



**Newsletter Nr. 5 – November 2024**

By Sibylle Freiermuth - Promoting English Literacy

An assignment from Comundo

## Every End is a New Beginning



Dear Friends and Family

I have been struggling to write my final newsletter to you. So much has happened, so many experiences, lessons, challenges and achievements. The final months of an assignment are not supposed to be particularly notable, as time is spent handing over and wrapping up the assignment. In my case it turned into a rather turbulent time. I will do my best to provide some honest insight into the past months, while keeping in mind that these are complex situations with various perspectives.

Through it all, I have been incredibly grateful for your support and look forward to connecting again face to face.

Sibylle

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### Drought in Zambia

As I settle back into life in Switzerland, I keep marveling at everything we take for granted. While I have already mentioned challenges with power, water and sanitation, 2024 has been an extremely challenging year for Zambia. Due to a combination of the El Niño weather pattern and climate change, there was almost no rain in the 2023-2024 rainy season leading to a severe drought.

- Almost half of the 2.2 million hectares of maize were lost.
- By April 2024, an estimated 9.8 million people were affected by the drought
- An estimated 5.8 million people will likely experience heightened hunger between October 2024 and March 2025.

### Descent into Darkness

Over 80% of Zambia's power is hydroelectric. While this is normally a great source of renewable energy, the drought has led to a crash in the power grid. March started with 4 hours of loadshedding/day. By May it was up to 8 hours, in July up to 12 hours and by September the system essentially collapsed. An attempt was made to provide up to 3 hours of power to all residential areas, but many neighbourhoods went without power for days.

Rich people bought diesel generators, installed solar systems, got batteries and inverters, or (like me) went to the big malls that had independent power supplies to charge phones and laptops. My colleagues of course did not have access to any of these options. Many shops and small businesses (print shops, barbershops, bakeries, etc.) shut down because they couldn't power their appliances.

Zambia's mobile and internet network towers are equipped with backup power systems designed to cover power outages of up to 4 hours. Once that limit was exceeded cellphone service became very spotty as the national network suffered from the lack of power.

### Water is Life

Zambians are used to having a long dry season - months without rain. Normally households are supplied with water either from a borehole or by connecting to the regional water system. However, both depend on power to pump water. No power = no water.

People with means set up solar/diesel powered borehole pumps or order big water tanks to be delivered to their homes. With increased demand and increased costs of pumping the water, the cost per 1000L doubled if not tripled. Within the compounds people wait for hours to buy a bucket/drum of water that then has to be carried home.

On very bad days, schools have to send students home because there is no way to maintain basic hygiene standards. Students have fainted from dehydration as there is no drinking water.



*Using my car to transport water*

Since returning to Switzerland, I am savoring every hot shower I take. I still get a twinge of anxiety when my phone battery is running low, and I have been very excited to wash my clothes using a laundry machine.





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### A Look Back - Successes and Challenges

My primary objective was to ensure that **teachers have improved their teaching skills and knowledge in literacy/English language**. There were three main challenges in achieving this goal.

1. A disconnect with the school management team early on (the teacher who was supposed to be my counterpart was out on maternity leave and we never really managed to get in sync after her return).

2. While Pakachele does a great job embracing different initiatives, the challenge lies with allocating the necessary resources for proper follow through. In my case there was not much time set aside for workshops and trainings. Instead I spent a lot of time in class with teachers.

3. In every grade I worked with there was an average of 100% teacher turnover annually (from Grade 1-5 I worked with 3 different teachers/grade).

Despite these challenges, we managed to make significant changes. While the level of competence in teaching phonics varies across the teachers, the entire team has understood and embraced the usefulness of teaching phonics in a systematic and explicit way. This represents a fundamental (and likely sustainable) shift in the approach to teaching English literacy.



*Teacher Terry working with a group of students*

"Madam Sibylle, what is a strike?" Rather than sitting in class copying notes they previously couldn't read, the Social Studies teacher has divided the students into groups and assigned questions for them to answer themselves.

