

Turkmenistan

Engaging Parents and Including All Children in Early Learning: Piloting ECD Centres in Local Communities



«ECD programmes can lead to improved rates of survival, growth and development; and ensure later education programmes are more effective. Well-organized inclusive ECD programmes for young children with disabilities can provide parents with more time to engage in productive work and enable girls and boys with disabilities to attend school.»

Early Childhood Development and Disability, WHO and UNICEF, 2012

Key words

Turkmenistan, Early childhood development (ECD), inclusive early learning environment, children with disabilities, parents and communities, family support services

Related links and additional information

If you are interested to learn how the ECD Centres make impact on children's, lives please read the stories of Dilara (5) and Arzuw (5).

Human Interest Stories available at

http://www.unicef.org/turkmenistan/reallives_27215.html

and

http://www.unicef.org/turkmenistan/reallives_27214.html

This documentation brief provides a snapshot of the pilot ECD Centres and the community services provided for respective communities. Study and monitoring reports with full information are available at UNICEF.

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A group activity with families and children at the ECD Centre in Turkmenabad

Contact person:

Elena Sialchonak, Deputy Representative
esialchonak@unicef.org

Djepbar Byashimov, Education Officer
dbayshimov@unicef.org

Ayna Seyitlieva, Communication for Development Officer
aseyitllieva@unicef.org

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Abstract

Initiating new community based services is challenging and requires a comprehensive approach, especially when it comes to ensuring better child outcomes and bringing various sectors to work towards.

Two ECD centres were piloted in 2013 as early learning and development spaces offering ECD services for children who do not participate in early childhood programmes and their families in Abadan and Turkmenabat, including children with disabilities. Co-funded by the Government and UNICEF, the Centres are to support and strengthen capacities of families to ensure optimal development of their children, including children with disabilities.

UNICEF supported monitoring and documentation

of the capacity of the ECD Centres to provide equitable community-based family support services. Research into the Centres' effectiveness within a wider mapping and assessment of existing social services helped to identify gaps between demand for such services and supply as well as deficiencies in quality stemming from a limited number of staff with required qualifications, difficulties in promoting multidisciplinary approaches, lack of trained social workers and information about the Centres.

The findings of the research will feed into development of a national vision of social support services for vulnerable children and families, including a possible scale up of such centres. They were also used to analyse how current programmatic interventions tap into the overall ECD system strengthening.

Regional Key Leadership Area 4 "Including All Out of School Children in Quality Learning"

UNICEF Turkmenistan provides policy and technical support to the Ministry of Education in improving quality and access of all children to a continuum of education opportunities, starting with pre-school and beyond.

Pilot family support ECD Centres provide inclusive learning environment for pre-school age children, including those with developmental difficulties. The Centres' staff practice a play therapy and early intervention techniques for children's development. The services also include support for families; parents receive advice on optimal development of their children, including children with disabilities and developmentally challenged children."

Issue

Despite considerable efforts of the country, children with disabilities continue to face challenges in acceptance into mainstream education, including capacity of teachers, physical inaccessibility, lack of assistive equipment, and overall limited understanding of disabilities, social and cultural norms. A number of policy and system bottlenecks also exist,



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A four-year-old Dovran with Down syndrome with his mother at the ECD Centre in Turkmenabad

which require further aligning of legislation with the CRC and CRPD, enhancing capacities in governance, increasing efficiency of public funding through the use of reliable demographic and socio-economic data, strengthening coordination among different sectors and many other systemic gaps.

The pilot ECD Centres contribute to the realization of the ongoing National Programme on ECD and School Readiness for 2011-2015. Despite the Centres' capacity to provide regular services for only a certain number of families (up to 30 children regularly attend each centre), the centres' operation is important for a number of reasons. The existing system of preschool education and learning comprises full-day kindergartens, at which 33.5% of children at the age of 3 to 6 participate, and parenting centres, which operate at weekends to provide advice to parents on child development and preparation to school.

Several types of preschool services for children with disabilities exist: special kindergartens or integrated groups for children with hearing and visual impairments, speech difficulties, intellectual disabilities, and disorders of the musculoskeletal system in 'regular' kindergartens. Alternatively, the Centres demonstrate models that provide inclusive and flexible child-centred services and perform support functions for young children, children with disabilities and their families. Technically supported by UNICEF Turkmenistan, the Centres also help to facilitate transition of children to school.

