

Influencing and developing good policy in Early Childhood Development (ECD) amongst pastoralist communities in East Africa: The case of Samburu in Kenya

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*“The real question is how to use the available funds wisely. The best evidence supports
the policy prescription: Invest in the very young” James J. Heckman PhD, Nobel
Laureate in Economic Science 2000.*

Introduction

What do we mean by a good ECD policy and are there special elements that are particularly relevant to children from pastoralist societies? Let's start by a quick deconstruction of ECD: early childhood and development. By early childhood we mean the period of a child's life, starting at conception and including the first years of primary school usually up to age eight. We look at child development holistically, meaning physical, social, intellectual, language, cultural and emotional development. A working definition of “good” or “quality” ECD is “one that meets the developmental and cultural needs of young children and their families in ways that enable them to thrive”. (Bernard van Leer Foundation). It can also be defined as that program which does not alienate the developing young generation but prepares them to fit into their society.

When it comes to policy it is probably better to talk about a policy framework or policy guidelines to ensure that the policy environment is flexible enough to cater for the many different contexts and multi-sectoral dimensions of child development. Ideally ECD policy should be based on “a strengths-based model that builds on the people’s culture and resources taking into account the stated goals and aspirations of parents and communities. Such goals vary widely in terms of resources, lifestyles and challenges of parents and communities. All stakeholders including children, parents, community, CBOs, NGOs and government are fully involved and they should have a common understanding of comprehensive and holistic ECD program and services.” (ADEA ECD quality paper 2003).

This is the ideal, but in reality it takes a slow and sometimes painful process to develop an integrated ECD program.

The role of Early Child Development (ECD) Programs has evoked considerable discussion and, in principle, there is no dispute that appropriate early childhood education is beneficial. However, the evidence from practice indicates that in contexts where parental and student demand is defined by their limited experience of didactic, teacher-led formal schooling, this can become a demand for socialization into the norms and behaviors of formalized schooling for the very young, which is likely to be counter-productive. On the contrary, where ECD programs are culturally and contextually appropriate parents value this education and there examples illustrate that incorporating nomadic and pastoralist peoples’ indigenous knowledge of child development into formal schooling can make that education more child friendly and relevant (e.g. Samburu of

Kenya). The following evidence from Kenya has shown that ECD can significantly increase the pre-and primary school enrolment of pastoralist children.

Historical perspective

The Bernard van Leer Foundation (a Dutch private Foundation specialized in ECD) has been supporting the Ministry of Education and in particular the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) since the early seventies. It started with a relatively modest, but long term (1971-82) experimental project on curriculum development and teacher training. In 1982 there was a National Evaluation Seminar co-funded with Ministry of Education which recommended the project going to national scale. A new project was started in 1983 and continued up to 1995: the national NACECE/DICECE Project. The NACECE/DICECE network¹ operates as follows: The National Centre for Early Childhood Education (NACECE) is responsible for: Training of ECD personnel and developing and disseminating curriculum materials. It is also responsible for coordination and liaising with partners in ECD.

The functions of the District Centre for Early Childhood Education (DICECE) are:

- Training of teachers and other personnel at the district level
- Development of grassroots pre-school curriculum
- Supervising and inspecting pre-schools at the district level
- Community involvement in pre-school education and welfare programs for improved child health care and education
- Basic research and evaluation on the status of pre-school children in the district

¹ Early childhood Care and Development, Margaret Kabiru, 1993

Part of the national pre-school teacher training program was a component that included adapting the project to a semi-arid area (Samburu) and in 1987 the Samburu district centre for early childhood education was opened in Maralal. However, Samburu district posed several challenges for the NACECE/DICECE program.

Samburu district in Northern Kenya is an area with a harsh arid and semi-arid climate with scrubland and limited rainfall. For the Samburu and Turkana people, the most viable way of life has always been nomadic pastoralism. The people move with their livestock, cattle, sheep, goats and camels in search of water and pasture. This traditional way of life is now under stress because of prolonged drought, cattle rustling and increasing insecurity, including an influx of weapons from the strife in neighboring Sudan and Somalia. Large numbers of formerly nomadic families have been driven to take up a semi-permanent residence around major trading centres, which in turn is putting an even higher strain on water and vegetation sources. The communities are in transition from a nomadic lifestyle to sedentary settlement, which poses many challenges and is causing rapid changes in the societal structure.

