

**JICA Grassroots (Kusanone) Project**

**Improving Access and Quality of Pre-primary  
Education in Rural Malawi  
(March 2023 – February 2026)**

**Final Report**

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## **I. Project Purpose**

In the target area, access to pre-primary education will be improved through initiatives to enhance quality.

## **II. Background**

In Malawi, while the net enrollment rate in primary education has reached 88%, the repetition rate remains high, averaging 25% across all grades nationwide. In particular, Grade 1 has the highest repetition rate at 34% among all grades (Ministry of Education, Malawi, 2022). These outcomes are thought to be influenced by insufficient school readiness during the pre-primary stage and by children not enrolling in primary school at the appropriate age. For these reasons, pre-primary education plays a critically important role both as a preparatory stage supporting a smooth transition to primary school and as a key developmental period for both cognitive and non-cognitive skills.

In Nkhata Bay District, the target area of this project, there are 294 Community-Based Child Care Centres (CBCCs) serving a population of 284,000 (2018). However, enrollment in pre-primary education remains low. Among children currently enrolled in primary school, approximately 40% had no experience of pre-primary education, while about 20% attended pre-primary education for only two to three months. In addition, more than half of caregivers have not participated in caregiver training programs, resulting in childcare that does not adequately meet the goals set out in the national curriculum. Furthermore, because the national curriculum covers a wide range of content, it is difficult for caregivers to fully understand it through the current training program, which lasts only about two weeks. As a result, educational and childcare activities in pre-primary education facilities remain insufficient.

To address these challenges, this project was implemented with the Nkhata Bay District Social Welfare Office, which oversees CBCCs, as the counterpart institution, in collaboration with the Nkhata Bay District Education Office, which is responsible for primary schools. Given that many children enter primary school directly without pre-primary education, and considering the transition from pre-primary to primary education, the project targeted not only caregivers but also primary school teachers. By translating the objectives of the national pre-primary education curriculum into concrete practices at the field level, the project aimed to improve the quality of pre-primary education and enhance access to it.

## **III. Activities**

### **1. The practical book for caregivers is developed and utilized.**

1-1. District officers and experts identify issues with the national curriculum.

1-2. The district officers and experts have made a practical book for caregivers and teachers.

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### **2. The district officers acquire skills for training caregivers and teachers. The district officers train caregivers and teachers.**

- 2-1. The experts conduct training for the district officers and prepare training materials.
- 2-2. The experts conduct training for the district officers.
- 2-3. The district officers and experts devise training for caregivers and teachers and prepare training materials.
- 2-4. The district officers and experts conduct training for caregivers and teachers.

**3. The monitoring system in the district office is enhanced.**

- 3-1. The district officers and child protection workers establish the monitoring system.
- 3-2. The district officers and child protection workers confirm the effects of training for caregivers and teachers.

**4. The enlightenment activities for pre-primary education among local people are implemented.**

- 4-1. The district officers and experts explain the project to local people around target CBCCs.
- 4-2. The district officers and experts conduct activities for enlightenment to improve access to CBCCs for local people.

**IV. Results**

Through training using the developed caregiver support book, caregivers' knowledge and skills were enhanced, and a foundation for a monitoring system within the District Social Welfare Office was established. As a result, the quality of pre-primary education improved.

In addition to quality improvement, awareness-raising activities were conducted for community members, resulting in an increase in the proportion of children attending pre-primary education. Based on these outcomes, it is concluded that the project's objectives have been achieved.

**1. Development and Use of the Caregiver Support Book**

In developing the Caregiver Support Book, the contents of government-issued documents—the National Pre-Primary Education Curriculum, the Caregiver Training Book, and the Caregiver Guidebook—were carefully reviewed first. Both the National Pre-Primary Education Curriculum and the Caregiver Training Book contain extensive information and are written primarily in English, in a text-heavy format. As a result, even after completing training, caregivers found it difficult to independently understand these materials and apply them to their daily childcare practices. Although the Caregiver Guidebook is written in Chichewa, it was also insufficient in enabling caregivers to fully understand the content and translate it into practice.

