

NATIONAL ECD STUDY IN BHUTAN LEADS TO UNIVERSAL ELM PROGRAMMING

Background

Early Childhood Development (ECD) center programming has been steadily expanding in Bhutan, in accordance with the Government’s Realizing Vision 2020: Education Sector Strategy. Although this policy states that “All children aged 0-5 years will be supported to enhance their intellectual, emotional, and physical development through a program that enables them to grow in their familiar and natural environment,” no systematic evaluation had been completed to gauge the most impactful and sustainable model(s) for the country¹.

Research

The Ministry of Education, UNICEF, Save the Children and other national partners in Bhutan collaborated on an impact evaluation of the national ECD center program to understand the impact of various types of ECD program models across the country on children’s learning. This study drew a random sample of different types of ECD centers—Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Community, and Private—as well as a sample of nonformal education (NFE) parenting programs and a comparison group of children who had no access to ECD programming. The aim was to explore which type of ECD center program, if any, supported stronger learning and development gains for children (Pisani et al., 2017)².



Photo Credit: Save the Children Bhutan

A boy demonstrates counting for his IDELA assessment.

Results

This national study resulted in two government initiatives to help address school readiness and ensure that Bhutan can meet its SDG 4.2 target. First, the national study showed that early literacy and math skills were among the weakest skills and that a focus on these areas would be critical to preparing children for school. As a result, Save the Children launched a national Early Literacy and Math (ELM) program reaching all the ECD centers in the country, with the support of the Ministry of Education.

Second, the study brought to the fore the importance of ECD and the fact that the most socially, culturally, and geographically marginalized children had the lowest access to ECD programming. This suggested the need to focus on alternative models to ECD that strengthen parenting or community support for early learning for those most in need. The Government is now exploring different ways of reaching disadvantaged children in rural communities through alternative models. In 2017, Save the Children initiated a partnership with the Ministry of Health to pilot ELM at Home

¹ Department of Health, Ministry of Health and Education. (2002). *Realizing Vision 2020: Education Sector Strategy*. Thimphu.

² Pisani, L., Dyenka, K., Sharma, P., Chhetri, N., Dang, S., Gayleg, K., & Wangdi, C. (2017). Bhutan’s national ECCD impact evaluation: Local, national, and global perspectives. *Early Child Development and Care*, 4430(March), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1302944>



in combination with UNICEF's Care for Child Development program in areas where children do not have access to ECD centers.

Next Steps

More broadly, this initiative highlighted the power of using the same tool across implementing partners in a national monitoring study. With the limited government funding allocated to ECD, there are often multiple groups delivering ECD services based on the needs of children in different communities. A national monitoring study like this delivers information about children's early learning and development across implementing partners and provides a common metric and language for all actors to use to advocate together for further investment from the government and other funders. It also provides a benchmark against which to measure the success of future initiatives.

Contact

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