



Kenya

In the enclosure

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The author is editor of the Foundation's 'Practice and Reflection in ECD' and 'Working Papers in ECD' series. In this article she reflects on the roles of parents in programmes for young children, as she observed them during a recent working visit to the Foundation-supported Samburu ECD Project in Northern Kenya earlier this year. All the project's work is based in communities, and is run by community committees, focus groups and so on, thereby having the greatest impact on the families and communities. Among the programmes that it runs are those that focus on health, nutrition, food security, education, water provision, and peace initiatives.

The project's focus on early childhood development (ECD) is relatively new but it now supports a number of ECD programmes. This article describes a 'typical' ECD programme – actually an amalgamation of different programmes scattered across a very harsh and isolated part of the country. What the author saw was impressive: parents as initiators, controllers and operators of their children's ECD programmes; the project as an enabler and facilitator responding to parents' needs.

Kenya Leirr ECD activity centre: *monitoring growth*
Samburu ECD Project
Photo: Joanna Bouma

The sound of children singing comes through the warm, dry air. As one of the social workers from the Foundation's project partner – who acted as interpreter between English and Samburu and Turkana – and I approached the ECD activities centre, we could begin to hear the sound of stamping feet and voices. Coming over a slight hill, a brush fence came into view, topped by the smiling faces of a couple of mothers who had spotted us approaching and were now pushing aside some of the brush that is used as a gate to let us in. Inside were dozens of small curious children, many of whom kept on playing, unbothered by our arrival. You could feel the very positive atmosphere straight away. It was informal, welcoming and friendly, and it seemed that everybody there – both children and adults – knew exactly what they were doing, and that what they were doing was something important.

We had arrived in a typical early childhood development (ECD) programme supported by the community-based Samburu ECD Project, from its two offices (El Barta and

Nyuat) that are based in Baragoi and Maralal, in the Samburu District of Northern Kenya. This project is a joint effort between the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE) NACECE/DICECE, and the Christian Children's Fund (CCF).

Working in a harsh environment

The Samburu ECD Project works in the Samburu District in the Northern part of Kenya, an area classified as arid and semi-arid. The scrubland and the limited rainfall mean that the most viable way of life for the resident Samburu and Turkana peoples is nomadic pastoralism. The people move with their livestock – mainly cattle, sheep, goats, and camels – to find water and pasture.

This traditional way of life has become more precarious recently as the rains, sporadic at the best of times, have consistently failed. Malnutrition is becoming more and more commonplace, leaving the people – and especially the children – increasingly vulnerable. Livestock, which is the livelihood of the people, is dwindling as the dry earth alone cannot support

sufficient vegetation for their feed. The resulting poverty has caused increased cattle rustling in the area – called 'insecurity' in the local terminology – and this has been a real problem in the last few years.

In turn, insecurity has pushed large numbers of formerly nomadic families to take up a semi-permanent residence around the major trading centres where there is a greater degree of safety. This in its turn is putting an even higher strain on the water and vegetation sources of the area, and is causing rapid changes in the societal structure.

Health hazards such as dysentery and diarrhoea have become prevalent because of overcrowding. It is common for women to spend almost a whole day walking great distances to fetch small amounts of water from dwindling sources, and for men to roam great distances with the livestock in search of food and water. And what happens to their children while they are away? They are often left alone or in the care of a sibling.

The Samburu ECD Project: a parents' project

In this harsh environment, the Samburu ECD Project is working towards the empowerment of the Samburu and Turkana communities through its integrated project work. Part of its approach is to work with parents to give their children care and stimulation, and the chance to have more choice in the future. The ECD work was initiated in 1997 through the collaborative efforts of KIE and CCF. By carrying out participatory research on the traditional childcare practices of the Samburu and Turkana, the project and the community determined the need to address the situation of young children, then the parents took the lead. While they had traditional ways of childrearing and organising childcare, they did not have the expertise to organise themselves on a wider scale – and especially not in the context of the breaking down of traditional community structures. Nor did they have the financial resources required to purchase basic materials or the food supplements that they saw their children needed. So they applied to



the project for help in this area, and this was quickly provided.

What they did have though, was real commitment to making the programmes work. In many ECD programmes 'parental participation' all too often means merely cleaning up after the children have left, repairing toys, doing some manual work, cooking the food and so on. In the Samburu ECD Project, parental participation means that the parents are in charge from the conceptual stage right through to running the programmes, and only approach the project for minimal support. All parents ask for is some initial support in terms of small funding; some help in learning how to organise themselves and run a programme; some knowledge on nutrition for young children; and some basic training in working with young children.

