Advanced knowledge about the importance of early childhood development (ECD) has heightened the interest in appropriate models of quality ECD, especially in low-income communities. ECD provides a strong foundation for entering school with the social, emotional, and pre-academic skills needed for learning. This brief explores some of the policy options, models and their implications for countries investing in quality early childhood education.

The scope of the challenge is daunting but one that needs to be urgently tackled. Over a third of all children are found in Africa, and yet they are the most vulnerable as just under half of all children who die before reaching the age of five are found on the continent. Most die from easily preventable infectious diseases; which in part are related to the low educational attainment of mothers, among other poverty related factors. Further, Africa lags behind most other developing regions in achieving the MDG target on underweight children. Although Africa has seen a significant reduction in the past decade, some 32 per cent of the world’s malnourished children come from this region.

Over half of African women aged 25 years and above and 30 per cent of women aged 15-24 are estimated to be illiterate in 2015. In the absence of concerted action, there is a serious risk that even in the 2030s, at least one third of Africa’s female labor force could be illiterate, and more than one third of its children could be born to illiterate mothers. Children with illiterate parents are less likely to go to school and, once in school, do not perform as well as their peers. Given the research about the positive impact of women’s literacy and numeracy in areas such as women's empowerment, child and family welfare and productivity, it is of concern that more attention is not given to this serious global development issue.

Although ECD is not the panacea, it is increasingly recognized as a key strategy that, if effectively implemented, can break the vicious cycle of poverty and limited potential. Nevertheless, recent research indicates that if it is to have a positive effect on the poorest sectors of the population, there are some key enabling conditions that need to be in place whose absence may otherwise lead to widened inequalities.

Is there an equally compelling argument for investment in ECD in low income countries? Protagonists argue that in terms of redressing inequity, the playing field has the highest chances of being levelled early on, and ECD programs have a higher impact for young children from poorer families. Economically investing early prevents higher costs down the road than later interventions. Also, ECD can be a platform for health promotion by coupling it with various initiatives such as health education, immunization and good nutrition programmes.

Despite this position, it is important to keep in mind that there are numerous models of ECD programmes and no one size fits all. Findings from across the globe indicate that children from different backgrounds will have different needs and will react differently to various types of care. While research indicates value-added benefits in pre-school education for the 3 years and above age group, the findings are ambivalent about the developmental impact on children between the ages of 0-3 years. Some research further argues that group care of the 0-2 year age group produces negative effects such as anti-social behaviours. Recent research in South Africa in 2014 on the public provision of pre-school is challenging some widely held assumptions on the cost benefits to the poorest wealth groups of the population.

Hence, it is important to carefully consider the implications of investing in ECD programmes, both in terms of their development impact on children and on the costs of different models, particularly for countries with limited resources.

The dynamics of childcare are influenced by variables related to both quantity and quality of provision. Critical factors include support from the extended family, mothers going back to work in the first year of the baby’s life, and whether provision is part time or full time. Childcare by relatives has been
found to have a positive effect in improving children’s social development while some studies argue that infants under the age of one, whose mothers work, are likely to be at a disadvantage. This represents a form of cyclical disadvantage where those from low income communities may seek employment in order to support their children and, while doing so, be forced to leave them in questionable childcare. There is also evidence to show that, contrary to conventional wisdom, part-time and full-time provision of pre-school have the same impact on children’s development – indicating that more expensive full-time provision may actually be a waste.

Conventional wisdom advocates for universal provision of quality ECD. However, there are some models of high quality ECD which are prohibitively costly and their impact is questionable on children from different wealth groups. Some research suggests that the quality of ECD makes little difference for children who are not economically disadvantaged. Conversely, other research notes that poor quality ECD has a negative impact on cognitive and language development. A third option, high quality associated home visits, has been found to be very effective.

The combination of these findings can produce an interesting mix of provision across social strata. For example, middle to high income countries may provide standard ECD services universally while targeting specific resources towards disadvantaged children only. Low income countries may choose to focus entirely on providing the best care to the most disadvantaged. This option, however, is also problematic. The provision of specific care to a particular group is likely to be a centralised affair. Research has shown that clustering at risk children tends to perpetuate the same types of behaviour, suggesting that at risk children would benefit more from being in the presence of well-adjusted children.

