

Emerging Challenges of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Through Icds in India



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Introduction

It is globally accepted that first six years of a child are the most crucial in determining the pathways of development of children, since the pace of development during these years is extremely rapid. Research in the field of neuroscience, particularly on the brain, has provided very convincing evidence of the critical periods located within these early years for the formation of synaptic connections in the brain and for the full development of the brains potential. ^[1] This early childhood stage is also important as a foundation for the inculcation of social and personal habits and values that are known to last a lifetime.

Given this wide scope, early childhood development has been defined and described in various ways under various programmes. The nomenclature and definition include Early Childhood Education programmes, which are pre school education focused programs 3-6 years olds as seen in nurseries, kindergartens, preparatory schools, etc. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) retains the same educational thrust but enlarges its scope to include the care component including care and early stimulation for 0-3 years old, through crèches and home based parent education. ECCE plays significant role as it helps children in successful completion of primary education^[2]

Research studies have also shown that ECCE education enhance literacy skills, child ability to learn, to communicate ideals and feelings and to get along well with others children who receive quality ECCE are more likely to succeed in school and in life^[3].

Good pre-school education increase cognitive abilities, school achievement, improve class room behaviour, decrease grade repetition among children ^[4]. The ECCE is therefore an integral part of child rearing experience provided by an agency for all children. One of the providers of ECCE in India is Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) network. The ECCE is one of the components of ICDS programme. In the present paper, an attempt has been made to critically examine the ECCE services through ICDS programme in India and challenges thereof.

Ecce Services Through Icds Network

The Government of India has identified the

universalization of ICDS program as it is primary strategy to achieve the first goal of ECCE under Education for All (EFA). This also imperative achieving the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) related to malnutrition. As a sequel to the adoption of National Policy for Children (1974), the Government of India evolved the Integrated Child Development Services Scheme, popularly abbreviated as ICDS. Over a period of time, this centrally sponsored programme which came into existence 1975 in selected 33 community development blocks of the country has come out as one of the innovative programme of its kind and the largest public initiative in the world to offer the ECCE Services in an integrated way. The basic premises of the ICDS programme, which is centrally sponsored and State administered national wide programme, revolves around the common consensus among educationalists, researchers and practitioners that early childhood care & education are inseparable issues and must be considered as one.

Based upon this fundamental assumption, the modus operandi of the program has been designed in such an integrated way so as to meet out the ECCE needs on continuum basis adopting holistic approach from a common platform of AWC at village level. The process execution of the ICDS program includes delivery of integrated package of minimum basic services like health care, nutritional nourishment and early childhood educational nurturance to children so as to reach a multitude of objectives including development of school readiness competencies and various other psycho-social domains.

The ECCE services under ICDS has identified not only as a significant input for providing sound foundation for development but also as a contributing role to the universalization of primary education, by providing to the child the necessary preparation for primary schooling and offering substitute care to the younger siblings, thus, freeing the older ones- especially girls to attend school. For accomplishment of this task, the Anganwari Workers (AWW) is expected to attend multifarious ECCE tasks. These include not only organization of ECCE activities for three hours a day, but also attending various peripheral activities

like preparation of ECCE aids using indigenous material with the help of local artisans, establishing functional links with primary school teachers, maintaining records and registers concerning attendance of children in ECCE sessions, programme planning in contextualized way, creating awareness in the community and the like. In order to give a boost to the ECCE activities, population norms for setting up of AWCs and Mini AWCs have been revised to cover all habitations, particularly keeping in view those inhabited by SCs/STs/Minorities. The revised population norm [5] for AWCs in various areas are given Table –I. According to new norms all children are eligible for availing the ECCE services through AWCs in throughout India.

Table -1 Pattern of Organizing AWCs

Particulars	Population	No of AWC
For AWCs in Rural / Urban	400-1800	One AWCs
Projection	800-1600	Two AWCs
For Mini AWC;	1600-2400	Three AWCs
For Tribal / Riverine / Desert , Hilly & other difficult areas	150-400	One Mini –AWC
For Mini AWC	300-800	One AWC
	150-300	One Mini AWC

Earlier Providing of Supplementary Nutrition was the responsibility of the States and administrative cost was provided by the Government of India as 100% Central Assistance. It led to limited coverage of the beneficiaries/villages because states were not providing adequately for supplementary nutrition in view of the resource constraints. Later on, it was decided to support the States/UTs upto 50% of the financial norms or to support 50% of expenditure increased by them on supplementary nutrition, whichever is less. The sharing pattern of supplementary nutrition is respect of North Eastern States between centre and states has been changed from 50:50 to 90: 10 ratios from the financial year 2009-10. For all other component of ICDS program, the ratio has been modified to 90:10 against 100% central assistance earlier. Having recognized the fact that AWC as the platform of ICDS is the focal point of service delivery to health, nutrition and education, there has been upwards revision in financial norms and nutritional norms of supplementary nutrition and enhancement in the honoraria of AWWs and helpers.

