

# Ways Forward for Early Learning in Ethiopia



YOUNG LIVES POLICY BRIEF 20

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**The importance of early childhood care and education (ECCE) is now widely accepted in international research and development policy. There is considerable evidence that targeted early childhood interventions have the potential to mitigate some of the risks to children's learning and development posed by poverty. But in many countries resources are scarce and are mainly concentrated on achieving the Education For All goal of universal primary education. A major challenge is to find ways to develop high-quality ECCE services which are accessible to poorer children and children in rural areas. This Policy Brief uses findings from Young Lives in Ethiopia to illustrate the early childhood experiences of two age cohorts of children. It concludes that the Ethiopian government's framework for ECCE provision is a positive advance, but highlights some of the obstacles that will need to be overcome in order to implement the policy effectively and in ways that benefit the most disadvantaged children.**

Ethiopia offers a case study of the opportunities and challenges in developing early care and education (ECCE) services in low-resource settings. The country has been viewed as a success story of Education For All, with the number of children out of school reduced from nearly four in five in 1992 to one in five in 2009. But there are significant challenges in improving the quality of education provision, and an intense focus on primary education has resulted in relatively little attention to ECCE. The national enrolment rate for pre-school was only 4.2 per cent in 2008-09.

There is a strong rural-urban division in ECCE provision. In urban areas, there is a diversity of non-governmental providers. Wealthier parents tend to use private pre-schools, while many poorer parents use faith-based facilities. In rural areas, the private and non-governmental sectors provide very few pre-schools. The coverage and quality of rural ECCE provision is low because government primary school systems are still being consolidated and lack the resources to offer pre-schooling.

This Policy Brief examines the early learning experiences of the Young Lives children in Ethiopia. It illustrates the diverse pathways they follow through their early education, and highlights the close relationship between pre-school and primary schooling. The Brief compares the subsequent schooling trajectories of urban children who do and do not have access to pre-school, and shows that those who access early education have substantial advantages. In rural areas, where pre-school is very rare, children face major difficulties in making a smooth transition into primary school.

The Ethiopian government has designed a national framework for ECCE (2010). Within this framework, the state would regulate existing private sector provision. It would also begin to provide low-cost ECCE programmes through extending existing government primary schools to provide a reception year. Where this is not possible, some older primary school pupils would be trained as Child-to-Child facilitators in a programme of play designed to improve the readiness of younger children to start school. But there is extremely limited government and donor funding available for the plans in the framework. The implementation of ECCE risks placing a significant burden on an already overstretched primary education system.



Children at a church-funded kindergarten. © Jorgen Schytte/Specialist Stock

## ECCE provision in Ethiopia: current patterns and future considerations

- Delivering on the promise of ECCE is a great challenge in the world's poorest countries, and greatest among poorer and more rural communities within those countries.
- There has been an overall increase in pre-school attendance between the older and younger Young Lives children in Ethiopia. In 1997-99, 8.5 per cent of the older children attended, while in 2004-06, attendance among the younger children was 24.9 per cent.
- Levels of pre-school attendance increased most rapidly for children living in urban areas.
- Access to pre-school has improved most dramatically among children whose families have higher incomes.

## The early education trajectories of Young Lives children

An examination of the experiences of the older cohort of Young Lives children, aged 15 to 16 in 2009-10, highlights some of the broad trends in early education in Ethiopia. This sets the scene for understanding the difficulties of developing high-quality pre-school provision. Of these older children:

- 99 per cent had enrolled in primary school at some stage.
- 8 per cent had either never enrolled at all, or had dropped out at some point.
- More rural than urban children dropped out in the early grades of primary school. They often faced domestic and financial pressures, which required them to 'pause' schooling for a year or two.
- A significant proportion of those who dropped out re-enrolled at a later stage. But children who re-enrol are older than the other children in their class, and face difficulties as a result.
- Of those who were enrolled by the age of 8 in 2002, only 22 per cent remained enrolled and passed four grades during the four years to 2006.
- Only 29 per cent of them could read a simple sentence in their mother tongue at the age of 12.

These data show that, for many, simply enrolling and remaining in school is a significant achievement. This illustrates the need for ECCE provision that prepares children to take full advantage of their primary education.

## Changing patterns of ECCE provision and access in urban areas

Although overall levels of ECCE provision in Ethiopia are low, there are diverse providers. Most are located in urban areas, giving urban families different choices and opportunities for accessing ECCE.

