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LEARNING FROM THE MULTI-COUNTRY STUDY ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION (MCSIE) IN MALAWI

SUMMARY OF INTERIM FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE MCSIE LED BY INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS (IDP) IN PARTNERSHIP WITH INVEST IN KNOWLEDGE INITIATIVE (IKI)

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INTRODUCTION

The Multi-Country Study on Inclusive Education (MCSIE) seeks to derive lessons about what works, for whom, and in what context to sustainably advance teaching and learning outcomes for children with disabilities in varying contexts. USAID and its partners will use the MCSIE evaluation to inform programming in Cambodia, Nepal, and Malawi and to plan for new inclusive education programming globally.

Specifically, MCSIE examines five themes:

- The overall **process** of setting up an inclusive education system
- Efforts to **screen and identify** learners with disabilities
- **Teacher training** models to build educator capacity
- The activity's **inclusive instructional approaches** for early grade reading (EGR)
- **Unintended consequences** resulting from the activity

This evidence summary draws upon key findings from the [Multi-Country Study on Inclusive Education \(MCSIE\) Malawi Interim Report](#) produced by Inclusive Development Partners (IDP) in collaboration with the University of Massachusetts-Boston and Invest in Knowledge (IKI) to highlight promising strategies in inclusive education for USAID and its partners, as well as other global stakeholders who would like to learn from the evidence generated.

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

INTERIM FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS IN MALAWI

- [Promising Identification Strategies](#)
- [Promising Training Strategies](#)
- [Promising Instructional Approach Strategies](#)
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SUMMARY

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READING FOR ALL MALAWI (REFAM)

In Malawi, MCSIE evaluates the 2019-2022 Reading for All Malawi (REFAM) activity, where training focused on building the capacity of Ministry of Education (MoE) officials, along with head teachers and specialist teachers, through professional development on universal design for learning (UDL), individual education plans (IEPs), deaf education, and disability screening and identification. Training was offered in-person when possible and was conducted via virtual platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp due to COVID-19. Training activities utilized PowerPoint slides, video demonstrations of techniques, and an “I do/we do/you do” method, which showed training participants how to perform a task and gave them a chance to try it with support before they embarked on the work. REFAM’s training program was grounded in UDL to promote inclusive education.

INTERIM FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS IN MALAWI

To shed light on core themes and findings in Malawi, the MCSIE team, led by Inclusive Development Partners (IDP) in collaboration with the research organization Invest in Knowledge Initiative (IKI), collected and analyzed primary data from October 2020–April 2022. Findings from this data should be considered formative in nature as the activity were ongoing at the time of the Interim Report. The endline report will provide additional information that will discuss findings from the activity’s final days and the perceived present and future impact on inclusive education in Malawi.

PROMISING IDENTIFICATION STRATEGIES

Under this theme, MCSIE asks **“What methods worked best to identify learners with disabilities?”**

RECOMMENDATION 1: EVALUATE SCREENING TOOLS FOR USABILITY AND VALIDITY AND PROVIDE FOLLOW UP SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS.

REFAM trained teachers in general screening concepts and provided four screening tools. Three of the tools were government-approved, Ministry-reviewed checklists already in use in Malawi’s schools. The fourth screening tool was a locally developed and validated tool. REFAM did not undertake tracking of how the tools were implemented. The government-approved checklists were hailed as easy to use, but not validated through comparisons with already accepted screening or diagnostic tools. Therefore, these tools may over- or under-identify children and may need further testing and consideration before use. The locally developed tool is reported to have undergone validation testing through a non-government disability service provider; however, it is more complex to use, and its performance when used by teachers for screening purposes is unknown.

It’s important to recognize the role ease of use played in adoption of the tools and ensure that is a factor in any tool selection. This experience also drew attention to the need for a transparent process for evaluating screening tools, along with clear guidance and follow-up support for teachers to select and use them. Such a process could increase stakeholder and international confidence in related screening results. This process could include expert review of tools and tool validation studies. Further, no matter what tool is selected, collecting usability data will help explain patterns in screening, referral, and assessment.

