SANTINA GUSMINI ASSOCIATION

ITALY

Project proposal for the improvement of Early Child Education in the Vubwi and Chadiza districts, Eastern Province – Zambia

"I NUOVI ASILI DI SANTINA GUSMINI"





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1. TITLE

"I NUOVI ASILI DI SANTINA GUSMINI"

PROJECT PROPOSAL FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN THE VUBWI AND CHADIZA DISTRICTS, EASTERN PROVINCE - ZAMBIA

2. SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT

The project aims to improve the quality of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in the districts of Vubwi and Chadiza in the Eastern Province, Zambia. The project will be carried out in collaboration with the local office of the Ministry of Education.

The main expected result of the project is to improve the knowledge of volunteer teachers (Caregiver) to enable them to provide quality education in selected ECE which are located adjacent to government schools. In this sense the project plans to prepare volunteer teachers through specific training courses.

A second result envisaged by the project is to proceed with the construction of Pre-schools, latrines, playgrounds, as well as supply books and games in order to provide safe and suitable environments and tools for the learning of preschool children.

Finally, it is planned to set up a monitoring system that, in addition to measuring the achievement of objectives and results, allows us to understand how to act to improve and arrive at a model of Pre-school that can be replicated in the future in other contexts.

The project purpose is to follow a "children's rights-based approach" to provide Pre-schools as an integral part of the curriculum offered in schools by the Ministry of Education.

3. CONTEXT DESCRIPTION

The Republic of Zambia is among the medium/low income countries in the world, with an average per capita income of US$ 1,187.11 per year (figure updated to 2024) for an estimated population of 22.5 million people. Life expectancy at birth is 69.3/64.4 (F/M) years.

Since 2010, Zambia's economic growth has been driven mainly by high copper prices (Zambia is Africa's second-largest producer, after the Congo, and the seventh-largest in the world) as well as massive investment from other countries. Unfortunately, the gradual decline in the growth rate, high inflation and the onset of the coronavirus pandemic have led the country to its first-ever default.

The new government of President Hakainde Hichilema, who was first elected on 12 August 2021, has launched a robust programme of reforms and an austerity programme which has required sacrifices from the majority of the population, but has enabled substantial progress to be made.

First and foremost, unlike other, more developed African countries, such as South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya, it has managed to reduce the inflation rate from 24.4 per cent in August 2021 to 6.5 per cent in July 2026. And this, in a country where the average inflation rate over the last 35 years stood at 38.2 per cent per annum.

The local currency, the kwacha, too, following an initial rally against the US$ of around 18.5 per cent in 2021, albeit amid sharp fluctuations (ranging from a low of 15.22 against the US$ in 2022 to a high of 30.53 in 2025, before setting at an exchange rate of 21.26 at the end of July 2026) has remained at high levels.

These results led Zambia to agree a debt restructuring programme with the International Monetary Fund: on 31 August 2022, a three-year assistance programme worth US$1.3 billion was approved, subsequently increased by US$385 million in June 2024, with the final tranche approved in January 2026.

Thanks to the economic growth of recent years, major cities have seen an ever-increasing demand for services aimed at improving education and the resulting educational provision, particularly from private individuals who have set up private schools and universities. There has also been a significant increase in enrolment figures at state schools. Statistics show that the net enrolment rate in primary schools has risen from 80 per cent in 2021 to 98 per cent in 2024.

The Ministry considers education to be a fundamental pillar for national development and personal empowerment (Education Statistics Bulletin 2025 – Ministry of Education).

Zambia's education system has undergone significant transformations since the country gained independence from British colonial rule in 1964. Initially, education was predominantly accessible to a small elite. Post-independence, the Zambian Government prioritized expanding educational access, resulting in the establishment of numerous primary and secondary schools nationwide and establishing the first university, The University of Zambia, in 1965.

Zambia's education system is currently guided by two concurrent policy frameworks. The 1996 document 'Educating Our Future Policy' outlines an education structure comprising 3 years of Early Child Education, 7 years of Primary Education, 5 years of Secondary Education and 3 to 4 years of Tertiary Education.

In parallel, the 2025 Education Policy has introduced a restructured system based on a 4-6-4-2 model, consisting of 4 years of Early Childhood Care Development and Education (ECCDE), 6 years of Primary Education, 4 years of Secondary Education at Ordinary Level and 2 years at Advanced Level. Tertiary Education will take 3 years.

During the transition period, both policies operate side by side, with institutions aligning implementation according to Ministry of Education guidance (E.S.B. 2025 – MOE).

