

Developing an International Network to Support Early Childhood Development (ECD): Results from Experience in Africa

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Abstract

An effective network for capacity building, knowledge sharing, and intercountry cooperation is a powerful vehicle to enhance allocative efficiency in education development. This article describes an early childhood development (ECD) network for Africa and its multipronged approach of regional partnerships, south-south learning exchanges through international conferences and seminars, and an ECD virtual university that uses 21st-century technologies and distributed learning methods to provide systematic training and build capacity among cohorts of ECD leaders in the Majority World. The article outlines the network's history, goals, key results, challenges encountered, and lessons learned, and addresses the question: In the context of education development, *why is early childhood so important?*

Introduction

This issue of the *Journal of International Cooperation in Education* is devoted to illuminating areas where education aid can have the greatest impact on education development. We submit that one such area is the development of effective networks for capacity building, knowledge sharing, and intercountry cooperation. To demonstrate the benefits of such a network, we present the case of an early childhood development (ECD) network for Africa and its multipronged approach of regional partnerships, south-south learning exchanges through international conferences and seminars, and an ECD virtual university that uses 21st-century technologies and distributed learning methods to provide systematic training and build capacity among ECD leaders in the Majority World.

Before the network's inception, Africa's youngest and most vulnerable children faced a challenging future with only scattered support. Just a handful of African countries allocated any of their education budgets to ECD, and those few allocated very small amounts (Colletta and Reinhold 1997). Only one or two countries had developed a national ECD policy. Efforts to deliver services to children lacked harmonization and thus tended to be ineffective.

Today, due in large part to network activities, 19 African countries now have a national ECD policy, and many others are in the process of drafting one. An African

international conference on ECD has become a triennial event. Participants in the conference, of whom about 85% are African, increased from 200 in the 1999 event to 600 in 2009, and from 19 African countries to 42 (Pence 2008a; and personal correspondence with E. Vargas-Barón, 9 May 2010). The World Bank and other partners have invested \$US 136 million and technical support to address the needs of young children in Africa through community initiatives (Garcia 2003). Productive regional partnerships and a supportive ECD community have been formed among 78 graduates of the Early Childhood Development Virtual University (ECDVU) and their learning and professional partners. Support for vulnerable children in Africa has never been stronger, and much has been learned about how to enhance the effectiveness of that support.

This article outlines the history of an ECD partnership in Africa, its goals, key results, challenges encountered, and valuable lessons learned. First, however, we address the question: In the context of education development, *why is early childhood so important?*

Why does early childhood matter?

In the latter part of the 20th century, children became the focus of international attention. In November 1989, the United Nations General Assembly formally adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which was ratified “more quickly and by more countries than any other human rights instrument” (Annan 2001, 1). Acknowledging that “learning begins at birth” (UNESCO n.d.), in 1990 at the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, the global community pledged to “universalize primary education and massively reduce illiteracy by the end of the decade” (UNESCO 1995). Ten years later, at the follow-up conference in Dakar, Senegal, delegates took stock of the global failure to meet those targets and committed themselves to six education goals to be achieved by 2015. The first of these goals was “expanding and improving early childhood care and education, especially for the world’s most vulnerable and disadvantaged children” (UNESCO 2000). That same year, when United Nations member states signed the Millennium Declaration, young children's needs and development were recognized as key to reaching the overarching Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of eradicating poverty by 2015 (United Nations Secretary General 2006).

It is argued, however, that none of these global targets can be reached without significant investments in early childhood (UNESCO 2006). In its *4 Cornerstones to Secure a Strong Foundation for Young Children*, the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development (2010) asserts:

The real crisis in education is in early primary – yet it receives almost no attention. By the time more money and resources are put into the later years of school, it is too late for the many who have already dropped out of school altogether!

... Good quality early primary education improves the efficiency of the

schooling system and saves money by improving achievement and reducing repetition and drop-out. It dramatically improves the chances of meeting the targets of EFA and the Millennium Development Goals. The return on investment is magnified when quality early primary schooling is combined with early childhood services prior to children entering school (1-2).

