

Early Childhood Development Programs in Nepal: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a comprehensive examination of the contemporary landscape of Early Childhood Development (ECD) initiatives in Nepal, focusing on both their quality and accessibility. Through a meticulous analysis of secondary data, this study scrutinizes the current state of Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) centers, the pivotal roles of educators, and the efficacy and caliber of ECD programs, thereby elucidating the prevailing opportunities and obstacles. A high-quality ECD program is fundamental in extending developmental prospects to all children, including those facing adversities, by furnishing them with requisite care, support, and safeguarding. Realizing this necessitates concerted efforts from diverse stakeholders, entailing heightened investments in ECD and the advocacy of its developmental imperatives. Paramount among these stakeholders is the family, serving as the primary gateway to ECD interventions, underscoring the imperative for tailored interventions within familial contexts. Moreover, communities wield significant potential in augmenting ECD initiatives. Thus, a decentralized approach to ECD delivery across all strata of governance emerges as imperative. The realization of quality ECD hinges upon the convergence of multifaceted inputs, harmonized across various domains. By fostering synergy among these inputs, ECD programs can achieve their utmost efficacy and impact, thereby fostering holistic child development.

Keywords: early childhood development, quality education, teacher, decentralized institutions

Introduction

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is an integral component of the educational development of the country. ECD programs are the foundation of human development, and early investment lays a sound foundation for later life. It is considered to be one of the issues addressed in the fields of childcare, development, and education (Evans et al., 2007). It is believed

that 80% of children's brains develop within the first three years of life (Young, 2002). Therefore, children need special care and stimulation during their early days. Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) centers are one of the programs that provide such opportunities in the community/schools according to children's age-specific requirements.

The ECD programs aim at increasing understanding among parents and stakeholders, collaborating for sustainable early childhood care and development. The programs focus on providing the community with knowledge, skills, and attitudes for the holistic development of children at the family and community levels, utilizing locally available human and other resources, and integrating with existing functional institutions and authorities. Children at the ECED center must have the opportunity for their learning, choosing among sections of a well-structured and stocked classroom, including practical life (fine and gross motor skill development), sensorial (sensory and brain development), language, math, geography, science, and art. This will be achieved only when community members and parents understand the importance of ECD and support taking ownership of the programs. Well-trained teachers/facilitators are another key to the quality of services in the ECED centers.

Research has shown that the first eight years of life are crucial for optimal development (Taguma, Litjens, & Makowiecki, 2012). It is therefore imperative that deliberate efforts are made to give children the chance to grow up in an environment conducive to the development process. A comprehensive approach to providing this environment is the early childhood care and development program. This is concerned with the child's holistic development and therefore covers not only early learning and stimulation but also other areas, including health, nutrition, hygiene, and sanitation (Young, 2002; Barnett & Nores, 2012).

Early childhood is the period of growth and development that children go through from the time they are in the womb until they are about eight years old (Evans et al., 2007). This is because the unborn child is affected by everything the mother experiences while she is pregnant, and this often continues to affect the child's growth and development even after birth. Evidence shows

the likelihood of graduating from high school increases fourfold if children read at grade level by third grade, while chances of reading at grade level are doubled if children start school ready to learn. Quality early childhood interventions are the key to preparing children who are ready to learn (Guastafsson-Wright, 2014).

The experiences children have and the care and stimulation they receive during early childhood lay the foundation for every aspect of their lives in the future, including their health, nutrition, growth, learning, thinking, and reasoning abilities, as well as their behavior with other children and adults (The Consultative Group for Early Childhood Care and Development, 2013). Scientists now know that the quality environment during early childhood will affect the lives of children, including their growth and development. Research shows that the brain grows the most during these early years. Therefore, children learn best and fastest at this time. Children who get high-quality care and stimulation during early childhood are healthier, get along better with others, learn faster, and do better in preschool, primary, and high school (ELO Framework, 2015). When children have a high-quality early childhood environment, they become educated, productive, well-thinking individuals. As a result, the whole society benefits from better-educated citizens, a more productive labor force, and less crime and violence. Fewer persons will, therefore, need to depend on social services as more persons will have good jobs and earn better wages.

