

Early Childhood Care and Education in Rural Ethiopia: Current Practices, New Initiatives, and Pilot Programs

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Abstract: *This study examines the current urban and private-based modern practices of early childhood care and education and the traditional priest schools, the new (Zero-Grades and Child-to-Child) initiatives of the Ministry of Education launched in a bid to improve access, and the civil societies-initiated preschool programs that are under piloting in rural Ethiopia. While the existing urban-based Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) was arguably presented to be externally introduced and had western orientation in many ways, the priest schools, Zero-Grades, and Child-to-Child, despite several implementation constraints that surround them, were believed to be contextually relevant, feasible, scalable and sustainable in many ways. On the other hand, the **civil societies**-initiated pilot ECCEs seemed to stretch the features of urban-based ECCEs to a rural setting and, hence, were found to be expensive, less responsive to local realities, and seemed to have less prospect for sustainability. It was suggested **that the** future of rural ECCEs rather **be envisioned** within the framework of low-cost and context responsive programs conveniently encompassing priest schools, Zero-Grades, and new kebele-initiated preschools in every woreda such that Child-to-Child initiative be used in conjunction with each of them so as to augment their outcomes. Civil societies were also suggested to work towards supporting such initiatives in different ways rather than working to create model ECCEs not aligned with rural realities.*

Key words: priest schools, zero-grades, child-to-child initiatives, preschools, civil societies

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Introduction

The early years of formal education in Ethiopia had a long historical presence with its roots in the major religious movements: the introduction of Christianity in the 4th century (Bowen and Horn, 1976) and the opening of priest schools that taught early reading and writing to young children (Pankhurst, 1955), and the Islamic movement along the western and northern African regions, introducing Islam to Ethiopia as early as the 7th century and spreading of Quranic schools that taught early Arabic reading and writing to Muslim children (Alidou, Boly, Brock-Utne, Diallo, Heugh and Ekkehard, 2006); both were mainly for religious purposes; and lastly the evangelical movement that brought protestant Christianity and introduced formal childhood education (opening primary schools, teaching children with mother tongue), care (opening hospital for child and maternal care), and literature (publications of primary reading materials) in the southern and western regions of Ethiopia (cited in Tesema, 2013). Modern preschools were, however, introduced much latter, firstly for foreign nationals in 1898 (Demeke, 2003), and then for the general public service of educating Ethiopian children in 1963 with pilot projects run by foreign nationals in different urban community centres (MNCDSA, 1972). Thus, preschools of modern/western-type were introduced externally, and from a new and foreign perspective, also marking the first rural-urban split in the history of early childhood education.

Although the establishment of this modern type early years' education may not be regarded as a delay even by European standards (Belay and Hawaz, 2015:1), its expansion is, however, very slow (Demeke, 2003; Hoot, Szente, and Belete, 2004). This trend, however, has been drastically changed by the bold measures of the current government which introduced primary school-attached readiness centres (Zero-Grades and Child-to-Child Initiative) subsequently boosting the enrollment rate from the 2.1% of the Sub-Saharan average (UNESCO, 2010) to 26 % at the moment (EMIS, 2014). Such Early Child Care Education is mainly provided by the private sector for nearly 70% of the

urban children (Woodhead et al., 2009; Young Lives, 2012). The regional disparity in ECCE access, ranging from 40.3% for the most urbanized (Addis Ababa) to 0.5% for the less urbanized (the Afar) regions (EMIS, 2014). This indicates how prominent the disparity is in the urban rural provision of childhood education. **In fact, attendance levels even** within the urban areas **vary**, strongly affected by poverty **where** only around 20% of the poorest fifth of households access pre-school **as compared to the** about 70% of the more advantaged fifth **households** (Young Lives, 2012; Woodhead et al., 2009).

Indeed, the government and NGOs' **provision of ECCE services are limited even** though **they are** distributed more evenly across household poverty levels at least in the towns (Woodhead et al., 2009). Hence, the need for more government and **NGOs' involvement for equitable and accessible ECCE provision for** rural children is highly felt.

In fact, the government has **laid** the ground rule for an equitable and accessible ECCE in Ethiopia. The following documents testify the contributions of the government: **a)** the Constitution giving recognition to children's rights for education (**FDRE, 1995, Article 36**); **b)** the **National Education and Training Policy** that has focus on preschool education for "all rounded development of the child in preparation for formal schooling" (MoE, 1994:14)²; **c)** the ESDP IV (2010) document that consists of a package of intentions, strategies, and programs for improving access, equity, and quality of ECCE, and, perhaps a breakthrough phenomenon of all times in ECCE history in Ethiopia (Boakye, 2008); **d)** the **development** of the National ECCE Policy Framework (MoE, MoWA and MoH, 2010a); **e)** Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (MoE, MoWA, and MoH, 2010c), and **f)** the Strategic **ECCE** Operation Plan (MoE, MoWA, and MoH, 2010 b).

Unlike the ECCE legislative framework (policy, programs, and strategies) that may be taken as a **development** of more recent times, the educational and administrative framework **had**, in fact, made their prior presence and **gone** through successive revisions: the curriculum

in 1981 (MoE, 1973 E.C), the standard for supervision a year later (NCC, 1974 E.C) and the teachers' guide in about the same year (NCC 1974 E.C). The curriculum guide was then successively improved in 1999 (MoE, 1999), 2006 (MoE, 1998 E.C.), and 2009 (MoE, Ginbot 2001 E.C.) increasingly **featuring** "developmentally organized, thematically integrated, competence-based, and participatory" **activities** (MoE, Ginbot 2001 E.C); while the standard was improved only once in 1995 (MoE, 1995).

Although the development of these legislative framework may not be taken as a breakthrough but rather a natural outcome of the socio-historical events that have taken shape domestically and globally (Boakye, 2008) and also that the Ethiopian government has also embarked on these endeavors, particularly the ECCE policy, much latter than many of the African countries, these guides are, of course, important source of impetus for ECCE to take off even in rural Ethiopia through such different modalities as parental education, health and early stimulation programs (prenatal to 3+ years), pre-schools, and community-based kindergartens (4-6+ years), and non-formal school readiness (e.g. child-to-child and Zero-Grade) (MoE, MoWA, and MoH, 2010:1).

There are different modalities of provision of early childhood education even in rural Ethiopia today: the existing religious-based traditional education (priest schools and Quranic schools), the recently introduced programs (public primary school attached readiness centres or Zero-Grades, and Child-to-Child initiative), and the NGO-initiated preschool education that are under piloting.

There is no critical assessment of the rural ECCE experience in Ethiopia; such an assessment is either too late apparently for traditional centres or too early for the newly launched programs. Whatever views exist, they are all based on shallow, stereotyped, uncritical acceptance of hearsays. Hence, in the bid to appeal to the needs and rights of the greater majority of marginalized rural children,

there is a need to work out some feasible modalities and strategies that could help fill in the gap. This study bears the objective of reflecting on the past (traditional schools) and the present (Zero-Grades, Child-to-Child initiative, NGO-initiated preschool education) so as to get lessons (identify strengths, opportunities, challenges) to venture out into the future delineating the way forward for a rural ECCE in Ethiopia. It attempts to envision ECCE in a much more feasible and pragmatic ways for a rural context deservedly soliciting a different, more tolerant, inward looking attitude and practice than the urban context. In fact, authors believe that both the urban and rural ECCEs need to lead to common ends. The conceptual framework for such a journey is delineated first. Then the approaches and methods of the journey are highlighted. Finally, the facts, opinions, reflections are presented and synthesized in a less conventional way to chart out the future of rural ECCE in Ethiopia.

