



“Bite Off Only as Much as You Can Chew”: Gambia’s Policy for Early Childhood

In its National Education Policy for 2004-15,¹ the Government of Gambia announced a plan to create ECD Centres for 3-6-year-olds on the premises of primary schools in the most disadvantaged areas. The plan aims to optimise the existing school infrastructure and workforce for early childhood. To learn more about the country’s efforts to develop a sustainable policy for early childhood, an interview was arranged with Mr. Momodou Sanneh, Director of Basic and Secondary Education of the Ministry of Education; and Mr. Alieu Badara Senghore, Principal of the Gambia College. The interview was conducted by Soo-Hyang Choi, UNESCO, Paris, who prepared the following excerpts.

But first, a profile of early childhood care and education in Gambia: Since 2003 the entire discipline has been referred to as Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECD) Key service components include ECD Centres catering for 3-6-year-olds and Clinics and Daycare Centres² for 0-2-year-olds. The Ministry of Education provides technical assistance for ECD Centres, while the Ministry of Community Development supports Daycare Centres and the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs supports Clinics. But the overall administrative and policy responsibility for IECD lies with the Ministry of Local Governments, which oversees a national multisectoral working group. Early childhood is not part of basic education at the system level, which includes primary and lower secondary education for 7-15-year-olds.³ Official data are not available, but nearly all early childhood services are private. The gross enrolment rate of pre-primary education stood at 20% in 2002. The Government plans to increase the rate by 50% by 2015. Children begin primary education at age 7. The PPP gross national income per capita of Gambia in 2003 stood at \$1740.

Choi: Could you tell us how you came up with the idea of establishing ECD Centres in primary schools?

Sanneh: That was considered the best way of providing some form of early childhood experience for the most disadvantaged children. Even the most disadvantaged community has at least one school. We thought it would be more realistic to make use of that existing structure than to try to build an independent service structure for early childhood.

C: Is the policy the Government’s pro-poor strategy?

S: It is a pro-poor policy for the poorest. For less poor but still poor areas, where some form of fee-paying non-public services are available, we are trying to ensure the quality of the services by training the teachers.⁴

¹ Approved by the Government Cabinet, the policy is scheduled to be submitted to the National Assembly in 2006 for ratification.

² Daycare Centre also refers to private services that cater for children above 2 years.

³ The Education Policy for 2004-15 proposes that basic education be made compulsory. At the moment only primary education for 7-12-year-olds is compulsory and free.

⁴ The College of Gambia, the country’s only teacher training institution, plans to develop a training programme for early childhood teachers

C: Which age groups will the ECD Centres serve?

S: 3-6-year-olds.

C: Are the ECD Centres focused on pre-primary education, preparing children for formal schooling?

S: No, they are not. As the name implies, the ECD Centres focus on child development, not education or schooling. We don’t even use the word *preschool* anymore⁵ since we adopted the multisectoral, integrated early childhood framework in 2003.⁶

C: When early childhood is embraced within the formal education system, the idea of universal provision is often debated. Was the idea of universalising one year of early childhood not considered?

S: Yes, it was considered. We examined the possibility of lowering the entry age into primary school to 6 years, universalising 6-year-olds’ access to education. But according to projections it would be too costly for the Government to handle without external support. The idea was dropped because of the problem of sustainability.

C: I guess the education sector’s plan to expand the current free compulsory education from 6 years to 9 years must have been another factor discouraging universalisation at the early childhood level.

S: That’s right. The Sector was clear about its priority, but it was fully convinced of the importance of early childhood and tried to find an alternative way to promote it, which was to set up ECD Centres on the premises of primary schools.

C: If the ECD Centre option was deemed less costly, where would the presumed savings come from?

S: Though the word *centre* may conjure up in people’s mind a building, the ECD Centres that we are considering are more like playgrounds, with sheds contributed and set up by the communities. So there is a cost saving for building infrastructure.

C: But even in sheds, in order to have a programme you need materials and, especially, trained teachers.

S: As we do not yet have a curriculum for the ECD Centres,⁷ they will run, for the time being, more like playgrounds, with no fixed programme, with the teachers

working in private services, 90% of which cater for the poor, though not the poorest. This training plan, which will be fee-charged, and the plan for ECD Centres in the poorest areas are two major axes of the country’s pro-poor early childhood plans.