### Types of ECCE providers

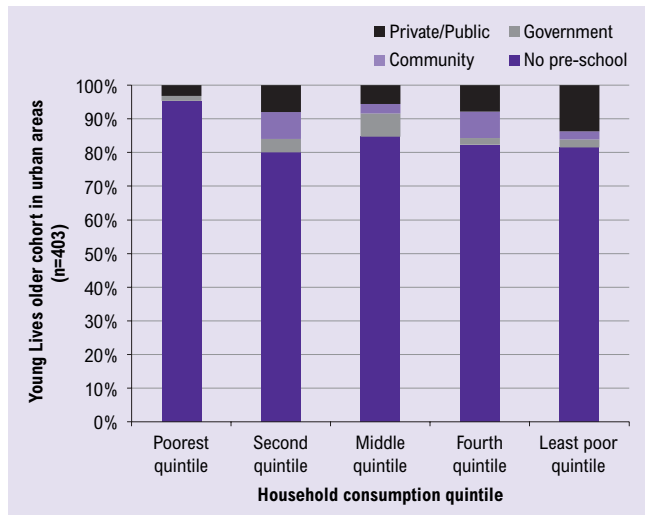
- **Private schools** are fee-paying. They are usually replicas of primary schools, with uniforms, academic lessons and sometimes instruction in English.
- **Public schools** are partly funded by government and partly by student fees. Facilities and the quality of service provision are more like private schools than government schools.
- **Government pre-schools** are mostly in urban areas but include a small number of reception classes attached to primary schools in both rural and urban areas. Teachers are paid from student fees and community contributions.
- **Community schools** are run by non-governmental providers. They include **NGO schools** which charge low or no fees if they are targeting poor communities. **Formal faith-based schools** charge lower fees than private schools. Christian schools combine teaching of a secular curriculum with some religious instruction, while *madrassas* only offer religious education. **Informal faith-based schools**, where children are taught by a single religious instructor, charge very low fees.

Figures 1 and 2 contrast the type of pre-school provider accessed by older and younger Young Lives children living in urban areas. They clearly show how patterns of pre-school attendance have changed between the 403 children in the study who were aged 5 in 1997 and the 762 children who were 5 years old in 2006. Not only did a greater proportion of the younger cohort attend pre-school, but more of them attended a fee-based provider.

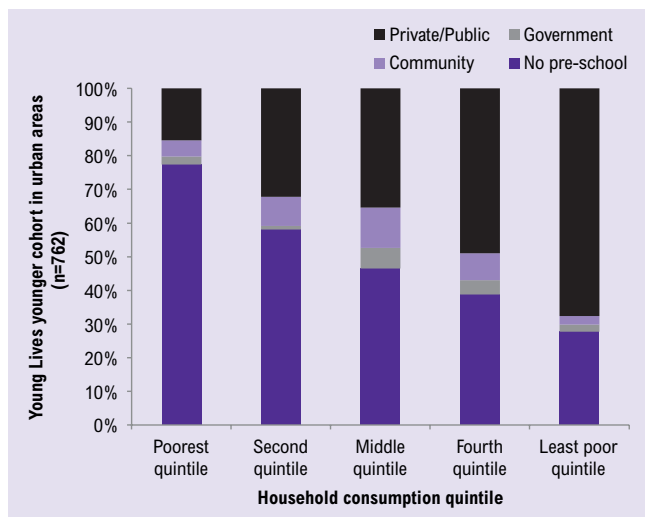
The data are disaggregated by income quintiles to show the differences between children from richer and poorer households. Increases in attendance have been most dramatic among the children in the higher income quintiles. Among the older cohort, 18.5 per cent of the least-poor quintile attended private or public pre-school. In 2006, 67.6 per cent of this quintile attended private or public pre-school. In 1999, 7.8 per cent of children in the second least-poor quintile were in private or public preschool; by 2006, this had increased to 48.9 per cent. Proportions of urban parents choosing private or public pre-school were smaller but not negligible in the poorer quintiles: in 2006 35.3 per cent of the middle quintile, 32.2 per cent of the second poorest quintile and 15.5 per cent of the poorest quintile of parents sent their children to public or private pre-schools.

Among these urban families, the cost of fees is a major factor shaping access to pre-school. Fees for better-quality private pre-schools are prohibitively expensive for most poor families. Consequently, children make the transition to school via different pathways and at very different stages of readiness. As a rule, early inequalities are reinforced as they progress, or fail to progress, through the early grades.

**Figure 1.** Type of pre-school provider among children between age 3 and 5 in 1997–99 in urban areas



**Figure 2.** Type of pre-school provider among children between age 3 and 5 in 2004–06 in urban areas



## Transitions into primary school: rural children’s experiences

Very few of the Young Lives children living in rural areas attend pre-school. Among the older cohort, the attendance level was 1 per cent. Seven years later, among the younger cohort, it had risen only to 3 per cent. In the absence of any school-readiness programmes, rural children face many difficulties in making the transition to primary school. Any ECCE initiatives in rural areas must be set in the context of much bigger issues facing rural children’s education, which affect all age groups.

