



**SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-BASED
PRESCHOOLS TO INCREASE ACCESS TO
QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN**

**Promising Practice
in Community Engagement
in Malawi**



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Cover photo: Preschoolers attending one of the community-run ECE centres in the Dzaleka refugee camp, jumping on a trampoline outdoors.

Photo credit: © JRS Malawi

Title: Supporting community-based preschools to increase access to quality early childhood education for refugee children

Type of practice: Case Study

Programme objective: To strengthen the skills and capacities of caregivers on early childhood education to adequately support the developmental needs of young refugee children at Dzaleka refugee camp

Dates: June 2019 – December 2020

Population groups: The refugee community in Dzaleka, young children and their families

Partners: Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS); Association of Early Childhood Education in Malawi (AECDM); community-based early childhood education centres in Dzaleka

Programme overview

In 2019, noting the critical role of early childhood education (ECE) in improving children's survival, health, growth and cognitive and social development, UNHCR and its education partner organization, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), started supporting refugee and host community ECE caregivers¹ participating in community based ECE centres, to build their knowledge and competencies in ECE at Dzaleka refugee camp in Dowa, Malawi.

The programme was based on the premise that participation in quality early childhood education is a clear predictor of children's success in primary school and their subsequent retention in the secondary education cycle. With this in mind, UNHCR and JRS targeted community workers in informal community-based ECE centres to strengthen their capacity to engage in activities for children under 6 years of age. At the same time, the programme supported the development of a network of ECE caregivers and raised awareness among parents and the wider refugee community of the importance of young children's social and emotional development.

As a result, 14 ECE caregivers obtained government-recognized ECE teaching qualifications. Thirty ECE caregivers² not formally qualified as ECE educators were also equipped with practical skills to help them to create a healthy and stimulating learning environment for children in preschool, to boost their development at this vital developmental stage of their lives. Also, community-based ECE centres made it possible for more young refugee children at Dzaleka camp to have access to quality ECE programmes and contributed to reducing preschool absenteeism and the dropout rate.

¹ The majority (approximately 90 per cent) of ECE caregivers working at the community-run ECE centres are refugees.

² For the purposes of this document, "ECE caregivers" refers to staff engaged in the provision of early childhood development services to young children, including staff without formal ECE teaching qualifications, as the programme aimed to strengthen teaching capacities through the provision of both government-certified and uncertified training. Usage of the term is distinct from "caregivers" in the sense of those working with unaccompanied or separated children.

Context

As of June 2023, Malawi was hosting over 51,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, mainly from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi and Rwanda.³ Due to the encampment policy of the Government of Malawi, most refugees reside in Dzaleka refugee camp near the capital, Lilongwe. Originally established to host 10,000 individuals, the camp is overcrowded and this has led to deterioration of the protection environment for refugees and asylum-seekers and a reduction in access to essential services, including livelihoods, education and health, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).⁴

Prior to the implementation of this initiative in 2019, there were 300 children enrolled at the UNHCR-funded preschool⁵ in Dzaleka camp, managed by the non-governmental organization

(NGO) partner the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS).⁶ This represented only 8 per cent of the eligible children aged between 3 and 6 requiring early childhood education that year.⁷ Due to limited space and resources, it was not possible for UNHCR and JRS to expand early childhood education in the camp. This became a major concern, given the determining influence of adequate early childhood education on the children's social, emotional and academic success throughout the rest of their child or young adulthood.⁸ In parallel, UNHCR and other partners continued to advocate for national authorities to increase support for schools at Dzaleka camp, given that the majority of resources financing education initiatives for refugees come from humanitarian actors.⁹



Children from Mtendere preschool, a community-based ECE centre in the Dzaleka refugee camp, pose for a picture with ECE caregivers and the Head of School. © JRS Malawi

³ UNHCR (2023). [Malawi Operational Data Portal](#)

⁴ UNHCR (2023). [Malawi Annual Results Report 2022](#)

⁵ In the context of the Dzaleka camp, preschools offer early childhood education services to children under 6 years of age who are not attending a primary school or equivalent.

