

The Effectiveness Initiative: first fruits

Last year, during my first visit to India, when I had the opportunity to visit Bangalore, I met the sculptor John Deveraj, and the group of street children with whom he creates theatre and artistic activities. To me, arriving tired and hot, Bangalore was a city full of dust, polluted with the exhaust of millions of ancient cars. During my stay, however, John and his family and the young people painted a picture of a city full of trees and beautiful buildings – a place in which I would love to live, they assured me. More important, they showed me that it was a city full of enterprising people with achievements behind them and the potential to achieve much more. And, as I learned more from them and learned to look through their eyes too, I was reminded that we see very little at first sight, perhaps because we only notice the obvious, or have preconceptions about what we will find, or are only there to look for what we want to see.

When visiting early childhood programmes, we see the poverty and material needs of the communities in which they are located. Sometimes we

see children packed together in precarious childcare centres, or left to their own devices and wandering dangerous streets. This is what forces us to take action, to generate projects and programmes that aspire to change such situations. But it's only when we know the realities properly that we can understand how to respond.

The EI is investigating how programmes have responded to realities. Each one of the programmes that is participating in the Effectiveness Initiative (EI) has a history of successes and failures, opportunities and difficulties. And every story from these programmes is a treasury of lessons about human nature, and about people's ability to perceive, reflect and understand, and then go on to fight adversity. Within such programmes – programmes that are aimed at the social inclusion of young children – there are thousands of experiences about taking advantage of opportunities and coping with obstacles.

It is these experiences that the EI looks for, describes and analyses in ten projects across the world. Teams of

investigators, both specialists within international agencies and people from early childhood development (ECD) programmes, are exploring how the needs of children and their families are met in different contexts. And they are doing that by going beyond the obvious, by putting aside their preconceptions, and by looking at everything that is there rather than selecting and filtering. Overall, each of us in the EI wants to know what lessons we can draw from what these programmes do and how they do it. We want to open and maintain an international dialogue on best practices that takes account of the points of view of a variety of audiences. And we also want to explore methodologies that ensure the participation of the variety of people and institutions that are related to, or affected by, the programmes.

The EI is an investigation that is open and flexible. Many different approaches have been and are being taken; and we have changed the course of the investigation many times, learning as we go. Now, after almost two years of research, exchanges and comparisons,

just when we thought we were reaching the end of the road, we have discovered that we have only just begun: as we build new knowledge and understandings, new questions arise.

This edition of *Early Childhood Matters* shows the evolution of this process with examples of how distinct understandings have been generated. First, on page 6, Ellen M Ilfeld, in collaboration with the Analytical Group of the EI, reminds us of the initial motivation for the EI. Using a fable, she shows what participants in the EI first came together to look at. She also shows how the process of the EI is discovering a series of factors that could influence projects and programmes; and then offers a commentary on some of these.

The articles that follow show some of the variety of EI tools and strategies that have been used for listening to different voices and for extracting information about each of the projects or programmes. These include: the use of the river analogy that enables participants to construct a visual history of projects in Peru and Colombia; the



India: SEWA Crèche for 0-3 year olds in Kunjrav village
photo: Jean-Luc Ray / Aga Khan Foundation ©

machamba (farm land) analogy from Mozambique (page 14) that helps people to analyse the evolution of the *escolinhas* (community-based ECD sites); the seasonal calendars from the Philippines; meetings and debates from Portugal; different forms of open and unstructured interviews, and the analysis of anecdotes and stories in almost all the teams.

The article by Liliana Godoy (page 16) offers a detailed reconstruction of the steps taken in the process of exploring the programme of the *Madres Guías* (Guiding Mothers) in Honduras. The design of instruments to collect information, the identification of a working hypothesis, and the investigation that will guide the next steps, play central roles in this.