In this background, the Government of Nepal (GoN) has implemented ECD programs. To support and regulate ECD interventions, GoN has developed a National Policy and strategy for Early Childhood Development. The goal of the policy is to promote a comprehensive approach to ECD programs for children aged from conception to 8 years to safeguard their rights to fully develop their physical, socio-emotional,

cognitive, spiritual, and moral potential. The National Early Childhood Development Strategy (2077-2088 BS) has been developed in line with SDG 2030. The focus of the National Strategy is to speed up the implementation of the integrated ECD programs following the Nurturing Care framework.

The Nurturing Care framework refers to conditions created by public policies, programs, and services. These conditions enable communities and caregivers to ensure children's good health and nutrition and protect them from threats. Nurturing care also means giving young children opportunities for early learning, through interactions that are responsive and emotionally supportive. The Nurturing Care Framework provides a roadmap for action. It builds on state-of-the-art evidence about how early childhood development unfolds and how it can be improved by policies and interventions. It is a statement of intent underlining what should be done to ensure that Nepali children are given a fair chance to survive, grow, develop, and participate.

Methodology

This section deals with various theoretical backgrounds and the analysis of various secondary sources based on contemporary practices of ECD to find the opportunities and challenges in the Nepalese context.

Present Status of the ECD Program

The Constitution of Nepal, 2015, guarantees health, education, and Early Childhood Development as fundamental rights of children (Government of Nepal, 2015). According to the Constitution of Nepal 2072, the authority to manage and operate schools (Preschool to grade twelve) is given to the local government. The present education system has not completely transitioned to this new local structure. There may be a lack of human resources for developing, supporting, and monitoring at the local level for quality ECD programs. Local Governments are responsible for creating and regulating quality

learning environments for all children. However, the government has promoted 'schoolification,' increasing formal academic activities by reducing unstructured learning environments in the name of school readiness (Ring, O'Sullivan, & Ryan, 2019).

The School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) 2016–2022 focused on quality education with an emphasis on early-grade education. The plan aimed to improve the quality of education through equity, efficiency, quality, governance, management, and resilience of the education sector (MoE, 2014). The SSDP is prepared within the broader framework of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG, 2030), aiming to improve quality. SDG goal number four targets children's education and is responsible for early literacy skills. Among the seventeen goals of SDG, eleven goals (11 out of 17 goals) are related in one way or another to ECD.

The School Education Sector Plan (2022/2023–2031/2032 BS) aims to achieve several outcome-level objectives in a ten-year period. They are:

- Ensure quality Early Child Development and Education for all children
- Ensure access to Compulsory and Free Education and enhance quality
- Access and participation in school education for all children
- Enhance the relevance and quality of school education
- Make all citizens literate and provide them with life skills

In Nepal's federal government system, the National Planning Commission leads the National ECD Steering Committee, which includes the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MOEST); Ministry of Women, Children, and Senior Citizen; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Government; Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development; Ministry of Water Supply and Sanitation, and

Ministry of Home Affairs (NPC, 2021). Similarly, there are provisions for Provincial ECD Committees at the provincial levels, Municipality ECD Committees, and Ward ECD Committees in Local Governments as implementing units/structures. Among them, MOEST is the nodal ministry for all education (formal and non-formal) systems from ECD to university. Similarly, school education, governance, management, operation, and administration are under the LG's jurisdiction. The Ministry of Women, Children, and Senior Citizens is responsible for ensuring child rights such as survival, protection, development, and participation of children. The Health Ministry is focusing on pregnancy to age 2-based health and immunization programs such as Golden Thousand Days and nutritional support program. The Ministry of Agriculture is responsible for nutrition food security and so on. Despite so many structural arrangements, investment is low in ECD programs specifically for newborn and toddler development and learning. In this multi-sectorial context, Lombardi (2010) claimed that public policies that affect early childhood development collectively overlap. In Nepal, not only has policy overlapped, but ineffective coordination within ministries also contributed to the lack of effectiveness.