In light of these challenges, four key content areas were identified from existing materials as essential for inclusion in the Caregiver Support Book: (1) understanding children's physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development; (2) health and nutrition; (3) activity planning; and (4) CBCC management. These areas were reviewed by experts in the fields of education, health, and nutrition, and reorganized into practical knowledge and skills that could be readily applied in CBCC settings.

In addition, activities practiced in Japanese pre-primary education that could be implemented under the human and material resource conditions of local CBCCs were selected and incorporated into the book. The book also explicitly emphasizes the importance of creating environments that allow children to play freely as active agents, learning through play, and the need for support from community members and parents.

The draft Caregiver Support Book was revised based on feedback from members of the JICA Overseas Cooperation Volunteers Early Childhood Education Network, as well as from the District Social Welfare Office and the District Education Office. Following the completion of the English version, the book was translated into Chichewa, resulting in the final Caregiver Support Book published in both English and Chichewa.

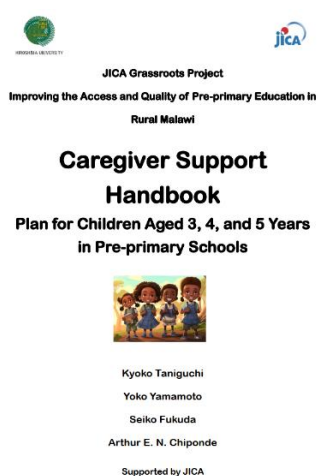
The Caregiver Support Book is available on the project website and can be downloaded upon registration (<https://tanikyo.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/project.html>).

## 2. Implementation of Training and Follow-up for Caregivers and Teachers

### (1) Development of Training Materials

For the training program, the Caregiver Support Book was used as the core material. In addition, various supplementary tools were developed for use during the training period and in post-training practice, including a monthly monitoring sheet, weekly and daily activity planning forms, a health management record, and a nutrition education board.

The monthly monitoring sheet was designed to record the number of staff and children, observations of activities, identified challenges, the outcomes of related discussions, and proposed solutions. The weekly and daily activity planning forms allowed caregivers and teachers to document activity time, activity content, and the skills targeted for acquisition. The health management record enabled the documentation of children's term-based and monthly records, allowing tracking of their growth and development over time. The nutrition education board was designed to classify snack ingredients into three nutritional groups, thereby promoting nutrition education with an emphasis on balanced diets.



Caregiver support handbook (left side for English and right side for Chichewa)

## **(2) Implementation of Training for Caregivers and Teachers**

A three-day training program using the developed Caregiver Support Book was conducted in early September 2024. The participants comprised a total of 38 individuals: two experts; four staff members from the District Social Welfare Office; two staff members from the District Education Office; three Child Protection Officers; 15 caregivers from five CBCCs (three from each CBCC); and 14 teachers from seven primary schools located near the CBCCs (two from each school). Primary school teachers were included because fewer than half of children attend pre-primary education and many enter primary school directly without prior pre-primary experience. As a result, lower-grade primary school teachers are also required to possess knowledge and skills related to pre-primary education. The training was facilitated by experts and district officials, with the participation of 17 members of the JICA Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV).



The participants in the training

The training content focused on understanding children’s physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development, health and nutrition, and activity planning.

On Day 1, participants learned about the developmental characteristics of children aged 3–5 and explored the importance of “learning through play.” Examples of play activities from Japan and Malawi were introduced and shared, followed by hands-on practical experiences.



Learning numbers through the Malawian game, *Phada* Introduction to the Japanese game, *Shiritori*

On Day 2, the training addressed health and nutrition. Practical sessions were conducted on handwashing, tooth brushing, and physical measurements. Measurement results were then plotted on growth charts to assess children’s developmental status. In the nutrition component, participants learned how to design balanced menus based on the six food groups and practiced menu planning and recording information on the nutrition education board.



