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Promoting critical knowledge, skills and qualifications for sustainable development in Africa: How to design and implement an effective response by education and training systems

Sub-theme 1
Common core skills for lifelong learning and sustainable development in Africa

SCHOOL READINESS and TRANSITION IN THE GAMBIA

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Acronyms and abbreviations

BFCI	Baby Friendly Community Initiative
CFS	Christian Fund
CRR	Central River Region
CWI	Child Welfare Index
ECD	Early Childhood Development
EFA	Education for All
EMIS	Education Management and Information System
FTI	Fast Track Initiative
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GER	Gross Enrolment Rate
HDI	Human development index
HTC	Higher Teachers Certificate
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMF	Infant Mortality Rate
LBS	Lower Basic School
LRR	Lower River Region
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MoBSE	Ministry of basic and Secondary Education
MSWG	Multi-Sectoral Working Group
NaNA	National Nutrition Agency
NBR	North Bank Region
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
PTC	Primary Teachers Certificate
SSS	Senior Secondary School
UBS	Upper Basic School
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
URR	Upper River Region
WASSCE	West African Senior Secondary Certificate Exams
WCAR	West and Central Africa Region

1. ABSTRACT

1. Children have the right to be safe, cared for, and stimulated at home, in school, and in the community. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that parents are a child's first and best educators and caregivers. The CRC recognises also that a child's capacities evolve rapidly between the ages of 3 and 6 years. During this period, children more fully develop their intellectual and social potential in safe, caring, play-based, and stimulating environments; such environments also help to fulfil their rights to participation and non-discrimination.

2. Starting primary school is, indeed, a very critical experience for most children and could provoke a shock for many of them if they are not properly prepared (physically, cognitively and socio-emotionally) to cope with this new learning environment. It is commonly acknowledged that there is a direct link between children's early experience, their subsequent learning and their successful evolution not only in the school system but in their global life as well in coherence with the labour market needs. Therefore, the concept of "school readiness" is at the heart of any intervention to promote early childhood development in order to ensure to all children a good start to life¹. What is overlooked is the fact that investment in Early Childhood Development (ECD) is the critical foundation for children's school readiness and achieving success in school and life.²

3. The concept of "school readiness" implies more than children's early learning and abilities. It refers also to two other factors: school readiness for children and family readiness for school. Those are two conditions to ensure a smooth transition for the 3-6 (preschool) and the 6-8 (first grade of primary school) year old children. ECD programmes and early primary school components should be linked as a whole. Literature on the transition process strongly emphasises the point that early childhood programs are more effective if they are part of a broader coherent framework, linking early child development initiatives to children's experience at home with the new reality of primary school and to primary education experiences. It is critical to develop policies so as to build bridges and to narrow the gaps across levels, including staff training, regulations, administrative departments and curricula. Cross-sectoriality should also be secured in order to ensure the holistic development of the young child.

2. Even though it is internationally acknowledged that the 6-8 year period is part of the early childhood development process and that this is a critical stage for children's successful integration in primary school and for their subsequent learning, this age group is not really taken into consideration by ECD specialists and by policy-makers. Moreover, the inclusion of young children coming from deprived environments with no proper early stimulation are often being neglected in the learning environment that has to cope with large classes and little learning material. What is being done within education systems to offer to the 3-6 and the 6-8 year old children a welcoming environment and developmentally learning opportunities? What is happening in the Africa region where the majority of children start school late and where the large majority has no previous early learning experience? What measures are being taken? To what extent are schools ready to facilitate young children's integration and performance as well as their holistic development? To what extent does the pre-primary school and the primary school curriculum pay attention to the integration of vulnerable children who have not had access to ECD programmes? What place is given in primary school programmes to components such as health, nutrition, water and sanitation, and protection of the young child? Are those programmes promoting participation of children as well as of their parents and their community with objectives to build skills and competences for Basic Education?

¹ Is everybody ready? Readiness, transition and continuity : lessons, reflections and moving forward, Background Paper for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007, by Caroline Arnold

²Planning Policies for Early Childhood Development: Guidelines for Action, Emily Vargas-Barón, published by UNESCO, 2005 ,

3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

4. Throughout West and Central Africa, governments are working to develop human capital in order to reduce poverty. Among other countries, the Gambia recognized that their efforts had to start with children. Gambia's Vision 2020 and the Gambia Poverty Reduction Strategy Program (PRSP) gave priority to free basic education for all. But making education readily available was only one part of the country's vision, school readiness - a smooth transition from home to primary school - was also a priority. Early childhood education has been extensively documented to show improved school readiness, increased likelihood of enrolment in the first grade of primary school; reduced delays in enrolment, dropout and grade repetition, and increased completion and achievement.³ In fact, one of the main challenges facing education systems in the Western and Central Africa Region is the high level of drop out and repetition rates at grade 1 and 2 of the primary school.

5. Through the agenda of Vision 2020, the Gambia offered increased access to Early Childhood Development through centers attached to lower basic schools, an integrated approach that took into account health, nutrition, water and sanitation, and protection of children ages 0 to 6, and targeted under-served regions, girls and other disadvantaged groups

The UNICEF Regional Office for Western and Central Africa, in collaboration with UNESCO-BREDA and PLAN WARO, commissioned the present study to assess preliminary results from the Gambia experience. The study posed the following questions:

- What is being done within education systems to offer the 6-8 year old children a welcoming environment and developmentally appropriate learning opportunities?
- To what extent are schools ready to facilitate young children's school integration and performance as well as their holistic development?
- To what extent does the primary school curriculum link to ECD programs?
- What gains have been made in transition from home to primary level as a result of ECD programs?

6. Using the guiding principles from the national development agenda, the strategy for providing ECD services was based on two premises: the participation of the private sector in the provision of such services in the urban and peri-urban areas, and the attachment of ECD centers to existing Lower Basic Schools in the rural communities by government. This approach included a play-oriented curriculum that promotes personal, social and physical development; knowledge and mathematical development; literacy and language development. Teachers were trained through an ECD certificate program with support from EFA/FTI at the Gambia College. So far, over 100 facilitators have been certified.

7. The qualitative and quantitative results of the study reveal preliminary positive effects on enrolment and retention rates, with anecdotal evidence that children were regularly monitored for health and nutrition to ensure their physical wellbeing and mental readiness for school. To date, 472 centers have been attached to lower basic schools in the impoverished rural communities to promote the transition from pre-primary to primary, and to ensure affordable ECD services for all children. A Parental Education Program, contributing to the holistic development of children, was a part of the Baby Friendly Community Initiative.⁴ Additionally, the program was strengthened by the innovation of the 'ECD Model and Support Center' strategy, which taught child-centered practices through continuous professional development.

8. Finally, the report offers practical recommendations for the government and other stakeholders to improve preprimary education and scale up the transition process from home to school

³ EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007, Strong Foundations, and Arnold 2004, Bertrand and Beach 2004; Mustard 2005; Young 1996

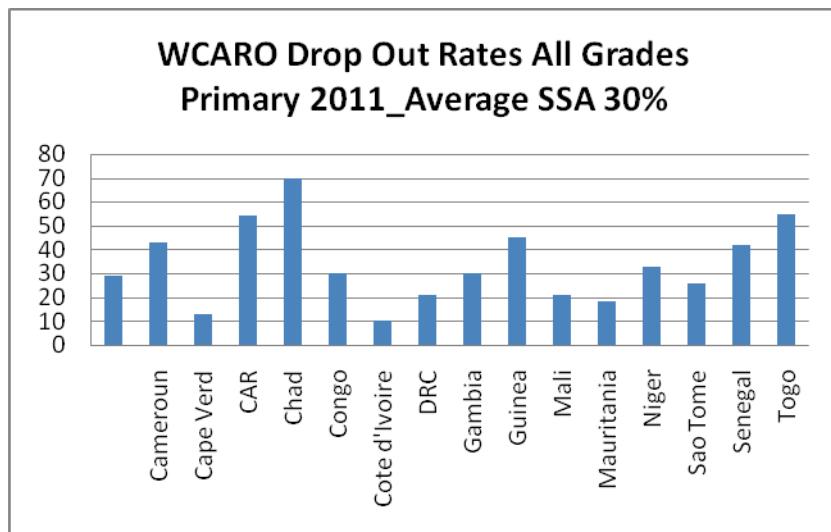
⁴ The BFCI is a community based breast feeding initiative combined with maternal health, nutrition water and sanitation.

at the national level, in both urban and rural areas, including how to better train ECD facilitators and the staff of the ECD unit on monitoring and supervision in the field. The adoption and appropriate use of the ECD curriculum in all schools and its close monitoring will require the attention of the MoBSE for years to come.

4. INTRODUCTION

9. The positive impact of participation to ECD programme on children and the transition process to primary education and beyond is extensively documented worldwide⁵. ECD programs not only improve school readiness making enrolment in the first grade of primary school more likely but they also reduces delayed enrolment, dropout and grade repetition; and positively impact on increased completion and achievement⁶. In fact, one of the main challenges which education systems have to deal with Western and Central Africa Region is the very high level of drop out and repetition rates already at grade with a special regard for the first two years of primary school.