It is clear that in a situation like this pre-school education will not be people's first priority and one of the weaknesses of the first Samburu ECD program was that it focused too much on training of teachers and establishing pre-schools without involving the parents and communities. The project trained pre-school teachers but the training did not prepare them sufficiently for the challenges of the Samburu environment. Some of the trained teachers faced serious problems of isolation, low fees and lack of professional support. The project also failed to substantially increase the low rate of pre-school

attendance in the district. However it did provide a useful policy framework and institutional structure for ECD programs to build on (DICECE) .The Samburu DICECE could develop culturally appropriate curricula and use of mother tongue education and even teaching aids in local language were encouraged. The real turn around in terms of project direction came in 1995 when a study of existing child rearing practices amongst the Samburu was carried out. This process led to a completely new atmosphere with the parents and communities, because the study directly involved them and drew on their knowledge and experience for the first time. The objective was to revive and enhance the traditional child rearing practices and to strongly focus on promoting ownership of the project by the parents and the community.

Samburu ECD program 1996 to present.

In 1996 a tripartite partnership was formed between the Kenya Institute of Education, Christian Children's Fund and the Bernard van Leer Foundation in order to improve the well being of young children in Samburu district in terms of health, nutrition, education and early stimulation. The program started working with two CBOs affiliated with CCF in Kirisia and Baragoi divisions of Samburu district, reviving the traditional loipi system of communal child care, ensuring full participation of parents and the community. In 3 years time the program spread from the two locations to 6 locations covering almost the whole district. Today there are 83 loipi centres all over Samburu district.

Traditional childcare: In Samburu culture children belong to the community as a whole. Children are treated with great tenderness and love by both the parents and the community. They are also highly valued as a source of wealth and continuity for the community. The Samburu have sound child rearing practices. Traditionally grandmothers

were left to care for young children as parents went out for grazing, fetching water or collecting firewood. Often the children were cared for in communal enclosures known as loipi (shade or enclosure). These loipi were often located under a big tree where the children could play and rest. Traditional values were passed on through story telling, songs and games and the children had the opportunity to socialize. Growth was monitored using beads and parents supplied milk for the children and a piece of cloth for sleeping. In turn, the community supported the grandmothers by collecting water and firewood for them.

The Samburu ECD program introduced the following modern aspects of health care and education into the loipi system:

- 1) Health activities include regular growth monitoring, immunization, de-worming, vitamin A supplements and treatment of common diseases
- 2) Educational activities to stimulate children include:
Physical activities, using toys, materials, games and play structures made by the parents (tunnels, miniature manyattas, slides, swings etc)
Oral activities (songs, riddles, poems, stories and lullabies)

There are also community development interventions with direct benefit to children's development that are integrated into the program: clean water, improved household food security, parent education on health, hygiene and nutrition.

The loipi is meant for children between the ages of 0-4, at the age of 4 the children go to the pre-school if there is one. If no pre-school exists then pre-school activities are incorporated into the loipi until the children are old enough to go to primary school. There are now 5,200 children enrolled in the loipi programme.

Samburu district, despite the fact that it is the second poorest district in Kenya has the highest percentage of children in pre-school, 54%, whereas the national average in Kenya is 35%. This high enrolment is also having a positive effect on transition to primary school although drop out rates in the upper classes are still very high. The integrated interventions in health, household food security, clean water and parent education are benefiting around 27,000 children and their families in Samburu district.

Lessons learned based on a recent study carried out by International Extension College (IEC)

Methodology:

To conduct the study, a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were used, including semi-structured interviews with adult and youth members of communities where Loipi exist, caregivers in the loipi, children in primary schools, teachers and heads of primary and pre-primary schools, government officials and NGO staff, both youth volunteers working to support the Loipi and CCF staff in Samburu and national offices.

Effects on the community as a whole have been positive. The communities involved with the Loipi programme appear empowered, coming from a background of disempowerment arising from recent stresses and trauma. From being fleeing victims dispossessed of their

lifestyle and livelihood, and with their future under attack and their children suffering and dying, they have in some measure been transformed into communities with an improved future and with a better lot for their youngest children than they had had before, and one certainly better than they would have had in the current context without the Loipi intervention. Benefits of the community development programme which are linked to but beyond the direct ECCD interventions include improvements in a range of aspects of community life which indirectly impact beneficially on children's welfare, including:

- Enhanced social stability
- Access to health care
- Livelihoods and income generation
- Crop cultivation
- Food security
- Community bonding and restoration
- Recognition of traditions, culture and identities
- Strengthened harmony and links between Samburu, Turkana and Pokot communities

This is not wholly a case of dependence on provision of external NGO or funding support. By providing a facilitating environment, the programme has enabled communities now to access health and education services which they were otherwise not in such a good position to do. Likewise, the re-establishment of communal childcare by grandmothers and others within the community has enabled mothers to go to undertake livelihoods with which to sustain their families. The associated adoption of small-scale

cultivation of crops in some instances, for cash sale and for eating, is a positive gain to the community and its food and economic security.