ECD is regarded as instrumental for the physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development of children. As such, it helps improve the internal efficiency of primary and basic education. According to the Flash report (2022-2023), a total of 40,656 ECEDs and Pre-Primary Classes (PPCs) were operational during the Academic year (AY) 2022/23, out of which 33,762 (83 percent) ECEDs/PPCs are school-based and community-based centers operated by the Government, 6,894 (17.0 percent) ECEDs/PPCs are privately operated, 538 (1.3 percent) ECEDs/PPCs are operated in traditional/religious schools. Of the Government-run ECEDs/PPCs, a total of 3,388 (8.3 percent of the total) are run by local governments. The goal of ECD programs is to ensure access for the most

vulnerable and marginalized children to holistic development opportunities. Though the trend shows an increase in the numbers of ECED/PPC (CEHRD, 2022), the access and quality of the ECD program are still in question.

According to the analysis, nearly 2.5 percent of children enrolled in ECED/PPEs at the start of the school year will not continue at the end of the school year. It is relevant to understand ECD professionals and their practice in 'school readiness at ECD centers/preschools' while reducing this type of dropout rate. At the same time, private PPE provision primarily consists of three-year programs spanning Nursery, Lower KG, and Upper KG, whereas ECED centers run by communities and community schools offer one-year programs for four-year-olds. To address such a situation, we must first understand what school readiness is and why early intervention based on the five domains of school readiness must be comprehensive.

Global Perspectives on ECD

According to the World Bank (2024), investing in the early years is one of the smartest things a country can do to eliminate extreme poverty, boost shared prosperity, and create the human capital needed for economies to diversify and grow. Early childhood experiences have a profound impact on brain development – affecting learning, health, behavior, and, ultimately, productivity and income. Globally, millions of young children are not reaching their full potential because of inadequate nutrition, lack of early stimulation, learning, and nurturing care, and exposure to stress adversely affecting their development. The challenge is substantial:

- In low- and middle-income countries across the world, almost 250 million children under the age of five are at risk of not reaching their full potential because of poverty.
- Worldwide, only 60% of all three to six-year-olds have access to pre-primary education.

- One in 200 children in the world is displaced, exposing them to the kind of stress that can undermine their development.
- Around the world, over 40 percent of children below primary-school-entry age – or nearly 350 million children – need childcare, but do not have access to it.

The holistic development (physical, cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional development) of young children from conception to eight years (from before birth until they transition to primary school) needs smart investment to provide a conducive environment to help them be productive and successful in a rapidly changing global economy. Evidence shows that if we invest in high-quality ECD programs that support children's health, nutrition, and early learning, we can improve learning outcomes and ultimately increase adult wages and productivity.

National Initiatives in ECD

The educational policy in Nepal has been reviewed several times to develop high-quality public schools with equity and accessibility (Bhatta, 2009). The periodic revision of the Education Act has tried to address the situational political demands of education. The National Education Commission (NEC) report in 1992 mentioned that the situation of teaching-learning in primary schools does not support the development of students' competency. There is a high rate of dropout and grade repetitions in the early grades. The Ministry of Education, under its Basic and Primary Education Program (BPEP) in 1997, started to take initiatives to open pre-primary classes to separate under-age children from Grade One and improve the teaching and learning situation in primary grades. Initially, the emphasis of pre-primary classes was not on the holistic development of children. After the inclusion of early childhood care and education as the first goal of EFA, the concept of PPC

has also been changed. The focus has shifted to the holistic development of children in ECD programs. The concepts and practices regarding ECD and pre-primary education are emerging as important foundations for further education and development, but they are still not part of the formal education structure.

The EFA National Plan of Action and the EFA Core Document 2004-2009 programs in Nepal made commitments to expand ECD provisions and improve the quality throughout the country to achieve the goals. Apart from this, an ECD Strategic Plan was developed in 2004 and implemented in 2005 by the then Ministry of Education and Sports to support the learning of primary grades. The country set a target to provide ECD services to 80 percent of children aged 3 – 5 by the year 2015. Similarly, it also targeted to have 80 percent of the children enrolled in Grade One with ECD exposure by 2015. The Tenth Five-Year Plan and the three-year interim plan mentioned that the ECD center was one of the strategies for increasing school enrollment and retention and reducing the repetition and dropout rate of children. The Department of Education (DOE), with the increase of significant numbers of ECD centers, has now started to focus on improving the quality of ECD centers by supporting learning materials, infrastructure, and facilitator training.