Fig 1: Drop Out Rates in Western and Central Africa



10. Literature on the transition process strongly emphasizes the point that early childhood programs are more effective if they are part of a broader coherent framework, linking early child development initiatives to primary schooling as well as to other basic services including health and nutrition.

To better understand the transition process, it is important to recall the concept of school readiness. The two main approaches regarding the transition to primary school may be summed up as ‘school readiness and ‘ready schools’ (Fabian and Dunlop, 2006). The ‘school readiness concept’ stresses the importance of ECD in promoting children’s development and assuring their entrance at primary school at the right age; it seeks to identify the competencies that children should display if they are ready for schools. The concept of ‘ready schools’, on the other hand, focuses on the characteristics of the school environment that facilitate or hinder learning⁷.

11. It is critical to develop policies so as to build bridges and to narrow the gaps across levels, including staff training, regulations, administrative departments and curricula. Cross-sectoriality should also be secured in order to ensure the holistic development of the young child taking into account health, nutrition, child protection and HIV/AIDS. Finally, parental education support the transition process sensitizing and supporting the caregivers on the importance of ECD. In the Gambia

⁵ Main references include: Arnold 2004; Bertrand and Beach 2004; Mustard 2005; Young 1996

⁶ EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007, Strong Foundations

⁷ EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007, Strong Foundations

the recognition of the importance of holistic approach to child care and development has been concretely acknowledged in 2002 when the development of a national integrated ECD policy framework was launched. Gambian authorities and civil society realized that Early Childhood Development cuts across all sectors and as such should not be an exclusive responsibility of any particular sector but rather a collaborative effort of all the social sectors to impact the holistic development of children.

12. The launching of the ECD Model Centre strategy and the annexation of ECD Centers to existing Lower Basic Schools were, therefore, part of a strategy to improve ECD in rural areas targeting the most vulnerable children and their families. The progress made, so far, through this approach may be limited but still relevant to justify a study to inform decision makers and other countries interested in boosting ECD. This case study, therefore, describes the overall country specific context highlighting the poverty situation, the economic context under which the ECD provisions are being implemented, the processes involved in providing ECD services, the challenges and progress made so far in the implementation process.

5. METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

13. A first step of the case study was realized in 2009 in the Gambia by a former consultancy research team from University of Geneva (Crahay and Delhaxe, 2010). The team carried out documentary review as well as data collection through field visits in two regions of the country and interviews with the main stakeholders involved in the promotion of early childhood development in the Gambia. During that part of the study, a qualitative observational technique was planned and implemented. Discussions were held through focus groups. These focus group discussions involved parents, community members and leaders, ECD facilitators, primary classroom teachers and head teachers. The objective of the focus group discussions was to assess and document perceptions, representations, beliefs, hopes and expectations as well as the level of involvement of different actors in favor of the smooth transition from home to school and from pre-primary to primary education. Sampling was done based on the selection of available participants, and not on a random sampling technique, and discussions were targeted on selected issues (policy environment, pedagogical models, and operational mechanisms to deliver ECD, family perception of ECD, community participation). For the purpose of the discussions, a focus group grid was developed and completed during the discussions. In addition to the focus group discussions, classroom observation allowed the researchers to analyze the learning-teaching dynamics.

14. A second consultancy was in charge of analyzing the previous data collected and of reviewing the report submitted.. Following this review it was found necessary to undertake yet another field visit to the Upper River Region to corroborate the data collected through the focus group discussions and in the schools using focus group discussions similar to those used by the previous consultancy. Some of the same sites that were visited by the previous consultancy were also visited during this consultancy, namely Perai Tenda and Gambissara schools which have ECD Centers attached to the schools; these are located upcountry in region 6. Discussions were held with the head teachers, the ECD facilitators at these two schools and also with parents in the community. Further discussions were held with the Region 6 Director for Education, the Education planner for Region 6 and the two cluster monitors in charge of the Perai Tenda and Gambissara clusters. Further discussions were also held with the multisectorial working group members and members of the ECD office in Banjul. The New Jeswhang Lower basic school and Wellingara Nursery School in Region 1 and 2 were also visited and school staff was involved in the discussion in order to assess the existing practice at the ECD model centers in terms of the facilitation and resources available at the school and to confirm some of the perceptions. Some additional data, qualitative and quantitative, was also collected during the field visit including school attendance and transition rates. Documents obtained from the MoBSE and from UNICEF on statistics and policies were reviewed and analyzed. Further interviews were held with some members of the MSWG and the ECD unit to gather information on the school readiness process, the challenges, opportunities and progress made so far in the roll out of the ECD model center strategy in URR. Other information related to number of privately owned ECD centers as well as the existence of a draft guideline on regulatory framework for the opening and operation of pre-schools in The Gambia was collected.

15. The limitation of the study includes the small sample size of the ECD model centers, paucity of comprehensive data and the short duration of the implementation of the model center initiative which was launched in 2007. A more definitive link between the school readiness initiative and transition to primary school as measured through attendance, retention, promotion and completion rates could be established over time as more data becomes available. Nonetheless, the analysis of the available data indicates a trend that shows progress in both attendance and retention. Already a 12.2 % reduction in absenteeism and a completion rate of 69% in URR was recorded⁸. Despite those limitations, it is hoped that the study will contribute to increase awareness on the importance of promoting transition and school readiness for young children and on the need for a holistic approach for early childhood development in Western and Central African countries.

⁸ The Gambia National Statistics for Education 2009/2010

CHAPITRE 1 - THE GAMBIA COUNTRY CONTEXT

a) Gambia's socio-economic context

16. Despite the economic indicators which place The Gambia among the poorest countries in the World and with 61% of the population living below the national poverty line, this country shows a relatively young child friendly environment. The Gambia has a population estimated at 1.6 million and an average per capita GDP of approximately US\$420 (2007)⁹. It has an annual population growth rate of 2.8% and a population density of 128 persons per square kilometer. About 49 % of the population is under 18 years of age; 19 % are between 15 and 24 years old and 22 % of the women are aged between 15 and 49 years¹⁰. This makes The Gambia a youthful country.

17. The population of the country is represented by five main ethnic groups in The Gambia, namely, Mandinka, Fula, Wolof, Jola, Sarahulleh and a few other very small ethnic groups. The various ethnic groups share similar social structures, including languages, and this contributes to homogeneity in society. However, English is the official language. More than 52% of the population is urban according to the 2003 census. This has been fuelled by rural-urban migration. Availability of jobs is limited with the formal sector being small and only employing 10% of the labor force. Women represent only 9.4% of the skilled labor workforce, despite making up 51% of the population. In contrast women represent 61.9 per cent of the unskilled labor category. The life expectancy according to the World Bank estimates in 2003 is 52 years for males and 55.

18. With regards to the country's economy, agriculture and tourism are two major contributors. Government's investment in addressing population and development issues is producing results and a decline in population growth rate from 4.2 percent in 1993 to 2.8 percent 2003 was shown in the 2003 Population and Housing Census. The total fertility rate is at 4.6 per Gambia woman. Social development indicators are still low but improving. Poverty has dropped marginally, from 58 percent in 2003 to 55.5 percent in 2008. Underfive mortality has dropped from 135 and 1,000 live births in 1993 to less than 100 in 2010. The malaria mortality rate is 106 per 100,000 inhabitants. Adult literacy however is low, estimated at 45 percent in 2008, below ECOWAS and African averages of 49 percent and 66 percent¹¹.

b) Education in The Gambia

19. On the scale computed by the World Bank's Africa Region Education Unit that synthesizes the context the education sector faces, The Gambia ranks 8th in social terms, 22nd in economic terms, whereas the global context index places The Gambia in 12th position out of 47 African Countries, above the average¹². The Gambian education system begins with four years of Early pre-primary education followed by nine years of uninterrupted basic education, including the lower basic (six years of primary education - LBE) and upper basic (three years of secondary education - UBE) levels.

20. Indeed, there have been many improvements in Education in the Gambia since 1995 which cover all areas, namely, basic education, including Early Childhood Development, as well as Adult and Non-Formal Education, all of which are under the view of the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE). Accordingly to the latest Country Status Report, the Gambia is still

⁹ The Gross National Income per capita (GNI) in 2007 is US\$320.

