IRAQ

WORKSHOP PROCEEDINGS[1]

Date: 14 to 15 December 2021
Time: 9h00 - 14h00 Baghdad time (virtual and in-person)
Hosted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MOLSA)- Child Welfare Commission (CWC) in collaboration with the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Save the Children and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).
Financial support provided by IRC, Save the Children and UNICEF.

Participants

- Several high-level government executives inputted into workshop proceedings at different stages of planning (e.g., agenda review, scope identification, etc.) including Dr. Hamed Khalaf, Advisor to the Prime Ministry/Executive Director of the Higher Council for Education Development, and Ms. Ghada Al-Rafie, Director of the Child Welfare Commission

- There was wide participation from actors in the Iraqi ECD space; there was especially strong participation by public sector representatives and local organizations. The 38 attendees represented the following stakeholder groups:

    Government: Prime Ministry/Cabinet, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MOLSA), Child Welfare Commission (as an entity under MOLSA), Ministry of Education, Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Planning, and the Ministry of Youth and Sports

    Academia and National Organizations: Baghdad University, Diyala University, Umel Yateem Foundation, Al-Thara'a Cultural Organization

    International organizations: International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, UNICEF, WHO

    Networks: Arab Network for Early Childhood

    Other Attendees: Representative from US Embassy, Representatives from Media, Education Cluster Coordinator

Opening Session

- Opening remarks were made by the following senior government officials:

    » Deputy Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, Dr. Abeer Al-Jalabi

    » Advisor to the Prime Ministry/Executive Director of the Higher Council for Education Development, Dr. Hamed Khalaf

- The opening remarks highlighted i) the strategic value that the government places on ECD, emphasizing the need to invest in the early years as an essential step in developing the necessary human capital for the country in the future; ii) existing efforts by the GOI and its partners to developing a comprehensive strategy for ECD in the country and the timeliness of this effort (the workshop) in complementing what has already been developed as a draft.

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1   For information on other workshops in the series visit: **https://nurturing-care.org/events/nurturing-care-for-children-living-in-humanitarian-settings/**.

- Dr. Abeer reiterated the need to develop more childhood-targeted programming within each sector/Ministry as well as the efforts that have taken place in the past to allocate more funding/finances towards ECD programming. She also iterated the need for stronger coordination and collaboration between the different agencies/government entities in order to provide complementary services through stronger communication.

- The opening session also included pre-recorded **presentations** in Arabic prepared by WHO and UNICEF on the *Nurturing Care Framework* as well as a presentation by ANECD on ECD in crisis from a regional perspective.

Context

- From the outset, the narrative of the workshop was framed around both the strategic actions laid out in the NCF as well as existing national efforts and plans — namely, the (draft) National ECD Strategy.

- There have been significant efforts invested by the Government of Iraq (GOI), UNICEF, and other partners over the past 4 years towards the development of a comprehensive ECD Strategy (2022-2031) for the country.

- The Iraqi presidential elections, held in October 2021 and in June 2022, led to the final endorsement of the National Strategy on Early Childhood Development, launched by the Prime Minister.

- The presentation made by Dr. Haider Ghali of MOLSA on the draft Strategy showcased multiple challenges affecting ECD in Iraq including legislative, economic, social, health, and educational challenges.

- The goals of the draft strategy presented by Dr. Haider addressed the following dimensions of ECD in Iraq: legislation; inclusion and equality; sustainability; quality assurance; coordination and community awareness; capacity building; monitoring and evaluation; and human and financial resources.

- The programs highlighted in the presentation addressed five domains (management, quality, curricula, capacity building, and community-based action) across 4 sectors (higher education, education, health, and labor) and 1 "shared" cross-sectional sector— a total of 43 programs and 108 initiatives.

- The presentation also addressed mechanisms for the operationalization and monitoring of the strategy, including the establishment of new committees and reporting structures.

- The head of the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) then presented on the commission's own experiences in coordination between different government agencies and the role it plays in childhood policy and legislation – highlighting some of the challenges faced in CWC's lack of autonomy in decision-making and lack of financial resources allocated to its operations.

- The CWC integrated many of the policy work they have been conducting into the draft strategy and noted the launch of a national action plan for child protection (2022-2025) last year that the CWC had led on development.

Workshop Outputs and Priorities

The breakout sessions in the first day grouped participants under three of the five strategic actions listed in the NCF: i) Creating political will and investment for ECD in Iraq, ii) Strengthening programs to ensure all children receive nurturing care, and iii) Nurturing care for ECD data management. Below is a summary of the discussions and priority actions that emerged from the group work.

Creating political will and investment for ECD in Iraq

- There was a strong emphasis on issues related to governance of the ECD sector throughout the discussion in this group; for example, participants saw the CWC's lack of autonomy as problematic noting the need for any organization whose mandate is ECD governance to report directly to the government's executive bodies (e.g. Prime Minister) and not as it is now under the MOLSA.

- Additionally, participants noted some negative implications of recent decentralization efforts at the national level in terms of governance, autonomy, and service delivery. Participants also highlighted the role that the private sector can play in service provision and the need for a more holistic approach that includes private actors in service delivery/provision.

- In terms of governance, participants saw the need for the establishment or activation of a higher council that governs ECD issues cross-sectorally that also includes representation from local communities to address some of the challenges noted. Participants did not specify whether this role could be played by the existing CWC in the future.

- In terms of high-level priorities that needed to be addressed under this theme, participants highlighted the urgency of endorsing the ECD strategy (strategy was later endorsed in June 2022) and its proposed operationalization mechanisms.

