

ANEER, Community-Based Preschool in Remote Morocco

ANEER means the source of light in the Amazigh language.

Zakoura Foundation is dedicated to providing free and quality education throughout life to underserved populations in Morocco, namely children born in deprived families, youth who dropped out of school, and women in rural areas. Zakoura's mission is geared toward reaching the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4: "quality education for all."

ANEER, the National Initiative for Early Childhood Education in Rural Areas, is an innovative and impactful project bringing preschools to remote Moroccan villages. Launched by Zakoura Foundation in 2015, in partnership with the Moroccan Ministry of Education and UNICEF, the free ANEER program is

based on an innovative model of community preschool that seeks to influence children's entire environment. The model aims to create the most favorable conditions for a successful education through the implementation of projects for parents, youth, local associations/NGOs/champions, and teachers.

Recognizing that early childhood is a critical stage in a child's

development, the ANEER model is based on a holistic approach that engages all stakeholders in a community, whether direct or indirect, to achieve a better and higher commitment to early childhood education (ECE). The model reflects international best practices based on learning through play, raising awareness among parents and the broader community, and ensuring

on-time registration in primary school (by 6 years old).

At the time the program was designed and launched, 500,000 children were being excluded from preschool every year in Morocco. In rural areas, only 35% of children and 25% of girls had access to preschool. By 2019-20, thanks to the efforts of all stakeholders, including the Moroccan Ministry of National Education and the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH), 72.5% of children were able to benefit from preschool education throughout the country and 62.4% in rural areas.

Zakoura Foundation is proud to be part of this successful extension of preschool programming in Morocco's rural areas. With years of expertise in implementing quality preschool programs and advocating for early childhood education, it was able to prioritize preschool in the national education system. The strategic partnerships with the Moroccan Ministry of National Education and INDH were also key to the effort.

Indeed, Zakoura was chosen by the INDH in 2019 to contribute to generalizing ECE in Morocco's rural areas for a 5-year plan. ANEER operates at a national level and is currently present in 8 out of 12 regions of the country. By the end of 2020, ANEER had established 492 preschools, benefitting more than 23,000 children.

Objectives and Challenges

Zakoura Foundation has been working for more than 23 years to promote human development and the inclusion of rural populations through the education of children, the training of youth, and the empowerment of women. It has developed a unique expertise in the deployment of socio-educational projects for populations in rural areas—first in non-formal education and literacy and then in school remediation. In 2006, it created its first preschool units.

Convinced that the most successful projects are those that are embraced by local populations and involve all stakeholders in the development process, the Zakoura Foundation designed the innovative community-based preschool model ANEER in 2015.



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ANEER's main objectives are to:

- Impart preschool skills to children
- Ensure registration in primary school
- Improve basic skills acquisition rates in early years of primary school
- Improve access to quality education for most vulnerable rural children
- Reduce school drop-out rates
- Foster a sustainable development and active interactions between parents, communities, and children.

These objectives are shared by educators and parents. Parents are educated about following up on the development of their children according to specific milestones and objectives. The strong collaboration between parents and educators makes it possible to adjust the programs when necessary and pursue early intervention for children with specific needs.

One challenge that ANEER addresses is a cultural misperception in Morocco about the goals for preschool education. Parents expect their children to learn French and Arabic and to learn how to write and read. ANEER tries, through parental education and community meet-ups, to build awareness about the other important aspects of ECE (e.g., physical development, cognitive development, language and communication development, social/emotional development, creative expression).



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Indeed, ANEER is designed as a threefold formula targeting children, mothers, and the community through preschool, parental education, and capacity reinforcement with local associations that will ensure sustainability. For even more efficiency, educators are recruited locally, which builds parent confidence (and enrollment rates) and involvement. Parents learn about early childhood, the benefits of preschool, and the play-based approach of the program. Mothers benefit from training sessions focused on child development, stimulation techniques, and hygiene rules so they can pursue activities and learning with their children at home that correspond to what happens at school. Through this participatory approach, mothers gain sensitivity to their children's schooling and what may be needed in terms of guidance throughout the years. To ensure their support, fathers also benefit from awareness sessions.

ANEER is sustained by local communities. Children's development is greatly affected by the quality of the context in which they grow. The awareness campaigns Zakoura Foundation launches in the broad community aim at informing people about the importance of education in the early years and what is necessary to complete the schooling years. The capacity-building program for local associations is designed to make the members work collectively to find solutions for preschool sustainability in each douar (village). ANEER itself is a model sustained

by local communities. Zakoura Foundation implements and runs preschools for two years, and then nominates a local champion, mostly associations, who will be trained to run the school in partnership with the local community.