Lessons learned so far:

- The Samburu ECD project is original in that its approach has been developed in situ in close collaboration with parents, community, government and NGOs.
- It is not a static project, as demonstrated by how it has spread to other communities by itself. Communities are implementing the approach in their own way which may differ from the original project but which is appropriate to their circumstances. For instance, women's groups in the neighboring Rendille, Borana, Turkana and Gabra communities have adapted the loipi concept into their own cultural context to enhance quality care and development for their children at infancy/toddler stages and increase access to pre-school education for the pre-school age children (4-7).
- It was made possible because an enabling policy environment exists in Kenya which allows for culturally and contextually appropriate interventions to be implemented
- Motivation through training opportunities and project exchange visits for volunteer parents is important

Sustainability and Challenges to sustainability of the program

- The loipi programme is based on traditional approaches and it values the positive in the communities' traditional culture, rather than being an alien intrusion

- Communities are motivated through seeing benefits to their children and to the wider community, in terms of children's health, development and education
- The bulk of materials used in the loipi are locally made and produced, using community labour and expertise
- Caregivers are community members, supported by their fellows and bound together by communal responsibility for their children
- The concept and activities of the loipi are reasonably compatible with mobility, not dependent on substantial buildings
- Community members are trained and supported to carry out activities such as growth monitoring and health promotion.
- Complementary inputs from a range of bodies including governmental education and health sector offices, CBOs and UN agencies, spread the institutional support beyond the catalytic role of CCF
- Income generation and food-security activities complement the ECCD activities (eg, market gardening in containers and larger, irrigated kitchen gardens, and provision of small loans to develop businesses) and sustain the overall community economy and well-being
- Peer-to-peer sharing of ideas and experience 'horizontally' among loipi is a stronger and more valid alternative to isolated innovations with 'vertical' support between a community and the supporting CBO

Challenges to sustainability are the following:

- Resources that are beyond the scope of the communities to provide are required to run the loipi programme in its full form and in the longer term (including

- technical guidance and organisation, funds for honoraria and some materials and food)
- Change is a slow process, and the results are difficult to entrench once external support has been removed
 - Poverty remains a predominant contextual factor exerting pressure against community and organisational persistence in the innovation
 - Deterioration of loipi play apparatus and buildings through weathering is rapid, requiring constant renovation
 - Parents associate the loipi programme with the CCF-supported project, and may be dependent on the focal point and leadership of an NGO or CBO
 - Motivation to work on a voluntary basis, by caregivers, other community members and youth volunteers, may have a finite duration
 - Land and forestry resources (for loipi sites and apparatus, respectively) are in short supply and need to be negotiated with local authorities.

Next steps:

The current district wide project is trying to ensure a wider impact of the “loipi” approach in the East Africa region. Other partner organizations have been convinced of the approach such as Save the Children, and UNICEF. Networking visits have taken place with the Maasai, Karamojong, Pokot, Oromo and the Ovahimba. A regional conference on ECD in nomadic pastoralist and hunter gatherer societies took place in Samburu in 2004, with participants from Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Namibia, Botswana and Nigeria.

The elements of the program that are replicable in other contexts are:

- the important role of grandmothers in childcare
- valuing and respecting children
- care as a community responsibility
- making a special place for children to gather which is secure and enhancing to their daily experience and accessible to all the community
- social reconstruction and wider community development as a co-commitment of ECCD
- incorporation of health and nutrition support into the ECCD programme, based at the loipi sites
- preparation of children for their progression into formal pre-primary or primary education whilst avoiding the distortion of ECCD into accelerated commencement of primary education.

The link between poverty and learning outcomes

Malnutrition and ill health (often poverty related) can significantly damage the cognitive processing ability of poor students. Students whose processing capacity is impacted by ill health and malnutrition may require more hours of instruction to learn various skills. Early Childhood Education along with health and micronutrient supplementation in young children may prove critical in achieving Education for All in low income countries or areas. These very effective interventions require close and sustained collaboration between Ministries of Education and Health. (Pedagogy of Poverty World Bank 2005).

The loipi project intervention design is based on this understanding. As children are facilitated to learn new experiences their health and nutrition status is monitored and food supplements including micro nutrients (Vit A) is provided. From statistical comparison between pre-school enrolment in Samburu and enrolment in Mandera, it is evident that loipi contributed significantly to the increased enrolment of children in pre-school in Samburu district. Pre-school and lower primary school assessments indicate better performance of children who participated in the loipi program compared to those who joined pres-school straight from home.

