

EDUCATION

Rural kindergartens help to prevent poverty trap

An initiative in one of China's most mountainous areas may provide a template for future development.

Hou Liqiang and **Yang Jun** report from Tongren, Guizhou province.

As China marks its third Poverty Alleviation Day on Oct 17, the success of Tongren, a city in the southwestern province of Guizhou, in promoting preschool education in rural areas is being hailed as a possible blueprint for the eradication of poverty and a means of preventing its reemergence.

Initiated in 2012 by the China Development Research Foundation and Songtao Miao autonomous county in Tongren, the Mountain Village Kindergarten project has established 100 new facilities in isolated areas, and has been extended to cover the entire city.

Under the project, the proportion of villages with kindergartens has risen to 100 percent from just 10 percent three years ago. More than 2,000 facilities have been built for preschoolers in Tongren's rural areas, where seven of the 12 county-level regions have been designated by the government as national-level poverty-stricken counties.

According to the China Development Research Foundation, preschool education is key to a student's learning and skill-adaptation abilities, because about 50 percent of intelligence development is completed before the age of 4. The foundation said international calculations suggest that every investment of \$1 in preschool education results in a social return of \$17.

Building for the future

More than 70 percent of Tongren's 4.27 million people are members of 29 ethnic groups, including the Tujia, the Miao and the Dong peoples. In 2013, the average per capita income for farmers in the city was 5,397 yuan (\$803), 40 percent lower than the national level that year.

Now, the authorities are hoping that Tongren's successful completion of a huge project, despite a limited budget, will provide a template for other poverty-stricken areas.

Instead of building new kin-



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Long Lihong, director of the Tongren City Education Commission

dergartens, most of the facilities are located in disused primary school classrooms, village committee offices or houses, according to Long Lihong, director of the Tongren City Education Commission.

Under the program, kindergartens were built in every area where it could be guaranteed that more than 10 children would enroll, and the average cost of transforming



Top: Shi Jiahui, 3, eats lunch at the Houzhai Village Kindergarten in Tongren, Guizhou province. **Above:** Children take a post-lunch nap at the Muziping Village Kindergarten in Tongren.

PHOTOS BY HOU LIQIANG / CHINA DAILY

and operating them is about 18,000 yuan, she said.

In Houzhai village, the kindergarten is based in three disused primary school classrooms. Two of them are used for educational purposes, while the other serves as a sleeping room where the kindergarten's 27 preschoolers — mostly “left-behind” children from a nearby 1,400-strong Miao ethnic community,

whose parents are migrant workers — take a midday nap.

Gao Xiulong, the headmaster, said two broken basketball stands have been made into a swing and several table tennis tables now serve as drawing boards. Some of the children's toys are made from discarded tires.

The kindergarten in Muziping village, in the Wanshan district, was also once primary

school classrooms, and almost all the toys are made from locally grown bamboo.

Tongren's total revenue was 37.88 billion yuan from 2011 to last year, and since 2012, the city government has allocated 5 percent of its annual administrative budget to the kindergarten project. District governments are given 10,000 yuan for every facility they establish in the mountains,

girls is cook food and wash their clothes.

“My granddaughters' awareness of hygiene has changed a lot since they started at the kindergarten. Now, they ask to change their clothes and have showers every day. They say they can't fall asleep if they don't take a shower,” she said.

Wu Changfeng cares for three grandchildren because their parents are working in large cities. “If it were not for the kindergarten, I would hardly have time to work on our farm. I'm looking after three children, so I have to take them to the farm while I am working there,” said the 54-year-old, whose husband has also moved away for work.

She said her 4-year-old granddaughter, Tang Hanjiang, who was taciturn and rarely greeted visitors, has become far more outgoing since she started at the local kindergarten.

Rising enrollment

Last year, the enrollment rate in Tongren's rural kindergarten's jumped to more than 84 percent, from 45 percent in 2013. Although that's 9 percent higher than the national rate, the city government plans to raise the number further by upgrading all of the mountain village kindergartens.

Long, from the city's education commission, said that in the coming three years the facilities will be upgraded and more fully qualified teachers will be employed. She is also drafting a plan to provide every child with a free simple lunch.

It will take about 20 years for the full impact of the project to be seen, but education is an important way of eradicating poverty, according to Long.

“In poverty-stricken areas such as Tongren, it's key for people to make their way to colleges or universities to eradicate poverty. In addition to occupational and compulsory education, importance should also be attached to preschool learning, so we can build up the talent pool and save future generations from poverty,” she said.

and the city government allocates 300 yuan a year to every child for teaching materials.

Long said every department of the city government donates thousands of yuan annually, and they also actively seek sponsorship from businesses.

“Many kids in the rural areas are left-behind children. They are cared for by their grandparents, who are usually poorly educated and unable to do much for them. We have seen great improvements in the children's linguistic skills, cognitive competence and memory capacity since they entered the kindergartens,” she added.

According to tests conducted by East China Normal University in Tongren, after spending a year to 18 months at a kindergarten, language competence in children ages 4 to 5 improves by 23 percent, while cognitive competence is 27 percent better and memory capacity rises by 34 percent.

Behavioral changes

The children's behavior and hygiene have also improved. Long Jiawei, 4, and her sister Long Jiali, 6, have lived with their grandmother, Shi Qingjiao, since last year, when their parents moved east to Zhejiang province for work. Shi has rheumatism, and the 75-year-old said all she can do for the

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Local loyalty proves key to teacher recruitment

By **HOU LIQIANG** and **YANG JUN**

Many of the 2,005 mountain village kindergartens in Tongren city, Guizhou province, are located in remote areas, which means it's difficult to recruit and hold onto qualified teachers for 2,000 yuan (\$297) a month. In response, the local government has devised an incentive mechanism to attract talent and ensure quality preschool teaching.

Official kindergartens in towns or townships with jurisdiction over facilities in mountain villages are responsible for offering guidance, so they regularly send teachers to remote areas to offer advice on teaching practice, said Long Lihong, director of the Tongren City Education Commission.

For two and a half years, Su Shulan, a teacher at the Gaolouping Township Kindergarten, has also been acting as the executive director of a kindergarten in Muziping village. She helps the teacher to draft tuition plans and provide themes that are reflected in photos, drawings and other items



Teacher Su Shulan, 26, talks with children after their noon nap at the Muziping Village Kindergarten.

2,000 yuan

monthly salary of teachers at the 2,005 mountain village kindergartens in Tongren, Guizhou

pinned to the classroom walls.

“The theme this month is autumn. We have provided an autumn-themed wall for the children's artworks made from fallen leaves, and also guide the kids to draw pictures about autumn and play related games,” the 26-year-old said.

Advisors such as Su also replace teachers in remote locations if they need to take a vacation or sickness leave.

Teachers at mountain village kindergartens enjoy preferential policies if they want to take exams to win a life contract with the local

government, Long said.

One principle underpinning the project is building kindergartens near the children's home. Many teachers are recruited locally as well, so they will feel settled in their workplace.

Liu Fen, 26, worked in a private kindergarten in downtown Tongren before she applied to teach at a kindergarten in a mountain village. “There is no big difference in salary, but now I work close to my home. Before, I could only go home once a week, but now I can go back every day,” she said.

In addition to a teacher, almost all mountain kindergartens employ a childcare worker, who earns 1,600 yuan a month, and is responsible for sanitation, including cleaning the classroom and sterilizing the children's tableware.

High ambitions and a dream fulfilled

By **HOU LIQIANG** and **YANG JUN**

When Xu Yan, from the Songtao Miao autonomous county in Tongren, a city in Guizhou province, was in junior high school, she would avoid conversations with her classmates if the topic turned to kindergartens. “I was afraid that they would laugh and say my hometown must be terrible because it didn't even have a kindergarten,” she said.

Instead of attending preschool education, the 19-year-old spent most of her early childhood on the farm where her mother worked, and when her mother left to look for work in the city, Xu was carried to the fields by her grandmother. “I had a dream that my experiences would not be repeated by children in my hometown,” she said.

To follow that dream, she decided to study preschool education and become a kindergarten teacher in her home area. Last year, after graduating from Hunan Zhijiang Normal School, Xu returned to Songtao and began work at the new kindergarten in Houzhai, based in disused primary school classrooms.

She recalled being “so

astonished” by the tough living conditions when she arrived. Her dorm room contains just a bed and an old ceiling fan, which hardly stirs the humid air during hot summer nights. There is no bathroom, so she has to take water to the bedroom for a bath. “I mop the floor to clean up the water that splashes out of the tub so often that the cement floor is now as shiny as metal,” she said.

The only toilet is in the distant school, and because she is afraid of the dark, Xu is hesitant to make the trip at night. “I try to avoid using the toilet at night because I have to wake up my colleague and ask her to accompany me,” she said, referring to the only other inhabitants, her colleague Zhou Xiaoyun and her daughter.

Life in the village is monotonous. There are no restaurants, just a couple of small stores with a limited range of goods, but itinerant vendors sometimes arrive to sell food. The school canteen opens at noon and only provides lunch for the students, so Xu cooks breakfast and dinner for herself. She's a poor cook, so she usually prepares dried noodles.

There are almost no people of Xu's age in the village, and



“I had a dream that my experiences would not be repeated by children in my hometown.”

Xu Yan, 19-year-old teacher at a rural kindergarten in Tongren, Guizhou

although Houzhai is only 7 km from Panxin, the nearest town, there is no public transportation. She has to try her luck by waiting on the roadside to see if the local taxi — a three-wheeled truck — is available. If not, she spends

about 90 minutes walking to Panxin.

Her only entertainment comes from animated programs that she watches on her cellphone. Her favorite is *Detective Conan*. “I have watched all of the more-than-800 episodes. If I am in a bad mood, I feel good after watching an episode,” she said.

The distance between her room and the wireless router in the school means the Wi-Fi connection is unstable, so she often sits in the doorway of her dorm at night to surf the internet.

Now, she has two new dreams: to visit Beijing and one of the steppes dotted around China. “I have a friend who works in Beijing. Every time she posts photos of Beijing on WeChat (an instant-messaging app), I admire her very much,” she said.

However, her dreams are likely to remain unfulfilled because she doesn't have enough money to achieve them. She earns 2,000 yuan (\$297) a month, and gives half to her mother. Instead of spending the remainder on herself, she uses it to buy clothes for her family.

“I enjoy buying clothes for them because they are so happy when they wear their new clothes,” she said.