Conceptualizations

Nomenclature: 'Early childhood' is understood as the period below the age of 8 years (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005: 2). Experiences, services and support to this group of children are known by different names internationally and nationally³. 'Early Childhood Care and Education' (ECCE) is an umbrella term used in the Jomtien declaration, the Dakar framework of Action, and the EFA GMR Strong Foundation (UNESCO, 2006) for all interventions with children up to eight years (Britto et al., 2012 in UNESCO, 2002). The concept is understood to entail a holistic, integrated, comprehensive, developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive, and child-centred

³"Early childhood care", "early childhood care and development", "early childhood care and education", "early childhood development", "early childhood education", "early childhood intervention," and "early childhood services" (Britto et al., 2012; UNESCO, 2006) are some of these terms. This early years' program has been designated with other different names being used interchangeably in Ethiopia: Pre-school education, KG, and preprimary education (UNESCO IBE, 2006). The term pre-primary is recently used as a more generic term consisting of daycare services (for those less than 3 years), KG or preschool education (for 4 to 6 years), Zero-Grade (for 5 to 6 years), and child to child services (see EMIS, 2012; EMIS, 2013).

approach (UNESCO, 2006) of policy formulation, activity programming and service provision to addressing health, nutrition, and educational needs of children, their parents and caregivers (MoH, MoWA, MoH, 2010a). It generally contributes to children's survival, development and learning in formal, organized and sustained centre-based settings like "Daycare Centres", "Kindergarten Schools", and "Nursery Schools" (UNESCO ICBA, 2010) as well as informal and non-formal (home and community) settings. It specifically encompasses (1) education related to basic learning skills (like pre-reading, pre-writing, pre-counting, and pre-arithmetic), (2) basic life skills (such as hand washing, good eating habits), (3) health care services (like supplementary nutrition, immunization), (4) monitoring growth and development of children with the participation of health workers, teachers, parents/care givers, and (5) protection services for children from various types of violations and abuses (Delaney, 2012; UNESCO, 2006, 2010). Conceived with the objective of enabling all children (from birth to 8 years) develop and learn to full potential through effective support, ECCE bears the specific objectives of ensuring that parents and guardians have the attitudes, skills and knowledge to support the development (including care, learning, and protection) of children, that children from 4 to 6 years old are participating in programs that promote cognitive, social, emotional and physical development, that effective school and community support are in place to ensure successful transitions to primary school, and that collective actions take place at community, districts and national level meets the development needs of 0- 8 year-old children (MoE, MoWA, and MoH, 201a,b,c; PIE, 2013).

Rural settings are characteristically distinct: Rural settings as a group differ from urban environments. This urban-rural divide is cumbersome in Ethiopia. Experience shows that the greater majority of the Ethiopian population is rural, settlement is basically scattered, rural parents and communities are educationally and financially much weaker. In the opposite pole, cultural traditions are relatively retained; life is relatively stable, and there is better and easy access to local resources. The vast

majority of rural children are still raised within extended families in rural communities that depend on subsistence agriculture.

In as much as rural settings are characteristically distinct and stand as a group in sharp contrast to urban environments, they are, however, inherently diverse in themselves at the same time. Rural communities are diverse spatially, linguistically, religiously, and socio-culturally and, hence, there is a need for diverse programs to address this diversity. In fact, provision of preprimary education in Ethiopia so far has been very diverse and operated by different agencies including the government, the private sector, local communities, religious organizations, and NGOs. Recognition of that diversity is crucial to maintaining access to services while scaling-up public provision of ECCE (Britto, Ponguta, Reyes, Mekoya, Tirussew and Tezera, 2012).

Directions of ECCE development in rural Ethiopia: With these distinct features, rural settings tend, however, to set developmental trajectories that are inherently driven towards the same sense of fulfillment that resonates in urban environments. Hence, although evidences are yet to come, we cannot rule out, at least, the possibilities in rural communities of retaining the precursors of the same modern pedagogy (peer learning, child-centred pedagogy, participatory pedagogy...) that are inherent in urban communities

Every community being complete in itself and dynamically self-evolving at the same time, changes sought in community profiles and systems can be effected in non-unidirectional ways. The practice so far has been, at least for ECCE adaptation, to try to customize external programs fit traditions, if at all stakeholders (policy makers, practitioners and academics) develop concern about relevance in the first place. Many critiques that hold ECCE programming is culturally irrelevant propose the need to customize it to fit to the reality (changing A to fit B) and rarely hold the other more sustainable view of change resonating Messay's theory of modernization from within - that puts Ethiopia's future neither in the hand of sustenance nor the rejection of

tradition but rather in modernizing it without necessarily importing modernization from elsewhere (Messay, 1999), Nsamenang's view of endogenous ECCDE development (Nsamenang, 2009), or Africa ECD Voice's of 'building on local strengths' (2014). Accordingly, rather than seeking to promote 'homogenization of the world around Euro-American developmental milestones and educational models' (Marfo, 2011) by trying to fit them to African realities, priority needs to be given in ECDCE curriculum development and practitioner education to African games, music and dances that stimulate cognitive, social and emotional development, promote cooperative learning between children of different ages, and contribute for building pride in cultural heritage and for demonstrating to skeptical parents that the ECDCE agenda need not alienate young African children from their cultural roots (AECDV, 2014).

ECCE quality programming for rural Ethiopia needs to be community based: ECCE quality programs are, among other things, rooted in the communities themselves. This is mainly because there is much strength in the communities that would give essence to quality. A preschool that is embedded within the community set up would entail a less westernized preschool profile and resources, an ECCE that is less costly in terms of design and conduct, more accessible to the greater majority, more relevant and useful to the children and to the nation, more able to mobilize community resources, promotes community ownership and ensure its sustainability in the long run. The call for increased public investment in Early Childhood Development as a strategic contribution to sustainable national development rests on this important assumption (Serpell 2008).

Serpell (2009) reviewed a series of programmatic inquiries conducted in Zambia between 1971 and 2009 that have generated significant African contributions to developmental science, and reviewed the implications of this and other African research for the design of ECD services in rural African communities. He outlined four principles of good practice that appear to have been largely neglected (and, in some

cases, deliberately violated) by current ECCE programs for children of rural African communities: Use of an indigenous language familiar to the enrolled young children, use of indigenous cultural games familiar to local adult family members/caregivers, child-to-child or involvement within the programs of preadolescent children of school-going age, and inclusion of children with moderate and/or severe developmental disabilities among the young children enrolled in the programs. Research has also shown that elders of rural communities and grandparents often serve as important social capital and they can be mobilized as resources for effective and relevant education of the children (Moll and Greenberg, 1990; Moll et al., 1992).

In the light of the forgoing conceptions of ECCE in rural Ethiopia, there is, therefore, a need to explore how practices so far are responsive to the needs of rural children and how they can be better positioned for this purpose in a more effective manner. The aim of this research is to explore current ECCE practices, challenges, opportunities and lessons in the country in general and in rural Ethiopia in particular. It specifically attempts to address the following:

- ECCE provision: major achievements, challenges, and lessons
- Existing practices and current initiatives of ECCE in rural Ethiopia: status, challenges, opportunities, and lessons
- How rural ECCE should be done: Opportunities and way forward

Methodology

The Study Centres and Participants: The rural ECCE centres are Feche (Klinto site), Selam Fire (Lai Armachiho site) and Tigwuha (Lai Armachiho site) preschools. To begin with the Klinto site, the preschool visited is “Feche Preschool”. It is located within the catchment areas of three agrarian villages in Klinto woreda: Koye, Feche and Tulumute. It was one of the five preschools established in 2013 as part of the community development project under implementation by Plan International and Ratson. According to the Coordinator¹ of this project,

this centre as well as the remaining others are equipped with locally developed culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate play and learning materials. The classrooms are organized into learning areas/corners to stimulate the active interaction of children in the classrooms. In addition, the outdoor play materials are constructed and put in place using locally available materials through the active engagement of community members. All centres have their toilet, dining room and school garden. At the moment, 154 (77 male and 77 female) children are attending in five centres. The children come from different socio economic background. Children stay for half a day within the centre. Ten centre facilitators, all of them females, were hired at the beginning of the project to care and support children. These centre facilitators were trained on facilitation skills, child development, active learning, classroom management, inclusive education, learning through play and production of locally made teaching aids on continuous basis. According to the coordinator, a good opportunity for the children is the availability of the centre close to their homes, and their enrolment and learning at the expected age for preschool. However, the non-availability of a primary school in the area and also the poor status of the developmental infrastructure around the vicinity pose some threats.

Two preschools are considered as data sources in Lai Armachiho: Selam Fire and Tigwuha¹. While Selam Fire is attached to a primary school, Tigwuha is established within the community unattached to a preschool. They are among the ten other centres established by SCN in the woreda as part of the education quality improvement program in the Amhara and other regions. The centres are well supplied with learning and play materials. The facilitators were trained with their teaching and care skills of the children (Focal Person, SCN Woreda Deputy Representative). At the beginning, ECCE activities were not much attractive. The number of preschool children was also small. But, the number began increasing from year to year, particularly as a result of awareness training offered to mothers (Focal Person, SCN Woreda Deputy Representative). Now in 2014/ 2015, the number of the children and facilitators of the two ECCE centres are 128 and 3 respectively.

