

# *Local solutions for improving the quality of care and education for young Maasai children in Tanzania*

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Many governments and donors seem to regard Education For All (EFA) Goal No.1: 'Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children' as more of an option than a necessity. However, this is not the case in Monduli, a district in the Arusha region of Tanzania, where Monduli Pastoralist Development Initiatives (MPDI) is working with Maasai pastoralist communities and the Monduli District Council to improve early childhood care and education as a foundation for meeting all the EFA goals.

Over the past two years, MPDI has been sensitising communities and helping establish their own Community Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centres. These centres do two things. First, they support and strengthen the informal care and education of young Maasai children in their family and community contexts. Second, they provide a point where clinic staff, school teachers and government officials can meet with community leaders, thereby enhancing co-operation and joint efforts to improve the quality of care and early education of young Maasai children.

A key guiding principle of all MPDI's work is to start with what defines the Maasai: who they are, what they know and what they want. The collaborative action, which is guided by the Maasai communities themselves, is showcasing much of what was laid out in the Dakar Framework for Action in 2000, which states that quality early childhood programmes

accomplish the following:

- include supporting care and education environments for children across the early years age range (0–8 years) in families, communities and more structured settings;
- include activities centred on the child, focused on the family, based within the community and supported by national, multi-sectoral policies and adequate resources;
- be comprehensive, focusing on all of the child's needs and encompassing health, nutrition and hygiene, and cognitive as well as social, emotional and spiritual development;
- include the education of parents and other caregivers in better child care, through building on the strengths of traditional practices;
- be developed in such a way that they are appropriate to young children and not mere downward extensions of formal school systems;
- be provided in the child's mother tongue;
- help identify and enrich the care and education of children with special needs;
- be best achieved through partnerships between governments, NGOs, communities and families.

This article provides some background to the project, based on the findings of a participatory, child-focused community research commissioned by MPDI in 2005 to inform project planning. It then looks at what has been achieved and what challenges remain to be addressed, and concludes with a discussion of what can be learned from the experiences to date.

## Background

The Maasai people of northern Tanzania are traditionally nomadic pastoralists, and their historical practices of caring for and educating their children have sustained them over generations. However, the enforcement of land regulations in recent years, coupled with environmental hardships such as drought, has resulted in their having to adapt to a more settled life-style and adopt agricultural and other practices that are alien to them.

The development of social services and infrastructure to support this transition has been limited, with both clinics and schools located far from communities in areas with no transport infrastructure. As a result, these communities live in very challenging social and economic circumstances in which they not only struggle to meet their basic needs, but openly recognise that they are no longer able to meet their own standards of quality care and informal education of their children. For example, women from one community reflected on their childcare roles after walking 20 km to collect water: “We know how to care for our children, but we have no time”.

Government officials have expressed concern about the low enrolment and retention of pastoralist children in primary schools in Tanzania. Traditionally, Maasai pastoralist communities have felt little need to send their children to formal school. Institutionalised schooling has been alien to their culture and nomadic lifestyle, and of no relevance to their aspirations for their children. With their changing circumstances however, communities have become increasingly interested in sending their children to school, but they have expressed significant concerns about the quality of the school programmes.

First, the schools are often far away and the children have to walk long distances to get there. As one community member explained: “Our children have to walk almost 10 km to school. During the rainy season some areas are flooded so the children can’t get there”. Because children must leave home very early, teachers note: “Children are weak at school because they do not have any breakfast and they receive no food until they get home”. In reality, therefore, children often do not enrol in school until they are 9 or 10 years of age.

As one mother emphasised: “If we have a choice, we like our children to start school later, because it’s too far for 7-year-olds”.

In addition, with limited basic school infrastructure, children are expected to contribute water and firewood from the home supplies, adding to the women’s workload. As one mother explained: “If you don’t give water and firewood for your children to take to school, they will not go”.

At the local government level, District Council officials have acknowledged that because they have not been able to provide enough schools (and clinics) close to communities, the attendance of 7 and 8-year-olds is limited, and any plans for developing school-based pre-primary programmes for 5 to 6-year-olds, as per the national policy, are compromised.

The physical distance between communities and schools also contributes to the fact that there is little or no interaction between them. As a result, the school programmes and approaches may have little relevance to the Maasai communities they serve. One community research team member noted: “There seems to be nothing in the school culture that indicates any thinking about the visions the pastoralists have for their children... it looks like kids are just picked up out of their community culture and dropped into the school culture”. Alternatively, as one male community member suggested, if schools could be located close to their community then this situation could be changed, because “communities can be more involved in the school, and the school can learn from the community”.

Research therefore indicated that community members and government officials shared common aspirations to improve the access, retention and success of Maasai children in school, and that this could be achieved through a two-pronged approach. First by communities and service providers working together to strengthen and support informal care and education in the family and community contexts, and second to build on this foundation to improve the quality and relevance of primary school programmes. Whilst elders were very concerned that formal education should build on their culture and not replace it, they were not aware that some



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teachers and government officials already recognised the importance of Maasai children’s informal education and culture. As two Maasai Head Teachers highlighted: “We need both informal and formal education together, because if we do not keep our culture then we will not have the confidence to get involved in formal education”. In this context, one elder articulated what community leaders agreed was the common challenge for communities and government officials alike: “Is it possible to bring both formal and informal education together to develop a person who is confident in both?”

