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## A Long-term Investment in Pakistan: early childhood education

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**ABSTRACT** This article explores the importance of early childhood education in the context of child development and focuses on Pakistan initiatives in the area of early childhood for long-term investment as child development and human development.

Investing in quality early childhood development is a 'hard' investment; it is as important to society as investments in bridges, roads, power and dams. (Mustard, 2002)

Learning begins at birth and continues throughout our lives. A child who develops well physically, mentally, socially, emotionally and intellectually during the early years is more likely to be a happy and productive member of the society than one who does not. Children whose basic health, nutritional and psycho-social needs are being met will develop and perform better than those less fortunate.

According to Mustard (2002), poor development during early childhood years affects key aspects of brain development; for example, it affects all body tissues during life including the immune system, and the brain development influences the cognition, imagination, behavior and skills.

Despite the enormous demand for early childhood education care and education, it remains a privilege for young children in most of the world's nine high population countries, known as the E-9 group (Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan), according to a report published by UNESCO (2003). The report, entitled *Early Childhood Care and Education in E-9 Countries: Status and Outlook*, finds that pre-primary education in the E-9 group is most developed in Mexico, where 76 per cent of children over three years are enrolled, followed by India (29 per cent), Nigeria (18 per cent) and Pakistan (8 per cent).

The World Education Forum (UNESCO, 2000) set early childhood education and care as a priority goal for human development. Pakistan visioned the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children. In order to translate the vision into an action and to meet the national goals, Pakistan launched a National Plan of Action for Children and the Social Action Program (SAP).

The National Plan of Action (Ministry of Education, 2003) of Pakistan identified three priority areas, and early childhood education was one of these priority areas to be considered. It has been designated as such in order to improve primary access and retention of young children, and provide them with opportunities for future success. Therefore, it is categorized in three phases: year 1 will focus on accessibility, and years 2 and 3 on accessibility and quality.

According to the latest Census Report (1998), the total population under 5 years old in Pakistan is 18.6 million, which is 14.2 per cent of the 130.58 million population of the country. In

the year 2000, the population in the three-to-five-year age group was 8.61 million (4.40 million boys and 4.21 million girls). These statistics force Pakistan to work harder in the area of early childhood education and care.

The importance of early childhood care and development (ECCD) or early childhood education (ECE) is now well-realized worldwide. In recognition of the long-term effect of good and quality initiatives in early childhood, Pakistan has initiated some programmes. Three examples are worth mentioning here.

- The *Teachers' Resource Centre (TRC)* is a non-governmental organization that has worked extensively in implementing ECE programs in the province of Sindh in Pakistan.
- *Releasing Confidence and Creativity (RCC): building sound foundations for early learning* is an ECE initiative funded by USAID and coordinated by the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF). This programme is being implemented by AKF and six partner organizations in the provinces of Sindh and Balochistan in Pakistan.
- *Aga Khan University – Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED)* Karachi Pakistan offers a certificate course in Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) to facilitate practising teachers' understanding of the subject, and become more effective practitioners in their classroom. AKU-IED also plans to offer an advanced diploma in ECED in the near future which will further develop the effective practitioners' skills and help AKU-IED to create a critical mass in this significant area.
- Besides the above-mentioned programmes there are other programmes being implemented by UNICEF, Plan International and Save the Children (UK) in various parts of the country.

To ensure the smooth implementation of the early childhood programmes and empower the public and private sectors, the Government Education Department has made the following quality inputs for ECE in Pakistan.

1. The curriculum wing of the Ministry has developed ECE curriculum in collaboration with the TRC.
2. Full-time teachers for Katchi class/pre-primary education are trained and recruited.
3. Instructional materials and activity-based learning materials are developed and provided free of cost to the low-income schools and children.
4. 'Play' has been introduced in ECE classes and integrated into the curriculum.

Despite all of the above-mentioned programmes and initiatives, provinces, district, communities and schools still lack awareness to plan, implement and monitor ECE programmes. There are still obstacles regarding making ECE successful in Pakistan, such as:

- lack of realization and awareness about the importance of the benefits of ECE among stakeholders (e.g. schools, teachers, parents and communities);
- absence of well-defined policy, laws and rules for ECE such as teaching strategies for young children, involvement of parents for enhancement of children's learning, appropriate curriculum and syllabus;
- pre-primary education has been recognized in the National Education Policy, but no formal measure has been undertaken to implement this policy provision at the school level, such as separate pre-primary classroom, trained teacher for ECE and resources;
- financial allocation to ECE is negligible, especially in relation to the needs of the children;
- lack of coordination among the various government departments related to ECCE and also among the different service providers, such as management of public schools, private schools, NGOs, and other related community-based organizations.

It is obvious that well-executed and well-targeted early childhood programs are indicators for Human Development (HD) and can stimulate improvements in education, health, social capital and equality that have both immediate and long-term benefits for the children participating in the programmes.

It is hoped that Pakistan will seriously look into the matter and immediately take the appropriate actions for the proper implementation of quality early childhood education programmes in our public and private schools.

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