

Report IV

RESEARCH STUDIES ON ECCE

*Recommendations and Policy directions for ECCE in India:
Lessons drawn from the three research reports on ECCE*

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Abstract

This report summarises the findings of the three research studies on ECCE undertaken a) Status of ECCE: Provisions and Gaps in India, with special focus on three states (Delhi, Odisha and Telangana) b) Analysis of ICDS Provisions and Budgets and c) Analysis of the Costs and Resources of select non-ICDS ECCE models. Drawing on these studies, it provides certain critical insights for policy, organised under four heads: (i) quality (ii) costs and cost-norms (iii) scaling and (iv) resources. The underlying concern across all four heads discussed is the issue of ensuring equity in the current scenario wherein the ECCE sector remains unregulated and highly differentiated, with multiple models and options that are differentially available to children of different socio-economic groups. Within this context, the report calls for:

- a strong regulatory framework which defines a set of ‘non-acceptable/non-negotiable’ provisions and practices, that ensure developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) of ECCE but also allow for innovation and contextually-relevant programmes
- defining non-negotiable cost heads while also setting ‘ranges’ rather than fixed costs and ceilings, to ensure equitable provisions and provisions of similar quality for all
- the need to plan large centralised programmes (such as ICDS) appropriately by understanding how economies of scale operate and how these cannot be reduced to per child costs
- the need to pay attention to innovative ways of resource-sharing and resource generation, both across government bodies and agencies as well as between state and non-state agencies, to achieve maximum efficiency in programmes.

Report

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has perhaps now come of age. In the last one decade, there has been increasing attention paid by international development agencies as well as national governments to ECCE provisioning. Currently, efforts to fund and advocate for ECCE programmes is also seeing increased interest and effort across the world. This can partly be attributed to the increasing research base that shows costs borne on ECCE programmes are outweighed by the long-term benefits they offer as also the recognition that the right to equal opportunities for education for all children starts with developmentally appropriate and good quality early childhood education and care that can minimise the otherwise reinforcing effects of socio-economic status, especially for the marginalised.

In this context, it is perhaps heartening to note the distinction that India has had of having conceptualised a holistic ECCE programme as early as the 1970s. The ICDS which adopts a life-cycle approach providing free and universal nutrition, health and pre-school educational services has made definitive improvements in certain areas of children's development at least, namely health and nutrition. However, despite nearly half a decade of its existence, the programme still suffers from serious issues of access (with currently only about 48% of the child population between 0-6 years having access), quality, especially with regards to pre-school education and poor allocation of funds. Financial estimates set for the restructuring of the ICDS to improve quality are yet to be met and in recent years the budgetary allocations for ICDS have also been declining, even within the budget for social sector expenditure and financial allocations for components of ICDS have been erratic.

More importantly, the lack of importance given to PSE within ICDS is evident from the absence of a budget head for education within ICDS budgets across most states (with some exceptions such as Odisha). The lack of adequate funds and resources to undertake PSE and set parameters for assessment, in contrast to provisions made for supplementary nutrition and growth monitoring, has also meant that the ICDS and AWcs have come to be seen as merely feeding centres for the poor.

The perception of poor quality of PSE within AWcs as well as the lack of a regulatory framework has contributed to a conducive environment for the growth of private and NGO-based ECCE services. This is particularly evident from data that shows declining enrolments in AWcs, with increase in under-age enrolments in primary schools. Repeated conversations with parents show that aspirations for English medium education for their children along with early training in academic skills have contributed to these trends. Furthermore, what is also evident is that it is not just English/academic skills that parents prefer but just as in the case of primary schooling, perceptions of higher quality education to be had in private schools has further contributed to the exodus from state schools to private schools with pre-primary sections in states such as Telangana and high numbers of private schools in general.