¹⁰ Gambia Bureau of Statistics

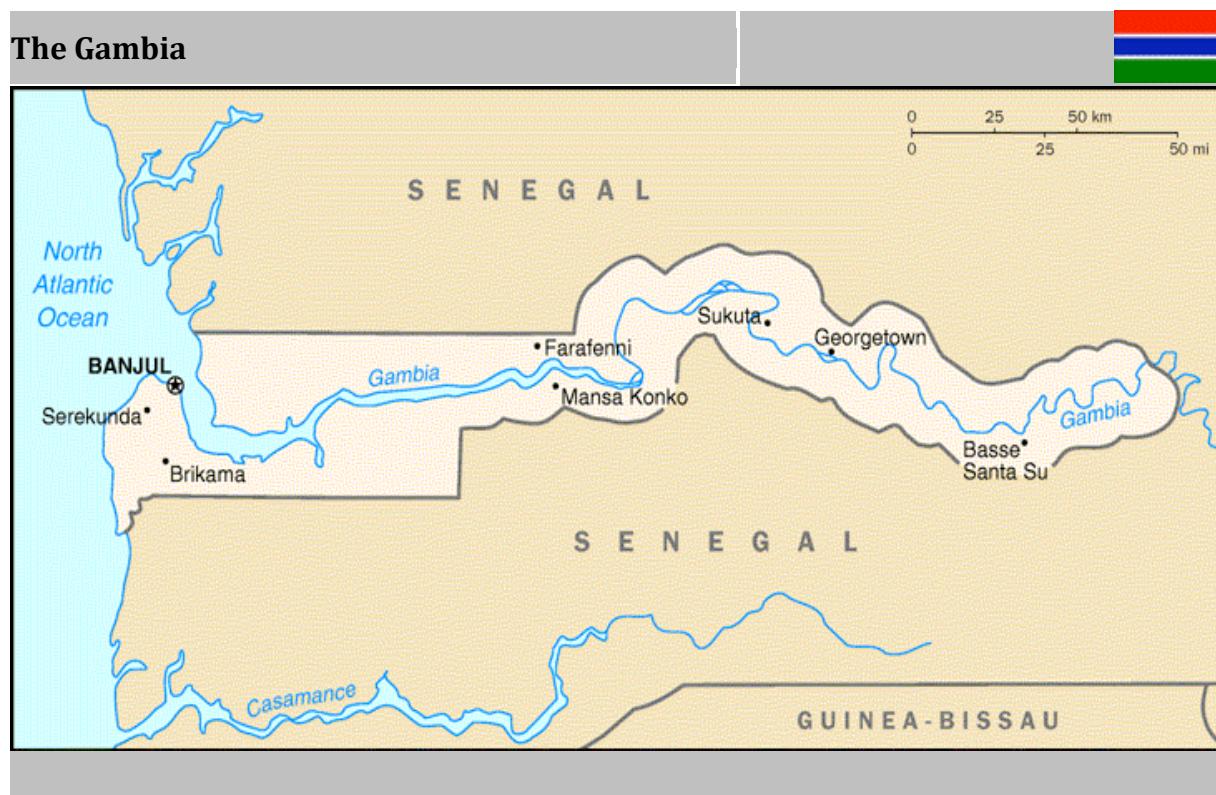
¹¹ Country Status Report, 2011

¹² Country Status Report, 2011

among the most advanced SSA countries in terms of actual enrollment and completion indicators at all levels but enrolment ratios have stagnated over the last 4 years. Furthermore, the number of dropouts is still too large. Of 100 children who enter the low basic cycle, only 75 reach Grade 6 and only 60 reach grade 9.¹³ Nevertheless, the primary completion rate is above the SSA average which is 67% and this place the Gambia in the 3rd best position out of 24 countries¹⁴.

21. In the Gambia, the Education sector receives the largest share of the government budgetary allocation annually (Budget Speech 2010). In 2010 the sector received 18% an increase of 3.6% over the 2008 allocation of 14.4%. Compared to the other sectors such as Health which received less than 10% and Agriculture which received less than 3%, the Education sector enjoys government's priority focus as it is the only sector that has developed a comprehensive sector policy and a robust strategic plan focusing on the Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) for 2015. Nevertheless, the level of budget priority given to education is comparatively low in 2010 at 18 percent of total expenditure, compared with ECOWAS average of 24%¹⁵.

Map 1: The Gambia showing cities where headquarters of Regional Educational Directorates are located.



Banjul/Kanifing is the headquarter for Region 1 Educational Directorate; Brikama is the headquarter for Region 2 Educational Directorate. These two regions combined represent the urban and semi urban regions. The remaining four regions represent Region 3, 4, 5, and 6 representing the rural regions.

22. Enrolment rates in Gambian school index at 0.678 (116th position out of 128 countries) in 2007, outperforms countries in the sub-region including Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger¹⁶. A vigorous campaign in 2002 for girl's education culminated in the establishment of the 'Girl

¹³ Also see the pyramid of education in the Gambia: http://www.poledakar.org/IMG/pdf/Gambie_FR.pdf.

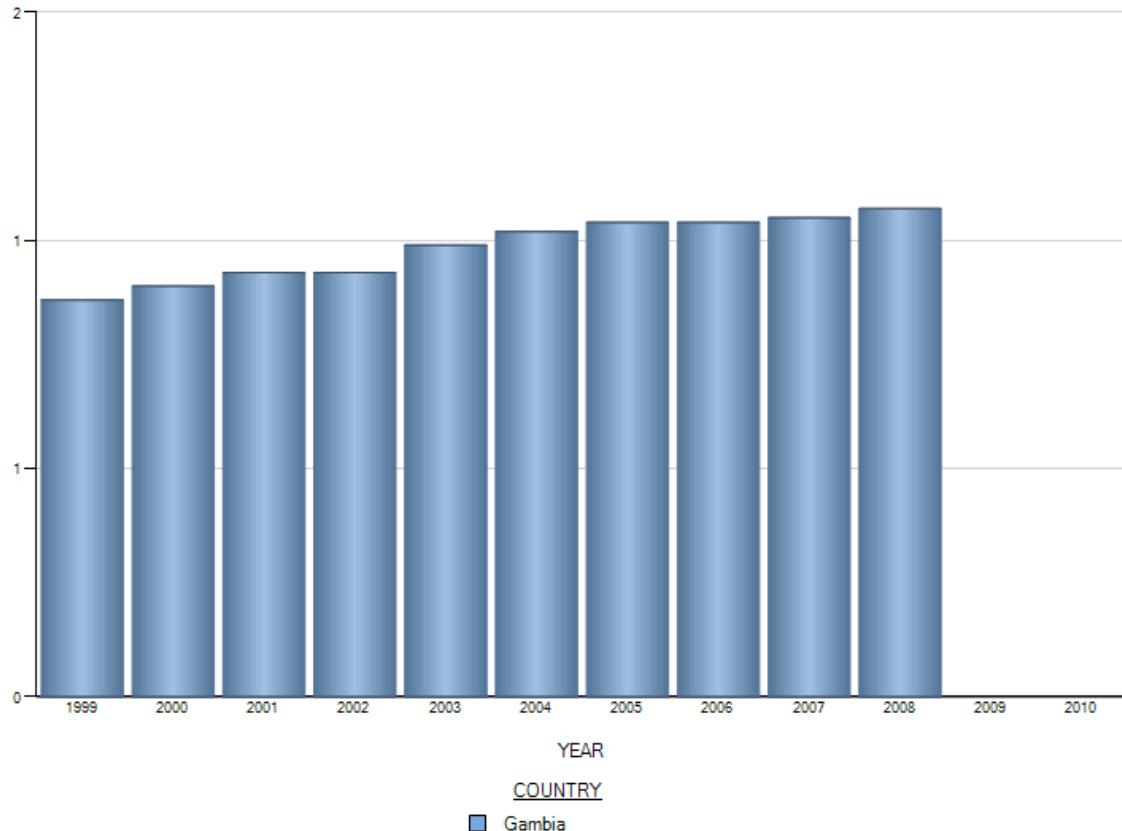
¹⁴ The Gambia Country Status Report, 2011.

¹⁵ The Gambia Country Status Report, 2011.

¹⁶ Education for All, Global Monitoring Report, 2010

Friendly Schools Initiative' and scholarships for girls which increased the Gender Parity Index in primary from 0.87 in 1999 to 1.07 in 2008.

Fig 2: Gender parity index for net enrolment rate in Primary Schools



Source, UNESCO Institute of Education, <http://stats UIS.unesco.org/unesco>

Secondary gross school enrolment rates are 52% for males and 49% female. Literacy among youth (15 -24) during the period from 2003 – 2008 show that 63% of young males and 41% of young females are literate¹⁷.