The quality of education, particularly in public schools, remains a significant concern. Factors such as inadequate teacher training, overcrowded classrooms and insufficient teaching materials impede effective learning. Many schools lack basic infrastructure, including proper sanitation facilities and libraries.

While primary education is free, hidden costs (uniforms, books, etc.) and long distances to schools can be prohibitive, particularly for children in rural areas. Gender disparities also persist, with girl facing higher dropout rates due early marriages, pregnancy and cultural norms.

The country faces a shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in rural and remote areas. The Government has launched several reforms and initiatives to resolve the problem, at least in part. Improving teacher training programmes and providing ongoing professional development are critical. Incentives for teachers working in remote areas, along with better pay and working

conditions, are essential to retain qualified educators.

In conclusion, Zambia's education system has made considerable strides since independence, but it continues to face significant challenges that hinder its ability to ensure quality education for all.

4. NEEDS ANALYSIS

The area affected by the project comprises two districts in the Eastern Province, Vubwi and Chadiza, which were merged until 2012. The decision on whether to proceed, first in one district or the other, will be assessed together with the Ministry of Education's highest provincial authority, the Provincial Educational Office (PEO), and following consultation with the two district officials, the District Education Boards (DEBs).

Let's now look at some information about the two districts:

VUBWI:

- It is a small but rapidly growing district in the Eastern Province, strategically situated on the border with Malawi and Mozambique, and feature a predominately Chewa population like the people of neighbouring countries, who share the same cultural and linguistic identity, Chichewa or Chinyanja

- Separated from Chadiza District in 2012, it covers an area of 982 square kilometers with an estimated population of approximately 53,000 people (2022). This figure makes it the smallest district in the entire Eastern Province of Zambia in terms of population. 87% of the population live in rural areas

- The entire territory of Vubwi falls under the tribal authority of the Pembamoyo Chiefdom. The Pembamoyo Chiefdom of Vubwi is not isolated, but forms part of a wider hierarchical structure. The Paramount Chief of all the Chewa people in Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique is Kalonga Gawa Undi, whose royal court is situated in Mkaika (in the neighbouring district of Katete).

- The administrative authority has its headquarters in the town of Vubwi (also known as Vubwi District Centre) which is estimated to have 7,475 inhabitants (2022 Census)

- Agriculture is the main occupation for 80% of the inhabitants, primarily maize but also groundnuts, beans and sweet potatoes. There are small-scale livestock farms raising cows, goats and poultry.

- In the district there are 41 schools, 9 secondary and 32 primary. Every primary school has an ECE class; there are no specific ECE buildings. The schools, most of which were originally community schools, are now all state-run. An unknown number of community school branches remain in rural areas.

- It is estimated that the number of children of early childhood education (ECE) age (aged between 3 and 6) is approximately 6,500–6,800 and the number of children attending ECE classes – around 2,500 – has risen significantly compared with a few years ago

- There are an estimated 32 to 35 official government ECE teachers in Vubwi. The role of volunteer teachers is crucial, but even with their support, the average teacher-pupil ratio is approximately 1 to 70/80, or 1 teacher for every 80 children

- Early childhood education centres are attached to the school to which their classes are linked:

in the most remote areas, they use temporary classrooms with thatched roofs and mud walls, or simply gather under a tree; where there are brick buildings, they share classrooms with primary school classes in double or triple shift

- Only 5 out of a total of 41 schools have advanced sanitation facilities connected to the mains water supply; a further 25 benefit from basic water and sanitation (WASH) programmes

CHADIZA:

- Chadiza District **is** an administrative division located in the extreme south-eastern corner of the Eastern Province of Zambia, sharing borders with Mozambique to the south. Created in 1949, making it one of the oldest districts in the province

- Agriculture is the main occupation for the inhabitants, primarily maize, but also groundnuts, beans and sweet potatoes, in recent years, cotton, soya and sunflowers too, Alongside agriculture, livestock farming is a strong economic sector, focusing mainly on the rearing of cattle, pigs, goats and poultry

- Since 2012, the district has covered an area of 1,594 square kilometers with an estimated population of around 111,000 people

- The tribal authority on the territory is officially divided into three historic traditional chiefdoms, each led by its own traditional leader recognised by the state: Chief Zingalume, Chief Mlolo and Chief Mwangala. All three leaders answer to the highest spiritual and traditional authority of the Chewa people, the Supreme King Kalonga Gawa Undi, whose main seat is in the neighbouring district of Katete

- The administrative centre is located in the town of Chadiza, which has a population of around 5,670 people (2022 Census)

