Early Childhood Policy: An Introduction

1.1 RATIONALE

There is increasing interest within governments in creating national policies that guide and validate the provision of a broad range of early childhood care and development and family support activities. Governments need information, such as knowledge, experience and skills, from the field of early childhood development to create and implement early childhood development policies to most effectively support young children and families.

Many within the early childhood community fear that the energy it would take to get involved in creating policies would be a drain on already limited resources. Yet, for the long-term it is important to focus our attention on policy, as it can contribute to the sustainability of the programmes, personnel and funding. A greater understanding is needed about the relationship of policies to planning and programming, the mechanisms that can be put into practice to effectively serve as policy, and how to create an effective policy, if that is deemed desirable.

In order to work on Early Childhood policy, it is important to have a comprehensive understanding of policies within a country, and to assess the policies at all levels.

1.2 DEFINITIONS

What is Policy?

There is no one accepted definition of “policy.”

The definitions that follow illustrate differences and commonalities. In her article on “How Policy Affects Early Childhood Care and Development,” Judith Evans (1996) draws on two slightly different dictionary definitions, both taken from the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1969). These are:

“Any plan or course of action adopted by a government, political party, business organization or the like designed to influence and determine decisions, actions and other matters.”

“A course of action, guiding principle or procedure considered to be expedient, prudent or advantageous.”

For his analysis of “The Dynamics of Education Policymaking,” Wadi Haddad (1994), took as his working definition of policy the following:
An explicit or implicit decision or group of decisions which may set out directives for guiding future decisions, or initiate, sustain or retard action, or guide the implementation of previous decisions. (4)

Finally, selecting one of many possible definitions from a broader literature, policy is:

_A set of interrelated decisions taken by a political actor or group of actors concerning the selection of goals and means of achieving them within a specified situation where those decisions should, in principle, be within the power of these actors to achieve._ (Jenkins 1993, 34).

These definitions all describe policy as something that influences future decisions and/or actions. When we see policy as a course of action designed to influence decisions and actions, it becomes a less abstract proposition. Yet we need a more refined definition of policy if we are to take actions that will influence policy and its implementation.

Policy—What It is and is not

There are a number of important distinctions and qualifications to be kept in mind when approaching policy.

There are various ways of articulating policy. Policy may be embodied in a constitution, laws, a set of directives, a plan or a set of decisions. Policy can include general principles, goals and courses of action, but also the guidelines, plans of action and procedures necessary to achieve those goals. Although these expressions of policy represent codified policy, it is possible also to imagine policy as something unwritten. For instance, a speech of a major government official may not codify policy but may nevertheless set out policy quite explicitly. Or, policy may need to be inferred from actions and programs because no position has been taken formally. In theory, then, policy can be explicit and codified or it can be implicit and vague.

Policy is not the province of a single set of actors. Sometimes definitions of policy refer specifically to political activity or to a political actor or group of actors. Policy can be formulated at international, national, regional or local levels. Policy can also be made and adopted by a wide range of organizations including governments and political parties, but also businesses, non-governmental organizations, and members of a community, among others.

Policy analysis may also be carried out at one or more of the following levels of generality:

- General public policies that affect young children (i.e., broad differences in economic and political policies, such as new-liberal vs. Keynesian policy, or a welfare state policy, or authoritarian vs. democratic rule, or the separation of church and state vs. the fusion of church and state).
- General social policy, as it frames and affects young children (i.e., differences in expressed goals and in the way in which social policy is focused/targeted, organized, financed and implemented)
- Early childhood policy (if such exists) looking across sectors. Sectoral policies that, taken together, may define early childhood policy
- Programs that respond to young children's rights (in the event that early childhood and/or sectoral policies are not well-defined and early childhood policy needs to be inferred from programs).