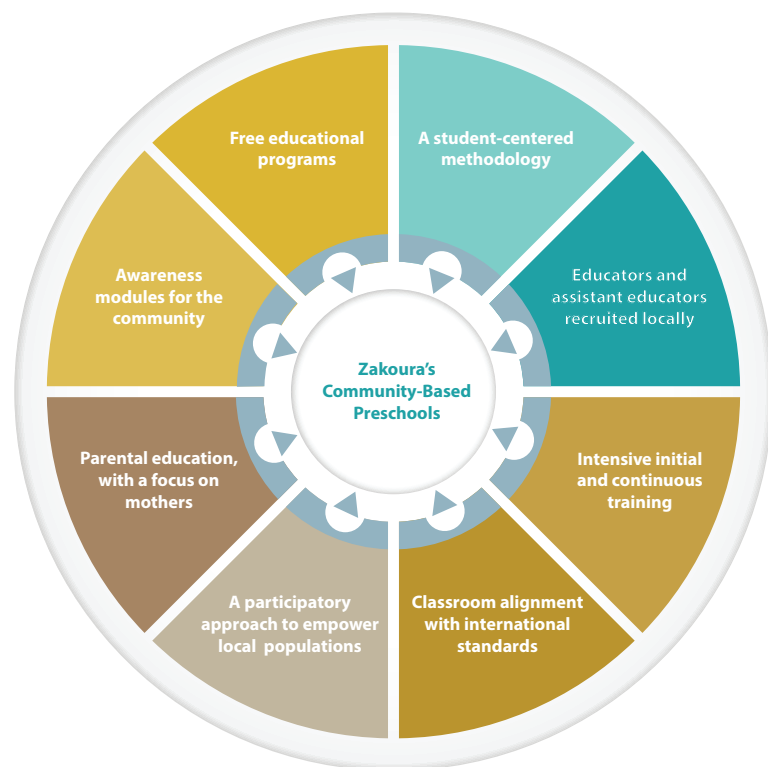
Lessons Learned

We thought about what would be the key factors necessary to replicate our community-based preschool program elsewhere. First of all, ANEER is an integrated and inclusive approach to provide: a free educational preschool program, parental education and awareness modules for the community, a participatory approach to empower local populations, and training and support of a local actor (usually an association) for sustainability. The qualitative approach is based on: a pedagogy centered on the development of the child, educators recruited locally and empowered by intensive initial and continuous training, and alignment with international standards.

With all that in mind, we have five key steps to follow when bringing a quality community preschool to rural areas. They constitute our contribution to the worldwide effort to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4—quality education for every child.

ANEER – 5 key steps to success

- 1 **Preparation phase and community mobilization**
- 2 **Qualified human capital with enhanced capacities—the importance of initial and continuous training**
- 3 **The program's approach: a pedagogy centered on child's development**
- 4 **Family and community engagement at the core of the model**
- 5 **Monitoring and modeling scalability.**



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Impact and Quality

We can humbly speak of the success of this ANEER community preschool program by highlighting its impact on two fronts: 1) results with children, parents, and the community' and 2) national and international recognition of the ANEER preschool program as an innovative and impactful project.

For continuous improvement and scaling, Zakoura Foundation team members constantly assess ANEER's programs through data collection and surveys. ANEER's key performance indicators in rural areas are:

- Students' attendance of 96%
- Dropout rate of less than 1%
- Parents' attendance at monthly meetings of 81%
- 100% of children who access ANEER's preschool program register on time into primary school.

The last indicator is important because entering school late is one of the reasons why children fail. They have difficulty catching up and sometimes their learning capacities have



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changed. What we try to do is to make sure children are prepared to enter primary school and succeed there.

Quality assurance is taken seriously at Zakoura Foundation, where we evaluate not only process (output) indicators, such as the number of children who attend the preschool program regularly, but also outcome indicators, such as children's psychosocial well-being. Indicators are contextually relevant, measurable, and developmentally appropriate. Improved parental attitudes and behaviors regarding early childhood development are also assessed. The

Foundation team has noticed the children blossoming, displaying obvious pleasure about being in class. During monthly meetings and parent education sessions, the parents are similarly enthusiastic. The program is gaining strong popularity among the local population.