I suggest they look it up in a dictionary - the classroom set is in the cabinet next to me. The students crowd around and quickly look up the word (we have been practising how to use a dictionary in class). On their own they read the definition, I confirm that they are right, provide a local example, and they write down the answer.

Three years ago, this was unimaginable.

My second objective was that **teachers have access to and use various teaching material, educational tools and methodologies**. In the beginning, teachers were quite skeptical about some of my ideas. Nevertheless, we made significant progress.

The library (locked, dusty and unorganized when I arrived) is now being used on a regular basis with student librarians taking on key responsibilities.

I set up a teacher resource room where we collected all the available teaching materials. The school had a lot of resources packed away that I helped make accessible to teachers. Over time we managed to sort and allocate these resources and move them directly into the classrooms - even creating a proper inventory.

Initially, I was unsure how much these resources would be used when I am not around. However, feedback from teachers and school management has shown that most teachers are actively using the resources to make their classes more engaging.



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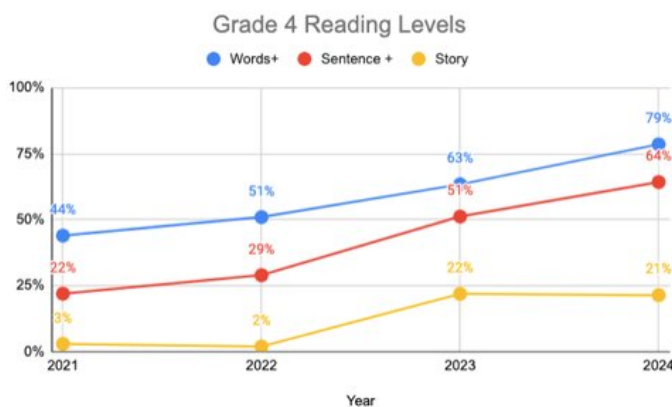
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### Literacy Results

While my responsibility was to work with the teachers, of course the goal was that **the learners of Pakachele Community School improved their skills in literacy and their proficiency across all subjects.**

On this front I am confident that my time in Zambia was well invested. Feedback from teachers, especially in Grade 5 & 6, show that not only are students able to read and write much better, but they have also gained confidence and take greater ownership of their education. It is not very common for students to ask questions or challenge their teachers, but at Pakachele the students have been given much more of a voice.

When looking at the numbers, there is a clear positive trend across all primary grades. The graph below shows how students in Grade 4 have improved year by year (the data for 2024 is the mid-year result so by the end of the year those numbers should have further improved).



*% of students able to read words/sentences/stories*

### Terry's Feedback

A significant milestone was that at the beginning of 2024 Pakachele officially named Teacher Terry Chipindi as the head of literacy. For the first time the school has someone to coordinate literacy efforts across the school and I gained an official counterpart. These are Terry's reflections on the past three years:

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My perception concerning literacy has been an eye-opening experience. The way I look at my teaching has changed. The new approach has brought a lot of spices into how I teach English/Literacy effectively. I have become more interested in teaching and now focus on teaching the building blocks (sounds > words > sentences > paragraphs) that allow students to work things out on their own.

I have observed the same change in my fellow teachers. Some of us have started doing our own research (for example watching educational Youtube videos) to better understand the rules behind English reading and to find ways to better teach the students. We have started looking at what resources we have available to make our lesson plans more interesting.

The students find the way we started teaching literacy and English very exciting and engaging. For example, when we use the bottletops the students really love how interactive class is and they often ask to repeat an activity.

In the past we would just ask students to learn how to read by reading together as a class. Now we teach the components of reading, so students learn all the rules (for example that there are silent letters, that certain letter combinations make different sounds, etc.). Students can now read, even on their own, because they know how to blend sounds into words. When they sit reading on their own and they come across a word they don't know, they try to decode it on their own. Only then do they come and ask me if they are correct. They have gained the confidence and the tools to try and figure things out on their own.



## Safeguarding

My third objective was to help ensure that **Pakachele has the necessary systems/tools in place to continue to run the academic program effectively and efficiently**. In addition to setting up inventories and supporting the introduction of a digital data management system, I also dedicated my final months to support proper implementation of safeguarding measures.

