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Regional Research on Achieving Inclusive Early Childhood Care and Development in Southeast Asia

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INTRODUCTION

In Southeast Asia, the marginalization of children remains a huge concern in achieving inclusive early childhood care and development (ECCD). Twenty-five million children living in multidimensional poverty (United Nations Children's Fund East Asia and Pacific, 2019) are in a disadvantaged position to receive high-quality ECCD programs, and therefore not only is their growth and development at risk but, in the long run, that of society in general as well.

Attendance of children in ECCD programs helps them to better perform in formal schooling, thus reducing the likelihood of repetition and early dropout (UNESCO-International Insititute for Educational Planning [UNESCO-IIEP] et al., 2019). Society benefits from children who participate in high-quality ECCD programs as it translates to higher earning, labor force productivity, stronger social attachment, and decreased social, economic, and gender inequalities (Heckman, 2015; Nores & Barnett, 2015). Addressing the inequities in achieving inclusive ECCD among children is a way to end the cycle of intergenerational poverty experienced by children who are born in poor households (Becher & Li, 2010), and therefore helps create an equitable society. Having quality ECCD programs offers opportunities to create a level playing field for all children, regardless of their status and background (UNESCO, 2006).

The eight (8) SEAMEO Member States included in this study recognize the benefits of having ECCD programs for children, as reflected in their national policies and frameworks. However, inequities still exist and factors such as poverty, geography, ethnicity, gender, disabilities, exposure to internal conflicts, susceptibility to disasters, and statelessness intersect with one another and create overlapping layers of marginalization. The existing gaps and challenges that need to be addressed include cultural attitudes, stereotypes, and practices; lack of knowledge on the importance of ECCD; low enrolment rate due to limited access and funding; issues in quality teacher training and services; and poor coordination among different government ministries and sectors. As described by UNESCO (2010), marginalization in education is a "form of acute and persistent disadvantage rooted in underlying social inequities."

SEAMEO identified two of its seven priority areas as achieving universal early childhood care and education, and addressing barriers of inclusion by 2035. This regional study, which seeks to identify ways of achieving inclusive ECCD among marginalized children in Southeast Asia, supports these priority areas and, at the same time, shares the prospect of Sustainable Development Goal 4 to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all".

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Recognizing the importance of an inclusive ECCD for children in Southeast Asia and the gaps that must be addressed to achieve it, this regional study provides a comprehensive analysis of the state of ECCD for marginalized children in eight SEAMEO Member States, namely, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. In particular, this research focuses on the following:

- Context and patterns of marginalization among children aged 0 to 6 years old;
- Policies that form the legal framework supporting the provisions of ECCD for marginalized children;
- ECCD programs and interventions, as well as the innovations and good practices being implemented for children from marginalized groups; and
- Factors that help or hinder the development and education of young children from disadvantaged social backgrounds.

PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

This regional study was jointly funded by SEAMEO INNOTECH, under its Regional Education Program (SIREP), and the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC). It documents and analyzes the patterns of marginalization affecting young children's participation in ECCD in Southeast Asia, and the policies and programs being implemented by SEAMEO member states to address these. With the technical assistance of ARNEC, three case studies of non-government organizations (NGOs) implementing successful ECCD programs were likewise documented. These include Khemara in Cambodia, Plan International in Indonesia, and the Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB) in Vietnam.

METHODOLOGY

This regional study used descriptive qualitative research methods and features case studies of the inclusive ECCD programs of eight SEAMEO Member States. In-country researchers who are experts from the ministries of education, government agencies, and organizations that have a mandate on ECCD in Southeast Asian countries were engaged to prepare the country reports. Through the financial and technical assistance from ARNEC, case studies featuring inclusive ECCD programs from NGOs in three Southeast Asian countries were included.

Validation of data was performed by researchers from SEAMEO INNOTECH who visited the participating countries and conducted interviews with key stakeholders from the ministries of education, government, local implementers, teachers of ECCD, and NGOs.