Table 1 resumes major education indicators for the country:

¹⁷ EMIS 2008

Table 1: GAMBIA EDUCATION STATISTICS¹⁸

INDICATORS	TOTAL	FEMALE	MALE
Preprimary Gross Enrolment Ratio	22%	22%	22%
Preprimary Net Enrolment Ratio	19%	19%	20%
Primary Net Enrolment Ratio or Net Attendance Ratio*	69%	71%	67%
Gender Parity Index	1.06		
Repeaters rate- All Grades	5%	5%	6%
Drop outs rate- All Grade	30%	28%	32%
Survival Rate to Last Primary Grade	72%	72%	68%
Pupil Teacher Ratio	34		
Secondary Gross Enrolment Rate	51%	49%	52%

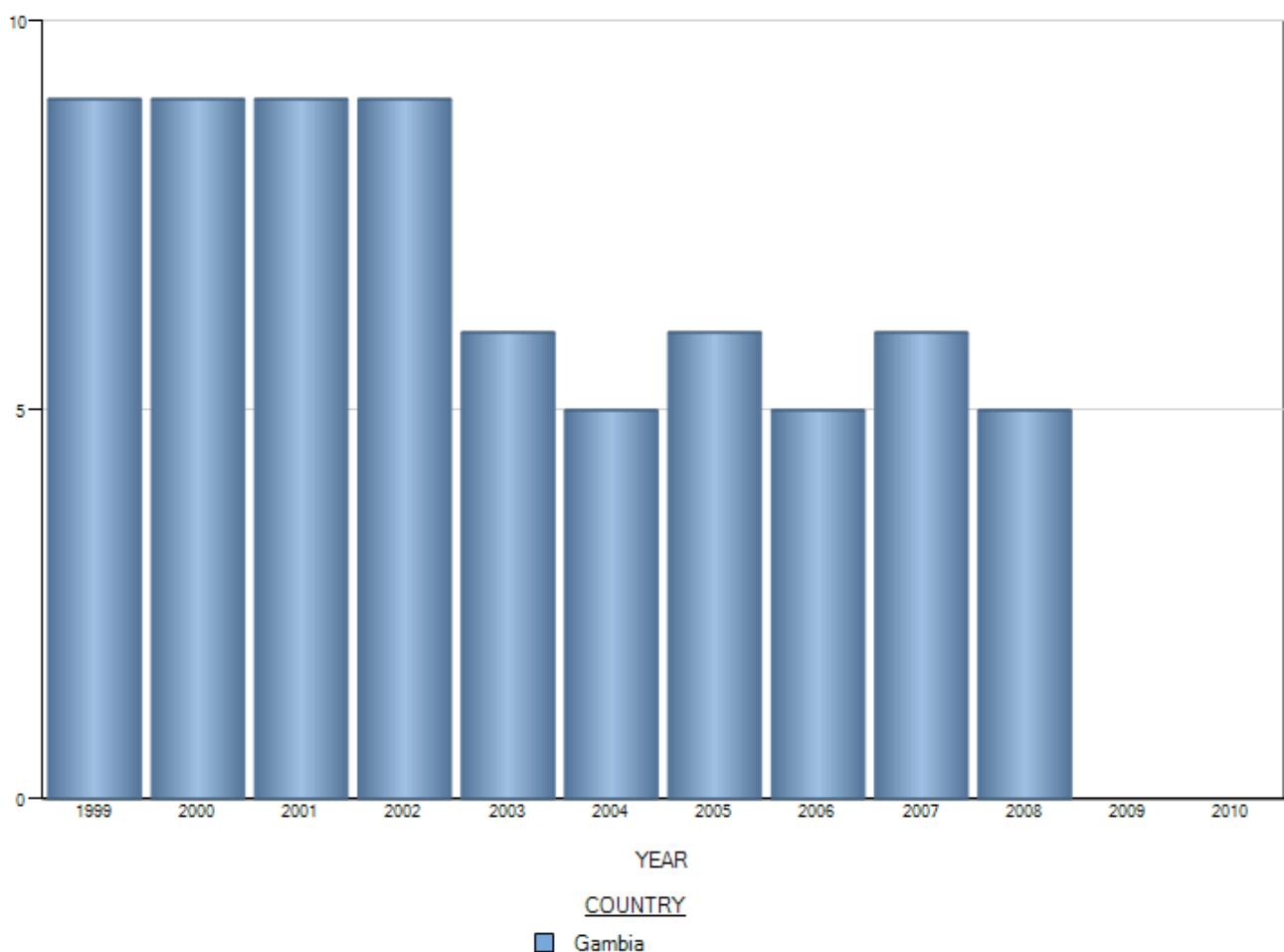
23. It is important to notice that, accordingly to the latest Country Status Report for Education in the Gambia, GER in pre-primary education has increased to primary education increased considerably from 22% in 2008 to 36.4% in 2010. ECD is estimated to have expanded at 9% on average per year since 2000. A variety of interventions including parental education, teacher training and classroom construction as well as and school feeding may have contributed to the increase in enrolments and retention. Over the period since 2007, 150 new classrooms annually have been built and a Food for Education program has also been established by World Food Program (WFP). Also, attempts have been made to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the past few years and one of the strategies used is to promote increased access to teacher training courses.

24. Data obtained from Gambia College shows that the number of teacher trainees at Gambia College has increased resulting in 1,564 Primary Teacher Certificate (PTC) teachers and 1,076 Higher Teaching Certificate (HTC) teachers enrolled in 2010, about double since 2007. A PTC extension program is being offered parallel to the pre-service teacher training program ongoing on campus. This program targets unqualified teachers who undertake the program through a mixed mode of face-to-face and distance learning. To better understand the crucial role of primary teachers in the process of school readiness it is important to note that, thanks to FTI funds, the Gambia College introduced a module on pre-primary education which is being integrated into teachers training programming. Another indicator which shows improvements in quality of education is the percentage of repeaters in the country which have been consistently decreasing since 1999, as Graph 2 from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics shows.

¹⁸UNESCO Global Monitoring Report 2011 (NER/GER), UNICEF Child Info (NAR)

Fig 3: Percentage of repeaters in primary. All grades.

Total 



Source, UNESCO Institute of Education, <http://stats UIS.unesco.org/unesco>

25. However, despite these results, concerns still remain in relation to the quality of teacher training, given the relatively low level of academic background (teachers' content knowledge) of incoming teacher trainees, inadequate pedagogical skills, inadequate teaching and learning aids in the classroom, inadequate support for schools from parents and the community, and inadequate curricular support, especially at the pre- primary and primary levels (Education Sector Strategic Plan, 2008 – 2015 (MoBSE 2006)). In this regard, support is provided by several partners including the Japanese Government through the Japanese Development Fund which provides the support for the development of a comprehensive National ECD curriculum focusing more on play and, as already mentioned, the Fast Track Initiative which support ECD teacher's course in the Gambia College.

26. All interventions to improve the education system in the Gambia are inscribed into the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper which, in line with the MDG commitments, focuses on:

- Attaining gender equity in primary and secondary enrolment
- Enhanced financing of education sector programs
- Enhancement of the quality and efficiency of teachers
- Provision of quality basic education for all by 2015
- Reduction of illiteracy rates by about 50%

27. The newly released Country Status Report mentions several policies to improve student learning achievements including the use of child centered teaching approach and the enrolment of children at the preschool level. The latter is considered to have very high impact and high cost effectiveness on the improvement of student learning achievements in lower basic education.

c) Situation of young children (0-8) in the Gambia

28. In order to better understand the impact of government investment in ECD services in the Gambia, it is important to consider basic early childhood indicators and compare it to the regional average. An integrated approach to the young child care and development is a basic requirement for any school readiness initiative in any given context. The following table provides a brief overview of health and wash related indicators for the Gambia:

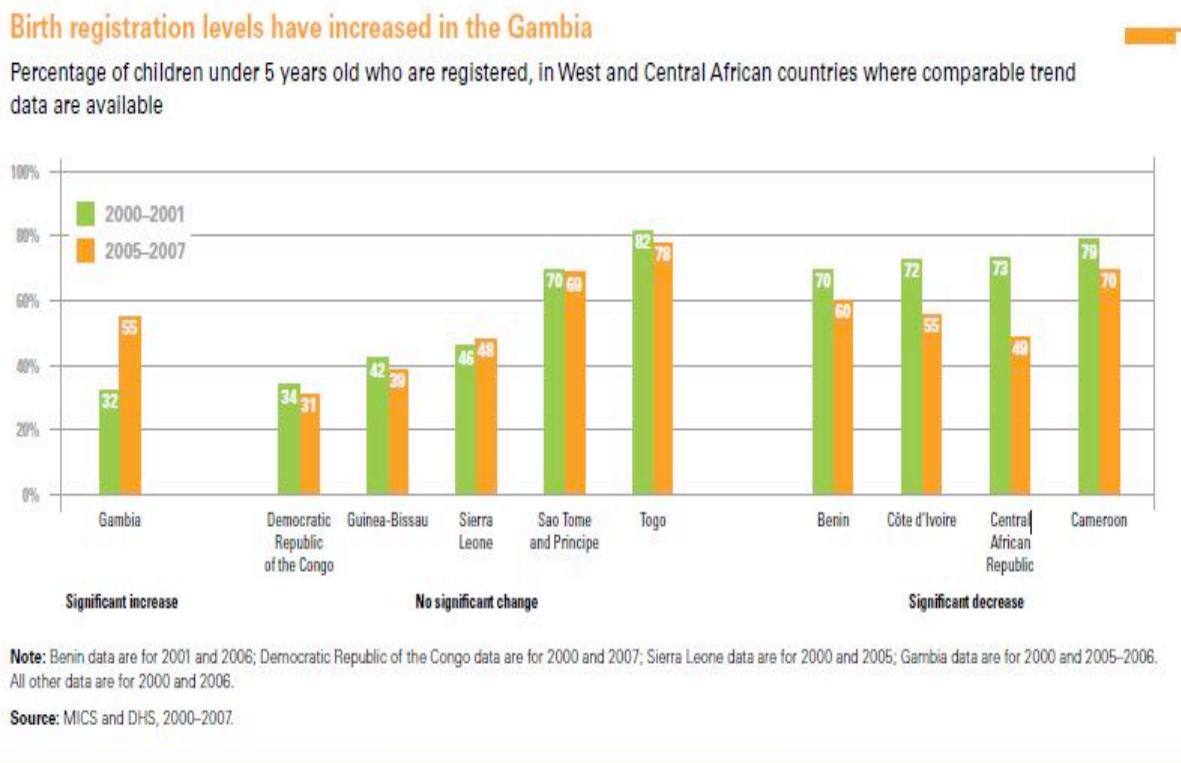
Table 2: Basic Indicators for the Young Child

Indicator	The Gambia	Sub Saharan Africa
Infant Mortality Rate	80‰	89‰
Child Malnutrition	16%	27%
Access to improved sources of water	86%	58%

World Bank, the Gambia at a Glance, Country Profile

29. Even though child health and nutrition indicators still require major attention from the policy makers it is important to notice the positive trend of The Gambia compared to the rest of the Region. Furthermore, important progresses have been made in The Gambia to enhance birth registration and the country is referred to as a unique example compared to other countries in the region. (See graph 1).

