



Country-Led Evaluation of Preschool Education in Timor-Leste (2012-2020)

Policy Brief

Commissioned by:



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This brief is based on the Country-Led Evaluation of Preschool Education in Timor-Leste which was commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) in Timor-Leste through the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Timor-Leste. The evaluation was conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and data were collected by colleagues from the Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e.

The opinions expressed within this report are those of the authors and evaluation informants and do not necessarily reflect the views of the government or UNICEF.

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Progress, Challenges and Opportunities

In recent years, preschool education has benefitted from renewed institutional support from the Government of Timor-Leste and partners. For instance, the National Education Strategic Plan 2011–2030 prioritises preschool education.

However, the country must further develop this subsector if it is to achieve its goals for children.

A national evaluation of Timor-Leste's preschool subsector provides evidence-based recommendations to guide this process.



Photo credit: Bernardino Soares, 2017

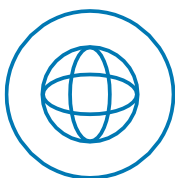
The Current Context for Preschool Education in Timor-Leste



Access. United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 states that by 2030, all children should have access to quality preschool education.¹ Timor-Leste's targets are 50 per cent by 2024 and 80 per cent by 2030. As of 2020, enrolment was 27 per cent.² Stakeholders widely agree that the country is far off track to meet its targets.



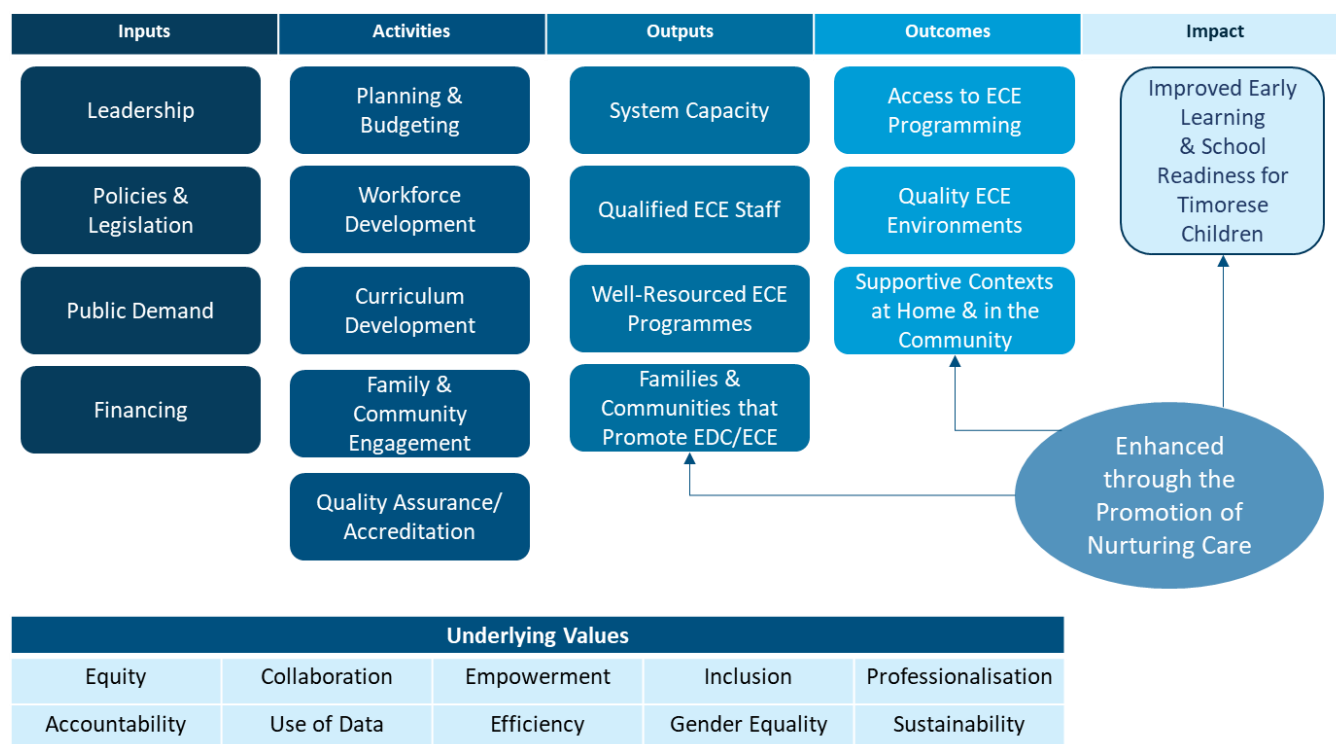
Financing. Timor-Leste's allocated budget to preschool education is less than one tenth the recommended level (of 1 per cent of gross domestic product). Within the education sector budget, the subsector receives approximately 5 per cent of the total budget (versus the recommended level of 10 per cent). However, partner organisations at least partially fill resource gaps.



Collaboration and Planning. The Government of Timor-Leste has several key partners in the preschool subsector, and stakeholders value this collaboration. However, the country does not have a costed, comprehensive national plan for preschool education, and regulatory frameworks and data systems do not include all preschool programming in the country, so the efforts of stakeholders are fragmented.

A Theory of Change for Preschool Education in Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste developed a theory of change for its preschool subsector, based on best practices globally and the underlying values of the country's stakeholders. Some elements of the theory of change also leverage the Nurturing Care Framework.³



A recent evaluation of Timor-Leste's preschool subsector identified how the country is progressing in terms of the inputs, activities and outputs required for a high-quality preschool system that reaches all young Timorese children.