After the safeguarding workshop I mentioned in my last newsletter, I found out about a number of concerning incidents (especially cases of sexual activity with minors). This is not really surprising as school systems globally deal with challenging child protection issues, and working with vulnerable children all but guarantees that students and teachers are confronted with safeguarding issues on a regular basis.

I was hopeful that given Pakachele's proactive attitude to other challenges (for example working to improve the literacy rates) and the rhetoric around zero-tolerance on child protection issues, that I could support the school in using these incidents as a catalyst for positive change. Initial conversations with the director indicated an openness to taking action. Unfortunately, the promised action (following up on incidents, having a meeting with concerned stakeholders, connecting the school to local experts and resources, updating and enforcing new policies) never took place. Instead young men under the legal guardianship of the director continued to engage in acts of defilement (statutory rape) without any meaningful action taken by the director.

Since the director did not seem to be responding to these incidents appropriately, I approached one of the co-directors (who had previously emphasized the importance of child protection) with the hope of starting a productive conversation. Unfortunately, that meeting did not go as I hoped.

Rather than focusing on the issues at hand, I was accused of meddling in affairs that had nothing to do with my role. Management wanted to know which teachers had been sharing information with me, expressly stating that these teachers would be fired. When I refused to name names, I was threatened with all sorts of consequences (from reporting me to Comundo, to taking legal action against me, and finally to threatening to dismiss the entire staff if I did not name names). The fact that teachers had been reporting all incidents to the director and the real issue was management's response was ignored. The offer to connect management to another external supporter of the school who had relevant information was also ignored.

I was temporarily suspended. Comundo reassured me that I had acted appropriately given the grave safeguarding concerns. There was a meeting between Comundo and Pakachele management. Unfortunately, nothing much changed. I agreed to a limited involvement with the school until the end of my assignment (continuing with an afterschool literacy program for older students and collecting literacy data), but otherwise was declared a persona non grata by the co-director. Luckily I could maintain a good relationship with the students, the majority of staff members, and even the managing director. However, the experience definitely put a damper on my final months.

Being confronted by safeguarding issues has been the most difficult part of my time in Zambia. In Switzerland there are a wealth of resources and a reasonable expectation that the systems work. In Zambia there are simply not enough quality resources. I did my best to follow up on the cases I was aware of on my own, but I have not figured out where or how to draw a line. When can I say, I did my part? Am I absolved from my duty of care if I report to school management while being well aware that no meaningful action will be taken? What about reporting to the police, knowing that without providing money and following up daily not much will happen?





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### Mary's Story

I noticed Mary early on. She was one of four students in Grade 4 who could already read simple words. Once we started with the phonics program she excelled - by the end of 2022 she could correctly read, write and understand simple sentences.

In September 2023 I immediately noticed Mary's absence in the 5th grade classroom. I was told that she had left school because she was pregnant. As my responsibility was to help the teachers improve literacy education, I initially did not follow up further. However, when my roommate Glory asked if I knew a place for her to donate some of baby Sibylle's newborn items, I immediately thought of Mary. Through a teacher who had stayed in touch, I was able to connect Glory to Mary, and learned more about Mary's story.



*Out with Glory, Mary and her newborn baby girl*

Mary's mother passed away when she was little. Her father died when she was 12. After living with her elderly grandma who struggled to provide for herself, let alone for Mary and her younger sister, the two girls found their way to Seko Village, the orphanage affiliated with Pakachele. When the director found out that Mary was pregnant she was kicked out of the orphanage for breaking the house rules and was forced to return to her grandma (who lives in a compound on the other side of Lusaka).

Thanks to Glory I had learned about giving birth in Zambia - every expectant mother is required to bring her own supplies to the hospital. The list includes gloves for the doctors, black plastic to lay down on the bed for easy clean up, a roll of cotton wool to soak up blood, a blade to cut the umbilical cord, clips, a bucket, baby clothes, a blanket, etc. Glory and I decided to make sure that Mary had a complete hospital bag as well as a taxi driver on standby to take her to the hospital for delivery. Despite the high risk of a teenage pregnancy, Mary had a beautiful and healthy baby girl.

