



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Kingston Cluster Office for the Caribbean

**Participation in Action
Developing the Early Childhood Policy in Antigua and Barbuda**

An Early Childhood Policy Brief

Leon Charles

**Participation in Action:
Developing the Early Childhood Policy in Antigua and Barbuda**

Leon Charles
CARICHILD, Grenada

The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

The authors are responsible for the choice and the presentation of the facts contained in this document and for the opinions expressed therein, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.

All rights reserved
© UNESCO 2012
Kingston Cluster Office for the Caribbean
3rd Floor
25 Dominica Drive
Kingston 4
Jamaica, W.I

Introduction

In 2008, the Government of Antigua and Barbuda successfully adopted a National Early Childhood Policy with the support of a wide range of stakeholders. Developed through a participatory process, the policy was deemed credible and realistic, reflecting a shared vision and priorities for young children.

This Policy Brief will highlight the importance of effective stakeholder participation in the development of early childhood policies by closely examining the case of Antigua and Barbuda. It will describe the reasons for adopting a participatory approach, the actual process used to build support and buy-in for the policy, the benefits and challenges of this approach and the lessons learned.

Early Childhood Profile - Antigua and Barbuda

Antigua and Barbuda is a small island state comprised of the islands of Antigua and Barbuda, located at the southern end of the Leeward Islands, in the Eastern Caribbean. Barbuda is located 48 km to the north of Antigua. The state has a land area of 442 sq. km and a population of 87,600 in 2009¹. The national GDP in current prices (2009) was US\$1,131,762,963².

Early childhood programming targets children between the ages of 0-5 and is the direct responsibility of the Early Childhood Education Training Centre (ECETC), a department within the Ministry of Education. Various other ministries including the Ministries of Health, Social Protection and the Emergency Services also play an important role the delivery of early childhood programming.

The early childhood sector was experiencing a number of challenges which compromised its effectiveness and contributed towards the urgency for the policy development. Anecdotal evidence suggested that participation rates among children were low, that the quality of programming was substandard and that the teachers were not adequately qualified.

This was taking place in an operating context that was characterised by:

- The absence of a legal framework to guide the operations of the sector;
- The absence of prescribed standards to guide the operation of the childcare facilities.
- A lack of authority by the ECETC staff over privately owned centres. This limited their ability to correct any undesirable practices, as they had no mandate to address undesirable practices and their interaction with the private operators was based on moral suasion.

The Policy Development Decision

Why an early childhood policy?

¹ <http://data.worldbank.org/country/antigua-and-barbuda>

² Ibid

The government became increasingly concerned over the reported poor quality of service provision and the low participation rates in the centres, together with the overall uncoordinated manner in which the sector was developing. It sought external guidance from UNICEF on how these challenges could be addressed. The agency recommended the services of an external Consultant, who advised that there were three options open to the Government, viz:

- *Option 1* - Use a "fire fighting" approach, addressing specific problems as they arose;
- *Option 2* - Tinker with the system, by addressing specific glaring deficiencies e.g. absence of minimum service standards, but leaving the underlying structures unchanged;
- *Option 3* - Initiate a comprehensive response to the challenges facing the sector, by developing a national Early Childhood Development Policy to guide the development of the sector in a focused and coordinated manner.

The Government, in collaboration with the ECETC, UNICEF and the Consultant, agreed that the development of a comprehensive Policy was the most sustainable of the three options. That decision was guided by two prime considerations, viz:

- a) The *first* was the uncoordinated nature of the operations of the early childhood provision and the need to bring some structure and coordination to these operations. Such sector wide coordination could best be achieved by a formal *Policy Framework* which clarified the direction in which the sector was expected to develop. It would provide the answers to two critical questions - Where is the sector heading? And what is the output expected of the sector?

These questions were deemed critical, as their answers would provide guidance for many other decisions that had to be made by stakeholders - governments, parents, teachers, centre operators and the like. Such decisions included considerations like: What kind of curriculum was needed in the centres? What level of training was needed for teachers and caregivers? What kind of participation and involvement was required of parents? What level of fees should be paid by parents? Should government provide assistance to those who could not pay fees and if so, how should this be done? Should government provide subsidies or subventions to early childhood centres, especially those serving vulnerable or remote populations? and the like. The answers to these and many more questions depended on where the sector is headed and what was expected of the sector.

- b) The *second* consideration was the fact that there were *many stakeholders* operating within the sector, who sometimes had *conflicting and contradictory objectives and interests*. These stakeholders included the children, parents, centre operators, teachers and caregivers, policy-makers and the community at large. A major concern of the centre operators was their ability to be financially viable, which required them to strive to maximize on fees, and to manage their costs within the constraints of the available finances. This however placed them at odds with parents, for example, who would want to have access at an affordable fee; with teachers, who would want to receive attractive salaries and benefits in return for their services, and with policy makers, who would want

to ensure that the service standards provided were in keeping with accepted norms of health, safety, pedagogical quality and social and emotional support.

A clear policy framework was seen as a way to harmonize and cater to the needs of this diverse set of stakeholders.

Why a Participatory Methodology?

The multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral nature of the early childhood sector meant that any policy to be implemented within the sector had to have the support of all the key stakeholders. It was therefore decided that the policy development process had to include participation from all such stakeholders. These included:

- Members of Government;
- Parents;
- Service providers/centre operators;
- Teachers and Caregivers;
- Senior officials from the Ministry of Education - Permanent Secretary, Chief Education Officer, Curriculum Officers;
- Senior officials from collaborating ministries and agencies - education, finance, health, social protection, emergency services, legal affairs;
- The Chamber of Industry and Commerce; and
- General public.

The Participatory Policy Development Process

The policy development process was implemented in phases - Preparation, Situation Analysis, Consultation with Stakeholders, Development of Policy Documents, Consensus Building and Policy Approval. The methodology used was the one recommended by the (then) draft CARICOM Guidelines³, which had been reviewed and endorsed by the authorities in Antigua and Barbuda in March 2007.

Preparation

This phase involved the development of an implementation plan for the process of policy development based on the existing realities. The plan was heavily influenced by the absence of empirical information on the sector, and therefore prioritised a Situation Analysis as a critical first phase that had to be implemented. The information that was generated in that first phase would then form the basis for implementation of the other phases.

Situation Analysis

Two surveys were initiated in 2007 to generate the required information, viz:

³ CARICOM Secretariat. 2008. *Regional Guidelines for Developing Policy, Regulation and Standards in Early Childhood Development Services*.

- A survey of the quality of programming in the early childhood centres which were in operation throughout the island using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Revised)⁴ (ECERS-R) survey instrument;
- A data survey to identify the number and ownership of the centres, the participation rates in the early childhood programmes and the qualification levels of the caregivers and teachers.

These surveys confirmed the following characteristics of the early childhood provisioning:

- *High level of Private Ownership* - There were 110 early childhood centres in Antigua and Barbuda. 72% of these centres were owned by private operators, 15% by the church and 10% by the Government⁵.
- *Low Participation Rate* - There were 9,684 children in the early childhood cohort and only 46% of the children of eligible age were participating in the formal early childhood programmes that were available - 28% of the children two years old and under and 73% of the children between ages three and five⁶.
- *Poor Quality* - There were significant weaknesses in the quality of the programming that was being provided⁷. Approximately half of the centres had inadequate space and furnishings, unsound health and safety practices, including care practices, and very limited involvement of parents in their children's learning. Insufficient attention was being given to language and communication skills development in over half of the centres and only a very limited range of learning activities was being offered in 75% of centres. Almost no provision was being made for personal needs of staff and only limited opportunities were available for professional development.
- *Inadequately Trained Staff* - Only 30% of the persons who interacted with children had received any formal training in early childhood development⁸.

Consultation with Stakeholders

A participatory process was developed to ensure that all the identified stakeholders were provided with opportunities to contribute to the policy at every stage of its development.

The consultations were initiated with the circulation of a national consultation document which summarised the findings of the surveys and invited all the citizenry to submit recommendations for inclusion in a national policy.

⁴ Harms, T., Clifford, R.M., and Cryer, D. 2005. *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale , Revised Edition, Updated (ECERS-R)*, USA: Teachers' College Press

⁵ Charles, Leon. 2007. *Results of survey carried out to inform Situation Analysis of the Antigua and Barbuda early childhood service provision (Not Published)*

⁶ Charles, Leon. 2007. *Ibid*

⁷ Early Childhood Education Training Centre. 2007. *Quality of Learning Environments in Early Childhood Centres in Antigua and Barbuda. Prepared with the assistance of UNICEF Barbados and Eastern Caribbean Office*

⁸ Charles, Leon. 2007. *Ibid*

The document was circulated to all parents at the early childhood centres and placed in other public places such as post offices and the like. The mass media was used extensively to build public awareness about the policy process and the issues in the document. This included radio call-in programmes on popular radio stations, where the issues were discussed with callers, who were also provided with an opportunity to make suggestions; articles in the local newspapers; and appearances on popular television shows.

This was accompanied by community level consultations in five strategically located communities around the country - four in Antigua and one in Barbuda - at which the findings of the surveys were shared and where recommendations to address the identified problems were discussed. The Minister of Education attended and participated in three of these consultations and senior staff members from the Ministry of Education and the ECETC were present and participated in all consultations.

The outcomes from these consultations formed the basis for the content of the draft policy document. Consistent themes that emerged from these consultations included⁹ concern over the quality of the service provision and low levels of participation; the need for the establishment of minimum standards and for supporting regulation of the sector; for the introduction of a standardized curriculum; for teacher training; for parental education; for linkages between early childhood centres and the health services and for support to be provided to the centres in the form of access to teaching materials and the like.

Developing the Policy Document

The recommendations from these consultations were used to develop a generic draft policy document and draft Minimum Service Standard, given the expressed concern over the quality of service provision and the call for the immediate introduction of standards. These were submitted to a round of targeted consultations with the main stakeholders - operators and owners of early childhood facilities as a group, caregivers and teachers as a group, and senior public service officials as a group. Copies were also made available in public places with a request for interested members of the public to make written submissions on the draft.