RECOMMENDATION 2: INVESTIGATE AND FOLLOW GOVERNMENTAL PROCEDURES FOR CONFIDENTIALITY AND CONSENT.

REFAM’s training on screening and identification highlighted the importance of confidentiality and consent. However, a review of training materials suggested that while the activity emphasized the need to safeguard learners’ information and obtain family consent throughout the process, guidance on how to do so was limited. The training lacked instruction on related law and practices to keep information confidential, and no specific forms to document parental consent for screening were provided. A good

practice for future activities would be to liaise further with MoE officials to align confidentiality and consent forms (or non-use of forms) with national policy.

PROMISING TRAINING STRATEGIES

Under this theme, MCSIE asks **“What training model(s) worked best to provide teachers with the resources and support they need to best meet the needs of learners with disabilities?”**

RECOMMENDATION 3: MAINTAIN A FOCUS ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, NOT ON LIMITATIONS OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES.

REFAM’s approach to training inclusive practices was novel within the scope of the MCSIE three-country evaluation and holds great promise for current and future programming as activities strive to align with theoretical frameworks of inclusion. REFAM utilized a Training of Trainers model with global experts on topics such as UDL and took a strong position that focused on accessible environments, not children’s deficits. Each training (UDL, IEPs, coaching, and parent engagement) provided explicit information on how the strategies taught could be used to support inclusion. Such a standpoint can be replicated in other similar activities elsewhere.

RECOMMENDATION 4: CONSIDER HYBRID TRAINING OR VIRTUAL TRAINING WITH LAYERS OF SUPPORT.

REFAM was able to efficiently reach stakeholders in all of Malawi’s districts through an initial virtual training. Innovations such as WhatsApp groups were used, and can be used in future activities, to support participants who may have missed content due to connectivity problems. However, WhatsApp also has limitations if stakeholders do not have smartphones. Despite limitations, activity findings indicate that virtual training is possible in low-resource areas, but requires additional support. One such support could be a “flipped classroom” model in which some of the activities are presented online—either live or recorded—and follow-up activities occur in small groups or are facilitated face-to-face.

PROMISING INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH STRATEGIES

Under this theme MCSIE asks **“What instructional models worked best to improve classroom instruction and reading outcomes among learners with disabilities?”**

Note that due to COVID-19-related timeline delays, little instructional approach data was available at the time of the MCSIE Malawi Interim Findings Report. As a result, the MCSIE team focused its attention on REFAM’s efforts to prepare for learning assessments via the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA). REFAM adapted the EGRA to be accessible for children who are blind or have low vision, who are deaf or hard of hearing, and who have learning difficulties.

RECOMMENDATION 5: ALLOW AMPLE TIME AND RESOURCES FOR THE PROCESS OF EARLY GRADE READING ASSESSMENT (EGRA) ADAPTATION.

REFAM adapted the EGRA to be accessible for children who are blind or have low vision, who are deaf or hard of hearing, and who have learning difficulties. Interviews with REFAM staff, however, revealed

that the adaptation process was very resource-intensive. REFAM staff indicated it was unclear if the MoE will sustain using the adapted EGRA tools, but REFAM built the capacity of MoE officials and hope efforts will continue. To adapt an assessment that is valid and contextually meaningful, ample processes need to be in place. Implementing partners must have the time and resources to research how adaptation is conducted in other contexts, must evaluate EGRA items against national standards, must identify when constructs or items have requirements that introduce disability bias, must have at least one week of training (or two for deaf/hard of hearing assessments), and must analyze statistical properties of the assessment. The EGRA adaptation process is a resource-intensive endeavor. Terms of reference (TORs) and solicitations should reflect this, and implementers should plan accordingly. REFAM worked with local partners to take the time needed to develop the assessments.

RECOMMENDATION 6: CONDUCT A SIGN LANGUAGE AND BRAILLE ASSESSMENT IN COUNTRY BEFORE DEVELOPING AN ADAPTED EGRA.

