

Assessing the supportiveness of the environment for young children

Are adults meeting their obligations?

A child rights framework

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January 2000

What are we concerned about?

- Children's well-being (impact)
- Program effectiveness - are programs working? (coverage, quality etc.) what needs improving?
- Accountability – are adults fulfilling their obligations to young children?

ECCD and children's rights

Worldwide the commitment to early childhood development programs as a key element of both basic education and overall child rights strategies is growing. Early childhood programs were earlier viewed as merely a “piece” of basic education. It is relatively recently that the critical connection to ensuring children's rights has been made. They are essentially **an integrated set of actions for ensuring young children's rights** - i.e. about children growing up healthy, well-nourished, protected from harm, with a sense of identity and self-worth, and opportunities for learning. About children being able to think for themselves, express their views, interact positively with others and participate actively in their families and communities. And about addressing the issues which put a brake on and damage children's development.

We know that **children's rights will be met when the environment around the child (family, community, local infrastructure, national policy) respects children's rights and supports their overall development.** . As such some recent child development program design - for example in Nepal, Bangladesh, Vietnam and Laos - has framed the objectives (and the indicators) in terms of increasing the supportiveness of the environment for children's overall development at all different levels (from family through to national policy).

What do we need to be measuring?

What we are needing to look at is **how adults are meeting their obligations to children** – family members, parent educators, child development center facilitators/teachers, district staff, NGOs, government policy makers etc. To do that we need to look at **children's status** and **adult efforts**.

The rights framework has ensured attention to **government policy** as a key to sustained change. However, all levels are critical if we are to achieve the sort of fundamental value changes and shift in social mores which we are seeking. While the Convention is legally binding for state

parties and, as such, is an immensely powerful tool, the **moral obligations to children extend throughout society** and long precede any treaty. This means that civil society's role is central.

It is especially important to take into account that for the majority of children it is the **family** which, in reality, is the institution most responsible on a **day-to-day** basis for the **management and defense of children's rights**. The younger the child the more this is the case. As such it is essential for reporting frameworks to be concerned with different levels.

Child development programs seek to have a positive impact on the child's physical and psycho-social development. Therefore we need to be able to observe changes in the **child**. However, we also need to be looking at all the **different levels (family, community, local institutions, national policy)** to confirm (or otherwise) that adults are meeting their obligations to children. We have to look at effort in terms of political will, financing, coverage etc. We also have to be concerned with the quality of what is happening and the overall context. These will be key in determining the outcome for children. (Using a **multi-level framework** allows us to home in on problematic areas - because we won't see the desired achievements at the child level on a significant scale unless things are working at the different levels.)

The attached **rights-based framework** attempts to summarize this visually – **with the child at the center surrounded by concentric circles representing the family, community, district and national levels**. It starts with identifying for each level the **key question** which we are needing to answer in order to make an assessment of how we are doing in supporting young children's development.

Note that within a rights-based framework we are concerned with the **whole child** and so **indicators are necessarily multi-sectoral and cross-sectoral**. Within each of these levels there are selected examples of indicators. (These are only examples – particularly for the “interaction” segment there is a vast range of possible indicators). The indicators are divided into 3 core areas:

◆ **political will**

This covers areas such as policy, levels of support indicated by budget allocations and expenditure, program coverage, inclusion of young children's issues in agendas etc. This is not seen as being exclusively concerned with national level decision-making – rather it takes account of all levels (district, village committee etc. and can go right down to household expenditure.)

◆ **socio-economic conditions**

This provides vital information about the overall context which has a powerful influence on the realizing of children's rights. For the most part these context indicators have been established and are available in a wide range of existing reports. The concern is with basic indicators relating to people's well-being - income levels, health, education and gender information. It is important to have access to community and district level figures not only national figures which may mask wide disparities.

◆ **interactions**

This is seen as perhaps being the most important set of indicators. For children it is the interactions with the people around them which are most important and have the most powerful effect on their well-being. And yet this is the area that is often most neglected...often because the indicators are more subtle and may require different approaches to gather information. The range of possible indicators is vast and must be locally defined. Examples are given and one of the interesting points to note is that some of the family and ECCD center ones are identical – e.g. “opportunities for play, frequent interactions with

adults and children, exploration of a variety of materials” and “secure atmosphere in which children’s efforts are appreciated and encouraged”

At the district and national levels the key interaction indicators are seen as being appropriate training and on-going back-up support and supervision for ECD personnel. The constant recommendation from almost every ECCD evaluation worldwide should perhaps be included as a core indicator – the definitions of “appropriate” and “ongoing” have to be made locally.

This presentation of ECCD indicators is designed to i) illustrate the connections within an overall child rights conceptual framework ii) help ensure we don’t lose sight of the key questions which concern us.

