

**ICMEC (International Centre for the Study of the Mixed Economy of Childcare)  
Seminar  
Tuesday 9 November 2 - 5pm**

## **ECEC in Asia and the Pacific**

### **Introduction:**

A defining feature of early childhood care and education (ECEC) in the Asia and Pacific region is the expanse and diversity of the sector. This is reflected not only in the cultural geography and demographic profiles of countries within the region, but the varying levels of economic and social development, political systems, administration and infrastructure of early care and educational services. Government expenditure and investment in early childhood services also contrast remarkably across the region, with significant variations in access and equity of provisions.

### **Asia and the Pacific**

The Asia-Pacific or **Apac** is the part of the world that covers much of East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania, and includes countries near or around the Pacific Ocean. East Asia or Eastern Asia, two geographical sub-regions of the Asia-Pacific, are names often used synonymously to refer to what was traditionally known as the Far East. The Asia-Pacific generally includes countries within East Asia and the Far East: [Cambodia](#), [Democratic People's Republic of Korea](#), [South Korea](#), [Laos People's Democratic Republic](#), [Myanmar](#), [Philippines](#) and [Vietnam](#), [Thailand](#), [Indonesia](#), [Malaysia](#), [Brunei Darussalam](#), [Japan](#), [Mainland China](#), [Hong Kong](#), [Japan](#), [Mongolia](#), [Taiwan](#), [Singapore](#), as well as countries around the Pacific Ocean and Pacific rim, such as [Australia](#), [Cook Islands](#), [New Zealand](#), and [Papua New Guinea](#).

[Map]

### **Socio-Economic Trends in the Asia-Pacific Region**

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) developments in Asia and the Pacific is best understood in the wider context of the region's socio-economic milieu, not least because many countries and economies within the region have experienced rapid and substantial socio-economic and structural changes through industrialization and globalisation, which in turn has a corollary effect on the distribution of ECEC services. Reports by UNESCO and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) which regularly review patterns and trends in human development (HD) indicate vast socio-economic disparities among countries in the region, as reflected through the Human Development Index (HDI) and the Gini Co-efficient. The human development index (HDI) is essentially a composite measure of a country's human development in terms of three main components:

- Health; life expectancy at birth;
- Education and adult literacy rate; and
- standard of living, GDP per capita income

The composite HDI ranking is standardised to values between 0 and 1 and countries are ranked on the basis of this value. (World's average HDI is 0.753) A country with a high Human Development Index indicates an advanced level of achievement in the conditions and standard of living (UNDP, 2009). The last HDI data collated in the 2009 UNDP report reveal marked differences in human development among countries in the Asia-Pacific region, especially between the developed and developing nations.

**Table 2.1.1 HDI Trends in the ESA Region**

Country Name	1980	1990	2000	2007	Annual Growth Rate		
					Long Term 1980–2007	Medium-Term 1990–2007	Short-Term 2000–2007
Japan	0.887	0.918	0.943	0.96	0.29	0.26	0.25
Singapore	0.785	0.851	--	0.944	0.68	0.61	--
Hong Kong, China	--	--	--	0.944	--	--	--
Korea, Rep	0.722	0.802	0.869	0.937	0.97	0.92	1.08
Brunei Darussalam	0.827	0.876	0.905	0.92	0.39	0.29	0.22
Malaysia	0.666	0.737	0.797	0.829	0.81	0.69	0.56
Thailand	0.658	0.706	0.753	0.783	0.64	0.61	0.57
China	0.533	0.608	0.719	0.772	1.37	1.4	1
Philippines	0.652	0.697	0.726	0.751	0.53	0.44	0.49
Indonesia	0.522	0.624	0.673	0.734	1.26	0.95	1.25
Mongolia	--	--	0.676	0.727	--	--	1.02
Viet Nam	--	0.599	0.69	0.725	1.16	1.13	0.71
Lao PDR	--	--	0.566	0.619	--	--	1.26
Cambodia	--	--	0.515	0.593	--	--	2.01
Myanmar	--	0.487	--	0.586	0.79	1.08	--
Timor-Leste	--	--	--	0.489	--	--	--

Source: *Human Development Report 2009*.

The socio-economic diversity of the Asia-Pacific region is apparent not only across countries but within individual nations, as reflected through the Gini Coefficient, which measures the income distribution or equality among the population of each country. The higher the Coefficient, the wider the income and wealth inequality among sections of the population. Data from the UNDP report shows systematic income inequality among the Apac countries.

In Singapore for instance, despite a high HDI score, the country has the second highest income gap between the wealthy and the poor as indicated by a Gini coefficient index of 42.5 with Hong Kong coming ahead at 43.4. Norway has the lowest index with a Gini coefficient of 25.8, followed by Sweden at 25.0, indicating the most equal distribution of income and wealth within the country compared to other UN nations. At the other end of the scale is Indonesia, with a Gini coefficient of 39.4 and Cambodia at 40.7, indicating a stark inequality between the richest and poorest household groups in the country (UNDP, 2009).

