

Policy Brief: How Can Regional Collaboration Foster Strong Policies on ECD

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Abstract: In recent years, Early Childhood Development (ECD) has become a development priority which has been epitomised by its inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Zonji, 2018). However, ECD policies have been criticised for not adopting a multisectoral approach and relying on siloed sectors to develop policy (Young, 2010). Furthermore, ECD policies fail to reflect regional cohesion and consideration (Thacker and Moreno, 2015). The Pacific Regional Council for Early Childhood Development (PRC4ECD) is presented as a solution to these problems. The PRC4ECD is a council that brings 15 countries in the Pacific region together to coordinate ECD policies and initiatives. An interview with Dr Ifereimi Waqainabete Minister of Health and Medical Services in The Republic of Fiji and cochair of PRC4ECD explores how the world can learn from this progressive example.

In recent years, Early Childhood Development (ECD) has become a development priority which has been epitomised by its inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Zonji, 2018). ECD is categorised as the experiences, interactions and environments of children under 5 years old (Denboba et al, 2014). The growing advocacy of ECD has been fuelled by advances in neuroscience that highlight the fragility of early childhood in forming a solid foundation in our brain's architecture, from which, all of life's learning is built (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). One example of this, is childhood stunting that is caused by malnutrition, disease and a lack of psychosocial stimulation - impairing cognitive development and subsequently impeding educational performance and participation in the labour force as adults (Young, 2010; World Health Organisation (WHO), 2020). More alarmingly, research has found high levels of stunting in children under 5 in Africa and Asia, 40% and 39% respectively (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), 2013a). Altogether, this evidence has fostered the integration of ECD interventions into the development

agenda in an effort to sustain long term benefits to child development and future success (UNICEF, 2013b).

In response to the inclusion of ECD in the global development agenda, countries have begun to introduce policies designed to target early childhood through evidence based interventions (Britto et al, 2017). This suggests progress towards improving ECD, however, countries have been criticised for drawing up policies from a domestic perspective with a 'lack of regional cohesion' (Thacker and Moreno, 2015, p. 1). As a result, policy initiatives have not benefited from coming 'together to learn from each other, find common ground and work for the common good' (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2019, p. 8). This collaboration is crucial to develop coherent, 'successful and forward-looking approaches' to ECD policies (Urban et al, 2018, p. 8). Aside from the lack of regional collaboration, ECD initiatives have also been criticised for targeting isolated sectors in society such as health or education, rather than adopting a multisectoral approach (Young, 2010; Zonji 2018). For Salunke and Lal (2017), a multisectoral approach is imperative when developing strong and effective policies that pool various knowledges together. Therefore, countries should consider regional collaboration and the inclusion of multiple sectors when consulting on ECD policy.

Lessons can be learnt from the Pacific region who have established the Pacific Regional Council for Early Childhood Development (PRC4ECD) which brings together 15 Pacific countries to coordinate ECD efforts (UNICEF, 2019). An interview with the PRC4ECD cochair, Dr Ifereimi Waqainabete Minister of Health and Medical Services for the Republic of Fiji, explored how the council will improve accountability, accessibility, coordination and resource conservation (2019). Dr Waqainabete, explained how the council was created to help illuminate successful ECD initiatives that are often operating in silence and unrecognised (*ibid*). More specifically, one of the first stages is to map out the ECD interventions currently underway in each sector to learn from success stories and identify gaps that need attention (*ibid*). For Dr Waqainabete, this is particularly relevant for resource constraint countries because it will ensure projects are not duplicated and successful initiatives can be disseminated which will conserve vital resources

and target them where most needed (*ibid*). Moreover, the PRC4ECD brings together ministers from multiple sectors in society including health, finance, education and social welfare (UNICEF, 2019). The purpose of which is to share knowledge from a variety of sectors and to help influence policy from different perspectives (Waqainabete, 2019). Altogether, this dynamic approach will allow the PRC4ECD to benefit from a multisectoral approach (Salunke and Lal, 2017) and increased cohesion when developing ECD policies (Shawar and Shiffman, 2017; Thacker and Moreno, 2015).

To improve accountability the council has devised a ten-year plan and smaller targets to help achieve it (Waqainabete, 2019). The council has ensured the targets are inclusive and recognise the variable constraints felt throughout the region so that all countries can achieve them (*ibid*). Above all, Dr Waqainabete is a firm believer in the strength of regional collaboration and working together because everyone is interconnected and it takes a region to grow a child (2019). Moreover, he asserts that the world should take note of these developments in the Pacific region and introduce their own coordinating bodies to generate a high standard of ECD across the world (*ibid*). This view is supported by Hussein et al, who recognise that no single strategy ‘regardless of how large of successful it may be, can solve a complex social challenge’ (2018, p. 48).

The PRC4ECD is not the only body collaborating on ECD as there have been multiple networks set up to try and help drive discussions around ECD and encourage governments to prioritise it. Firstly, the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC) formed in 2008 provides a platform for a wide range of ECD professionals to share their knowledge and best practice with one another (2020). More recently, The Africa Early Childhood Network (AfECN) established in 2015 is a platform to champion excellence and encourage collaboration in ECD across the African continent (2018). Both of these networks advocate for the need to excel work on ECD and ensure improved quality and standards across their regions. Networks like this are great at sharing innovative ideas and pushing governments to commit to ECD.

Therefore, considering the purpose of these networks and the recent success of the PRC4ECD, a crucial step is to get governments to place ECD high on their

agenda. This commitment would allocate more resources and time to develop strong policies. Furthermore, there is good evidence that demonstrates the effectiveness of regional collaboration to develop coherent ECD policies. In conclusion, this policy brief will make 3 recommendations for governments to consider, in order to strengthen their ECD policies.

Policy Implications:

- Engage with other countries when consulting on ECD policies to learn from others experiences of ECD. Then use this communication to create a detailed map of ECD success stories and consider how these could apply to your specific context.
- Place ECD higher on the governments agenda and demonstrate how effective intervention could support the country economically and socially in the long term. Encourage all sectors of government to support ECD and invest in its development.
- Establish links with other countries with the aim of setting up a regional coordinating body to ensure effective and efficient ECD standards.

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