

Funding Equitable and High-Quality Early Childhood Education Highlights from The Gambia



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Overview

Quality pre-primary education is widely recognized as crucial in providing children with the foundation to succeed, but many countries face obstacles in adequately funding scale-up of the pre-primary sub-sector. A major impediment to the expansion of early childhood education (ECE) is limited data on the cost-effectiveness of existing pre-primary models and on the funding that is available. This prevents proper integration of ECE into education sector plans, hampering adequate resource mobilization (Atinc, Putcha, and van der Gaag, 2014). Where resources are strained, countries also need strategies to increase ECE financing, including from public sources and via alternative financing mechanisms.

The Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE) of The Gambia has therefore collaborated with the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) on two studies on cost-effectiveness analysis (CEA) and funding for ECE. This policy brief discusses funding, providing analysis of the inefficiencies, inequities, and sustainability issues with current ECE funding patterns. It concludes with practical recommendations for future funding strategies to support the expansion of quality ECE provision in The Gambia.

ECE landscape in The Gambia

ECE enrolment on the rise

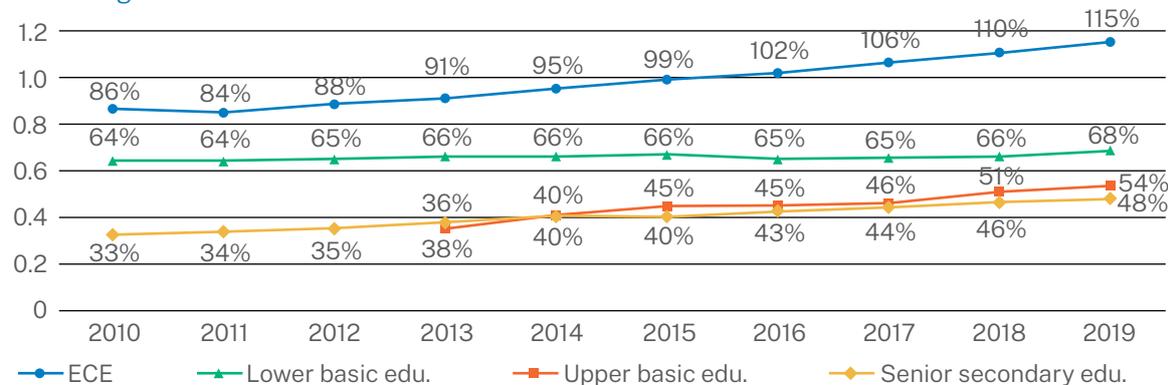
Access to education and enrolment has been increasing at all levels over the last decade, particularly in pre-primary and secondary education (*Figure 1*). Yet ECE enrolment is far from being universal, with a gross enrolment ratio at 56 per cent in 2019. It is still not compulsory, which may limit its ability to expand. In addition, the education system, in particular the ECE subsector, is marked by sharp disparities according to disability status, wealth, and location, although gender parity has been reached. Because disparities tend to widen as children move up through the general education system, tackling enrolment disparities at the outset will prove critical to providing each child with a fair start in education and in life.

ECE provision dominated by private provider

There are five major types of providers of ECE in The Gambia: private; government; Madrassa; community-based; and Mission centres, with private centres generally dominating the landscape. More than half of children enrolled in ECE were in private early childhood development (ECD) centres in 2019, twice the number in government centres. However, over the years, the share of private enrolment has been decreasing to the benefit of Madrassas. Madrassa ECD centres have received increased

Figure 1: Trend in gross enrolment ratios, by education level, 2010–2019

Percentage



Source: MoBSE education management information system (EMIS) data.

Note: GERs can exceed 100% due to under- and over-age enrolled children.

government support, enrolling 17 per cent of ECE children in 2019 compared to 11 per cent in 2013. The share of enrolment in public ECD centres has been stable over the period, around 25 per cent, while community-based and Mission schools accounted for 0.4 per cent and 3.8 per cent of enrolment in 2018.

