



12TH FORUM EDUCATION MINISTERS MEETING

ICT Video Conference Room 1, University of the South Pacific, Laucala Campus, Fiji

13 - 14 April 2020

SESSION FIVE: Early Childhood Education in the Pacific

(PacREF(21) FEdMM.11)

(The paper written by UNICEF provides a background to ECE development in the Pacific.)

Title/Topic	Early Childhood Education (ECE) in the Pacific
Presenting Agency/Unit	UNICEF
Purpose of the Brief	The purpose of the brief is to provide an overview of progress and opportunities for early childhood education (ECE) in the Pacific.

Background:

- Enabling young children to achieve their full developmental potential is a human right and a critical requisite for sustainable development. Gaps in support to early childhood learning and development are exceptionally acute in the first years of a child’s life, when the brain undergoes its most rapid period of development and is extremely sensitive to environmental influence. Young children with a disability or from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds face compounded risks, as do those impacted by disasters and emergencies.
- Early Childhood Education (ECE) is an integral component of multi-sectoral ECD, which refers to all the essential policies and programmes required to support the healthy development of children from birth to 6 years of age, including health, nutrition, protection, early childhood education opportunities and responsive caregiving. ECE refers to organized programmes that are intentionally designed to include educational content for young children before the start of grade 1 level education, often around age 6 in Pacific Island Countries.
- Participation in quality ECE is proven to establish strong foundations for learning and success in school and beyond, especially for the most vulnerable.
- Delivering quality ECE at scale requires the recognition of ECE as a comprehensive subsector that is integral to the education system, rather than an ‘add-on service’.
- An effective ECE sub-sector depends on an enabling environment that includes strong national policies, dedicated budgets, ministerial leadership, and public demand for quality early education programmes. Within the sub-sector, five core functions need to be developed and nurtured specifically for ECE, namely: 1) equitable planning and resource allocation 2) curriculum implementation 3) workforce development 4) family and community engagement and 5) quality assurance. Evidence based decision making to ensure equitable access and participation, especially for young children with a disability or in vulnerable circumstances, to quality programmes should underpin each of these.
- Effective support to young children by the education sector also depends on attention to ECE within emergency preparedness and response, disaster risk reduction and resilience building. Just as young children are better serviced, disasters and emergencies including COVID-19 have exacerbated the above-mentioned pre-existing challenges in the ECE sub-sector, exposing critical vulnerabilities, and yet emergency-related efforts often fail to fully integrate attention to ECE. This requires special consideration when planning for and implementing response and recovery actions for ECE in context of disasters and emergencies.
- Although most Pacific Island countries have traditionally had more limited access to ECE than other levels, ensuring access to quality early learning is a priority for most countries in

the Pacific region with increased focus and resourcing of the sub-sector within national systems, including in emergencies.

- Therefore, the rationale for adopting a resilient, equity focused, efficient and well-coordinated systems approach towards strengthening the ECE sub-sector within national education systems, including in emergencies, is strong.

Summary:

- Following a 2017 ECD Forum, Pacific Island Forum Leaders in 2018 called for a whole of government, whole of community approach to ECD recognising the need for health, nutrition, social welfare, education and finance agencies to work together with families to achieve optimal outcomes for our youngest citizens.
- This led to the establishment of the Pacific Regional Council for ECD (PRC4ECD), expanding from the original PRC4ECCE, which was focused more specifically on education. The PRC4ECD terms of reference outlines structures for multi-sectoral coordination, and also calls on each sector for dedicated attention to young children.
- The Pacific Regional Taskforce on ECE established under PRC4ECD is mandated to support and guide ECE regional initiatives. A baseline on ECE status in the Pacific was presented in a Status Report in 2017, with an update of the report due in 2021, which should be tabled at PHES in 2021.
- Looking forward, the Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF) presents opportunities for Pacific countries to work toward expanding youngest learners' access to and participation in quality ECE. The planned work aims toward improving participation, strengthening quality, and ensuring readiness to make successful transitions to Grade 1 through region-wide activities as well as country-specific initiatives. Ensuring that such opportunities are responded to through a Pacific lens is paramount so that the resulting goods and services are reflective of the Pacific context.
- Pacific countries are also leading and innovating in ECE already. Several countries are mainstreaming the ECE sub-sector in education sector plans and EMIS systems, expanding budgets for ECE and/or registering centres based on ECE quality standards. Some are revising ECE curricula reflecting contextualized expectations for learning and development, and readiness for Grade 1, and working on professional development strategies for ECE teachers. ECE has been integrated in contingency plans, learning continuity strategies, and emergency response. Pacific countries are sharing experience in ECE and learning from each other, opportunities that should expand under PacREF.
- As Pacific island countries and their partners seek to scale up quality ECE, for supporting strong foundations for all children it is critical that these efforts be guided by a strong, comprehensive and systemic vision that is integral to education sector plans, including in emergencies. The ECE Regional Taskforce and PacREF implementing agencies are available to support governments' efforts towards delivering equitable and quality ECE for all young children and families across the Pacific.

The Ministers are invited to note:

- The contribution of ECE to ECD and to continue their support to this intersectoral approach, championing the role of ECE within the wider ECD;

- The critical importance of establishing strong foundations for learning in early childhood, ensuring access to quality and relevant ECE for all children, including the most vulnerable;
- The need to adopt a comprehensive systems approach to improving equitable access to quality ECE and
- The expanded support to ECE within the Pacific through Pacific Regional Education Framework (PacREF) and with support from the Pacific Early Learning Taskforce.

Decision requested	<p><i>Ministers are invited to:</i></p> <p>(i) support the continuation of current regional efforts in the development of ECE within the wider Education sector, as well as within ECD, in collaboration with the Pacific Early Learning Taskforce of PRC4ECD;</p> <p>(ii) direct PHES to receive the upcoming status report on ECE in the region and consider recommendations to the next FEdMM.</p>
Minister's Position	