Handwashing demonstration



Height measurement



Learning about nutritional balance

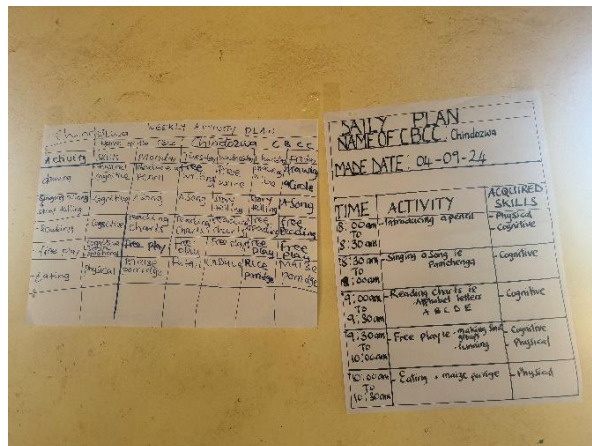


Creating a food education board

On Day 3, the focus was on activity planning, and participants engaged in practical exercises to develop weekly and daily activity plans.

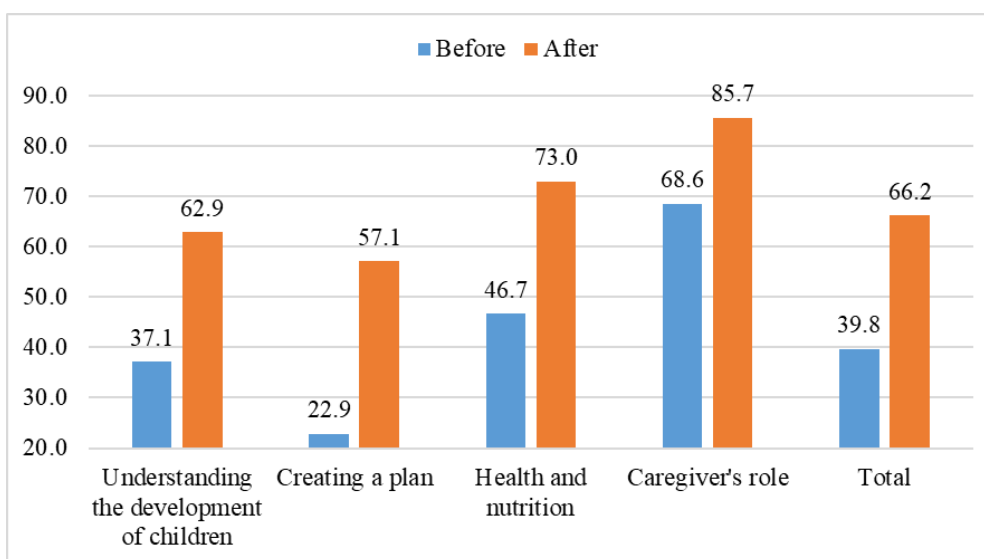


Creating a weekly and daily activity plan



Presenting the created plans

The questionnaire was administered before and after the training to assess its effectiveness. The results confirmed improvements in participants' knowledge and skills related to understanding children's physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development, health and nutrition, and activity planning (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Percentage of correct answers in understanding content before and after the workshop**

Note. The improvement was statistically significant across all content areas.

However, while improvements were observed in participants' confidence in creating nutrition education boards, activity planning, and CBCC management, gains were limited in confidence regarding understanding child development, implementing learning through play, and

supporting children’s health and nutrition. Therefore, it was decided that these areas would be addressed through supplementary guidance during post-training follow-up.

### **(3) Implementation of Training Follow-up**

Two rounds of training follow-up were conducted. The first follow-up took place approximately six months after the training, during which visits were made to each CBCC and to the participating primary schools to assess how the knowledge and skills acquired through the training were being applied and to observe the implementation of activities. The results showed that caregivers were, to a certain extent, implementing practices such as preparing weekly and daily activity plans, conducting physical measurements, and developing weekly menus. It was also confirmed that teachers were applying the knowledge gained from the training in their classroom teaching and in caring for children. Although differences in the level of implementation were observed among CBCCs and primary schools, the training content was generally being utilized in practice. However, the preparation of activity plans was identified as an area requiring further improvement.