- Another theme that emerged relates to the adoption and activation of ECD legislation in Iraq that ensures children's rights nationally and in line with global conventions.

Priority actions underpinning this discussion emphasized the need for advocacy focused on ECD within government, with a specific "spotlight" on agencies or individuals that champion ECD issues across government.

Group 2: Strengthening programs to ensure all children receive nurturing care

- Participants noted core challenges related to poor financial resources/inefficient allocations and insufficient costing and budgeting across many ECD services provided (strong emphasis on education, health to a lesser extent) as well as the poor infrastructure many of these services are delivered through.

- The priority actions in each sector were as follows:

  » **Early Education:** there was a need to **address supply-side challenges by expanding school readiness programming to the whole country** and investment in preschool (physical) infrastructure to expand centres providing early education services. Additionally, respondents saw a need to **spur demand for preschool services by increasing community awareness of the importance of ECD** through media channels and outlets.

  » **Health:** participants highlighted the need for a wider implementation of ECD programming in primary healthcare centres across the country without going into much detail (pilot will begin to address this in 2022).

  » **Disability and Inclusion:** Another theme related to disability and inclusion – and the **need for early screening before entry to school and a more inclusive approach for children with disabilities (in schools)**, as well as the need for joint efforts between the Ministries of Education and Health for screening at an early age.

> Priority actions that surfaced through these discussions highlighted more the fundamental challenges related to infrastructure and access issues — and less so issues of quality-of-service provision. With that said, participants did address quality primarily from the angle of capacity building of workers and teachers — and primarily in the education sector.

Group 3: Nurturing care for ECD data management

- Participants noted the inadequacy of some the data currently being collected across sectors, including school enrolment data and health outcome data. Participants noted the use of this data in policy-making and strategic analyses within each of the respective sectors.

- With this said, the participants in this group noted **the need for a consolidated database that maintains *ECD-specific* data** across sectors housed at the Ministry of Planning in coordination with the CWC; a useful starting point in this regard would be the census according to participants.

- Participants also emphasized the need for the development of ECD-specific indicators at the country-level connected to global and regional indicators, with a specific focus on disability/inclusion indicators in ECD.

> Priority actions in this area included the need to build data collection, management, and analysis capacity in order to obtain reliable data for decision-making as well as awareness campaigns targeting families to register their personal data in government databases.

Unlike other settings where the workshops took place, the workshop in Iraq allocated further breakout sessions in the second day that tackled common governance issues in Iraq (focused on coordination, implementation, and monitoring & evaluation) - bringing to light important discussions around policy implementation relevant to policy-makers who endorsed the draft (now final) ECD strategy.

Priority Actions to Address Coordination Challenges:

- Intensifying meetings, discussions, and coordination across actors (vertically and horizontally) working on ECD within an institutionalized framework or mechanism.

- Establishing an autonomous and well-funded higher council for childhood affairs/issue that can lead on coordination issues across sectors.

- Creating cross-sectoral and cross-organizational technical committees to address ECD service delivery (including monitoring and evaluation) - which includes representation from civil society and the private sector.

Priority Actions to Address Funding Challenges:

- Earmarking funding specific to ECD programs/service-delivery in Ministry budgets and/or expanding financial allocations for existing budgets.

- Establishing an ECD fund in Iraq that includes contributions from specific taxes levied (e.g. as flat tax rates from export revenues).

Priority Actions to Address Monitoring and Evaluation Challenges:

- Creating technical M&E committees that monitor ECD program implementation at the national and ministerial levels.

- Establishing feedback and learning loops/mechanisms between M&E results and the ECD strategy.

Priority Actions

GOAL 1: TO CREATE A POLITICAL WILL AND INCREASE INVESTMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Brief description of relevant activities	Responsible entity	Target date for completion	Source of funding and technical support needed	Partners
1.1 Putting EC as a top priority of the Iraqi government through a clear strategy and advocacy campaigns.	Relevant ministries Civil Society Organizations	2022-2025	Relevant ministries UN Agencies The private sector Creating a special fund for ECD Allocating special taxes or percentages from oil revenue	Relevant ministries Civil Society Organizations
1.2 Creating a Higher Council for Early Childhood Development in Iraq.	Relevant ministries Civil Society Organizations	2022-2025	Governmental and societal agencies	Relevant ministries Civil Society Organizations

GOAL 2: TO STRENGTHEN SERVICES ENSURING ALL CHILDREN RECEIVE NURTURING CARE

Brief description of relevant activities	Responsible entity	Target date for completion	Source of funding and technical support needed	Partners
2.1 Improving the infrastructure and the health centres by increasing the numbers of kindergartens/nurseries & making sure health centres include EC programs.	Relevant ministries Civil Society Organizations	2022-2025	Relevant ministries International Organizations Private Sector Creating a special fund for ECD Allocating special taxes or percentages from oil revenue The media	Relevant ministries Civil Society Organizations

GOAL 3: TO ENHANCE INFORMATION DATA MANAGEMENT IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SECTOR

Brief description of relevant activities	Responsible entity	Target date for completion	Source of funding and technical support needed	Partners
3.1 Developing a data base for EC with indicators	Ministry of planning Child Welfare Commission	2022-2025	Government International organizations Experts	Relevant ministries Civil Society Organizations
3.2 Conducting field & specialized research	Ministry of planning CWC	2022-2025	Government INGOs Experts	Relevant ministries Civisl Society Organizations