The Foundation, in partnership with UNICEF, contracted with an independent consulting firm to conduct an evaluation of its community preschool and parent education programs. Briefly, the results of this study¹ indicate that the community-based program has a positive effect on student performance in the 1st



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and 2nd grades. The program appears to increase the overall student average by about 7% (0.47/6.15).

In addition, the ANEER program enjoys national and international recognition. In May 2015, the ANEER program was presented to the Clinton Global Initiative conference and was acclaimed and recognized for its relevance, innovative aspect, and impact. In 2017 and 2018, ANEER was among the dozen finalists chosen by the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) for its innovative and impactful approach to today's most daunting education challenges. In 2019, ANEER was recognized as one of the 100 brightest global innovations in education by the Finnish nonprofit HundrED. Finally, a double distinction came in 2020, when the Zakoura Foundation was selected to present its community preschool model at the World Education Week organized by T4 Education and ANEER was among the 11 case studies of innovative international organizations in education presented by the Education Above All Foundation.

From a national point of view, the Zakoura Foundation is very proud to have been designated as one of the leading associations for the generalization of preschool in rural areas since 2019. The Ministry of National Education also included it in their advocacy for quality education for all.

Addressing Challenges

One of the main challenges affecting extension of this program has been fundraising. Although preschool is a critical phase in a child's development and preparation for successful schooling, a variety of equally important causes are also seeking the attention of organizations, businesses, and government departments. It was not until 2018 that preschool was made a national priority by His Majesty the King, which gave new impetus to this challenge of generalization. For its part, the Zakoura Foundation has been able to count on the renewed commitment of partner companies

and organizations. The Foundation also innovated its fundraising by launching initiatives such as the Fund for Education in Rural Areas and #Preschool Heroes, calling for general mobilization to support its commitment to education and the financing of educational projects in areas of high need. The participation of all parties in these initiatives is proof that only by working together can we achieve quality education for all.

We would also like to emphasize the constant need for quality training of human resources. This is a determining element for the preschool's quality!

Applicability Across Contexts

We believe that everyone today who is interested or has the same needs can be inspired by ANEER. We started off small, thinking that we could reach out to and create about 30 schools per year. Suddenly, we were expanding to 350 preschools a year. The families have been so welcoming of the whole ANEER program. The children are happy to go to school every day and we are there to prepare them as much as possible for what will be expected of them when they arrive at elementary school.

The capacity of the program to scale is amazing because of the current lack of quality and proximity supply of preschool programs for the most marginalized populations. We welcome opportunities to share our experience and expertise and thank all organizations or initiatives

that provide us the opportunity to do so. And we are happy to share any of our content if people are interested.

Of course, as for any other organization, the challenge of scaling requires funding and strategic partners. It is therefore important that we all work together to see how we can help each other in those two important ways—how to improve our impact and reach, and how to reach out to the maximum number of people.

A Success Story From ANEER

The story of Rita, a little girl who is a beneficiary of ANEER, is fairly representative of the impact that our community-based preschool program can have on an entire community. Rita lives with her mother while her father works outside the village. Her mom has benefited from our literacy classes as well as our parenting education program. We also worked with her on a vocational training

path, which helped her become financially independent. The most important difference is that this newly literate mother was able to be involved in her daughter's education, understand her and be there for her every day, and help her progress. Stories like these are our daily inspiration and source of motivation.

"I have noticed big changes since her entry to school. Rita became sociable, curious. She does gardening. She developed unsuspected talents in theater and drawing. I think she had no opportunity before to express or develop her talents. She has learned songs. . . . She talks with people. She likes to express her opinion! And she has become autonomous!" said Zineb, Rita's mom.

Notes:

¹ An outline of the results of this study is available in a dedicated article in *The Journal - Preschool*, an underestimated impact? https://www.fondationzakoura.org/assets/publications/258bf-the-journal_fondation-zakoura_edition1_web.pdf

Early Childhood in Morocco by the Numbers

- 39** Percentage of children age 36-59 months attending an early childhood education program
- 36** Percentage of children age 36-59 months with whom any adult household member has engaged in 4 or more activities to provide early stimulation and responsive care in the last 3 days
- 65** Percentage of children age 36-59 months whose father has engaged in 4 or more activities to provide early stimulation and responsive care in the last 3 days
- 21** Percentage of children under age 5 who have 3 or more children's books
- 14** Percentage of children under age 5 who play with 2 or more types of playthings
- 7** Percentage of children under age 5 left alone or under the supervision of another child younger than 10 years of age for more than 1 hour at least once in the last week

Source: UNICEF



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