The need for quality ECE

Developing a strong, high-quality ECE subsector in The Gambia is vital. According to the latest 2016 early grade reading assessment (EGRA) and early grade mathematics assessment (EGMA), children still scored poorly in simple reading and mathematical tasks. Repetition rates, while globally low at primary level, are hovering at 8.9 per cent in Grade 1 and 5.8 per cent in Grade 2, which could indicate a lack of adequate school preparation. Expanding quality ECE could be a cost-effective way of improving primary outcomes, yet evidence from the CEA (IIEP-UNESCO, forthcoming) shows that

the quality of ECE services is currently very low. Therefore, while improving access to ECE service provision will be critical, improving its quality will be all the more important. However, this is particularly challenging because of high, although decreasing, demographic pressures, a poor macroeconomic context, and the small budget allocated to education.

ECE financing patterns

Multiplicity of funding sources and mechanisms

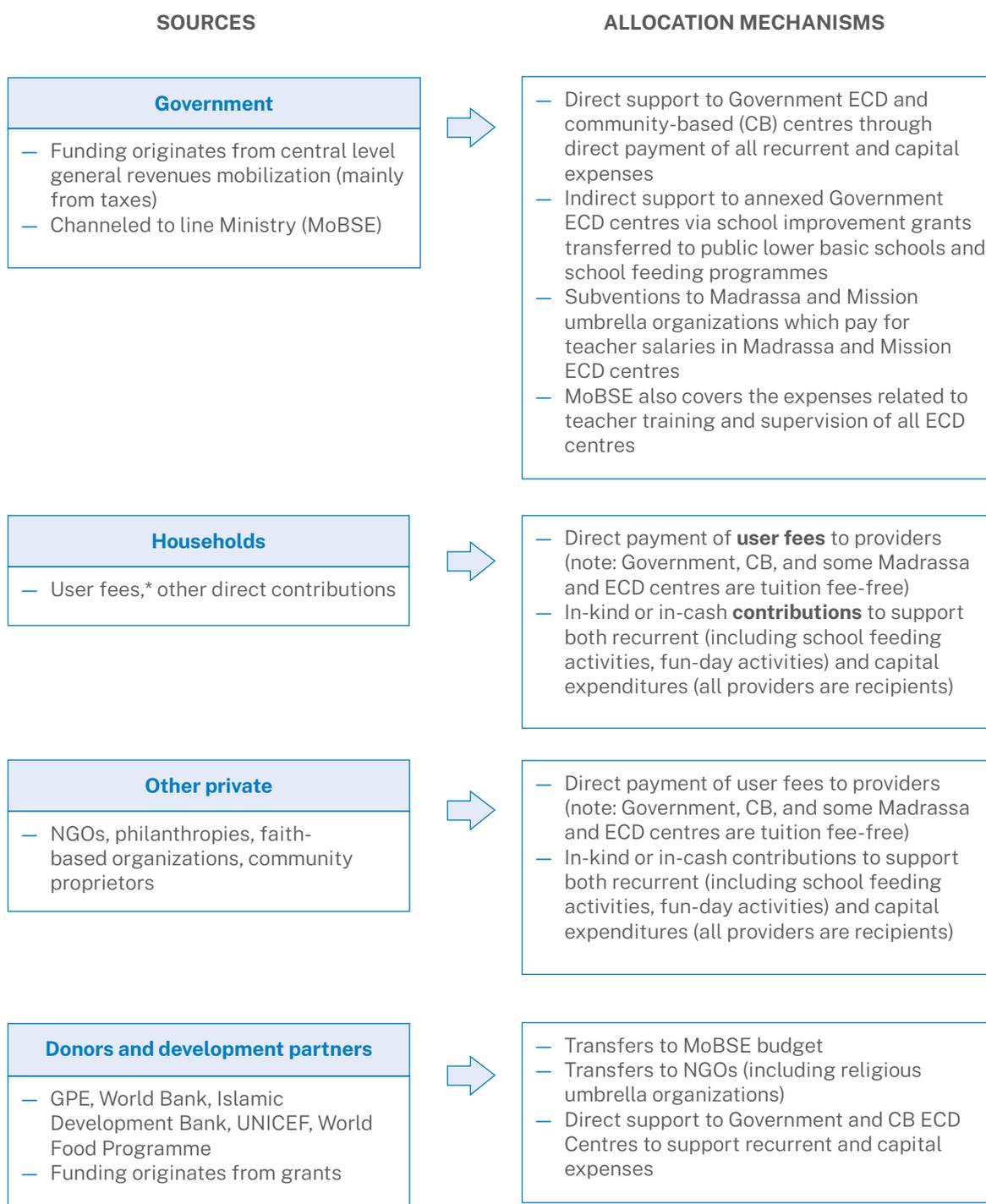
ECE is financed by many funders, with a high burden falling on households – which reflects the enrolment pattern, dominated by private provision. The financing of ECE is characterized by multiple service providers and multiple significant sources of finance, a feature common to many countries (Belfield, 2006). Figure 2 outlines how public financing, through MoBSE, provides direct support to government and community ECD centres, while also

