

Influencing and developing good policy in Early Childhood Development (ECD) amongst pastoralist communities in East Africa

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Early Childhood Development

Early Childhood Development (ECD) projects in Africa must strike a delicate balance between rigor and cultural sensitivity. The value of such programs, which aim to help pre-school-age children overcome poverty and thrive in later schooling and social life, is not generally disputed. However, assembling a functional program is easier said than done. This is especially true for societies, such as pastoralist communities in sub-Saharan Africa, for whom schooling is a low priority due to their nomadic way of life. In order to be effective, ECD programs should involve all segments of the community and build on the particular strengths, structures and goals of the society in question.

The research summarized in this brief evaluates the successes and constraints of an ECD target site in the Samburu district of northern Kenya. Largely inhabited by nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists, the Samburu have recently been plagued with recurrent drought, unrest in neighboring countries and various problems associated with gradual sedentarization. In this environment, pre-school programs are understandably not a paramount concern. Earlier attempts to set up EDC projects in Samburu resulted in failure. EDC teachers did not solicit the involvement of the greater community and thus found themselves isolated and without the requisite support. School enrolment rates failed to rise for those children who participated, as they had in other, more successful programs.

Lessons learned from the earlier failures of ECD projects in Samburu were subsequently used to modify and improve the structure and program content. The Samburu District Center for Early Childhood Education (DICECE), in collaboration with the Christian Children's Fund (CCF) and with technical and financial support from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, developed culturally appropriate curricula by adapting and enhancing traditional child-rearing methods and placing ownership of the project in the hands of the parents. Called the *loipi* method, this technique solves problems faced by other programs by embracing, rather than fighting, cultural differences.

Samburu ECD Program, 1996-Present

In keeping with the aforementioned strategy of adapting traditional child-rearing practices into new ECD projects, a tripartite venture by the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE), CCF and Bernard van Leer Foundation has been working since 1996 to integrate the traditional *loipi* Samburu system of communal child-care into an appropriate ECD program. The program has expanded from two *loipi* centres upon inception, to six such centres three years later, to 83 today.

The *loipi* system places child-care responsibilities in the hands of the entire community, not solely with the parents. In the traditional system, children were placed under the care of the community's grandmothers in a shaded enclosure (or *loipi*). As the grandmothers

entertained and educated the children with songs, stories and games, the parents were free to supervise the maintenance of the community, gathering water, food and wood. The new Samburu ECD program augments the traditional loipi system by adding the following services and features:

1. Health Activities: the collectivised setting is used as an opportunity to administer growth monitoring, vitamin supplements, immunizations, and treatments for common diseases.
2. Educational Activities: in addition to traditional songs and games, the children are provided educational toys, play structures, and other avenues to advance intellectual and physical growth.
3. Community Development: some parts of the program designed to help children affect the entire community's well-being, including improved water access, food security and parent education.

Designed to carry children through to pre-school age—it services children up to four years old—the ECD program has been very successful at preparing children for later schooling. Though Samburu is Kenya's second-poorest district, it leads the country in percentage of children in pre-school, exceeding the national average by nearly 20%. Transition rates to primary school are also very high, though the dropout rate increases in the upper years.

International Extension College study

Individuals representing the entire breadth of the Samburu community were interviewed for this study to assess the effect the ECD program has had. The response was overwhelmingly positive; many and diverse aspects of Samburu life have been improved, including health levels, social stability, and relations with neighboring ethnic communities. These successes are not exclusively attributed to external organization and resources. The program has given these communities access to health and education services that can be internally sustained. Likewise, the re-establishment of communal child-care by grandmothers and others within the community has enabled mothers to undertake employment through which they can sustain their families and improve their communities' wealth.

The success of the Samburu ECD project, developed through close cooperation between parents, community, government and NGOs, is evident in how its childcare model has spread of its own accord to neighbouring communities, where it has been adapted in keeping with those communities' respective traditions and cultures. The policy environment of Kenya, which allows for contextually and culturally selective programs, is cited as a contributing factor to the success of the project.

Sustainability and its Challenges

The strengths of this program, and the factors which suggest its sustainability over generations, centre on its generally holistic and organic structure. The program is based in traditional practices, circumventing the natural scepticism that indigenous communities may have for Western intervention. The drive to continue the program comes from within the community, rather than from outside pressure, as community members are motivated by the improvement their children begin to show. Local materials are used in construction

of the loipi, and community members are recruited to run it, both of which suggest that self-sufficiency is feasible. Perhaps most importantly, the loipi concept has already begun to spread on its own (as described above), indicating that the program can survive and expand independently.

Some concerns regarding sustainability do remain, however. Some of the resources necessary to run a loipi properly are beyond the scope of a nomadic community acting alone, and may be difficult to maintain after the framework of NGO support is removed.

Conclusions

Broadly, the ECD loipi program improves pastoralist societies through three avenues, by 1) providing development scaffolding in the extremely sensitive and often overlooked years before primary school; 2) improving the subsequent academic performance of its students; and 3) effecting non-educational improvements to the society as a whole, reducing gender and income inequalities and providing a generalized positive impact.

A child's developing mind performs amazing feats of growth in the first five years of life. This cognitive expansion sets the groundwork for all of the learning, both academic and social, that a child will eventually accomplish. But that child simply cannot approach his or her full potential without certain levels of nutrition, health, and stimulation that are necessary to fuel cognitive growth in the early childhood years. The loipi project, and ECD programs like it, satisfies all three of these needs in an efficient, flexible and culturally appropriate package, providing at low cost a service that is important to the future of pastoralist children as those children are to the future of their societies.

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