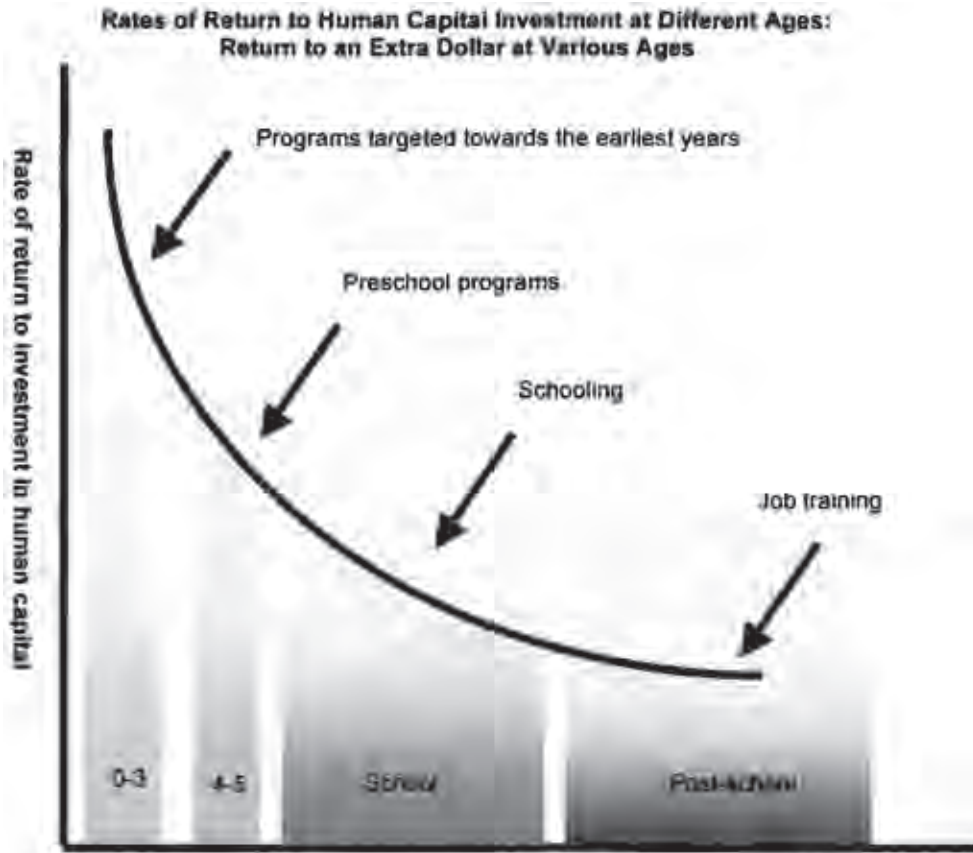
Grantham-McGregor and colleagues (2007) estimate that more than 219 million children under age 5 will not reach their developmental potential due to illness, malnutrition, and a lack of nurturing care, early stimulation, and education. This reality “places an enormous burden on the children, their families, and their societies” (Black et al. 2008, 455).

Extensive brain research shows that 80% of a child’s brain growth and synapse development occurs before the age of 3 (Gopnik 1999; McCain and Mustard 1999; Mustard 2007; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000; Shore 1997). Vargas-Barón (2009) contends:

The period of gestation to age three is the foundation for all later growth and development. If children who are fragile, pre-term, low-birth weight, at-risk, developmentally delayed or disabled do not receive appropriate, quality ECD services, they will never reach their inborn potential (10).

Quality ECD interventions can reduce the risk for vulnerable children, yet in 2008, *86% of children in sub-Saharan Africa had no access to an early childhood program* (CGECCD 2010). Handa and Sharma (2008) estimate economic losses resulting from the failure to ensure adequate ECD. Applying the Lancet model (Grantham-McGregor et al. 2007) to two longitudinal data sets from Eastern and Southern Africa, they calculate the cumulative lifetime loss in adult income for children who are stunted by age 7 at approximately 30% (Handa and Sharma 2008, 25).