Table 1: Evolution in the distribution of enrolment by ECD centre provider, and annual enrolment growth rate (number of pupils and %)

| | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | Enrolment average annual growth rate |
|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------------------------------|
| Government | 24% | 24% | 24% | 24% | 25% | 25% | 25% | 9.2% |
| Grant-aided | 2% | 2% | 3% | 3% | 2% | 3% | 2% | 14.9% |
| Private | 63% | 61% | 60% | 60% | 58% | 58% | 56% | 6.6% |
| Madrasa | 11% | 13% | 13% | 14% | 15% | 15% | 17% | 17.0% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | |
| Total (enrolment) | 75,849 | 87,021 | 97,554 | 100,349 | 103,689 | 117,987 | 125,584 | 8.8% |

Source: EMIS data. Grant-aided includes mainly Mission and community-based ECD centres.

Figure 2. Mapping of ECE main financing sources and allocation mechanisms



Source: Author's illustration, adapted from Belfield, 2006, and Nadeau et al., 2011, and based on key informant interviews.

Note: Income generated by ECD centers through activities is an additional (internal) source of funding, but remains marginal (so not shown).

*Includes tuition fees (including school, parent association, development, and pupil insurance fees), and fees for school trips, canteen (meals, snacks), uniforms, extra parental care, and extracurricular activities.

providing indirect support to Mission and Madrassa ECD centres through subventions which are then managed by Madrassa and Mission organizations to pay teacher salaries. A large proportion of donor funding is direct budget support, which goes through MoBSE, although some donors, such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP), provide support directly to ECD centres. The remaining sources of finance are predominantly private, e.g. households, philanthropists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and faith-based organizations (FBOs), and they tend to finance ECD centres and ECE services directly.

High burden on households

In 2018, the overall spending on ECE amounted to GMD 650.3 million, dominated by household funding (responsible for 67 per cent of total spending on ECE). Most of this expenditure, 75 per cent, was associated with families whose children attended private ECD centres. The government was the next largest, at 11 per cent, with development partners (Global Partnership for Education [GPE], UNICEF, World Bank, and WFP) accounting for 8 per cent. Other private actors, including NGOs, philanthropists, and communities, accounted

for 14 per cent of ECE expenditure (*Figure 3*). It is worth noting that The Gambia has achieved relatively high ECE coverage with little government financial support; this financing pattern raises important sustainability and equity questions that need to be addressed by MoBSE.