Strategy and Implementation

2012, UNICEF Turkmenistan agreed with the government on the establishment of a cross-sectoral working group to facilitate the implementation of the National ECD Programme and pilot regions were selected to model ECD services, try out multi-sectoral approaches in service delivery and monitor their outcomes. UNICEF Turkmenistan provided extensive capacity building activities and technical expertise to undertake participatory research into ECD issues. Local authorities, health, education and social protection specialists were exposed to the best international practices to ensure a quick start-up and smooth operationalization of the services.

The intent of the monitoring exercise was to assess how capacity development interventions affected existing mechanisms, services and practices at local level in reaching the most vulnerable children and families. The documentation was profoundly informed by the evidence generated from the Survey of the Situation of Children with Disabilities, the Study on Social Services Survey, field monitoring of



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A four-year-old Dovran with Down syndrome with his mother at the ECD Centre in Turkmenabad

health related ECD and joint monitoring field trips of the cross-sectoral teams. This approach enabled to see a bigger picture of demand, supply and overall socio-ecological environment rather than fragmented understanding of the ECD Centres' work.

Progress and Results

The selected monitoring framework focused on different aspects of the ECD Centres' work designed to provide multifunctional and multidisciplinary ECD services such as physical conditions, family support services at local level, individual programmes for children and progress assessment, management and coordination and parental engagement. Both Centres are well-equipped with developmental materials, but have little access to assistive technologies or devices for complex disabilities and motor control and development.

With regard to the capacity of the two Centres, although specialists from both Centres benefited from the same trainings, regulations, documents and working procedures, they vary considerably. These differences in structure and approaches are also reflected in the way the Centres are managed and led.

The Turkmenabat ECD Centre appears to be more advanced in terms of methodologies, experience, expertise and scale/coverage. This can be attributed to the strong capacity of this region, which benefits from proximity and long standing relationships with

the Pedagogical Institute, as well as trained human resources.

The Centre takes a proactive role to become a methodological resource unit for etrap specialists and parents, developing and piloting innovative services. The Centre worked with the parents' centres and trained 600 kindergarten and primary school teachers on school readiness, which resulted in a high level of school readiness of children across the region in 2014. The Centres mainly offer service for families with children beyond 3 year old, leaving out the younger ones and, thus, starting late and missing a critical window of developmental opportunities. The physical environment and human resources require further efforts, especially with regard to case management.

The Centres, building on positive experience, should strengthen their work with parents through advice and counselling and enhanced engagement in children's assessments and participatory development of individual plans.

Lessons Learned

The monitoring exercise revealed some useful lessons learnt and recommendations:

Next steps

In December 2014, a roundtable meeting on review of the National ECD Programme was convened with engagement of various sectors including the management of ECD Centres. Findings and recommendations from the ECD Centres' assessment as well as from other ECD related studies were extensively discussed and

■ The ECD Centres have a strong potential to provide community-based family support services and there is growing demand from local communities to expand the scope of services by adding home visitation. The Centres could benefit from cross-fertilisation, building more effective referrals with other sectors and expanding their resource potential to share expertise with velayats and etraps.

■ The Centres' support function needs further strengthening: multidisciplinary teams should be established and case management improved to better support children with disabilities and their parents.

■ Systemic approaches are required to ensure a move from the medical model of disability to a social one, as the former prevails in parents' and experts' views about children with disabilities.

■ The ECD Centres appear to evolve the role of the social support service. Some parents feel that the engagement of children at the Centre provide some meaningful time to parents and their children.

The staff of the Centre allocates sufficient time for parents to share their concerns and needs and provides necessary counselling to meet the incoming demand. This innovative approach can play a critical role in the context of absence of the social work per se.

contributed to understanding that much work needs to be done to implement the national ECD policy.

UNICEF Turkmenistan and partners agreed to work on introduction of early intervention services and the social work profession, building referrals between sectors, strengthening data collection and monitoring mechanisms.

United Nations Children's Fund
UNICEF Turkmenistan Country Office
UN House, 40, 1995 (Galkynysh) Str.
Ashgabat, Turkmenistan 744013
Telephone: +993-12 425681/82/85/86
Fax : +993-12 420830
Email: ashgabat@unicef.org
www.unicef.org/turkmenistan
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/unicef.turkmenistan>

