

## Cross-sectoral Co-ordination in Early Childhood: Some Lessons to Learn

Early childhood care and education is the concern of many government sectors, notably the education, social affairs and health sectors. Co-ordination among these sectors in policy development and implementation is essential for ensuring the child's holistic development and the efficient use of government resources. Coherent regulation, funding and staffing schemes as well as a common vision of care and education among the concerned sectors are key factors that determine the quality of early childhood programmes.<sup>1,2</sup>

Cross-sectoral co-ordination is difficult, however, especially at the national level. It is one of the main challenges facing many governments of both developed and developing countries wishing to promote a holistic approach to early childhood. Responses to the challenge have varied from one country to another. Some have sought to remove the problem at the structural level by integrating the area into a single ministry. This is a trend in some developed countries. Others have tried to divide sectoral responsibilities according to age range (e.g., 0-3-year-olds under a social/welfare ministry and 4-5-year-olds under an education ministry). But most have opted for the less dramatic approach of seeking coherence in policy and administration through co-ordination mechanisms (COMs).

In general,<sup>3</sup> COMs are effective when their function is to co-ordinate a particular early childhood programme. For instance, in 2000 the Government of Singapore, seeking to co-ordinate pre-school education programmes provided by both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Community Development and Sports, set up a Pre-school Education Steering Committee, with the MOE designated as the lead ministry. With input from the Committee, to date a common kindergarten curriculum framework has been launched to be used by both services and a Kindergarten Bill is being prepared. Through another joint committee, the two ministries have also successfully

developed a joint training framework for pre-school teachers and accredited training courses and trainers for the required preschool training courses, important steps towards the country's development of a common system of pre-school teacher training to improve the quality of teachers.

A COM that focuses on the same target population also seems to encourage convergence and co-operation between different sectors. A case in point is the National Co-ordination and Technical Committee of the Programme Opportunities in Mexico. The mechanism was instrumental in delivering to extremely poor families an integrated social assistance programme incorporating education, health and nutrition components. "The delivery of particular services continues to be the responsibility of each sector, but a concerted effort is made to see that these services get to the same population, thereby trying to take advantage of the synergistic effects such as concentration or convergence."<sup>4</sup> The Committee's success has also been attributed to the fact that its members, coming from all the relevant sectors, jointly set the rules of operation and approve new initiatives.

A COM also seems to be effective in carrying out a specific task for a certain period of time. The Cabinet Office Strategy Unit Project Team in the U.K., which conducted the government's Inter-Departmental Childcare Review, is a good example. The Team consists of staff drawn from various sectors within the government as well as from the private and voluntary sector. Commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills, the country's lead sector for early childhood, it conducted a comprehensive inter-sectoral review of early childhood and produced a report whose results have been used in important government budget processes related to early childhood.

While COMs have been effective in co-ordinating sectors to handle specific programmes and tasks<sup>5</sup>, they have not been very successful in promoting a coherent overall policy and administrative framework across sectors. This in part has to do with their *ad hoc* status. In an effort to maintain sectoral neutrality, the COM is often set up as an *ad hoc* body outside of a line ministry, with no decision-

<sup>1</sup> Starting strong: Early childhood education and care (2001). Paris: OECD. / Education policy analysis (2002). Paris: OECD.

<sup>2</sup> Lack of co-ordination between public and private sectors and between central and local authorities also provokes quality concerns.

<sup>3</sup> Since the political and administrative processes through which COMs are set up and operate vary widely, it is difficult to generalise about the functionality factors of COMs. But some consistent, though episodic, observations offer preliminary insights into what works and what does not in COMs. This note attempts to summarise these emerging understandings in order to bring to the attention of policy makers the risks and promises of COMs, which at the moment seem to be proliferating with governments' efforts to promote a holistic approach to early childhood.

<sup>4</sup> Myers, R. (in preparation). Early childhood policy and program co-ordination: A Mexican case study. UNESCO Early Childhood Working Paper.

<sup>5</sup> COMs are also effective in bringing different sectors together for information exchange and sharing and launching advocacy materials and activities. COMs are often set up to serve these purposes.

making authority. Such COMs can, at best, make recommendations to ministries, but most have proven to have little influence with ministries, especially regarding decisions related to policy changes and funding, unless as in the U.K. example the mechanism made recommendations that were solicited at the lead sector's initiative.

To counteract the lack of authority, COMs are often affiliated with a high political office (e.g., president, prime minister, first lady). Such political affiliation certainly helps increase visibility and ability to command co-operation. But political patronage can have a price: when the government changes, the COM also undergoes a "transformation". In most cases, it is dismantled; if it stays in place, its functions and mandate are altered or diminished, disrupting continuity.

Similarly, high-level membership is often suggested to reinforce the authority of COMs.<sup>6</sup> The involvement of authorities with the necessary decision-making power and commitment is, of course, crucial. But when high-level authorities are asked to take part in a mechanism that does not handle issues or decisions requiring their level of authority, they tend to delegate the responsibility to junior staff. This delegation process has been found to be time consuming, and the selected staff members are often less committed and less likely to attend meetings than members of a mechanism set up as a technical body appropriate to their level of functioning. The delegation process can even cause the mechanism to fail, simply through the difficulty of convening meetings among members.<sup>7</sup>

One structural way to ensure the COM's decision-making power is to place it under a line ministry.<sup>8</sup> This strategy requires the designation of a lead sector – a challenging prospect for early childhood services.

First of all, singling out a sector can be risky, no matter how necessary, if the government has not already clearly associated early childhood with that particular sector, as the decision can inadvertently diminish the roles of the other sectors.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the choice of a lead sector is a decision that hinges on many factors. It varies, understandably, with the ideological context as well as the particular early childhood priorities of the country. There is no one-size-fits-all approach; each country must go through its own consultative, reflective and learning processes.

Finally, once a sector is designated, it must be open to a comprehensive approach, embracing the concerns of all the sectors involved and mobilising their respective strengths and competences. But balancing leadership and partnership is not facile and not many countries, especially those in the developing region where early childhood has not been part of the government's public policy, have mastered the art.

Despite these challenges, making one sector responsible for co-ordination is necessary if a COM is to be functional, especially if the mechanism aims to bring about changes at the policy and administrative levels. Unlike other functions expected of a COM, to develop and implement a coherent early childhood policy and administration system requires more than merely bringing different sectors together. There must be a clear understanding of where the co-ordination is to be centred, and more importantly the identified leader should be able to exercise the necessary authority, while mustering a partnership with all the sectors involved.

This eventually amounts to the importance of a national decision on the lead sector for early childhood, without which even a compromise, moderate measure such as setting up a COM will not generally be very effective.

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<sup>6</sup> cf. Torkington, K. (2001). WGECD policy project: A synthesis report. ADEA Working Group on Early Childhood Development.

<sup>7</sup> Job, H. (in preparation). Early childhood policy co-ordination mechanisms in Namibia. UNESCO Early Childhood Working Paper.

<sup>8</sup> This is also one of the strategic ways for COMs to secure their operational funding.

<sup>9</sup> Pre-dominance of one particular sector, if necessary, can be minimised to some extent by designating an individual or organisation independent of the lead sector or of the government structure to head the mechanism, even while the mechanism remains within the lead sector.

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