To address the post-training challenge of promoting the practice of “learning through play,” additional guidance was provided on the knowledge and skills needed to create toys using locally available materials. An English-language Toy Book was developed using toy ideas designed by students of Takeda Junior High School in Higashihiroshima City as part of their home economics classes (Appendix 4-6). Using this book, caregivers and community members worked together to create toys and engaged in play activities with children.



Making toys in CBCC



Children are interested in making toys

The second follow-up was conducted approximately one year after the training (about six months after the first follow-up). In this round, the implementation status of the training content was reviewed again, and additional guidance and advice were provided on activity planning, which remained an outstanding challenge.

### **3. Establishment of a Monitoring System Framework within the District Social Welfare Office**

At the District Social Welfare Office, monitoring by Child Protection Officers had been in place; however, its primary purpose was to track the number of children, and it was not necessarily

conducted monthly. To strengthen the monitoring system, the existing monitoring sheet was therefore reviewed.

During the initial seven months, a revised version of the monitoring sheet was used in which items with no record of use were removed, and a new section was added to document meetings with community members. As a result, it was confirmed that monitoring was conducted approximately monthly and that the contents were recorded accurately. Based on these findings, the monitoring sheet was further revised to include not only checks on activity implementation but also sections to record CBCC operational status, challenges caregivers faced in their activities, the outcomes of discussions, and corresponding solutions. This revised monitoring sheet has been in use since December 2023.

Through this further revision, it became easier to grasp the activities being conducted at CBCCs and to clearly identify existing challenges. Regular review of monitoring results by the District Social Welfare Office enabled Child Protection Officers to conduct monthly monitoring consistently.

Regarding oversight of monitoring conducted by Child Protection Officers, experts initially played a central role, alongside district officials, at the beginning of the project. In the latter half of the project, however, district officials became able to carry out this role independently without support from experts. In addition, following the training, monthly monitoring confirmed whether the training content—such as preparing weekly and daily activity plans, physical measurements, and weekly menu planning—was reflected in actual practice.



Monitoring CBCCs

#### **4. Community Awareness-Raising Activities**

District officials and experts consistently arranged meetings with community members during visits to CBCCs. In the initial phase, they explained the project's objectives and activities and shared information on the importance of pre-primary education. Subsequently, discussions were held on ways in which community members could support CBCC operations, operational challenges and their solutions, and appropriate forms of support for caregivers. In addition, issues identified through monthly monitoring were discussed with community members, and solutions were explored through

dialogue and the exchange of opinions.

Through these efforts, the understanding of the importance of pre-primary education deepened among both community members and caregivers. As a result, community members began encouraging other residents to send their children to CBCCs. In some CBCCs, initiatives were also undertaken in which staff visited individual households to provide direct explanations to parents and guardians.

Across the project as a whole, excluding four CBCCs where unexpected external factors occurred—specifically, the establishment of nearby private pre-primary education facilities—the number of children increased by 36.3% at one CBCC.



Meeting with community members in CBCC



Prepared porridge by community members

## V. The challenging issues

The project was implemented successfully. On the other hand, the following challenges were also identified.

First, although community members play a central role in the operation of pre-primary education facilities, they do not yet possess sufficient knowledge and skills required for effective management.

Second, while a total of 29 caregivers and teachers from five pre-primary education facilities and seven primary schools participated in the training, the District Social Welfare Office and the District Education Office expressed a desire to extend the training to a larger number of caregivers and teachers. To achieve this, continued technical support will be necessary.

Third, although the Caregiver Support Book was developed to match caregivers' educational level, there is a demand for more concrete, practical content that directly links knowledge to daily childcare activities.

Finally, while the implementation of monitoring helped clarify existing challenges, it was not sufficient to fully track or evaluate the extent to which they were being resolved.

Therefore, continuous follow-up is required to ensure that the project's outcomes are sustained and further strengthened over time.