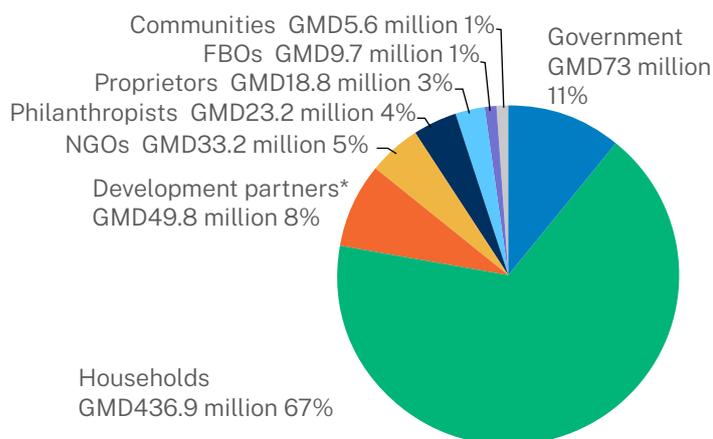
Low public financing

ECE public financing, at GMD 73 million, equates to 4 per cent of total government basic and secondary education expenditure. While low, and below the 10 per cent benchmark recommended by UNICEF, it is somewhat higher than the 2 per cent seen in other low-income countries. This nevertheless demonstrates that the government's long-standing lack of a specific ECD policy has resulted in underfunding. The situation is gradually changing, however. Growing numbers of pupils registered in government-supported ECD centres indicates increased government support. Since 2017, ECD has its own sub-programme within the MoBSE budget and there is a dedicated ECD unit within the Directorate of Basic and Secondary Education. Yet much of government spending on ECE is still an indirect consequence of spending on lower basic schools (LBS), which often have ECD centres as annexes.

Donor support limited but on the rise

Donor support for ECE is on the rise; however, this support is limited, often project-driven, and derived from a few actors, and therefore may not be sustainable. Donors contributed GMD 50 million to ECE, which represented 7.7 per cent of total ECE financing in The Gambia in 2018. The largest donors were the World Bank and GPE (almost half), followed by WFP and UNICEF (a quarter respectively). Donor trend analysis (excluding WFP data) shows that, in 2015, ECE funding accounted for only 4 per cent of financing, increasing to 6 per cent in 2017, an increase that helps the government support the expansion of the subsector. It is also a strong indication to the government of the importance placed on ECE by these donors.

Figure 3: Overall spending on ECE, by source, 2018
2018 Gambian Dalasi (GMD) and %



Source: Author's calculations based on Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs (MoFEA), MoBSE, and CEA data.

* GPE, UNICEF, World Bank, and WFP

Other private sources (NGOs, philanthropists, FBOs, proprietors, communities) provide 14 per cent of total ECE funding. However, while important, these are often one-off contributions, and are not sustainable over time.

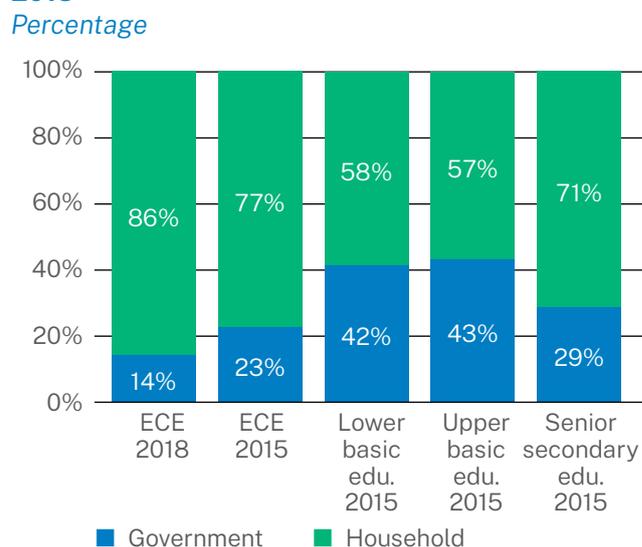
Limited spending on quality inputs and capital expenses

ECE public financing is heavily directed to salary spending (75 per cent of total ECE expenses), leaving little room for expenditure on quality inputs or capital expenses. The policy so far has been, for government and Madrassas, to annex ECD centres to existing LBS, limiting the need for capital costs. ECE expansion will require more capital funding, which is where donors (World Bank, Islamic Development Bank) are stepping in. Pedagogical materials are often financed by private entities, including households, which again raises issues of equity and sustainability over time. Aware of this, beginning in fiscal year (FY) 2020, MoBSE has introduced dedicated school improvement grants for public ECD centres. Increasing the level of resources directed at non-salary items in ECE will also prove critical to enhancing the quality of ECE public services, which is often low.