Such trends have serious implications and should be a cause for concern. In the absence of regulatory and legislative frameworks, the available alternatives to AWCs and government-run schools have been impossible to estimate, their quality difficult to ascertain and the economic and social costs and outcomes of their programmes hard to determine. Currently, alternatives to state-run ECCE programmes vary from high end, chain pre-schools at one end of the spectrum to programmes run by NGOs in collaboration with communities with limited infrastructure and resources, at the other. The availability of these differential tiers of ECCE, of variable quality and costs, pose a real threat of consolidating inequality and inequitable outcomes for marginalised communities that is already a deeply embedded pattern within primary and secondary education (as a result of similarly available varied options).

As with primary and secondary education, the limited data available on PSE already shows how access to better quality programmes (perceived or otherwise) are mediated by factors such as social background and gender, even in the case of PSE, with boys and children from higher income quintiles and urban-locations having a greater likelihood of being enrolled in private pre-schools than girls and low income household children. Even when the quality in these private pre-schools may be suspect, the participation there gives them an edge in certain skills and exposure considered desirable in a highly competitive society.

Private and many NGO alternatives, in addition, also rely on user fees to sustain their programmes as our study shows (with rare exceptions such as UPCS or UBM/UCM that charge nominal fees). Others (e.g., CUSP, UPPS) that have started without a user fee have also gradually come to rely on user fees. All non-state alternatives (examined) have come to rely on some or the other kind of community contribution, in kind (e.g., land, volunteering services, donations in kind such as fruits or vegetables, books and play material, etc.), cash (as donations, corporate or individual sponsorships) or out-of-pocket parental expenditure (e.g., on books, transport, nutrition, etc.).

This is strongly indicative of the fact that any alternative to state-run ECCE programmes face the real challenge of sustenance and, in the absence of state intervention, the probability of ECCE costs, currently completely unregulated, being off-set to communities, particularly those in disadvantaged circumstances. As with school education, the lack of regulation with respect to specific provisions for ECCE, has also allowed for questions of quality to be conflated with questions of cost with the result that, on the one hand, programmes for elite communities/private ECCE programmes have come to justify their user fees in the language of quality, while generating a surplus¹ and, on the other, locally sourced/locally prepared resources have come to be justified as adequate/appropriate for marginalised communities due to their 'low costs'. Without disputing the value of locally developed resources and

¹Although it should be noted that for some models like UPPS, which are highly enrolment-dependent, the surplus is used to create a teacher fund, to guard against yearly fluctuations in income and increase security for teachers.

material, the argument we place here is the need to critically interrogate the quality of provisions across all programmes, and estimate their real costs, rather than accepting different standards of quality (and costs) for different communities.

In addition, in an unregulated environment, it is not just differences in social status and access that can contribute to inequities but also differences in the orientation and nature of intervention itself that need to be critically evaluated. As research suggests, different interventions have differential effects and address different aspects of development (Barnett, 1995). Thus, even enrolment in pre-schools or pre-primary sections of schools (private or state) has to be cautiously viewed, as the focus within such models may well remain on a limited range of school readiness skills such as literacy, numeracy and self-regulation.

As much research in ECCE shows, considering the continuous and cumulative nature of child development, ECCE programmes need to be planned appropriately, going beyond practices of simplistic downward extension of curriculum. It is important for programmes to pay attention to the child's developing physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, linguistic and creative-expressive capacities and support this appropriately. Important variables that have been identified for this include caring child-adult relationships, play-based curriculum as well as preparation of primary schools to receive children from ECCE programmes. While different kinds of models (i.e., centre-based, community-based programmes, etc.), have all been found to improve later school outcomes, more fundamentally it is perhaps the inclusion of certain principles and processes that guide these models, despite differences, that contribute to better outcomes. Critical among these factors is the role of teachers, classroom management and organisation practices and the availability of adequate play and learning materials and appropriate use of these in activity-based learning opportunities that link across the various domains of development, rather than those that address different domains serially (Kaul and Chaudhary, 2017).