Carneiro and Heckman (2003) study rates of return on investment in ECD in relation to investments in schooling and job training. As demonstrated in figure 1, they find that the highest rates of return accrue from programs that target children in the first three years.



Source: Carneiro and Heckman (2003) reprinted in ADEA-WGECD, UNESCO/BREDA, & Save the Children USA (2009)

Figure 1. Rates of return to human capital investment at different ages

Because the rate of return on investments in early childhood is so high, the World Bank’s Africa Region Human Development Department promotes ECD as a key strategy for poverty alleviation (Garcia 2003). For the most part, however, despite convincing evidence regarding the devastating social and economic costs of failing to provide quality early childhood services to vulnerable young children (Cleveland and Krashinsky 1998; Heckman 2000; Kilburn and Karoly 2008; McCain and Mustard 1999; Van der Gaag and Tan 1998; Young and Mustard 2008), it remains a challenge to convince decision makers to expand investments in early childhood. Typically, donors and national political and policy leaders want quick results, and many believe the return on investment in ECD to be only long term. Vargas-Barón and Williams (2008) argue, however, that significant short- and medium-term benefits can also accrue from investments in quality ECD services. In the short term, for example, preconception and prenatal education and health care

yield greatly lowered health care costs and reduce the number of high-risk parents who require intensive early childhood intervention services. Medium-term results include the following:

- Early childhood services tend to improve rates of timely enrolment in primary school, and children are better prepared for success in school.
- Once in school, children with early childhood education through pre-primary education tend to have better attendance records, repeat grades less, drop out of school less, and complete their primary education.
- Parent education and child development services combined with good case management and tracking systems improve child rearing, reduce child abuse, and reduce child welfare costs. (Vargas-Barón & Williams 2008)

These savings often more than compensate for expanding investment in early childhood. And, over the long term, they yield additional savings related to improved national productivity, increased taxes, reduced criminality, and enhanced citizen engagement (Vargas-Barón & Williams 2008).

James Heckman (2006), Nobel Laureate in economics, summarizes the research implications delineated above as follows:

It is a rare public policy initiative that promotes fairness and social justice and at the same time promotes productivity in the economy and in society at large. Investing in disadvantaged young children is such a policy (A14).

History of the partnership in ECD: Interlocking networks

The network supporting ECD in Africa has evolved over a period of many years; it encompasses several groups whose members frequently collaborate and, in many cases, overlap. We identify these groups and their main objectives below; in the subsequent sections we outline the history of their partnership.

Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development (CGECCD)

The CGECCD works to identify gaps, critical issues, and emerging areas of need and interest related to ECD. Established in 1983 by a small group of donor funding agencies, the CG has evolved into a respected global network of committed partner agencies, institutions, and ECD professionals. Its mission is to improve early childhood policy and practice, and a major objective is to strengthen regional capacity to support young children's development (<http://www.ecdgroup.com/aboutus.asp>).

Early Childhood Development Network for Africa (ECDNA)

The Early Childhood Development Network for Africa (ECDNA) was formed in 1994. Supported by international donors, ECDNA was instrumental in planning an Africa-wide ECD seminar in Namibia in 1997, discussed in more detail in a later section. The network merged into ADEA's Working Group on ECD in about 2000 (Cyril Dalais, personal communication, May 2010) .

Working Group on ECD (WGECD)

In 1996 the Donors for African Education (now the Association for the Development of Education in Africa, ADEA) organized a Working Group on ECD (ADEA-WGECD). The Working Group undertook country-level ECD policy studies (Torkington 2001; Torkington and Irvine 2000) and subsequently focused its efforts on promoting networks at the country level. The WGECD continues to play a key role in African ECD development. It is currently hosted by Save the Children and chaired by UNESCO BREDA (based in Dakar, Senegal). As part of a planned “graduation” process for ADEA Working Groups, the WGECD will eventually be unlinked from ADEA. In November 2009, its Steering Committee proposed beginning this process.