Children attend the centre in two shifts in Selam Fire, morning and afternoon. The younger children aged 4- 5 years are taught in the morning shift, while those who are six or older are taught in the afternoon shift. The children attend their early learning with songs and play like activities (Focal Person, SCN Woreda Deputy Representative). The centres are in good condition. They enable the children to know their environment, to respect their parents, and to learn the basics generally before they go to the formal schools (Head, ECCE, Gondar). The education is offered with play materials, and children learn their lessons being very relaxed. There are Montessori play materials and the children are happy with them. They are also eager to stay prepared wide awake for the following task when brought to their attention about “what we have done today and what are we are going to do tomorrow (Facilitator, 30 years old, female, Selam Fire).”

Design of the Study, Data Sources and Analysis: The study employs a qualitative research design. Attempts are made to conduct a critical analysis of ideas, research findings, and data drawn from secondary and primary sources in order to clarify definitions, identify ethics, synthesize higher knowledge or make a value judgment concerning ECCE practices.

Attempts are made to capitalize on findings and data secured from prior research reports, feasibility and needs assessment studies, and evaluation reports with respect to existing centres (mainly priest schools) and current modalities (Zero class, and child-to-child initiatives). Views, ideas, findings and data are synoptically presented from these sources and then subjected to a critical intellectual analysis. With respect to preschools, primary data are secured from participants drawn from three accessible and consenting pilot ECCE centres in rural Ethiopia. Children (orphans and non-orphans, boys and girls), guardians (parents and grandparents), (female) facilitators, and administrative personnel (ECCE heads, ECCE focal persons in education offices, directors, and supervisors) were employed as participants. The research participants include the following:

Children: The following 10 children (n=4 from Klinto, n=4 from Selam Fire, and n=2 from ChigWuha) were interviewed; some live with both parents (n=5) while others are either full (n=2) and live with grandparents or single orphans (n=3) living with mothers alone; both boys (n=5) and girls are represented; and their ages range from 5 to 7 (mean=5.8) years. The interview is made individually and in an age-appropriate way. The children are very active and expressive. In fact, some distortions are noted when it comes to factual information. For example, when asked about the number of their siblings, some gave information that was not similar with their guardians. The interviewer noted this: "The child stated that she has four brothers and three sisters, but has none of these according to information from parents" (5 years old girl child, living with both parents, Klinto Centre). In the same way, "The child stated that he has four sisters and one brother. But, information obtained from his parents revealed that he has only one brother" (6 years old boy child, living with both parents, Klinto Centre). These situations do not, however, invalidate the responses of the children because other items are content or fact-free. In fact, interviewers are impressed with the interest, verbal fluency, and memories of these rural children. The interview items generally focus on indigenous childcare and education (songs, games, materials); daily routines of their child at home, in the playground and at school; goals, values, expectations (of being a good child, for example); relationship with careers, mentors, and partners (i.e. siblings, grandparents, and friends), views about the ECCE centre the child attends and the facilitators; contribution of the ECCE centre.

Guardians: A total of 18 guardians are considered from the three centres (n=8 Klinto, n=5 Selam Fire, and n=3 ChigWuha). Half of them are parents (n=5 mothers, n=4 fathers) and the remaining half are grandparents (n=5 grandmothers, n= 4 grandfathers). The mean ages of the guardians are 29 for mothers (range 25 to 35years), 41.75 for fathers (range 28 to 58), 50 for grandmothers (range 45-56), and 61.5 for grandfathers (range 48 to 70). Family size ranges from 3 to 7 for parents (mean=4.67) and 3 to 12 for grandparents (Mean=7.22).

Parents and grandparents are interviewed on indigenous childcare and education; daily routines of their child at home, in the playground and at school; goals, values, interests; concerns about childcare and education; beliefs and attitudes about current practices of childcare and education; views about the ECCE centre the child attends and the facilitators; contribution of the ECCE centre; and their relationship with the centre. The interview was for about an hour and was enriching. All recording was made with their full consent. Some hesitations were raised but they were cleared up at the beginning with the support of ECCE facilitators who, being familiar to them, gave us a hand to build trust any time concerns arise.

Facilitators: A total of six female facilitators (4 married with an average family size of 3.5 persons) were interviewed; in fact, all facilitators in the ECCE centres are females. Ages range from 20 to 42 (mean=32) with 1 year and 7 months to 14 years of work experience (mean =8.33). The facilitators were interviewed nearly for an hour about children's participation, interest, how individual differences unfold themselves and children with special needs, guardians' participation, views about the ECCE centre, situation of children in the community, and how local or indigenous are the ECCE implementation.

Administrative personnel: These include participants selected from individuals assuming different administrative responsibilities regarding ECCE in the two sites: Six are considered and grouped into three categories as follows:

- *ECCE Project Coordinators:* (ECCE Project Coordinator since January, 2009, Klinto ECCE).
- *ECCE Head and Focal persons:* Head, ECCE, Gondar; Focal Person, SCN Woreda Deputy Representative
- *Directors and Supervisors:* Director of full cycle, Selam Fire School, 8 years teaching experience, Selam Fire School; Supervisor from Selam Fire, 10 years work experience, Woreda Education Office; and

Supervisor for 10 Unaffiliated Child Centres, 10 years of experience (began work in 1997 E.C), Save the Children Norway (SCN).

These interviewees were asked basic information about the ECCE centre-related project implementation; role of the organization in the process; views about the ECCE centres; design and implementation of a community- inclusive project. They were also contacted so many times to give researchers the context of the projects; they were used to connect interviewers with the study sites, and they also provided important insights about ECCE in the area.

Information about the identity of these centres and their sponsoring NGOs is not disclosed for two reasons: firstly, this will give leverage to the researchers to freely present their critical reflections; and secondly, this reflection will not alter the piloting process; the piloting needs to be done as naturally planned.

Practices and Reflections

Existing Programs: Modern and Traditional Centres

The urban based ECCE: Daily observations and experiences indicate that ECCE implementation was far from uniform - MoE curriculum was not put to use and there were dissimilarities among the curricula and books used by preschools/ kindergartens; some preschools particularly those in the private sector were using foreign curricula rather than that of the MoE' (MOE, 2006). Most private preschools used curricula and books borrowed from other countries (like India, England, and America) and none of the elements reflected the Ethiopian culture and tradition (Demeke, 2007a). In the same way, the ECCE standard bears high expectation set forth for advanced countries and is not applicable to **developing** countries like Ethiopia (UNESCO Cluster Office Addis Ababa, 2006, P. 11); and thus it does not encourage the use of local resources.

Accordingly, a number of researchers have generally questioned ECCE provision in Ethiopia not only in terms of coverage but also in terms of linguistic, socio-cultural, and developmental relevance (Tirussew et al., 2009; Demeke, 2007a) as well.

The development of ECCE in Ethiopia seems to show a sort of discontinuity rather than the continuity of experiences. Modern education in general and ECCE in particular were **evidently introduced to Ethiopia as foreign extractions at the expense of traditional education and existing practices (Demeke, 2003; 2007a, b).** ECCE was **particularly** introduced without giving recognition to, learning from the experiences of, and cooperating with the traditional education. It gave little concern for what was on the ground and literally started everything afresh; the notion of 'building on strengths' **was not clearly articulated.** Relevance was taken for granted; strengths of traditional centres were foreclosed; and what was different in traditional centres was eventually treated as a weakness to overcome. Such orientation led to valuing the external (language, commodities, culture, education) and what was local was taken as traditional, less useful; what was imported was modern (more useful) and to modernize was to detach from tradition. Looking at tradition through modernity (using so called imported education as a yardstick to measuring the local), whatever was in tradition was critiqued and suggested to be changed to fit into modern education. There was considerable criticism of traditional schools using modern schools as a template. Attempts at appropriating traditional education to meet the demands of the day have never been attempted. Hence, there appeared a historic lack of continuity, complementarities, and interdependence between the two. Rather, the two remained divorced and turned out to be mutually exclusive. In fact, they were in contradiction; the former appearing to replace the latter.

This discontinuity of experience and cancelling out of former experiences by subsequent ones was observed not only between modern and traditional schools but also within the modern education itself historically across time. For example, following the **period** of the

socialist revolution, the Ethiopian Workers' Party and the government gave due attention to the sector and as a result there was a tremendous rise in the number of KGs as well as enrollment of children from only 77 KGs accommodating 7, 573 before the revolution to a total of 912 KGs with 103,000 children after the revolution; in fact this is still a very small (i.e. 2.07%) GER **when** compared to the 4,979,239 children that **were** supposed to get the services (MoLSA and MoE, 1982 E.C). However, there was a relative stance of silence **even during the earlier assumption of power by the current government**; in fact, the issue of ECCE was pushed to the background until a resurgence of interest in the program reappeared late in 1990s (Demeke 2007a,b).