By the end of 2023 I turned my attention to getting Mary back in school. Zambia has a fairly good re-entry policy to protect students like Mary. Unfortunately, it is rarely enforced. A visit to the YWCA women's centre got us a referral to the Social Welfare Department, and the promise of a follow-up. However, knowing how these systems work I also inquired about the possibility of Mary returning to Pakachele. The teachers at the school had shown me that they are very caring and encouraging and Mary expressed an interest in returning. The managing director agreed and we started looking for a way to relocate the entire family closer to Pakachele, so that Grandma could watch the baby while Mary returned to school.



*Mary and Tasheni*



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As I got to know Mary better, she told me that the alleged father was another resident at Seko Village. Her boyfriend was in Grade 11 and no longer a minor, so their relationship legally constitutes defilement. The young man initially denied being the father, but in time indicated that he probably was the father.

In Zambia, cases such as these are often handled outside of court, with the father and his family paying for "damages". However, since the supposed father is also a double orphan, he does not have the means nor the family to officially acknowledge the baby as his own. A private paternity test costs thousands and taking the legal route is also expensive and leads to a lot of complicated questions. The director of Seko Village/Pakachele, who had legal responsibility for the young man, did not offer any support to Mary (other than eventually agreeing to let her return to school). While Mary was kicked out, the young man was allowed to continue with his education, was provided a place to live, given food and was supported as before.

Mary's return to Pakachele, planned for May of 2024, coincided with the visit from the co-director. As I approached her with my request to look at safeguarding issues (it turns out Mary's situation is far from unique), I mentioned how impressed I was with the teachers for how they had stepped up in supporting Mary (three teachers had helped me find a suitable house for Mary and her family and one had helped coordinate all the support for Mary). I was quite shocked when the co-director's response was to state that she would not allow Mary to return to school. While championing a rhetoric of child protection, the co-director shamed Mary for getting pregnant while under her guardianship. It was a disappointing reminder of how much stigma teenage mothers continue to face.

With Pakachele not being a safe option for Mary, I started looking at schools closer to her grandma's place.

I struck gold when I reached out to Jubella Christian Academy. The director assured me that they practice the Christian value of love thy neighbour and that they do not tolerate any bullying and all are welcome. A school visit with Mary confirmed my feeling that this would be the right place for her.

Under the condition that Mary works hard in school and makes smart choices in her personal life, I agreed to sponsor her until she finishes primary education (the school is a feeder school for a good government secondary school, so as long as Mary passes grade 7 exams she should have a spot in a free public secondary school). Despite missing out on two terms of school and raising a young baby at home, Mary continues to do well in school. She was disappointed in her end of term 2 results - she was *only* 9th out of 21 in her class. She wants to be back at the top of her class.

I assume that by now it is evident that I am extremely proud of Mary. I admire her resilience and her drive to succeed. I also love to see how her confidence has grown. Dealing with the stigma of being a teenage mum is never easy, but in one of our conversations Mary told me that she is no longer ashamed. That this is her story and she is willing to share it - maybe it helps someone else or maybe someone will help her achieve her own dreams.



*Mary is a great mum. I just provide the baby books.*



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## The Language Market

With my involvement in the Comundo funded literacy project I mentioned in my last newsletter, I had two additional objectives added to my assignment:

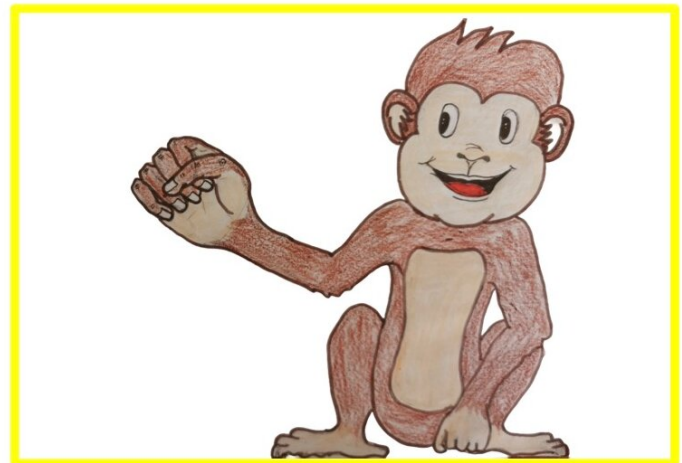
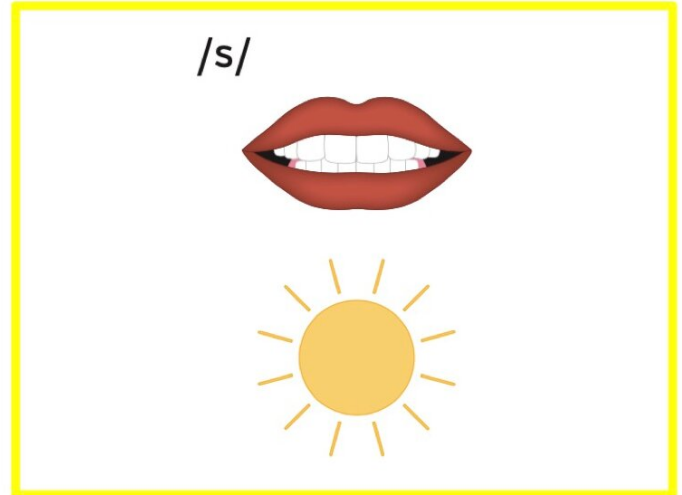
- Develop an English literacy program suitable for Community Schools in Lusaka.
- Make a contribution to the improvement of the literacy program at other community schools.

In many regards this project has been the most rewarding and the most frustrating at the same time. I have had the privilege to work with an incredible team. In January of 2023 Felistus, Timothy and I started developing the concept and the material for a comprehensive English Language and Literacy Program called The Language Market. In December 2023 we trained 13 Literacy Coaches (called LICs) and around 100 teachers from 47 different community schools.

Despite challenges (delays due to cholera, high teacher turnover, schools/teachers that have not all prioritized the program) the overall reception and implementation has been going very well. We have schools that have requested to join the program based on positive feedback from schools already implementing The Language Market. Teachers who were skeptical or overwhelmed at the beginning have embraced the program. Student assessments show great improvement in their pre-reading skills.



*The team showing our first initial using sign language.*



*Naughty Monkey shows how to make the sign for /s/*

One of the things I am most proud of is the integration of Zambian Sign Language. We have aligned every sound with a corresponding sign. Naughty Monkey is a character that lives at The Language Market, and because he can't speak he has a sign for everyone. The students have absolutely fallen in love with him.

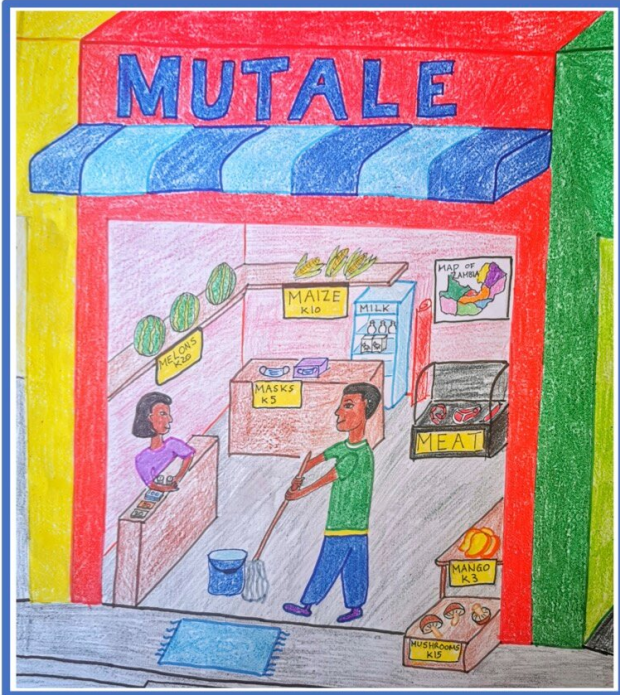
We are also using a system of mouth charts, similar to what is common in Switzerland, and we are developing stories that are designed to present the target language in the context of experiences that the children can relate to.