Participation in the EI project has created space for reflection within organisations and the communities that the projects and programmes serve. Feny de los Angeles-Bautista's description of the use of EI in the Philippines illustrates how a programme can benefit from this space for reflection, using concrete tools that help the community to organise for the benefit of its children (page 22). For his

part, Rui d'Espiney (page 32) discusses how the EI process has been used in Portugal to examine what a project has achieved; thus opening it up to a new phase. In addition, an analysis of the project has revived awareness about issues related to children's social exclusion. More important, it has remotivated the project by reminding it of how and why it came into being.

The EI research process has itself impacted directly on the effectiveness of some of the participating projects and programmes. Each has generated information that is relevant for its own practices and has applied this immediately. For example, SEWA (page 36) has used EI and its processes, to bring about improvements in its approaches and operations. Fiorella Lanata's article about the PRONOEI project in Peru (page 38) and Fernando Peñaranda's article about the PROMESA project in Colombia (page 42) show how findings that have emerged from analysing data gathered through open interviews could improve aspects of the current operations of the project. However, in neither case was it enough to merely allow the original analysis and subsequent findings to be applied: first

they were returned to all the people who had provided the data to be considered, challenged, modified and refined in open meetings. Only then were they applied. This process not only demonstrates the extent to which each project was the property and responsibility of all stakeholders, it also demonstrates the degree to which the EI was internalised in those projects.

Fernando Peñaranda's article stresses the importance of a factor that has consistently emerged from all who contributed to the investigation: credibility. Few people involved in development work will be surprised that credibility should emerge as important: the real interest is in how it can be generated and sustained. In that sense, the value of the EI work is clear: it has revealed a wide range of examples of how credibility is naturally established, what militates against it, how it can be reinforced, and how and why it generates success.

Because of its nature, its approaches, its methodologies and its tools, the EI process has raised questions about the role of researchers in programmes. Peter Mwaura (page 47) as the official

evaluator of the Madrasa Resource Centres programme in Kenya, discusses the relationship between a research team and a programme, looking especially at the advantages and disadvantages of being an 'outsider' or an 'insider'. He examines in detail what this means in terms of being able to generate knowledge about the project.

Today, after two years, we are beginning to compare findings across the ten participating projects and programmes. This is revealing thematic affinities – but also that these have a great diversity of local expressions. The people involved in the EI – an international network of consultants and practitioners – have been discovering and documenting the lessons hiding in each project or programme. To bring these findings together, a working group consisting of members of different teams, has started to identify and organise the emerging findings from all the different sites. Early in 2001 two meetings were held of those interested in beginning a cross-site analysis of these findings. Some of the results that emerged from these meetings are outlined in the article by Ellen M Ilfeld (page 53). She illustrates one method for categorising results

using software (Atlas-ti) designed specifically for the analysis of qualitative research. She shows how it is possible to organise data flexibly, allowing concepts to be brought together into many different permutations of related groups of themes (families). She also shows how links can be maintained with the original qualitative data, allowing it to be retrieved and used to tell the real stories that lie behind the code words.

Overall, the research processes at the ten participating projects and programmes continue, generating findings and lessons that will be of use to donors and programme administrators. As they do, we are continuing to learn about learning, about those research processes and about the findings they are producing. Lessons are emerging and are feeding back into the projects that produced them. One major realisation is that one way in which effectiveness can be achieved is by simply creating room for reflection and research within projects. A second realisation is that our original purpose of looking for what makes programmes effective has been complemented: we now see that the Effectiveness Initiative is a rich process in and of itself.

Those of us engaged in the EI are still busily looking and reflecting together. That means that still more lessons will emerge when we complete our work in identifying everything we can about what makes projects effective; when we are further advanced with organising what we are learning; when we make many more comparisons across the participating projects to highlight similarities and contrasts; and when we develop more ways of understanding the significance of complex combinations of factors in a particular situation at a particular time. ○

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The February edition of *Early Childhood Matters* will deal with the theme of early childhood and HIV/AIDS. I am especially interested in articles that centre on successful practice with young children and their nearest circles of adult supporters. If you have stories to tell, please do contact me so we can work together to share your experiences with others.

Jim Smale, Editor