The inequity of ECE spending

The relative contribution of households is highest at ECE level, and has increased over the years. This raises major equity and sustainability issues. In 2015, households contributed GMD 77 towards ECE for every GMD 23 provided by the government; in 2018 the ratio was 86/14 (Figure 4). Increased levels of enrolment in non-public ECD centres may account for this.

Figure 4. Proportion of government and household recurrent spending by level of education, 2015 and 2018



Source: Author's calculations based on MoFEA, MoBSE, and CEA 2018 data, 2015 values World Bank 2017.

Children from poorer backgrounds are most affected, with households in the richest quartile spending nearly twice as much as households in the poorest quartile (Figure 5). Food-related expenses occupied a disproportionate share of spending among the poorest – 54 per cent, against 42 per cent on average for other income groups. The requirement for uniforms and clothing, as well as school-related fees, also puts further financial pressures on the poorest households.

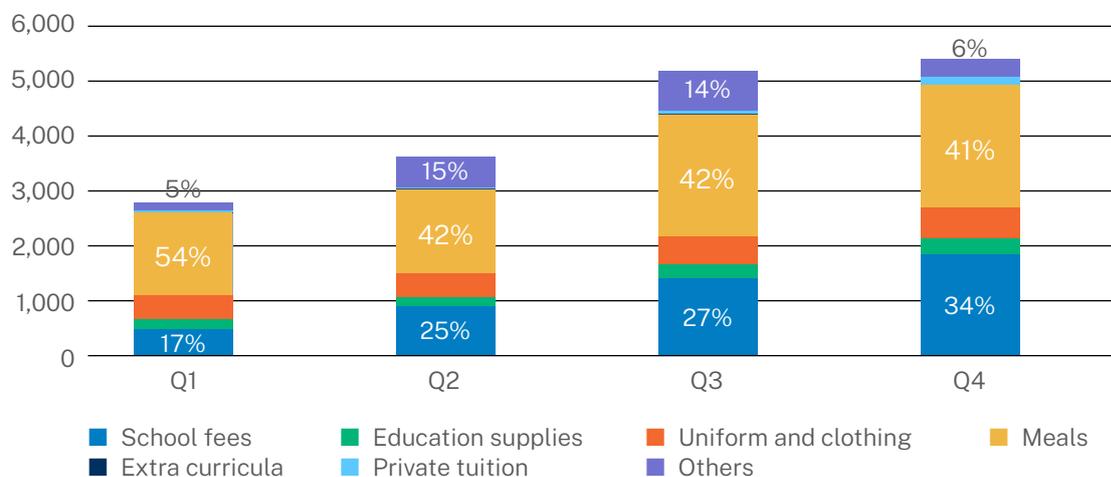
Table 2. ECE financing by nature and source, 2018 (Million GMD and %)

| | Personnel | Goods and services | Social | Capital | Total (%) | Total (ml GMD) |
|------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|
| Government | 75% | 7% | 4% | 14% | 100% | 72.9 |
| Household | 18% | 22% | 56% | 4% | 100% | 436.9 |
| Development partners* | 0% | 58% | 41% | 0% | 100% | 49.8 |
| NGOs | 43% | 27% | 9% | 21% | 100% | 33.2 |
| Philanthropists | 40% | 47% | 2% | 11% | 100% | 23.2 |
| Proprietors | 48% | 4% | 1% | 47% | 100% | 18.8 |
| FBOs | 61% | 19% | 0% | 20% | 100% | 9.7 |
| Communities | 15% | 28% | 1% | 56% | 100% | 5.6 |
| Total (ml GMD) | 172.6 | 153.1 | 272.5 | 52.1 | | 650.3 |
| Total (%) | 27% | 24% | 42% | 8% | 100% | |