Early Childhood Development Virtual University (ECDVU)

The Early Childhood Development Virtual University (ECDVU), whose history is detailed below, complements and extends the work of other networks in Africa. Funded by the World Bank and the Norwegian Educational Trust Fund, the ECDVU was established at the University of Victoria, Canada, in 2000. Its mission is “to further develop African ECD leadership capacity as a key strategy in support of child, family and community well-being and broader social and economic development” (ECDVU 2000).

Africa Early Child Care and Development (ECCD) Initiative

The World Bank’s Africa Early Child Care and Development Initiative was launched in September 2008 with four main purposes:

- To improve the capacity of African countries to attain the education MDGs by laying a strong foundation of early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
- To increase understanding among stakeholders of the importance of children’s early development and learning as a key ingredient in achieving Education for All (EFA) and Fast Track Initiative (FTI) goals.
- To provide country teams with technical support to develop national ECCD policies and programs.
- To foster the scaling up of early childhood policies and programs through the EFA–FTI by helping countries obtain sustainable funding for cost-effective approaches.

The Initiative builds on ten years of work by the World Bank’s Africa Region Human Development Department (<http://www.worldbank.org>).

Timeline of key ECD events in Sub-Saharan Africa

The following timeline, adapted from Pence and Nsamenang (2008), provides a brief overview of key events in the ECD field in Africa and furnishes some context for the

subsequent history of the ECD network.

- Early 1970s:** Bernard van Leer Foundation supported development of ECD through the Educare project in South Africa and through the Kenya Institute of Education. (Its first ECD supported program started in Jamaica in 1966.)
- Early 1980s:** Aga Khan Development Network began planning for Madrasa Resource Centres (MRCs) in East Africa and formulating internationally informed approaches to Islamic early childhood education and development. (First program at Liwatoni Mosque in Mombassa in 1986.)
- 1980s:** A small number of other donors and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) came forward in support of ECD in various African countries.
- 1990:** Many African countries were quick to sign the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989).
- 1992:** First Africa Region International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development (ISSBD) meeting held in Yaoundé, Cameroon on the theme “Child Development and National Development.” Subsequent regional meetings held approximately every two years.
- Mid to late 1990s:** World Bank ECD funding credits in SSA (Eritrea, Kenya, Nigeria [limited], Uganda).
- 1996:** Creation of Réseau africain francophone prime enfance (Early Childhood Francophone African Network) through UNESCO and UNICEF.
- 1998:** 7th Conference of Ministers of Education of African Member States (MINEDAF VII) accepted recommendation that “clear policies be formulated to promote early childhood education and development” (Report of the VII Conference, April 1998, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/>).
- Late 1990s:** UNICEF shifted to greater ECD emphasis (integrated ECD = IECD).
- 2001:** The New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) formed.
- 2002-2003:** ADEA–WGECED project to support national policy planning for ECD in Burkina Faso, Mauritania, and Senegal.
- 2006:** ADEA Biennial Meeting, Libreville, Gabon, focused on ECD programs (<http://www.adeanet.org>).
- 2008:** *Africa’s Challenge: Early Childhood Care and Development in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Garcia, Pence, and Evans (Eds.). 24 chapters with 56 authors, mostly based in Africa, published by the World Bank.

A chronology of steps in network building

Coordination among the networks has been maintained through periodic face-to-face meetings and ongoing electronic linkages. Importantly, the steps taken to coordinate an effective ECD network for Africa can also be viewed as some of its key results. This section outlines the network’s growth trajectory through descriptions of the ECD seminar

series, international conference series, and ECDVU. In the subsequent section, we utilize thematic lenses to discuss goals, approaches, challenges, and important lessons learned in the process of building the network through each of these vital components.

