



NEPAL

Evaluation of the National Early Childhood Development Program

How was evidence used to reshape early childhood development policies in Nepal?

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EDITORIAL INSIGHT

This strategic evaluation was commended by the panel for underscoring the importance of a holistic approach to early childhood development (ECD). The evaluation aimed to inform a new ECD national strategy in Nepal. The resulting evidence showed that the new strategy should spell out the minimum ECD services that every child should receive, from birth to 5 years of age. The evaluation also informed the UNICEF Country Programme Action Plan 2018–2022, which identifies programming for ECD as a key cross-sectoral issue in Nepal.

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Children play with letter blocks from an Early Child Development kit in a child-friendly space created as part of the Nepal earthquake response in Bilaune Danda Village, Dhading District.

Early moments matter for every child's development. This principle has been recognized globally over time and consolidated through the adoption of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Target 4.2, calling for all girls and boys to have access to quality ECD by 2030.

Amid the political, social and educational transformation that Nepal is undergoing, there has been a renewed focus on ECD, with evidence showing progress, even if slow. In 2004, a Strategy Paper for Early Childhood Development in Nepal was developed under the leadership of the Ministry of Education (MoE) at the time. The document set out an action plan to integrate ECD service delivery across the five sectors considered central to ECD provision: education, health, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), and protection.

This evaluation of Nepal's National Early Childhood Development Program (2004–2015) sought to identify potential ways of enhancing coordination among key ministries; demonstrate the linkages between early childhood education (ECE) and other ECD sectoral interventions; and identify the gaps between policy and implementation.

The analysis identified an emphasis on ECE, demonstrating the need to engage key ministries other than the MoE. Through Nepal's decentralized system of government, UNICEF has now uncovered an opportunity to integrate sectoral initiatives under the umbrella of the new ECD strategy for the period 2019–2030.

PURPOSE

There is no doubt that the situation of children in Nepal has improved: young children are now better nourished, less prone to disease and more likely to attend school. But the variable pace of development across regions and socioeconomic groups suggests that the integration of ECD initiatives throughout the country has been uneven. The National Planning Commission (NPC) requested an evaluation to focus primarily on how the ECD programmes had been integrated across sectors, and how relevant stakeholders coordinated ECD service delivery. The lessons learned will prove vital to the NPC in ensuring the success of the 2019–2030 strategy.

APPROACH

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach, combining primary qualitative research with secondary quantitative data analysis and a literature review. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions provided information about stakeholder perceptions of ECD implementation. Data drawn from national databases were used to build a picture of the national context for ECD service provision and the impact of services on outcomes for children.

To account for Nepal's geographical diversity and newly implemented federal structure, seven districts covering all three ecological belts and all seven provinces were selected for the fieldwork. Within these districts, both community- and school-based ECD centres were visited.

Limitations

The evaluation took place in 2018, three years after the ECD programme had ended. Respondents thus had difficulty recalling past activities and many programme officials had since been transferred. Tracing links between the 2004 Strategy Paper and ongoing programming across sectors also proved difficult.

BOX 1

WHAT DO CHILDREN GET OUT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT?

Eat, play, love are the foundations on which the future well-being of a child rests. This combination is never more critical than in the first three years of a child's life, when the brain develops at a faster rate than at any other time. Families are essential to ensure that children grow in nourishing and nurturing environments, but governments have a critical role too in providing support so that every child can reach its developmental potential.

ECD activities cover maternal and child health, nutrition, water and sanitation, early childhood education and child protection. Ideally, these services are provided through an integrated strategy, so that every child receives all ECD services at the appropriate age. ECD strategies are an attempt to draw these disparate threads together so that national targets for children are aligned with global targets, such as those set out in the Sustainable Development Goals.





ECD is a foundation for life. It is the primary stage and first step to educational achievement. It provides a real environment in which to adjust to senior class education. It intends to support a child's physical, social, emotional and psychological development.

– District official quoted in evaluation report

KEY FINDINGS

Holistic in intent, but not in practice

The MoE led the development of the 2004 Strategy Paper to expedite implementation of national commitments to ECD, in line with Nepal's adoption of the global Education for All framework. The strategy was explicit about taking a holistic, integrated approach to ECD, but omitted details regarding coordination. In fact, the main thrust of the National ECD Program was ECE, and delivery of other services to young children was fragmented across sectors. Line ministries were responsible for providing health, nutrition, WASH, education and protection services, but only MoE policies and programmes made direct reference to the strategy. As a result, the programme evaluation had to assess ECD efficacy by sector, and was unable to link findings to the national vision for ECD.