⁶ UNHCR Malawi (2019). [Factsheet December 2019](#)

⁷ UNHCR & UNICEF (2019). [Towards Integration of Dzaleka Camp Refugees' Education in National Systems in Malawi](#) <https://copenhagenconsensus.com/publication/malawi-priorities-early-childhood-education>

⁹ UNHCR & UNICEF (2019). [Towards Integration of Dzaleka Camp Refugees' Education in National Systems in Malawi](#)

UNHCR and JRS consulted the community to determine how parents and preschool children were coping with the limited ECE opportunities for younger children at the camp, and found out that some [faith-based organizations, refugee-led organizations](#) (RLOs) and refugees in the community had opened their own ECE centres to fill the gap. These centres run primarily on voluntary contributions from local churches and tuition fees paid by parents of enrolled children to purchase school materials and support ECE caregivers working at the centres.

The findings also revealed that the staff working at the community-based ECE centres had not been trained in ECE and therefore lacked adequate pedagogical tools to support young children's development. Nevertheless, community-run ECE centres provided UNHCR and JRS with an opportunity to build on

existing community efforts to reach and support more refugee children who could not be accommodated at JRS-run schools due to budgetary constraints.

To balance these needs and opportunities, UNHCR and JRS opted to direct their efforts towards building the capacities of community-based ECE centres to deliver early childhood education by seeking partners and donors to collaborate in providing training opportunities that would enhance the overall quality of services offered to early learners at Dzaleka refugee camp by the community ECE centres.

Taking into consideration the programme's objective to strengthen overall ECE teaching capacities, the word "ECE caregivers" in this document is hereinafter used to denote both certified and uncertified ECE educators.

Resources and partnerships

In 2002, the Jesuit Refugee Service became the main UNHCR education partner at Dzaleka refugee camp and has since led the provision of several educational services to refugees at all UNHCR-supported schools operating in the camp, including one pre-primary school.

The UNHCR education team in Malawi provides JRS and governmental authorities with technical support in the field of education, working alongside other development agencies and community structures to promote access to equitable quality education for refugee children. As part of these efforts, UNHCR and JRS have jointly developed project proposals seeking financial support to boost the overall quality of the educational services of community-based ECE centres by equipping ECE caregivers with foundational learning on ECE methodologies and tools that can subsequently be shared with other ECE caregivers and parents in the community.

The main funding for this project came from a direct contribution from the Spanish Regional Government of Galicia (the Xunta de Galicia) to JRS in Malawi. UNHCR contributed to the implementation of the programme by sharing its technical expertise on ECE learning approaches and community-based educational engagement strategies, supporting the selection of ECE training providers as well as trainees and supporting coordination and community outreach efforts as part of its regular community-based protection interventions.

Process and activities

1

MAPPING COMMUNITY-BASED ECE CENTRES AND EXPLORATORY EXCHANGES ON ECE

UNHCR and JRS set out to identify community-based ECE centres in Dzaleka refugee camp to learn more about the services that were being provided and estimate the number of children that were being supported. Some 20 ECE centres receiving approximately 1,165 children were subsequently identified with the support of community structures, notably religious leaders and families with children in the communities.¹⁰ Several of these centres expressed interest in obtaining more information about the learning approaches to ECE being applied at the preschool run by JRS.

As result of these exchanges, ECE caregivers and leaders of some of the community-based ECE centres visited the UNHCR-funded preschool to observe some of the sessions and learn more about the teaching methodologies used. Likewise, UNHCR and JRS observed classes taught at the community-based ECE centres to better understand their organizational and teaching capacities and identify opportunities for collaboration.

2

LIAISING WITH GOVERNMENT-CERTIFIED ECE TRAINING PROVIDERS

Building on the efforts of the community ECE centres and their interest in enhancing the quality of their services, UNHCR and JRS liaised with the Ministry of Gender, Women, Children and Social Welfare, the governmental entity overseeing ECE in Malawi, to explore options for collaboration and obtain recommendations on government-accredited ECE trainers.

