PLENARY III: ECCE Country Best Practices

Early Childhood Development in Mauritius

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Early Childhood Development In Mauritius

By

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Introduction

The Republic of Mauritius has attained substantial progress in the enhancement of human welfare, the ultimate goal of development. Mauritius can be considered to be one among the most advanced countries in the African continent on this score.

Government’s investment in Health, Education, Women’s Development and Poverty Reduction has been instrumental in the realization of these achievements.

International Instruments ratified by Mauritius

In the 1990’s Mauritius has acceded to and ratified several important international human rights instruments, namely

(i) the Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC)
(ii) the African Charter for the Rights of the Child
(iii) the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Labour
(iv) the Hague Convention on Civil aspects of Child Abduction.

The Optional Protocol on the CRC on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography has been signed in November 2001.

Further, the Government of Mauritius has agreed to the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the CRC on Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict in January 2009.

Child Development Unit of the Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare

The Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare has the mandate to look into protection and development needs of children from 0-18.

All National Policies and Programs to ensure overall development and protection of the child from harm including violence are based on the articles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter for the Rights of the Child.

The Child Development Unit of the Ministry was set up in 1995 and is the executive arm of the Ministry for intervening in cases of child abuse and neglect. The Unit is
responsible for the enforcement of legislation pertaining to children and for the implementation of policies and programmes pertaining to the survival, development, protection and participation of children.

This Unit works closely with other agencies such as the Police Department and provides a 24-hour service through its hot lines. Free legal assistance and psychological counselling to children at risk and in distress, as well as to their parents and families are dispensed whenever required.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE CDU**

- To advocate the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).
- To ensure enforcement of the provisions of the Child Protection Act.
- To promote and propose appropriate legislation for the welfare of children.
- To organize educational and recreational activities for the development of children in collaboration with the National Children’s Council, a parastatal body operating under the aegis of the Ministry.
- To eliminate child abuse, including commercial sexual exploitation of children and child neglect.

**Legislations**

The main legislations which cater for the protection and welfare of children are:

(i) the Child Protection Act 1994 which protects the child from all forms of harm including violence and provides for the temporary removal or alternative placement of the child if living in dysfunctional families and families with violence.

(ii) the Institution for Welfare and Protection of Children Regulations 2000 provides for the upkeep of norms and standards at the level of Day Care Centres and ensures that children really have a good start in life and are made ready for school;
(iii) The Child Protection Act (Foster Care) Regulations 2002 ensure that abandoned children or children living in dysfunctional families have the opportunity to thrive in a substitute family environment.


(v) The Child Protection (Amendment) Act 2008 provides for the setting up of a comprehensive child mentoring programme to cater for rehabilitative needs of children with mild behavioural problems.

- Following the General Elections in Mauritius in May this year, the Government Program 2010-2015 spells out the key priorities of the Mauritian Government. The Consolidated Children’s Bill prominently figures on the program and Government is committed to bring all legislations pertaining to children under a single major piece of legislation. The aim of this Bill will be to harmonise these enactments with the provisions of the CRC while at the same time forming a legislative backbone for all children-related laws. The administration of these laws will still remain with the respective Ministries, like Health, Education, Social Security, Youth and Sports, Social Integration and Economic Development and Information Technology but they will be referred to in the Consolidated Children’s Bill.

- Work on this major project is already under way and is getting the full collaboration and encouragement of the Minister as well as the State Law Office.

Early Childhood Development

Early childhood is the most rapid period of development in a human life. Although individual children develop at their own pace, all children progress through an identifiable sequence of physical, cognitive, and emotional growth and change. The Early Child Development (ECD) approach is based on the proven fact that young
children respond best when caregivers use specific techniques designed to encourage and stimulate progress to the next level of development.

The ultimate goal of Early Child Development (ECD) programs is to improve young children’s capacity to develop and learn. A child who is ready for school has a combination of positive characteristics:

- he or she is socially and emotionally healthy, confident, and friendly;
- has good peer relationships;
- tackles challenging tasks and persists with them;
- has good language skills and communicates well; and
- listens to instructions and is attentive.

The positive effects that ECD programs have can change the development trajectory of children by the time they enter school. A child who is ready for school has less chances of repeating a grade, being placed in special education, or being a school drop-out.

ECD interventions include educating and supporting parents, delivering services to children, developing capacities of caregivers and teachers, and using mass communications to enhance parents and caregivers knowledge and practices. Programs for children can be center or home-based, formal or non-formal, and can include parent education.