All of these factors also make evident the need to fundamentally invest in the ECCE teacher/caregiver who currently receives little attention, has little bargaining power and occupies a marginalised position within the education system as well as within society in general. As our study shows, though there are variations. Salaries for pre-school teachers/caregivers in general remain lower than even for primary school teachers and even AWWs in most of the non-ICDS models studied, indicating that this largely remains an unprofessionalised role. Even though salaries as a whole consume the largest portion of the ECCE budgets across models, even for models demanding higher qualifications (e.g., PG Diplomas in ECCE), salaries for teachers remain low. Further, as reported by AWWs and other pre-school teachers in the study, ECCE and ECCE professionals are not afforded the same importance as school education or teachers by parents, a large majority of whom are not aware of the developmental significance of the period or the importance of a sound,

developmentally appropriate curriculum or trained faculty. Thus, the importance of investing in the teacher and in parental awareness programmes is also critical.

Taken together, the findings of the study point to four major considerations for policy: first, with respect to quality, second, in relation to costs and cost-norms, third, about economies of scale and fourth related to resources. These are elaborated below:

1. **Urgent attention towards developing a regulative and legislative framework for ECCE**

While India already has a National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Education (2013), which also provides an in-depth, developmentally relevant curriculum, in the absence of a legislative mechanism, ECCE provisions largely remain unguaranteed and not assured entitlements. There is a need to strongly articulate ECCE as a right, just as with primary education, with a strong regulative framework laying down conditions for quality, ownership, responsibility, cost, partnerships, curricula, etc. Each of these points also need careful consideration, as we elaborate further below.

- i. **Quality** While it is important to set parameters for quality, it is also important to ensure that these parameters do not create barriers for creativity, innovation, experimentation and for contextualisation of interventions. Our study importantly reveals the variety of programmes that are available and also contextually-situated and suited. It is important to ensure the possibility for innovation, without compromising on certain basic features.
- ii. **Non-negotiables and Non-acceptable practices** In order to allow for the possibility for contextually-relevant learning opportunities, while also ensuring quality, it is important to develop a list or framework of non-acceptable and non-negotiable processes and practices, rather than a list of must-do processes and practices. This can ensure diversity while simultaneously ensuring that programmes or models do not create adverse conditions.
- iii. **Developmentally appropriate practice**- Further, regulation of quality should also be uniformly linked to developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) which not only advocate the need for age-appropriate skills and pedagogic practices but also the importance of learning in the mother tongue in the early years. This is important to counter the current trend of pushing children in the early years to read and write in English and guarding against the attraction of early English medium education presented by certain private operators who feed on parental anxieties about preparing children early for later schooling. Considering that English is a language of power and viewed as necessary to have for any social or economic mobility, it is important to have an effective, mass-media based campaign to educate people about the need for home/local language-based education in early years to enable learning

needed for academic excellence and ability to pick English simultaneously and in later years.

iv. Building a bridge between ECCE and primary schooling Another critical factor in improving outcomes of ECCE programmes is the need to build a bridge between ECCE programmes and primary schooling. Studies show that even after developmentally appropriate stimulation in the early years, transition to school may be difficult or challenging. In this context, it is both important to prepare schools and students for such transitions and invest in practices such as reported in Telangana (where primary school teachers supported AWWs in preparing children for this transition), developing a bridge curriculum (sensitive to linguistic differences between pre-school and primary school environments), such as that developed by UPPS.

2. Costing and Financing/Funding ECCE provisions An important component of this report has been the evaluation of various ECCE models with regards to their costs and qualities. Both public and private models are seen to have various kinds of lacunae in this regard. Public provisions have clearly been inadequate and are declining. Despite commitments to a re-structured ICDS, funding has failed to match estimates for improving quality. Further, with the changes brought by the Fourteenth Finance Commission, the centre's share of CSS has declined, while providing greater untied funds to states. In states such as Odisha, with a larger (rural) child population, this has also been accompanied by poorer management of finances and implementation of ICDS (CAG Report 2016). On the other hand, private and NGO models show larger variations in per child costs and are also seen to off-set these costs to parents and community. Further both public and private models are seen to critically fail with respect to investing in important ECCE provisions: for example, there is no separate head for PSE under ICDS and provisions for play and learning material in AWCs has also been found inadequate. ICDS and other private and NGO models are seen to invest very little in teachers/caregivers who form the backbone of the ECCE programme.