ECD seminar series

In 1994, UNICEF asked the University of Victoria (UVic) to establish a series of ECD training seminars for middle-level professionals within UNICEF and their government and nongovernmental partners. The seminars were intended to help individuals trained in other disciplines to better understand ECD's principles and potential, and to foster intersectoral and regional cooperation to address its objectives. The regional seminars (initially called Summer Institutes based on an earlier series at UVic) typically lasted two or three weeks and brought together country-identified professionals with regionally and internationally recognized ECD specialists. Over time the seminars focused primarily on Africa. The first African seminar, as mentioned above, was held in Namibia in 1997; a second was held in The Gambia in 1998. The seminars proved particularly effective in:

- identifying country-level ECD leaders;
- highlighting worthwhile but little-known ECD initiatives in Africa; and
- forging the personal and professional bases for enhanced networking and information sharing.

Data from the seminars indicated that opportunities for sharing ideas and developments within the ECD field across Africa were few, communication was difficult, and access to international development ECD specialists was limited.

Participants found the seminars useful and asked the organizers to seek funds for an ongoing set of linked seminars that could serve as a vehicle to earn graduate-level academic credit. The result was a proposal to the World Bank to fund development of an Early Childhood Development Virtual University (Pence 1998). While the seminar series has not been picked up since 1999, this fact does not reflect a lack of interest, but indicates limited capacity to maintain the series while undertaking two newer initiatives, the international conference series and the ECDVU (Pence 2008a).

International ECD conferences

Following the Gambia seminar the World Bank and several partners initiated discussions to develop an international conference on African ECD. Now a triennial event, the first African International Conference on ECD was subsequently held in Kampala, Uganda in September 1999. The conference built on networks established through the ECD seminars. About 200 people working in the ECD field in Africa attended, including three national ministers. Subsequent conferences were held in Eritrea in 2002, Ghana in 2005, and Senegal in 2009. Growth in the scope, participation, and impact in the conferences has been exponential. (For an overview of the four international conferences, see figure 2.)

Figure 2. 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th African International Conferences, comparison of size and scope

Conference location and theme	Date	Attendees	SSA Countries	Presenters	African-based participation	African govt representation
Kampala, Uganda <i>Showcasing ECCD: Innovation and Application in Africa</i>	1999	200	19	35	75%	3 national ministers
Asmara, Eritrea <i>Health, Nutrition, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECE/ECCE), and Children in Need of Special Protection</i>	2002	200	28	60	80%	6 national ministers and 1 international minister
Accra, Ghana <i>Moving Early Childhood Forward in Africa</i>	2005	300	39	80	85%	6 national ministers and 27 international ministers or reps
Dakar, Senegal <i>From Policy to Action: Expanding Investment in ECD for Sustainable Development</i>	2009	600	42	146	89%	23 ministers and deputy ministers and 90 additional govt reps

Source: Authors, with input from Emily Vargas-Barón (May 2010)

Key among its many benefits, the conference series provides the opportunity to engage in broadly significant African ECD advocacy. For example, the *Asmara Declaration* (2002) was put forward by participants at the 2002 conference, the *Accra Communiqué* (2005) was endorsed by more than 25 ministers or ministerial representatives who attended the Accra conference, and the Dakar conference produced *A Call to Action* (Delegates of the 4th African International Conference on ECD, 2009). The conference series has helped place young children's care and well-being on the African political and professional agendas and, significantly, it has brought together African governments and major international organizations to collaboratively advance global education goals. The recent Dakar conference, for example, was cosponsored by ADEA, World Bank, UNESCO and UNESCO/BREDA, UNICEF, Save the Children USA, Aga Khan Foundation, Bernard van Leer Foundation, Consultative Group on ECCD, ECDVU/UVic, Education for All Fast Track Initiative, Open Society Institute, PLAN International, Save the Children USA, World Health Organisation, and the Republic of Senegal.

Early Childhood Education Virtual University (ECDVU)

Participants in the Namibia and Gambia ECD seminars identified a need for a graduate-level applied ECD education program that would build on the seminars' success and link participants electronically to enable them to share country-level experiences and work together on regional goals. During this period, the World Bank's Africa ECD Team was rapidly expanding the ECD portfolio and looking to develop effective means to train ECD leaders in Africa. Distance learning was a promising option. The World Bank prepared terms of reference to develop an ECD virtual university, and a draft proposal was submitted (Pence 1999). The ECDVU – “a university without walls” – would advance country-identified ECD objectives and allow participants to study while working full time in their countries. The program's methodology and curriculum preparation were financed by Norwegian Educational Trust Funds managed by the World Bank.