Fig 4: Birth Registration in The Gambia



Progresses for Children: A report card on Child Protection, UNICEF, 2009.

30. It is widely recognized that in order to provide quality care to the young children, an integrated approach which takes into account health, nutrition, water and sanitation as well as protection needs for the age group 0-6 is required. In the Gambia, children under 8 constitute 25% of the population and children under 3 represent 8% of it (2003 Gambia National Census).

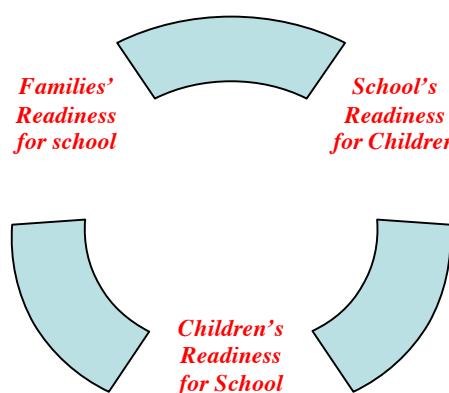
31. Furthermore, the population of young children in the Gambia is growing faster than services can be provided for them. Challenges such as changing work patterns for parents, the impact of illnesses and increasing urbanization and modernization have placed heavy burdens on families, especially those who still shoulder the economic responsibility of the extended family. This has impacted upon the ability of families to provide children with the same amount of care and attention.

32. Overall, in spite of remaining significant problems, the global policy environment is rather positive and offers enabling conditions for the promotion of an effective ECD programming which facilitate a smooth integration of young children in the school system.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK SCHOOL READINESS AND TRANSITION SCHOOL READINESS AND TRANSITION

33. The concept of school readiness, as noted by Britto & Kohen (2006) in the review of international school readiness assessments, is broadly defined along these three dimensions.

- Children's readiness for school, which is focused on children's learning and overall developmental progress;
- Schools' readiness for children, which is focused on school-level environment and practices that foster and support a smooth transition of children into primary school to promote the learning of all children;
- Families' readiness for school, which is focused on parental and caregiver attitudes and involvement in their children's early learning and development and transition to school.



34. This concept of school readiness is closely linked to the basic assumption that the child cannot be the primary actor of the smooth transition from home to primary school. Of course, the child's readiness for school forms the basis for the assessment; however, the attitudes and beliefs of the parents and of the community should support the child in this transitional process. Moreover, the school's readiness for the child is also a decisive factor. Therefore, in order to analyze the factors potentially favorable to a smooth transition from home to school, it is not enough to assess the child's readiness for school alone, it is also necessary to assess to what extent the school and the ECD program promote the potential adaptation of the child to the primary school level. Also important will be to examine the role of the family and the community with regard to this transitional process, considering that the family and the community can be either an obstacle or, a positive vector of this transition.

d) Children's Readiness

35. Concerning the child's readiness, it is recognized that some basic skills and competences in diverse domains are positive predictors of a good adaptation to the primary environment. In all educational systems, there should be minimum standards that the children should reach before entering the first grade of school. In a holistic perspective – which is what the Gambia is promoting – child readiness includes multiple aspects of development, not only verbal and cognitive competences, but also social abilities, motivational and affective dispositions, as well as health and nutritional status. The cognitive dimensions include language competences and logical abilities: so for example children, who cannot understand or follow directions because of language or logical insufficiencies, are more likely to fail at school than the children who can understand the teacher's request and give the correct

answer.

36. Cognitive readiness understood in a broad sense also includes attention and persistence. A child who is able to persist at a task, who has impulse control and is able to sit still in the classroom long enough to follow directions and explanations of the teacher, is more likely to learn and succeed at school. Concerning social skills or social adaptation, a child who cannot engage with peers because he is aggressive and hits other children, or has poor ability to control his impulses is likely to have problems throughout his schooling, and is more likely to fail at school and drop out.

37. So, child readiness for school is defined as the child's behaviors, competence, skills, and emotional and motivational dispositions that enhance his/her potential to profit from formal or structured schooling, and which predict later school performance and global adaptation to social life. It includes health/nutrition status because the cognitive ability is dependent on the physical wellbeing of the child for it is difficult to be attentive in formal learning situations when a child is hungry, ill or in danger of physical and other forms of violence.

e) School Readiness

38. School's readiness for children can be defined as the opportunities offered to all children to learn and develop the necessary skills and abilities by the time they are ready to enter school. The children will start primary school with the highest chances of success, only if schools provide relevant learning opportunities for them. This implies an encouraging atmosphere in the classrooms that fosters children's attention and participation. It also implies a climate in which positive answers are encouraged and errors positively accepted and corrected. The standards encompassed by the Child Friendly School Model (CFS) can be used as a reference to assess the readiness of school¹⁹. Physical and financial accessibility of preprimary opportunities is of course an important aspect of the school readiness concept.

f) Families' Readiness

39. Families' readiness for school refers to the parental and community attitudes, behaviors, expectations, and involvement in their children's early learning and development and transition to school. It is regularly considered that the most important factor in a child's healthy development is to have at least one strong relationship (attachment) with a caring adult who values the well-being of the child. Lack of a consistent caregiver can create additional risks for children and appropriate care during the early years is a key feature for an optimal development of the child. Appropriate care is much more than keeping the child safe and free from harm, nurturing parents-child interactions influence greatly the ways in which the child develops. Children should have appropriate supports in terms of the following:

- Protection (an environment that is safe from physical and emotional harm);
- Good health (safe water, hygiene);
- Appropriate nutrition (including exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months) ;
- Stimulation (opportunities to explore the world, express curiosity, engage in problem solving) ;
- Language development (listening and responding) ;
- And, the most important aspect, affection and a stable attachment to one or several caring adult(s) which foster the development of a positive self-image.

¹⁹<http://www.unicef.org/cfs/>

40. When a family is under economic or social stress, children are likely to receive inadequate care. When there are multiple constraints on adults (single parenting, lack of food security, few resources and so forth), it is more difficult for the caregiver to provide appropriate care. So, while the ultimate goal of parenting programs is to enhance children's wellbeing, this cannot be done without taking into consideration the needs of parents and the family, within the context of the society as a whole. Helping caregivers to respond positively to children's needs may require ensuring that parents also have appropriate supports. Social protection measures in a context of poverty reduction could contribute to empower parents for better care to their children.

Traditional Beliefs can be a barrier to ECD

Traditional beliefs on the care and development of young children in The Gambia used to be a major challenge in promoting holistic development of children.

For example before the introduction of the Baby Friendly Community Initiative – a community based breastfeeding initiative; there was the belief that colostrum (the first milk) is bad for the infant. This meant that breastfeeding did not begin immediately following birth in some cases. This delay could cause a mother difficulty to breastfeed properly and can result in children not receiving the nutrition which breastfeeding provides.

Another important belief that some mothers held was that their infants are not capable of seeing and hearing at birth. This could prevent mothers from interacting with their infants and in some instances that was the case. Related to this was the mother's lack of awareness of her own capacity to make a difference in the child's development. Another example is the issue of food taboos where certain foods are considered not good for the child when in fact nutrients in these foods are essential to the child's growth and development. (e.g bananas are not good for the infant because it makes them "sluggish".)

41. Initiatives such as the Baby Friendly Community and a broad parenting education program have been identified by the Gambian authorities as important strategies to improve family practices and thus, family readiness. In particular, with the introduction of the Baby Friendly Community Initiative and the ECD Parental Education Program in 2004 the above mentioned perceptions have changed positively. Exclusive breastfeeding rates have increased to about 41% (MICS 111 2005/2006) from 24% when the BFC initiative started in 2003/4. The Parental Education Evaluation conducted by UNICEF in 2009 also revealed that 95 percent of parents and caregivers gave complementary feeding to their children and 93 percent of parents and caregivers had very friendly and supportive interactions with their children. Also important to note is that 76 % of the communities have registered their children's birth. Additionally the report indicated that most of the communities demonstrated knowledge and skills in making culturally relevant toys and encouraged their children to play with these toys, they also demonstrated knowledge on the benefits of these toys for their children. Thus the challenges presented earlier are starting to be addressed carefully and successfully by these mechanisms leading to the holistic development of children and their readiness to school.