Source: Author's calculations based on MoFEA, MoBSE, and cost-effectiveness analysis 2018 data. GPE, UNICEF, World Bank, and WFP. Social refers mainly to school feeding activities. * Type of spending based on World Bank/GPE and WFP figures only, sufficient details on nature of UNICEF expenditure were not available.

Figure 5. Household per child ECE spending, by nature of expenditure and household wealth quartiles, 2018

GMD



Source: Author's calculations based on cost-effectiveness analysis 2018 data.

Recommendations

To find the resources to expand quality ECE and to ensure that all children are prepared for primary school, the Gambian government will have to rely on a multipronged approach that deals directly with funding and also with quality and management issues that have financial implications.

Here, seven recommendations are presented: the first four address financing issues, while the final three relate to quality and management issues. (These recommendations align with the related literature. See ELP, 2016; Results for development, 2016; UNESCO and UNICEF, 2016; UNICEF, 2019.) They need to be analysed based on their financial, technical, and human feasibility. Financial simulation models can test different options and scenarios, and help create a set of policy options and targets to support the development of the sector in the medium term.

1. Prioritizing and increasing the allocation of the education budget to ECE over the medium term

Currently only 4 per cent of the basic and secondary budget is directed toward ECE. The government should aim to get closer to the UNICEF-recommended benchmark of 10 per cent by 2030. Redirecting more government funding towards ECE should be seen as an

earlier and more cost-effective investment that will also improve later educational outcomes. For this to be feasible, the government would need to increase its education budget to 20 per cent of the national budget, which would require The Gambia to rapidly improve its fiscal base. Increasing domestic resources mobilization will prove critical in loosening fiscal constraints and orienting more public spending towards education in general and ECE in particular. (The World Bank addresses this issue in its 2020 public expenditure review.)

2. Seeking more efficient use of existing public resources to leverage and redirect additional public funds for ECE

At ECE level, MoBSE could consider the following:

- *Reducing the duration of ECE to one or two years.* This could help to reallocate resources to quality improvement measures and support to the most disadvantaged children.
- *Using a double shift system to expand enrolment and make better use of facilities, particularly in areas with high pupil/teacher ratios (PTRs).* Additional investment will be required to organize additional supervision and transportation to ensure success.
- *Lengthening the school day and year, making better use of teachers and premises.* Currently, contact time between teachers and children

averages only three hours per day, and is further limited by teacher and child absenteeism and school interruptions.

- *Improving equity and efficiency in the allocation of teachers across schools, including ECD centres.* This will require measures to improve existing management practices and put in place effective monitoring tools.

Moreover, costs saved at post-primary levels could be redirected to ECE. For example, fees for end-of-cycle national examinations, at upper basic and senior secondary levels, could be paid privately, as most students completing secondary education are from the wealthiest families. The fees of candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds could continue to be subsidized.

3. Promoting public–private partnership (PPP) while maintaining equity

Various ways of increasing ECE financing need to be developed, including from public sources and via alternative financing mechanisms. The scale of the private sector provides opportunities to establish PPPs to use limited public resources to leverage private providers. However, public spending remains essential, in order to serve all socio-economic groups, as further stressed by Putcha, Upadhyay, and Burnett, 2016.

Public money could prioritize disadvantaged groups (including children with disabilities) and hard-to-reach areas, leaving non-government actors to operate in more affluent areas. Mapping schools alongside poverty maps could help identify the deprived areas where ECD centres need to be established. Further subsidizing community-based and Madrassa ECD centres established in deprived areas could also be an interesting cost-effective option. MoBSE could assess the financial feasibility of subsidizing some (targeting primarily meals, uniform, and other school fees) or all school-related costs. MoBSE could also subsidize children enrolled in non-public ECD services that meet minimum quality standards (see ELP, 2016), thus promoting enrolment of the poorest and most vulnerable, at a lower cost.