When community members and local- and national-level government officials discussed the findings of the community research at an open forum, it was agreed that this common challenge also inspired coordinated collaborative action for improving the quality of care and early education of young Maasai children in families, communities and schools in Monduli.

#### **Achievements and challenges**

There have been a number of significant achievements. When this project started in October 2005, there were five pre-schools in the ward, two based at primary schools and three in communities, involving a total of 180 children between the ages of four and seven. Now, there are 34 Community ECD Centres, involving 1,818 children, and there is already an increase in the number of Maasai children in school. As one primary teacher explained: “We have more children enrolling in Standard One now. They are used to interacting with others at the ECD Centres, and they have been introduced to Swahili, so they are more confident when they start school”.

As a result of MPDI’s awareness-raising at dispensaries and clinics, local healthcare service providers are reaching more young children and their families than before. Some providers are attending the Community ECD Centres on a regular basis to monitor children’s health and offer

healthcare and health education services. As a result, MPDI field staff have noted that clinic staff are developing more positive relationships with Maasai women and children, and community members are becoming more aware of and open to 'outside' healthcare advice and medicine for their children.

Indeed, the Centres have become such an integral part of community culture and events that MPDI field staff recognise that they "are much more than centres for children, they are community centres and meeting points. Even government officials say that nowadays communicating with communities is much easier because they can meet them at the ECD Centres".

Four community ECD Centres that are more than 10 km from a school have become 'Satellite Schools'. This means that at government request the programmes have been expanded to include Primary Standard 1 and 2 classes for 7 and 8-year-old children. Whilst government has nominated teachers for these programmes, communities have taken the lead in building temporary facilities for the classes and are highly motivated by the prospect that they are in the process of developing their own community primary schools. Recently, the Monduli District Council has included ECD issues in its plans and budget, including a contribution for a monthly allowance to pay community-nominated ECD Centre 'teachers'.

Whilst the Monduli District Council and the neighboring district have called on MPDI to expand this programme, Monduli District has also been proposed as a pilot area for a national integrated ECD initiative.

Several challenges remain. Communities are pressing for even higher contributions from the district council towards teachers' pay and training, as well as food and water provision at the Centres in times of emergency. Funding limitations are holding back progress in documentation of community knowledge, beliefs and practices to inform local curriculum and resources development; in capitalising on the opportunity to work in partnership with the national curriculum development institute in developing local curricula, resources and training programmes; and to expand the programme to other wards and districts.

Progress is also limited by a lack of professional capacity in early childhood development in Tanzania, and delays in implementing the National Poverty Reduction Strategy's commitment to "Develop an inter-sectoral policy framework to guide early childhood development and pre-school learning". This makes it hard to mobilise donor funding for early childhood support.

#### **Assessment and lessons learned**

The strength of the achievements to date rests on the fact that local communities' ownership of and commitment to their ECD Centres is very strong. Community ECD Centres are based in the community, run by a community-nominated 'teacher' with grandmothers as resource people, and they are designed, constructed, maintained and managed locally. They offer clear benefits to parents as well as children. As a women's group explained: "At least now we have a place for the children to play and be safe while we are looking for water".

Decentralised and flexible approaches to programme development, steered by communities themselves and realized through ongoing processes of consultation and negotiation between stakeholders, have been vital to success. At the same time, it has been very important to integrate the project into local government structures right from the planning stage. As a result, government officials are very supportive of these initiatives as integral to their work.

The ongoing effort to research and document Maasai community knowledge, beliefs and practices about informal early care and education, although limited, has provided a significant motivation to communities. At the same time, local teacher trainers are inspired by the fact that there appear to be strong links between the Maasai traditional approaches to supporting children's learning and their new participatory approaches to teacher training.

Sensitisation at both primary school and community levels has helped the ECD Centres to bridge the social and cultural divide between the Maasai and the formal school system. Whilst the Community ECD Centres operate in the Maasai language, they also introduce the national (and school) language of Swahili as preparation for the transition to formal school. As a result, primary schools have become

very supportive of the Community ECD Centres as a foundation for strengthening children's informal care and education as well as preparing them for successful entry into primary school. The growing relationships between communities and schools through Community ECD Centres is also providing an important platform for schools to work with communities to improve the relevance of their programmes and be better prepared to support the transition of young Maasai children to school.

MPDI is now working to strengthen partnerships between communities, the District Council and the local teacher training college to develop locally appropriate parenting education programmes and curricula, training guidelines and resource materials for the community ECD Centres and the early primary classes. As one Maasai teacher explained: "School culture is Swahili culture. By developing teaching and learning resources based on Maasai culture, Maasai children will be proud of who they are and proud to be learning Swahili at the same time". In this context, it is highly significant that the national institute responsible for curriculum development has recently proposed a shift from a centralised approach to a more participatory, community-informed approach to curriculum development.

Through this project, both pastoralist communities and government officials have realised that they share common goals for local solutions to improve the quality of young Maasai children's early care and education, at home and at school. Together they also recognise that these goals can only be achieved through committed partnerships between families, communities, local government leaders, ward and district officials, and health and education professionals, and that are must also be well supported by national-level policies, guidelines and resources.

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