- Early childhood education (ECE) in the district is provided by 50 to 57 ECE centres spread across the town's urban area and the surrounding rural areas. All these centres are integrated into state primary schools. There are very few ECE private schools

- The ECE target group (3–6 years) is estimated to be around 12,000–13.000 children

- There are an estimated 60 to 80 official government ECE teachers in Chadiza The role of volunteer teachers is crucial, but even with their support, the average teacher-pupil ratio is officially 1 to 30, but in rural areas are approximately 1 to 80, or 1 teacher for every 80 children

- Early years education facilities vary depending on the area where the school is located: in town, although early years classes are mostly attached to a primary school – whether state or private – they have suitable buildings; in more remote areas, ECE classes have to make do with dilapidated classrooms or simply hold lessons outdoors

- There is also a significant difference between urban and rural areas in terms of child-friendly water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities: in rural areas, almost all young children share the same pit latrines as older children and however, overall, only 44 per cent have child-friendly WASH facilities

In conclusion, in rural areas, here in these districts too, as in all Eastern Province, children receive an inadequate education, both in terms of the training of volunteer teachers, who are all too often completely unqualified, and in terms of the non-existent or dilapidated facilities, with classes comprising an exorbitant number of children

These children will therefore receive fewer educational opportunities than their peers living in towns and cities, resulting in a learning deficit and, consequently, fewer chances of success in adult life.

5. GENERAL AND SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE, EXPECTED RESULTS, ACTIVITIES

General objective

The general objective of the project is in line with the sustainable goals set by the United Nations, in the document the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development (the document was signed on 25 September 2015 by 193 United Nations countries, including Italy and Zambia). It wants to be a guide to share the commitment to guarantee a better present and future for our planet and the people who live in it.

In particular, the project aims to achieve objective No. 4 "*To ensure inclusive and equal quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."* Specifically, in paragraph no. 4.2: "*By 2030, ensure that all children have quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education"*

Specific objective

The specific objective of the project is to improve Early Childhood Education at some ECE schools in the Vubwi and Chadiza districts of Zambia.

To achieve this goal, the project will support the expansion of Pre-schools in the selected area and improve the quality of the services offered with the aim at enhancing the cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development of children.

Indicator:

Net enrollment rate, one year before the official primary school age.

Expected results

Three are the expected results of the project:

1) Improved skills of volunteer teachers (Caregivers) and their ability to involve children in learning and guarantee them adequate nutrition and health.

Indicator: Volunteer teachers with minimum qualifications in each project school (currently, most ECE schools do not have qualified teachers.) Target: twenty schools with qualified volunteer teachers.

2) Improved learning spaces, buildings, classrooms, playgrounds, latrines etc ... so that children have learning opportunities in a safe place with the help of quality educational material, based on play so that they can develop the socio-emotional aspect and the cognitive functions that they will need to be successful in school;

Indicator: number of schools meeting the minimum standard for ECE schools (at present, very few meet these criteria). Minimum target: one new school; maximum: three new ECE schools

3) A system of continuous evaluation of children's progress has been initiated to ensure the personalized attention necessary to develop their full potential.

Planned activities

Having already run four training courses for volunteer ECE teachers, the preparatory and logistical work can be carried out so that a new course can begin this coming December.

The baseline survey will take place through a combination of field visits and a desk study, which will serve to identify the direct beneficiaries of the action and their characteristics, such as teacher qualifications, the state of infrastructure and teaching materials, as well as the learning, gender equality, school progression and enrollment rates. The data collected will allow us to examine the interactions between initial conditions and the impact of the project and to measure progress in results in all areas.

The first component will focus on improving the skills of volunteer teachers. With the support of the school parents' committee and government teachers, potential volunteer teachers in each school will be selected. Priority will be given to girls who have completed secondary school but with no formal teaching experience and willing to serve the communities.

Once the teachers have been identified, the training will be carried out during the school holiday period. The training will consist of 3 modules lasting two weeks.

A child-centred approach will be adopted as a methodology to promote every child's right to participate and communicate. In particular the following training courses will be offered: children's rights approach, general pedagogy (from observation to educational planning), special pedagogy (basic elements), ECE pedagogy and management of ECE centres, the inclusion of childhood, elements of developmental psychology (main stages of psychomotor development of the child), teaching methodology and teaching techniques; all of which are elements of childcare.

The core textbook for the course will be *The Early Childhood Teacher Training Handbook*, written by two Italian PHD's women (an educational psychologist and a doctor) and three Zambian teachers, published by the Santina Gusmini Association and already used in four annual training courses for volunteer teachers organized by the Association and held in Chipata in the Eastern Province.