However, there are still questions regarding the access and quality of the ECD centers. The DOE has formulated minimum standards and early learning and development standards for the ECD centers to upgrade their quality. Moreover, most of the ECD centers are not aware of the standards, leading children to have poor development opportunities and preparation for formal school. The facilitator's training package was revised and implemented, but due to the high turnover of ECD facilitators, most of the ECD centers have untrained facilitators.

A baseline study of quality mapping of ECD services (UNICEF, 2014) shows that the ECD programs are targeted at children aged between

3 to 5 years; however, they are more focused on 4-year-old children. Most of these programs (community-based ECD centers) are merged with schools and skewed towards formal reading and writing rather than focusing on the aspects of holistic development (socio-emotional, physical, or cognitive) with little to no emphasis on health and nutrition. The facilitators were focusing on formal reading and writing in a rote learning way, ignoring child-friendly activities. Thus, ECD centers and PPCs, which educate children aged 3 to 5, were not included in the education (school) structure. As a result, the ECD/PPC centers have shown poor quality, low investment, and a lack of proper accountability.

To address all these problems, the ECD/PPC is included within the school structure in the Education Act, 8th amendment 2016. However, the new Education Bill is in parliament, and the school structures and their implementation plan are yet to be discussed.

Analysis of the Opportunities and the Challenges of the ECED Services

Even though Nepal has an excellent ECD policy, there has not been sufficient implementation to address the development requirements of children aged five and below. The analyses below are the result of consultations with various stakeholders at district and grassroots levels. The present status has been analyzed in terms of access, quality, and other key components of ECD.

The quality of the ECD centers is always under debate. CEHRD (then DOE) has developed minimum standards to maintain the quality of the center and the Early Learning and Development Standard (ELDS) for the quality of learning and development of the children. However, quality has not been achieved for several reasons. Most ECD classes currently lack adequate facilities, with limited capacity of the service providers. The quality of learning and development is directly affected by the quality of the teacher and the infrastructure. The classes are not

meeting minimum standards, and ELDS has not been applied to date. There is no provision for monitoring and support for the quality program. Quality is not an abstract term; it is contextual. Quality needs to be addressed as per the context, socio-culturally, politically, economically, and geographically. The blanket approach in training and operation without proper support and monitoring didn't work well.

Access. As mentioned in the ECD Strategy 2004 and EFA goal, "ECD centers will be established with program assistance in the areas with the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups that include 'D' and 'C' districts classified by the NPC." The expansion of ECD has taken place since then. However, the distribution of the ECD classes as quotas increased but couldn't reach the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. After including ECED within the school structure, the community-based ECD centers were merged into the schools. Thus, fair access has not been achieved for several reasons, including distance to the schools, poor quality services, geographical barriers, and limited capacity of teachers and service providers (NCE, 2015; UNICEF, 2014).

The data shows that only 41% of children from the lowest-income quintile but 83% of children from the top-income quintile attended pre-primary school in 2014 (CBS 2014). The MICS (2019) reported that more children from wealthier households attend ECD than children from poorer households. Key indicators for the 2019 round of MICS have been published, but data by income level are not yet available.

There are reports that the enrollment of ECD-age children shifted to private schools, but a recent newspaper article suggests that because of its money-making opportunities, private enrolment is being promoted locally over public alternatives. Multiple factors are likely influencing this shift to private pre-primary education:

- The positive effect of increasing per capita incomes, which enables parents to pay for private ECED/PPE;
- private pre-primary schools provide services for children as young as 2 years old; but mostly for 3 to 5-year-olds, while community schools only provide one year of ECED/PPE for 4-year-olds plus 2 years of ECED/PPE if demanded by the local community; and
- private schools are perceived to be of higher quality and/or are associated with greater prestige than community schools, because of the association of private enrolment with higher incomes.

