



# MMERA MPOYAMBA FACT SHEET



The Government of Malawi



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## WHY INVESTING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IS GOOD FOR MALAWI'S FUTURE

What happens during the early years of a child's life, from birth to eight years, influences what the child will become during adulthood. Behaviour patterns of a lifetime are formed during this period when brain development is most active. The child acquires the ability to speak and learn and reason and the cornerstones laid during this period affect later learning in school<sup>1</sup>. A child receiving warmth, care, mental stimulation and social interaction from parents and preschool teachers has a better chance of succeeding in life than one who is not.

In Malawi, children aged between 6 to 8 years are usually enrolled in primary school. The problem, however, is that many of these children missed out on early learning and stimulation that would have better prepared them for school. In fact, only about thirty percent of children aged between 3-5 years are enrolled in a service providing early childhood development, such as a pre school or a Community-Based Childcare Centre. Put another way, seventy percent of children aged 3 to 5 years are missing out on emotional, mental and cognitive stimulation, leading to delayed brain development.

There are compelling economic and social reasons for investing in Early Childhood Development (ECD). Intervening in the early years of a child's life helps to reduce social economic gaps and gender inequalities that divide a society. It contributes to including those who are traditionally excluded, such as poor children, into a country's mainstream development process. For every \$1 spent on quality early childhood programmes, there is a \$7 return in cost savings.

A failure to invest in ECD diminishes by 20 percent all investments a country makes in its children. For Malawi, this is a loss the country can ill afford and undermines its ambition to "reduce poverty through sustained economic growth", as stated in the Growth and Development Strategy.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN MALAWI

The constitution, the supreme law of the land, provides for the protection of all children in Malawi. The Malawi Growth and Development Strategy, while making no specific mention of Early Childhood Development, specifies actions that will contribute to ECD. They include expanding infrastructure at preschool level to increase access, decreasing disease and death among children by improving their health and nutrition, and reducing gender-based discrimination and HIV.

Prior to 2003, Malawi had no policy on early child development. As the government progressed with its agenda to eradicate poverty, it became necessary to develop a policy that would ensure integration of ECD in the poverty eradication agenda. The policy was therefore adopted in 2003 but has continued to suffer from poor implementation, a low profile and limited resources.

ECD services in Malawi are offered by communities and the private sector. At community level, there are about 6,000 Community-Based Child Care Centres (CBCCs) providing ECD services to about 400,000 under-five children. A 2008 survey found that most CBCCs are located in rural areas where they provide services mostly to poor and vulnerable children. Eighty-eight thousand orphans and 16,000 children with special needs were registered in these centres.

- CBCCs provide important pre-primary school learning activities for children, setting the foundations for later learning in school;
- CBCCs pre-occupy children in communities with play and recreation, sharpening their learning and social skills and ensuring that they don't stay idle;
- For a considerable number of orphans and vulnerable children, these centres are their only means of accessing ECD activities. Many are too poor to afford private pre-schooling;
- The meals provided at these centres are a source of vital nutrition for the children, many of whom come from very poor families;
- Since they are owned by communities and staffed by volunteers, CBCCs are a low cost, high impact approach to early childhood development.

Twenty-three volunteers work in these centres, three-quarters of them women, where they provide learning and stimulation, play and recreation to children. In 2008, there were 20 children for every caregiver.

At national level, the Ministry of Gender, Child and Community Development regulates and coordinates all ECD activities. An ECD Network comprising members from Government, UNICEF, academia and the civil society is a forum for coordinating activities and sharing information among all key players.

In 2008, a five-year strategic plan for ECD was developed to speed up the implementation of the national policy on ECD and align it with national development objectives in the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS).

## FACTORS AFFECTING ECD DELIVERY

ECD in Malawi faces numerous challenges:

- The existing delivery points only reach 30 per cent of children;
- The buildings in which children learn are poor and inadequate. Many centres are characterized by poor ventilation, dusty rooms, poor lighting, temporary dilapidated structures and lack child-friendly sanitary facilities;
- The volunteers who provide these critical services in CBCCs are often not trained. A negligible 1 per cent has an adult literacy certificate, 19 per cent have reached Form 4, 23 per cent have reached Form 2, and 46 per cent have senior primary schooling. Four per cent have no formal schooling.
- It suffers from chronic under-funding and low priority. Most government ministries do not have structures for ECD and some are unable to pinpoint how much of their budget is spent on ECD. The 2008/9 budgetary provision of K17 million for child services in the Ministry of Gender, Children and Community Development is a far cry from the K20 billion required a year in the National ECD Strategic Plan.
- A lack of support from development partners. Mostly UNICEF and other civil society organisations have so far funded ECD activities, providing K350 million in 2008.

There is no task nobler than giving children a better future. Investing in ECD has rewards for the child and the nation.

**Economic:** Increased economic productivity over a lifetime and a better standard of living when the child becomes an adult, later cost savings in remedial education, healthcare and rehabilitation services and higher earnings for parents and care givers who are freer to enter the labour force.



- It brings wealth to families and improves quality of life. On average each year of schooling increases wages by 9.7 percent.
- For every dollar invested in ECD, there is a return of \$17.01 in cost savings. Children that have been prepared through ECD have fewer class repetitions, drop out of school less often, and are less delinquent. These children will also incur the country fewer medical expenses – \$12.90 saved by the national treasury and \$4.17 by the family.

**Social:** Intervening in the very earliest years helps reduce social economic disparities and gender inequalities that divide a society and contributes to including those traditionally excluded. There are other spin-offs which include better nutrition and better preparedness for formal schooling.

**Geo-Political:** A country's position in the global economy and its ability to compete in a global marketplace depends on the competencies of its people. The foundation for these competencies is set early in life.

## THE OPPORTUNITY COST TO MALAWI

The failure to make the right investment choices in favour of ECD has far-reaching implications for a country's long term development:

- A 20 percent loss on all child investments. It is expensive to reverse the effects of delayed brain development, which often manifest in poor school performance and low productivity in the workplace;
- An increase in school repetition rates and drop-outs. Currently, 74 percent of children in Malawi do not complete primary school education.
- A 20 percent deficit in adult income associated with stunting and poverty

In short, children who start poorly are more likely to end poorly. They fail to reach their full potential and will more likely perpetuate an inter-generational cycle of poverty and disease.

## ECD IS ABOUT MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICES

For leaders who want to make a difference, there are obvious steps they can take:

- Ensure that every child without exception benefits from early learning activities by mobilising communities to establish ECD services where none exist;
- Support initiatives aimed at improving family and community parenting skills;
- Advocate for increased funding and resources to support the heroic efforts of volunteers and caregivers.

Children's loss of development potential, the cost for individual children and families, and the undermining impact on poverty alleviation of not providing quality ECD services to every young child, are not fully recognized. There is a tendency to respond to short-term effects and ignore the long-term investment in human capital development. The task of reducing poverty through sustained economic development starts with making the right investment choices. To put the early years of a child's life at the centre of these investment choices is to invest in the country's ability to compete in future.

