

Summary Report

Regional Seminar on Early Childhood Policy Review: “Sharing and Learning from the Policy Review Process”

**In Bangkok Thailand
11-13 July, 2007**



***Organized by
UNESCO Bangkok – UNICEF EAPRO***

The Project Background

The UNESCO-UNICEF joint regional policy review project was launched in September 2006 with the aim to support the countries of Asia-Pacific region in meeting the first goal of EFA on ECCE by identifying, documenting and sharing good practices as well as constraints and challenges in early childhood policy development and implementation. To this joint call for a policy review initiative, nine countries of the Asia-Pacific region responded, namely, China, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines and Viet Nam.

The specific project goals are:

- To support national governments in developing and implementing policies related to young children and their families
- To build national capacities in preparing policies that support the development, delivery and access to quality early childhood services and provisions.
- To develop knowledge about policy and identify a resource base to function as reference for policy makers, including justification and foundation for early childhood (in their countries).
- To share experiences and perspectives in policy development and implementation within and among countries on early childhood services/provisions.

With the help of the Regional Guidelines¹ developed by UNESCO/UNICEF with inputs from Dr. Judith Evans, resource person for this project, the participating countries started their groundwork for this policy review prior to the initial regional workshop in February 2007.

The first workshop provided an opportunity for countries to reach a common understanding of the Policy Review process, to share ideas on how each country intended to conduct the review, to get ideas from one another, and to agree on a way forward. The workshop was also designed to provide country teams with technical inputs and support from external consultants. The workshop came out with refined Regional Guidelines for the policy review and draft country work plans. Since the training workshop, the participating countries have started their review process with the continued support of UNESCO and UNICEF country level offices.

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The Regional Seminar, the second meeting for those participating countries, was also joined by observers representing DPR Korea, Papua New Guinea, as well as regional partners such as Plan International, Hong Kong University, and Regional Training and Resource Centre for ECCE Asia. The participating countries shared their review experience to date in terms of the technical “process” as well as “progress” in terms of key findings and common issues in the EC field in the region. They also learned how to translate these key findings into policy recommendations

During this seminar, an informal brainstorming session was also held to explore the possibility to establish regional network mechanism for ECD in the Asia region. With much enthusiasm by all the participants, the voluntary core group was formed by the end of the seminar and has started to discuss further with the aim to get such a network up and running shortly.

Highlights from the Seminar

PROCESS RECOMMENDATIONS

Coordinating Committee:

- Working under the auspices of a national inter-ministerial coordinating body is highly recommended for undertaking such a policy review. If all possible, working with an existing body rather than creating a new one is likely more effective, in terms of its continuity and high likelihood that the results will be followed up.
- The chairperson should be in a top level position (e.g. above the line ministries, such as PM's office) with authority over different sectors.
- At working technical level, involvement by different stakeholders including NGOs and private sectors is also recommended as they may be major EC providers. Process of the study should be interactive and consultative throughout the project.
- Working with such wide level of participation will help the project to obtain sensible ownership in the country, facilitate researchers access to important data/information (including existing data and implementation of further data collection), and accelerate advocacy for policy makers to accept/approve the study findings and further endorse the policy recommendations.

The research team:

- If only government employees are part of the research team, it may be difficult to collect 'honest' opinions. Involving a recognized research institution in the activity will give the outcomes greater validity.

¹ Regional Guidelines that defined the purpose of the review and requirements for participation. As an indication of their commitment, countries needed to engage in a process within their own country to determine the level of commitment from government. People were asked to create a multi-disciplinary Task Force that would serve as a reference point for the Review Process. Members of the Review Team and a Lead National Reviewer were to be identified. It was suggested that the Review Team should consist of ministry personnel from different sectors and at least one researcher.

Terms of Reference:

- Having a clear purpose for the policy review approved by such a committee is by far the most important thing to do in the beginning of the project, followed by a good planning for the whole process and scope of the study. The Terms of Reference should articulate the purpose, objectives, scope, methodology, work modality – composition and roles and responsibilities of the coordinating committee/research team, tasks to be done with timeframe etc. Taking into account the resource capacity, you may need to prioritize focus area of the review.

