

2019 Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Early Childhood Development (ECD)

*Working across sectors to promote nurturing and
sustainable environments for young children*

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ARNEC

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Matthew Rees (University of Sheffield) Policy

Introducing the *Physical Environment* onto ARNEC's Agenda - How Effective Has This Been?

Executive Summary

For the first time in its nine-year history, the 2019 ARNEC Conference expanded its area of focus to include the *physical environment* of young children. This was a bold move that incorporated and recognised the devastating effects that a child's physical environment, greatly impacted by climate change, can have on early development. Having previously focussed on the *policy, community and home environment* of a young child, the addition of this was a positive step in the right direction, uniting different academics, ministers and NGO's from across Asia and the Pacific Islands.

However, discussing and agreeing over the impact of the climate emergency on childhood development has ultimately proved frustrating and ineffective. The overwhelming consensus between different actors has been on protecting the youngest through reactive measures that aim to deal with the adverse effects of environmental change. This is the required first step, but it needs to be more ambitious. This policy report will argue that in order for a truly sustainable environment to be created, a proactive and radical plan will have to be developed by ARNEC and countries across the Asia Pacific region. If it doesn't do this, then the values it cherishes will become victims of the climate emergency.

Impact of the Climate Emergency on Early Childhood Development

Throughout the conference, the severity of air pollution was closely focussed on. The catastrophic effects on young children were highlighted in multiple ways, including the fact that:

- [93% of children](#) live in environments with air pollution levels above WHO guidelines.
- Air pollution affects the lungs, heart and brain. [Studies](#) have shown this to contribute towards pneumonia and behavioural disorders, whilst also impairing motor development.
- Of the 4.2million deaths attributed to ambient air pollution in 2016, 543,000 were from [children under 5](#).

Children are therefore highly vulnerable to the physical environment that they are faced with, especially when encountering unclear air. This was explained further by Reecha Upadhyay of the 'Clean Air Fund', who discussed how children are often banned from going outside or attending school due to the high levels of pollution, proving detrimental to their educational progression.

Additionally, young children are disproportionately affected by the displacement process that occurs due to the increased frequency of natural disasters. According to Kishor Mishra Key, of the population affected by environmental disasters, 50-60% represent children. By living in an area where there is a lack of stability, the developmental process is reduced significantly. Children may lose parents due to displacement and have schools destroyed by flooding. They are also affected physically and mentally, lacking the sufficient platform required for them to flourish in. The consequences of the climate emergency are therefore devastating and wide-ranging - already impacting on hundreds of millions of young children.

Responding to the Climate Emergency - Tackling Air Pollution

The issue of air pollution gained considerable focus over the conference. Some of the most polluted nations in the world are located in Asia and the [recent smog in Delhi](#), which saw

schools close down, was a topic consistently referred to. The subject of air pollution seemed to be the sub-area of the physical environment which generated the most proactive solutions.

For example, Carlos Dora, representing Colombia University, advocated using successful methods that already exist around the world to form effective solutions. This included following the 'low emission zones' seen in London, whilst also suggesting the banning of vehicles in the immediate vicinity of schools - something applied throughout Europe. These schemes have succeeded in exposing children to lower volumes of toxic particles and reduced the potential risks presented by their physical environment. In addition, these proposals are viable and possess the potential to be upscaled to deal with larger cases of air pollution.

However, despite Dora's thought-provoking presentation, the solutions proposed were merely offering slight changes to the current system. It did not seek to radically alter behaviours, such as the societal need to collectively reduce individual car journeys and increasingly use public transport in all aspects of life, rather than just in the vicinity of a school. By offering to reduce pollution in the surrounding areas of a school, it will still see children in other polluted regions significantly affected. Dora's approach is logical, highly valid and provides a baseline for gradual expansion to the macro level. However, given the current context of emergency, there needs to be a more ambitious plan that looks upon tackling the issue on the macro level, rather than only partly dealing with it on the micro level. The idea of building upon these ideas and then expanding upon them is too gradual and lacks ambition in such desperate times.