The second component of the project focuses on improving the school infrastructure.

Regarding infrastructures, it is worth remembering that since 2020 Santina Gusmini Association has built three ECE schools and one Primary school in the villages of Kaulembe, Molotsi and Mkanda Mateyo, in the districts of Chipangali and Kasenengwa, in the Eastern Province. The construction of these schools has enabled children to benefit from a suitable place where they can learn in a safe and appropriate environment.

Therefore, to respond adequately to both the identified infrastructural needs, the construction of a number of pre-school buildings ranging from a minimum of one to a maximum of three over the course of the project. The buildings will follow a standard floor plan dictated by the Ministry of Education. Whilst the buildings will be built in the vicinity of the primary schools it will nonetheless be a separate place. In any case, it will be owned by the government school. Communities will have to share the cost of construction by preparing, at least in part, the bricks, sand and gravel that will be used for construction.

To improve the tools available to students and teachers, it is planned to donate desks, books and

games to the completion of every single building to facilitate teaching activities. Finally, the possibility of setting up a small playground for children and as well as toilets will be assessed based on the available budget.

Throughout the project, there will be a monitoring component to assess the quality of children's learning to determine which things work, which don't and why.

This component will be developed in close collaboration with Dr. Rita Florenti, psychopedagogist from Italy and author of the program for the training course proposed to the volunteer teacher candidates

This will make it possible to evaluate the progress of the project from the point of view of the various actors involved and will allow them to make individual and collective contributions.

The goal is to guarantee the quality and effectiveness of the entire project and each specific process, and more specific it will ensure that: (i) any potential problem or challenge is identified and addressed immediately during the life cycle of the project, (ii) the systematic application and verification of activities, according to the defined indicators, (iii) the analysis of the quality of the results achieved in order to use the experience acquired for other projects.

6. SUSTAINABILITY

The project will be part of others activities (ECE classes run by state schools) and aims to improve the existing situation in Early Childhood Education, following the guidelines of the Ministry

Therefore, the economic sustainability of the project is guaranteed by the fact that the Pre-schools that will be built will be delivered and will remain the property of the Ministry of Education which will take them under management. It should also be considered that, as already demonstrated in the first Project “Gli Asili di Santina Gusmini”, the schools are strongly desired by the community as evidenced by the meetings with teachers and parents' representatives who will therefore take care of their management carefully and consciously.

The payment of volunteer teachers is already a reality in itself but the involvement of parents in the project and the scheduled meetings will serve to sensitize them on the importance of continuing to financially support the teachers who will be trained.

The institutional sustainability of the project is guaranteed by the fact that the schools concerned are managed by the Ministry of Education which already has a school director in each school. It will be their job to monitor the volunteer teachers and verify their work in line with the required government standards.

7. ADDED VALUE ELEMENTS

The proposed activities will address education needs of vulnerable group children living in rural areas that should attend Early Childhood Education but the project will pay special attention to children with disabilities.

During data collection and baseline assessment a special effort will be made to indent children with disabilities living with in the communities.

Training in the rights of children with disabilities will be part of the curriculum offered to the volunteers teachers and specific training will be conducted for the specific types of disabilities identified during the data collection.

8. DURATION

36 months.

9. BENEFICIARIES

The groups involved in the project are:

- Ministry of Education, Provincial Office for the Eastern Province, Vubwi and Chadiza School Districts, in particular the PEO for the Provincial Office and the DEBS for the District Offices. These are the offices responsible for managing all activities related to education to ensure that the required government standards are met.
- Parents and Teachers Association (PTA's) of the selected schools: these groups are actively involved in the management of the schools and will be involved in the process of selecting volunteer teachers, construction of the schools and monitoring of teachers and payment of the contribution.
- Parents of children aged 3 to 6 will be sensitized of the importance of sending children to school
- Village chiefs with a community awareness role on the importance of early childhood education.

The direct beneficiaries are:

- Around 500 children, aged between 3 and 6 without access to activities or with access to primary school at the required age.
- Nr. 20 volunteer teachers or Caregivers: they are local people who do not have access to early childhood training and do not have job opportunities in the project areas.

The indirect beneficiaries are:

- The population of the area where the Project will be carried out, about 15,000 people with a very low standard of living and few economic resources.

10. AREA OF INTERVENTION OF THE PROJECT

The selected schools will be located in Zambia, in the Eastern Province in the Vubwi and Chadiza Districts.