Source: The Baby friendly Community Initiative: Expanded vision for Integrated Early childhood Development in The Gambia by Isatou Semega Janneh 2002.

3. PROMOTION OF ECD, SCHOOL READINESS AND TRANSITION IN THE GAMBIA: THE POLICY ENVIRONMENT AND NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

a) National Policy Environment

42. Gambia's Vision 2020 and the Gambia Poverty Reduction Strategy Program (PRSP) present government's national development agenda which aims to develop human capital of the country by reducing poverty. It is recognized that effective human capital development has to start with children. In this regard, the Gambia government has produced policies and other relevant documents to guide this development process. The education sector developed the 2004-2015 Education Sector Policy and in this policy, The Gambia has demonstrated its high commitment to developing its human resource base with priority given to free basic education for all. Hence, using the guiding principles that are in conformity with the national development agenda as articulated in Vision 2020, access to ECD centers and literacy programs is meant to be enhanced with specific emphasis on under-served regions, girls and other disadvantaged groups of the population.

43. A review of the Education Policy resulted in the production of a Medium Term Plan (MTP 2008-2011) which refocused ECD as a priority area within the expanded vision of Basic Education. An indicative framework of both recurrent and capital costs and a financial framework have been developed to guide the implementation of the MTP with a focus on the annexation strategy of ECD centers to lower basic schools (Education Policy 2004-2015).

44. Under the MTP, the strategy for providing ECD service was based on two premises, one of which was the participation of the private sector in the provision of such services in the urban and peri-urban areas, while the other was the attachment of ECD centers to existing Lower Basic Schools in the rural communities by government. However, Government's participation in ECD in the urban areas is relegated largely to a regulatory role to ensure compliance in terms of the physical environment, learning materials and other requirements of the centers. This is because the private sector has extensive involvement in the provision of ECD education in the urban area. In this regard government has developed a regulatory framework for the establishment and operation of ECD centers nationwide in order to standardize the provision of ECD services and ensure quality service delivery. The ECD unit under the MoBSE has overall responsibility to implement and monitor this regulatory framework and has the mandate to approve the establishment of new ECD centers.

45. Both types of centers (annexed and private ECDs) are expected to focus on the holistic approach to ECD, which requires integration of other social services such as nutrition, health care, water and sanitation, protection and early stimulation for learning. This cross-sectoriality of ECD made it necessary to create a Multi-Sectorial Working Group (MSWG), drawing from all the sectors involved, to facilitate a more effective coordination of ECD services country-wide. For the purpose of harmonization of services for effective provision of ECD, the Multi sectorial Working Group in collaboration with donors and civil society embarked on the development of an ECD Policy framework since in 2002. This policy emphasizes the holistic development of young children on the basis of the school readiness practice. However, this draft policy has not yet been enacted by the government. Despite this constraint there are ongoing efforts to promote the inter-sectoriality of the ECD approach especially at the community level. In its National Education Policy for 2004-2015 the Government of Gambia announced a plan to create ECD centres for 3-6-years old on the premises of primary schools in the most disadvantaged areas. The plan aims to optimize the existing school infrastructure and workforce for early childhood. This policy is not only focused on preparing children for formal schooling but focused on child development.

46. Regarding the perspective of integrating one year of pre-primary education in the basic education system, The Gambia has examined the possibility of lowering the entry age into primary school to 6 years, making universal 6-year-olds' access to education. But according to projections it would be too costly for the Government to handle without external support then the idea was dropped

because of the problem of sustainability. Currently, child survival issues are planned to be addressed through Health and Nutrition Policies and development issues through the Education Policy, both independent from each other. Nonetheless, there is the understanding that these approaches are to be integrated at the implementation level in the rural communities. The ECD policy framework is meant to complement the overall sectorial and national development plans thus building on existing structures and policies.

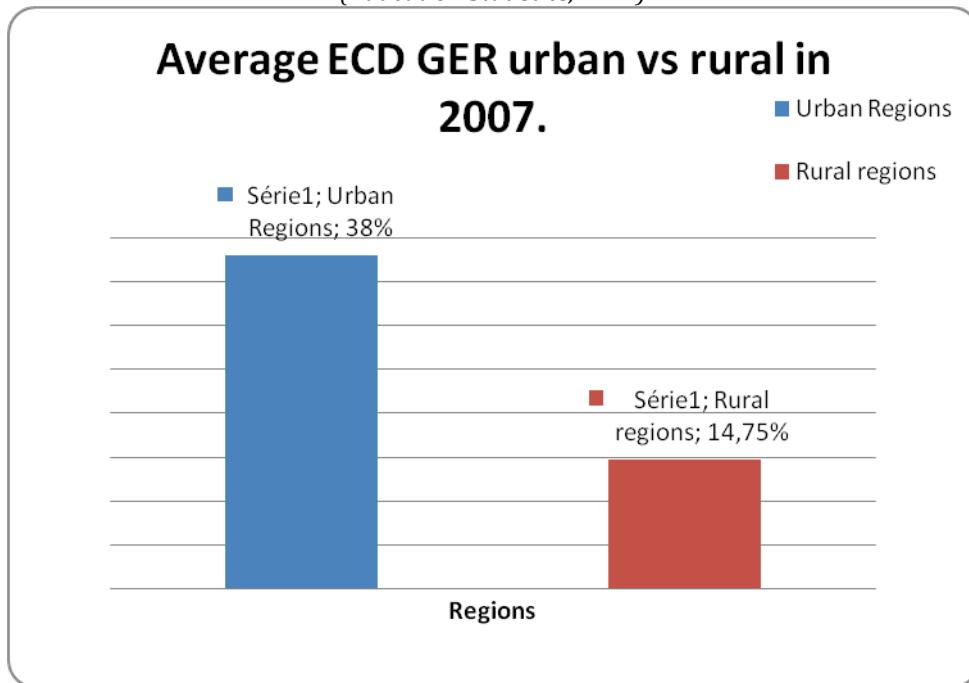
47. The ECD Policy framework was budgeted and the costing was based on estimates of population figures up to the year 2015 and depending on an agreed coverage. It was based on assumptions relating to the level of funding that can be mobilized from the existing Education budget and the other sectors such as Health, Department of Community Development, the National Nutrition Agency(NANA) and Water Resources which are indicated as percentage of the GDP of the country. Also included was the possible coverage for the different age cohorts. Quality issues were partly addressed by setting up different scenarios of pupil/teacher ratio with a given level of coverage (Alain Mingat, 2007).

48. Five costing scenarios were developed by the MSWG and the scenario that was recommended to the government provided an ECD service coverage by the year 2015 of 32 % of the population of children under 0-3 years (52,800 children) and 3-6 years 35% (67200 children) of which 43,680 are from the community-based support systems. This gives a total cost requirement of \$48.3 million, and currently total resources that can be mobilized from the various existing budgets of the different sectors, based on the assumptions of the model used, (e.g. that 0.5% of the recurrent budget of the education sector would go into supporting ECD) is \$48 million. This, therefore gives a funding gap of only 0.3 million dollars which represents a fairly easy funding for the government and development partners to mobilize..

b) Pre-Primary Offer in the Gambia and Perspectives for Scaling Up

49. Historically in the Gambia, preprimary education has been almost completely provided by the private sector and it has been concentrated in urban areas. In urban settlements, 42% of children attend ECD centers compared to 14% in rural areas. Since ECD is largely provided by the private sector, affordability becomes an issue and poses a major constraint for poorer households living in urban areas, with a special regard for the capital Banjul. The low access to preprimary facilities is usually more pronounced in the rural areas, where poverty is more acute and where the tradition of leaving children in the care of siblings or grandparents, or having children accompanying their mothers to the farms or other work places, still remain the dominant practice for early childhood care.(MoBSE 2006).

Fig 5: Average ECD GER by Urban and Rural' 2006/07
(*Education Statistics, 2006*)



Data in table 2 highlights the fact that 42.7% of children attending Primary school with ECD experience in the urban areas and only 9.3% of children from the poor rural regions are attending primary school with ECD experience in 2007²⁰.