Work to develop the ECDVU began in January 2000. A technology feasibility study was conducted and an international ECD advisory group¹ consulted. The planning team elaborated a curriculum design based on generative curriculum (Pence et al. 1993) principles of respect for multiple sources of knowledge and the importance of local context. All aspects of the program, including assignments, discussion sessions, use of local teams, and inclusion of local ECD leaders in seminars, were designed to address three central objectives: leadership promotion; capacity building; and network enhancement.

The international advisory group assisted in identifying priority countries and developing criteria that could be used in-country to select participants from among the many applicants. The approach that evolved linked back to the seminar series, using network participants from the seminars, in coordination with UNICEF, World Bank, and state government staff, to create an ECD country committee composed of key ECD groups and individuals from each country. The committees set ECD goals for their country and nominated ECDVU participants. In order that personal financial situations would not be a factor in student applications, the program was tuition free. All program delivery costs were covered by core donors, including the World Bank at country levels, UNICEF at international and national levels, UNESCO, the Bernard van Leer Foundation, and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). In addition, about 60% of the employers were able to contribute support to their employees.

Program delivery commenced in August 2001 and proceeded in six-month terms of Web delivery with a midpoint two-week face-to-face seminar. Each seminar was held in a different part of Africa where faculty (selected from around the world as well as that region) were joined by ECD specialists for presentations and discussions. In conjunction with the seminars, site visits were made to key ECD programs in the vicinities, and a wide variety of academic and “network bonding” activities took place.

¹ See <http://www.ecdvu.org> for members of this advisory group, the African students' thesis and project committee members, and other key individuals, organizations, and donors associated with the ECDVU program.

A remarkable 90% of learners who enrolled in the first delivery completed the program, graduating in 2004. The World Bank evaluator noted that not only had these results been achieved at a “considerably lower cost” than a typical masters degree available in North America (Vargas-Barón 2005, 43), but that the ECDVU “is also making a significant impact upon policy and program development for Education for All and Poverty Reduction Strategies” (ibid., 12).

Concurrent with this three-year program, in 2001 the World Bank’s Middle East-North Africa (MENA) department requested delivery of a one-year professional development program based on the ECDVU model. Utilizing funds from the Dutch government, the ECDVU developed the MENA program in 2002 and delivered it in 2003. Since then, a second MENA and two SSA programs, all one year in duration, have been delivered, the latter in partnership with African universities (SSA-2) and with funding support from in-country employers, UNICEF, Open Society Foundation-UK, the World Bank, and the Bernard van Leer Foundation (SSA-3; for more details on these programs, see <http://www.ecdvu.org/overview.php>).

The major projects completed through the various ECDVU deliveries are outstanding examples of capacity building. The participant-directed initiatives meet country- or community-identified needs in the service of young children and their families. Among many others, the projects include:

- providing parent support and enrichment in rural districts of Eritrea through an innovative training of trainers program;
- developing and implementing child and family policies in Malawi and Ghana;
- supporting HIV/AIDS-impacted children through innovative grandparent support programs in Uganda;
- creating ongoing in-country ECD networks in Tanzania and Malawi; and
- creating an undergraduate ECD program in national institutions in Yemen and Lesotho.

Concurrent with the network-building steps described above – and in many ways as a result of the momentum they created – during these years the World Bank invested in freestanding ECD programs in several African countries; other partners also increased their investments in early childhood.

Successful approaches

In pursuit of its primary goal – building African ECD capacity to meet global development targets – the African ECD network employs a variety of interconnected approaches. The most effective of these strategies are described below.

