



Strengthening Zambia's Community Schools:

Results from the Time to Learn Project

When Ireen was three, her father passed away, leaving her mother to care for the family. Through the family's perseverance, Ireen managed to attend school through grade 10. But it became difficult for her mother to find the money to continue paying her school fees. Ireen, like many girls in her rural village in Zambia, faced the prospect of having to drop out of school and get married at a young age. Fortunately for Ireen, help was at hand. Because of Zambia's Time to Learn (TTL) project, Ireen was able to obtain a scholarship to continue her studies — making her the first in her family to finish secondary school.

Introduction

Ireen's experience was one of the many successes of the TTL project, which was funded by USAID with additional financial support from the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The five-year effort improved the quality of Zambia's community schools and supported orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) like Ireen. Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) implemented school support activities in 2,000 community schools in six provinces and provided scholarships to secondary school students in all 10 provinces. Working in partnership with the Government of Zambia's Ministry of General Education (MOGE) from 2012 to 2017, the project exceeded its targets. Community schools improved, reading levels of students increased, government support to community schools increased, and access to secondary education among orphans and vulnerable children affected by HIV and AIDS was expanded.



**ZAMBIA
TIME TO
LEARN**

The Challenge in Zambia's Community Schools

Community schools are an important part of the Government of Zambia's plans to reach universal primary education by 2030. They constitute about 30% of all the schools in the country and serve about 25% of all primary school students.

Unlike other schools, community schools typically operate with classes of 60 or more students meeting in makeshift facilities. They are staffed by volunteer teachers who usually lack professional preparation and must make due with few learning materials and other classroom essentials. Community schools cater to the poorest of the poor, with a majority of the students being orphans and vulnerable children. The daily struggle to offer meaningful education is immense.

For community schools to succeed as a vehicle for helping Zambia achieve universal primary education, they need to demonstrate to communities and parents that they provide a credible educational experience and a genuine path to social advancement—on par with the regular government-run schools. Ireen's completion of secondary school was important in demonstrating that community school students could be successful, too.

The biggest challenge for the MOGE was addressing the low level of learning outcomes across the educational cycle and in particular for OVCs. Significant improvement in teachers' and managers' skills through training and a large infusion of learning materials was required, but MOGE had only limited resources to reach schools nationwide. The special economic, social, and psychological needs of orphans and vulnerable children also needed to be addressed in order for them to succeed and advance in school. Keeping the process of improvement on track and growing also required building understanding and increasing policy and resource support from communities, the private sector, and the government.

The TTL Response

In collaboration with MOGE, participating communities, and other stakeholders, TTL developed a multifaceted approach that was tested and adjusted across the life of the project. This approach involved a mixture of capacity building, development of a framework to improve literacy in the early grades, provision of learning materials and instructional support, scholarships, policy dialogue, awareness building, outreach to the private sector, and advocacy.

The project's output was impressive. TTL trained teachers and administrators at more than 2,000 community schools and reached more than half a million children. More than 900,000 supplemental reading materials and teaching aids were delivered to the most underresourced schools across the country. With the Forum for African Women Educationalists in Zambia (FAWEZA) and the Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED), the project's scholarship packages



In Zambia, community schools make up about 30% of all schools.

Community schools serve a quarter of all primary-age learners, and most students are orphans and vulnerable children.

aided 48,550 OVC students, who, like Ireen, were able to complete secondary school.

At the national level, TTL supported major MOGE policy initiatives and contributed to the development of the National Literacy Framework, which sets the path of early grade reading in Zambia. The framework is focused on teaching and learning in the various local languages spoken throughout the country. The project also supported the Ministry's revision and production of the Operational Guidelines for Community Schools. TTL brought together MOGE and other stakeholders to develop the first Competency Framework for Community School Teachers. Two national symposiums on community schools took place with assistance from TTL, leading to a comprehensive review of community schools in Zambia. Together, these policy documents contributed significantly to a greater awareness of the issues facing community schools at all levels of MOGE—and a dramatic increase in government support to community schools.

TTL's policy work also addressed the problems facing orphans and vulnerable children and the ways to address them, in a successful example of "policy informed by practice." With funding from PEPFAR and working with MOGE and others, TTL produced the Orphans and Vulnerable Children Framework, which outlined the administration process for a comprehensive scholarship package, one that included both financial and psychosocial support to secondary school students throughout the country. The scholarship package included books, stationery, school uniforms and shoes, female hygiene products, Parent-Teacher Association levies, school and examination fees, and boarding fees/stipends to cover other school-related costs, such as transport to and from school.

Creating a Climate for Innovation

A distinguishing feature of TTL was its ability to mobilize talent and energy across the country to innovate in the delivery of instruction, measurement of progress, engagement of stakeholders, and delivery of services.

Using m-learning to train community school teachers.

TTL supported innovations in instruction tailored to the challenging community school classroom, where teachers were highly mobile and lacked training and resources. Using EDC's m-learning platform Stepping Stone, TTL introduced mobile phones as an in-service training tool to help teachers in community schools improve their early grade reading instruction. Phones were loaded with videos aligned with Zambia's Primary Literacy Program (PLP). The videos focused on both improving literacy instruction in the classroom and showing users how to create materials to support instruction. Having these phones in the schools allowed new teachers who rotated in during the school year to get up to speed on instruction quickly without having to wait for annual face-to-face trainings.

Time to Learn's Orphans and Vulnerable Children Framework highlighted a plan for the administration of a comprehensive scholarship package, including both financial and psychosocial support to secondary school students throughout the country.





