Early Childhood Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: Policy and Programs

As Sub-Saharan Africa contends with persistent poverty, rapid population growth, and erosion of traditional family support structures, investment in early child development (ECD) is imperative. Investments must begin from birth and include health, nutrition, and attention to cognitive and social development to take children up to the transition into primary school. Broad-based investment in young children’s survival and development should be a vital part of countries’ systematic pursuit of social and economic development.

This study, Review of Early Childhood Development Policy and Programs in Sub-Saharan Africa, is the second in a series of three studies conducted under the World Bank’s Africa Regional ECD Initiative. The first described the condition of young children in Africa and pointed to the benefits of ECD in increased efficiency of primary and secondary school investments, children’s enhanced economic contribution to society, and the reduction of social inequity. The third study will synthesize lessons drawn from the preceding two studies and from case studies in Kenya, South Africa and Mauritius.

There are models of success

The findings of this Review are that weakened family and public social sector support for child development create a tremendous need for complementary and alternative forms of child care, and that there are models. The Review selects eleven case studies from across the Sub-Saharan region to illustrate a range of possibilities for an integrated response to the physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, economic and cultural dimensions of young children’s development, so that impact is maximized through the interconnectedness of investments.

The policies and programs reviewed are shown in Table 1. Almost all of the programs have multiple objectives. The scope most often is determined by the extent to which existing delivery systems in education, health, grassroots organizations and others can be utilized innovatively and more effectively. The variation in program objectives translates into target populations that include not only children but also parents and others who figure in children’s physical growth
and socialization. In some cases the ECD action focuses directly on children; in others, on the household and community.

The specific enabling conditions for ECD are:

Community and family demand and resources: *the cornerstones for ECD*

ECD skills at local and national levels

Availability and interest of local ECD workers

Community capacity for participation (management, financial and other)

Capacity of local institutions

Public awareness and demand for supportive policy

External and supra-national resources (for training, research, advocacy)

Policy movers’ support

Mass media resources.

The case studies illustrate how these enabling conditions come into play to design and sustain ECD policies and programs for particular circumstances of regions, nations and communities. The findings are as follows.

- **Local culture offers options for implementing and extending ECD.**

  The Angolan Mobile Trauma Team combines traditional culture and healing rites with recent scientific evidence on child development, trauma and healing. Professionals, paraprofessionals, parents and youth leaders are trained to interact with children in refugee camps, children’s homes, schools and in street children’s programs. In Botswana, the Child-to-Child program for basic health education is adapted into a school readiness activity for primary school children to help prepare younger siblings for entry.

- **There needs to be a focal point for ECD.**

  This may of course be home-based care as for Nigeria’s Development Communication Project which uses national television to teach children (aged 3-6 years) and their caregivers active learning techniques. A mobile service brings the same instructional videos to local viewing centers. In Zimbabwe, the focal point is the Kushanda integrated community development project in commercial farming communities. The project began with skills training, material and financial inputs. It was supplemented with adult education, literacy and extension training for health, nutrition and ECD. In Ghana, Mali and Burkina Faso, maternal health and a child care
curriculum were developed by women’s joint liability credit associations. They were encouraged to analyze problems of child development and collectively produce a response.

- Community participation is the bedrock of ECD and is necessary to attract human, financial and material resources at the local level.

The Madrasa Preschool Programs in Kenya, Uganda and Zanzibar require community management and co-financing. Communities work with the Madrasa Resource Center to meet criteria to access endowments for continuous funding for the preschools. Local management committees appoint women from the community as ECD workers, who are trained by the Resource Center.

- Grassroots organizations can make a significant impact on national development policy.

The National ECD Congress in South Africa emerged from extensive organizing and advocacy by community groups and local NGOs. It is a strong (voluntary) association, now a resource for implementing new government policy including a ‘Reception Year’ school readiness program. From the Kushanda project, a federation of preschool parents and teachers was created across the scattered communities. This now has national presence to advocate on behalf of more resources for ECD.

- It is effective to combine nationwide activities and individual initiatives of smaller scope.

This is evident in the Nigerian situation, described previously. Another example is Mauritius. The welfare of all children is addressed legally through the brief of the Ministry of Women’s Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare. Complementing this are individual ECD programs in the private and public sectors.

- Program quality and impact must be monitored more systematically to assess impact.

Analysis of cost-effectiveness is hampered by extremely limited financial data. Assessments are however consistently positive across the cases reviewed in terms of children’s social development (sharing of materials, independence, responsibility), school readiness and communication skills.

- ECD is an institutional and social policy issue that cuts across health, education and other social sectors.

ECD cuts across macro, meso and local levels of administration; government departments and non-government entities. Institutional arrangements and partnerships for ECD will be crafted according to the needs of the target population. The challenges are in going to scale and in sustaining initiatives.

- Adopt a long term perspective.
Several of the programs began or are beginning from small pilot experiences. In Kenya, the national program emerged from over a decade of experimentation with community-based ECD. After twenty-five years, the program covers no more than a third of the relevant age cohorts across the country. Zimbabwe’s Kushanda project was built upon nearly a decade of work in supporting commercial farm communities and resettlement communities. In Mauritius, the government-Export Zone partnership is a pilot private-public collaboration. The expectation is that this will catalyze investment for additional populations and industries to meet the child care needs of working parents.

- **Institutional capacity is key to sustainability.**

Measures in combination — mobilizing parents’ demand for services, collaboration of various parties in program delivery, external funding and training — contribute to institutionalization of ECD services.

- **If ECD coverage is to be broadened and sustained, governments clearly need to be more involved.**

To the extent that sustainability hinges on financing, the success with ECD to date mainly represents the financial and technical support of foundations, international and national NGOs, religious groups, bilateral and multilateral aid agencies. Government GDP specifically earmarked for ECD is nil for nineteen of twenty-five Sub-Saharan countries for which data exist.

- **Localizing ECD initiatives is critical to effectiveness.**

a. Program quality is enhanced by using community members as teachers and trainers, and building ECD curricula from local traditions and culture.

b. The effectiveness of training will be increased by locating training close to the actual work sites and alternating training and practice.

These last two principles relating to local initiatives are so central that they figure in every case in the Review. Employing local people enhances connections and collaboration between the community and the ECD supporting agency. ECD workers’ training in close proximity to the location of their work helps instill realistic expectations and boost trainees’ confidence.

**Directions and Challenges for the Future**

The Review signals three areas for action in order to accelerate investment in ECD:

- **Increase data available for planning and evaluating ECD.** Focus especially upon impact and cost effectiveness, and the long-term benefits of ECD.

- **Increase access to ECD services particularly for children (and mothers) most in need.**
Raise public awareness about the value of ECD and forge partnerships for action among communities, private and public sector organizations. National governments may not be direct providers of ECD, but many would do well to consider establishing a policy framework to give formal recognition to and bolster action at local level.

- Pursue more coherent national frameworks for planning and implementing ECD. Work for better coordination and mutual support among policy, programs and research.

These various ECD programs have built on the strengths of African tradition and culture, and multi-sectoral policy frameworks which certain countries have constructed for the protection and development of young children. They illustrate choices for other countries to consider, to tailor to their respective institutional and socio-economic circumstances. Thus, ECD is not only imperative, it is also affordable and effective. However, a key message that emerges is the need to emphasize a long-term perspective.

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