**Quality Factors of ECD:**

1. Adult-child interaction that is responsive, affectionate and readily available.
2. Well-trained staff committed to their work with children.
3. Safe and sanitary facilities accessible to parents.
4. Ratios and group sizes allowing staff to interact appropriately with children.
5. Supervision that maintains consistency.
6. Staff development that ensures continuity, stability and improving quality.
7. A developmentally appropriate curriculum with educational content.
9. Strong support services i.e. administration, health and nutrition.

**ECD Policy Developments in Africa**

The ECD sector is predominantly supported by providers outside of government in most African countries – including faith based organisations, NGOs and the private sector. With regard to the public sector, government policy on the right to ECD services is mixed in most African countries. There is a tendency to segment ECD policy into line ministry mandates. Given the new emphasis on the value of pre-primary education, many ministries of education are adding pre-primary grades to their primary schools. Similarly, ministries of health, gender and social welfare are promoting strategies on health, nutrition and women’s literacy to support mothers with young children. The degree to which they are integrated varies across countries. The most comprehensive policies articulate how responsibilities are shared between the household and private and public schools as well as civil society and international agencies.

According to work produced by the Knowledge Network for Early Childhood Development for the World Health Organization, countries that have made advances in ECD ‘are those that have developed and implemented a coherent inter-sectoral, multi-level policy that is broadly understood and supported.’

**ECD Models**

Early childhood education policies tend to focus on the delivery of pre-primary education, with a concern on ensuring minimum standards on curricula, environment and teacher qualifications. There is a tendency, particularly among SADC countries to conceptualise ECD provision using a costly formal model, similar to that of primary education. Some countries such as South Africa are exploring alternative models. These would determine the norms and standards for provision, offer in-service teacher training to paid or volunteer care-givers and allow the hosting of ECD centres in private homes or non-traditional spaces.

Strong government-led national policy and regulatory framework development have contributed to the success of ECD.

1 http://www.who.int/social_determinants/resources/ecd.pdf
implementation in countries such as Mauritius, Mali, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa and Zimbabwe. These countries have largely relied on existing structures, universities and teacher training colleges to increase teacher qualifications. The challenge of both unqualified and under-qualified teachers working in ECD centers remains despite these efforts. Low salaries and inadequate incentives contribute to the increasing employment of unqualified staff at the centers. This is in addition to inadequate teaching and learning materials and minimal supervision and monitoring of ECD services.

When all is said and done, it must be remembered that gains produced through intervention in the ECD years diminish over time unless a concerted effort is made to sustain them. In order to achieve this ECD must become part of a larger country strategy and include the recognition of non-governmental actors, the private sector, communities and parents in supporting children’s growth and development.

**Costing ECD**

One of the major challenges education policymakers in Africa face is how to reduce inefficiencies as well as inequity in the allocation and use of financial and human resources in educational systems. Sometimes it is found that relatively high cost interventions do not produce the expected outcomes in terms of learning achievements, or even in keeping children in school.

Spending on ECD occurs at different levels of government, across multiple government agencies, by the private sector and by households. There is no consolidation of these different funding flows to present a full picture of how much countries are investing in their children. Attempting to aggregate such data is a complex endeavour. Variation in cost estimates may reflect the quality, intensity of program inputs and duration. Three complementary aspects of cost may play a role in this respect: financial sustainability, cost-efficiency and the relationship between spending and expected benefits. Under the common label of ECD, activities may exist which have a very different content, mode of implementation and costs.

A recent study conducted in South Africa on the cost benefits of providing pre-primary grades in the public sector, where some 90 per cent of those enrolled in these grades are located, provided some surprising findings. The impact of ECD programme is mixed, with no correlations on learner retention and outcomes among learners from the poorest three quintiles but slight improvements among learners from the wealthiest population quintiles. The overall effect was to widen inequalities between wealth groups. High government expenditure at an estimated USD 385 per learner per year in 2012 calls the cost effectiveness of the programme into question. The study authors posited low quality ECD as a possible reason for the poor outcomes, attributed to limited capacity, weak supportive framework, unavailability of good teachers and weak parental support, among other factors. Recommendations include improving training of ECD teachers and availing guidelines on teachers and curricula.