Perhaps the most succinct and comprehensive strategy put forward was by Bernadette Daelmans of the World Health Organisation (WHO). This presentation set about laying out the structural requirements for effective change to be implemented. Daelmans argued that a sustainable physical environment could be possible if multisectoral partnerships were formed, which could then infiltrate different entry points of government at the local and national level.

Daelmans focussed on the required process for initiating policy change, explaining the importance of bringing about structural alterations that could in turn affect people's behaviour - eventually creating a more sustainable physical environment. Had the focus been from this perspective from the onset and developed by the various experts attending, then a highly proactive outcome could have been achieved. This would have allowed for radical policy outcomes to be initiated, all with specific strategies in mind that could have been taken to various governments across Asia.

Responding to Climate Change - Improving Education

Despite the climate emergency being discussed with such urgency, the response over the conference was largely on reactive solutions, rather than proactive measures seeking to prevent the causes of the climate emergency and the protection of future generations of young children. It appeared that despite certain solutions being proposed, there was still a focus on working within the current system of mass consumption, travel and energy production

However, it is key to note that the focus on improving education during the 2019 ARNEC Conference was an important first step. With this being the initial year of the physical environment being on the agenda, it is wrong to expect radical solutions to be implemented immediately. When questioning representatives from 'Save the Children Bhutan' on whether more radical action could be initiated, they stated that there was a 'fundamental lack of education' on how to respond to an environmental disaster. This is a crucial point that is sadly the case globally and especially in large regions of Asia. Not

enough children and parents are aware of the effects of climate change and what to do when faced with it.

During the workshops, it became clear that producing safety measures is an urgent matter, with children lacking basic knowledge on what to do during a fire or flood. Therefore, this is an issue that ARNEC and countries across the Asia Pacific region need to firstly address and should do so as a priority. However, without an ambitious multisectoral programme being made that agrees to significantly reduce the contributory factors towards global warming, children will still be disproportionately victims of an unstable physical environment.

Numerous arguments were made to suggest that educating young children is an important objective that needs to be prioritised, as they are the next generation who can create a sustainable environment for the future. Although it appears reactionary, it is in fact a proactive and beneficial manoeuvre, possibly creating a generation who collectively want to protect the planet. Yet, this solution assumes that the climate will still be salvageable in a generation's time, when research has shown this to not be the case. Educating children is an imperative which needs to be done urgently. However, ARNEC and countries across the Asia Pacific region should look beyond this towards more preventable means that are suited to dealing with the current situation.

Dr Dora discussed the need to effectively 'frame' the issue at hand, using scientific facts to emphasise the importance of the matter. ARNEC and countries across the Asia Pacific region should follow suit and take this message on board. It needs to rebrand climate change as an issue that affects the most vulnerable children in society, using the stark facts and research conclusions that have been discussed over the past three days to draw attention to the issue. It needs bold government action and this could be a way of forcing it to happen.

Conclusion

Overall, the 2019 ARNEC Conference succeeded in meeting the objectives that it aimed to achieve. When discussing the threat that climate change presented the *physical environment*, the target of 'raising awareness' and 'sharing knowledge' certainly occurred. The decision to expand the conference's focus to include the physical environment was a necessary update and came to subsequently dominate the agenda.

However, to tackle the core instability surrounding children's physical environments, bolder action needs to happen. Discussing climate change and its consequences should have been talked about in detail many years ago. It is an issue that experts have been aware of for a long time, in particular the harm that it causes children.

On the whole, the 2019 ARNEC Conference was productive at discussing the issues at hand and understanding the measures being put in place across Asia and the Pacific. Yet, it would have been more effective to spend the three days compiling different expertise from across sectors into a succinct strategy that could have been used to initiate government policy. At the next conference, something like this will need to happen to ensure the protection of young children for current and future generations.