Report on the

National Capacity-Building Workshop on Early Childhood Care and Education

“Working for Access, Quality and Inclusion in Thailand”

30 November – 2 December 2004

Bangkok, Thailand
The three-day workshop on ECCE was organized by the UNESCO Regional Office in Bangkok in collaboration with relevant ministries and UNICEF Thailand. The workshop provided an opportunity for Thailand’s leading experts, policy makers and practitioners in ECCE to convene in order to engage in a collaborative process of critical reflection on the state of ECCE in Thailand and plan for more coordinated and complementary actions to achieve their goals of providing quality ECCE for all Thai children. The workshop was a rare opportunity for the representatives of various sectors (public and private) and disciplines (education, health, social welfare, public administration) to interact and share experiences and insights on the state of ECCE in Thailand. Through presentations, panel discussions and small-group workshops they identified the most pressing concerns, identified their priorities and explored possibilities and concrete steps needed to reach those who are marginalized and unable to access quality ECCE services today.

In her opening remarks, Dr. Kasama Varavarn, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education, paved the way for an open, honest and critical perspective on the state of ECCE in Thailand. As an EFA veteran who has been a prime mover of educational reform in Thailand and a dedicated civil servant in the Ministry of Education throughout the decade of EFA, she was in a very good position to assess the current state of ECCE since she understood what it took to achieve such impressive coverage and quality during the EFA decade and what the prevailing challenges are. As she reaffirmed the government’s commitment to the framework and goals of Dakar she was also critical about the apparent failure to safeguard those gains. She reiterated the need to intensify efforts and not to be complacent about the task of ensuring access to quality ECCE for all Thai children. In order to fulfill these goals, the national commission and international partners have planned for projects to be implemented in all the provinces throughout the country which are designed to broaden opportunities for the participation of Thai children aged 0-5 in various ECCE programmes such as kindergartens. She reiterated the need to improve the quality of ECCE programmes so that these can effectively facilitate children’s entry and adjustment to primary school as well as the need to increase attention to disadvantaged children. More and better teacher training to enhance understanding and support for holistic child development as well as enhancing support and commitment to ECCE at the provincial levels of government will be crucial. Cooperation is also vital to ensure that the ECCE goals within the National EFA Plan will be accomplished by the year 2015.

On behalf of the UNESCO Regional Office, Mr. A.H.A. Hakeem, Director of APPEAL, recalled the main challenges for Thailand in relation to ECCE as identified in the National EFA Plan of Action of Thailand i.e. expanding the coverage of ECCE services particularly in remote areas, improving the quality of ECCE programmes and facilities, securing increased financing and enhancing teacher development, formulating a comprehensive ECCE strategy for medium and long-term development.

UNESCO believes that Thailand is well-positioned to achieve the ECCE goals of EFA. First, despite many difficulties and challenges, there is a long and solid experience base to build upon in current efforts to expand access and improve quality of ECCE in Thailand. Second, there are many examples of successful ECCE programmes and effective practices that can be promoted and disseminated among service providers and managers. Third, there are many institutions and specialists working in the area of ECCE, and the potential for closer and more effective inter-agency and multi-sectoral collaboration is great. Mr. Hakeem expressed his hope that the workshop participants, all major stakeholders in ECCE in Thailand, would feel a renewed vigour as they participated in this rare opportunity to convene and collaborate on a reflective review and planning process. This energy hopefully will contribute to sustain the ECCE stakeholders and advocates in Thailand to remain on track and remain steadfast and persistent as they approach the “finish line” and finally achieve the goals of EFA - for all Thai children.

Ms. Annelene Rør, focal point for ECCE, UNESCO Bangkok office, provided an overview of the importance of early childhood development and highlighted the necessity for a holistic approach to ECCE programming given the synergistic relationship between health, nutrition interventions, support for psychosocial development and active learning. This synergism is best illustrated by the impact of the quality of care and early childhood experiences on a young child’s brain development. Ms. Rør said that in order to reach Education for All, making sure that the quality of an individual child’s early childhood experience supports optimum growth and development is of vital importance. The positive correlation between good quality early childhood experience and good performance in primary school is well established. Research also has shown that investment in the early years outperforms other public policy options in terms of savings on remedial programmes. For children from poor families, early childhood is a time-bound opportunity to break the cycle of poverty. And children at risk of being marginalised because of disabilities have a much greater chance to reach their potential if they are beneficiaries of early identification and intervention.