The Lmwate – traditional childcare

All the ECD settings are based on the traditional Lmwate system. Lmwate – plural Lmwaat – loosely translated means 'an enclosure'. In some Samburu

areas they are called 'Loip' – plural Loipi – meaning 'shade' while the Turkana community call them 'Ekwoel la Poloin' meaning 'big house'. Traditionally, parents used to construct Lmwaat where there was shade from a tree or house and leave their children in the care of grandmothers while they were working. The gate to each enclosure was strategically sited in the shade, making it easy for the even very old grandmothers to look after the children. They would play with the children and teach them songs, poems and stories.

They would make toys, play equipment, and musical instruments. In short, all aspects of child development were addressed in the Lmwate. The children received mental stimulation from the songs, poems, and stories. And, because these often had a moral edge to them, the children would also learn right from wrong and how to function in society. The latter would be reinforced by the socialisation aspect of the Lmwate: the simple fact that there would be other children and adults in the Lmwate with whom to play and talk, and with whom they would have to learn to share and get along. The grandmothers were the

ones who knew about traditional medicines and healing practices, and this was also useful when working with the children.

While grandmothers don't take care of children in return for payment, parents still have an obligation to give them food and water, help build houses for them, or provide whatever assistance the grandmothers need.

This system of childcare has worked for countless generations. In more recent times, however, the gradual modernisation of the Samburu and Turkana societies has been having an impact on traditional family structures and the way communities are organised. Over the past few years, 'insecurity' has hastened this process with the result that many children neither benefit from traditional forms of childcare nor from more modern ones. As already discussed, with the men in the family going longer distances to find food and water for the livestock, and the women going longer distances in search of water for the family, many young children are left alone at home or left in the care of siblings not much older than

themselves. Given these factors, many communities started to realise that they had to bring back the traditional early childhood development practices, of which Lmwaaat are practical examples.

Setting up a modern Lmwate

At the activity site, the mothers and fathers who had set it up, told me their story. They all came from the neighbouring area, all living within about a 15 minute walk from the Lmwate. About one and a half years ago, they had realised that their youngest children were not receiving any form of care, and were often either left alone while other family members went about their domestic tasks or else were taken along and had to endure very long days and walk very long distances. The parents felt that this was detrimental both for their children and for they themselves, and that they had to do something about it.

During their regular community meetings, they thought about the options available and related this to how childcare was organised in the past. Memories of the Lmwate run by the grandmothers was still clear and dear in

many people's minds, and they realised that they could revive this traditional form of childcare. On this basis, they formed an ECD Centre Committee made up of volunteer parents from within their own community. The Committee was to be responsible for creating a modern Lmwate. In consultation with the community members, the Committee chose a location with a number of trees for shade near the community and came up with a rough design for the centre. They then mobilised parents and other

community members to clear the land of brush and thorns and animals, and built a perimeter fence using the brush that they had cleared. They also constructed a big house for the children to rest in and take refuge in when it rains. They now had their basic Lmwate.

Talking to the elderly grandmothers who had either been 'carer grandmothers' or else had been under the care of carer grandmothers within the community, the Committee



Kenya: teaching aid about childcare, painted on project office wall Samburu ECD Project



Kenya: learning aid about reaching pastoralists, painted on project office wall
Samburu ECD Project

developed ideas about the kinds of activities that were possible and desirable. Based on the advice from the elderly, they made a number of toys, collected a number of songs, stories, riddles and poems, and designed and built play equipment. The toys included wooden and leather dolls and balls, clay and rattan animals, slings, rattles, catapults. The play equipment included climbing frames, raised platforms, miniature houses, swings, see-saws, hoops, crawling tunnels and so on. The parents told me that the interest generated among community members was high, and that many people offered

their labour so that the site was quickly built and equipped.

While this work kept most of the parents busy, the Committee, again in consultation with the community, selected a few of the parents to work in turn at the site. The Committee approached the Samburu ECD Project, and the project provided basic training in ECD for the parents. In their turn, the trained parents now share their knowledge with the other mothers who work in the site. In this way, everyone's capacity is gradually built up. Among the original mothers who received

training were a couple who were appointed as 'supervisor mothers'. They received some extra training and are always at the centre to oversee the activities that take place.

Apart from training on ECD activities, the project also provided training on health, nutrition and hygiene. It also helped the Committee with obtaining basic medicines and supplementary porridge for the children's midday meal, including enriched porridge for those who suffer from malnutrition. Once all these elements were in place the project stepped back. Its involvement is now confined to being available when the Committee itself approaches it, although the Committee does keep the project up to date with how everything is going. The project's community mobilisers make regular visits to the centre and to homes to keep in touch with families in particular need; and its health worker also regularly provides health messages, guides the monitoring of the growth of children and monitors malnutrition. In all other aspects the centres are self-sustaining, independent bodies.