#### **The ECEC Sector: Issues and Development**

The use of international measures such as the HDI and Gini Co-efficient as indicators of a country's development and well-being can be problematic and present their inherent shortcomings, in that the index ranking can be relative and it is often hard to obtain accurate figures and trace how existing data have been collated and interpreted, but nonetheless, these measures provide a useful point of reference from which to better understand the socio-

economic conditions of economies, and generate comparable analysis across the Apac nations. The evident regional imbalance is significant to the issues and challenges currently facing the ECEC sector. A recent regional report by UNESCO which served as a background for the first World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education held in Moscow in September this year, provides a comprehensive review of the progress made among countries in the region in terms of early years policies and strategies. Two key issues emerged:

1) **ECEC perceived as largely the responsibility of the individual and family**

The dearth of research from the international community has made a strong case for the role of effective governance in promoting equity and access to ECEC services (UNESCO 2007; UNESCO, 2006; OECD, 2001; OECD, 2006) but a prevailing issue in the Apac region is that early childhood education and care services are often seen as primarily the responsibility of the individual and family and therefore delivered largely by the private sector. [This provides convenient grounds for governments to assume diminished responsibility of ECEC services.] The report states, ‘An issue in many Asian sub-regions which hampers the development of ECCE is the generally uncontested view that small children are the responsibility of their families, not of the authorities. In many Asian countries, the population prefers to keep a safe distance between themselves and officials and there is no ground swell of demand for government backed ECCE provision.’ (UNESCO, 2010 p.5).

Not surprisingly, ECEC provision in many Apac countries are funded partly or wholly by the private sector, with governments often assuming a nominal role. For example, in **Singapore**, preschool provision is provided solely by the private sector, although the government does provide some financial investment by way of subsidies and financial grants made available to low-income families to help with the cost of childcare (for example, through the Centre-based Financial Assistance Scheme for Child Care (CFAC)). There are no public childcare centres or kindergartens, with the government taking on a regulatory role through the work of two Ministries: the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS). The reason for this is two-fold. Historically, the care and education of preschool children in Singapore has been largely a private concern for the family, where strong family ties and values mean that children are often looked after at home by their grandparents, mothers, or members of the extended family. The second reason is the expenditure and cost of ECEC provision. The Director of MCYS, Mr. Lee stated poignantly in an interview on ECEC policy in the country ‘it would be a more cost effective option instead for the private sector, a non-public organization to ‘be responsible for the management and operation of services, with the government providing financial support’ (UNESCO Policy Brief, 2007). The Singapore government’s role in the ECEC sector is therefore mainly that of an administrative and regulatory role while out-sourcing the provision of care to the private sector. As the current economy in Asia continues to be volatile with the recent downturn, the situation does not look likely to change in the near future.

The country profile of Apac countries, as part of a series of UNESCO regional reports prepared for the *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2007, Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education*, provide further insights into the sector. In **Cambodia** for instance, NGOs and UNICEF provide the majority of funding and support for ECEC services, targeting the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and communities. In **India**, the rapid proliferation of for-profit early childhood services has led to a large private, commercial ECCE sector, available even in the rural areas. The report states, ‘There are no government regulations for registering and operating preschools, no curriculum guidelines, and no requirements for staff to have professional qualification.’ A consequence of this is a direct impact on the quality of services, ‘There are an estimated 10 million children who receive early childhood services from privately owned and operated programmes. While a few prestigious private schools offer very high quality programmes, it has been estimated that 95% of the preschools in the private sector use age inappropriate methods, focus on academic objectives and are downward extensions of primary education.’ (UNESCO, 2010).

In **Indonesia**, the government's investment in the education sector as a whole is significantly low, with early years care and education services almost entirely funded by the private sector. The government's priority is on achieving its 9-year compulsory education, and the allocation of resources and finance does not include early childhood. It is difficult to obtain accurate corroborating data on the country but it is notable within the UNESCO profile report on Indonesia that private sector funding of ECEC services, which forms a significant part of provision, caters mainly to the upper socio-economic population. In addition, governance and regulation of ECEC services in Indonesia is a concern given the level of fragmentation within the sector. As many as eight ministries and government offices deal with their own early childhood services: kindergartens (taman kanak), playgroups (kelompok bermain), childcare centres (taman penitipan anak), posyandu (Integrated Service Post), and mothers programmes (bina keluarga balita). Kindergartens function under the auspices of the Ministry of National Education; religious islamic kindergartens are the responsibility of the Ministry of Religious Affairs; Playgroups and Childcare Centres are supervised by the Ministry of Social Welfare; the Posyandu and Mothers' Programmes are under the responsibility of Ministry of Health and Ministry of Women's Affairs, respectively' (UNESCO, 2010). With different ministries, non-governmental organisations and community groups involved in the provision of early childhood services, coordination at a local and national level is a particular challenge; thereby increasing the likelihood of the fragmentation and diffusion of government responsibility.

