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TANZANIA

SUCCESS STORY

Education for All in Zanzibar

Promoting creative learning and teaching tolerance



Photo: USAID/Kim Wylie

A mural painted on Mtopepo Primary School's entrance area reflects its emphasis on inclusive education.

“Since learning to communicate with sign language I can talk with and educate children who can not even hear. This has been a miracle for myself, the other children, and especially for those who are challenged. Our program makes me very proud,” said the headmaster of Mtopepo Primary School, Mlekwa Yusuph Ali.

Telling Our Story
U.S. Agency for International Development
Washington, DC 20523-1000
<http://stories.usaid.gov>

Along the sandy shores of the Indian Ocean island of Zanzibar, parents, teachers, and children arrive at Mtopepo Primary School in the morning. The main classroom is basic, with peeling blue paint on the walls and rough, unfinished floors. One classroom will hold 300 children for several more months, while the school is expanded. Until recently, more than half of the children would not have been attending school — their visual, hearing, speech, learning, or physical disabilities would have barred them from starting their education.

Students perspire in the muggy heat of the tropical rainy season. Sitting closely together on the floor, they giggle and squirm before teachers bring the class to attention. They begin the lesson. The school's emphasis on inclusion ensures each child is warmly welcomed and learns the lessons to the best of his or her ability.

This learning environment is new to Tanzania. It is part of a policy of “inclusive education” launched by the government in 2006. USAID is supporting the initiative through curriculum development, advocacy, and teacher training in ten pilot schools. The goal is to give every child an opportunity to learn alongside their peers. The schools work in coordination with doctors and medical experts to determine the needs and abilities of individual students.

“Many of the 169 children with disabilities attending this school today would never have gone to school without this initiative. Some have congenital birth defects, others have had accidents, and some, like the children deemed deaf until they were diagnosed with ear wax buildup, have just never kept pace with others. These disabilities would normally preclude children from attending school, either because the services offered are too few, too costly or too far,” said the headmaster Mlekwa Yusuph Ali.

The program is also changing attitudes in communities through awareness campaigns. Parents who once believed that slow learners or children with disabilities did not belong in school have come to understand that inclusive education is beneficial to all. The school still lacks some supplies — tables and chairs and specialized teaching materials — yet parents and children are visibly excited about the school, and the future, as they arrive each morning.