1.3 CLASSIFICATION
Whether the interests of children will be best served by separate policies integrated into relevant existing government policies or as a single stand alone document will depend on the exigencies of each country. However the approach to development of the policies must be integrative, multi-dimensional and inter-sectoral. It must also recognize that policies, like programmes, cannot remain static—they must evolve and develop to meet changing needs and realities. This new thrust will broaden the concept of integration to encompass a more holistic and dynamic approach oriented towards ensuring the survival development, protection and participation rights of young children in order to establish a truly enabling policy and programming environment for optimal whole child development.

There is increasing interest within governments in creating national policies that guide and validate the provision of a broad range of integrated early childhood and family support initiatives. Policy affords a critical mechanism for developing a new national perspective towards young children. It can also set the stage for a different type of programming and offer official sanction for funding of a greater variety of activities. It provides an opportunity for non-governmental organizations, government, and donors to come together in the creation of policies and programs to support young children and their families.

To create effective policies, governments need information from the field of early childhood development on the kind of policies that can be developed. There is a need to better understand the relationship of policies to planning and programs and the types of mechanism that can be put into place to effectively serve as policy. The process should also lead to arrangements for effective implementation, monitoring, management and coordination of programs, and subsequent identification of strategy options for strengthening EC’s contribution to national development.

Policy creation or change does not need to be a top-down proposition. It does not need to rest solely in the hands of lawmakers and ministry personnel. Most important, policy is not created in a vacuum. Each local solution, each successful research project, each advocacy effort has the potential to influence decision makers' thinking about what best supports young children and their families. In Turkey, as reported in Coordinators’ Notebook 17, “A Multipurpose Model of Non-formal Education,” a research project showing the benefits of parent education has led to changes in the national government policy, increasing government support for early childhood programmes through the Ministry of Education. (Kagitcibasi 1995) In the United States the mothers of children enrolled in Head Start, a national early childhood programme for disadvantaged children, took to the streets in protest in the early 1970s when the funding was about to be cut by policymakers who believed Head Start was a waste of money. The mothers' actions influenced policymakers to continue support for the programme. Later, longitudinal research results demonstrating the social benefits of preschool education helped to cement government commitment to Head Start, which continues today despite massive cuts in other social programmes.

**National Policy**

For the most part, policymaking is thought of as a national activity. Within a national context, policy frames the course of action taken by governments in relation to the people. National policy represents a distillation of a philosophy about the role of government in the lives of those being governed. At the most general level policy defines the style of government in place—democratic,
capitalist, socialist– and the type of economy that is in place. There are specific levels of policy within the broad framework.

**Operational policy.** At this level there are policies that frame how the government operates and the judicial and legal systems that are to govern the country. Policy guides how monies are allocated and the processes that will be put into place to disburse the monies.

**Social policy** tends to be broad and strategic, setting out goals and strategies for attending to the social (as contrasted with the economic) condition of people in a society. It positions the government in terms of what it will and will not support. Social policy addresses the role of the government vis-à-vis families and society as a whole. It defines the government’s responsibility in relation to families and the care and development of children.

**Sectoral (issue specific) policy.** Within the general social policies are sectoral policies that determine the services to be provided by the sector. For example, there are education policies that specify when the government becomes responsible for the education of children, whether or not attendance at schools is mandatory, and if so, for how long.

**Implementation policy.** Within each sector that are policies that address implementation issues. Implementation policies are much more specific than sectoral policies and define who has responsibility for what. Implementation policies clarify the role of central government in relation to local units, and they define standards and procedures. If there is to be intersectoral collaboration it specifies how that should happen.

How to link sector-based policies to issue-based policies should be analysed carefully and put into practice as much as possible.

**1.4 CAUTIONS**

> To work, a child-care policy must be contextual; that is, it must grow out of the specific historical and social circumstances of the society in which the policy is to be implemented.

Lamb et al. (1992)

Criteria to make good early childhood development policies include a variety of issues. Although each policy should be country specific, the following challenges are being identified as common issues. Finding ways of overcoming those challenges in a collective manner with counterparts will strengthen the each stake holders’ commitment and will serve as a base for the further work in creating and implementing early childhood development policies.

