

Prajayatna's approach towards addressing quality in Early Childhood Care and Education

Context

In India, concerns related to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has been much discussed since the 60s-70s, when the extent of malnourishment was recognised as a severe problem in the country. The National Policy for Children outlined its primary goal as to 'provide adequate services for children, both before and after birth and throughout the period of growth to ensure their full physical, mental and social development'. It is in this context that the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) was first proposed in 1975 by the Department of Women and Child Development, as a scheme for the wellbeing of children below 6 years, particularly for socially and economically disadvantaged communities.

The ICDS initiative encompasses aspects of care (health, nutrition) and education with a view to universalise these services. It operates from the premise that views 0-6 yr old children from low-income families, as those requiring particular care and attention in terms of health and nutrition. The scheme also intends to offer preschool education for the 3-6 year olds and provide better linkages with the local (Government) primary schools. The ICDS primarily functions through centres – anganwadis – that engage an anganwadi worker and a helper. A lot of efforts have been put in by the government into the making the programme effective and enhance its reach and quality.

ICDS in Karnataka was initiated in 1975 with one project (covering 100 AWCs). With increasing efforts at achieving Universalization of the ICDS, based on the Supreme Court Order 2002, access to ECCE services has improved but it still requires an impetus to receive attention on every aspect, especially the involvement of stakeholders.

ECCE facilities need to be made not only accessible, but enjoyable and meaningful to every child, meeting the developmental needs of the children in accordance with the aspirations of local communities.

Prajayatna and ECCE

Poor quality in Anganwadis was seen in the working areas of Prajayatna and this was understood as a consequence of the lack of engagement of local communities with the public system due to time constraints and absence of supportive structures.

The current scenario can be perceived as characterised by a lack of stakeholder ownership of the State run anganwadi centres leading to an absence of a collective vision and a system of poor governance, with low levels of accountability and transparency related to the finance and administration of the ICDS.

Prajayatna recognises that community ownership is the key to good quality anganwadis. Over the years the organization has worked to build the capabilities of communities in managing their own pre-school centres in low income areas of Bangalore Urban, Rural and Ramanagar. Subsequently, Prajayatna has partnered with the Department of Women and Child Development (WCD) to work with select circles (group or cluster) of Anganwadis in rural areas.

The present approach of the organisation to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has been derived from the extensive work of the organisation in this field for the past twelve years. The work on ECCE was initiated in the year 2000 as a response to the problem of out of school children and child labour in low income areas in and around Bangalore Urban and Rural, as it was seen that in these areas, because of a lack of a proper learning environment and access to good quality ECCE facilities, a large number of older children were dropping out of school to take care of younger siblings. This was especially seen in low income areas where it was common for both parents to be working.

As an attempt to solve this problem, the organisation worked to set up child care centres in these areas. The local community members were enrolled in the process to set up and manage these centres. Within a short span, 180 communities owned centres were established in low income areas of Bangalore Urban and Rural. Further to setting up these centres, the organisation developed processes to ensure the participation of community members, and to build capabilities of community based structures to manage these centres with little external support.

It was understood that the practices followed in the community run centres and the learning gained by the organisation from setting up and running these centres could benefit the larger system of the Government managed early child care facilities, which already had a wide network of child care centres across the state and was extensively working towards ensuring quality ECCE for each child.

This led Prajayatna to work towards strengthening the Government run facilities by ensuring community involvement in managing these centers. It has also worked towards building the capabilities of the teachers running these Centres and getting the community involved in the governance of the Centres which included both management and learning. Work with the Government on Early Child Care was initiated in 2009 and at present the initiative reaches out to anganwadis spread across different districts in the state of Karnataka.