More than a decade after independence, South Sudan remains in a protracted humanitarian crisis, impacted by conflict, economic stagnation, and instability as well as being highly prone and vulnerable to climate-related shocks. One of the outcomes of this protracted crisis is the lack of educational opportunities for children and adolescents. According to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), the education system in South Sudan is characterized as a low investment and low capacity but high demand system. Budgetary allocations to the education sector have been declining since independence. The strain on limited existing educational resources, and on those to ECE in particular, is further exacerbated by constant population movements and the influx of returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), as a result of ongoing conflicts and floods within the country.

Even in the midst of a protracted crisis, the Ministry of General Education and Instruction (MoGEI) considered pre-primary education as a priority area of focus, as stated in the National General Education Policy (2017-2027). Yet as of 2021, there still was no inter-sectoral policy or strategy on pre-primary education. The absence of comprehensive and coherent policy and standards, especially at the implementation level, led to ad-hoc interventions and a lack of standardized processes which affected quality service delivery. A stakeholder diagnostic study coordinated by the MoGEI, UNICEF, and the World Bank was conducted in 2019. The following key challenges were brought to light: 1) there was no ECE/pre-
primary policy or developmental standards for children 2-5 years of age; 2) there was inadequate financing for the pre-primary subsector; 3) there was inadequate physical infrastructure to support ECE; 4) there was a lack of qualified pre-primary teachers, leading to poor quality services and drop out/repetition of primary education; 5) there was inadequate coordination mechanisms between the national, state, and county levels; and 6) there were no alternative modalities for the most marginalized children, including those living in pastoralist communities. Therefore, the MoGEI determined an ECE policy was needed to harmonize/regulate ECE standards and programming across the country. Further, it was important to ensure that crisis strategies were embedded into the ESP in this context of protracted crisis.

With support from UNICEF, the Department of Early Childhood Education mobilized funding and resources from the GPE-KIX project, “Integrating early child education in sectoral planning”, for ECE system strengthening, capacity building, and advocacy. A series of meetings and workshops took place between January 2021 – November 2022, with the intention of developing a national ECE policy, strategy, and implementation plan and ensuring that crisis-sensitive strategies are incorporated in the development of these different aspects. Various tools from the ECE Accelerator Toolkit, a global package of tools designed to support countries in developing and mainstreaming ECE subsector plans into broader education plans and budgets, were used throughout this process.

An ECE Technical Working Group (TWG) was formed using Tool 1.4 (Tip sheet: Strategic ideas for establishing the ECE TWG), comprised of members from the MoGEI, UNICEF, and World Vision International. In preparation for the pre-primary sub-sector analysis workshop, two training workshops were held with members of the ECE TWG, government staff, and implementing partners on 1) building consensus on key areas of the policy documents and 2) developing details of the content around the core areas of pre-primary education, following the Build to Last Framework (Tool 1.2). The UNICEF South Sudan team also reached out to the UNICEF Sierra Leone team to learn about Sierra Leone’s successful use of the Toolkit to develop their ECE subsector plan and how the ECE Accelerator Toolkit could be used for the workshops.

In February 2022, the ECE TWG led the pre-primary sub-sector analysis workshop, attended by 30 participants drawn from the MoGEI and education partners across the country. Tool 2.2 (Pre-Primary Subsector Analysis Tool) was used to outline existing strengths and gaps and identify available and necessary resources to support an enabling environment for the pre-primary subsector. Specific questions in this tool helped take into consideration crisis-related issues relevant for the South Sudan context. The Build to Last Framework was used to facilitate medium- and long-term strategic planning for sustainability. In August 2022, the ECE TWG had another participatory workshop involving government officials and other education partners and used Tool 3.1 (Guiding questions and tips: Refining, selecting and prioritizing ECE strategies and developing corresponding activities) and Tool 3.2 (Criteria, recommendations, and checklists: Defining ECE indicators and target setting) to help with developing an implementation plan, which will be contextualized by each state for effective implementation and sustainability. In November 2022, the Early Childhood Accelerator Simulation Model was used to assist with detailed costing of the action plan.

RESULTS ACHIEVED
As a result of these processes, a national policy, strategy, and implementation plan for the provision of pre-primary education were completed for South Sudan in January 2023 and underwent national validation in May 2023 for positioning in the new education sector plan. This new strategy was aligned to the General Education Strategic Plan 2023-2028 and emphasizes the continuity in learning both during
and after conflicts and emergencies. Additionally, with the formation of the ECE TWG, a functional ECE technical team at the national level was established.

Further, approaches to system strengthening for the provision of pre-primary education were developed. The strengthened capacity of the ECE TWG, as well as ministry staff and education partners, was demonstrated through their active engagement in the process of developing the policy documents and a corresponding communication strategy. This enhanced understanding of the importance of the ECE subsector among ministry personnel and partners resulted in the prioritization of the subsector in the MoGEI, notably in an increased budget allocation to 13.6% of the total education budget in 2022.

LESSONS LEARNED

• It is important to leverage the ESP process to ensure that crisis sensitive ECE strategies are effectively planned and budgeted into national plans. Strong political will as well as collaboration with education development partners was important during this process.

• Tools and resources in the ECE Accelerator Toolkit can be effectively used to mainstream ECE into national plans and policies, even in the context of a protracted crisis. The tools were helpful in serving as a guide through the process of developing the ECE policy documents. South-South knowledge exchange between South Sudan and Sierra Leone allowed those in South Sudan to get a better idea of how to contextualize tools to the local context.

• The ECE Technical Working Group can play a role in engaging both humanitarian and development partners in the planning and strategy development process to promote the nexus between emergency and development programming for ECE. Pre-planning workshops enabled participants to be knowledgeable about the context and subject areas and come to the pre-primary subsector analysis workshop ready to work.

NEXT STEPS

This process demonstrates that even in a protracted humanitarian crisis, systems strengthening processes do not need to be ignored, and in fact, can be successfully pursued. Next steps include the national dissemination and implementation of the ECE policy, using the newly developed ECE communication strategy to develop national community mobilization campaigns. ECE TWGs also will be formed at the state level to assist with subnational implementation of the policy. Additionally, in order to expand capacity, there are plans to establish community-based ECE schools as well as train teachers on the development of no-cost teaching materials.

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