

Quality Information for a Quality Early Childhood Care and Development

A previous UNESCO Policy Briefs on Early Childhood¹ observes that “more often than not, early childhood policies are developed without the support of sound data”. The first step in advocacy, policy-making and implementation of initiatives is “developing an integrated, comprehensive data system for early childhood”. The present note suggests an approach to collecting and using data for planning and action, which utilises existing systems and checks and complements them with innovative methods based on local needs and understanding.

Early childhood care and development (ECCD) provision varies widely. Rather than a centralised provider (e.g., a Ministry of Education), there is often a variety of ministries, charities and welfare organisations, religious bodies, for-profit commercial sector and other non-state actors providing services. Even the definition of ECCD is not agreed on: Is it only formal, registered kindergartens and nurseries? Or should account be taken of such provision as childminding, playgroup, day care and healthcare centres and other family benefits and services etc.? And how does parent- and family-provided care and development fit in?

Save the Children UK's Central and South Asia Region has developed the Child-focused or Community-based Education Management System, C-EMIS. Unlike existing government EMIS systems, C-EMIS endeavours to include all children (in- and out of school). It provides a structure for collecting data at the very lowest level (from children, on doorsteps), and its use by local stakeholders.

C-EMIS has the flexibility to collect information regarding school-based problems and quality issues. By drawing on responses from children and families, C-EMIS can begin to address questions central to relevant and appropriate provision, such as the reasons for non-enrolment and dropout. It can be used to identify and analyse informal ECCD provision and get a perspective on the way choices are made between these and formal services. Information obtained through C-EMIS can be combined with other data from nurseries, kindergartens, health centres and schools to provide planners with a detailed and realistic representation of the situation at any level.

Methods of data collection vary in different situations. In Nepal, Save the Children UK, a local NGO and the

District Education Office met with children, families, teachers, and administrators from a village. The first activities were a social mapping of the village and designing a household survey for recording children's educational status. A Village Education Committee (VEC) was formed to establish and train education committees in hamlets (villages had 9 wards comprising several hamlets). The hamlet committees, both adults and children, conducted house-to-house surveys to establish who was in or out of school and why. They then prepared an education plan for their community, and where possible found ways to overcome obstacles to access by giving advice and marshalling local resources. The quantitative and qualitative data collected was passed to the ward and then to the VEC which used it to develop a profile of the whole village and then a village education plan. The VEC also responded to outstanding concerns, for example, by supporting ECD where many older girls were at home caring for younger siblings. Problems that required greater resources, such as teacher shortages, were passed to the district education committee.

ECCD provision can also be informed by data drawn from the community by its own members. Over a twelve month period, Save the Children UK and its partner in Sri Lanka sought to collect information towards planning for effective ECCD in a village of 468 households seriously affected by war and neglect over many years. The data was derived from answers to questions asking the age and number of pre-school children, whether they were attending an ECD centre or ever had, and what the children did otherwise. Individual's details were collected: Does the child want to go to pre-school? Is the child progressing well in development? Other questions were asked about school-age children in the family: Is the child attending school? Can he/she read and write? Has the child ever dropped out and why? How is the child progressing at school?

The findings of this process confirmed that there were currently no centres, but that previously there had been and that they had closed for various reasons. There were also several issues related to schools: non-attendance, an acute teacher shortage, a shortage of supplies, furniture, materials, facilities etc.

The data gathering exercise motivated the community and saw some attitudes change. The best evidence of this was the construction of a new pre-school by villagers. Three other pre-schools restarted. In these four pre-schools 115 children within the age of 3-5 years were given an

¹ Planning for Access: Develop a data system first. UNESCO Policy Briefs on Early Childhood, 2002, no.2

opportunity to attend formal early childhood development services. Resources were found so that eight facilitators were trained. Parents of 105 children of 0-2 years took part in classes on early years development theory and practice. Twenty three previously unregistered children received birth certificates. The attendance rates in the formal school increased. The community started to offer support to the activities of the school in the village, and approached the Ministry of Education to demand resolution of the teacher shortages, the provision of furniture, and suitable buildings. Parents helped to rehabilitate the playground which had been out of use for many years. Hearing about the scheme, neighbouring villages began demanding a similar programme. Partner organisations involved "found it easy to take forward C-EMIS processes in other locations" (Save the Children UK internal report).

It can be seen from the above that C-EMIS extends a much greater reach than the usual government systems. This process of data collection leads to community participation, involvement and empowerment, and can change attitudes towards education and ECCD. The data can be used to support informal education and care such as home-based ECCD, access and retention programmes. The methodology is clearly appropriate for both assessing ECCD services and addressing some of the problems which lead to children being denied its benefits.

In Save the Children's planning of a response to the recent earthquake in North-East Morocco, the provision of activities for very young children was identified as a priority for intervention. To this end "quality information regarding the situation of children and the services available to them" was needed in order to target the proposed ECCD, play and learning activities. A variation of C-EMIS was recommended, whereby information particularly relevant to the displacement, disruption and trauma caused by the disaster, such as family status, living conditions (physical and social), disability and medical status, were highlighted. As a result of this mapping, planners could be sure that the real problems were being addressed and the right priorities identified.

Like many problems encountered in providing basic services, especially for the most needy and marginalised, the scarcity of reliable information on ECCD can be reduced by engaging the community. The image of children swarming through their hamlet in search of information about girls, disabled and working children and others left out of schooling is very different from that of overworked ministry officials struggling to organise ever increasing piles of paperwork.

By combining qualitative data with numbers, C-EMIS addresses questions of access to and demand for services, and assesses their actual and perceived quality. C-EMIS can only work where there is genuine partnership between government and civil society, and to make this possible it builds the capacity of communities to assess and address their own needs, and to act upon their rights. While government's role remains one of standard setting and

supervision, C-EMIS supports it in ensuring the equitable distribution and efficient use of scarce resources.

C-EMIS can help governments fulfil their commitments to extending quality ECCD provision to all children. It is not the only means of deriving realistic analysis of present provision and monitoring the process while improvements are made, but it does go some way to ensuring that these efforts are centred on the people most concerned.

*J.R.A. Williams
Education and ECCD Advisor
Save the Children (UK)
Middle East & North Africa*

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For comments and inquiries, please contact:
Section for Early Childhood and Inclusive Education, UNESCO
7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 PARIS 07 SP, France
☎ 33 1 45 68 08 15, fax: 33 1 45 68 56 26, sh.choi@unesco.org