Early childhood education boosted, but unevenly

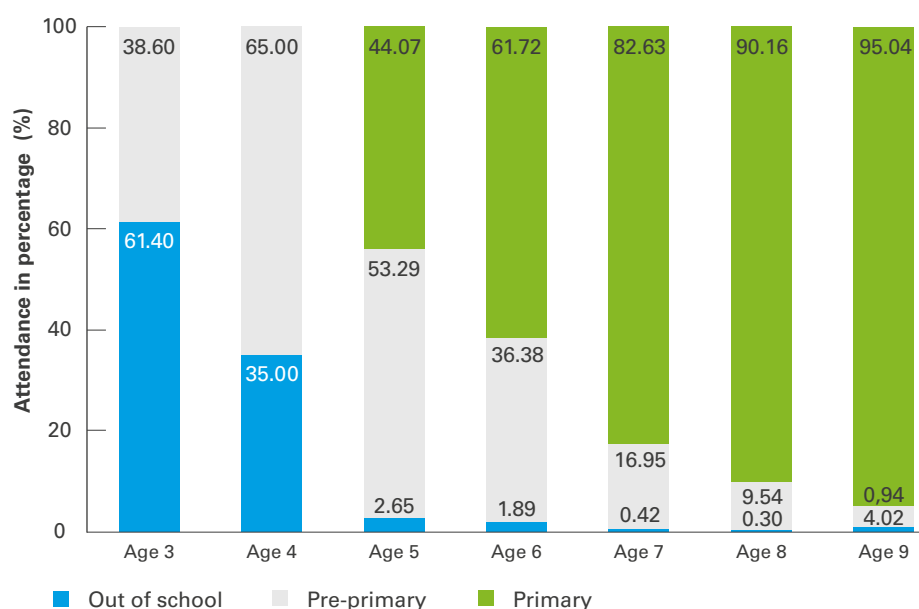
ECD centres increased substantially in number, from 4,032 centres in 2004 to 35,991 centres in 2015, dramatically boosting ECE provision nationwide. By 2011, 88.8 per cent of households lived within 30 minutes of a centre; by 2015, enrolment had doubled to just under 1 million. The proportion of children in their first year of school with experience of ECD also increased, from 10.9 per cent in 2004 to 62.4 per cent in 2014.

Despite these impressive achievements, the evaluation report expresses serious concerns about accessibility and quality of ECE provision. Just 28.9 per cent of children aged 3–5 years in the Far Western Hills could access ECE, compared with 78.2 per cent of their Central Hills peers; only 41.2 per cent of children aged 3–5 years from the poorest fifth of the population attended ECE, compared with 83.5 per cent of those from the richest quintile. Although the evaluation found that 64.4 per cent of children were developmentally on track according to the Early Childhood Development Index, only 28.8 per cent were on track with literary/numeracy. Further, children in the Kathmandu Valley were more than eight times (75.1 per cent) more likely to be on track with literary/numeracy than those in the Far Western Hills (7.7 per cent). Disparities between geographical areas and economic brackets recur in findings across sectors.

The evaluation found limited data on the ages of children in community-based ECD centres, with many underage (under 4 years) and overage children (over 5 years) attending school-based centres, and 20 per cent of those aged 4 years entirely absent. These findings raise questions about ECD service quality as well as access, since it is more difficult for facilitators to manage a range of ages. While facilitators receive training, low pay and insufficient resources translate into poor motivation and retention. Although the budget for ECD is increasing, it still represents only 1.47 per cent of Nepal's total education budget, and community-based centres are in decline.



FIGURE 1
Overage and underage early childhood development centre attendance



Source: Calculation made by the author based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2014 data.

TABLE 1
Early childhood development centre attendance, by wealth quintile

WEALTH QUINTILES	TOTAL
POOREST	41.2%
SECOND	39.1%
MIDDLE	38.8%
FOURTH	62.7%
RICHEST	83.5%

Source: MICS 2014.

The ECD centre is a place where children get an education. Although we did not get an education, if our children get a primary education, then their future will be bright. We send them to get an education and a good job.

– Mother quoted in evaluation report



Impressive health gains, but poor coordination

Nepal's budget allocations in health-related expenditure have quadrupled over the period 2004–2015, resulting in a rise in safe motherhood practices. Health gains included an increase in the proportion of deliveries attended by skilled workers from 12.7 to 40 per cent and in deliveries at institutions from 9 to 22 per cent from 2001 to 2017. Over the same period, the under-five mortality rate decreased from 54 to 34 deaths per 1,000 live births. Child survival has been boosted by exclusive breastfeeding and good immunization rates.

In just over a decade, from 2004 to 2015, Nepal's pioneering multisectoral approach to undernutrition reduced the national stunting rate from 57 to 36 per cent, with coverage of growth monitoring visits increasing from 54.5 to 78.2 per cent. Access to safe water and toilet facilities has improved rapidly, as has hygiene, producing very positive results for child health. In 2015, 82 per cent of the population used improved sanitation facilities, up from 39 per cent in 2005. Nepal has also increased its birth registration rates and provision of child grants, augmenting children's security and future prospects.