THE MAURITIAN EXPERIENCE

Out of a population of almost 1.3 m, the number of children enrolled in primary schools is about 119,000 and slightly lower for secondary schools, that is, about 116,000. The number enrolled in pre-primary is 37,000.

In Mauritius, early childhood care from 0-3 years is given by private individual providers and the services vary widely from the sophisticated, high level and expensive Day Care Centres to the bare minimum in terms of a room in the child minder’s house.
The Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare is the regulating body for this age bracket. The Ministry of Education and Human Resources has the responsibility for child care and education from 3+ to 6 years and of course primary, secondary and tertiary education as well.

**CURRENT STATUS OF THE ECD PROGRAM**

At the level of the Ministry several policy initiatives have been taken to improve the operation and standards of the day care institutions.

Within the framework of the Child Protection Act 1994, the Institutions for Welfare and Protection of Children Regulations 2000 have been made to regulate the activities of Day Care Centres. It is mandatory for DCCs to be registered with the Ministry.

**Establishment of a System of Childcare in Mauritius**

- A Child Care Advisory Committee has been set up since April 1998 comprising representatives of Ministries, NGO's and private institutions. The role of the Committee is to advise on appropriate mechanisms, strategies, coordinated planning, in the execution of ECD programs and also on establishing a sound working relationship amongst childcare providers.

- An ECD Unit has been set up within the Child Development Unit of the Ministry in 1998.

- A Child Care Accreditation Bureau has been set up in January 2001. With independent members from outside the Ministry, it has the responsibility to implement an Accreditation System based on principles and standards established for quality childcare including health and nutrition.

- A user friendly handbook on Child Care Accreditation in Mauritius has been prepared to be used by managers and caregivers of day care centers who opt for accreditation on a voluntary basis. A Child Care Accreditation System
Project is being implemented since 2003 and 90 day care centre managers have been trained and initiated to the accreditation system.

**Development of Training for Personnel Working in Early Childhood Development**

**Training Caregivers**

Training has been given due attention with a view to improve capacity building of child care personnel and to enable the caregivers to ensure a good development perspective of child growth.

Since June 2003 the Mauritius Institute of Education, jointly with Mauritius College of the Air is conducting a distance learning programme on ECD 0-5 years for caregivers of day care centres together with preschool teachers. This course leads to a Certificate of Proficiency on ECD 0-5 years.

According to the Regulations 2000, child caregivers working in DCCs should be professionally qualified in ECD. There are currently many institutions that are providing courses in Early Childhood and are registered at the Mauritius Qualifications Authority (MQA).

Since July 2008, arrangements have been made for the Mauritius Qualifications Authority to consult the ECD Section of the Ministry whenever they are processing a request from an institution that wants to provide training in Early Childhood.

In 2009, the Ministry organized a Foundation Course for Child Caregivers having worked in Child Day Care Institutions and who did not have appropriate academic qualifications.

Workshops are organized throughout the year, for managers and caregivers of child day care institutions for them to express themselves on the problems and issues affecting them in their day to day interaction with children and parents and in the running of their institutions.
These workshops also provide the opportunity to build up capacity on issues related to development, care, safety and hygiene of children among others.

**Development of Strategies for Parent Education and Community Awareness**

Focus has been given to arousing community awareness on ECD as a key strategy for strengthening the caring capacities of families and communities. Parental involvement is a key element in this strategy.

Officers of the ECD section organize activities for parents and the community at large to create awareness on the laws regulating child day care institutions and the norms and standards necessary for the running of these institutions so that people know what to expect as concerns child day care services for children in the age bracket 3 months to 3 years.

**Development of Curriculum Framework for 0-3 Years**

With the assistance of a consultant from Australia and a panel of ECD core-trainers, a programme guidelines for ECD 0-3 years handbook was prepared. The pre-testing was carried out in 34 day care centres. The inputs of managers and caregivers have been incorporated in the document. The ECD program guidelines was launched in 2003 and is being implemented in day care centres since 2004.

In order to standardize the course content of all institutions providing courses in Early Childhood Development, the Ministry together with the MQA and other stakeholders in the field have come forward with a National Framework for Curriculum Development in ECD.