Data collection (methodology, tools/instruments):

- All the countries found some difficulty in accessing the data they hoped to obtain within their study scope. Such are data related to government budget, data on private provision, age disaggregated data.
- Sometimes, data can be collected in an informal manner (e.g. through attending government meetings).
- Use both quantitative and qualitative methods. For quantitative data, much can be gathered from existing data sets, although there may be discrepancies between data from different sources. When it happens, it is up to the researchers to determine which data are to be used with note of a rationale for their choice.
- Given the limited scope of the activity, the qualitative data is not likely to be drawn from a large sample; rather it can be used to validate what other data are indicating and/or to illustrate findings suggested by the quantitative data. It is likely to be drawn from a selective sample that is not necessarily representative of a large population.
- Develop standardized instruments, which should be validated through pilot-test before use.
- Follow protocol. For meeting with officials, consider whom you should contact at first and in which way. (e.g. a letter from the coordinating chair). For field research, advance notice and consent by the people/programmes/communities should be arranged properly.

Data analysis and policy recommendations:

- Situate analysis in the local/national contexts.
- Present results linked to data. Government may not accept the study results (and not publish them) but the role of the researchers is to present what they find.
- Lack of data (as key findings) can also be turned into policy recommendations (e.g. advocate for disaggregated data sets, identification of further research needs)
- Validation of the final draft should be undertaken by some experts before submission to the government.

The report dissemination:

- Dissemination plan of the report should be developed strategically (ideally in the beginning of the study).
- Outcome does not need to be a single report only compiling all the findings and policy recommendations. It can be more than one report – selecting relevant information for each audience (e.g. ministers, mid-level government functionaries, community members, parents). For example, one page fact sheet can be developed pinpointing the issue of budget in order to advocate for Ministry of Finance.

KEY STUDY FINDINGS TO DATE

Background

- Definition of EC/ECD/ECCD/ECD (concept clarification) is still an issue
- Policy backgrounds vary (a national policy – Philippines, Mongolia)

Access

- Urban-rural gap in enrolment is fairly large
- High-level of private provision of EC services, especially in urban
- There are various forms of EC programmes (formal, informal, non-formal) – discrepancies in the government official data
- Programmes/services on parenting are not much mentioned by countries in this review

Quality

- Big gap between public/private provision (mostly, better quality in private programmes with trained teachers, teaching-learning materials, better facilities, etc.)
- ECD facilitators' qualification level is low
- Pedagogical approaches are not age appropriate
- Relevance of programme standards, national curriculum – also, application level of such is low (ECD facilitators are not aware of the curriculum – indicating no training opportunities for them)

Coordination

- Lack of coordination/weak coordination between
 - key government sectors, and non-state sectors (private, NGOs)
 - different administrative levels of government and within an ministry/office – central, provincial, district levels – decentralization

Public investment – public resources allocation

- EC gets very low priority (for example, 1% of the education sector budget on EC – Pakistan.)
- Little investment in quality dimensions or the programmes/services (professional development teachers, teaching learning materials, facilities improvement)
- EC teachers/facilitators not included in the formal system as professionals – professional value is under-recognized (low salary, no/little provision of professional development)
- Unequal distribution of public resources (lack of equity) for disadvantaged groups of children (e.g. rural, poor, special needs, ethnic minorities)
- Due to decentralization, resource allocation for EC varies by region.

In relation to other policies

- China – Due to the effect of the One Child Policy, there are many un-under-utilized primary and middle schools. Using this opportunity of available resources, the study may well draw a recommendation to shift such resources into EC programmes.
- In relation to the universal cash benefits scheme (for all children). In Malaysia – Capital Grant for Children (100 RM for each child) and the regulation on the class (10 children/class for special education class vs 25 person/class for regular classes) puts special education children at a disadvantage (1000RM special education class) vs 2500RM (regular class). In Mongolia, there is a scheme on Child Money to support all children to have access to EC programmes. But do rich people need that money? Some don't come to receive the money. Those who receive may not spend on the child.

Data/M&E

- Lack of disaggregated data by age, by participation of different forms of EC services/programmes (e.g. non-/in-formal, non-public)
- Lack of ECD indicators to evaluate the programme effectiveness

Next steps:

The countries have nearly completed data collection and/or started data analysis. With ongoing technical support from UNESCO and UNICEF, country reports are expected to be completed by the end of October 2007.

For more information on the project/seminars, please contact Cliff Meyers, Regional Education Advisor, UNICEF EAPRO (cmeyers@unicef.org)