Yet significant discrepancies remain today. The child mortality rate is 57 deaths per 1,000 live births for the poorest quintile, compared with 22 deaths per 1,000 live births for the richest quintile. Malnutrition is still a major problem in more economically deprived regions, particularly the Far West, where only 48 per cent of the associated budget was spent in 2015.

The ECD strategy included health as a developmental domain, but did not outline how support should be provided, and sectoral bodies did not refer to the 2004 Strategy Paper. ECD centres did not usually systematically conduct health check-ups or keep records of child growth or immunizations. The evaluation found that facilitators were not generally responsible for initiating behavioural change among children attending ECD centres, as envisaged by the strategy, largely because of the focus on ECE and a largely theoretical rather than practical approach overall. Child protection demonstrated little coordination with the ECD agenda, neglecting those children who did not attend ECD centres or were in alternative care.

Stakeholder perceptions

On the whole, mothers perceived ECD centres positively – as places where children can develop and grow physically and mentally – although most considered such centres a stepping stone to primary education. Some integration across sectors to provide services, including through ECD centres, was found – but, contrary to some district officials' claims, this was more by accident than by design.

INFLUENCE ON POLICY AND PROGRAMMING

UNICEF Nepal established channels for regular interaction with all stakeholders to share evaluation findings. UNICEF was able to leverage the influence of the evaluation through strategic communications, new partnerships and sustained advocacy.

Informing the new national strategy

Findings and recommendations provided by the timely evaluation – which took place between the old and new strategies – were critical in informing the National ECD Strategic Plan 2019–2030, drafted by the NPC. A key recommendation that was taken up was for an intersectoral body (such as the NPC) to coordinate implementation of the new strategy instead of the MoE, to avoid a continuing bias towards ECE.

The results of the evaluation were far reaching, brave and conclusive – and contributed to a complete reconfiguration of the way in which Nepal's early childhood development services are conceived, managed and delivered.

– Case study, UNICEF Evaluation Office



Informing UNICEF programming

The evaluation contributed to the UNICEF Country Programme Action Plan 2018–2022, which stresses the importance of delivering ECD as a cross-sectoral initiative. The Action Plan commits to supporting health, nutrition, WASH, education, protection and Communication for Development (C4D).

Encouraging ownership

To encourage ownership, the evaluation suggests that each relevant ministry assigns a representative to align departmental policies and programmes with the 2019–2030 strategy. Similarly, local governments under the new federal dispensation are being engaged in the process early on and informed on the range of services that can contribute to a quality ECD package.

Creating a child-centric checklist

The new ECD strategy provides a checklist of the minimum services to be provided, classified by age and theme, and clarifies which services every child should receive in each successive year. This service mapping is intended to be child-centric, to ensure that no child is left behind. Each sectoral ministry is now involved in the delivery of the checklist, and follow-up and accountability mechanisms have been put in place.

Monitoring progress

To enable evaluations of performance against the new strategy, key indicators have been identified for each ECD service to be provided. Sectoral ministries have been advised to regularly collect data to a specific level of detail.

Guaranteeing resources

Total ECD expenditure in Nepal amounts to around 0.34 per cent of gross domestic product. A strong political commitment is expected to boost the resources needed for ECD services, although community mobilization and local taxation may be necessary to compensate for the shortfall.

BOX 2

INFORMING AN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY FOCUSED ON COUNTRY OWNERSHIP

UNICEF joined the Government of Nepal to undertake a country-led evaluation. The findings, disseminated through a communication strategy, resulted in:

- a new evidence-based National Early Childhood Development Strategy 2019–2030, including a recommendation to have an intersectoral body – the National Planning Commission – to ensure intersectoral coordination
- an enhanced strategic positioning for UNICEF in Nepal
- relevant evidence to inform the UNICEF Country Programme Action Plan 2018–2022
- strong country and ministerial ownership through an effective advocacy strategy and the engagement of provincial governments, departments and representatives of non-governmental organizations, among others.

The new ECD strategy for 2019–2030 aims to enable a holistic approach to ECD to be implemented in Nepal in the coming years. Monitoring and evaluating progress towards the newly developed strategy will be key.





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Children play outside of a school in Solukhumbu district, Nepal.

LOOKING AHEAD

ECD activities across sectors fell short of the expectations of the 2004 Strategy Paper. However, the new decentralized system of government in Nepal offers a unique opportunity for central and local government to work together to provide a comprehensive package of ECD services to every child. Evidence and recommendations from this evaluation will continue to inform the strategy for 2019–2030 and beyond. This should enable a holistic approach to ECD to be implemented in the coming years.



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