Further, many non-state interventions fail to provide for nutrition and other auxiliary services (despite charging user fees). What is also important to note is that of the various non-state interventions studied, five of nine models have costs which well exceed the per child annual expenditures of ICDS which provides a range of additional services other than PSE (which ranges from Rs. 4340 in Odisha to Rs. 7415 in Delhi). Ranges for the non-state models, on the other hand, extend from Rs. 6400 at the lowest end to Rs. 29527, of which only two models provide some form of nutrition. While this observation is not made to advocate simply lowering costs (as this does affect the quality of provision as seen with ICDS, which suffers from unrealistic budgets for rent, honoraria, transport of food, etc.), the observations have important implications for policy.

The policy implications remain the same for state-run programmes (i.e., ICDS) and for regulation of non-state-run programmes although they may need to be articulated differently. Here, we present the policy suggestions while also articulating what it would mean for state-run programmes and what implications it has for regulation of non-state programmes. Towards the end, we also discuss certain specific issues pertaining to both state and non-state run programmes. The policy suggestions are:

- i. **Declaring specific cost-heads as non-negotiable*** It is important to ensure that certain cost-heads such as budgets for curriculum development and nutrition are established as non-negotiable, as these form the crux of the programme. Good quality programmes with developmentally appropriate practices and curricula, such as UPPS, have been built over the years through large investments made in curriculum development. UPPS, in its initial period, received support (financial and otherwise) from development organisations such as UNICEF and the state government which has allowed them to develop a strong curriculum through multiple rounds of consultations and collaborations. It is important to make and allow for such provisions that can improve quality of programmes.

Similarly, budgets for nutrition are critical, particularly when working with disadvantaged communities. Provisions for nutrition are important in a country with still high numbers of malnourished children, as these critically influence enrolment, retention and learning, as noted by UPCS. Considering some of these costs as non-negotiable would be a desirable practice.

Another important component identified within certain models was the role of community involvement which increases ownership, knowledge and awareness and contributes to better outcomes. Community volunteering, in terms of time and resources, can also off-set costs but this requires efforts at building community interest and skills. In successful models like CBCDC, community engagement has had positive dividends where it has been possible to hand over centres to the community for management, reducing costs for the parent organisation. However, it is also important to ensure that this does not become burdensome for the community and hence financial planning, along with conceptual planning for such provisions is important.

This implies that both in state and non-state programmes, these cost heads must be present. The actualisations may vary but provisions for these components is essential.

- ii. ***Determining principle sand ranges for costs rather than fixing unique and rigid cost norms*** This is particularly important in the context of state-run programmes but is also relevant for others. Most government programmes, including ICDS, suffer from the presence of unique and rigid norms for the entire country. Even if the provisions for minor modifications exist, these require permissions that take ages to come. This fails to take diverse contexts and needs into account. Even when the state governments have taken steps to revise ICDS norms, they have remained as rigid and centralised within states which also happen to be large and diverse geographical entities.

One way to break this rigidity is to define principles for determining the cost range and define cost-ranges rather than the cost per se. For instance, the principle for determining the salary for the ECCE instructor/teacher can be that it would not be less than the prevailing minimum wage for skilled labour in any area, will also be responsive to ensure purchasing power parity (higher in urban areas than rural areas if the prices are higher in the former) and will also take all the tasks that she/he is supposed to undertake, including preparation, into account in counting the number of hours that she works for, in estimation of wages. This would mean that a graduate AWW would get at least Rs.17,604 per month and a matriculate but not graduate AWW would get at least Rs.16,182 per month in Delhi as per the current legal provision.² This could also be made part of the regulatory framework for non-state programmes, whether run by NGOs or private entities. These cost norms could work in conjunction with quality norms such as one for qualifications and number of working hours for ECCE instructors/teachers.