Table 3: Pre-primary Gross Enrolment Rate and % of children with preprimary experience in 2007

Regions	Preprimary GER 2007 (average)	2007 % of children attending primary with preprimary experience
Two Urban and semi-urban regions	38%	42.7%
Four rural regions combined	14.75 %	9.3%

50. As anticipated, in the framework of national education strategy, the Gambia authorities, with the support of its partners, initiated two main programs using the pre-primary facilities as an entry point to provide basic services for the young children. At the national level, the Ministry of Education initiated the **annexation of ECD centers to 472 primary schools** to promote the transition from pre-primary to primary and to promote health and access to water and sanitation as well as protection services to young vulnerable children in rural communities. This is to ensure the availability of affordable ECD services to all children. The annexed centers accordingly have trained Primary School Teachers as the facilitators using the play oriented curriculum developed, and the ECD unit as the coordinating unit of all these centers. To date 472 centers have been attached to lower basic

²⁰ Country Status Report

schools in the impoverished rural communities providing some basic ECD services including nutrition, health care, water and sanitation, protection and early stimulation for learning in preparing children for school.

About the policy dialogue with the stakeholder, UNESCO had helped to facilitate the discussion between parents and policy makers about the language of instruction. Parents wished the ECD centers to use English, the medium of instruction in schools, but the Government advocated the use of local mother-tongue languages, believing this to be pedagogically more effective. The latter position was adopted and today English is not used as a medium of instruction but taught as a subject from grade one in primary school

51. As usual, when early childhood closely precedes formal education, there is a danger of “academization” or pre-primary education becoming early primary education. In the Gambia, the measures put in place to prevent this are highlighted in the teacher training curriculum as well as in the monitoring aspects. A pilot programme within the private system served as a benchmark for more professional early childhood teacher training and helps developing a qualification mechanism for early childhood teachers. The quality monitoring system that is in place for primary education is used to monitor ECD centers. The communities, parents as well as specialized monitors are trained to make a clear distinction between early childhood and primary education, and they are mobilized at the grassroots and system levels to ensure that early childhood does not become early primary education. Another initiative which aims at improving access to preprimary opportunities for most vulnerable children is **the creation of ECD model centers**.

ECD Model and Support Centre concept



UNICEF Banjul introduced the concept of **ECD Model and Support Centre** as an innovation in one of its intervention regions of Upper River Region (URR) where access and retention in Basic Education is a real challenge.

Recognizing the fact that children's development has to be holistic, the aim of the ECD model and support center strategy was to demonstrate the integrated approach to ECD to ensure smooth transition of children aged 3-6 years from home to school emphasizing on important developmental outcomes for children such as physical wellbeing; socially competence; emotional security; mentally alert and ready to learn.

The strategy was launched in 2007 covering 10 schools and 15 support centers. Some of the criteria used in the selection of the ECD model centers included low access to ECD education in the most deprived rural regions, inadequate availability of resources for schools and limited provision of qualified teachers. Thus based on these criteria 10 ECD model centers and 15 support centers were selected. The program was designed such that the 10 model centers were to receive all the necessary support including provision of adequate materials, play things, supportive play environment and trained facilitators, while the 15 support centers were to be supervised by the facilitators of the 10 model centers. The model centers were, therefore, centrally located to be easily reached by the teachers and facilitators from the support centers 25 school heads, regional education staff in URR and the

communities that were to benefit from the program were orientated on school readiness.

Then, 25 teachers and facilitators were identified to operate the model and support centers (10 model centers and 15 support centers) and they were trained on the concept of school readiness with particular emphasis on getting schools ready for children and getting children ready for school. This training also covered some aspects of the parental support needed for the model center strategy including parental education on child welfare in the home. The 25 teachers and facilitators were selected based on their Primary Teachers Certificate (PTC) qualification.

To support parental involvement in getting children ready for school, the registration of children's birth was promoted and parents supported in monitoring their children's immunization, health and nutrition status and were provided with some essential services. The support was in the form of provision of services to monitor the growth of children, provision of micronutrient supplementation (Vitamin A), de-worming of children, education on improved food hygiene practices, the use of iodized salts, provision of meals with all food groupings and first aid services. Although a comprehensive M&E was not planned in the beginning of the model center initiative design, regular monitoring visits were organized during its operation. These visits provided the opportunity to give additional pedagogical support to the ECD Centre facilitators and also to evaluate the entire operation of the centers. From the onset, the parameters for the strategy and the steps to roll it out were clearly defined. Important aspects included the availability of a play oriented curriculum that aims to promote personal, social and physical development; knowledge and mathematical development; literacy and language development and creativity. Also included in the criteria were the availability of conducive learning environment including child-sized furniture; mats, adequate and safe indoor and outdoor materials, and adequate lighting and ventilation of the premises. There must also be adequate protection; physical environment safety, positive behavior correction, monitoring of children's birth registration, safe water and sanitation (adequate toilets 1: 25 children) proper waste disposal, and hygiene education including hand washing.

The *model centers* were to be fully equipped with trained ECD facilitators, required child-sized furniture, adequate play materials, effective community involvement in growth monitoring, immunizations; and provision of adequate water and sanitation facilities. The *support centers* on the other hand are not supposed to have all the necessary facilities at the outset but progressively getting these facilities with support from the model centers in terms of coaching and demonstrations by the facilitators and head teachers of these schools. The facilitators of the *support centers* receive some training and orientation on the concept of school readiness and what necessary amenities will have to be mobilized to enhance holistic development of children to be ready for school. Such support from the *model centers* is provided periodically for the *support centers* as they move gradually towards the ideals of a model center.

52. As can be seen here the criteria mentioned above captured all the dimensions of school readiness. The concept of school readiness, therefore, was much understood even where it can be argued that there were considerable gaps in terms of technical capacity in rolling out the strategy. The challenges of providing trained ECD facilitators in a sustainable manner, the provision of adequate supplies, as well as providing adequate sanitation facilities were enormous. These notwithstanding progress in terms of enrolment in primary school with ECD experience is being made as noted in table number 3 on proportion of children with ECD experience attending primary school.

53. Despite the data limitations on school readiness Annex 1 shows basic information obtained through focus group discussions, individual interviews and existing documents, attesting to

some basic understandings of the school readiness concept among stakeholders. This is clearly demonstrated by the data in annex 1 on the participation of different stakeholders in the school readiness program. Some of the data in the annex shows support by the communities to ECD facilitators through the payment of their salaries and by providing them with housing in order to support child readiness. The integration of the ECD curriculum into the main teacher training curriculum so as to provide Gambian schools with polyvalent teachers, equipped with both ECD and primary education skills will also contribute to enhance the creation of a smooth transition from ECD to the Primary Education.

c) Other opportunities for the expansion of ECD in the Gambia

54. The availability of a **Japanese Social Development Fund grant of 1.4 million** dollars through the World Bank to expand and implement community based ECD programs is yet another significant opportunity to extend ECD services to the rural regions through the development of a comprehensive appropriate curriculum for ECD and strengthening of the Parental Education Program with a view to support the ECD school readiness initiative. Similar commitment has been made in the **EFA/FTI proposal** as part of the annexation program to strengthen ECD especially in the marginalized poor rural communities.

55. Many **side initiatives** contributed to the expansion of an inter-sectorial approach to Early Childhood Development in the Gambia, which includes school readiness. In addition to the Baby Friendly Community Initiative, it is important to recall that the Gambia authorities and civil society promoted: i) the implementation of a national policy against sexual harassment in schools, ii) a policy for separate toilet facilities in schools, iii) the adoption of alternative child discipline (in lieu of physical and other punishments), iv) parental education programs through Mothers' clubs.

4. KEY RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

56. As indicated earlier, the study found that the government has actually recognized the importance of ECD as encapsulated in the Education Policy and Strategic Plan 2004-2015 in not only making a policy pronouncement of annexing ECD centers to existing Lower Basic Schools but in actually implementing the policy in most of the rural schools. The introduction of the annexation initiative is believed to have helped improving transition to school as well as improving attendance and retention rates. Already at the national level the net attendance rate is over 85% and completion rate is at 70%²¹.

57. The UNICEF supported ECD model center strategy was also informed by this policy pronouncement to strengthen the Education sector's capacity to improve school readiness and transition. There is evidence that 10 such model centers and 15 support centers are in operation in the Upper River region one of the most remote regions of the country. It is important to note that this initiative together with the annexation program are still in infancy and would only have their full impact measure over time through a more structured longitudinal study. Preliminary results on the positive impact of the ECD model center strategy and the annexation program were perhaps the most far reaching finding of the study. In terms of the process important considerations were made in rolling out the initiative. An initial dialogue on the concept of school readiness was held between UNICEF and the MoBSE, ECD Unit.

a) The Play Oriented Curriculum

58. The development and availability of a play oriented curriculum with the objective to promote personal, social and physical development; knowledge and mathematical development; literacy and language development and creativity was undertaken. The particular curriculum framework covered 16 themes including six identified learning areas namely literacy and communication, knowledge and understanding, numeracy, personal and social, creative and physical development (Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, 2008). It was also designed in such a way that it covered all six learning areas where specific targets were developed for the learners. Activities for these areas were developed to reflect a child friendly curriculum. Orientation training for the 25 facilitators (10 from the model centres and 15 from the support centres) and the 25 school heads of the schools selected was conducted on this new ECD curriculum to familiarize them with its content.

