

# *Policy and decision makers: translating effective ECD*

It's a rest day in the village. A small girl is busy learning to draw with a stick in the earth. She got the idea from her older brother who happened to be playing a simple mathematical game with his friend at the time. Soon her brother will teach her the game because he has learned to help her learn. Meanwhile, the girl is making patterns, sometimes carefully controlled, sometimes scribbled so quickly that the dirt flies. When she has finished, she might show her work to her mother or father, knowing they will discuss it with her, praise her, encourage her. Her parents are proud of her and they know she is doing well. For example, they know she is the right height and weight for her age in this community, and that she has had all her inoculations: there's

a chart on the wall of their house that they update regularly with the village health worker.

Today, her father is working with the girl's grandmother to complete some teaching materials that the local preschool teacher has asked them to make. These are about the memories the grandmother has of the old ways of gathering and preparing food, of treating common illnesses, of singing, dancing and celebrating, of filtering water. On Monday, the grandmother will lead the children out from the preschool that community members helped to build, through the village and into the surrounding countryside, bringing these traditions back to life – for the children and for herself.

In two years or so, the girl will move on to the primary school a few kilometres away. She'll be confident in who she is and what she can do in that new environment. And she will do well, often in ways that, a few years ago, her new teacher would have found hard to categorise or cope with.

Some time in the future, perhaps as she starts to take on some village responsibilities, she will learn that the environment in which she grew was influenced powerfully by remote policy and decision makers – those who, for better or worse, try to positively affect local economies, health and education provision, the supply of essential resources, the ability of people to provide the best for their children.

And she may be surprised to find out how long the list is. It includes people from national, regional and local governments and their agencies; non-governmental organisations; international financial institutions; international donors and grantmakers; and national and international lobbying groups. She'll recognise then that, on balance, the influences on her early childhood were positive, not least because those remote policy and decision makers were effective in what they set out to do. This edition of *Early Childhood Matters* shows how such people and their agencies – at international, governmental, regional and country levels – attempt to be effective, to have a positive influence on the lives of young children.



Zimbabwe: *Many hands make light work*  
 Centre for Development Information & Education  
 photo: Paula Nimpuno-Parente

### Supporting families

Supporting families is one of the single most effective starting points for helping children enjoy the best possible start to their lives. Such support may include providing parents with the information they need; ensuring that the support they need is available; helping them gain the necessary skills; or improving the economic status of their family. It may be on a wide scale – for example, the support that governments can give by marshalling,

refocusing, supplementing and delivering the considerable resources that they control.

The first article considers the approach of the Irish government to providing that broad support. It established an independent Commission on the Family that spent a total of three years consulting, investigating, collecting and analysing information and ideas, and then devising practical ways of deploying existing and new resources effectively. As it did this, it took account

of what kinds of interventions had proved particularly effective. Notable here was its endorsement of the Community Mothers programme in which Family Development Nurses employed by the Regional Health Boards train experienced mothers to voluntarily support first time mothers. The Commission delivered its report – *Strengthening Families for Life!* – in the context of a new Programme for Government that was committed to a ‘families first’ approach in developing policies and services. The Commission’s recommendations included: broadening the remit of the Department of Social Welfare to include new responsibilities in family policy and services; the establishment of a Family Affairs Unit and the investment of carefully placed sums of new money. (page 6)

### Effective investments

Supporting ECD costs money and that may invite the question ‘Is it only developed countries that can afford ECD?’ One answer is provided by the World Bank. Its endorsement of ECD programmes is based on a recognition of the importance of the early years not just for individuals – especially the

poorest – but for the direct economic benefit and future financial health of whole countries. As the article on page 12 shows, investments in the health and nutritional status of young children, and in their cognitive development, have multiple benefits. They range from a direct reduction in the number of children who suffer from ill health, to enjoying more productive lives as adults, to improving society by, for example, reducing crime rates.<sup>2</sup>

Many donor and support organisations have been involved in making ECD affordable by supporting the development of a huge range of highly effective, low cost approaches. They also look beyond providing direct technical support. An ‘Informal information exchange’ day organised by the Academy for Educational Development in November 1998, provided an opportunity for major players to compare notes about maximising their effectiveness. The article on page 18 shows that each has a range of carefully focused strategies while, overall, there is considerable diversity. It includes: identifying key objectives at particular stages of child development; social marketing campaigns; interventions to

break the cycle of poverty; improving monitoring and evaluation; supporting qualitative research; bridging the gap between the academic world and advocates; and supporting integrated development programmes.<sup>3</sup>

The article by Mirza Jahani, the regional representative of the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) in East Africa, shows why AKF supports a move away from stand-alone ECD programmes towards integrated development programmes. It is the one of the effective ways of guaranteeing the viability of the community in these remote and impoverished areas. His model also goes beyond development in individual communities. It includes the development of mutually supportive networks of communities that help to generate and circulate the wealth that can be used to pay for many necessities – including ECD programmes. Beyond this, the network can also serve as the basis for establishing or reinforcing grassroots structures through which regional and central government support can be lobbied for and channelled. (page 27)

The following article from Southern Africa offers Mokhethi Moshoeshe's own reflections on what it takes to build strong partnerships between the grantmakers and the grantees. He links these to the experiences of the Southern African Grantmakers Association as it developed its *Guidelines for good practice*. As he stresses, the point is to bring grantmakers and grantees into close and effective partnership. Few people are better qualified to discuss this: Mokhethi Moshoeshe has worked both in grantee organisations as well as on the grantmaking side. He is well aware of the practical difficulties that can arise, even when each side is of equal good will, and is committed to producing the same results for the same reasons in the same ways. (page 34)

The final article looks back over ten years of building on what was there, developing policies and making decisions in Cambodia. Once Redd Barna was able to establish a country office in 1988, it was able to start laying the foundations for long term sustainable development. The article indicates some of the difficulties in coming to the right strategic decisions in a particularly challenging context,

and stresses the need to be willing to learn. Policies and programmes have not remained static: they have evolved and developed to meet changing needs that are drawn from changing realities. (page 38)

### Conclusions

This collection offers a spread of experiences from which many lessons emerge. For example, it shows the importance of maximising the potential of what is there – whether that is the synergy that can be developed between service providers, or the untapped talents of parents. It also shows that early childhood initiatives serve as excellent entry points to communities; and that they can also be excellent starting points for wider programmes: there is a motivation and commitment that can be built on. For example, parents – acknowledged and respected as first educators – are committed to enhancing the well-being of their children; and communities know that they must build towards a better future through each new generation. The challenge for remote policy and decision makers is – as Mirza Jahani puts it – to be a strong link in a chain

that stretches through to that little girl scribbling busily in the earth. Effectively, that means building strong partnerships with organisations who have, or can develop, close and productive relationships with the communities – partnerships that are built on trust, openness, realism, learning from each other and mutual respect.

### The next edition

As part of the development of *Early Childhood Matters* I am very pleased to welcome a guest editor for the October 1999 edition: Ellen Ilfield. The edition will include a first report on the Foundation's 'Effectiveness Initiative', a major undertaking in collaboration with other key players, that will delve deep into 11 projects in 11 different countries to try to discover what has contributed to – or detracted from – their effectiveness. ○

**Jim Smale** Editor

### notes

1. See page 6.
2. See page 12.
3. See page 18.