They chose the Association of Early Childhood Education in Malawi (AECDM), a non-governmental organization that is one of the government's main ECE partners and whose pedagogic principles are aligned with the **learning through play model**¹¹ supported by UNHCR and JRS at Dzaleka camp.

3

PARTICIPANT SELECTION AND TRAINING OF CAREGIVERS

The training was open to a maximum of 20 ECE caregivers and therefore it was important that participating ECE centres retained the services of trained staff to enable the transfer of skills to other caregivers in the communities. Thus,

UNHCR and JRS encouraged community ECE centres to nominate ECE caregivers who had a higher likelihood of staying at the schools based on their own learning motivation and commitment to community service. Gender

¹⁰ Data as at December 2019, available at [UNHCR Malawi Fact Sheet December 2019](#)

¹¹ Play-based learning is one of the ECE approaches which is based on child-led exploration and discovery through play. The model seeks to help children develop holistically through motivation, socioemotional learning and self-confidence, as well as practising cognitive skills. See [Play-based vs formal academic early childhood education | Unesco IIEP Learning Portal](#)

equality was also encouraged in the selection process and 9 out of the 14 selected participants were women. To support their retention, JRS provided a monthly stipend for ECE caregivers who signed an agreement committing to work at the same school for an academic year and to participate in training and support sessions for other ECE caregivers in the community.

Although the call for participants in the training was open to all ECE caregivers at Dzaleka camp, priority was given to caregivers from six preschools that stood out during the identification and mapping phase conducted by UNHCR and JRS (activity 1) for:

1. The interest they showed in supporting the project (e.g. facilitating the release of ECE caregivers to attend the training and/or to

taking in young children whose parents did not have the financial means to enrol them);

2. Their efforts to enhance the physical and safety conditions of the centre, as reflected in their levels of internal organization, including health and safety regulations.

A total of 14 participants attended a two-week training programme focusing on the following areas:

- ▶ Child growth and cognitive development
- ▶ Teaching strategies for young children using the play-based learning model
- ▶ Developing didactic and cognitive games and activities using locally available materials and resources.



Young children from Mtendere Preschool, part of the ECE community centres partnering with UNHCR and JRS for this project, playing in the school playground during break time. © JRS Malawi

4

DEVELOPING A SUPPORT NETWORK FOR ECE CAREGIVERS

ECE caregivers trained and certified by AECDM became focal points for early childhood education in the community ECE centres where they worked. A WhatsApp group was created to facilitate the sharing of information among them about educational events in the communities, training opportunities and activities for children, inter alia. This platform also enabled them to receive technical guidance from JRS and UNHCR on ECE resources and pedagogical issues encountered. As part of the methodology envisioned for this component of the initiative, JRS and UNHCR sat in on some of the classes taught by the trained caregivers to assess the impact of the training on their performance with preschool children and to provide feedback and additional support.¹²

To support the capacity of ECE caregivers who were not prioritized for certified training, JRS, in collaboration with the organization Early Starters International (ESI), organized additional uncertified training sessions throughout 2019 on ECE development approaches, activities and methodologies, which were open to all ECE caregivers in the community. Thirty ECE caregivers participated in the training

sessions, 20 of whom were women. As part of this initiative with ESI, a few programme participants were selected by JRS to be ECE mentors, who would provide support and oversight to less experienced ECE caregivers by conducting classroom visits and offering peer advice between training workshops and upon completion. These mentors were joined by the certified ECE caregivers trained by AECDM, resulting in a network of mentors who offer ECE support at Dzaleka camp.

UNHCR supported the initiative, along with JRS, by facilitating meetings between ECE mentors and other ECE caregivers in the community, at which participants were able to have exchanges on ECE resources and knowledge, as well as on challenges and tips to overcome them. In addition, ECE mentors developed refresher training sessions on ECE approaches to address some of the information gaps and challenges posed by ECE caregivers participating in these support groups. To facilitate continuous communication among members of this ECE support network, JRS created a WhatsApp group and shared a contact list, both of which were updated periodically.