Quality ECD Service to Children (4 to 5 Years). The SSRP shifted community-based centers for 3 to 5-year-olds to school-based one-year programs for 4 to 5-year-old children. Therefore, there are ECED classes in schools, preschools, daycare centers, Montessori schools, Madarsa, kindergartens, and other centers. However, access to all children is limited, and the quality of the service is in question. According to official statistics, in 2019, 87% or about one million pre-primary-aged children attended either an institutional or a community pre-primary school (ECED/PPE) in Nepal (CEHRD 2019b, Flash 2). This figure is lower than the enrollment figure of 2013, reflecting a decline in the pre-primary-aged population. Official pre-primary enrollment is divided between government community schools (56.4%) and private institutional schools and centers (43.6%) (CEHRD 2018c, Flash I). This nearly even division is a relatively new phenomenon because, in recent years, enrollment in pre-primary education has been shifting from community to institutional schools. Just 7 years ago, institutional school enrollment made up only 24% of the official pre-primary enrollment rate. In 6 years, the proportion of enrollment in pre-primary in institutional schools has increased by almost 20 percentage points.

ECD Center Infrastructures. Infrastructure is one of the indicators for the quality of ECD. Many ECED classes were running in poor infrastructure and were mostly inappropriate for young children. Classes in public schools are also characterized by poor ventilation, dusty rooms, poor lighting, temporary structures, and the absence of child-friendly sanitary facilities (toilets and clean water). Very few ECED classes had maintained the minimum standard of size and space of the classroom in terms of learning materials, seating arrangement, cross ventilation, display boards, etc. Many ECD classes did not have a minimum number of learning corners with sufficient materials. They also lacked locally made learning materials (UNICEF, 2014).

ECD Management. The ECD Operation Guidelines (2062) mentioned the formation of a management committee in both school and community-based centers. Almost all the schools have not formed a separate management committee. The school management committee has taken on the responsibilities of management; however, it is found that they are not giving priority to ECED quality. Most of those who are taking responsibility for the management committee are not aware of their roles and responsibilities. Capacity building of the management committee is not a priority of the government. Provision of a mother school was made earlier for monitoring and supporting the community-based ECD centers, which was not continued after merging the community-based center with schools. As the role of the head teacher is not specifically defined in terms of ECED classes, it is limited to monitoring the facilitator's attendance without proper supervision and monitoring. They are not supporting quality enhancement.

Facilitators (Teachers) Competency: The qualification of the ECED teacher has been mentioned as a grade eight pass earlier and revised to grade 10 later with one month of TPD (pre-and in-service) training. There are teachers with high academic qualifications as well, ranging from

grade 6 to Master's level degrees. The dropout rate of teachers is extremely high, which leads to the growing entry of newcomers, and most often, they start serving without training. Many teachers responsible for teaching nursery and kindergarten in private schools are untrained. Even if facilitators/teachers have been trained, most have attended short courses, and this is not adequate for the development of productive competencies.

There is a low level of motivation for the teachers. With low remuneration and the temporary nature of the job (without long-term benefits or provident fund), teachers were not developing their professionalism. The tendency of irregularities in work is also found in some cases, and there is no proper and timely monitoring of the teachers' performance. Ad hoc academic qualification, absence of training, and low motivation of the teachers are major reasons for inadequate productive competencies.

Curriculum and Curricular Materials: Centre-based ECD programs are very popular throughout the nation. The curriculum and the curricular materials are the key aspects of quality enhancement. ECED curriculum 2077 is approved and implemented by the Curriculum Development Centers (CDC). The teaching-learning approach does not follow the ECED curriculum. Even though there is a curriculum, most of the ECED classes do not follow it (UNICEF, 2021). Early learning and development standards are not used to assess the children's progress. There are curricular connections between grade one and ECED; however, teaching-learning approaches are not found linked with grade one, creating a gap in teaching-learning approaches in ECED classes and grade one. The conventional approach to teaching-learning is adapted in most of the ECED classes and private schools.

Resources and Capability: There are limited resources for the ECED programs both in schools and communities. A key one is the absence of

both human and financial resources adequately at the national, provincial, and local levels. Despite the availability of ECED minimum standards providing a quality framework and relevance of services, the standards are not reinforced, and service providers are not properly trained, coordinated, or regulated. There is a lack of coordination for resource allocation and minimizing duplication. There has been an ad-hoc allocation of budget from local government to support ECED programs, but these have not been properly designed or implemented. Owing to the lack of resources, the whole ECD system relies heavily on unqualified or underqualified volunteers, and thus, quality is compromised by this arrangement.

