

Maldives - First Steps

Summary

The First Steps programme was initiated by UNICEF in 1999 as a three-year complement to and extension of the Government of Maldives Fifth National Development Plan. First Steps involved capacity building designed to foster print, radio, and television media for and about children up to the age of five.

Simple and practical information on early childhood care and development (ECCD) that emphasized the right of all children to basic needs, participation and learning opportunities was provided in the materials, many of which featured children and adults with disabilities. The implementation process involved respecting and drawing on the indigenous culture and practices of local people. A larger goal was to raise the status of ECCD so that it might become both a key indicator for assessing progress and development within the country as well as a project belonging to and positively affecting all Maldivians.

Main communication strategies

A central strategy was building the capacity of local ECCD initiatives to advance positive and non-stereotypical images of children and their caregivers that were developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive. To this end, First Steps sought to reach directly into the household (rather than depending on already-burdened service delivery channels). To initiate the project, a baseline Knowledge/Attitudes/Practices survey was conducted. After a number of briefings, field visits, and a workshop, a set of 12 core ECCD messages was developed.

The Institute for Health Sciences and Institute of Teacher Education were trained in ECCD, which equipped them, in turn, to train local educators and media in sessions that emphasized these programme messages. This local team then designed a core curriculum for a proposed 52-week multi-media campaign and developed a wide range of prototype materials for and about children.

People with disabilities are featured in these materials as much as possible as part of an effort to help address the absence of images of disabled persons and accompanying feelings of shame. For example:

- Information about detection of disabilities, intellectual and social stimulation of those with disabilities and inclusion are included in several of the caregiver-oriented materials. One of the 12 core messages is devoted entirely to infants and young children with disabilities.

- One poster emphasizing steps fathers can take to nurture their infants features a man in a wheelchair.
- In the book series "Everybody Loves Me" about the importance of play in the life of a young child, one book features a boy with Down's syndrome.
- Another book features examples of older siblings with mental and physical impairments caring for and teaching their younger brothers or sister.
- The multi-media campaign integrated numerous implicit and explicit messages about disability.

A multi-media campaign was launched on Maldivian Children's Day (May 10, 2001). Weekly ECCD radio and television spots featured caregivers in short dramas or simple stories demonstrating practical interactions and activities with children from birth to three years of age. For example, one radio spot emphasized the importance of saying "I love you" to a child. These productions represented people all over the Maldives and for the most part, used everyday families as opposed to actors.

In the final phase of the project, a group of preschool teachers was trained to educate parents. Curriculum developers, textbook writers and producers of non-broadcast educational media were also trained.

Key points

The Maldives is comprised of approximately 1,200 islands, 200 or so of which are inhabited. Almost 40 per cent of the islands have a population of fewer than 500 people. These isolated islands are scattered across an area of over 90,000 square kilometres of ocean. Although much progress has been made over the past decade in areas such as universal child immunization, providing education, health and other services to the communities can be a formidable challenge. All educational material, most food, media hardware and software, and building materials must be imported.

In the Maldives, one sees very few children or adults with disabilities portrayed in the media. Anecdotal information from a variety of sources indicates that parents feel ashamed if their children are disabled, and that there are virtually no trained persons to assist these families with children. Programme organizers' efforts to include children and adults with disabilities in as many products as possible proved difficult. Identification of disabled people was a challenge and many parents and grandparents were not comfortable with the idea of having photographs of them or their children taken for any publication. Organizers explain that, for the most part, disabled

women and/or mothers declined to be photographed. Their reasons ranged from personal shyness and fear, the fact that their husbands or parents were not cooperative to their doubt that the images would truly be portrayed in a positive light.

UNICEF has defined early childhood as one of its global priorities. The goal is to ensure that "infants and young children [are] nurtured in a caring environment, physically healthy, mentally alert, socially stimulated and able to learn". First Steps was part of the "Master Plan of Operations " between UNICEF and the Government of Maldives. Directed by a five-member National ECCD Council formed by the President of the Maldives, First Steps was inter-sectoral in that it existed under the joint auspices of the Ministries of Education and Information/Arts/Culture but was represented and supported by the Ministries of Health, Atolls Administration, External Affairs, Planning, Women's Affairs and Social Security.