5

ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY TO SUPPORT YOUNG CHILDREN'S SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Although social and emotional learning in ECE was one of the key topics addressed throughout the trainings developed for the caregivers, engaging parents and the wider refugee community in the topic was important as they support the development of their children influencing the way young children manage their emotions and relate to others. To promote this,

UNHCR and JRS organized awareness-raising sessions with parents of children attending formal and informal ECE centres at Dzaleka refugee camp, as well as with religious and cultural leaders in the community. These sessions emphasized the importance of providing children with an environment in which they feel safe and secure, providing participating community mem-

¹² In order to qualitatively measure the impact of the training on teaching performance, JRS and UNHCR relied primarily on the following indicators: (i) adoption of participatory teaching strategies for engaging young children in learning through the play-based approach; (ii) use of didactic games and learning materials constructed with locally available resources; (iii) assimilation of theoretical and practical approaches to ECE included as part of the training imparted by AECDM: this was assessed, among others, by observing the quality of the teaching process, including the structuring of lessons and how caregivers responded to children's behaviour and needs.

bers with tools and ideas on how they could support young children's socioemotional development at home, at church and through other social structures.

To strengthen the psychosocial support component of the project, social workers funded by JRS developed refresher trainings on social and emotional skills for community ECE caregivers and organized group sessions with leaders of community-based ECE centres and parents to support the handling of situations involving chronic absenteeism, psychosocial distress and dropout. To complement these efforts, UNHCR and JRS liaised with the District's Social Welfare Office,

which also supported some of the training in socioemotional learning for ECE caregivers in the community.

Given that adequate nutrition is necessary for the healthy development of children and that one of the reasons preventing parents from sending young kids to school in Dzaleka is the lack of financial means to prepare school lunches, the project also organized the distribution of food to ECE centres so that meals could be prepared with the support of parents and community volunteers. When the schools closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the ECE centres instead facilitated the distribution of food rations for parents to take home.

Achievements, results and impact

The programme enabled ECE caregivers to gain practical skills for creating a healthy and stimulating learning environment for preschool children. As a result, community-based ECE centres made it possible for more young refugee children living in Dzaleka refugee camp to have access to early childhood education: whereas in 2019 the JRS preschool could accommodate 8 per cent of eligible children, ECE community centres supported 1,165¹³ children, increasing the overall enrolment rate to around 41 per cent in 2019 and to 56 per cent in 2023. By strengthening their caregivers' professional capacities, including new pedagogical approaches to ECE, the initiative has contributed to **more equitable access to quality education for young refugee children**.

Furthermore, the process created **synergies between UNHCR-funded schools and community-based ECE centres**. Prior to the implementation of the project, there was little communication among ECE centres in Dzaleka camp because they were not known to each other. The opportunity to work together and exchange views on ways of doing things to support the educational needs of younger

children in the communities has brought all ECE schools together. This in turn has had a long-lasting impact as evidenced by:

- ▶ Improved access to data collection on ECE indicators at Dzaleka camp;
- ▶ Continuous exchange of information among all schools about capacity-building opportunities for ECE caregivers; conferences, activities with parents and children in the community, etc.;
- ▶ Community schools reach out to JRS and the UNHCR education team for technical support on key issues and also collaborate in the identification and referral of children at heightened protection risk.

Awareness-raising sessions on ECE with various stakeholders, including heads of schools, community ECE caregivers, parents and the community at large, contributed to a **decrease in school absenteeism and dropout**, which went from 80 per cent in 2019 when the project first started to 58 per cent when it ended in early 2021.¹⁴

¹³ UNHCR Malawi (2019). [Factsheet December 2019](#)

¹⁴ These indicators are extracted from Education Management and Information Systems (EMIS) data, which is collected

Additionally, the established support mechanism for ECE caregivers, through dialogue spaces where mentors could teach and advise less experienced teachers in the community, continued to operate through self-organization efforts by the ECE teaching community.

ECE schools in Dzaleka camp now use **modern learning approaches**, particularly the play-based model, which allows children to learn through

play and keeps students motivated to attend school.

