The MECPK project has evolved significantly since its first iteration. It now includes the review, revision, and implementation of the Reading for Comprehension methodology (RfC), teacher training in that revised methodology, the use of an improved student learning assessment tool, comparison of learning outcomes to baseline and to a control group, increased parental support, and the establishment of local libraries.

MRCK is a micro level project complimented by comparative data and limited to madrassas in the Mombasa, Kilifi, and Kwale counties of Kenya. Motivation for this program stems from parents disappointed by the academic outcomes of Muslim children of that area.s. MRCK maintains the religious education component of the program, important for community relations, while reinforcing the reading and math skills necessary for success in later public schooling. The project uses the language of the catchment area, Swahili, as well as English. Presently, teachers use English because materials and guides are available in that language, though the MRCK background level assessment shows that the preferred Language of Instruction (LoI) is the local language (Swahili, Digo, and Duruma, depending on location) and would be used more widely if local language materials were available. MRCK is rich in best practices.
Project Implementation and Capacity Building

The project designed an assessment tool and has used it in thorough baseline and end line reading level assessments for both test and control groups. Though originally intending to measure reading outcomes only in test classes, the project added comparison to a control group. Assessment parameters include a group with only classroom improvements, another with only home reading improvements, another with both and a fourth with neither (the Evaluation Plan documents provide full support of this.). Based on results from the baseline study, the reading methodology was revised and the revisions were included in initial teacher training the following year. Classes consistently used the improved methodology and monitoring tools.

MRCK is particularly strong in the areas of reading methodology, teacher training and parent/community involvement. Capacity transfer has been important in the area of M&E, including assessment tool design as well as assessment data analysis and its use to improve program design, methodology, teacher training and assessment technique.

Results

Despite the effective implementation of project innovations, the end line results did not indicate greatest improvement in reading outcomes among the test group that benefited from full project implementation. This is likely due to the lack of time needed to bring the intervention to maturity in the multiple year test group. None the less, improvements were made to reading methodology and assessment capacity. Perhaps the greatest positive impact is the contributions made in bringing the teaching of Swahili to the ECD level. Another significant impact includes the involvement of community/parents in ECD, resulting in learning materials production and library support. Teacher performance was well monitored. The print environment in classrooms is rich and intentionally coordinated with learning goals.

Mitigating circumstances

MRCK benefits from the working relationships already established through Aga Khan’s activities throughout the area as well as their relationship with its target group, the madrassas. The inclusion of religious education in classes and the clear affiliation of the staff with the local Muslim communities have encouraged community cooperation and project acceptance.

The project area has experienced some conflict which is occasionally disruptive to program activities.
Lessons Learned

- The results of a baseline assessment can inform and improve tools, procedures and attitudes if the assessment process is understood as a formative learning experience. For example, the baseline study showed a weakness in decoding abilities and a confusion in letter name/sound recognition. This led to an adjustment in program design, methodology, teacher training, and assessment technique.

- The granting mechanism worked well in this case. Aside the one delay in program implementation, Panel of Experts was able to quickly recognize MRCK’s potential, resulting in a prompt approval that allowed adequate coordination of project activities with the scholastic calendar. That MRCK had already been implicated in the ECD domain meant that the needed expertise and structures were immediately available. The timeliness of the TA grant also allowed sufficient time to interact with MRCK over the question of expanding their M&E plan to include a control group and then to prepare to implement that plan before the baseline. Had the grant occurred later, this would not have been possible.

- The MRCK innovation was accompanied by many best practices, making it difficult to isolate and evaluate the proportional effect of any one practice. Familiarity with the project environment did, however, enable staff and the TA consultant to estimate the relative value of the various practices.

Scaling

This project could be scaled quantitatively to other counties in Kenya as well as other countries once adjusted for appropriate language. As this is one of the few projects working in the area of ECD reading methodologies and curriculums, it has great potential to become a point of reference for Kenyan ECD programs, especially if adapted for Swahili. MRCK regularly shares its techniques and expertise by training staff from other organizations. Several counties are already requesting MRCK training. Its strong affiliation with the Muslim community facilitates its adoption in Islamic environments but may limit MRCK’s ability to expand into other domains. The innovations would be very useful to Catholic Education, the County Scholastic authorities and NGOs charged with ECD oversight. Aga Khan program structures in Uganda and elsewhere would lend to the replicability of this innovation in those areas.

MRCK operates in a troubled area of Kenya and works directly with the population that is often targeted by extremist group recruiters. The positive influence of project benefits on these young students could be considered a significant driver for program continuation or expansion.

Recommendations

Given the pedagogical soundness of the approach and staff capacity, the TA technical consultant would recommend that this project be positively considered for scaling up. If scaling up were to be undertaken by a different organization or by franchise, the MRCK staff should be considered as possible consultants to that effort.