

School Readiness Initiative in Zimbabwe



What are the reasons for getting involved?

Zimbabwe's education sector, once a flagship in the region, has been profoundly damaged after years of economic instability. In 2019, the country's GDP contracted by an estimated 6.5%. Government support for essential educational materials, equipment, school infrastructure, and teachers on a primary school level has dwindled, shifting the burden to parents and communities already overwhelmed with rapid devaluation of currency, scarcity of basic food, hunger, rising poverty, and the highest number of orphaned children per capita in the world. Furthermore, the education budget has shrunk significantly, averaging US\$412 million over a 4-year period running 2017-2020 compared to US\$832 million for 2013-2016. Similarly, real education spending has sharply declined, reflecting the impact of depreciating local currency and increasing inflation. Similarly, as a share of GDP, the education allocation has fallen from the peak of 5.4% of GDP in 2014 to the revised 3% in 2019. This level of funding is inadequate to ensure quality education for children and progress towards the SDG targets for education. The Infant, Junior and Secondary education budgets as a share of the total budget have been reduced.

Today, poverty has a child's face in Zimbabwe. Of the 6.3 million boys and girls in the country, 4.8 million live in poverty, including 1.6 million in extreme poverty. Of the 13 million people in Zimbabwe, 48% are children. Most of them (72%, or 4.5 million), live in rural areas which, on average, are the worst off in terms of health, education, nutrition, water and sanitation, access to information and other basic indicators of well-being and quality of life. Urban vulnerability is also increasing, especially in the poor neighborhoods of big cities. Recent analyses indicate that over two-thirds of all children in Zimbabwe live below the food poverty line and are unable to access basic services such as health and education. The plight of children is worse in the target districts where the Roger Federer Foundation is involved due to their remote nature and reduced funding in those regions. There are significant inequalities existing along geographical, income and gender dimensions. Net Attendance and completion rates are lower in rural compared to urban areas. Since 2014, the Government declared ECE compulsory. Nevertheless, only a national average of 60% of children has access to pre-primary education compared to the number of learners in Grade 1. In rural provinces, such as Matabeleland, the enrolment rate is much lower at around 20%. This is also due to the fact that the average distance to the next ECD class is 5 km, a distance which is impossible for a four-year-old to manage every day.



Another major negative impact on the quality of pre-primary is the limited number of qualified ECD teachers. In particular, in rural Provinces such as Matabeleland North the rate of qualified ECD teachers is as low as 30% and these teachers work mostly in the Province capitals.

Source: UNICEF Education Budget Brief
<https://www.unicef.org/esa/media/6496/file/UNICEF-Zimbabwe-2020-Education-Budget-Brief.pdf>

Source: Situation of Children in Zimbabwe: UNICEF
<https://www.unicef.org/zimbabwe/situation-children>

What does the programme include?

Since 2008, the Roger Federer Foundation has been actively working in Zimbabwe focusing on improving the quality of primary schools and Early Childhood Education in vulnerable communities in Matabeleland North and South Provinces. In line with the Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 the Foundation will fully focus in the upcoming strategy, the school readiness initiative 2019-2025 on the two years of compulsory preschool education so-called ECD A and B. By 2025, the Roger Federer Foundation School Readiness Initiative in Namibia hopes to ensure that 70% of vulnerable children in targeted 3000 pre-primary institutions (public primary schools and ECD centres) have access to quality education so that they are ready for primary education. School readiness means that children are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being before entering primary school. This is a decisive precondition for further learning to take place and it being sustainably rooted.

Although Zimbabwe is impressively advanced when it comes to formalized preschool education it still faces some substantial challenges which the strategy will address. The number of qualified ECD teacher is low, the paraprofessional educators are not properly paid, access to ECD services still a challenge, dropouts are frequent and repetition rates are high. These facts are clear indicators that children might not be school ready when they start Grade 1. As there is neither a systematic way nor a consistently applied school readiness assessment, nationally or at subnational levels there is no proven evidence about that. But two of the most obvious challenges the ECD A and B level is facing is the very poor quality of facilities and inadequate qualified teaching staff as budget allocation to this sector is very limited.

The School Readiness Initiative of the Roger Federer Foundation will not only enhance the children's readiness for school, but also the schools' readiness for the children. The initiative will mainly focus on the improvement of the quality of the ECD A and B. We will increase the capacity of ECD teachers, sensitize and engage relevant stakeholders such as the Rural District Council, school inspectors, school development committees and parents to the children's needs in the preschool, and mobilize them to ensure that schools are in a better position to accommodate young learners. A Child Monitoring Systems will track the development of children and respond to their individual needs in the domains of language, numeracy, physical, socio-emotional and cognitive development.

The School Readiness Initiative will have the potential to increase the number of children who are participating in ECD A and B, increase the children's school readiness before transitioning into primary school and also increase the readiness of families and schools for the children who are of primary school age. In addition, it can potentially lead to a decrease in early grade repetitions and drop outs.

What has been done so far?

- Currently in the start-up phase until 2021
- Who is involved: 17'000 learners, 310 primary schools, 10 districts