

By Jack Mcbrams, contributor

# Lessons from radio instruction

At a church-turned-nursery school in Nkhomboli Village, Rumphi, several toddlers cluster around an old radio.

They dance and sing along to the instructions coming through a voice on a worn-out wind-up radio that has seen better days.

However, sensing a discord among the learners, as the instructions are not being followed to the dot, caregiver Mercy Kalumbi bellows out supplementary instructions and soon there is order as the learners excitedly chorus the song from the radio.

Across the country, at 530 other early childhood development (ECD) centres at precisely the same time, thousands of children are listening to the same programme, broadcast across 31 community radio stations across Malawi.

Kalumbi, who teaches a class of about 40 learners at the centre, hails the impact that the radio programme has had on her teaching by easing some of the major challenges that she initially faced.

“For a start, I am not trained as a caregiver, but from following the radio programme, I have been empowered and I have even been able to train my fellow caregivers just by following the programme,” she says.

Kalumbi further states that the radio programmes have eased her workload.

“With this programme, I am merely an assistant teacher, directing the learners in the classroom as most of the teaching is transmitted through the radio. This makes work easy even for some of us that have not been trained as caregivers,” she says.

The involvement of the community makes sure the lessons flow seamlessly.

“For instance, under this programme, the community is obliged to buy the radio sets for the pre-school. I approached the community and they resolved to lend us a radio that was being used at the primary school. Although it is an old radio, it still serves its purpose,” Kalumbi says.



DETERMINED—Kalumbi interacts with ECD children



MUHIWA —It is a low-cost approach

Rumphi District Social Welfare Officer Zindaba Lungu states that due to its interactive nature, Interactive Radio Instruction (IRI) has enhanced learners’ participation as well as class attendance.

“It has helped the children to pay attention to the instructions because it is exciting; it is a new approach, so the child is excited to learn new things like vocabulary,” Lungu says.

In Kasungu, where Save the Children was not implementing the IRI programme, the

community sought out trainers in Mchinji before approaching Kasungu Community Radio Station to broadcast the lessons.

Kasungu Community Radio Station Manager Jones Banda says the station broadcasts 108 programmes to over 1.7 million people within a 100 kilometre radius.

“We have actually impacted quite a lot of communities that we are serving in Kasungu and the surrounding areas. Of course, there are other areas we are not able to reach but our dream is that we should leave



SIMWAKA—Most of our caregivers have low academic qualifications

no one behind in as far as the programming is concerned,” Banda explains.

Banda adds that the radio station has gone beyond just airing the IRI programmes.

“We thought that we could also come up with other programmes like cartoons that would actually talk to the duty-bearers and the parents on the importance of ECD. So, the dream now is that we should diversify our programming,” he says.

Chief Child Development Officer in the Ministry of Gender,

Community Development and Social Welfare, Pauline Simwaka, stated that government was ready to fully take up the IRI programme after Save the Children wound up its implementation last month.

Simwaka waxes lyrical about the initiative which ensures all learners are subjected to the same lessons at the same time, thereby ensuring standardisation.

“And through IRI, we have groomed well-informed caregivers because most of our caregivers have low

education qualifications apart from that they are not trained,” she says.

Project Coordinator for the World Bank-funded Investing in Early Years Project, Peter Muhiwa, explains that IRI came into being after the Government of Malawi observed what Save the Children had achieved when it piloted the project in three districts.

“We thought it wise that we should take Save the Children on board to assist us with the implementation of IRI when we looked at the advantages because it is a low-cost approach which has demonstrated the capacity to reach out to many children and caregivers in hard-to-reach areas with minimal resources and support,” Muhiwa says.

He further states that IRI is an important tool that can enhance educational programme in Malawi, especially in emergencies.

“From 2019 to around 2022, Malawi was hit by Covid and most of the ECD centres were closed. But IRI classes were still going on in the communities where children were able to assemble while observing preventive measures and the caregivers were able to provide the support for the children to continue learning,” he says.

Save the Children’s Area Operations Manager for Central and Northern regions for IRI Steve Kamtimaleka says the project started as an innovation from 2008 to 2017.

“In 2021, we were engaged to build the capacity of the government, from the ministry to the district and community levels. So, we have been building the capacity of the government in 10 districts,” he says.