The framework of necessity is concerned with a wide range of indicators – some easily obtained using standard quantitative methods and others requiring more qualitative research approaches.

- **quantitative** indicators which are collected on a large-scale and routinely (enrolments, retention in primary (comparisons of children who have participated in ECD programs with controls), nutritional status, numbers of personnel at village/ district level, budget allocations etc.)
- **qualitative** assessments (small-scale) using participatory research methodologies
The qualitative piece is important because it is the quality of children’s interactions with others which is critical and while there are measurable indicators which help capture “quality” (responsiveness to questions, use of open-ended questions etc.) more qualitative observations which take account of a whole host of factors relating to the way adults relate to children often end up providing more meaningful information. Moreover, it may well be that the more subtle outcomes of attention to the early years may ultimately be the most important. If children's experiences within the family and within community-based programs build both strong bodies and their sense of self-worth, their communication skills and their enthusiasm for learning then this will have effects which may be hard to capture relying on only statistical methods.

observation (both structured (quantifiable) and informal observation/report) is key.

While an overall framework is needed the reality is that we will, quite appropriately, be very **selective in choosing the indicators** we use. It will at times (e.g. when developing 5 year plans, conducting situation analyses, country strategies, evaluations etc.) be necessary to take a broad view to relate the different pieces together (context, outcomes etc.) rather than focussing too much on only program inputs. At other times it is absolutely appropriate to just be checking whether the inputs committed to were indeed provided in terms of budget allocations, posts filled, centers established etc.

Different agencies (both governmental and non-governmental) may fruitfully take a variety of approaches and focus on different aspects. Governments are responsible for the major quantitative indicators while NGOs may for example offer particular expertise in participatory research. **It is linking the different pieces and connecting them within an overall child rights framework which may be helpful in i) encouraging a more holistic approach to programming for young children and ii) enabling us to better assess how we are doing in meeting our obligations to young children.**

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Supplementary note on indicators for different levels

Child level

- nutritional and health status
- psycho-social status

Difficulties with assessment of psycho-social status because measurement does not follow the measurement principles which apply to biological variables. There is little predictive validity for what can be measured during infancy (first 18 months). Predictive power much more significant in assessments with children from 36 months up.

Fixed and absolute standards or relative and focused on improvements?

It may be useful to draw some lessons from how assessment procedures have changed over time in the nutrition field.

Growth charts- weight for age.

At first the focus was on where the child was (red, yellow, green) - according to international nutrition norms. Later national norms were created in many countries. Also the focus shifted to whether a child was gaining weight between weighing periods. Most recently indicators of micro-nutrients have been added.

A similar concern with positive change (in both individuals and populations) and jointly developed assessments is appropriate for the psycho-social area.

Useful child level tools

Nutritional status

This is an important indicator for child development programs. It is important in its own right. In addition research in Jamaica and Chile demonstrates the importance of affection and stimulation for physical development. In the studies one group of children is given a nutritious meal and another group is given the meal plus participates in a stimulation program. When compared with the children who receive only the meal the children who are both fed and given the play and learning opportunities consistently demonstrate not only better status on psycho-motor tasks but also better nutritional status

Screening tools

- e.g. 10 question screening tool (very basic tools for identifying children with clear developmental delays)

Developmental Checklists

These are preferable to comprehensive developmental assessments for most purposes. There are numerous comprehensive developmental assessment tools but these far more complex than are needed for most purposes. Most have been developed in US, Europe or Russia. There have been many adaptations (e.g. the Denver has been adapted for Vietnam, Bayley has been adapted widely) but there is tremendous disagreement regarding the extent to which assessments can be applied cross-culturally. As Engle emphasizes assessment tools are not intrinsically transportable being based on social conventions which vary tremendously from one culture to another.

Assessment procedures have to be developed together with representatives from the area in order to incorporate local perceptions. This does not mean that we will not make use of existing scales and checklist (such as the Philippines checklist which was cross-referenced with 11 other tools). It just means that we will be careful to ensure that local ideas about children's development and what is important are incorporated. The childrearing study (Nepal) aims to assist communities articulate their own knowledge and values about how children develop and what it is important for children to know and do. This provides a strong basis for dialogue and practical planning for child development interventions.

A developmental checklist is most valuable as a practical tool to enable caregivers to better support all aspects of children's development. It assesses the young child's skills in different developmental areas (fine motor, gross motor, cognitive, language, social, emotional) and highlights specific strengths and weaknesses at different ages/stages. This gives the caregiver/teacher the opportunity to plan activities which are developmentally appropriate for the child- e.g. if a child development center teacher notices a child of 4 never joins in with other children she can make special efforts to organize group games and help the child to join in or to organize activities in pairs.

