Trainers of Trainers" model which cascaded learning, knowledge, practice and support from CBO to CBO, from CBO to ECD center staff members, and from CBO to community members. This not only expanded the knowledge of multiple stakeholders, it also ensured the sustainability of the knowledge and action.

What did it lead to?

- Collective community identification of and support to highly vulnerable families and children.
- Improved permanent infrastructure for ECD centers in their communities.
- Increased access to ECD centers for children in the community.
- Improvements in lesson planning, and availability of teaching and learning materials.
- Improved learning outcomes in children who attended ECD centers compared to those who did not.
- Communities feeling ownership of and appreciation for their ECD centers.
- CBOs and communities providing ongoing support to ECD centers.
- Improved home environments and caregiver-child interactions.
- Communities with a deeper understanding of the importance of ECD, especially before the age of 3.

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children in the community.

- CBO trainers and counsellors supported parents and caregivers to increase the frequency with which they engaged in positive care and development practices with their children under the age of 3 – including telling stories and reading books, playing together, and singing songs. Parents already see substantial changes in their children, especially in their more vulnerable children.
- CBOs were able to identify ultra vulnerable children and families who were previously not accessing any programming or services, and mobilize community/civil society support for them and reduce their social isolation.
- In Tanzania, CBOs were able to sensitize and mobilize communities around their rights – resulting in communities demanding accountability from government around policies, budgets, and practices for children's learning in early primary.
- CBOs successfully mobilized parents and ECD center management committees to improve access to and the quality of ECD centers.
- CBO trainers supported ECD center caregivers to improve their practices and environments in different dimensions of quality – especially in the use of a curriculum and daily program, fostering positive adult-child and child-child interactions, and the quality of the physical classroom environment. We see promising improvements in children's school readiness scores.
- Community members continued to improve the physical infrastructure, develop low-cost learning materials, and contribute time and resources to feeding programs at the ECD centers.
- CBOs were being recognized by other stakeholders and are now participating and contributing their skills in technical working groups on ECD established by their governments to elevate the quality of ECD programs and services across the country.
- CBOs themselves are stronger, more resilient, and more accountable to their communities.

If you would like to read more about our reflections on our early childhood support for CBOs, please click here. If you would like to read individual stories of change, please click here.

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