REFAM faced an unexpected situation in which regional variations of Malawian Sign Language (MSL) meant that the process to validate and standardize the assessment took longer than expected. Because no specific rules existed on how to address regional variations of signed languages while working to standardize a tool that would require a standardized signed language, an appropriate response was to build consensus among experts, including disabled persons organizations (DPOs) from the deaf community. Consensus-building to develop rules for engagement allowed for assessments to reflect the national context while maintaining broadly standardized procedures.

EGRA baseline survey data also revealed that many students who took the braille assessment did not know how to use braille. Although this information is useful from a policy perspective, assessing students in formats or languages for which they are unfamiliar will invalidate results; therefore, it is important to assess braille proficiency before administering the EGRA.

PROMISING PROCESS STRATEGIES

Under this theme, MCSIE asks **“What worked in the process of setting up an efficient, effective, and sustainable system to focus on improving the quality of education for learners with disabilities?”**

RECOMMENDATION 7: RECRUIT STAFF WITH INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND NATIONAL CONTEXT EXPERIENCE.

Education activity experience alone does not prepare any staff member for an inclusive education activity. REFAM’s strategic hires of staff who had both inclusive education and contextual knowledge of the country provides an example of how a small but knowledgeable and committed staff can be influential at a national level. It is often difficult, however, to find applicants with such knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Complex activities such as REFAM that span multiple units within the Ministry of Education and civil society require adequate skilled staff to improve opportunities for sustained impact.

RECOMMENDATION 8: ENSURE PARTICIPATING DISABLED PERSONS ORGANIZATIONS (DPOs) ARE PAID FOR THEIR KNOWLEDGE, TIME, AND EXPERTISE.

REFAM worked closely with DPOs; however, they were unable to hire them as consulting organizations in the same manner as other consultants and partners. REFAM staff described positive relationships with DPOs, and DPO partners indicated that the relationship with REFAM strengthened the capacity and connections of organization members involved. However, due to the lack of compensation, interviewees indicated some concerns over their level of consistent engagement and the overall sustainability of the program. Participation of DPOs is an important element of inclusive education programming, and to avoid any perceived power imbalances or limitations on sustained involvement, programming should include adequate DPO compensation that is in accordance with that of other expert consultants and partner organizations.

SUMMARY

The findings described in this brief reflect learnings from the MCSIE in Malawi at the point of the interim report. While not conclusive, these interim findings have surfaced compelling cross-cutting themes and areas for additional consideration.

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES FROM ALL MCSIE COUNTRIES

Taking a broad look at this work in Malawi—as well as across all three MCSIE countries—several overarching themes stand out in the findings. These include:

- The need to embed technical experts in content areas (e.g., disability, screening, assessments) across the activity, ideally identifying those who also have experience in the national context.
- The value of DPO identification and engagement in all areas of inquiry.
- The importance of early testing of tools and planning to mitigate process breakdowns due to new screening and identification tools and systems.
- The necessity to embed UDL in all activities to avoid addressing disability in isolation and limiting the reach of disability-specific approaches.

Recognition of these key ideas can inform and enhance programming in all areas of inclusive education.

AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND PROGRAM CONSIDERATION

In addition to providing valuable insight into good practice, MCSIE is also bringing to light areas where further study is recommended for all who are engaged in disability-inclusive education. The following areas are suggested for continued investigation:

- Development of an easy-to-use and statistically validated universal screening instrument designed for use by teachers could expand access to screening.

- Tactics for identifying, building, and leveraging local stakeholder relationships to support sustained advancement of inclusive education in communities.
- Strategies for incorporating an “inclusion first” philosophy into teacher training that keeps the focus on how inclusive education can be implemented instead of whether it should be implemented.

For additional information on any of the findings and recommendations in this document, or on the MCSIE in general, please see [Learning from the Multi-Country Study on Inclusive Education](#) on USAID’s Education-Links site.