59. To implement this curriculum, an ECD certificate program for ECD facilitators has been started with support from EFA/FTI at the Gambia College and so far over 100 facilitators have been certified as qualified to work in the ECD Centers. And, the program enrolls 276 students in the current academic year. Also, a module on ECD was developed from a previous early childhood development training course documents funded by UNICEF (Sowe et al.) for the Primary Teacher Certificate (PTC) (for grades 1-6 teachers) program at the Gambia College in order to train polyvalent teachers who can also serve as facilitators at the model ECD Centers. Developmental learning opportunities are created through the new ECD curriculum framework and also through the separate module on ECD for the Primary teacher training curriculum. A review of the draft Curriculum Framework for ECD in the Gambia and the existing curriculum for Grade one shows strong links in the integrated studies component within topics such as my family and myself (Grade 1 curriculum) to themes such as all about me, family life and culture (the draft ECD curriculum framework). Discontinuity however exists within the core subjects of English and math in the areas of pedagogy and developmentally appropriate activities.

²¹ EMIS 2009

60. Child friendly teaching methods recommended in the ECD curriculum framework such as “story-telling, picture talk and oral language through play, games, question and answer” would be replaced with more teacher-directed methods such as “Whole class repetition, Individual response, Pair work-short dialogue, Choral recitation, Group, individual recitation” (Grade 1 Curriculum). The ECD curriculum framework in numeracy aligns closely with the stages of mathematical growth, documented in young children, however the curriculum in Grade one at times relies upon mathematical skills, such as “Subtract two digit numbers up to 50” and “Find the missing addend in a simple mathematical statement”, that may be too advanced during the nursery to school transition year.

b) Initial impact in terms of enrolment, repetition and drop outs:

While it may be too early to attribute any significant positive changes to enrolment, repetition and dropout rates due to the ECD school readiness and transition program, there are emerging trends showing progress already in these areas. See table below.

Table 4: Pre-primary Enrolment trend from 2001 to 2009 (Absolute Numbers)

	Year						Annual Average Growth rate 2000-2009
	2000/01	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	
Pre-primary including Private	29,910	n/a	48173	44521	35486	62447	9%
Lower Basic	181835	207474	218638	220931	235826	230445	3%

61. Pre-primary enrolments have increased on average by 9% since 2001 and Primary (Lower Basic Education) by 3% on average. These increases are partly due to the annexation initiative and the launching of the ECD model center initiative in one impoverished rural region. Also to note is the fact that the annexation of ECD centers to lower basic schools in the rural areas resulted in providing services for 105,570 children who would have otherwise missed the opportunity of an ECD experience in school. (See table 6 below).

Table 5: Number of Lower Basic Schools (LBS) that have ECD centers attached to them

Educational Region	ECD centers attached to LBS	Total ECD Centers
1 Banjul & Kaninfing	96	462
2 Western Region	60	300
3 North Bank Region	62	142
4 Lower River Region	38	74
5 Central River Region	104	142
6 Upper River region	112	124

Total	472	1,244
(Source: EMIS. Basic and Secondary Education)		

62. As can be seen in table5, in the urban areas (Banjul and Kanifing) and semi urban region of the West Coast the ECD centers (government ECDs) attached (annexed) constitute only 33% of the total of 472 centers that were annexed. This figure contrasts with the 4 rural regions (i.e. regions 3, 4, 5, & 6) combined where 67% of the entire annexed centers are found. Following the annexation of ECD Centers, the ECD enrolment in region 6 in particular showed a sharp increase with level 1 children with ECD experience constituting 77% of the total enrolment compared to only 5% of level three, thereby implying a marked increase in ECD activity and demonstrating a positive trend towards provision of ECD experience to all Gambian children.

63. Data obtained for region 6 also suggests a reduction of absence of pupils from school in grade 1 by 12.2% for the period between May 2009 and April 2010, while for the same time period no reduction in absence of pupils in grade 1 was observed for the neighboring region 5 where the initiative has not yet been launched. The data is anecdotal and comprehensive data on attendance for previous years was not available. This trend can only be fully established if comprehensive data on attendance is available without interruption for a longer period of time through a longitudinal study.

64. Since the commencement of the annexation program and the launching of the ECD school readiness initiative (model center) in URR, the situation looks different as 49.65 % children in grade 1 in Primary schools in the rural regions have had some ECD experience in 2009. In URR in particular where the ECD model center initiative was launched in 2007 the transition rates into grade one with ECD experience have jumped from mere 0.8% to 59.8%²² . Nationally, the increase is nearly doubled from 9.7% in 2007 to 18.0% in 2009.

²² Country Status Report 2009

5. BOOSTING QUALITY TRANSITION IN THE GAMBIA: CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

a) Main challenges identified:

65. Inadequate numbers of qualified facilitators to work with the children at the centers, and inadequate space for children. One major challenge here was that the majority of the students came to the Gambia College for training with low academic qualifications. For example, for both the graduating class and the beginning class of the ECD program at Gambia College in 2010, less than 10% hold 3 West African School Certificate Examination (WASCE) passes, which is the minimum requirement for employment by the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education. Applicants to the College with the 3 WASCE qualifications would rather opt for the Primary Teaching Certificate (PTC) program, graduates of which have a higher starting salary.

66. A second major challenge is that because not all children 0-6 years receive ECD experiences prior to entering grade 1, the primary schools receive children coming from different levels of ECD, as well as children coming directly from the home with no formal ECD experience. This situation creates multi-grade dynamics in the class which requires special skills that the teachers do not have, and makes it difficult for them to adequately support the children. This situation is improving over the years as can be seen in table 5 which shows an increase of children with ECD experience.

67. The third challenge is that the ECD Centers themselves cater for different levels of ECD (levels 1-4) in the same class room, creating a multi-grade situation which the ECD facilitator is not able to manage. As a result, the children may not receive the appropriate support, nurturing and guidance necessary for their development. This situation is partly due to the fact that schools that do not have adequate space in grade 1 are not able to receive all the would be incoming children from the ECD centers. Consequently children may stay longer (up to level 4) in the ECD Centers before they can transit to grade 1.

68. Furthermore, major challenges remain in availability of comprehensive data including that on attendance for facilitators and children in the ECD setting and also in the lower grades of LBS, as well as data on dropout rates in the ECD centers and LBS by school and region. Availability of such data will be useful in further establishing the link between ECD experience and retention at the lower grades of LBS.

b) Opportunities:

69. Parents are involved in toy making, and the community supports the ECD facilitators financially. The Mothers clubs have been the “stars” in the Girl Friendly School Initiative (GFSI) initiative (Mitchell and Sowe, 2003). Their efforts were outstanding in their advocacy role especially in convincing other parents to send their girls to school and their entrepreneurial skills and activities which helped to provide uniforms, fees for lunch and other support to children whose parents could not afford it. The impetus created by these clubs will certainly enhance the success of the school readiness initiative because all of their activities are relevant to school readiness. In fact, this group of parents is proving to be equally effective in the roll out of the School Readiness Initiative through the provision of toys, uniforms and their participation in school gardening and other activities in the

school and community. Their advocacy experience and skills will be an asset in popularizing ECD provision.

70. Free meals are provided through the school nutrition programs, and at least 7433 children in ECD programs annexed to government funded LBS have access to one meal a day through WFP-Gambia Government country program, although its sustainability is an issue (WFP Strategic Plan 2007-2011). The community could help to supplement this program by cultivating vegetable gardens and providing firewood for cooking. The produce from the garden could supplement the meals, and this with the firewood would help to minimize the Gambia-WFP contribution.

Recommendations

POLICY and INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL:

- Government should enact the ECD draft policy as soon as possible (in the next National Assembly sitting) to allow the effective functioning of the inter-sectorial approach to the holistic development of children. For this purpose the MSWG should engage the National Assembly Education Committee to help speed up the enactment process.
- In order to close the funding gap of US\$0.3 million as per the costing analysis of the ECD policy, Ministry of Finance should continue to mobilize funds to be allocated directly into ECD rather than through the budgets of the line Ministries of Health & Social Welfare, Education and National Nutrition Agency.
- The staff of the ECD Unit at the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education should be accorded more training on school readiness to help them effectively support the implementation of the overall ECD program.
- The ECD Unit of the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education should ensure that the new ECD curriculum framework replaces all other existing curricular for ECD, and that it is implemented in all ECD centers, government and private.

TECHNICAL LEVEL

- The University of The Gambia should launch a diploma program in ECD to cater for the capacity development of trainers of ECD facilitators.
- An additional module should be added to the PTC curriculum that would overlap 3rd/4th level ECD material with grade 1 material to further foster the smooth transition of children from the ECD setting into grade 1 in the Primary school setting.
- The current MSWG guidelines should further include the minimum required prior academic and professional qualifications of potential candidates to the ECD training program.
- Commission a longitudinal study on the first and second cohorts of children in the ECD model centers to track progress and impact of the initiative on transition to inform future interventions on school readiness

COMMUNITY BASED LEVEL

- Expand the Parental Education Program at the national level to provide parents and caregivers with the skills necessary to participate fully in preparing their children for school
- Explore Communication for Development strategies at the community level to support and improve caregivers practices for the care and development of the young child.

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