⁵ Though this is the policy, in reality, ECD centres are still being referred to as preschools.

⁶ All the concerned sectors of the Government participated in the development and take part in the implementation of the framework. Within this broad framework, individual sectors develop their own policies concerning the services they are responsible for.

⁷ The Ministry of Education is working on it in collaboration with UNICEF.

responsible more for childminding than for their learning process.

C: How would you supply the teachers?

Senghore: We have introduced a polyvalent teacher training framework, under which primary school teachers are now certified by the Government to teach early childhood as well. Once the plan is approved and implemented, each school principal will assign one of these polyvalently trained teachers to the new ECD Centre.⁸

C: This is a strategic way of securing at least one government-paid and -trained teacher for each ECD Centre, but in order for it to happen, the primary schools will each have to lose a teacher to the ECD Centre in the shed.

Sanneh: In the absolute sense, yes. So the Government plans to recruit more primary school teachers. But we figured that it would still be more cost effective than to meet the workforce needs of early childhood through early childhood specialists.

C: The net enrolment ratio of primary education in Gambia is only 73% (2001/02) in the face of the pressing urgency to universalise primary education. Did the schools welcome the responsibility for ECD Centres?

S: They welcomed it very much because they believed that it would certainly boost enrolments in primary education and help increase internal efficiency.

C: What about early childhood stakeholders? What were their reactions?

S: Those who were concerned about the low participation rate in early childhood, just 20%, welcomed the idea as a viable way of meeting the government target of increasing the rate by 50% by 2015, especially for the disadvantaged. The idea was received as a clear sign of the Government's investment and involvement in delivery of early childhood services.

C: Would there be any particular benefits for the children that can be attributed to the ECD Centre's close link with the primary school?

S: Yes. Although early childhood is currently not part of free compulsory education, the children attending public ECD Centres in deprived communities would not be charged fees. They will also receive free meals, as primary school students do.

C: Were there any negative reactions?

S: Not negative, but what was debated was the language of instruction. Parents wished the ECD Centres to use English, the medium of instruction in schools⁹, but the Government advocated the use of local mother-tongue languages for ECD Centres, believing this to be pedagogically more effective. The latter position was adopted.

C: When early childhood closely precedes formal education, there is a danger of "schoolification," or early

childhood becoming early primary education. What are the measures you will put in place to prevent that?

S: The quality monitoring systems that are in place for primary education¹⁰ will be used to monitor ECD Centres. The communities, parents as well as specialised monitors will be trained to make a clear distinction between early childhood and primary education, and they will be mobilised at the grassroots and system levels to ensure that early childhood does not become early primary education.

C: What is your plan for 0-2-year-olds?

S: They are taken care of by other sectors and the education sector does not plan to involve itself with them.

C: Is parenting education the major approach for 0-2-year-olds?

S: It is, but parenting education is an important component stressed in all services provided by all stakeholders of the multi-sectoral framework including the education sector.

C: Do you think it is necessary to be concerned with younger children?

S: It would be ideal for the education sector to be equally concerned with the earlier years. But in terms of the sector's resource capacity, that is not possible, at least for now. One should bite off only as much as one can chew. We have taken up the responsibility for 3-6-year-olds; it is our priority to fulfill this responsibility of ours as best as we can.

C: What advice do you have for other countries?

Sanneh and Senghore: An integrated approach by which different sectors join and share their strengths within a common framework could be a strategy for making the best use of available resources in the country. In Gambia, thanks to such an approach, each sector is looking after certain age groups within its mandate, but in a coordinated manner.

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⁸ However, the Government has a parallel plan to develop a stand-alone early childhood training programme for teachers working in the private sector. This pilot programme will serve as a benchmark for more professional early childhood teacher training and help develop a qualification system for early childhood teachers.

⁹ English is not used as a medium of instruction but taught as a subject from grade one in primary school.

¹⁰ Two systems are in place. One is *Participatory Performance Monitoring*, where communities and parents can take the liberty of coming to the schools and assuming monitoring roles for the quality of teaching and learning. The other is the *Cluster Monitors System*, by which one monitor is identified for a cluster of four or five schools to monitor teaching and learning processes.