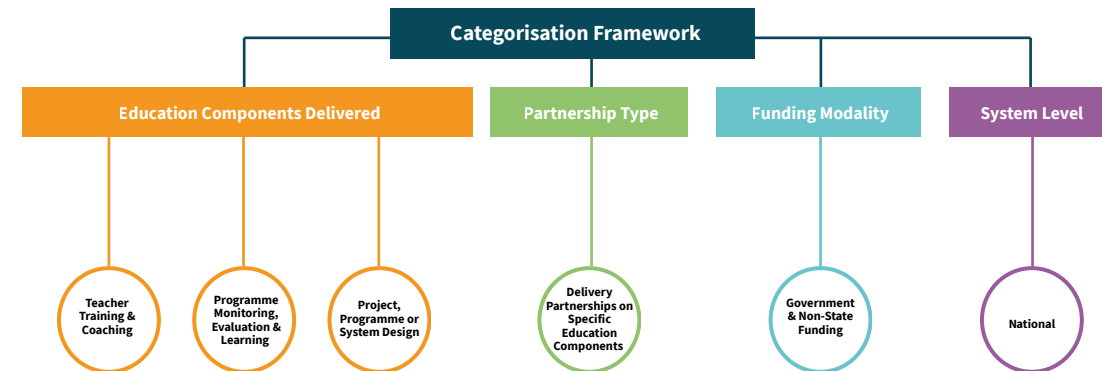


Case study

Link Education and the Government of Malawi

Inclusive Complementary Basic Education



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Background of the partnership

In Malawi, only 45% of children complete primary school¹ due to a range of barriers including poverty, child labour, early marriage, and disability. The Ministry of Education (MoE) developed the National Complementary Basic Education (CBE) framework to support children who have dropped out. It aimed to help them catch up on missed learning and re-enrol in school. CBE supports children and young people to gain foundational literacy and numeracy in community-based accelerated learning classes delivered by local facilitators.

However, with limited teaching experience and no formal teaching qualifications, CBE facilitators often struggle to identify students' complex needs and adapt their teaching in response. As a result, the most marginalised learners were still being left behind.

MoE and Link Education reflected on the challenges and developed an inclusive education approach to CBE which meets the needs of all learners. They piloted this through the TEAM Girl Malawi Project².

This was an adapted CBE programme designed to include the hardest-to-reach young people – adolescent mothers, orphans with family responsibilities, children with disabilities, those living in extreme poverty, and children experiencing exploitation through child labour or child marriage. It engaged 6,300 of the most marginalised young people in three two-year cohorts using an inclusive education approach.

Link Education was a strong partner for this initiative, given their work across Africa to remove barriers to education, particularly for girls. Link partners with local and national governments, communities and schools. Together, they design tailored activities to overcome specific local challenges. With a 30-year track record in strengthening education systems, they have strong evidence of impact delivering foundational literacy and numeracy approaches, targeted teacher and leadership professional development, gender-responsive and inclusive pedagogy, engaging communities, and building resilience to climate change.

Link's effective and scalable programmes are delivered by national teams through local structures. Their model leverages government and community resources, ensuring long-term sustainability and effective resource allocation.



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Inclusive education recognises that the most marginalised learners face multiple, intersecting barriers. It helps facilitators understand learners' experiences and respond to their needs. They can adapt their teaching style, adjust the classroom environment, and engage parents and the wider community.

The inclusive education approach shaped the design of the CBE model by putting the learners at the centre of the process. Lessons were arranged around work or household responsibilities and community volunteers were engaged to provide childcare. Facilitators were also trained to be flexible in their teaching, for example reinforcing key concepts using different techniques, using multiple learning aids, providing additional breaks, and supplementing classes with take-home activities. As a result, instead of singling out learners with specific challenges for different treatment, everyone is supported to participate, and the variety of participation methods makes learning more fun and more effective for all.

To develop the inclusive CBE model, Link Education and MoE shared roles and responsibilities:

Link Education

- Consulted with local communities and representatives of these groups to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers and possible solutions
- Brought expertise in inclusive education
- Ran adaptive management sessions to get feedback and make sure the model worked for the most marginalised learners

Ministry of Education

- Analysed national data for out-of-school children and enrolment in CBE, and identified groups who were not being served
- Delivered pre-service training and continuous professional development for facilitators
- Provided support to use inclusive education practices in lesson planning, teaching, and assessment

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Reflected on their experiences of delivering CBE programmes in Malawi.

