

## Early Childhood Education: The Best Investment We Can Make!

Quality early learning environments are proven to improve school readiness and completion rates, as well as a variety of economic and social outcomes far into adulthood – especially for the most vulnerable.<sup>1</sup> Return on investment in preschool is higher than returns on any other level of education.<sup>2</sup> Preschool and early learning programmes also increase efficiency of education systems through improved readiness, achievement and retention.

Evidence shows that early learning programmes have the greatest impact on the most disadvantaged. In Tajikistan, preschool access is concentrated among children from urban areas (4 times more likely to attend than rural children) and those able to pay the complementary costs of attendance (wealthier children 5 times more likely to attend than poor children).<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, evidence shows that children already behind on the first day of school tend to stay behind during the schooling years. This calls for better targeting of services, to reach more vulnerable children with at least one year of access to early learning programmes.

In Tajikistan, preschool receives only 2.5% of the Education budget<sup>4</sup>, and only approximately 9% of preschool age children attend traditional kindergartens, which are the legacy from the Soviet period. The significant expansion of the current, high-cost model is economically not feasible, but there are other options for expanding access to early learning programmes. The National Strategy for Education Development 2020 calls for the development of cost-effective approaches to preschool, highlighting the need to expand various alternative models.

Despite low indicators and enrolment in kindergartens and early learning programmes in Tajikistan, the situation is slowly improving. A growing body of evidence shows that one year of targeted and quality yet cost-efficient programs prior to school entry *can* make a difference.

Since 2009 UNICEF in collaboration with Aga Khan Foundation in Tajikistan, the Ministry of Education, district/city education departments has developed and established 124 early childhood education (ECE) groups, which provide 3,000 girls and boys between the ages of 5-6 years with conducive, child-friendly access to quality early childhood education and development. These ECE groups provide targeted early learning opportunities for 3-4 hours per day, 5 days per week throughout a year. In addition to providing critical school readiness skills, the programme helps children build a positive first relationship with schooling. Schools devote classrooms for the creation of the groups. Start-up costs are very low relative to traditional kindergartens, and include planning, teacher training, and provision of essential equipment and supplies. UNICEF provided the ECE groups with relevant furniture, developmentally and culturally appropriate reading materials in Tajik, Russian and English and other different teaching and learning materials. Recurring costs are low and are entirely

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<sup>1</sup> Heckman, James J. (2006). “Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children”, *Science*, vol. 312, no. 5782, pp. 1900-1902.

<sup>2</sup> Heckman and Masterov. (2004). “The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children”.

<sup>3</sup> McLean, H., (2010). “Laying the First Bricks True: A Situation Analysis of Early Learning in Tajikistan”, Tajikistan: UNICEF.

<sup>4</sup> Central Treasury accounts, Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Tajikistan. Data for 2010.

covered by governments and communities (parents) to ensure sustainability. Building on this particular UNICEF models for alternative ECE services (school based ECE groups), the Ministry of Education and district/city education departments have already established about 550 ECE groups on their own.

It is important to highlight that education programme/curriculum used in ECE groups are developed on the bases of National Early Learning and Development Standards (from 0 to 7) and officially approved by the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, UNICEF, OSI Assistance Foundation – Tajikistan and Aga Khan Foundation are actively collaborating with Majlisi Namoyandagon of Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan to develop Law on Early Childhood Education and Care, which will officially recognise and legalise alternative ECE models UNICEF and other partners have been promoting. Majlisi Namoyandagon of Majlisi Oli of the Republic of Tajikistan is working towards finalisation and widely presentation of the draft law and planning to adopt it by June 2013.

The continued collaboration between UNICEF, Ministry of Education and Parliament in this area will capitalise on critical opportunities and utilise proven, affordable, and quality ECE models to improve school readiness and children's futures.

Ensuring that preschool age children are prioritised in the provision of services and opportunities will lay a foundation for society to prosper in the future. The ancient Persian poet, Saadi Shirazi, understood that if the first bricks are not laid true, the whole wall will be crooked.

Хишти аввал чун ниҳад меъмор қач,  
То ба охир меравад девор қач. (С. Шерозӣ)

If the builder does not lay the first brick true,  
The whole wall will be crooked.

(Muslih-ud-Din Mushrif ibn-Abdullah Shirazi, 1184 – 1283/1291? سعدي )

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