Institutional Arrangements (Leadership). ECD is a multidisciplinary program that requires a multi-sector approach. The key ministries responsible for ECD services are Education, Science, and Technology (MST), Health and Population, Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens (MoWCS), and Ministry of Federal Affairs and Governance Administration (MoFAGA). Other stakeholders include the private sector, international organizations (INGOs), NGOs, community-based organizations (CBOs), non-state actors, and the communities themselves. MOEST is the lead ministry for ECED after the inclusion of ECED in the school structure. The CEHRD has the key role of coordinating with the local governments for the access, quality, and governance of the ECED programs. The National ECD Committee has been formed under the leadership of the National Planning Commission (NPC) however, it has limited human resources to take a lead and speed up the process.

At the local level (Municipalities), bringing together different line agencies, and developing a framework of action for the integrated plan is the task of the Local ECD committee which is not formed yet except a few municipalities. The National ECD strategy highlighted to formation of Province and Local-level ECD committees

and the recruitment of an ECD coordinator. Only a few municipalities have appointed ECD coordinators with UNICEF support. It also lacks adequate staff and specific resources for the program. This reduces its effectiveness. ECD coordination and networking structures at community and Municipality levels are weak and inadequate, which in turn leads to low quality at implementation levels.

Several development partners have been supporting ECD programs. Their efforts and resources are not fully coordinated, because Municipalities do not have control over the issues of how partners allocate their resources. As a result, there are duplications of efforts and a concentration of services in limited areas only, leaving other areas poorly serviced. Many children are thus denied access to good quality ECD services. Basket funding of ECD services and good coordination mechanisms would improve this situation.

Advocacy and Awareness. ECD service is a basic need for all children. However, due to a lack of awareness and advocacy, many parents and key stakeholders are not giving proper attention to the need and quality of ECD services. Early stimulation and holistic development are abstract ideas for many parents. People rely on early reading and writing rather than holistic development. One of the factors hampering the delivery of ECED is its low visibility. Many people still cannot internalize the long-term benefits of ECD programs. The ECD Policy and Guidelines have not been widely disseminated. Only a few people appreciate the importance of ECD in a country's development. There is no budget line for ECD at the province and local level, and there are no events dedicated to ECD only in the district. As a result, the level of ECD awareness is very low throughout the nation. This resulted in a low level of support for this important (human) development intervention directly affecting the quality. Urgent action is needed to develop a communication strategy that will lead

to public awareness of the vital importance of the early childhood years and the value of investing in ECD at household, community, municipality, province, and national levels.

The Age Group of the Children. The dual structure in the ECD programs is adding confusion to the public in general. The community-based ECD program was a two-year program enrolling children of three years of age and now the ECED in schools is only a one-year program that has to enroll children of four years of age. However, underage children (two years and below) are enrolled in ECED in public schools and private schools' kindergarten classes. There is also the practice of making academically weak or new students enrolled in grade one participate in ECD programs despite being older. There are no age-appropriate facilities for these children at schools (ECED and kindergarten) and no parenting awareness programs conducted to support these children at home. This also affects the teaching-learning approaches and the quality of the services.

Monitoring and Evaluation. Constant monitoring and support is needed to improve ECED services. It is found that the monitoring system for ECD programs is yet to be formed. However, there are some practices of ECD supervisors in INGO-supported programs. The municipalities have not yet developed the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system for the ECD program however, some municipalities have begun recruiting resource teachers to monitor the schools.

ECD is an evolving discipline that can be integrated into each specific agenda. Constant monitoring and support are needed to improve the quality of ECD services at the community, local, province to national levels. A good M&E system provides the basic information for evidence-based decision-making and for designing demand-driven ECD programs.

The Way Forward

Based on the review and the reflections on the present status of the ECD programs the way forward is provided below:

Sensitize Policymakers and Planners for Effective Strategic Plan

Proper policies and guidelines are needed for the quality of governance and services from all levels of government. Unless and until the policymakers are not aware of the importance of the Early Years and the urgency to invest more during this period the quality of the services is always a challenge. Therefore it is necessary to sensitize the policy makers and the planners for effective planning and execution of the programs.