In the same way, community ECCE centres that mushroomed in the mid-1980s and were easily accessible and affordable for the low income families were dwindling rapidly because of financial setback resulting in a very low salary rate as well as scarcity of resources (Tirussew, 2007). These centres **are** almost **nonexistent** now, possibly **replaced by the Zero-Grade mode of operation**. As noted by Mhangami (2009), the introduction of primary school attached Zero-Grades in Zambia yielded certain negative/unintended outcomes including the extinction of community based ECD centres. Because these Zero-Grades are expanding, they may further weaken the traditional priest and **Quranic** schools.

Despite the collaborative role of several stakeholders, ECCE in Ethiopia is still characterized as an urban experience as well as an activity left for the private sectors and donors ((Tirussew, 2007; Tirussew et al., 2009; Young Lives, 2012). This may inculcate an attitude of envisioning quality ECCE only from an urban and private-based perspective. ECCE also took a commercial perspective as in, for example, working primarily to insure marketability of the education (for example appealing to parents preference for western curriculum and language) despite relevance ((Tirussew et al., 2009; Demeke, 2007a), competing rather than cooperating with similar others, and inculcating the view that ECCE attendance in general and quality ECCE in

particular is a social class indicator (Tirussew et al., 2009); ECCE attendance can be excused if parents are from lower level or cannot secure support from NGOs. The fact that ECCE is an absolute necessity and right of the child is yet to appeal for an understanding among stakeholders.

From a historical perspective, ECCE practices in Ethiopia can be characterized as collaborative exercises rather than activities that were left to the monopoly of one party. Different organizations have been involved in conducting ECCE programs: government, faith-based organizations, NGOs, individual/ private organizations, and, public/ community organizations. In fact, a little more prominence could be noted in the contribution of one over the others across time. For example, government played a leading role through MOLSA in establishing and expanding ECCE before the revolution. In the same way, public organizations like City Dwellers' Associations, Peasant Associations, women's associations, etc., played an active role during the socialist regime in the operation of over 190 KGs; paying salaries of teachers; availing indoor and outdoor preschool facilities, and raising funds to cover preschool expenses (MoLSA and MoE, 1982 E.C). Similarly, the private sector has assumed a leading role, and with the introduction of Zero-Grades, it seems the role of the government has increased.

Although these collaborative efforts are to be appreciated as they are the only promising avenues for reaching out the multitude of underserved Ethiopian children, such endeavors do, however, fail short of cooperation and networking to meaningfully define scope and territory, share resources, and exchange experiences for a common goal. It is even worrisome to note that there is no government body that owns the ECCE in Ethiopia (MOLSA and MoE, 1982 E.C). For example, during the socialist regime there were three offices responsible for ECCE:

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- MOLSA: **offered** teacher training program **services** until 1970 E.C; administered 12 KGs under it; **conducted** awareness raising about preschool education and **encouraged** public organizations to start up their own KGs; **gave** in-service training for personnel of the KGs under its supervision, and **carried** out research on matters relating to preschool education;
 - Children, Family, Youth Organization - the former NCC: conducted national workshops, seminars, and conferences with government, public, NGOs and international organizations, prepared regulations, directives, published children's books, provided technical and professional services for those working to start up new KGs, provided license...
 - MoE: prepared and distributed curriculum materials and syllabi, teachers guide, textbooks; offered a 3 months KG teacher training **services** and produced about 200 teachers annually; supervised KGs; administered the six KGs under it; provided educational leadership, monitored and evaluated performance of preschool education

Problem of ownership and lack of coordination among the various organizations also seem evident in more recent years (e.g. MoU, 2010). In a bid to addressing the holistic development of children, the present government has attempted to pool up three line ministries with stake in ECCE together: Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Health (MoH) and Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs (MoWCYA) (MoU, 2010); in fact it is unclear why the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs had the first historic presence in ECCE affairs in Ethiopia and disappears from the scene when ECCE is about to take shape now (Belay and Hawaz, 2015). In fact, a sort of division of labor (not just collaboration in the strict sense of the term) **was worked out such as the aspect of care was taken up by MoH, education by MoE, and parent and family issues by MoWCYA, but the administrative and coordination aspect among **these line ministries** remained unclear.**

In addition to ownership problem and lack of coordination between offices, it is also surprising to observe that ECCE problems noted in Ethiopia before many years are still taking a strong hold; **there is a noted lack** of permanent budget particularly for KGs established by public organizations, **many** KGs were opened in an area that was not child friendly; classrooms **were** not convenient, **there was** lack of space for different services **and** many KGs ran short of teaching aids and resources. As per the regulation issued by NCC, KGs ran by public organization were supposed to be administered by committees elected from these organizations. But, the members were busy with their own work and showed less commitment, Supervisors **were** untrained; **there was** lack of daycare services hampering mothers from public and professional participation, **and inadequate** health services to children enrolled in KGs (MoLSA and MoE, 1982 E.C).

A number of other concerns were generally voiced **regarding** quality of ECCE in Ethiopia: **Consequently, the** social and cultural relevance of the curriculum and its developmental appropriateness to the target children has been a point of concern (Tirussew et al., 2009; Demeke, 2007a), the classroom is far removed from modern pedagogy because practices are too often focused on teaching the children formal/academic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic exercises, and not structured and managed to addressing the rights of the child **for** holistic development; psychosocial aspects of care, health and nutrition and related other needs are not taken care of (Habtamu, 1996; Tirussew, 1979; Tirussew, 1998), the ECCE standard used to gauge the implementation of EEC policy and curriculum reflect the requirements of preschools in advanced countries and hence only few preschools meet the expectations (UNESCO Cluster Office Addis Ababa, 2006, P. 11). Obviously, the standard doesn't give recognition to traditional schools. It is also a challenge that the standard rather marginalizes indigenous resources because quality is defined in terms of external standards. **For instance,** the use of English as a medium of instruction beginning from preschools has still been a major barrier at indigenizing the ECCE program in Ethiopia (Alem, 2007; Demeke, 2007a).

There is a strong rural-urban division in ECCE provision. In urban areas, there is a diversity of non-governmental providers. Wealthier parents tend to use private preschools, while many poorer parents use faith-based facilities. In rural areas, the private and non-governmental sectors provide very few pre-schools. The coverage and quality of rural ECCE provision is low because government primary school systems are still being consolidated and lack the resources to offer pre-schooling (Young Lives Policy Brief, 2012).

Traditional priest schools: Early year's education, where mainly priest schools had flourished long before urbanization in Ethiopia, is originally a rural phenomenon. These schools were not visible as an institution, were not given recognition in the ECCE Policy (possibly out of an understanding that their approaches were non-secular as some critiques also hold), and were gradually fading away. However, they are neither debated nor critically examined for possible contributions in the expansion of education particularly to rural children.

Existing views about traditional priest schools hold that traditional schools are linguistically irrelevant, limited only to basic literacy (SCN, 2011), recall-based (cited in Demeke, 2007a), unsystematic (Woodhead et al., 2009), religious focused (SCN, 2011; Woodhead et al., 2009), gender-biased (SCN, 2011), age-inappropriate (SCN, 2011), less beneficial (SCN, 2011), and hence require modification of objectives, programs, approaches, and management (SCN, 2011). An exception to this negative portrayal of priest schools is the national study (Tirussew et al., 2009) that resented marginalization of traditional priest schools and Quranic establishments and underscored the need for reactivating them by upgrading their conditions through training and provision of necessary materials. There are also some ECCE personnel who seem to be aware of the importance of priest schools. Asked if they encourage traditional early year's education (Church and Quranic) schools, they interestingly believe that they were supposed to

do this but indicated regrettably that they didn't do it (Teka and Belay, 2015).

More recently, a strong counter critique was presented against the negative views. It was argued that these views were born out of a misunderstanding of the real nature of priest schools. Although linked with religion, the purpose of priest school education is by no means limited to religious education. In fact, **at** the lower levels, there isn't any religious teaching except for some literary materials prepared for children to practice reading. Religious teachings would follow later at advanced stages once students decide to stay in the program and move forward. Yet, such decision to pursue for priesthood is not automatic. There has to be recommendation of the priest, demonstrated interest on the part of the student, and approval by parents. Otherwise, the lower levels are in most cases meant for preparing children for 'asqala' (modern school). In places where priest schools were known to exist, primary schools used to normally expect children to pass through them and master basic reading, writing and numeracy before enrolling in Grade One so that this grade can be salvaged for more substantive teaching. **In fact, one developmental virtue of the church school that is observed but often overlooked is the competitive reading exercises it offers learners and the subsequent early eye coordination and superior reading skills that are noted in comparison to those of the modern preschools.** Because of this major role of the church schools, it was common to note even Muslim children attending **church** education particularly in areas where **Quranic** schools were not available. Materials used for reading were not also limited to scriptural materials but children were also allowed to bring in their own story books and practice reading to augment their skills.