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Every morning Mr and Mrs Mutale go to the market. Mr Mutale mops the floor and Mrs Mutale counts the money. They sell maize, mangoes, melons, meat, milk and mushrooms.

M: melon, maize, milk, map, mask, money, mop, mat, mango, mushroom, meat, man.

*A3 story page for Mr and Mrs Mutale who say /m/*

For each of the 42 sounds that we teach in The Language Market there is a corresponding character. In Level 1 (being taught this year) the focus is on pre-reading skills. This includes learning how to play with sounds (segmenting words into sounds and blending sounds into words). Starting with the basics is very helpful, especially since almost all the teachers do not have any experience with phonics. Moreover, the sounds of English are very different from local languages. The many different vowel sounds are particularly challenging.

Level 2 (to be taught in 2025) will focus on phonics (connecting the sounds to letters) with a level 3 and 4 planned for future years.

## The Challenge

While at the programmatic level things have been going fairly well, the issue has been with ZCCS, the organisation in charge of managing the project. Early on there were signs of trouble, but I was hoping that these would be growing pains and things would improve over time.

Unfortunately, despite my best efforts and for reasons I still don't really understand, ZCCS has continued to mis-manage or fail to manage the project. This includes critical issues such as not doing proper project accounting (not keeping track of budget lines and getting creative with how money is spent), failing to adhere to Zambian labour law (failing to register employees for national health insurance, not paying social security, not registering with the workers compensation fund), not writing/submitting reports to Comundo, and not taking an active interest in the project (not knowing what we are doing nor responding to requests in a timely manner).

The consequences have been severe. The quality of the project has suffered as necessary resources (that have been budgeted for) are not made available. Twice Comundo halted the release of funds due to missing reports. Each time this meant that my colleagues were not paid for up to two months. When living paycheck to paycheck that was absolutely devastating - both to my colleagues lives and to morale.

I wanted to walk away from the project in January because I didn't see a productive way forward. ZCCS promised significant changes in writing. By May it was clear that none of it was true. Through all of this I had been keeping the Comundo Country Director in the loop and in May the Comundo management team from Switzerland also came for a visit. I hoped something would be done. Unfortunately, so far I haven't seen any meaningful action from either organisation, which has left me rather disillusioned.



## Newsletter Nr. 5 – November 2024

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### Literacy Day 2024

One of the critical issues in a project like The Language Market (funded by Comundo for three years) is the question of sustainability. The goal was to develop a pilot project with such convincing results that other stakeholders (the Ministry of Education/another NGO) would be eager to continue with the project post 2025.

The main component of the advocacy strategy was to organize a big celebration for Literacy Day 2024. While this was supposed to be spearheaded by the ZCCS management team, months passed without any action. In the end Felistus and Mukusekwa (who took over for Timothy when he was recruited by the government) took the lead and I helped where I could.

We developed a wonderful program, building partnerships with key figures. Unfortunately, since we were dependent on ZCCS releasing the allocated funds, we were stuck. Eventually the Comundo country office found a creative way to help us at least secure the venue and pay the caterers.

In the end we managed to have a great celebration: a creative writing competition, an interesting keynote speech, a panel discussion (moderated by me), breakout discussion groups, a book fair showcasing Zambian authors, and the presence of a representative from the ministry of education. While the feedback was really great, once again ZCCS has not capitalized on this opportunity.



Panel discussion - Literacy in Zambia by 2030  
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Finalists of the short story writing competition

### Was it worth it?

I still believe in Comundo's approach and have witnessed the value of interpersonal knowledge. Hundreds of students have benefitted, dozens of teachers have been introduced to an evidence-based approach to literacy and a few teachers have fundamentally shifted their approach to teaching.

At the same it has been a challenging three years. The biggest frustration has been working within systems that are dominated by strict hierarchies in which the success of a project is very dependent on the effectiveness of management. Top management can block implementation with very limited accountability.

In the beginning I struggled with how to deal with the power dynamics - I did not want to inadvertently reinforce neocolonial systems. What I eventually realized is that most of my Zambian colleagues shared my concerns, and even the Zambian government has been actively promoting human rights (including child protection) and is fighting corruption. Within such a context I reframed my perception of my own voice - I was in a unique place of privilege that allowed me to communicate more freely than my colleagues. As such I felt like it was my duty to use my privilege to speak up whenever possible. Even though it may not have affected much, I do not regret speaking out on important issues.

**Cooperating for a fairer world**





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### What's next?

Originally my plan was to continue supporting Pakachele. While I still love the school, the students and the teachers, I cannot in good faith support an organisation in which I do not trust the management. While some aspects of my work have made a lasting impact, I am sure a number of the initiatives I supported (Entrepreneurship Club, Literacy Club, Arts & Crafts Club, Library Time, Parent Literacy Initiative, etc) will not continue. Moreover, in addition to the issues with project leadership for The Language Market, Comundo did not find anyone to replace me in supporting the pedagogical/technical side of the project.

As I was confronted with this rather disappointing reality, I found two ways to move forward. To try and help the The Language Market successfully transition to Level 2, Comundo and I agreed that I would continue supporting the project on a part-time basis from Switzerland until the end of 2024.

I also kept having conversations with two very good Zambian colleagues in which we discussed all the things we thought needed to be done or wished were different. We quickly realized that it is easy to complain - if we wanted to see change then we should follow Gandhi's advice and be the change we wanted to see.

We identified the following problems:

- Motivated individuals who have good ideas lack a support system to implement their ideas. People need a system that works - proper registration with all necessary documents, a safe space, reliable communication, proper systems, and most importantly a supportive environment.
- The impact of good people is limited by working in isolation - collaboration and supporting each other across sectors is key.
- Too many people still struggle with literacy.
- There are huge gaps in the safeguarding ecosystem.

Based on these concerns we sketched out the concept for the **Collaborative Learning Hub (CLH)**. Fighting our way through Zambian bureaucracy we managed to officially register the CLH as a non-profit. I decided to go all-in and invested my entire Zambia savings into our company so that we could purchase a property in Kabanana (a very low-income area).

The property serves two purposes. Until we find funding to pay my two co-directors for their work, we can at least offer a rent-free place for them to live. Secondly the property will also serve as a community space - we have plans to open a little community library, have space for workshops, open a little shop for income generation/entrepreneurship training, and whatever other idea we end up implementing.

So far the process of purchasing the property, getting it connected to water, having it rewired, getting the fire inspection and all the other tasks that go into such a project have been eating up a lot of time. The goal is to start collaborating with the community by the 1st quarter of 2025. If you are interested in finding out more - please do let me know. We are called the *collaborative learning hub* for a reason.

Overall, I look back over the past three years and I feel proud of everything we achieved and all that I learned. I am also hopeful about our future projects in Zambia and am excited for my life in Switzerland. Above all I am extremely grateful for all the support I have received along the way. Thank you for being part of my journey!



Farewell party at the CLH. A bittersweet goodbye.

**Cooperating for a fairer world**





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## Cooperating for a fairer world

What if the right to a healthy, safe life free from violence no longer applied? If the opportunity to attend school – vital for education and a decent job – was denied? Or if the only way to feed your family was to flee to a foreign country?

With a team of about seventy co-workers, Comundo improves the lives of people in Latin America and Africa, focusing in particular on children, youth and older people. This is all thanks to sharing knowledge and experience with local partner organisations, networking, and the promotion of mutual learning.

As a civic organisation in Switzerland, Comundo works towards achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It puts our co-workers' specific experience and skills to excellent use on site and couples this with political action in Switzerland.

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