The ICDS authorities have been directed to serve more than one meal to the children who come to AWCs which include providing a morning snack in the form of milk /banana /egg/seasonal fruits/ micro nutrient fortified food, followed by a Hot Cooked Meal. Besides, for severally underweight children, additional food items are given in the form of micro nutrient fortified food and /or energy dense food. These norms have also been endorsed by the Apex Court in their

order dated 22nd April, 2009. The ICDS programme was launched in 1975 in 33 blocks (Projects) with 4894 AWCs. By the end of X Plan it has gradually been expanded to 5652 projects with 6 lakh AWCs. Currently 7076 projects and 14 lakhs AWCs have been approved. Of the 1366776 sanctioned AWCs/ Mini-AWCs, about 12.41 lakh have been operational as on 31st December 2010. The number of ECCE Children (3-6 years) was 166.56 lakh in 2001-2002 has also increased to 355.02 lakh as on 31st December 2010. Plan allocation which was at Rs. 10391 crore during the Xth Plan period has increased to Rs. 44400 crore for (XII) Plan (2007-12). The achievement of the ICDS programme goals depends upon the effectiveness of AWWs and Helpers in improved delivery of packages of services under ICDS program [6]. Besides, Union and State governments have taken a number of initiatives to strengthen the ECCE component of the ICDS programme. These include distribution of ECCE Kits and different States have also adopted various contextually suited innovative practices to strengthen ECCE activities. [7]

Emerging Challenges

Analysis of available secondary data indicates that there are about 14 lakh AWCs providing ECCE for 3-6 years olds in the country through ICDS Network. It is difficult to estimate the exact increase in the number of 3 to 6 years old children who are availing any ECCE facilities. However a positive trend is consistent as per the official data, the number of 3-6 years olds attending ECCE at AWCs under ICDS programme in Indian has increased from 16.65 million in 2001-2002 to 35.5 million as 31st December 2010. The macro and micro level studies conducted by various agencies have revealed that AWCs have been playing important role in ECCE, However, due to absence of systematic and basic infrastructure adequacies, the ICDS programme make its difficult to deliver the expected results [8]. These research studies further speak about the fact that multidimensional unreasonable expectation of State government from AWWs by the way of the workload they carry, most of the time, put them under hard situations to deliver the expected out comes. [9].

A study conducted by World Bank has also identified this mismatches and has recommended the contextualization of the ECCE programme design, rationalization of the workload of the AWWs and promoting utilization through improvement in quality of services delivery[10]. As per Census 2011, the country has about 70 million children in the age group of 3-6 years. The figures of covering about 35.5 million children by ECCE initiatives under ICDS leaves apart a large segment of millions of children in the 3-6 years population bracket unattended for pre school activities.

Though, it needs to be acknowledged here that in a country as diverse and large as India, with about 70 million children in the age group 3-6 years, achieving universal access to ECCE is not an easy task. However, the current and futuristic magnitude of uncovered are found in both rural, urban and semi urban areas.

Children living in difficult circumstance like children of long term patents , children with special needs , children of sex workers , women prisoners , riot and disaster affected, refugees and displayed, orphan-ages and military affected children have yet to be identified as uncovered and unreach children for ECCE activities. It casts shadow on the education of the girl child; since she is made to stay have to take care of younger siblings.

Currently under public initiative of ICDS nearly 14 lakh AWWs and an equal number of helpers totaling about more than 2.8 million women, have been engaged in imparting AWC based ECCE Services to 35.5 million of children. They are forced to work in poor working /service conditions due to the honorary status of their work. The situation gets further compounded because working conditions of these AWWs and Helpers are not subject to the regulation of any law in the country. All of the eligible children have not been registered. The AWWs and Helpers used to absent and food stocks were found to be questionable quality. The basic facilities have been missing and compounds of AWCs have been used as a Kitchen and classrooms at a same time. Through the ICDS authority has provided toys, pre-school kits, alphabets charts etc, these however, could be seen either misplaced or lie dimped in corners gathering dust in rural areas. The AWCs do not have their own buildings, safe drinking water supply and sanitation facilities.

At no time in the recent years there has been keen interest in early child education. The studies have shown that still a large number of children remained uncovered to the total child population below 6 years.

The challenges are still exist in terms of access to quality ECCE as well as the cultural and contextual diversity. In absence of adequate data base, deployment of resources and lying down of minimum standard has been found wanting. It is well fact that industrialization urbanization, migration and increased participation of women in the work force have transferred traditional family pattern. As a result the quality of care available to young children has deteriorated. The socio-economic inequalities of society have pushed a large number of families into poverty, which has placed young children in risk. It is within the scope of ICDS to address socio-economic and gender inequalities by promoting the development of learning opportunities for the young child. To preserve the spirit of holistic and integrated approach, it requires the reorientation of implementation strategies at the grassroot level.

The gap between the number of pre-school children and the available pre-school services seems to very large. The current and futuristic magnitude of uncovered ECCE children is a major challenge in the coming years. The pre school age population projected is more than 70 million presently and 73 million of children by 2016. In order to extend the benefit of ECCE to such large number of presently uncovered , unreached and projected population of 3-6 years age children for this decade, it is urgently needed to draft a policy with contextually suited, locally relevant innovative strategies approach and also strengthening of resources being required to fill this huge gap. There is also a need to encourage competitiveness in the field of the ECCE services. Towards the objectives of ICDS, there is need of a regulatory framework and comprehensive law that that will deals with all aspects of early childhood care and education. The proposed law should treat the child as one entity in need of various services- from nutrition to cognition and stimulation. The idea behind suggesting a single law for early child care stems from the plethora of new laws that seek to treat child from their respective prism.

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