Enhance Access and Quality of ECD Services

The overall objective is to ensure that every child is given a healthy start in life. Increasing access to ECD will entail building structures in both urban and rural areas. These should be accessible to all (marginalized, deprived, disabled) people and fairly distributed geographically. The needs of marginalized children, such as orphans and street children should also be taken into account. Both home-based and center-based programs need to be implemented. To increase fair access, baseline mapping has to be done and the distribution and reallocation of ECED centers is required based on the recent data.

Increase Competency and Recruit the Most Qualified Teachers Facilitators, and Caregivers

The teachers are the responsible frontline workers to enhance quality services. It is recommended to increase the minimum academic qualification of the teachers to be grade twelve pass. All the ECED teachers, facilitators, and caregivers have to have pre-and in-service training along with periodic refresher training. The training package has to be revised and should maintain a blend of knowledge and skills. Periodic evaluation of the teachers, facilitators, and caregivers needs to be done, and refresher training should be provided as per the requirements. It is recommended to

start discussions for motivational packages like exposure, meetings, supportive supervision, reward and punishment, additional remuneration, and long-term benefits to the teachers.

Allocate Resources and Enhance Capability

The Centre for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD) is the coordinating body for the implementation of ECED at the national (central) level. However, the National ECD Committee at NPC needs to reform the network comprising, ECD experts practitioners, and academicians. CEHRD has to coordinate and initiate training programs for human resources at the provincial and local levels. Each municipality and provinces need to be sensitized to initiate the allocation of budget and create an ECD Fund in the respective Provinces and Municipalities. The fund can be utilized for the advocacy, quality, and support of infrastructures, learning, and play materials that are developmentally and culturally appropriate.

Raise Advocacy and Awareness

It is necessary to develop advocacy and behavior change communication strategies to raise awareness at national, provincial, and local levels, from the general public to authorities and corporate / business people. This can also be an important tool for advocacy with other line ministries (Health, FOFAGA, Women, Children, and Senior Citizens), line agencies, local authorities, corporate sectors, and international organizations for financial and resource investments in ECD. The advocacy and awareness-raising activities can be complemented by special events and activities dedicated to children's development.

Strengthen Collaboration

Leadership, partnership, and coordination can be strengthened by creating a forum for key stakeholders (including government, civil society, and development partners). The formation of the ECD Committees at national, provincial, and local and their capacity needs to be strengthened periodically to play the lead role for policy

development, budget allocation, coordination, and collaboration. Sharing and joint planning of the programs need to be started in coordination with I/NGO and civil societies for the ECD services and advocacy. The National ECD Committee has to take a leadership role in the upgrade, update, and periodic revision of the policy, strategy, and operational guidelines.

Enhance Monitoring Evaluation and Research for ECD

M&E of ECD are key priorities for the effective delivery of evidence-based ECD services. A strong M&E system with clear targets and indicators needs to be established to track and document implementation. ECD is an evolving discipline that is also related to different sectors. Thus, periodic multi-sectoral planning and reviews should be conducted every year to inform progress. Constant research is needed to improve ECD services, coupled with good M&E systems. These activities provide the basic information for evidence-based decision-making and for designing demand-driven ECD programs. A national research forum can be created to set the research agenda and disseminate results.

Sufficient Education Budget

It is proven that the investment in early years has long-term benefits for society and the nation. Allocation of budget in ECD needs to be increased with separate budget heads in all three levels of government (National, Province, and Local level).

Conclusion

The primary aim of this paper is to address issues regarding the enhancement of effectiveness and quality within ECD programs, particularly focusing on ECED, with the goal of providing quality learning and development opportunities to all children, including those facing challenging circumstances, by ensuring adequate care, support, and protection. This objective will be achieved through the coordination and consolidation of efforts among various key stakeholders, alongside increased investment in ECD and the promotion

of its developmental agenda. Special emphasis is placed on the family within the proposed interventions, as it serves as the initial point of entry to ECD. Communities also hold significant potential in this regard: ECD initiatives should be implemented through decentralized institutions at all levels. Quality outcomes are the product of coordinated inputs across various dimensions. ECD, when integrated into the school structure as a foundational element, must be recognized and supported with allocated resources (both financial and human) to enhance its quality.

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