Formative evaluation of the Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECD) approach 2016-2018

Evaluation brief

Together with consistent economic growth, over recent decades Cambodia has made large strides forwards in in advancing Early Childhood Care & Development (ECCD). Gains in antenatal and delivery care since 1990 have contributed to an 84% reduction in maternal mortality and an 81% drop in child mortality.

However, many challenges persist, including high rates of child stunting, wasting and being underweight. Malnutrition among pregnant women and children, birth registration and access to early childhood education remain major barriers to strong early childhood development. Severe inequalities exist, particularly in the poorest and more rural areas.

Holistic early childhood development requires social, emotional, language, cognitive and physical development. Coordinating or integrating services between agencies responsible for different aspects of early childhood is considered as one of the best guarantees that young children will receive quality, holistic service.

In 2014 the Government of Cambodia established a National Action Plan on ECCD (NAP-ECCD). This plan introduced new legal, implementation, monitoring and capacity development mechanisms for integrating and coordinating ECCD services across sectors. Between 2016-18, UNICEF’s Cambodia country programme aimed to support the objectives of the NAP-ECCD by through its ‘Integrated Early Childhood Development’ programme.

The IECD programme adopted a ‘whole district’ approach in geographic areas with the lowest child development indicators: five north-eastern provinces, as well as poor urban areas of Phnom Penh.
Penh. With a budget of USD 25.3 million over three years, the programme aimed to achieve improved and more equitable use of integrated ECCD interventions and practices among infants, young children and pregnant women in the target areas. To achieve this, the programme’s activities – with a focus on training, technical support and financial assistance – were aimed at national government and sub-national administration, ECCD service providers, carers, and communities.

Evaluation objectives

UNICEF Cambodia commissioned a forward-looking evaluation to identify lessons learned from the previous programme that could be applied to implementation of the new National Action Plan on ECCD (2019-2023) and UNICEF’s new country programme. The evaluation would look at the logic in the programme’s design, assess how well the programme achieved its intended results and identify gaps and obstacles in providing IECD support in the target areas.

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation was conducted by an independent team of specialists from Oxford Policy Management and was overseen by a Reference Group comprised of members of the government’s National Committee on ECCD and UNICEF Cambodia.

Starting in January 2019, the evaluation commenced with a review of existing ECCD research and conducted consultations with key stakeholders in Phnom Penh and Kratie province.

The findings from this phase were used to reconstruct the IECD programme’s theory of change and then to define the key questions for the evaluation to answer and develop a methodology for answering them.

The set of 13 questions agreed with the Reference Group related to the standard evaluation criteria for evaluating development assistance: relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability. It was agreed the evaluation would not look at impact. Given the interest of the Reference Group in equity, cross-cutting themes (such as gender) was added as a criterion.

From March 2019, the evaluation team commenced qualitative data collection, drawing on: (i)

- Existing relevant literature, including research and evaluations conducted by UNICEF;
- Interviews with UNICEF personnel across sectors, at national and provincial level;
- Interviews with senior line ministry officials at national and sub-national levels and administrators at province, district, commune and village levels;
- Interviews with local service providers, including health centres, formal and community pre-schools, village health volunteers and parental educators;
- Interviews, case studies and focus group discussions with pregnant women and carers of children ages 0 to 5 years old.

The sample of respondents was drawn purposively from five of the ten districts covered by the IECD programme across Kratie, Ratanakiri and Phnom Penh. The selection of districts ensured a balance of urban and rural areas. Within those districts, villages were selected randomly. Individual respondents were then identified based on the demographics of interest to the evaluation, including age, gender, location and economic status.
Main findings and conclusions

Relevance: The IECD approach was highly relevant in terms of both the serious and urgent needs of the target groups and alignment to the NAP-ECCD, although the design requires further attention to needs around service access in remote locations and time poverty.