With a comprehensive policy framework and serious education reform efforts to promote ECCE in Thailand Ms. Rør acknowledged that the Thai people were well on the way to ensuring a fair start in life for all children. She reminded them that “...quality does matter. It is not just a question of expanding access. The promotion of quality ECCE necessarily includes child-friendly learning and developmentally appropriate programming and practices that benefit all children.” She said that even though the purpose is to provide an opportunity to learn from Thai colleagues about their experiences in implementing ECCE programmes that are of good quality, it is important to bear in mind that in pluralistic societies it is impossible to unilaterally impose only one particular approach to ECCE. It is therefore necessary to promote practices which serve the best interests of young learners in their own social and cultural context thereby helping them make the most of their active learning capacity by accommodating their diverse needs. Hence, “good practices” should be seen as bottom-up strategies rather than policies mandating everyone to adopt certain approaches and methods.” Ms. Rør concluded her presentation with a short story entitled “One Little Boy” which stimulates reflection about the
Ms. Feny de los Angeles-Bautista focused her presentation on the UNESCO study on best practices in three countries on the Thailand country paper. She started her presentation with the strengths and achievements of Thailand in ECCE. Thailand had been successful in expanding access to ECCE and achieved very high participation rates before the EFA decade ended. The most notable part of this increasing coverage is the fact that in recent years, The Office of National Primary Education Commission (ONPEC) in the Ministry of Education concentrated its efforts on expanding access for children in the rural areas. By 2001, the ONPEC established a total of 67,200 preschool classes in 29,410 rural primary schools, which serve more than 1,399,055 children each year. This program is financed by the Royal Thai government with a 37,675,000 Baht (US$9,416,000) annual budget. An increase in provision of public funds for ECCE is one of the facilitating factors and demonstrates the strong political will needed to ensure access to ECCE.

But there are other factors that also account for such an impressive achievement in expanding access as well as promising developments in the overall improvement of quality of ECCE. First, the fact that enabling and essential policies exist and there is continuing effort to review and revise or introduce better options within the framework of serious education reform. Second, the fact that very much attention was given to developing the human resource base for ECCE and the institutional capacity to educate the teachers, child care providers and health care providers is relatively strong. Third, the government and partners in the academe and private sector have encouraged the proliferation of diverse programme approaches and models appropriate for various social, cultural & economic contexts exist and that promote quality standards. There has been continuing support for research on child development, child health and resource made available to develop, test and promote innovative practices in early childhood education. These include the demonstration kindergartens in every province, which are “learning laboratories for ECCE.” Fourth, the presence of stronger community support and increased private sector support for ECCE so that more philanthropic organizations have focused on the provision of ECCE services to children of disadvantaged families. Finally, the most important investment — Thailand has always emphasized the importance of parent education. This has significantly improved their ability to provide children with better care and it also raised parents’ awareness about the importance of ECCE. As the government increased its investments in ECCE, for example, by setting up more kindergarten classes in the public school system to make ECCE more affordable and accessible to Thai families, parents were ready to make the most of it.

Thailand’s national policy reaffirms the role of parents as the primary caregivers of young children but at the same time, acknowledges the responsibility of the government to support parents to enable them to fulfill their responsibilities. The Education Law also emphasizes the responsibility of parents for ensuring their children’s access to educational opportunities and reiterates the importance of parental involvement in children’s education. This is an appropriate balance of accountability and responsibility shared by families and the State as a party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Today there are challenges to address and problems to solve but these very same difficulties also present opportunities for development. Foremost among this is the continuing disparity in quality of programmes depending upon the amount of resources available to the families. There is now a need to intensify the process of reducing or closing the urban-rural, rich-poor gap. If the upward trend in public and private sector financing for ECCE continues and with increasing efforts to mobilize Thai society to support quality ECCE this can be achieved. The second major challenge is to implement more focused and responsive programmes and services for children at-risk and marginalised groups. These can amongst others be the children of hill tribes, refugee children and “border” population, disabled children from low-income families and children affected by HIV-AIDS. In order to do this, more effective identification and targeting of children and families at risk will be necessary. This will require coordinated planning involving all the different government agencies and local authorities. This coordination has to be matched by complementary financing and systematic monitoring of ECCE programmes that build on successful pilot programmes.