Response to the current drought situation in Kenya

The program has also proven successful in mitigating the effects of the current drought on young children and their families. CCF, UNICEF and the Catholic church are able to use the loipi as supplementary feeding centres and to monitor children's health in the drought stricken Eastern and Rift Valley provinces. Part of this monitoring includes de-worming and distribution of Vitamine A supplements.

Loipi were the most appropriate feeding centres for the under five children during the drought of 2005/2006. Organizations such as UNICEF, CCF, churches and WFP through the Ministry of Education school feeding program used the loipi to

- carry out initial nutritional surveys to collect data necessary to mobilize resources through proposals to get food to feed the starving children
- feed children as they monitor children's nutritional levels
- collect and analyze demographic data on under five children

Loipi also acted as child protection centres during the recent tribal conflict between the Pokot and the Samburu. Displaced children were referred to the loipi and some of the reconciliation and peace making used the same loipi as the venue.

The Samburu people were introduced to new farming practices such as perma-culture, cultivating vegetables, to not only feed children at home but also in the loipi.

Loipi have stimulated more people to raise camels in order to have milk for the children in the loipi during times of drought.

Loipi have also given mothers more time to engage in gainful economic activities such as bead work and other handicrafts.

Conclusion

Governments in Sub-Saharan Africa allocate between 5 and 25% of public expenditure budgets to education ministries, because education is seen, correctly, as a major contributor to human welfare and social and economic development. Yet it is clear that these large expenditures are sub-optimal, that is, provide less than the expected return. Most indicators of output and quality of African education systems bear little comparison with most of the rest of the world. For example, according to recent UNESCO statistics levels of repetition, and dropout are unacceptably high and indicate that in general SSA educational systems are inefficient and of poor quality. Further a number of factors external to the education system contribute to their inefficiency and low quality, namely—

malnutrition, poor standards of personal and public health, HIV/AIDS (social, health and economic effects) and conflict.

Within these systems relatively little is spent on early childhood education or development, yet we believe strongly that appropriate investment in ECD is a more efficient intervention for the improvement of educational systems than remedial programmes later on. They have a high payoff and cost less with more dramatic and persistent results than interventions at other education levels.

Research has shown that ECD programmes provide a range of benefits for the individual, family and community that make them eminently suitable for Sub-Saharan Africa. ECD programmes provide an opportunity for early interventions that can have a significant impact on the lives of poor and marginalized children. The evidence for the benefits of ECD will be presented below in three broad strands.

The first strand is that the period up to 8 years of age is of supreme importance for emotional, intellectual and social development, that interventions at this stage can have strong and lasting impacts on their health and welfare as adults and that opportunities foregone at this stage can rarely be made up for at later stages. Therefore, governments should develop realistic and effective strategies for intervening at this stage and not wait until primary school to begin human capacity building. Well-designed ECD programmes, that is, those that combine health, nutritional, educational and social interventions, can redress the damage resulting from poor nutrition or environment during the early months. In a context within which the proportion of children born into and growing up in poverty

is increasing every year, it is clear that ECD programmes should demand even greater attention and resources within the education sector.

The second strand is the growing research/knowledge base that demonstrates that children who have experienced ECD interventions, or at a minimum pre-primary schooling, do better in school than those who have not. Specifically, those children who attend ECD programmes are more highly motivated, perform better and get on better with their classmates and teachers. ECD graduates are therefore less likely to dropout or to repeat. Therefore the cost of their schooling is reduced and primary and even secondary education is more cost-effective. Further, ECD in itself can spur educational participation in a region of the world that lags behind on most educational indicators.

The third strand centres on the non-educational impacts of ECD that lead to better employment records, increased family formation and a reduced likelihood of engaging in criminal activities. Further, the evidence is strong that these effects are greater for girls and children from poor or disadvantaged communities. Consequently, ECD can have a generalised positive impact on economic development and contribute towards the reduction of gender, income and cultural inequities.

Much of the evidence for this comes from the North, but much research has been done and continues to be done in the South. The findings from both geographic areas are consistent with each other. Evaluations have been carried out for many large programmes some for up to four decades after the children have experienced the programmes. They show an amazing return on investment of 1\$ to 7 \$ for every child that went through a quality ECD program. Many of these programmes were set up specifically for poor or

disadvantaged children and the evidence of strong positive impact, lasting into adulthood, for these children is a particularly robust dimension of the case for ECD in Africa in particular amongst pastoralist communities.

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