Building on lessons learned

One key to success in the process of building an African ECD network has been the opportunity to share experiences and lessons learned among network partners. For

example, a vital step in developing the ECDVU involved thoroughly exploring past results and challenges in the African and global ECD fields. Based on lessons learned, the development team and its advisory group agreed that the ECDVU would:

- Promote a learning pod (team) approach with three or more participants from a given country.
- Connect learning to participants' workplace objectives.
- Utilize local content and knowledge.
- Provide participants with a very high level of technical, personal, and professional support throughout the program delivery (Zuckernick 2000).

These decisions proved highly effective in supporting the approaches described below.

Nurturing learners through mentorship and support

A decision by the ECDVU developers to create the position of cohort manager has proven invaluable. The cohort manager provides ongoing support and connection among learners, instructors, and the central office. Similarly, the country team approach allows participants to forge relationships in which they can support each other to advance shared goals for their country and region. The ECDVU has fostered a community of learners and practitioners in which mentorship and partnership play key roles. Working together, ECDVU faculty, learners, and partners have become much more than a network or even a community of practice: The ECDVU has evolved into a *family* in support of ECD in Africa. Such a process takes time, personal engagement, and commitment.

Fostering an African community of practice

The international ECD conference series grew out of a concern that African voices and perspectives are too seldom heard in international forums, even some that have taken place in Africa (Pence 2008b). To rectify this gap, the conferences emphasize African participation in terms of delegates, presenters, keynote speakers, government representation, and themes. As seen in figure 2, African participation at the Dakar conference, fourth in the series, was 89 percent.

Similarly, the ECDVU strives to foster an African community of practice. For example, top international instructors are balanced with an increasing number of local ECD leaders. Participants' projects, country reports, and key assignments are published on the ECDVU website with participants' photos, biographies, and contact information. Whenever possible, graduates are identified as capable specialists and consultants when countries or INGOs are seeking to develop some facet of their ECD work in Africa. An increasing number of south-south site visits have developed over the past ten years, and some countries, such as Mauritius, have plans to establish a Centre of Regional Expertise in ECD.

The conference series provides opportunities both for ECDVU participants to continue networking after they complete the program and for other African ECD leaders to share

and support good practices at program and policy levels. Organizers have increasingly sought to bring political leaders into these forums to involve them in planning next steps.

Utilizing new and appropriate technologies

As described above, the ECDVU combines distance and face-to-face learning methods to deliver some of the world's leading thinking on ECD to local settings. The new information communication technologies (ICTs) work best when participants can access larger urban centers; however, as time goes by, more remote settings in Africa are becoming linked. ECDVU materials are provided on the website as well on discs and in print. This purposeful redundancy enhances access to the materials.

In the future the network plans to explore new social networking platforms (e.g., Facebook, Skype, LinkedIn) and cell phone possibilities to expand access and outreach into areas not previously reached by ECD programming.

Promoting in-country contribution while learning

The ECDVU ultimately measures its success by change on the ground with respect to children's well-being: new programs, policies, educational opportunities, political commitments, and other indicators of progress related to healthier children, families, and communities (ECDVU n.d.). The evidence base for these changes has been documented in an external impact evaluation (Vargas-Barón 2005) and in various publications (e.g., Garcia, Pence, and Evans 2008; Pence and Marfo 2004). These results can be attributed in large part to the country team approach for recruiting participants and defining ECD goals. Additionally, the flexible curriculum design allows learners to study while working full time to advance their country's ECD objectives.

Stemming brain drain

Specialists from diverse professions have identified brain drain as one of the most significant challenges to African capacity-building efforts (Padarath et al. 2003; Tebeje 2005; Wadda 2000). The ECDVU is remarkable not only for its extraordinarily high completion rates (over 95% across three deliveries) but for its even higher record of 98% retention of graduates in Africa. Further, over 90% of graduates have remained active in child and family-related employment. These results can be attributed in part to the participant identification process. Country goals and objectives are established by an intersectoral ECD committee and these goals are then broadcast to solicit applications. The same committee vets applicants, noting those with appropriate backgrounds and a history of commitment to children's issues and national development. Applicants are asked to share their application with their employer and request their in-kind and financial support for travel and accommodation at seminars. This web of understandings and commitments helps ensure that only those who are very committed to the program's capacity-building objectives are enrolled.