Similarly, there could be principles for determining costs of other heads as well. For instance, based on the quality framework, once the physical norms of space requirements are defined, then the cost norms can be linked to those by pegging the prevailing prices. For rent in urban areas, a range can be determined taking prevailing practices into account with provisions for reasonable annual increases. In the same manner, costs of other heads such as nutrition and learning materials can be linked with a quality framework and be defined in ranges. The advantage of such norms are that these are self-corrective and do not need bureaucratic permissions that take long, at times years, for a small change, in addition to the fact that these also ensure adherence to the quality frame and protects the rightful entitlements of both learners and instructors/teachers. These can also be made part of the regulation framework for non-ICDS programmes and thus enhance their accountability. It is important that any such regulatory frame are not different from practices in state-run programmes for

²http://www.delhi.gov.in/wps/wcm/connect/doiit_labour/Labour/Home/Minimum+Wages/

two reasons: one, that can become discriminatory, and two, the state-run programmes also need to have the responsibility of being the pace-setters.

A question may be raised about the ease of implementation, especially for state-run programmes, as one argument for rigid norms is that those are easy to implement. The answer is that the government systems are implementing similar norms in various other streams, e.g., salaries of their own employees where the Dearness Allowance is linked with prices and various other infrastructure projects where cost overruns are routine occurrences. Also, the education departments in a number of states have implemented one programme, District Primary Education Programmes (DPEPs) that for many years followed quality framework-based cost norms successfully. It is more a matter of accepting the need and then developing appropriate frameworks and accountability processes rather than an issue of the ease of implementation.

Such norms are also more in line with a de-centralised frame of governance, especially in view of transfer of high amounts of untied funds to local governments. The government can also think of having a model where local governments can be made responsible for filling the gaps using these cost norms on top of the transfers made for programmes such as ICDS using their own resources.

- iii. **Ceilings for fees and user-charges*** An important finding of the study is that most though not all non-ICDS models charge user fees. The practice is not limited to private institutions and includes NGOs. These remain unregulated and sometimes perhaps even unreported. It definitely calls for a caution against unregulated user charges and there is indeed a need for ceilings on such charges. Ceilings must be fixed not just on user charges/tuition fee but also for compulsory contributions in kind and out-of-pocket provisions that can place a burden on poor and disadvantaged families and communities. In this context, lessons can be drawn from models such as CBCDC and UCM that have used nominal community contributions and user fees as ways of sustaining the programmes through community efforts and interests while not overly burdening them.

3. Economies of scale and cost

As mentioned earlier, the lessons learnt clearly suggest the need for a de-centralised approach and context-specific models. The need for de-centralising monitoring using both experts and community and collaboration with NGOs has also been mentioned in the last report. An important question that we sought to address through the study was the relationship between size/scale of programmes in terms of costs. Most non-ICDS models are small in scale and do not have many lessons to offer. However, it is clear that costs for centralised features such as curriculum, teacher training, monitoring and supervision can be

reduced if the scale is not very small. A particular number of institutions would help in bringing down per centre and per child cost. Here too, it is important to note that while it is desirable to an optimal level to save resources, caution should be used not to make any of these centralised features over-centralised. All features should have the scope to be contextualised within the defined framework.

Another important aspect is that the cost norms be determined after taking note of the fact that fixed and variable costs are not the same as capital and recurrent costs. This is something the centralised cost norms rarely take into account. For instance, there would not be much difference in total costs for running an ECCE centre for 20 children and 40 children as the infrastructure and teacher requirements would perhaps remain the same. This means that these are fixed costs and when the second teacher is brought or the second room is built/rented, the total cost would again remain roughly the same till the number crosses the limit of, say, 80 children. This has two implications: one, that per child cost should not be made the basis for estimation of resources without taking their location into account; two, even if the intervention is large scale, the dispersed nature of the intervention would prevent it from taking full advantage of economies of scale.