Revised the CBE curriculum, focusing on core literacy, numeracy and life skills.

Combined responsibilities of Link Education and MoE

Monitored the facilitators' teaching and provided regular coaching and in-service training to continue strengthening their skills.

Developed a new training course for CBE facilitators to build their capacity in inclusive education methods. Key features were the ability to investigate the underlying challenges to students' presence, participation and achievement; developing individual education plans and learning resources using local materials; and simple techniques to make teaching more inclusive.

Key success factors of the partnership

Several factors contributed to the effectiveness of the partnership between Link Education and the Ministry of Education and helped the model respond to the needs of the learners. These included adaptive management, long-term trust between partners, and working within existing government systems.

Long-term trust between partners

The strong relationship between Link Education and the Ministry of Education as long-term partners meant that MoE was open to Link's perspective on inclusive education and trusted Link to propose changes which aligned with the government's vision for education in Malawi. It meant that Link had an excellent understanding of MoE's priorities and the policy environment, which shaped these, and so could design interventions which both emphasised inclusion and advanced the government's agenda.

Working within the existing system

Working within the existing system, and with those responsible for delivering it, ensured the intervention was informed by real-world experience and a strong understanding of available resources. Joint development, testing and evaluation built strong ownership within the Ministry of Education (MoE) and strengthened system capacity to sustain changes after Link's exit.

Adaptive management with the full spectrum of stakeholders

Taking an adaptive management approach with regular monitoring and reflection with the spectrum of stakeholders, including the most marginalised children who were the intended beneficiaries of the intervention, led to the early identification of blockages and ultimately to a stronger intervention which was ready to scale up.

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6,300 previously out of school, young people were supported to complete two years of Complementary Basic Education. Participants were all from extremely poor households, a quarter were pregnant or adolescent parents, and 13% had a disability.

At the end of the course:

77%

of learners were able to read, write, and understand and apply arithmetic

74%

had stronger life skills including social and emotional learning, and sexual and reproductive health and rights

93%

of participants reported that barriers to learning had been tackled

94%

of households 'agreed a lot' that their child's participation had improved their future

86%

of households 'agreed a lot' that the CBE programme will have lasting positive impacts in the community

“I am able to read and write with support from the TEAM project. Thanks to the teachers who believed in me that any learner can do it despite any form of disability. I want to be a teacher when I finish school.”

CBE Graduate

They became more confident about making the right decisions for their lives and more resilient to withstand change. Most went on to join mainstream school or are earning an income.

“Among the things I do when I come to this centre is to listen, support and observe the conduct of our [teachers] as they work with children. I want our area to develop and, as a leader, I admire other areas whose children are advancing in education and not facing any abuse.”

Traditional leader

MoE officials felt that TEAM was a model worth following. One district official suggested that their own budget would be better spent “to emulate Link.” Another official reported that learning about effective resource allocation “is a continuous process we can learn from TEAM”.³

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Make evidence-based arguments for change

Data on who was being left behind helped convince the government that the most marginalised learners needed a different approach.

Advocate for inclusive approaches from the perspective of human rights as well as value for money.

The Government of Malawi is committed to the right to every child in Malawi to receive a quality education. But with a limited budget, governments often feel they can't afford to support children with complex needs. Inclusive education is a low-cost approach to supporting the most marginalised, while simultaneously improving the learning experience for all children. This leads to better learning outcomes and improved earning potential for everyone, ultimately reducing the demand for government services associated with poverty, including social welfare, healthcare, and crime.

Keep checking in with the hardest- to- reach children

MoE gathered regular feedback from learners and facilitators, along with attendance and learning data. This helped tailor in-service training to better meet learners' needs.

Focus on building capacity within the system.

Through joint development and delivery, MoE drew on Link's expertise to adapt their CBE model and played a leading role in implementing it. This means they believe in the new approach and are ready to roll it out.

Endnotes

1. Malawi Education Statistics Report 2024
2. Transformational Empowerment for Marginalised Adolescent Girls in Malawi, UKAID, 2018-2023
3. All stats and quotes from TEAM Endline Evaluation 2024 <https://linkededucation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Link-Education.TEAM-endline-2024.pdf>



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