Indeed, for many Apac countries: Indonesia, Vietnam, Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Cambodia, Singapore and Hong Kong included, early childhood education and care are seen as the prime responsibility of the family and individual, rather than the state. The issue is exacerbated by the fact that developing nations within the region include many of the most populous nations in the world: India, China, Indonesia and Bangladesh, and meeting the needs of so many young children and their families is often beyond the financial means of the State. Hence, where governments may seem willing in principle to support the early years, through recent participation in public making policy, they are often lacking in practice and implementation. It is widely recognised that most governments allocate more expenditure and investment in primary rather than pre-primary education, where the cost of funding ECEC provision is met by families and communities, NGOs and international donor agencies, 'Despite mounting evidence on the importance of investment in early childhood for children, their families, communities and nations, there is considerably less investment in early childhood than in primary education. (UNESCO 2010, p.65).

However, it could be argued that changing demographic trends may well alter the current management of ECEC services. With more women choosing to work in order to supplement the family income and pursue a career, there is increased demand for childcare outside the immediate extended family, and the need for quality provision. In **Singapore** for instance, in the last decade, more than fifty percent of women contributed to the country's labour force, and the figure is predicted to rise in the years to come (Kwan, 2000). The participation rate of females in the labor force increased from 48.8% in 1990 to 50.2% in 2000, and the levels of income improved proportionately (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2007). The government's family policy have also been forced to change to encourage a more child friendly working environment, with the implementation of the Children Development Co-Savings Act which entitles female employees a total of 12 weeks maternity leave, instead of the previous 9. Thus, with social-cultural changes and with more women joining the workforce, the demand for preschool provision has become increasingly strong, as reflected in the increase in supply of out-of-home care and provision for children, and the government's role in the ECEC sector will inevitably evolve. The concern, however, is that with the absence of adequate publicly founded entitlement and regulation of the ECEC sector, a mixed economy of provision will continue to thrive to meet the demand and space left by the lack of appropriate policing, funding and public policy.

**2) Access and equity in early childhood services are pervasive not only across countries within the region but within country.**

Secondly, a key concern of ECEC in Asia and the Pacific is the inequitable distribution of ECEC services, which serves to reinforce the importance of facilitating economic and social structural transformation in order to increase participation and access to quality early years provision. The challenge of raising access and equity in ECEC services within the region is tied up inextricably with issues of poverty and equality. The UNESCO report indicates that large segments of the population in developing countries of East Asia continue to live in poverty and children from disadvantaged families who will benefit most from early years services are often the ones marginalised and excluded from these services. This is in direct contrast to developed nations within the region such as Singapore, Japan and Hong Kong where the majority of the population are largely affluent and access to early childhood services are more prevalent. The report found that ‘Access is positively related to family wealth and parental education. Rural residence, ethnic minority status, language, and disability exacerbate disadvantages presented by poverty and low levels of parental education.’ (UNESCO 2010, p.71). The crucial question then is, how can governments promote social participation and empowerment among young children and families as a way of improving decision making and governance within the sector and society at large? How can they continue to effectively shape the course of ECEC development in their country and the Apac region?

**Key questions**

For many Apac countries, the challenges facing the ECEC sector stem from an ideological and political divide between what constitutes the public and private interests of the state and the individual in matters of childcare and education - a central tenet in the work of ICMEC. It could be argued, and indeed has been well argued by existing research, that while early years provision arising from the operation of a market economy may well offer diversity and choice, (at the same time), it also sets challenges in terms of equity, access and affordability as well as quality and sustainability of service.

Given the complexity of the ECEC sector in Asia-Pacific, and in the presence of many different stakeholders, several key questions remain:

- 1) Access and equity – how can governments ensure effective public participation, inclusion and equitable distribution of care and education resources?
- 2) Sustainability - At a local and national level, how do governments maintain continuity and sustainability of early years services among all relevant agencies in the development and operation of ECEC programmes and services?
- 3) Quality – How do governments sustain the quality of care and education services? Is providing additional funding and resources the only solution? How do government and stakeholders measure the quality and efficiency of ECEC services when quality itself is such a dynamic and complex concept, influenced by values and beliefs, and closely bound up with culture and context?
- 4) Governance: Some of the major issues which seem to confront the ECEC sector in Asia-Pacific are the consequence of deep-seated divisions. These include not only structural divisions arising from the divided governance of early childhood services between different agencies and government ministries but value-based divisions revolving the responsibility of ECEC between the public and private sectors. How do governments effectively reconcile the needs of the sector amidst such incongruity and competing demands?

## Conclusion

To conclude, it is evident that the development of early years provision in Asia-Pacific touches upon a current and central debate, more specifically with regards to the distinction between care and education as a public good and as a private commodity. Inevitably, differences in the values and beliefs of policy makers, service providers and service users of what childcare and education should entail - whose responsibility and accountability - have a direct impact on the nature of provision and services rendered, and ultimately the experience for young children and their families. There needs to be decisive and durable strategies to address these challenges and issues facing the sector, in order to engender transformative change for the future of early years services in the region. Perhaps the issue here is not about what constitutes the public and private interests of early childhood education and care, but the need for a principled, value-based approach to the management and governance of early years care and education provision, in order that a firm foundation for ethical decision-making can be achieved, and that which will maintain the interests of young children at the heart of any political and socio-economic reform.

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