Policies and Plans

Timor-Leste's policies and plans address the key areas required for high-quality preschool education systems. However, plans are fragmented and general rather than specific. There are substantial gaps in the availability of relevant data, making it very challenging for stakeholders to use evidence-based planning.

Collaboration and Coordination

There are a variety of actors in the subsector, but there is no national operational plan that integrates their efforts into a larger framework. The national coordinating body (the Early Childhood Development Working Group) is inactive. There is no

systematic coordination amongst municipal education authorities, partners and the government.

Governance and Accountability

Timor-Leste has clear lines of authority and explicitly defined roles and responsibilities for the subsector. There is a need for more effective collaboration related to financing and implementation amongst government actors and between the government and other organisations. The municipalities have primary responsibility for preschool financing and implementation, and they want improved guidance on preschool standards.

Budgeting and Financing

Timor-Leste's current budget and financing for the preschool sector are far below global standards. Timor-Leste appears to first allocate a portion of the education sector budget for preschool education and then determine how to use it, rather than determining the preschool budget based on a comprehensive, long-range subsector plan with corresponding identification of needed resources. On the positive side, the government and partner organisations communicate well regarding resources for the subsector.

Monitoring and Quality Assurance

Timor-Leste's school standards are only partially aligned with developmentally appropriate practices for the preschool level. There is an insufficient number of school inspectors, and programmes lack guidance on how to work towards meeting standards. Stakeholders use the national education management information system (EMIS), but issues of timeliness compromise its utility. Furthermore, the EMIS does not include data on preschools that are supported by international organisations, which are major players in Timor-Leste's preschool education sector.



Photo credit: Noemio Soares, 2019.

Workforce

Timor-Leste follows best practices by considering preschool teachers as part of the educator workforce. However, the government does not prioritise hiring preschool educators, and there is a severe lack of qualified teachers and teacher trainers. Most preschool teachers lack formal training, although there are some professional development opportunities.

Participation

Timor-Leste has made substantial progress in the development and expansion of preschool education, but with a 27 per cent gross enrolment rate as of 2020, the country is not on track to attain SDG 4.2 by 2030, nor is it likely to reach its own targets of 50 per cent enrolment by 2024 or 80 per cent enrolment by 2030. Encouragingly, boys and girls participate equally in preschool programming.

Family and Community Engagement

Timor-Leste has policy directives for family and community engagement in schools, but schools are unclear about how to implement them. Family and community engagement is almost entirely focused on what they can provide to schools (money, labour, etc). Educators and parents are unaware that preschool programmes should also engage in planning and partnership with families and communities.

Promotion of Equity

Timor-Leste has strategies to develop and professionalise the preschool workforce, but these are not used consistently. A significant constraint is a lack of designated funding for preschool workforce development. The country has a plan to incentivise qualified teachers to work outside the capital, which can help improve equity in access to professional teachers. Education system monitoring addresses gender and disability, plus non-discrimination, but not linguistic diversity. Finally, children with disabilities have almost no access to educators who can meet their needs.

Action Points to Develop Timor-Leste's Preschool

Subsector

1. Develop a **comprehensive and realistic national plan** for preschool improvement and expansion. The plan should define step by step how the country will achieve its goals (with costed activities) and should specify the roles of the actors in the subsector in carrying out the plan.
2. **Improve financing** of the subsector. Carrying out Recommendation 1 can help the government and partners project funding needs, identify activities to prioritise with limited resources, advocate for funding from donors and create efficiencies in the system.
3. Improve the **timeliness and quality of EMIS data** to facilitate planning and oversight. Expand the EMIS to comprehensively cover public and private preschool programming.
4. Determine how to simultaneously build the skills of the country's largely untrained preschool workforce whilst working towards increasing the size of its

qualified workforce. The country needs a **national teacher recruitment and training strategy**.

5. Determine how best to **build upon the diversity of preschool delivery models** in use in Timor-Leste, so as to maximise efficient coverage and meet the needs of diverse communities.
6. Tailor Timor-Leste's standards for basic schools for the preschool class, so as to **reflect developmentally appropriate practice**.
7. Provide preschool programmes with **step-by-step guidance** on how to work towards meeting standards. This guidance should provide low-cost and feasible options where achieving some standards may seem costly or out of reach.
8. Establish working groups at the national and municipal levels to **foster coordination** within the subsector as well as **promote cross-sector collaboration** for child and family well-being.
9. Enact a **legal requirement** for all preschool programming and activities to be registered with and approved by the national and/or municipal government.
10. Provide preschool programmes with guidance regarding the **use of mother-tongue instruction**, and work to ensure that all preschool programmes have the basic materials they need to carry out the preschool curriculum.
11. Broaden understanding of **family and community engagement** to include strengths-based partnership with shared responsibility for meeting children's needs.
12. Complete a situational analysis of **education for children with disabilities**. The study should consider both the needs of the children and how educators and programmes can best be prepared to serve these children.

Endnote

¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 'The 17 Goals'. <<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>>, accessed 1 April 2022.

² Ministry of Education. '3. Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) (District wise by School Level, by School Type and by Gender) 2020'. <<http://www.moe.gov.tl/pt/component/jdownloads/download/15-emis/99-3-gross-enrolment-rate-ger-district-wise-by-school-level-by-school-type-and-by-gender-2020>>, accessed 1 April 2022.

³ <<https://nurturing-care.org>>, accessed 1 April 2022.

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