In addition, the teaching and learning **activities** are rather highly organized, systematic, **integrated**, inclusive, cost-effective and reflective of many of the principles of modern pedagogy despite the fact that **church** schools are customarily considered 'traditional' or "non-modern". Evidences also exist indicating that children with priest school

background are in fact better literate in primary school than those without. But, the benefits were not only basic literacy alone. It is said that children are given opportunities for interaction and time for free play (than trapped in child work) that socializes them in turn taking, discipline, and a number of cognitive and emotional skills as well. The peer learning approach built into the system was also believed to nurture cooperation than competitions. In the process of the mentor-mentee relationship, both of them also learn to respect one another. Bullying, violence, and misbehavior are less likely to occur because children submit to the authority of the mentor as he bears the responsibility of shaping the mentee being very close and friendly to him/ her. This makes priest schools culturally relevant in building character valued by parents.

New Initiatives: Zero-Grades and Child to Child Initiatives

Zero-Grades: In order to improve the alarmingly lower rate of access to ECCE programs in the country in general and in rural areas in particular, the Ethiopian Government instituted a new modality of delivery known as 'Zero Class' or 'O Class' in the year 2003 E.C. (EMIS, 2011/12). Zero-Grades share some commonalities with church schools. Both have rural and urban existence, and have a potential and feasibility for wider coverage particularly for the disadvantaged.

Zero grades and priest schools, however, contrast each another in so many other variables. For example, unlike priest schools whose very existence is unrecognized by the government, Zero-Grades are government- initiated. While the former is on the dying, the latter is on the rise. The former is old, the latter is new; although existed informally and would have been scaled up even quite earlier had there been an inward looking attitude that would give space to checking best practices on the ground across historical periods. It was a practice in olden times in Ethiopian schools that primary schools enrolling students without pre-reading and writing skills used to arrange some preparatory classes to make up for the deficits. These classes are

spring boards for school readiness and somehow resemble to what is currently called 'Zero Class'. In fact, this practice was going on even in a more formal way during the socialist regime as some assessments indicate. For example, in a study report of the general situation of KGs in Addis Ababa in 1986 (Government, kebele, public, church, missionaries, community, and private preschools), it was found out that some of the KGs were found annexed with primary schools (AAEOPU, 1978 E.C) in a more or less similar fashion that today's Zero-Grades are operating.

The Zero-Grades are generally conducted within the public primary school premises with the same resources (material, human, and financial) allocated for primary schools. ECCE focal persons were reported as the key ECCE Taskforce and/or Ministerial representatives that **facilitated** the communication with Regional Bureaus for the planning, implementation, and scale-up of preschools, attached to primary schools and Zero Class. Regarding monitoring, evaluation and supervision, some informants reported that primary school supervisors are often responsible for overseeing Zero-Grades (Britto et al., 2012).

There are both contributions and challenges in the implementation of these Zero-Grades. As regards contributions, it is true that this approach of mainstreaming ECCE into the first cycle of primary education has reportedly increased enrollment tremendously. In terms of access this approach has drawn thousands of underprivileged preschool children to **its** premises. This state supported preprimary education program **has** multiple positive effects for Ethiopian children. Apart from paving the way for smooth transition to the formal education by bridging the gap between children that had access to the service and the ones that are denied of this opportunity, it is expected to increase school success by reducing the high dropout rate observed in the first cycle of the primary education.

The feasibility study for the implementation of the Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Framework in Ethiopia (Britto et al., 2012) has also indicated the following:

- Informants most often mentioned preschools attached to primary schools and Zero-Grades as effective entry points to ECCE (Britto et al., 2012).
- The Zero Class curriculum appears to be in the process of being developed with support of development partners. This is a critical issue because some informants indicate that Zero-Grades are not always age-appropriate;
- The results suggest that, in general, using the existing primary school structure is a feasible approach to scalability (Britto et al., 2012).

The new approach to ECCE has, however, not been without its own challenges. Absence of clear guideline on the management of these centres is one of the implementation problems. The primary schools that operate under serious budget and logistic constraints are expected to host these centres. Whether or not this resource sharing strategy would yield better result in preparing the **underseved** children for the formal school system is **to** be seen. Whether or not this increment is meaningful and promising in terms of providing quality service to children is also a point of argument. The policy directive was not accompanied by any form of financial support. **There is** little technical support **for** schools to enable them properly handle this tender age. **Besides, there is** lack of qualified teachers, lack of the requisite administrative skills in heads of schools and education officers, shortage of classroom space, shortage of furniture, lack of play and learning materials, **and** lack of sanitary facilities (Britto et al., 2012).

In another feasibility study in North Gondar, ECD budget was pointed out as a major problem. The *woreda* education offices reported that there was no budget allocated for ECD. It was not clear from where finance would be allocated for facilitators' training, ECD centre construction, facilitators' salary and **for** other recurrent costs. The feeling was that the respective communities would cover most of the costs. Under this situation, realizing the plan of opening Zero-Grades attached to formal schools would be unlikely. In North Gondar there are 579 kebeles. According to the Zone Education Department, a minimum of 579 ECD centres (Zero-Grades) will be opened. Kebeles, CBO's and different associations are expected to take part in the provision of ECD services. When this materializes about 28,950 children will enroll in the newly established Zero-Grades. Nevertheless, the situation at *woreda* level does not indicate that **the** plan will materialize. For example, Chilga and Lai Armachiho *woredas* have plans for expanding ECD services in their *woredas*. The *woredas* intend to open at least one ECD centre in each kebele administration (sub district) as indicated by the Zone Education Department. That being their long term plan, presently they don't have a plan to open more than two new Zero-Grades (SCN, 2011). According to the *woreda* education officials, small villages are evolving where health posts, mills, telephone centres, primary schools **are** all at one site. This is attracting households to form villages at these areas. Seizing this newly created opportunity, **the** *woreda* education offices have plans of creating Zero-Grades attached to formal schools so that school directors could supervise and technically support them. The ECD centres attached to formal schools will be referred as Zero-Grades. So far, the two *woreda* education offices have registered children at two sites; however, even these have not started the program. The *woredas* feel that the respective local communities would be responsible for paying facilitators salary and other costs (SCN, 2011).

Child-to-Child program is a UNICEF-initiated low cost non-formal school readiness mentoring process whereby an older child (grade 5 or 6) is paired with about 5 or 6 young children of ages 5 to 6 years to

engage in **play-like** learning activities with locally made materials and others provided by UNICEF. The main aim of the Child-to-Child Initiative is to prepare young children for primary school by providing opportunities for building skills that are important for the holistic development of the younger child. The average length of one session is almost always 45 minutes to one hour. There are 36 sessions that need to be worked-out with the children, according to the program (Britto et al., 2012). It is envisaged to involve a developmentally appropriate series of **play-based** learning activities that can be used by children in the early primary grades to enrich the overall development of their young siblings or other children in the community.

According to the ECCE policy documents, child-to-child initiative **was** put in place considering that it would take **more** time and effort to bring the formal ECCE services **of** a country-wide scale **for reaching** children in the rural and pastoralist communities. Currently, it is implemented in Tigray, Oromia, Harari, SNNPR, **Benishangul** Gumuz, and Somali regions. The program started in 2008 with 3,500 participants and grew **to** 291,831 only in five years (EMIS, 2012/13). Some regional differences were observed in implementing the program. For example, in Tigray, Child-to-Child was implemented in all *woredas* by the Regional Education Bureau while in Oromiya it was implemented in only *woredas* that were targeted by UNICEF. In **Benishangul** it was implemented in six out of 20 rural *woredas*, in 33 schools, and 99 centres with a total of 99 young facilitators assisting 495 young children.