A major barrier to entering primary school for many children is proving that they have reached 7 years old, the legal age for enrolment. Birth registration is far from universal and parents struggle to prove to teachers that children are ready to enrol, especially if they are small for their age, as poorer children often are. For other children, responsibilities at home and on family farms, combined with the need to meet

the costs of school materials, mean that they are not able to enrol when they reach 7. Even if they do enrol, the same factors mean that they can struggle to attend regularly, do homework and progress through grades. Aida’s story illustrates some of these difficulties.

### Aida’s story: barriers to starting and staying in school

Aida briefly attended a summer pre-school that was temporarily established in her village, where she learned the alphabet. But when her mother first tried to enrol her in primary school, the teachers refused to accept her into Grade 1, saying she didn’t show maturity. She waited another year, but was only enrolled for two months before she was sent to another village to care for a sick relative. The next year, she re-enrolled in Grade 1 at the school in her new village, but reported often feeling tired at school because of her workload at home.

As well as unpaid work in the home or on the family farm, many rural Ethiopian children do paid work from an early age. Sometimes, if parents are unable or unwilling to meet the costs of education, children’s earnings enable participation at school. But in other cases, when attending school competes with working for money, children feel pressured into dropping out. Degife’s story highlights this dilemma.

### Degife’s story: the pressure to work

Degife was 12 years old when he first enrolled in formal school. His father said that the family wanted to enrol Degife earlier, but could not provide him with materials or clothing because they didn’t have the money. Degife offered a different version of events: “My parents prevented me from joining school. They made me herd cattle. They give more priority to their cattle than to my education.” The following year, Degife dropped out. Although his parents said that he had been suspended for quarrelling, Degife again commented that: “they forced me to drop out and keep cattle, then I had to be involved in daily work [planting and harvesting onions] ... I earned a lot of money.”

Those rural children who do enrol and stay in school face quality issues which affect their ability to learn. Lack of books, large class sizes, absent or late-arriving teachers and overcrowded classrooms are common problems reported by Young Lives children. Many boys and girls struggle to learn if they are taught in a different language than their mother tongue. Concerns about primary school quality have led to the ambitious General Education Quality Improvement Programme (GEQIP). Meanwhile, these concerns are relevant for plans to provide ECCE through pre-school classes at existing government primary schools. Many of these lack both the physical and human resources to provide pre-school classes.

## Implications for policy

There are clear benefits to equitable access to high-quality ECCE. Interdisciplinary research offers evidence on the risks poverty poses to children's development and learning, and the potential of early childhood interventions for transforming their lives. Our research shows that there is pressing and immediate need for ECCE in Ethiopia. In urban areas, those who can access ECCE have substantial advantages. In rural areas, many children struggle to make a smooth transition into primary school, and children experience difficult and slow progress through primary school.

Ethiopia, in common with most sub-Saharan African countries, faces the task of designing policies to try and ensure that ECCE reaches the most disadvantaged, and does not merely reinforce existing inequalities of opportunity and outcome. Children from poorer households and rural children are currently least likely to access to ECCE services, so the inequalities linked to their home circumstances are amplified. Evidence from other African countries shows that when provision is left mainly to private providers, access tends to be inequitable, even though NGOs and faith-based providers play an important role.

The introduction of the ECCE policy framework in 2010 marks significant progress. It offers the promise of ambitious increases in ECCE access but to date it is unclear how this will be resourced. Cost savings are anticipated by drawing heavily on the existing primary school system. But risks attach to this proposal.

Expecting the primary education system to take major operational responsibility for ECCE in rural areas without additional resources risks burdening a structure which is already overstretched. For ECCE to provide benefits, it may be worthwhile investing in longer-term, proven strategies to provide high-quality ECCE programmes rather than

attempting to score quick wins through improvements in access. Much of the evidence of the benefits of ECCE comes from smaller-scale, relatively well-funded community-based programmes. Scaling-up needs to be adequately planned and resourced for ECCE to achieve maximum potential for children.

The following could also assist in ensuring the success of the framework:

- A strategy and funding to train a cadre of ECCE teachers, to deploy them across rural and urban areas and to pay them enough to keep them in the system.
- A national curriculum, with technical support and structures to ensure compliance across the range of providers in the sector.
- In rural areas, alternative structures for ECCE that rely less on primary schools, such as community-based schools not attached to pre-schools, or Rapid School Readiness Programmes.
- In urban areas, structures to ensure that poorer children can access non-government providers, either through direct subsidy to providers in poor communities or vouchers issued to parents.

In the long term, the government's ECCE framework offers a real opportunity to provide universal, low-cost and quality ECCE in Ethiopia. But if the framework is to deliver the full benefits of ECCE, it must be carefully phased in and provided with sufficient resources.

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