**Policies can be inappropriate.** Mina Swaminathan (1993) presented an analysis of 135 countries. In it she noted that many of the developing countries "have borrowed their legislation directly from the industrialized countries with very different conditions, and it is hence often inappropriate to their situation". (9) She provides the example of the Maternity Benefits Act (1961) in India. Within the act there are provisions that protect pregnant women from being fired because they are pregnant. Women are also to be freed from doing arduous work during the last 10 weeks of their pregnancy. This Act addresses the needs of women working in the formal sector. In India this is only 11% of all working women; 89% are in the informal sector, so this Act has little meaning for them. Not only does the Act apply to only a very limited work force, but even within the 11%, only 2.28% of those women have benefited from the Act. (3) In essence the Act has little meaning for the great majority of working women in India.
Policies can be restrictive rather than facilitative. In an attempt to address an issue, policies may be created which inhibit rather than promote what was originally desired. There are many examples of this within the early childhood field. As early childhood programmes begin to proliferate, many governments decide they cannot afford to operate ECCD programmes themselves. However, they want to be supportive of the programmes being developed as the result of NGO and community initiative. They then decide that an appropriate role for government is to provide guidelines for the programmes and to register them so that they know what programmes are being offered, and where. The government develops regulations for the establishment of centres. What tends to happen is that these regulations (generally based on standards from developed countries) are so restrictive that the majority of current ECCD programmes cannot comply, and operate illegally. In effect the government limits the availability of quality ECCD programmes rather than supporting a diversity of approaches appropriate to the setting. A Nigerian example illustrates the issue.

Policies can be contradictory. An example comes from India. (Swaminathan 1993) In 1990, India adopted the National Code for Protection and Promotion of Breast-feeding. In 1992 the Regulation of Infant Foods, Breast Milk Substitutes and Feeding Bottles Act was passed. In essence these support breastfeeding for the first 4-6 months of life. Meanwhile the Maternity Benefits Act cited above provides a woman with only three months of maternity leave. Since some time is generally taken prior to the birth, maternity leave does not take the infant into even the fourth month of life. Within the Maternity Benefits Act, once women return to work they are entitled to two 15-minute nursing breaks, with a small amount of time allowed for travel if the infant is in an off-site crèche. The number of working women who could actually continue breastfeeding within these limitations is minuscule. Thus while the two laws (the 1990 National Code and the 1992 Regulation of Infant Foods) try to promote breastfeeding the Maternity Benefits Act effectively forces women to use bottle feeding once they have returned to work.

Policies can have unintended consequences. Many countries have instituted policies that state that establishments employing more than a given number of women have to provide crèches at the workplace for their workers' children. This law was enacted to protect women's jobs. It also facilitates breastfeeding and the caretaking of the infant by the mother. It allows women to return to work soon after the birth of the child. While this policy is supposed to help maintain women in the workplace, in many instances it has restricted women's participation in the formal sector. Employers simply hire fewer than the minimum number of women required to establish a crèche. Thus before rushing to put a policy or law into place it is important to anticipate the consequences.

Policies may not be implemented. To have a policy in place does not necessarily mean that it is being implemented. There may be good (or bad) policies already on the books that have never been enacted. Thus before creating a policy it is advisable to assess what currently exists, the extent to which it is being implemented, and to determine what has stood in the way of its implementation. It may be more important to focus on creating mechanisms that allow for the implementation of current policy than it is to create new policies.

Having no policy may be better than having a bad policy. There are times when a certain momentum has been achieved by an idea and there is informal support for the expansion of a programme or project. The project may be flourishing even in the absence of a clear policy to support it. Sometimes turning the spotlight onto the project and attempting to formalize it by creating a policy to assure its sustainability can backfire. Lawmakers can actually curtail the potential and halt the momentum of a project through slow or self-interested deliberations.
Knowing when to push for a policy requires sensitivity to the political situation and a careful approach.

References:
Primary sources: