Policy Brief 02

Executive Summary:

A child's brain develops at a surprisingly rapid rate during early years to lay foundations for lifelong development. ASER Pakistan reveals that 61% (rural) and 42% (urban) children between ages 3-5 are out of school in Pakistan. This highlights an urgent need to address this problem and work towards partnerships and alliance models that incorporate necessary Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for all. This policy brief explores the recent global target setting for ECCE under Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 and 4.4, analyzes its current status in Pakistan and calls for inclusive action at all platforms.

Background

Recent upsurge in research on the development of a child's brain underscore the need of early childhood care and education, especially in developing countries. Studies reveal how a child's brain develops at a surprisingly rapid rate during the early years thereby laying foundations for lifelong development. These foundations allow for successful adaptation and effective learning that 'become building blocks for healthy and competent adulthood, responsible citizenship, economic productivity, strong communities, and a just and sustainable society'.

Research firmly supports that ECCE can compensate for disadvantage and vulnerability, regardless of underlying factors such as poverty, gender, race/ethnicity, caste or religion (UNESCO, 2006, p. 113). ECCE helps level the playing field for disadvantaged children as they enter primary school, empowering them to be confident and successful in later education and employment. Most young children at highest risk of educational failure - those experiencing poverty and related circumstances that may limit early learning experiences - benefit the most from high quality early care and education programs. Barnett & Heckman propose mechanisms through which preschool can powerfully contribute to fight against poverty.

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4 Heckman, J., Maloeev, L., Pinto, R., & Savelyev, P., Understanding the mechanisms through which an influential early childhood program boosted adult outcomes, University of Chicago, 2010.
The 1990 Jomtien Declaration and the 2000 Dakar Framework for Education for All vouch for expansion of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) facilities world-wide, but the goals have been constantly subsumed by the basic provision of primary education for all. However, the post 2015 agenda across the 17 proposed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) builds a sharper case for ECCE urging to strengthen means of implementation and revitalize global partnerships for sustainable development. The proposed SDG target 4.2 mentions that “by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education”. Similarly, the Incheon Declaration 2030 states “...we also encourage the provision of at least 1 year of free and compulsory quality pre-primary education that all children have access to quality early childhood development, care and education”.

Being part of the global commitments and endorsing Article 25-A, Right to Education, Pakistan included at least one compulsory year of early childhood education in its National Education Policy 2009 and developed a National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education. According to the National Plan of Action, the goal is to enroll at least 50% boys and girls in pre-primary by 2015. However, so far only 36% children are enrolled in ECCE - males 23% and females 40% (ASER, 2014).

### Trends in Enrollment and Learning

ASER 2014 covered 144 rural districts and 21 urban districts across Pakistan. Using the population of children aged 3-5 years; we examine the proportion of children enrolled in different types of institutes and those not enrolled at all.

ASER 2014 rural results for early childhood education show that 61% of the children are not attending any type of pre-schools whereas only 39% are enrolled in schools. 20% are attending public schools and 19% are going to non-state institutes.
Figure 2 illustrates access to early childhood education by socio-economic lines. Results show that only 31% of the children in the poorest households are enrolled in early childhood schooling in rural Pakistan whereas 52% of the children from the richest families are attending pre-schooling. Similarly, the highest out of school percentage of children belong to the lowest quartile i.e. the poorest (69%). The least percentage of children out of school is in the richest quartile. However, approximately 50% of the children of the richest families are also not enrolled in pre-schools.

Additionally, the enrollment in ECE by type of institute portrays an interesting picture - the highest percentage of enrollment in government school prevails in the poorest quartile whereas the highest enrollment in private school exists in the richest quartile.

With over 60% children not enrolled in any pre-primary program in rural areas - specifically a large proportion being out of school at ages 3 and 4. This problem becomes more pronounced when it translates into poor learning levels in lower primary grades at school.
ASER learning assessments (figure 4) show that only 38.2% children in class 1 could read at least letters in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto and 15.9% class 3 children could read story based on grade II level curriculum. Similar trends are shown in English and Arithmetic assessments. Only 23.7% class 1 students could read small letters in English and only 14.0% class 3 children could read sentences. Arithmetic results are the weakest of all assessments. 29.9% children enrolled in class 1 could recognize numbers (10-99) and 10.9% children enrolled in class 3 could do division.

The above evidence and analysis compels us towards the need for investment in early childhood education. Pakistan faces two-fold challenge – access to early childhood schooling and the long lasting effects it has on the learning abilities of a child. There is urgent need for action to be taken at the national level to promote learning of children from early age for building lifelong learning skills. Rigorous evaluations internationally have also established that investment in ECE programs have high rates of return. They demonstrate that children with quality ECE experience tend to advance to higher education, obtain employment, have higher earnings as well as savings, provide higher contributions to social security, and are less likely to be on public assistance and commit crimes.

**Recommendations:**

Provision of quality early childhood education can help offset such low learning levels of children in schools. Realizing this need, strategic and low-cost solutions to provide quality early childhood education to all could include:

- With the implementation of Article 25-A and one year of ECCE class included in the formal National Education Policy 2009, ensure enrollment of ALL children in one year ECCE program before entering primary schools.

- Advocate stronger policies in the National Education Policy 2016 to counter the problem of *inadequate and inequitable access to early childhood programs* in the country; train teachers and community members to understand the needs of ECCE and develop a useful social skills set; fill the gap between demand and supply of ECCE teachers; use low-cost buildings/equipment and voluntary efforts to counter budget problems.

- Proactively advocate alliances for public and private partnerships to create a consolidated and well funded early childhood education system, including building alliances with young mothers, livelihoods, research, health and education.

- Establish Child-Parent Centers in public and private schools which offer early education and support to the low-income families for enrolling children in early education schools. This will expectedly results in better school achievement and completion, and significantly lower rates of remedial education, juvenile delinquency and child maltreatment.