Keeping the site going

The programme is open every morning and can only be sustained by the input of parents. All the mothers take turns to work in the programme and they have set up a rota for this. However, because the setting is so friendly and homely, most mothers in fact appear to turn up almost every day if they can fit it into their daily chores. Each site also has a cook who makes the midday porridge for the children. She also adds enriched supplements to the porridge of the children suffering from malnutrition. Many of the children who come to the programme for the first time suffer from malnutrition and they are easy to spot among the rest: they are apathetic, don't socialise, nor do they play. Within a few months however, through the food supplements and gradual socialisation, many overcome their difficult situations, become more playful and mix with the other children.

Each family contributes whatever they can to the centre in kind. This may be some water – a very precious

commodity – some food, or perhaps utensils such as spoons or cups made from old containers. Families may collect certain types of twigs which are used for cleaning teeth, bark strips to make toys, or branches for making climbing frames. And, of course, the parents contribute their time and labour to maintain the programme, make new toys and equipment, and repair the equipment. Time and labour are significant contributions because they take precious time and energy away from searching for food and water.

The end result is an ECD programme that functions well, that is welcoming to all, and which has become more than simply an ECD programme: it is a central part of the community. The centre welcomes everybody, so that there is continuous traffic of adults and children coming in or going out. In fact, it is used by all in the community to such an extent that the supervisor mothers in this programme have complained about the older children coming after school to play. In itself this is not a problem, but because

they're so much bigger and heavier than the young children, they sometimes break the play equipment. This causes great inconvenience to the parents and the young children, so the Committee is thinking about running a programme for the teenagers in the afternoon. This would benefit both the teenagers and protect the equipment.

What are the benefits for the parents and children?

Talking to the parents, it was good to see how clear they were about the benefits of the programme for the whole community, and how determined they were to keep the programme going. They discussed several different benefits. The more obvious ones were that the children are healthier because they are guaranteed a meal – which does not always happen if they are at home – and therefore have put on weight, are growing better and have more energy. They are also cleaner, because the parents have learnt the importance of hygiene and how to keep the children as clean as possible with very limited water. This in turn

has reduced the incidence of problems such as scabies, jiggers, and skin rashes. The children's behaviour has also changed because of mixing with other children and adults: they are no longer afraid of strangers and are more independent. A couple of people also put this down to the fact that the children are now more exposed to outside influences during their walk from home to the centre, which widens their view of the world.

Some of the mothers mentioned that their children were more helpful at home and in the community. They thought that the reason was that the children saw that they lived with other people, and they saw that they sometimes had to wait their turn. Children also imitated the carer parents as they went round cleaning the site or organising the children. The parents reported that their children were physically able to do things which other



Kenya: learning aid about a good harvest, painted on project office wall Samburu ECD Project



Kenya: learning aid about a healthy diet from the family farm, painted on project office wall
Samburu ECD Project

children were not able to do, and were less clumsy than before. They put this down to playing on the climbing frames and see-saws and crawling through the tunnels, thereby building up muscles and coordination.

Many of the parents – the fathers in particular – appreciated the fact that traditions were being revived. They enjoyed hearing the children singing old songs, reciting poems and stories, and asking them riddles. This aspect seems to play a significant part in bringing fathers and grandfathers into the ECD programmes.

I also had the opportunity to talk to some preschool teachers in the area, whose preschools receive children from the ECD programme. The preschool teachers all said that there is a big difference between the children who come from the ECD programme and those that come straight from home. In fact, since the ECD programme was set up their jobs have been made much easier. They no longer have to expend time and energy trying to get children to feel comfortable in a new setting and with other children. The programme children happily mix with the others,

putting them at their ease. They are also interested in learning, understand things quicker, listen better, take the initiative more and are easier to organise. The only problem that the preschool teachers occasionally face is that some of the children want to go back to the ECD site because they can play more there.

A lasting impression

My experience in the Samburu ECD Project was rewarding in so many ways, and there is much that I will carry with me for a long time to come. One of the visual images that sticks in my mind, is the picture of those mothers opening the brush gate for us, smiling and welcoming us with great pride into their world of children. This simple picture reveals many deeper meanings. It reveals the commitment that the parents in the area have towards their children's well-being and development; and their will to give their children the

best through the ECD programme. It reveals the great efforts that the parents put into their own empowerment; and their firm belief in their own capacity. But the image also reveals the fundamental belief of the Samburu ECD Project in parental participation and its commitment to that belief. This will be my lasting impression; and it's a hugely powerful one. ○