The child-to-child initiative is one of the most promising alternative channels in the quest to provide **cost-effective** and efficient interventions in ECCE (Maekelech, 2009). It is a viable interim solution to reach the learning goals of primary **schools** (Britto et al., 201). It is an informal effective low-cost modality of improving school readiness (MoE, MoWCYA, MoH, 2010, P.11). It has significantly contributed to total percentage of children having access to readiness programs nearly by 12% in 2004 E.C. (EMIS, 2011/12) which grew to 14 % in

2005 E.C. (EMIS, 2011/12). It would also ultimately reduce child labor that appears to be a major problem of school attendance in rural Ethiopia. Impacts on parental notions of childrearing, and play would also improve. Many rural parents believe that play is a waste of time that influences children to be lazy.

Child-to-child initiative is a community-based provision, promoting community ownership and sustainability of ECDCE services, keeping young children closer with their pre-adolescent elder siblings and peers who are important agents of socialization (African ECD Voice, 2014), highly valued dimensions of child development that are largely ignored by Western (African ECD Voice, 2014, p.19). It is also a source of considerable learning opportunities given that in a 24-hour period, most parents, like teachers, are only partially available to guide and supervise children's development and learning (Nsamenang, 2011); it promotes growth of egalitarian relations between the genders, even within adult marriages (Serpell et al 2011), and deserves special attention in the design of ECDCE programs in Africa, with a view to integrating it into the curricula of 'the hands-on responsibility training component of African family-based education' (Nsamenang, 2012).

There are, however, lots of technical, administrative, and cultural constraints that constrain its effectiveness. Still dependent on overstressed teachers, the rights of the older children to school education need not be compromised by forcing their participation as facilitators. Even though child facilitators receive some training and act as volunteers, the parental attitude that is teacher-centred towards education, may possibly downplay the role of small children teaching other small children. In addition, child labor could limit attendance; there may be lack of any formal parental accountability for child absenteeism. Thus the huge UNICEF presence and influence in terms of initiating and sustaining the program would cast shadows on sustainability, as one contact hour in a week is just inadequate and if increased that would be a burden on the young mentors and their learning. Furthermore, role of parents is bound to be unduly reduced,

and the deeply ingrained parental attitude towards an idea that a child is going to play to learn would take longer time to genuinely **accept the program**. **Even so**, in order to improve quality, the learning of the young facilitators needs far more **attention**.

The pilot Child-to-Child initiative implemented in Addis Ababa **failed** because parental notions of an early learning program were that of a preschool or kindergarten that affected their **children's** demand for the program. In all regions, UNICEF support for implementation **of the program** appeared to be essential. The regions took ownership of this program **as they were** not able to sustain it without UNICEF support. Therefore, going forward with the feasibility of implementation of Child-to-Child, it would be important to ensure UNICEF support for the startup phase of the program. **However**, that would need to include a transition plan to ensure that the regions take over the implementation and roll out of the program (Britto et al., 2011). In fact, a program as huge in its responsibility as that of preparing children for school nationally and for many years to come **has to be** left only to children's voluntary services needs to be a point of concern **for** a nation.

Pilot Programs: NGO-initiated Preschools

NGOs play a critical role, along with the government, in the design of ECCE policies and programs that create a foundation of support for children, their caregivers, and the community. They are, more specifically, expected to undertake on community empowerment and advocacy for **the** execution of existing laws and formulation of clear policies on ECCE. **They have to** work with children **in the promotion of** their identities, engage stakeholders in ECCE, initiate and support child protection programs, build bridges and create networks with other development organizations for sharing information and good practices, promote inter-sectoral collaboration, initiate a communication strategy for tracking and documenting the contribution and role of different service providers in ECCE, and design a mechanism of continued dialogue and joint monitoring and evaluation issues of ECCE (Benda,

2009). In the Ethiopian context, Plan International and Save the Children were amongst the organizations that are widely involved in ECCE programs.

Since January 2013, Plan Ethiopia, in association with Ratson's Women, Youth and Children Development Program, has been engaged in the launching of a holistic Community Led Action for ECCD project addressing the four pillars of the National ECCE Policy (i.e. parenting education, early learning program, effective transition to primary school and partnership). As part of this project it opened 5 preschool establishments, employed 10 facilitators, rented houses for the centres, provided all the teaching and play materials and aids and then enabled the centres function smoothly. In a similar way, Save the Children Norway has been implementing different projects in various parts of the country including the relatively recent and comprehensive project "Improving Quality of Education Project in Amhara, Afar and SNNP. The project included establishment, strengthening, monitoring, and scale up of community-based ECCE centres. For example, in Lai Armachiho *woreda* of the Amhara region, ten ECCE centres were established enrolling a total of about 669 children and 14 facilitators. The SCN initiated, supported, and guided all these centres with the construction of buildings, supply of materials, and training of facilitators.

Experience particularly with SCN has shown that the government would gradually involve in ECCE meaningfully. It was noted that the *woreda* administration took over the responsibility of

screening and employment of facilitators (*Head, ECCE, Gondar*) and paying them salaries (*Focal Person, SCN Woreda Deputy Representative*) while SCN is engaged in material provision and training (*Head, ECCE, Gondar*), raising community awareness and participation on ECCE as well as raising the awareness of mothers about the importance of play for children and how to keep children clean and healthy (*Focal Person, SCN Woreda Deputy Representative*). SCN also participates in the construction of different

types of buildings, sponsored ECCE activities that started with few centres some time ago now **spreading** to several places. For instance, ECCE activities are being carried out in 54 of the 61 primary schools of the **woreda** (*Focal Person, SCN Woreda Deputy Representative*).

Experience with ECCE centres run by Plan International Ethiopia (PIE) and Save the Children Norway (SCN) shows that the centres served as an entry point to conducting consultative meetings (*with Focal Person, SCN Woreda Deputy Representative*) and providing education and skills to parents about childcare and related others (*Focal Person, SCN Woreda Deputy Representative*). In the same way, parents and community members **provided** different kinds of support including financial contributions (*Director, 35 years old, female, Selam Fire School*), feedback about issues that need attention (*Supervisor of the 10 child centres, SCN*), and assistance in solving problems jointly with the centres (*Focal Person, SCN Woreda Deputy Representative*). As a result, ECCE centres made positive impacts on parents and communities including giving more attention and support to their children than before (*Facilitator Two, female, 42 years old, married, family size of 3 persons with one girl child*), and **fostering** an improved conception of early years' schooling such as parents sending their children, observing the appropriate age for school (*Facilitator Two, female, 42 years old, married, family size of 3 persons with one girl child*). In fact, children benefited to learn from good facilitators **who were** caring and loving, and **from** a setting that **promoted** care and learning **being proximally situated** to children's home. Guardians and facilitators noted that children's participation in ECCE centres brought a number of visible contributions in their development. Participants **talked** passionately about the importance ECCE experiences in their locality in preparing the children for formal schooling. Nearly all **were of the opinion** that going through ECCE helped in clearing the ground for success in later years. This success was particularly evident when ECCE children were compared to those who joined grade one coming directly from home. Participants believed that such children were better

performers because they **were** empowered academically, socially, and psychologically.

On the other hand, distance or location of the centre being far from the home locations appeared to justify the prevalence of a number of problems of the centres (Facilitator, 30 years old, female, Selam Fire). **Some** centres are too far to be provided with the materials (Head, ECCE, Gondar), *to begin with*. It was learned that **these** centres could address limited needs in a rural setting because they covered wider and farther catchment areas too far for children to travel. Hence, the centres do not enroll the expected number **of children** and facilitators are not happily carrying out their duties because of inadequate number and irregular attendance of the children (Facilitator, 35 years old, female, ChiguWuha) as well as absence of supervisory visit due to distance (Head, ECCE, Gondar). There was a noticeably observed decrease in the number of children after registration at the centres (Supervisor of the 10 child centres, SCN). Children may generally be absent for various reasons: heavy work load (Facilitator, 35 years old, female, Chigu Wu; Facilitator, 30 years old, female, Selam Fire) as when parents require support in taking care of younger siblings (Facilitator, 30 years old, female, Selam Fire), parental worries and concerns that the child might be exposed to harmful conditions if sent to the centre (Supervisor of the 10 child centres, SCN), parental worries of risks of extreme heat, cold weather, muddy roads, and flooded river banks (36 years old, Father, Selam Fire), and parental misconceptions about child's status that *that they are too young for learning* (Facilitator, 35 years old, female, ChiguWuha).