4. Nature/source of funding for ECCE programmes

The biggest question with respect to funding and financing ECCE programmes revolves around the issue of whether this should be a public good or allow for private provision as well. Further, in case of public provisioning, particularly if ECCE were to be legislated as a right, it also raises the question of which ministries/departments should be responsible for ECCE. While the DWCD has already made huge investments in setting up of AWCs and has the administrative infrastructure in place, it also occupies a lower position within the hierarchy of ministries compared to education. The DoE, on the other hand, has higher budgets, larger administrative machinery, and a more professionalised cadre of workers who are more fundamentally connected with questions of education, unlike the AWW, who is also burdened with several responsibilities in addition to preschool education.

Further, considering the transition that children would have to make to primary schools, the DoE also appears to be the right body to plan for ECCE such that it can ensure a smooth transition into schooling. On the other hand, considering the interrelated aspects of development in the early years, also tied to maternal health, children's nutritional status and health, AWCs also appear to make a compelling case for locating early childhood education services in them. In addition, there is another risk of shifting ICDS or the ECCE component to the DoE. If not done appropriately, it could lead to even earlier introduction of reading and writing practices (instead of pre-number and pre-letter, and all kinds of age-appropriate stimulation activities/games) which will be counterproductive.

Considering the different advantages offered by both, it is perhaps important to conceive of different ways of integrating provisions across departments and for cost-sharing. For

example, such provisions can perhaps take the form of making the DoE responsible for planning for a bridge course for the AWC to primary school transition, training of AWWs and monitoring and supervising the educational components of the ICDS scheme, while retaining PSE as part of ICDS. Moving ECCE centres to the primary school premises wherever it is possible (as is being done in Telangana), might also be considered.

Keeping in mind the need to allow for diversity as well as numbers, it is perhaps also necessary to allow for alternative providers for ECCE as well as for collaborations between the state and non-state providers. But this needs to be carefully regulated, the conditions of partnership well-set and, as mentioned before, costs and expenditures on these models maintained on parity with other public services so that it does not create hierarchical tiers of PSE as with primary and secondary schooling.

Further, it is important to ensure that partnerships do not just take the form of the state investing funds in private programmes without returns or certain forms of accountability. For example, partnerships could take the form of investments in curriculum development or in training which can also then be used for state ECCE programmes. Partnerships can also take other innovative forms, like provisions of land for programmes within state and central university campuses, public sector companies etc. while also making mandates on private companies/industries to provide space and options for state or non-state run ECCE programmes for staff as well as children from the neighbouring communities. Public-private partnerships and alternative provisions need not be completely avoided but must be carefully planned and regulated.

Finally, we conclude by presenting a set of good practices observed that might be taken together for planning:

1. Addressing infrastructure costs and availability by making ECCE programmes a mandated part of larger public and private institutions such as universities and industries, as seen in the case of SSUP and UPPS.
2. Ensuring better pay and building ECCE teacher/caregiver motivation and morale. Though this was not seen in any specific model, UPCS is one of the models that provided the highest pay to their teachers.
3. Developing professional capacities of the teacher through training which was visible to some limited extent across models. LUPS has invested in training for better classroom management though teachers' across other models seemed to also manage classrooms well.
4. Investing in developing a sound curriculum with extensive teacher handbooks and resources to support classroom learning, as has been undertaken by UPPS, for better quality of learning.
5. Integrating a bridge curriculum for transition to primary schooling which is also sensitive to issues of language and culture, as has been tried by UPPS, to ensure continuity of learning, prevent high dropout rates and improve retention.

6. Developing community involvement as an integral part of the model, as has been planned for in the CBCDC model, to ensure greater community involvement and ownership, which allows for phased handing-over of centres to the community.
7. Considering nutrition as an integral component of programmes for learning, as has been done by UPCS, as this affects motivation, retention and learning.