“Our children have never attended a community preschool, a formal preschool or another form of early learning programme because school is so far from home and we lack transportation to bring our child to school.”
(Mother, Kuoy indigenous group, Kratie province)

The need for improved action is underscored by baseline evidence from the longitudinal survey showing very low outcomes in key pregnant women and children development indicators in the targeted areas. Many mothers of infants and young children interviewed for the evaluation highlighted the importance to them of early childhood education for their children.

The programme’s generation of evidence and advocacy further heightened the relevance of the approach by raising the profile of IECD issues on the national policy agenda. At the sub-national level, there is substantial variation in commitment to IECD at the senior administrative level.

The programme was well-designed to achieve its outputs but insufficiently oriented towards maximizing cross-sectoral integration. The programme structure largely established sectoral silos and the design lacked a consistent set of strategies across sectors to enhance cross-sectoral integration. The design of the approach partially targeted equity, but failed to target resilience to emergencies, as intended. With the new NAP-ECCD 2019–2023, there is a real opportunity to build and capitalize on growing support for IECD approaches.

Effectiveness: Overall, the IECD programme has had a positive effect; through the advocacy and technical support provided by UNICEF and its partners, the well-being of pregnant women and children ages 0 to 5 has improved to some degree. Most notably, the IECD programme has advanced the discourse around ECCD and created an understanding around the need for integrated service delivery.

In particular, with substantial UNICEF support, the longitudinal survey has made important contributions to a growing body of evidence on the needs of vulnerable groups and on the impact of integrated ECCD services in the targeted areas. Beneficiaries and front-line workers have developed a keener sense on the rights and needs of their children, and they are using and requesting public services that they have ignored in the past.

Kratie and Ratanakiri provinces report a significant increase in the number of mothers receiving antenatal care and delivering their babies in health centres and hospitals, and officials in these provinces link this progress with UNICEF’s support. According to the Kratie Provincial Health Department, Kratie has reported zero maternal deaths.

The capacity of sub-national administrators regarding the IECD programme has been strengthened by UNICEF-supported training and advocacy, but cross-sectoral collaboration is patchy.

The IECD programme appears to have helped build the foundations for the integration of local service delivery through training of education, health and rural development line workers. Yet, there is limited evidence in terms of formal intersectoral work at the service delivery level.

“There have been changes in the classroom. Previously, we did not know about hygiene after having a cooperation the organization has trained us on hygiene… I educate the children to clean the courtyard around the house and on the street. It helps make parents more aware of hygiene.”
(Community pre-school teacher, Ratanakiri)

Ethnic minorities and remote villages are the most difficult populations to reach and are often neglected in terms of outreach and service delivery because of cost and resource restrictions.

Efficiency: The IECD approach has generated small examples of more efficient outreach and dissemination of information, which could be used to demonstrate the value of integrated approaches for increasing efficiency.

However, workplans, budgets and monitoring were conducted largely within sector silos, and this obstructed systematic realization of efficiencies. Institutionally, government intersectoral coordination was stronger over the programme duration in Ratanakiri than in Kratie.

Focused M&E of cost efficiency and cost effectiveness was not conducted. The approach would likely benefit from a more deliberate attitude towards efficiency by articulating
efficiency as both an objective and a strategy towards improving ECCD outcomes.

“ECCD was very sector-based in UNICEF and with development partners. To do integrated programming for children, it’s important that everyone makes time for coordination.”

(UNICEF staff member)

Cross-cutting themes: By definition, the IECD approach targets vulnerable populations in the most disadvantaged areas of the Kingdom of Cambodia. The improvements in maternal and child outcomes among vulnerable populations is not recorded by the IECD approach as disaggregated data are not available, except for longitudinal data.

The IECD programme has not sufficiently addressed the needs of the most vulnerable groups because of the diverse challenges in reaching these groups, nor has it been able to include fathers in a meaningful manner. These groups require additional or specific programmatic elements to be included successfully.

“Fewer ethnic minority children come to study. Early in the school year students come to school a lot, but then teacher becomes busy harvesting cashew nuts. Then, during the rainy season, the road is slippery and so less children come to school.”