The information gathered from the country reports and NGO case studies were analyzed and synthesized to determine the state of ECCD in the eight participating countries and the patterns of marginalization of children. ECCD programs and their relevant policies and legal frameworks were identified and examined. Issues and challenges in implementing ECCD programs were also explored to determine factors that help or hinder the education and development of children. As the framework for analysis, the Ecological Systems Theory is combined with UNESCO's Inclusive Education Triangle. The Ecological Systems Theory recognizes that individual development is influenced by different layers of children's environment that interact both within and across contexts (Bronfenbrenner as cited in Duerden & Witt, 2010). In this study, having these different layers is adapted to explain the different levels of environmental factors that interact with one another to address the marginalization of children. These stages are structured around the three elements of inclusive education as identified in UNESCO's Inclusive Education Triangle. These elements are entitlements and opportunities; accessibility and affordability; and learning environment and learning delivery (UNESCO, 2010)

SCOPE AND DELIMITATIONS

In 2016, SEAMEO INNOTECH invited experts from eleven (11) SEAMEO Member States to serve as in-country researchers. These experts are from the ministries of education, government agencies, and organizations that have a mandate on ECCD. Out of the eleven SEAMEO Member States, eight agreed on or recommended key people to engage in the study as in-country researchers. These include Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. With support from ARNEC, three case studies of the three aforementioned non-government organizations spearheading successful ECCD programs were selected for documentation.

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this section, the contexts of ECCD in the SEAMEO Member States were analyzed and synthesized to describe the regional context of ECCD in Southeast Asia. Recognizing that the marginalization of children is influenced by various factors, this section presents the identified patterns of such condition and the enabling environments that support the inclusion of children. As identified by UNESCO, inclusive education consists of entitlements and opportunities; accessibility and affordability; and learning environment and learning delivery. In connection with this, the programs

and interventions supporting ECCD for marginalized children are also identified and analyzed. Lastly, the findings of this research include common factors that help or hinder the development and education of children. Overall, these would help in identifying specific policy recommendations in achieving inclusive ECCD in Southeast Asia.

Regional context of early childhood in Southeast Asia. With a total of 53,071,000 children in the eight participating countries (UNICEF, 2019), only 55% of these children participate in pre-primary programs. While there are Southeast Asian countries where almost all children attend at least one year of pre-primary education, such as the Philippines (96%) and Vietnam (95%), there are countries that remain to have very low attendance rates in ECCD programs such as Myanmar (10%). All eight SEAMEO Member States have recognized the importance of ECCD as reflected in their legal and policy frameworks and the available programs supporting ECCD. However, participation in pre-primary programs is considered optional in all participating countries except the Philippines.

Patterns of marginalization in early childhood. Through this regional study, common patterns of marginalization in the region have been identified. These include poverty, geographic remoteness, ethnicity, disabilities, susceptibility to disasters, presence of internal conflicts, and statelessness. These conditions intersect with one another, creating overlapping layers of marginalization and further exacerbating existing conditions and proliferating intergenerational poverty.

Enabling environments supporting the inclusion of marginalized children in ECCD. In terms of entitlements and opportunities, all countries included in this study have existing national policies that support ECCD programs in addressing the marginalization of children. They may have varying degrees and forms, but their constitutions comprise equal treatment and protection, including the rights to education, nutrition, and protection against abuse, exploitation, and discrimination.

When it comes to access and affordability, ECCD programs and services are being offered by the government, private sector, and non-government entities. However, state-sponsored ECCD programs and services oftentimes experience low budget allocation, especially in countries where pre-primary education is not compulsory. Meanwhile, ECCD services being offered by the private sector only reach a limited number of children, as they entail costs that are not affordable to all.

ECCD programs, whether center-based or home-based, have certain guidelines for learning delivery systems and learning environments. Each country has specified standards for curriculum, facilities, teacher training, and materials. To consider the different backgrounds and abilities of children, there are specific programs intended for specific sectors of marginalized children.

ECCD programs and interventions for marginalized children. In the participating countries, ECCD programs have integrated services addressing the basic needs of children to ensure the holistic development of children. These basic services integrated with early education include parenting education, pre-natal and post-natal health care, nutrition programs, and WASH (water, sanitation, and health).

Recognizing the varying needs and abilities of children, specialized programs and interventions for children with special needs and specific disabilities are being offered. There are also efforts in improving and adjusting the curriculum to better address the needs of the children. Teachers undergo trainings on inclusive classroom practices so they may be able to deliver activities more effectively, regardless of the ability of children.

To reach as many children as possible, community-based programs are being implemented in cooperation with non-government organizations. These are considered effective as they contextualize the programs with respect to the linguistic and cultural characteristics of the areas and utilize available resources. In cases when community-based programs are not accessible to children (in hard-to-reach areas), alternative and mobile programs are implemented. These services may include home-based and work-based programs and those run by parent organizations and volunteers.

To ensure that the delivery of activities is understood by children with different languages, **multilingual** education and culturally appropriate programs are being implemented. There are also special programs that consider the cultural identity of children belonging to indigenous communities.

Factors that help or hinder the development and education of children. In this study, various factors influencing the education and development of children have been identified. These include multidimensional poverty; cultural attitudes, stereotypes, and practices; level of access and funding dedicated to ECCD; quality of teacher training and services; and coordination of different government ministries and sectors.

Considered as one of the main causes of marginalization, multidimensional poverty creates disadvantages in education among young children, particularly deprivation from basic needs. In effect, this may lead to the stunted growth of children and further the exclusion of marginalized children from participating in ECCD programs.

In Southeast Asia, some cultural attitudes, stereotypes, and practices are observed to affect inclusive practices relating to ECCD. The belief that having children with disabilities or special needs is a curse still thrives in some communities, leading to families hiding such children from society. Children from ethnic and indigenous backgrounds also experience discrimination. Issues on statelessness are complex, as they involve concerns on the sovereignty of countries involved. Generally, one critical factor considered in the participation of children in ECCD programs is the perception of parents on their importance. Without the support of parents, attendance of children in ECCD programs will simply not be possible.

Another crucial factor in the implementation of inclusive ECCD programs is the level of access and public funding involved. The existence and sustainability of these programs depend highly on the budget and resources allocated by the national and local governments. Therefore, it is important that they recognize the benefits of ECCD programs to children and to society in general.

As the main implementers of ECCD programs, teachers must be equipped with proper knowledge and skills in delivering inclusive pedagogy. Countries involved in this study seek to ensure quality instruction and facilitation in ECCD programs by implementing certain qualifications for teachers.

Considering that achieving inclusive ECCD entails holistic and integrated approaches addressing various needs of children, the coordination and cooperation of different government ministries and sectors are deemed necessary. ECCD teachers and program implementers work closely with community leaders for resource generation and information dissemination. Efforts can also be optimized through proper coordination among relevant stakeholders to prevent possible duplication of efforts and instead make use of combined resources to address the issues surrounding the marginalization of children.

In summary, children experience overlapping layers of marginalization that lead to preventing them from achieving quality early childhood care and development. These factors, which are beyond the control of children, consist of economic and environmental factors such as poverty, geographic remoteness, and susceptibility to disasters; political factors causing conflict and statelessness; and cultural perceptions causing negative attitudes towards ethnicity and disability. ECCD programs for marginalized children are supported by inclusive policies and laws that protect the entitlements and opportunities of children, ensure accessibility and affordability of ECCD programs, and maintain standards for the learning environment.

All eight countries are commendable for recognizing the importance of early childhood care and development, as reflected in the provisions protecting the children's right to education and health under their respective Constitutions and laws. In support of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, these eight countries have committed to promoting the welfare of children by instituting laws for protection against discrimination, protection from harm and violence, and access to health services. Policies against child labor, maltreatment, and exploitation have also been specified.

Recognizing that exclusion of children from early childhood education is caused not only by one factor but overlapping layers of environmental factors leading to marginalization, the participating countries have sought to institute holistic and integrated ECCD programs. Basic social services addressing the needs of children such as health, nutrition, access to clean water and sanitation are being integrated into early childhood education. Various stakeholders take part in the achievement of inclusive ECCD by promoting accessibility and affordability, especially in remote areas. Government agencies, the private sector, and non-government organizations implement programs that address issues of marginalization and build on achieving integrated and holistic ECCD programs and services. Community-based programs, alternative, and mobile programs are being implemented to reach children in remote areas. For children with special needs or specific disabilities, specialized programs and interventions that have been developed according to the abilities of children are being offered. However, the major challenge when it comes to increasing accessibility and affordability is the lack of funding and investment.

Another important element in inclusive education is children's learning environment and learning delivery. All eight countries have instituted their respective standards for infrastructure, curriculum and instruction. Certain qualifications for teachers are being implemented to ensure that they are equipped to deliver an inclusive pedagogy. Various programs are also available that cater to the needs of each child based on their backgrounds and abilities. However, there is still an observed gap when it comes to the implementation of these standards in the learning environment and learning delivery. It depends highly on available resources, meaning fewer resources hinder effective implementation. Teachers also need to be more equipped in addressing the needs of children with different backgrounds and abilities.

CONCLUSION

Achieving inclusive ECCD is a shared goal among the eight participating countries in Southeast Asia. It is commendable that national laws and policies have been created and implemented in support of ECCD programs. However, the marginalization of children in the region remains a barrier to achieving universal ECCD in the region. Children are faced with overlapping layers of marginalization that exacerbate their condition.

Given the complexity of the challenge to achieve universal ECCD, an integrated and multi-sectoral approach is imperative. Entitlements and opportunities of children should be protected by implementing laws and policies that are intended to create an integrated and comprehensive approach. The fragmented efforts of different sectors have always been a huge challenge in the implementation of ECCD programs. It is proposed that a central government agency leading the ECCD policy making and program implementation be established. In this way, better coordination and collaboration among these sectors can be made possible.

In terms of increasing accessibility and affordability, ECCD programs such as community-based, alternative and mobile programs have been observed as effective tools in reaching children in remote areas. Therefore, they should be supported by allotting more financial, human and other resources. The use of mass media can also be utilized for ECCD programs to be able to reach children in remote areas. To increase the participation of children in ECCD programs, information and dissemination regarding its benefits should be reinforced by LGUs, especially at the barangay level. Another important element is public-private partnerships, through which limited public funding can be augmented.

Recognizing that teachers are at the forefront of implementing inclusive education, efforts should be made to professionalize teaching in ECCD programs. These can be done by further formalizing qualifications and standards through licensure examinations and by implementing measures to protect the welfare of teachers. These initiatives also need to be supported with pre-service and in-service training that will enable them to deliver an inclusive pedagogy. A strong support system would likewise encourage improvement in their practice as ECCD practitioners. To further improve learning environment and delivery, documentation of data on children and available ECCD programs in the country needs to be developed or enhanced. These will be instrumental in creating more responsive and informed policy making and program planning.

In summary, efforts toward achieving inclusive ECCD require an integrated and multi-sectoral approach. This involves protecting the entitlements and opportunities of children, increasing accessibility and affordability, and improving the learning environment and delivery.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To address identified gaps, what follows are some recommendations for member countries to improve on their strategies to address inequities in access by young children to ECCD programs and services. These recommendations are categorized under the three elements of inclusive education: entitlements and opportunities, accessibility and affordability and learning delivery and learning environment.

Entitlements and Opportunities

1. Enforce national laws and policies requiring attendance in at least one year of pre-primary education. This is in support of achieving universal early childhood care and development. Among the eight SEAMEO member states involved in this study, only the Philippine Education System implements at least one year of mandatory pre-primary education.

2. Promote integrated and coordinated efforts across sectors by creating national laws and policies institutionalizing a central government agency responsible for operation, regulation, monitoring and evaluation of all early childhood programs in the country. This will facilitate better integration and collaboration among the various government agencies and facilitate coherent and consistent policymaking across sectors.

3. Promote a holistic and comprehensive early childhood program for young children in which all crucial services (education, nutrition, health, protection, etc.) are integrated. Under the proposed central government agency, a common curriculum for early childhood programs in the country can be implemented to facilitate access to the same program for all young children. This will enhance the quality of ECCD programs and services and improve the continuity of early childhood experiences. While implementing a common curriculum, there should also be flexibility to consider the different backgrounds of children and efforts made to contextualize the implementation of ECCD programs. Furthermore, the rights of children should continue to be promoted and secured by the State, ensuring a safe environment.

Accessibility and Affordability

1. Reinforce information dissemination spearheaded by the local government regarding the value of early childhood development on young children. Emphasize that early childhood years are critical to the brain development of young children and have a significant influence on preparing children for lifelong learning. Empower officials at the community or village level to implement appropriate ECCD services and inform parents, especially mothers, regarding access to ECCD programs.

2. Address the root causes of socio-economic inequality and poverty that create structural barriers to inclusive ECCD. Government should mitigate the impacts of such inequalities by targeting disadvantaged families with programs and initiatives that provide opportunities for livelihood and income generation and improved quality of life. This can further be achieved by fostering intersectoral cooperation, implementing poverty alleviation measures (e.g., conditional cash transfers, enhanced social safety nets) and initiating community development activities.

3. Allot more resources to the implementation of ECCD programs in marginalized communities across different levels of the government. Financial resources can be directed toward building ECCD infrastructure and capacity building for teachers working in marginalized communities. Increase state-support in community-based programs by providing more financial and human resources.

4. Provide free or affordable ECCD programs for families that cannot afford to send their children to such programs. Where government funding is lean, partnerships with other stakeholders can be harnessed. Public-private partnerships can be promoted to support funding and ensure viability of ECCD programs. One way is by providing vouchers to families who cannot afford the cost of private ECCD programs.

5. Support ECCD programs being implemented by non-government organizations by creating legal policies to promote their sustainability. Instrumental to the success of the community-managed ECCD program by Plan International Indonesia, is the support from the community and local government as well as existing national policies and laws. The enactment of local regulations in support of ECCD programs has been proven to be an effective mechanism in implementing community-based programs, as it would better cater to the needs and capacities of the communities.

6. Establish strong coordination and collaboration among all sectors and stakeholders. For a holistic ECCD program which integrates all crucial services, it is imperative to have the involvement and cooperation of all relevant stakeholders. This will also help in increasing accessibility to such programs and services.

7. Increase accessibility of alternative, home-based, community-based and mobile ECCD programs by maximizing the use of mass media. ECCD programs can be aired by government-owned TV stations and be incorporated in the daily activities of young children, especially those in remote areas. In areas where there is limited to no access to internet services, broadcasting through radio can be another option.

8. Improve roads and transportation services to make ECCD centers accessible, especially to children with disabilities and those in remote areas.

9. Implement activities promoting active engagement of parents in ECCD programs and services, especially those from disadvantaged families. Engagement of parents may involve raising their awareness of the importance of ECE, enhancing parenting knowledge, understanding and practices, addressing cultural barriers in accessing ECCD programs and services and promoting the holistic development of children. Stronger parental involvement is expected to lead to an increase in enrolment rate as parents are encouraged to send their children to ECCD programs.

Learning Delivery and Learning Environment

1. Professionalize ECCD teaching by implementing standards and qualifications such as a licensure examination for those teaching at the early childhood level. Provide opportunities for career progression based on identified levels. As part of promoting the welfare of teachers, provide them with security of tenure and benefits. Increase the number of qualified teachers in marginalized communities by providing incentives in monetary form or other benefits.

2. Encourage the formation of a professional organization for early childhood practitioners. Through such groups, develop a mentorship program in which novice teachers learn from seasoned practitioners in the field of early childhood care and development.

3. Improve teacher quality by providing trainings on inclusive practices. This could be achieved through pre-service and in-service trainings on sound child development theories, concepts on disability, and pedagogy of children with special needs. The undergraduate curriculum is proposed to include courses and topics on special education, health, and nutrition, as well as teaching students with different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

4. Strengthen and institutionalize a systematic child monitoring in ECCD programs at the classroom level. With such a mechanism to observe the wellbeing of children and their participation in classroom activities, the barriers to their learning and participation can be identified. This, in turn, can help ECCD implementers determine possible solutions to address access barriers and improve children's learning experiences.

5. Improve documentation and monitoring of ECCD children in the country. Disaggregate data on children by age in order to have a more accurate picture of the status of ECCD children. For monitoring and evaluation, the Philippine Education for All 2015 assessment recommends digitalization and better management of information systems. The development or enhancement of database systems will be helpful in making a more informed and evidence-based policy making and program planning.

6. Develop a database of available early childhood interventions and programs being implemented by all sectors in the country. This will help in the efficient use of limited resources by preventing duplication of efforts and identifying areas where programs are needed the most.

7. Develop more inclusive infrastructures and learning materials. These include the installation of ramps and improving building openings for easier mobility. Multisensory materials should also be made available to cater to the different learning styles of children. The learning environment, learning pedagogy and learning materials should consider the abilities, language, culture and context of children.

8. Provide opportunities for marginalized communities to be involved in the planning, design, implementation and monitoring of ECCD programs and services. This will help in ensuring such programs and services are responsive to community needs and contexts while also encouraging active support and participation by parents and community members.

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