

Title of the Study : Early Childhood Care and Development in Sri Lanka
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Objectives / Terms of Reference

The Consultant was required to :

- i. review the organization, extent and quality of the present provision for early childhood education in pre-schools and day care centers.
- ii. Assess the adequacy of these programmes to meet the needs of the under five population.
- iii. Propose:
 - a. Policies
 - b. Institutional mechanism
 - c. Programmes
 - d. Appropriate methodologies to meet current and emerging needs in early childhood education.

Methodology

Preliminary discussions on Early Childhood Care and Development with a few key persons helped to identify the following areas for further study:

- Role and responsibility of those facilitating ECCD
- Issues directly related to pre-schools, teachers and children attending them
- Perceptions of people in different capacities on ECCD
- Type of partnership emerging in ECCD.

Information was obtained through:

- Visits and observations
- Interviews
- Study of documents
- Participation in workshops and meetings which were not directly related to this assignment, but which had a bearing on ECCD.
- Survey of 42 pre-schools.

Recommendations

1. National Level

1.1 A National Unit for ECCD

The country needs a truly effective National Level umbrella organisation for integrated planning and action in Early Childhood Care and Development. Therefore a National Unit for ECCD is recommended for coordination of different sectors involved in programmes for young children.

1.2 Advisory Body for ECCD

The National Unit for ECCD will be assisted by an Advisory Body consisting of specialists in the field, including Education and Health, INGOO, selected NGOO and the provincial focal point.

1.3 A National Resource Centre

A National Resource Centre be established to support quality development activities in ECCD carried out by the National Unit for ECCD.

The National Resource Centre will be a semi autonomous body and may function in collaboration with the National Institute of Education (MOE). It will have a small core of expertise with experience. The Centre will identify and work with clusters of people involved in ECCD at different levels from parents, preschool teachers, voluntary workers to NGOO, INGOO and University academics. The Centre will provide professional support to the National Unit.

It will engage in action research studies, design innovative methods and material based on field trials, collate publications and material related to ECCD and keep abreast of new developments. It will carry out feasibility studies. It will work towards professional development of different categories of ECCD personnel, support media in creating parent and public awareness and enable sharing of expertise and experience.

2. Provincial Level

2.1 There will be a focal point for ECCD under a Ministry designated by the province. This provincial ECCD Unit will coordinate with respective Provincial Ministries.

2.2 A Provincial ECCD committee, with representatives of the districts, zones, divisions, NGO, specialists in the field and community representatives will assist the provincial ECCD Unit.

3. Issues to be Addressed

3.1 Preschools and Day-care Centres

- Collate basic statistical data regarding preschool age child population by specific age and by province.
- Carry out a survey of Day care centres and creches. Make a study of the quality of services provided.
- Take steps to register Day care centres.
- Follow up findings of the National Status study of Preschools which is being completed presently.
- Locate isolated geographical pockets and groups where ECCD services are marginal or absent.
- Develop standards for identifying most deserving ECCD centres and prioritize services accordingly.
- Utilize preschools as places to monitor health and growth of the 3 - 5 year old children.
- Frame regulations to maintain minimum standards in preschools.
- Ensure registration of preschools and avoid duplication of registration by naming the particular District / Provincial office for registration.

3.2 Preschool Teachers and Caregivers

- Focus on professionalisation of preschool teachers Lay down minimum qualifications. Provide opportunities to upgrade.
- Develop a framework as a guide to provide remuneration in keeping with the service and qualifications of the preschool teachers.
- Avoid ad hoc arrangements for preschool supervision. Use trained personnel for advisory roles. Methods such as self appraisal and peer evaluation be utilized in neighbourhood clusters of preschools.

3.3 Preschool Teacher Education

- Support development of training packages at different levels for different groups, and to meet any deficits in training already completed.
- Examine training programmes in terms of quality, duration etc. and place them in broad categories.
- Relevance and usefulness of brief training programmers of 1-3 day duration need to be reviewed, as some such meetings are not properly focused, and tend to be a waste of time and resources.

These recommendations are based on the premise that -

- a) early childhood from birth to five years is the most important period in an individual's life as growth during this period is very rapid and fundamental to future development. It is also the period when the child is most vulnerable to environmental influences.
- b) the need of the child are many and they are interdependent. Any programme designed to promote early childhood care and development should therefore take the integrated approach aiming at the total development of the child.
- c) all such programmes should take into consideration the role of the parents and family in promoting early childhood development and design measures to create awareness among parents, develop appropriate parenting skills and improve the psycho-social atmosphere of the home.
- d) policy proposals for early childhood care and development take into account the powers devolved to the provinces, the existing infrastructures, institutional facilities and the role played by various organizations active in the field.

It is therefore proposed that -

A National committee be setup in the Ministry of Social Welfare to include representatives from other relevant Ministries, Non-governmental organizations and specialists to -

Formulate National policies and guidelines in relation to early childhood care and development.

Oversee the implementation of such programmes island-wide
Ensure standards

The Children's Secretariat under the Ministry of Social Welfare develop programmes for implementing national policy recommendations, develop curricula and learning and teaching material, organize and provide training for the implementation of programmes and support research in collaboration with other ministries and organizations active in the field.

At provincial and district levels ECCD committees be setup and regulations be framed in keeping with the national policy and the powers devolved by the 13th amendment to the constitution to allocate financial and other resources to carry out ECCD programmes. Village levels ECCD committees be setup with a management committee for each center to oversee the implementation of ECCD programmes at village level.

ECCD work be recognized as a social responsibility of local governmental institutions - Municipal/Town Councils and Pradesiya Sabbhas.

Facilities already created in the plantation sector and other schemes be linked to the overall national framework and special attention be paid to children of migrant workers, single parent families, war victims and children with disabilities.

An allocation be made through a special fund as an expression of national commitment to the welfare of children without which adequate recognition of its centrality in nation building may get ignored.