The **growing number of children aged 3–6 enrolled in ECE has widened prospects for their enrolment at primary level**, because these preschool children are now used to going to school. The enrolment process is easier than for those going to school for the first time.



Young learners from one of the community-run ECE centres in the Dzaleka refugee camp play freely outdoors. © JRS Malawi

Lessons



ENABLING FACTORS

- **Members of the refugee community and faith-based organizations decided to take action** unilaterally to address the lack of ECE services affecting young children and parents in the community. With their own contributions, they were able to expand the reach of early childhood education services within the camp.
- Receiving **financial support** for the training of ECE caregivers and for incentivizing caregivers to train and mentor other caregivers in the community was a key enabling factor, creating conditions that encouraged greater participation and commitment from ECE caregivers.
- Cultivating a **good relationship between UNHCR, JRS and the Malawi Ministry of Gender, Women, Children and Social Welfare**
- **Engaging parents in their child's socio emotional learning** has been important in reducing absenteeism and ensuring that young children receive adequate support at home to develop to their full potential.
- **Distributing food to support the adequate nutrition** of children attending ECE centres was a key incentive for parents to be able to send young children to school.



ADVERSE FACTORS AND CONSTRAINTS

- Implementation of the project was disrupted by the mandatory closure of schools at the end of March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of this, ECE caregivers who had received training found themselves without opportunities to apply their skills for several months. Although the project continued for a few more months after schools reopened, the closure of schools for six months likely impacted the overall educational quality.
- Most of the community ECE centres struggled to offer their caregivers competitive compensation packages. Consequently, once the project concluded, some ECE caregivers opted to transition to alternate schools, resulting in a shortage of qualified staff in certain project-affiliated schools.
- The lack of adequate financial resources facing the community-based ECE centres, as well as reduced livelihoods opportunities for refugee families at Dzaleka refugee camp, posed various challenges for the ECE caregivers. The majority of schools lacked appropriate WASH conditions and had limited infrastructure and school supplies such as crayons, paper, toys, etc., which affected the overall learning environment. In addition, some children went to school hungry, which affected their behaviour and ability to concentrate.
- Due to budget constraints, the content and length of the training curriculum offered by AECDM had to be adjusted to cover essential ECE approaches in less time.

Tips for replication and scaling up

- ✓ Investing time in the selection of competent and committed caregivers to be trained is important, as they will play a key role in ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of the programme, which is based on the transfer of skills and knowledge. Throughout the piloting of this initiative, caregivers driven by passion not only exceeded their training expectations but also demonstrated a greater inclination to remain connected with UNHCR and JRS through the ECE network.
- ✓ Sustaining the collaboration established throughout the project beyond its designated timeline, thereby fostering sustainability even after its conclusion, is essential.
- ✓ Supporting the retention of trained ECE caregivers contributes to ensuring the transfer of skills and knowledge in the community and the sustainability of ECE support networks.
- ✓ Seeking resources for integrating adequate nutrition in early childhood education responses in Dzaleka camp is crucial to fighting absenteeism and ensuring that young learners can learn and concentrate adequately.
- ✓ Investing in infrastructure expansion and/or improvement, including ensuring adequate WASH conditions, can complement scale-up efforts and promote a healthier learning environment for young children.
- ✓ Promoting the integration of ECE into basic education, both in the state school system and at camp level can incentivize financing opportunities for early childhood education.

Next steps

Building on the successful implementation of this programme and its long-lasting effects, UNHCR and JRS continue to explore partnerships and funding opportunities to enhance the ECE teaching capacities of community-based and refugee-led preschools in Dzaleka camp. Moreover, both organizations are seeking to replicate the model and strengthen community-run education initiatives at primary and secondary

levels. As a priority, UNHCR and its education partners are advocating for the Ministry of Education and the district education authorities to support more community-based education interventions in the camp, including by deploying more teachers and social workers, expanding refugees' access to the state education system and facilitating the registration and licensing of refugee-led private schools.

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