Bringing m-learning to students in the classroom.

TTL also piloted a program to put digital learning into the hands of students. The Vernacular literacy app provided animated tablet-based reading activities in mother-tongue languages, following Zambia's National Literacy Framework and schedule for students learning in the CiNyanja language. A randomized control trial revealed that Vernacular dramatically improved reading ability and lowered projected costs when compared to the use of print materials. The activity resulted in a full-scale classroom implementation model that can benefit both community and government-run schools in the future.

Delivering teaching and learning materials to community schools.

TTL provided 900,000 supplemental learning and teaching aids to those classrooms that were most in need across Zambia. Careful planning procedures and tools meant that reading kits and materials reached almost every community school in the six target provinces—dramatically exceeding initial targets for resource distribution.

Using media to engage stakeholder support for community schools and OVC.

Building advocacy skills among parents and community members was a mainstay of the stakeholder engagement strategy. TTL assisted committees, facilitated events, and developed resource documents to help Parent-Community-School Committees advance their work. TTL developed eight radio episodes that focused on the importance of

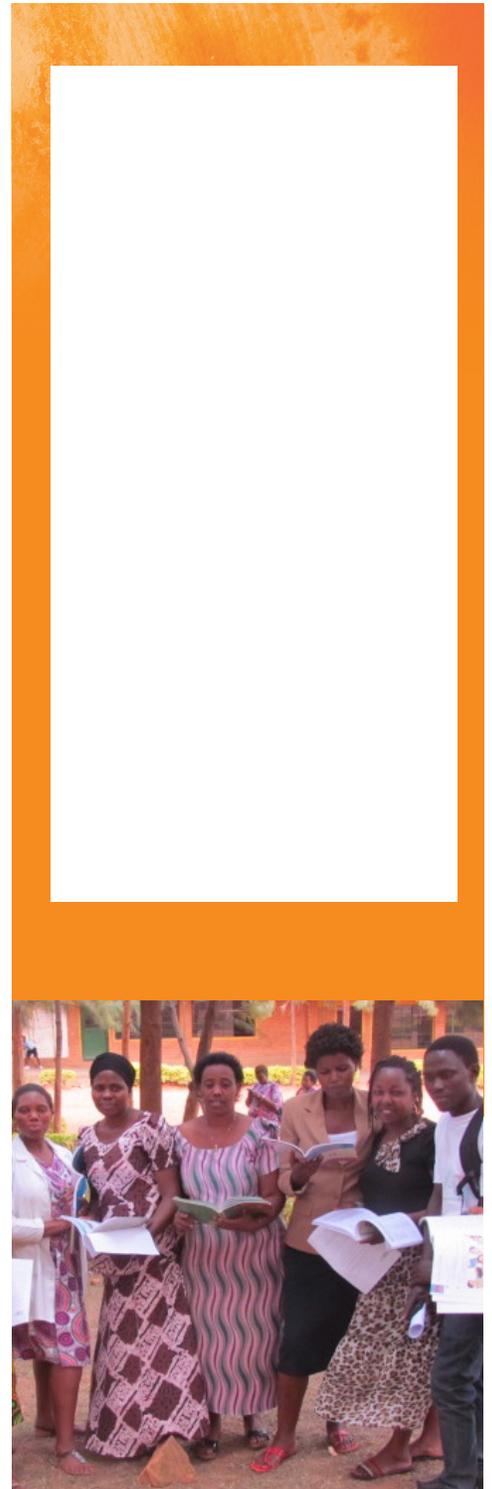
literacy and helped parents of children in the early grades support their children's schooling. Public and community radio stations aired the episodes in the seven major Zambian languages, and some stations continued to air the programs beyond their contract with TTL because of strong listener interest.

Key Outcomes

- **Grade 2 learners in community schools are reading better.** In fact, **reading rates increased by 5 to 6 times across all language groups and all reading tasks.** Improvements were particularly apparent in the fundamental reading competencies of decoding and reading fluency.
- **There is no gender gap in achievement.** Gains in literacy skill acquisition are similar for male and female learners, indicating that parity in performance has been maintained as reading levels have improved.
- **Classroom practices are shifting to strengthen literacy teaching methods.** Across the five literacy competencies, most teachers reported that they were using TTL-recommended practices.
- **Government support to community schools is increasing.** **MOGE significantly increased support to community schools through materials provision, teacher training, monitoring, deployment of government teachers, and infrastructure.** Assignment of government teachers to community schools increased by 38%, community school monitoring by Ministry staff increased by 47%, and provision of teaching materials increased by 75%.
- **Opportunities for the most vulnerable students increased.** **TTL scholarship packages enabled a cohort of more than 48,000 the most vulnerable students in grade 8 to enter formal secondary education and continue through their final grade 12 exams.**

Listening, Learning and Looking Forward

TTL's approach grew iteratively across the years of the project as a result of listening to and learning from partners, community leaders, teachers, and student beneficiaries. TTL leaves behind a rich legacy, one that is woven into the fabric of educational policy and practice in Zambia. The country now has a framework to enable better learning in classrooms in community schools. TTL also helped develop a wider support system to address the needs of OVC, such as Ireen and her cohort, and reduce the risks they face as they grow from children to young adults. The evidence suggests that the TTL legacy, along with commitment and determination, will help ensure continued success over the longer term as Zambia moves toward its goal of attaining





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Time to Learn was an application of EDC's Read Right Now! literacy approach. Read Right Now! is an adaptable, evidence based literacy program for low capacity and resource-lean environments.