Other concerns were related to resource problems (mainly plot of land for constructing houses for the centres), harmful practices, parental misconceptions, child work, and distance from ECCE centres, and the situation of children with special needs. There was also the tendency by some of the participants to *devalue cultural practices*. Many guardians and facilitators were found to have a good understanding of harmful practices in the culture, as well as some better ways of child

upbringing, child needs and rights. However, there **was** at the same time the fear that cultural practices can be packed aside altogether as traditional, less useful, and be avoided. Positive cultural values (e.g. respecting elders, serving adults during meals...) were severely critiqued by guardians and reversing some of these values was also appreciated. For example, a facilitator said, *there are some signs of improvement...Nowadays, children join their parents and eat together at tables* (Facilitator One, male, 20 years old). Disciplining methods (mainly physical punishment) were totally condemned **and such** none physical methods **of control as** 'Merekat' (ምርቃት) and 'ergiman' (እርግማን) were not even mentioned.

A related problem of negative impact was noted regarding child work. Many parents seem to denounce child work, though in reality they might continue the practice. There is, on the one hand, a desire for apostasy but, on the other hand, **a felt demand for a child's work**. This seemed to leave some parents to **prefer coping with denial** about children's involvement in work while in reality the children listed a number of activities they were engaged in everyday while describing their typical day. First and foremost, child work promotes development. Second, child work and earnings enable participation at school if parents are unable or unwilling to cover school costs (Young Lives Policy Brief (2012). Third, when **school attendance** competes with working for money, children, **of course**, feel pressured into dropping out (Young Lives Policy Brief, 2012) **in pursuit of** the most urgent priority need, that is, survival. For example, it was noted that child heads of households drop out and work to earn but to cover expenses of their siblings and allow them continue school (Belay and Belay, 2010). Child work in this case should not be viewed as a hindrance to education but as a coping mechanism to the demands of life.

Sustainability concerns were also noted in different ways. According to the interviewers' outstanding comments of the observation as well as the interview they conducted, dependency feelings were noted among people in the sense that they expected all the ECCE resources, materials, and other required input to be provided by NGOs and the Government. *In fact, one* local government, kebele, was found least involved in the activities as if it was an NGO business. *On the other hand,* a supervisor *expressed* that the challenge they had was the work that they had to undergo in order to persuade parents to send their children to the centre. There was also the challenge of calling parents to meet with the school personnel, discuss issues, and eventually develop a feeling of ownership in matters related to the centre. *These challenges were expected as, we after all, were working to change perceptions* (Selam Fire "gudgnt" Supervisor). There were *also* nominal Centre Management *Committees* in all ECD centres. The committees consisted of up to 8 members. It was said that meetings were held once in a month and discussions centred on absenteeism and dropouts. The great potential that could be tapped for the development of the centres appeared to be not yet exploited (SCN, 2010). Facilitators and administrative personnel also raised such concerns as religion based *issues* and *issues related to the* suspiciousness of the community (Focal Person, SCN *woreda* Deputy Representative)

Community ownership could still be doubted when reference is made to the issue of ECCE centre protection. There is little community involvement in terms of caring for and protecting the ECCE resources (Interviewers' personal Notes, 2014). *During a discussion* with the facilitators regarding the mechanisms to address some of the problems of the centre including issues of theft and how to keep the safety of the centre from looting (36 years old, Father, Selam Fire), *it was noted that until recently, the ECCE centres were not fenced and guarded.* It was *further* learned that two centres in Lai Armachiho were looted. It appears that communities have not yet developed ownership of the ECCE centres. With measures taken to make the community aware of the importance of ECCE provision, communities in Chilga

woreda have employed guards for most ECCE centres. Similar efforts were taken in Lai Armachiho. In the 2010 baseline assessment, SCN (2010) **also** found out that parents and *woreda* education offices didn't seem to have awareness on the importance of ECCE centres and didn't even seem to feel that these centres were their own properties **in view of the** instances of looting and theft that occurred. Occasionally, the kebeles are provided with report of some centres that are sometimes looted and yet there is no official response from these offices (Head, ECCE, Gondar).

Furthermore, it was found out that community resources are least exploited; thus **challenging** the sustainability of these ECCEs.

- Grandparents involvement was extremely low; even parents' involvement is limited only to attending meetings (Interviewers' personal Notes, 2014);
- Expensive ECCE **materials** are put in place that can hardly be supported by cultural knowledge; **use of such imported materials** may not discourage support that could be obtained from grandparents and parents ;
- The challenge of integrating cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity issues in ECCE must be addressed alongside caregivers and the communities (Britto, et al., 2012);
- **Challenges in convincing** the community **to secure** a building site as people are worried of being evicted from their land, and
- Perceptions about qualities of preschools **was** also far from what **should** be possible in the area:

I cannot say that the teaching materials we have been using so far are locally made/ homegrown (Focal Person, SCN Woreda Deputy Representative). All the resources are imported; classroom and outside resources are not made from locally available materials. Almost all the resources hardly reflect local situations (Interviewers' personal Observation, 2014).

Realizing the need for indoor and outdoor playing materials, Save the Children Norway has recently purchased and distributed materials to all the ECD centres (SCN, 2010). *We are dependent on teaching materials brought by SCN; we cannot say that these are produced locally* (Focal Person, SCN Woreda Deputy Representative). *Furthermore, we have the Montessori play materials* (Facilitator, 30 years old, female, Selam Fire). *They were routinely prepared to reflect Montessori approach* (Interviewers' personal Observation, 2014). The play materials are good. But because of lack of proper management, many of these play materials have some of their elements missing (58 years old, grandfather, Chigwuha).

The descriptions above are typical features of a very well established ECCE centre that are so characteristic of the one mentioned in the ECCE standard. One would doubt if these expectations are reasonable even for urban centres. If the following descriptions hold true, then the classroom is a typical European ECCE centre rather than a centre in a rural Ethiopian setting,

Education is offered with play materials, and children learn their lessons being very relaxed. We have the Montessori play materials, and the children are happy with them. They are also eager to stay prepared wide awake for the next task when I bring to their attention about what we did today, and what we are going to do tomorrow (Facilitator, 30 years old, female, Selam Fire).

One would imagine how unrealistic these practices are as they are not in line with the objective realities where the ECCE centre is planted. **Hence, ECCE sustainability as well as scalability, under these circumstances are bound to be under serious question.**

Lessons, Opportunities, Challenges and Way Forward

The ECCE experience is that critical assessment has not been made regarding the reality of existing practices; such an assessment is either too late for traditional centres or too early for the newly launched programs. But, in the bid to appeal to the needs and rights of the greater majority of marginalized rural children, **there is the need** to work out some feasible modalities and strategies that could help filling in the gap. This calls for a reflection on the past (traditional or the ‘**dying**’ schools) and **on** the present modes of ECCE delivery (i.e. the Zero-Grades, Child-to-Child initiative, and the NGO-initiated preschool education) so as to learn lessons, by identifying strengths, opportunities, challenges, and venture out into the future delineating the way forward for rural ECCE in Ethiopia.

Evidently, the dispersed settlement of rural communities and the greater majority of the Ethiopian population living under such dispersed situation make ECCE provision very expensive, and inherently challenging unless it is envisaged in a more cost-effective manner and through use of diverse programs.

These distinctive features of the Ethiopian rural communities would entail that urban ECCE experiences are less likely to send a positive transfer of knowledge. That is, although ECCE provision has been in place for many years as an urban practice, it seems that this experience is less likely to make meaningful contribution for conducting ECCE in rural Ethiopia mainly because the rural-town divide in ECCE provision is huge in Ethiopia. Compared to the urban environments, over 80% of the **Ethiopian** population is rural, settlement is basically scattered, and rural parents and communities are educationally and financially much weaker. This urban-rural divide is surprisingly evident even among the same ECCEs established in rural towns and remote villages. It is said that there are differences between the centres in terms of ECCE program practices, employment and training of facilitators, and in terms of SCN’s support (Head, ECCE, Gondar;

Focal Person, SCN; Woreda Deputy Representative), the buildings and practice (application) of the ECCE's programs and education (Focal Person, SCN Woreda Deputy Representative); enrollment of children **that is quite small** (Head, ECCE, Gondar; Focal Person, SCN Woreda Deputy Representative), and in terms of the **low motivation of facilitators** (Head, ECCE, Gondar), **with little** knowledge and skills (Focal Person, SCN Woreda Deputy Representative). The **following** views of **the interviewed** ECCE personnel may give some insight about the issue:

The town centres have enrolled many children while rural centres do not enroll the expected number of children as parents do not send their children, fearing that they will be bitten by snakes or dogs on their way. As a result, the facilitators are not happily carrying out their duties of teaching at these centres. Facilitators also loath teaching, as they do not expect any one coming to supervise their teaching activities. There are also some limited differences between rural and town centres on matters related to facilitators' training and employment (Head, ECCE, Gondar).