(Formal pre-school teacher, Ratanakiri)

Sustainability: The IECD programme required significant investment from UNICEF in terms of financial and human resources, which were bolstered by the partnerships established with local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as other development partners. The existence of cross-sectoral mechanisms, such as the Women and Children’s Consultative Committees (WCCCs), provided a solid foundation for the inclusion of the IECD approach in government policies. Accountability was often lacking in key coordinating and implementing bodies.

A critical missing aspect in the design of the IECD approach is the role and responsibilities of communities, which could have important implications for the sustainability of the IECD approach in the targeted areas as well as in other provinces. A sustainable scale-up of the IECD approach across the country should also be required to consider proper monitoring of inputs and outputs.

Lessons learned

There are some interesting lessons from the evaluation that are relevant elsewhere:

✓ Evidence and advocacy have played a key part in identifying the need and generating the consensus for reform for improved ECCD services.
✓ The IECD programme targeted pregnant women and children aged zero to five in vulnerable districts; nevertheless, focused, innovative strategies and disaggregated monitoring are required to ensure that IECD benefits are accessible and extended to the hardest-to-reach.
✓ Village-based actors have played a key role in the provision of more holistic ECCD information and in strengthening service referral, and are likely to represent a key outreach resource in hard-to-reach areas and other parts of Cambodia.
✓ Communities have much potential to improve the status of pregnant women and children aged zero to five, but this has not been sufficiently leveraged.
✓ Strengthening governance and accountability is essential to maximize the benefits from integration.
✓ Accountability for and ownership of IECD at all levels is fundamental.
✓ Implementation of strategies in (at least) planning, budgeting and monitoring is needed to break down silos.
✓ Efficiency is an important IECD objective, and quantifiable efficiency is a powerful advocacy tool that is easy to overlook.

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Recommendations

The evaluations recommendations are targeted separately at **strategic level** (national & sub-national strategy, planning, monitoring) and the **operational, service level**:

### Strategic level

1. **Roles & responsibilities**: To increase accountability and effective implementation, the National Committee should define the roles & responsibilities of all line ministries involved under the NAP-ECCD and —with those ministries — define the roles of their decentralised bodies. The roles of Women and Children’s Consultative Committees must also be clearly defined.

2. **Effective leadership**: The National Committee for ECCD must ensure that appointed members have sufficient authority within their respective line ministries to operationalise the new NAP-ECCD. Membership of cross-sectoral sub-national mechanisms such as Women and Children’s Consultative Committees must include senior representation of the subnational line ministries and provincial administration.

3. **Budget**: Ministries should receive sufficient financial resources dedicated to NAP-ECCD activities, including removing any bottlenecks faced by frontline workers to reach vulnerable populations.

4. **Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E)**: The National Committee and UNICEF should develop a strong M&E framework for the National Action Plan (NAP), including specific objectives on (i) pregnant women and children’s outcomes and (ii) integrated and cross-sectoral service delivery. This should ensure a sufficient level of data disaggregation to cover specific target populations and vulnerable communities. Regular reporting mechanisms would function across WCCCs from commune to provincial levels.

5. **Communications & awareness**: The National Committee and UNICEF should develop a structured communications strategy. This would include: (i) the reinforcement of messages on holistic early childhood care and development for children, parents, caregivers and future parents; (ii) the dissemination of the NAP across national and sub-national levels; and (iii) the development of a national ECCD network of implementing stakeholders.

### ECCD service delivery level

1. **Holistic approaches**: UNICEF can support the development of training, guidelines and guidebooks that aid line ministries to work across sectors at all sub-national levels. UNICEF should assist development of an overarching framework on the delivery of coordinated services by each line ministry, which would strengthen cross-sectoral links.

2. **Equitable outreach**: Innovative systematic approaches should be formulated across line ministries to identify and reach the most vulnerable families, and line ministries should formalise links between ECCD and social protection mechanisms at the local level.

3. **Community participation**: Community engagement in the use of local social service funds would better address specific needs of each village and commune. UNICEF and partners should continue to support MOI to build decision-making capacity of commune councils and encourage opportunities for inclusive participation of civil society.

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