A centre-based community driven pre-school model in rural Mozambique that provides ECD to children from marginalized backgrounds offers contradictory evidence. The intervention has increased the likelihood that children would enroll in primary school by 24 per cent and that they were significantly better equipped to learn compared to their counterparts not covered by the program. At a cost of USD 2.47 per student per month or USD 29.64 per year, this is significantly cheaper than the previous South African example. The model has managed to keep costs down by drawing on community involvement to identify sites and build structures as well as provide support by para-professionals. Training includes refresher courses and the establishment of experience-sharing networks with other para-professionals. Despite Mozambique’s financial and institutional constraints, the programme has proved that it is possible to offer quality ECD in a resource constrained context. The applicability of these findings should be tempered by the knowledge that the study was conducted in a well-managed setting and used a relatively small sample. Further, the programme’s sustainability could be in question given the ECD teacher allowances were paid by the programme in the first two years, and thereafter the responsibility is handed over to communities.

The comparative data on unit cost of public pre-schooling with primary schooling from four countries - Benin, Cameroon, Côte-d’Ivoire and Niger indicates that the unit cost in preschool (0.236 times the per capita GDP) is more than twice that of primary education (0.139 times the per capita GDP). A key driver of costs is the low pupil teacher ratios typically found in pre-primary grades. In the four countries mentioned previously, the average number of learners in pre-primary grades was approximately half that of the number of learners in primary grades, suggesting it was double the costs. Similarly, the corresponding figures for Sub-Saharan Africa were 27 and 45 learners per teacher respectively. Although there are wide variations among ECD programmes in terms of content and delivery models and intensity of inputs per child, these costs are influenced by location, scale and complexity. Catering for children with multiple and more complex needs require special and more costly services.

---

2 Ibid
3 This term is used in place of the term commonly used in South Africa, "Grade R"
4 Republic Of South Africa (2013) Policy Summary, Executive Summary & Report Summary The Impact Of The Introduction Of Grade R On Learning Outcomes By Prof Servaas Van Der Berg
5 Estimate calculated using expenditure per learner in 2012 and the Rand to United States dollar exchange rate in the same year
4. ECD framed as an inter-sectoral issue - The integrated approach fundamentally seeks to build cross-sectoral co-ordination systems, promote programme innovation, overcome gaps in knowledge, services and resources, and build cost-effective programmes that are culturally appropriate. The inclusion of health and nutrition, access to birth registration and social grants as some of the services offered by ECD can improve the value of the system as well as open the possibility to benefit from non-education budgets. Countries find the integrated approach to ECD policy planning helps all sectors contribute to improving child survival, growth, development and success in school.

5. New models of ECD provision. There is not one size fits all model. Traditional approaches—government-supported, highly paid teachers, formalized training, though desirable, is not a guarantee learners achieve high cognitive development scores. Caregivers do not need to be highly qualified and training for caregivers need not be formal. Short, focused, reliable, and contextualized training can be more efficient and less costly than most formal programs. However, pre-primary teachers need to be qualified but since their salaries consume a proportion of the budget, managing them well can make ECD more affordable.

6. Demand side financing as an option. The use of a voucher system and a greater level of school choice could increase access to information and ECD services. Vouchers have proved in some contexts to be an effective means to reform public and private education as they aim to attract choice pupils. Private education providers will also emerge while those already in operation will expand access if the demand is great enough. Funding strategies such as social impact bonds act as an incentive to government partners to get involved in ECD provision while also allowing government to regulate the sector.

**Recommendations**

We cannot afford not to invest in ECD. Not investing means a loss of opportunities but also contributes to the accumulation of inequalities and condemns generations to deprivation and under performance. Below are some recommendations on policy options countries could consider:

1. Changing perceptions. Strengthen parental and caregiver knowledge and skills in ECD. This will improve the public’s ability to strategically engage and support government at multiple levels to prioritize and operationalize ECD. Dissemination of evidence on the impact of ECD will improve household level demand for service and willingness to invest in pre-primary education.

2. Targeting of funds. Expand access to an age-appropriate continuum of quality ECD services which are gradually integrated across schooling, particularly among the disadvantaged communities. Where universal coverage can only be envisaged in the long run, provide targeted funding to ECD services among the poorest communities of the population.

3. Norms and Standards for ECD. While the private sector is a valuable partner, over-reliance on private funding perpetuates inequalities between children. There is a need to design an optimal mix of formal and community based activities, with providers complementing each other, while standards and policy issues are set by government with oversight to ensure compliance. A friendly policy outlook can encourage entrance of private players while safeguarding equity and access. Government has a key role in regulating and supporting quality implementation of ECD, including metrics for measuring and assessing impact.

---

8 ADEA (2014) AU Outlook on Education, Continental Report

9 Ibid