There were also differences among the centres in terms of the number of enrolled children. For instance, the Musevamb child centre is better than others in both the number of the children and facilitators. On the other hand, Tiguwuha has a few number of children; the place is not comfortable for children either, and hence, we don't think it would deliver better education and care. Even so, we think that the material distribution among all these ten centres is about equal. As a result of these differences among the centres, we cannot expect equal performances among the centres. For instance, ECCE centres of the town areas provide a strong educational delivery. The facilitators of the town centres have also better knowledge and skills in child care than those in the rural areas (Focal Person, SCN Woreda Deputy Representative).

A related challenge is, however, that despite this urban-rural disparity, the situation on the ground is such that the influence of urban life is so huge that the virtues of rural culture are almost vanishing and as a result clashes between the reality of rural life and parental goals and wishes are common. For example, impacts of an urban life are evident in parental perceptions of the goals and values of childrearing, their notions about a good ECCE centre and facilitators as well. For example, asked about their goals and wishes they have for their child as an adult, some participants expressed specific job preferences for their children (i.e. a medical doctor, banker, civil servant, teacher, manager, pilot, and engineer); others gave two choices (medical doctor, teacher); in another case, there **was** also a preference for change of place ('want my child to land in USA') on top of choice of a profession (i.e. **a pilot**). **Grandmothers**, particularly, gave non-specific preferences (e.g. good job, dignified position, good employment, married wife). There seems to be an influence of the urban life in their values. The major reason seems to be a desire to escape from the hardship of a rural life they witness themselves.

Parents also described a 'good ECCE' centre in ways that reflect urban ECCE centres. Hence an ECCE centre for them was characterized by adequate financial, human resources (good and caring facilitators; good administrators), material resources (sufficient numbers of chairs and tables, outdoor and indoor play materials, toys; sufficient classroom materials and books; and service for children, potable water), physical resources (smooth and leveled, spacious and clean compound, playground latrine and learning classroom; dining room for children, child recreation area, tea room; green, clean, and insect-free compound, and good fence to keep away older children from entry - free environment). Consider the following case of one parent, as an example:

This centre has several missing elements to fulfill when compared with other centres of the area. It was simply the first to be established in this area. This centre is still in its beginning stage, and not attended to by the essentials. It has several loop holes. For instance, the surface area has not been flattened and smoothened. It has no shaded play area. Hence, when compared with other centres in the big towns, it lacks several required things (27 years old, mother, Selam Fire).

On the other hand, attitude towards traditional schools, values, and methods have taken a negative welcome; physical punishment, work, discipline, responsibility and obligation were considered to be harmful uncritically. Interview was held with parents and grandparents regarding their childhood upbringing, issues they remember most, experiences with play, stories and songs, and views about childrearing of their time compared with the present. Recurrent themes emerging from the transcribed interview include issues like "...limited school attendance, intensive engagement in work, limited play, social interaction with peers in the neighborhood being limited, stories and songs scarcely noted, if at all existed, physical punishment in place for disciplining the children, early marriage commonly practiced, physical needs (health, nutrition, clothing) not attended to the satisfaction of the participants, and, hence, preferences for present childcare practices to that of their time" Even so, it should be noted that the alleged limited childhood stories, or songs of some parents, was noted to contradict the views of the other participants who have, on further probe, tried to recall the details.

As further noted, there are opportunities that would support and facilitate provision of low cost ECCE in Ethiopia as well; the legal, administrative and academic ground rules can be taken as a starting point but of course need to be contextualized. In Ethiopia, almost all local stories are indiscriminately reflective of the rural life, culture, and environment. Cultural games, stories and songs are yet fundamentally useful in the provision of a relevant ECCE to children (Kabiru, 2008;

Okwany, Ngutuku and Muhangi, 2011). In terms of resources, there are lots of locally available materials for preparing play objects and games. Culturally salient methods of positive disciplining methods (e.g. market) can also be employed for socializing children. The child-to-child care and mentoring that is **amply demonstrated in the traditional pedagogy of the church and Quranic schools and** built into the culture of child rearing particularly in rural Ethiopia can also be exploited far better than the existing situations for ECCE provision.

Indeed, the Ethiopian rural society is socially structured and organized (e.g. idir, mahiber) and this would **also** lay a fertile ground for ECCE establishments in the various localities. Space can hardly be a problem in Ethiopia unless the people consider ECCE as their threat rather than their own property. There are also lots of civil societies that can be mobilized in supporting rural ECCE provision in more sustainable manner.

One may then ask *how **should** rural ECCE **be conceptualized and practiced**?* First and foremost, **rural ECCE should be** conceptualized in a fundamentally different manner from the urban ECCE (Young Lives Policy Brief, 2012) including goals, meanings, approaches and modalities. Preschool is not necessarily a classroom that is known to exist in private schools (carpeted, modern chairs, flip charts and drawings, and many other outdoor expensive play materials), **nor should it** be that values mastering English language as an implicit learning goal. Second, there is a need for diverse approaches in ECCE scale up (Britto et al., 2012) with clear ownership, and coordination (MoLSA and MoE, 1982 E.C) of the modalities. For example, it'd be suggested that the following ECCE approach to operate in one **woreda** so that it may be possible to widely address the scattered population of young children. **It is further to be noted that** in each modality, it is recommended to connect children in a child-to-child program to augment experiences to be gained in each case:

- One kebele ECCE to be sponsored by the local Kebele administration along with Child-to-Child initiative as a supplement;
- One revitalized church school to be provided in a church building with again a possibility to connect children in a child-to-child additional program, and
- Operation of Zero-Grade classes in the available government primary schools such that the children are still engaged in a child to child program.

It appears more meaningful if all stakeholders operate jointly supporting these three centres. In this regard, civil societies and NGOs can do a better job if involved in supporting and creating model centres from these local programs, keeping in view the importance of focusing on local resources and approaches. The current approach of working to institute an urban ECCE in rural settings is rather more harmful with all the expenses it incurs.

If ECCEs are locally contextualized, there are lots of stakeholders that can be deployed for support. For instance, relevant indigenous knowledge could be imparted by deploying *grandparents in story telling sessions* (Moll and Greenberg, 1990; Moll et al 1992). Attempts to tap into this potential have seldom been made in standard ECCE programs in Africa. But a small number of programs addressed to the needs of orphans in Southern Africa have adopted with some success the strategy of working with grandmothers as key community resource persons for the care of the growing number orphans and vulnerable children in rural communities as a result of the HIV and AIDS pandemic (Serpell, et al, 2011). Thus, considering *grandmothers to contribute to ECCE programs through activities such as story-telling* would be a potentially valuable addition to the portfolio of intervention strategies for the promotion of ECCE in rural Ethiopian communities, that could help to strengthen the connections between young children's home and school environments, and build the confidence of those communities in the local cultural relevance of their services.

As one local Ethiopian practice reveals, older peers can, in fact, be used as mentors. For example, in Hadiya area there is a practice known as *Drancha* in which the child learns about his/her culture, surroundings, people, etc sitting in the middle of their father's foot in the evening. They use different stories and encouragement system by using different models/metaphors to enable children know new thing and responsibilities. Fathers help children to learn how to fight and how to hunt, how the girl should work and act when married (cited in Belay, 2011).

Rural Development Agents (DA), health workers, and ABE workers can also be mobilized for community awareness creation, health education etc. But, these approaches need to be contextually valid. Cursing child work, condemning physical punishment, emphasizing child rights without responsibilities in interconnected communities will do much harm and produce resistance rather than change. Understandably, implementing the recommendations would encounter considerable economic, political and institutional challenges. Many of these arise from the endurance of Western cultural hegemony in the publication and training practices of the international community of research and higher education, which is sustained by the low level of indigenous institutionalization of systematic research in the African region. Hence, plotting a way forward will call for effective advocacy for evidence-based decision-making and decision-oriented research (Garcia, Pence and Evans 2008). In the meantime, it would be appropriate to give the following practical steps to be pursued as further line of building contextually valid ECCE programs in the long term (African ECD Voice, 2014):

- Challenging western hegemony through systematic study of cultural diversity;
- Integration of African cultural resources into teaching resources;
- Institutionalization of child development research in African universities;

- International partnerships in the design and delivery of professional training for ECCE providers that emphasize the use of African cultural resources and the cultivation of commitment by trainees to work in local, poorly resourced settings;
- Feasibility demonstration projects incorporating and adapting African cultural resources in ECDCE, and
- Inclusion of cultural relevance among the criteria applied by accreditation bodies for approval of ECCE programs.

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