Reaching out to funding partners in effective ways

Increasing evidence for the economic imperative to invest in early childhood has in some ways facilitated garnering support for ECD initiatives. For example, in 2008, global business leaders attended an international conference in support of ECD programs as a means to combat poverty and improve business performance (Fournier 2008). African governments are increasingly becoming aware that investing in ECD is essential to attain sustainable development and achieve EFA and the MDGs (Vargas-Barón 2009).

All of the network's initiatives have involved working with international and local partners. That network of support allows the network and its component parts to survive and thrive. This in turn affords the network opportunities to garner support for early childhood policies, programs, and training.

The principle of engagement with key international organizations and donors was put in place at the Kampala conference. The World Bank and conference organizers approached UNICEF, UNESCO, ADEA, WHO, Aga Khan Development Network, Save the Children, PLAN International, Bernard van Leer, and other organizations to identify suitable presenters and financially support them to attend. That "many partners" approach has continued as a key feature of the conference series' organizing structure (Pence 2008b).

From its conception, the ECDVU consulted with an international advisory group representing the highest level of ECD expertise in developing countries around the world. Some of the advisors had participated as instructors or facilitators in the ECD seminar series and many were associated with leading donor and program support organizations in international ECD. Similarly, the ECDVU built consultation with African governments into its foundations to enhance efficiency in planning and funding programs for young children.

These and other strategies have contributed to developing an engaged, committed network in support of ECD in Africa. These approaches are not without challenges, however. We address several of the most significant obstacles in the following section.

Challenges

The expansion of the World Bank's ECD portfolio in the 1990s created a huge demand for ECD training and networking, since the projects demanded skilled professionals to implement the programs. For example, the World Bank-supported Eritrea ECD Project paid for project staff to be trained through the ECDVU program, and a similar arrangement was instituted for Nigerian participants in the third ECDVU cohort. Many other ECDVU participants were sponsored by international NGOs who found its distance learning methods efficient for training their staff. While the network for African ECD was challenged to meet this demand, in doing so it produced beneficial results throughout the network. For example, the Eritrea project directly benefited from the networking of ECDVU participants, and the project implementation evolved in tandem

with network knowledge that was building at the same time.

The network faces other challenges, including the need to stay abreast of rapidly changing technologies; the intricacies of keeping partnerships alive; the demand for national as well as regional networks; and the challenge of building a truly African future with local research that feeds into local training and local program development, resulting in African models, African scholarship, and African practitioners.

The principal challenge to maintaining the network, however, is the lack of predictable, sustainable funding sources. Most donor programming, including that of the World Bank, UNICEF, and various partner foundations, is based on cycles of one to three years. These short-term cycles preclude any longer-term planning of technical assistance for capacity building, networking, and training.

The Norwegian Educational Trust Funds and subsequent Education Development Trust Funds, via the World Bank, provided consistent funding of the ECD networks in Africa over a period of more than ten years (1998 to 2009). These funds were replenished from year to year to support the international conferences and the ECDVU. Consistent ongoing support for the ECDVU was also provided by UNICEF and the Bernard van Leer Foundation, with funds for specific deliveries from CIDA, UNESCO, and the Open Society Institute. The current global financial crisis now threatens the gains that have been made in early childhood as well as future investments in ECD.

Network building takes time and consistent funding

Capacity building, training, and networking (especially in support of south-south learning) are shown to be key components of early childhood education, care, and development. But the benefits of these activities, while acknowledged, are difficult to fund consistently given the current external program development funding processes adopted by the international donor community. For instance, these funds are allocated on an annual basis or, at most, in three-year cycles. Fruitful networks need years to mature; in the case of the ECD network in Africa, a commitment over a period of ten years is now yielding significant advances across a range of fronts. Thus it is important to clearly define the goals for young children and reallocate education aid to pursue those mechanisms – many of which have been identified here – that can support learning networks as they evolve and mature. Only then will learning networks fulfill their potential to enhance the well-being of the world's most vulnerable children and contribute to meeting global education and development goals.

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