Feny de los Angeles-Bautista pointed out that this would be the perfect time for policymakers and ECCE practitioners to learn from their own experiences as one of the innovators in parent education and support programmes. The challenge in this regard are the “new” and emerging issues affecting Thai families and their young children: “smaller family size: less children, women-headed households, children left in the care of relatives or siblings, more nuclear families, less extended family, itinerant families in search of new economic opportunities, consumerism“ all these interact and affect their lives. Thailand must not let go of its commitment to families. They should sustain diversified parent education and support systems that reflect changing lifestyles of Thai families & blend indigenous childrearing practices with other developmentally appropriate practices.

There were two panel presentations during the workshop. The first, “status of Thai children”, went into more depth and details in analyzing the status of young children and families in Thailand and the current state of ECCE programming from a multidisciplinary perspective. The second “early intervention, inclusive education” discussed the need for a more inclusive approach to reach all children and the importance of early intervention to prevent children from being marginalised.
The latest findings from brain development research and its implications for the quality of care including nutrition and health care, psychosocial development in the first years of life were presented. The results of the research on the developmental status of Thai children that has been worked on for several years were also discussed. This is one of the most significant longitudinal studies on child development and child health that is being conducted in the region. This study provides excellent justification for investing in ECCE especially in programmes with effective parent education that supports parents in their roles as caregivers.

Experiences from Meanprasatwittaya school were shared with the participants. The school is based on the concept that all children have the right to a good standard of education and that special-needs children should have the chance to mix and be accepted by society. It is understood that we adapt to our immediate environment, therefore special-needs children will develop at a quicker rate if they are in a regular child environment, making a point of integration rather than segregation.

One of the most important things we discussed was the inclusion of out of school children into the general curriculum. Special focus and attention should was put on the disadvantaged children to provide them with educational opportunities. An important concern was the durability and sustainability of these projects as well as the funding.

**Workshops**

The participants worked in groups 1) to identify issues needing attention and address age-specific concerns 2) to plan concrete steps to be taken to address these issues affecting children and in particular, those who are currently excluded because they are disadvantaged, disabled, displaced. The workshops were designed to conclude with concrete agreements and a plan of action that they could commit themselves to. The participants wanted to pay careful attention to the specific requirements of these groups of children in order to refine policy and programme considerations. Since each of the groups had multi-sectoral and multidisciplinary representation, it allowed them to engage in the problem-solving process from a complementary and holistic perspective. For the first workshop, the participants task was to identify the most important or pressing issues affecting the specific age group or children in especially difficult circumstances. During the first workshop they identified the special needs, specific issues and problems affecting the children and then the output for the second workshop was a plan of action with concrete recommendations for the next steps.

**Steering committee**

Mr. Chaipruek Sereeluk, Director of the Policy and Planning Division of the Ministry of Education provided an overview of ECCE, which has been part of the Thai educational system for a very long time. Since 1980, the government supported ECCE programmes such as the kindergarten classes. In a continuing effort to improve the quality of early childhood education programmes within the public school system, the government will allocate 500-600 million Thai Baht for 2005 to fund the establishment of demonstration schools in 921 districts. Every school will receive THB 500,000 to be used for all the necessary resources to establish a good quality ECCE programme. Other schools in the district will learn from this model school and it will help to improve the quality of their programmes. Khun Chaipreuek further committed to initiate a Multi Agency Steering Committee on ECCE comprising of:

Chair: Khun Chaipruek Sereeluk, Director of the Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education  
Dep. Chair: Khun Dr. Nittaya Kotchabhaikdi, Director of the National Institute for Family and Child Development of Mahidol University

Members of steering committee:

Ministry of Education  
Ministry of Health  
Social Development and Human Security  
Ministry of Interior  
NGOs  

UN Liaison: UNICEF and UNESCO  

The committee should aim for:  
- Providing resources and information and support  
- Strengthen the network between the different ministerial actors in ECCE in Thailand  
- Influence policy to expand and improve ECCE programmes  
- Follow up on Khunying Kasama Varavarn’s input in her opening speech

Participants in the seminar that are not represented in the Steering Committee shall contribute as much as they can to the above mentioned aims.

**Closing**

After a synthesis of lessons learned, focusing on building on best practises and a way forward, Director of UNESCO Bangkok, Mr. Sheldon Schaeffer, concluded the workshop. Mr. Schaeffer thanked the participants for their efforts and contributions in the workshop and wished them the best of luck in future work.