

Faces of *change*



For a quarter century, Aga Khan Foundation U.S.A. (AKF USA) has been investing in people, extending a helping hand to communities and individuals so they may live with dignity and hope.

Khadija's Story

Life, as we know it, can change at any given moment, as five-year old Khadija Kali Mati of Makoba Village in Unguja in Zanzibar found out. Suddenly enveloped by darkness, Khadija's hopes were shattered. Khadija recalls: "I could not see. Not even objects that were very close to me."

The onset of blindness rendered Khadija isolated in her grandmother's house. The grandmother, who depended on Khadija's contribution to household chores, could not imagine the future. Alone, Khadija had to bear the brunt of her infirmity. Occasionally, Khadija would be beaten by her mother, who continued to think she was only pretending. It was not until Khadija started stumbling over potentially dangerous objects like firewood and pits in the field that she managed to pull a chord that resonated with the people around her home.

Khadija's mobility beyond the household was now greatly reduced. At age nine, Khadija was enrolled at the local primary school, two years above the official school enrollment age. While Khadija struggled to learn, she also had to struggle with teachers who always punished her, oblivious to her disability.

Early 2005, the Special Needs Department of Zanzibar's Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MoEVT), selected Makoba Primary School as one of the ten schools for special needs support through a program called Mradi wa Kuendeleza Elimu Zanzibar (MKEZA), which translates to "Improving the Quality of Learning in Zanzibar."

MKEZA's first step was to have Khadija medically assessed. She was subsequently recommended for eye surgery for the removal of cataracts. "We could not afford the surgery as a family, but we also wanted Khadija to be cured and to be able to pursue her education like other children in our village," notes her mother. MKEZA staff worked with Khadija's family to sensitize the Makoba community to understand Khadija's challenge. The results were miraculous. Contributions began to come from everywhere: teachers, relatives, the sheha (local leader) and the whole Makoba community.

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In October 2005, Khadija was taken to Muhimbili National Hospital in Dar es Salaam, where she underwent eye surgery which fully restored her eyesight.

Today, at the age of 11, she is in standard 3 and is an active member of her school as well as in the household. Khadija is able to support her grandmother once again in performing such chores as cooking and grating coconut on a hand grater: "With my good vision, I do not fear grating coconut because I can see the sharp grater."

Khadija is freer now than ever in the classroom: "I used to sit very close to the chalk board in the attempt to catch the tiny glimpse of blurry images. It doesn't matter where I sit now. I can see clearly now even from the extreme end of the class," she says happily.

"Khadija is a lot better now and she is improving so fast to catch up with the rest in class," notes the head teacher of Makoba Primary School. "She can read and write without any problems and with the high level of motivation that she has shown, she will surely move mountains."



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