**Equity and Access in Childcare**

A state funded child day care centre has been set up in 2005 in a deprived region, on a pilot basis, to provide assistance to women and children from very poor social economic backgrounds. Child Care Services are free of charge for all low income
parents ($130) and those with slightly higher incomes ($130-$260) pay only a nominal fee of about $6 monthly.

The Ministry of Social Integration which has been recently set up after General Elections in May 2010 will shortly be launching Child Day Care Institutions in several deprived regions for children from vulnerable families.

Development of the Concept of Integrated Services in ECD

Integrated Approach to ECD

Adopting an integrated approach and services for early childhood development aims at introducing a collaborative framework for a holistic ECD, which will provide the best possible service for children and their families. It ensures that children have access to an integrated service in line with the needs and demands for programs of care, health, education and overall development.

Setting up of a Child Care Resource Centre

A Child Care Resource Centre was set up in 2007, where theoretical and practical training are conducted for caregivers. The Centre also includes a book and toy library where books and toys are made available to help in the upgrading of the standard of DCCs and parental education. Managers and Child Caregivers as well as parents and students are encouraged to use the facilities of the reference library.

Expansion of Centre-Based and Home-Based Facilities

Existing DCCs and new centres are being encouraged to upgrade the standards in terms of infrastructure, equipment and services. To that effect they benefit from various micro credit schemes.

Another incentive scheme has been introduced where a **basic kit comprising of educational toys** are provided to the registered day care centres. This scheme aims at sustaining the efforts and motivation of managers so as to promote better child care and services for the enhancement of ECD.
National Parental Empowerment Program

In line with the National Children’s Policy, a National Parental Empowerment Program has also been worked out with a view to empowering parents with better parenting capabilities and emotional competences to handle both the young child and the adolescent. This programme is spread over a period of 10 years (2005-2015).

Objectives of the National Parental Empowerment Program

- To enhance the relationship between parents and children in general
- To reduce and remove intergenerational gaps that leads to conflicts between parents and children
- To improve the parenting skills of parents particularly those faring in deprived areas, and in disadvantaged circumstances
- To empower parents with the capacity to manage and develop coping mechanisms with regard to their family problems
- To create, promote and sustain awareness and understanding of the rights and corresponding responsibilities of the child among parents.

“Ecole Des Parents” - Parents go to school

In an attempt to provide in a systematic manner for comprehensive and coherent parental empowerment, the Ministry has recently developed the “Ecole Des Parents” which is an offshoot of the National Parental Empowerment Programme.

The “Ecole Des Parents” has been launched in September this year and proposes to offer adequate and appropriate information regarding child development in general and also focus on prevention from all forms of child violence. Parents will also be apprised of the support services available to respond to the various needs of parents during different periods of parenting, ranging from pre-birthing to late adolescence through early childhood.

The “Ecole Des Parents”, as a component of the Parental Empowerment Programme, comes in response to Article 18 of the Convention on the Rights of
the Child (CRC) which provides for parents’ joint responsibilities assisted by the State.

As per the provision of this Article, States Parties are to render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child rearing responsibilities.

In order to provide for a common program regarding parenting, a trainer manual and kit for intervention has been developed in consultation with experts in various fields.

The programme will be started soon in a few targeted areas and will be extended to all the different regions of the country during the forthcoming year.

The expected outcomes of parenting sessions are:

- Improved knowledge regarding child development and child rearing practices
- Transformed mindsets and attitudes toward the child and child rights
- Awareness of the need to ascertain maximum support to ensure optimum development of the child who in turn shall be responsible parents to future generations of children.

Challenges

Some of the constraints that are faced in implementing the projects of the Child Development Unit are as follows:

- Shortage of financial resources – The unit has had to operate within tight annual budgetary limits.
- Lack of human resources - Difficulty in recruiting and retaining specialized staff at the level of the Ministry
- Training and capacity building lag behind requirements
- Difficulties in sustainability of projects
- Review and updating legislations and regulations involve lengthy procedures
• Need for expertise and technical assistance in appropriate fields
• With regard to ECD, some caregivers have very low basic qualifications – primary or a few years of secondary education
• Some Day Care Centres cannot get registered with the Ministry as they lack the resources to upgrade the facilities they are offering. Any effort in this direction would entail an increase in the fees charged which parents would not necessarily be able to pay. Closure of these centres should probably be envisaged but in view of the far reaching implications of such a decision, these centres are being given extended moratoriums.

To conclude, I will say that the protection, development and survival of children are constantly presenting new challenges and demand ever increasing efforts on our part to deal with them.