Observation

This is an important part of assessing child development achievements as those of us who are parents all know! We should not underemphasize this in our programs and both informal and structured observation are important

Informal observation/report

parent/facilitator report (“ She’s so much more confident and helpful around the house since she went to the child development center”/ “ he greets people so nicely now” / “”she knows so many songs”)

Structured observation

these can be for example structured observations at fixed periods looking at selected aspects of development e.g. use of language. The comparison can be of children over time (looking for progress or comparison between program participants/ controls).

Listening to Children

The younger the child the more necessary it is to observe and interpret what they are telling us through their behavior. However, well before the child goes to school he/she is well able to talk about feelings and opinions and these need to be taken into account to a far greater extent than has been the case in traditional monitoring systems. We miss critical information when we don't

listen to children. For example recent research with young school children in Bangladesh and Nepal has revealed how critical teacher violence is in leading to children's dropping out.

Assessing Program effectiveness against child development indicators

For assessment of program effectiveness one might want to home in on selected indicators from within the huge battery of development indicators. There is no nutritional status equivalent for psycho-social development. Much discussion around this at present.

Examples:

- nutritional status
- enrollment in primary schools from child development centers
- reduction in incidence of illness
- language skills (comparison of program participants with control group)
- motor skills (comparisons)
- social skills (comparisons)
- cognitive skills e.g. meaningful counting of objects, classification into categories (comparisons)
- parent/caregiver observations and judgments

Note:

It is not necessary to have normative data to assess whether an intervention has changed a child's developmental course. A comparison between an intervention and control group does that.

Information on child development at different times and from different sources is needed.

There are dangers in some indicators. For example in Nepal BPEP is interested in ECD because it wants to reduce drop-outs in Grade1. Some effect will be achieved through ECD programs but in order to guarantee significant reductions in drop-out rates schools will have to be prepared for children - not just children prepared for schools.

Family level

Another crucial set of indicators are family indicators as it is primarily from the family that the child develops his/her sense of who s/he is and what life is all about.

There is a whole range of important information about the family's socio-economic situation and the overall family environment (housing, livelihood, family composition, water and sanitation, landholding, access to healthcare etc.)

These factors all influence the critical piece we are concerned with here:

- Interactions within family

Again the indicators will vary enormously according to the culture, age of the children, program focus but are essentially concerned with a whole range of knowledge, attitudes and practice regarding children's overall development

Examples :

- feeding within first 6 hours after birth
- exclusive breastfeeding for first 4 months
- continued breastfeeding/food during diarrheal episode
- use of alternative methods to encourage children's co-operation i.e. not physical punishment
- equal quantities of food given to boys and girls of similar ages
- equal importance given to boys and girls education
- positive interactions between parents and children

A range of tools will be needed to examine these indicators in addition to regular monitoring formats, KAP surveys etc. (e.g. participatory research, sample observations). Process measures are also critical for continuous improvement of programs e.g. caregivers' responsiveness to program interventions, levels of participation etc.

Community level

Community indicators are concerned with evidence of commitment to children in community and amongst community organizations

examples

- coverage of community-based child development projects
- inclusion of children's issues in agendas of community/local government/ CBO meetings
- community decisions indicating concern for children's "best interests"
- allocation of funds for child-focused projects
- community support for/ownership of child development and education programs

Local institutions

e.g. schools, child development centers, health centers etc.

Not just about access although coverage is certainly an issue - especially for ECD programs...but about working for the kind of experience which will foster children's overall development - an area in which Unicef and several Alliance members have been working to define what we mean by "child-friendly/ rights-based" schools/ ECD centers/ etc.

Key indicators :

1) Quality - developmentally appropriate

quality learning outcomes - improved teaching/learning methodologies
(child-centered active, co-operative learning - age-approp., life relevant
literacy, numeracy skills + problem-solving, communication, critical thinking etc.)

2) Supportive, nurturing environment - positive experiences promoting well-being and sense of self-worth and encouraging participation

- secure, encouraging environment (Teachers to children +teachers promote caring amongst children)

- conduct regulated - no bullying, physical punishment

- support to children entering school
 - healthy physical environment (clean, safe, water and toilets etc.)
- 3) **Relevant** - relation with families/ community
- relevant curriculum
 - regular contact between ECCD center/ school and home (support parents to help children's learning)
 - flexible calendar (according to seasonal schedules)
 - 1st language allowed
 - parents/ communities' active role in management
- 4) **Active promotion of equality, respect, and inclusiveness**
(gender, ethnicity, caste, religion, disability)
- Teachers' behavior
 - materials and lesson content
 - center's/school's active role in respecting/ assisting promote/ monitor children's rights (not just in school)

Policy environment

This is concerned with:

- legal frameworks and mechanisms for dealing with rights abuse
- national government policies
- NGO status
- organizational policies
- levels of support for policy implementation (budget allocations etc.)

(e.g. policy change indicating increased commitment to young children, more holistic approaches, creation of bodies/ posts with specific child rights responsibilities)