In addition, to further diversify ECE service provision, MoBSE could explore innovative funding mechanisms, such as impact bonds,

direct public support for up-front investment to establish non-public providers, tax deductions or excise-taxes on certain goods.

4. Increasing development partners' investment in ECE

Levels of investment in ECE from development partners remain well below those of other subsectors; recent trends are positive but need to be continued and intensified.

5. Supervising quality issues across all ECD centres

The quality of ECE remains poor, with very few centres adequately preparing children for primary school (in such areas as early literacy and mathematics, fine and gross motor skills, executive function and self-regulation, and socio-emotional skills). ECE teachers' qualifications, child-centred and play-based teaching approaches, pedagogical material, and small class sizes are key factors affecting quality (IIEP-UNESCO, forthcoming). Attracting and retaining qualified and motivated ECE teachers and providing continuous training will improve quality. Concrete interventions could include the following:

- *Promoting strong ECE training qualifications.* Most ECD teachers, particularly in ECD public schools, are untrained, as the ECD certificate is not recognized by MoBSE and tuition fees are high. From FY 2020, ECD teachers holding a diploma in ECD from The Gambia College will be hired by MoBSE as ECD Qualified. (Re-) Training of teachers and facilitators will also be critical, following the newly released ECD curriculum in 2019. Until recently, no funding was available to roll out this training. In 2019, UNICEF funded training on the revised ECD curriculum for 30 teachers in each region (from different ECD categories).
- *Better paid ECE teachers and facilitators, with more harmonized pay.* Government ECE teachers are much better off than their counterparts working in non-government schools. At the same time, patchy evidence found that salaries of staff in the education sector were lower than the average for public sector and health sector staff (World Bank, 2017).

- *Promoting a sound career path within the ECE subsector, starting with teacher assistant.* This will attract competent and talented young people to the profession, and boost retention levels. Recruiting assistants could also help improve PTRs at a lower cost. The newly released teacher policy, while a very positive step, is currently too generic and does not directly address ECE teacher career paths.
- *Ensuring enough resources are directed to learning inputs at school level.* Barely 1 per cent of total ECE costs is devoted to quality-related inputs. The introduction of a dedicated school improvement grant for ECE in 2020 is a positive step towards increasing funds for pedagogical materials. Cost-effective measures could also include investing in the production of local resources to reduce the costs of imported resources.
- *Introducing effective early learning monitoring tools could be very cost-effective.* MoBSE could consider introducing sample-based early learning assessments, such as the MELQO (measuring early learning quality and outcomes) or UNICEF ELA (early learning assessment), to regularly assess ECE pupils' readiness for school and the quality of ECE centres, making them an integral part of its assessment and monitoring mechanisms.

6. Strengthening existing quality assurance and monitoring mechanisms to ensure quality and accessibility

To ensure that non-governmental actors offer quality and equitable services, MoBSE will need to strengthen its oversight, quality assurance, and monitoring mechanisms. For example, cluster monitors could be recruited to be solely responsible for monitoring ECD centres. MoBSE would need sufficient resources and strong co-ordination mechanisms to avoid duplication and inefficiencies.

7. Strengthening ECE data collection systems for proper monitoring and advocacy

Improved data collection is critical for proper planning, budgeting, and monitoring. Currently, ECE data comes from a variety of sources, is not centralized, and can be inconsistent. The financial management information system (MIS) does not track all spending and the education MIS does not record all ECD centres, often omitting critical information (disability status of children, languages used, etc.). Issues of data storage and access are also of concern. Dealing with those shortcomings would greatly help MoBSE and its partners assess progress towards quality ECE *for all* and improve the development of the subsector.

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