Building the Consensus

The inputs from this second round of consultations were used to develop a formal draft Policy document and a formal version of the Minimum Service Standard, which were presented to the Cabinet of ministers in an informal session. The feedback from Cabinet was used to further develop and refine the formal draft Policy and formal draft Minimum Service Standard.

These formal drafts were submitted to a National Stakeholder Consultation on Early Childhood Development to which representatives from all relevant stakeholder groups which would be affected by the implementation of the Policy and Minimum Service Standard were invited. This grouping reviewed the draft Policy and Minimum Service Standard and made a number of recommendations. These were incorporated into the formal Policy and Minimum Service Standard, which were submitted to Cabinet for approval in July 2008.

The main methodologies used to involve the different stakeholders are summarized in Table 1.

⁹ *Early Childhood Education Training Centre. 2007. Minutes from Stakeholder Consultations*

Table 1 - Stakeholder Participatory Methodologies

Stakeholder	Methodologies
Members of Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Informal Cabinet meeting to review draft policy▪ Formal submission of recommended Policy to Cabinet
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Personal communication at centre level▪ Community level consultations▪ Representation at National Consultation
Service Provider/Centre Operators	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Personal communication at centre level▪ Community level consultations▪ Specific operators' meeting to discuss draft policy▪ Representation at National Consultation
Teachers/Caregivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Personal communication at centre level▪ Community level consultations▪ Specific teachers' and caregivers' meeting to discuss draft policy▪ Representation at National Consultation
Ministry of Education Officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Personal communication▪ Community level consultations▪ Specific meeting to discuss draft policy▪ Participation in National Consultation
Officials from collaborating agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Specific meeting to discuss draft policy▪ Participation in National Consultation
General Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Community level consultations▪ Call-in radio programmes

Policy Approval

The Policy Approval process involved a formal presentation to Cabinet that consisted of the proposed Early Childhood Policy, proposed Minimum Service Standard and an Implementation Plan, which included confirmed support from both UNESCO and UNICEF for the implementation of specific activities in Year 1.

Outcomes from the Use of Participatory Methodology

The use of such a participatory methodology brought many benefits to the process, viz:

- a) ***Accuracy in problem identification and realism in policy responses*** proposed, as the stakeholders were conscious of the fact that they would be the ones who would have to implement the policy. The final approved policy document reflected the concerns that were raised at the stakeholder consultations and addressed the following eight priority issues¹⁰, viz:
 - i. A Vision that "All children in Antigua and Barbuda are provided with the opportunities to develop to their fullest potential".

¹⁰ Early Childhood Policy for Antigua and Barbuda

- ii. Increased access to early stimulation and early education services for all children from birth to eight.
 - iii. Development and implementation of a regulatory framework for the provision of early childhood services, based on minimum service delivery standards and a strong compliance mechanism.
 - iv. Strengthening the quality of the learning environment in early childhood centres.
 - v. Establishment and maintenance of teacher training and development programmes for early childhood workers.
 - vi. Provision of financial support and incentives for the development of the early childhood development services.
 - vii. Strengthening parents' understanding of the importance of early childhood development and of their participation in their children's programmes.
 - viii. Formalization of structures and processes for the integrated management of the sector.
- b) ***Creation of an atmosphere of trust among stakeholders and between stakeholders and the government.*** Stakeholders were provided with an opportunity to consider and discuss each other's viewpoints, thereby enabling greater understanding of the different perspectives that influence the final decisions. The opportunity was also provided to examine the government's motives in initiating such a process and to alleviate fears that the policy, when implemented, would have adverse implications for the operators.
- c) It provided ***an opportunity to resolve difficult issues in advance*** as the mutual discussions provided a forum where contentious issues were dealt with in a frank and transparent manner, instead of being deferred for the implementation stage.
- d) It built awareness of ***the vision of an effective early childhood service provision and the challenges that had to be overcome*** to achieve that vision.
- e) It generated ***ownership of the policy*** among the participating stakeholders, who were able to identify "their points" in the policy and thus have a sense of ownership and an interest in its successful implementation.
- f) It increased the ***public demand for quality service***, resulting from the publicity that was needed to promote a successful participatory process.
- g) It generated a greater ***willingness by the political leadership to approve and support the implementation of the policy***, given that it already had a critical mass of people and institutions that were demonstrating support.

- h) It generated *greater confidence on the part of the international donor community* in the support of investment in early childhood services, as evidenced by the participation of multiple agencies in supporting the Implementation Plan that was developed.

Using such a methodology also had its share of challenges. These included:

- a) ***Duration*** - Such a participatory methodology is a time consuming process and the entire process from conceptualization to Cabinet approval took 19 months.
- b) ***Cost*** - It was a costly process. The use of an external consultant meant that multiple visits had to be made to Antigua and Barbuda to keep participation to the forefront of the process, even though a significant number of the consultations were done by local officials within Antigua and Barbuda.
- c) ***Credibility*** - Maintaining credibility with such a wide range of stakeholders required attending to the needs of all stakeholders in a manner that was perceived by all as balanced and equitable.
- d) ***Maintaining momentum*** - This was also a major challenge, as stakeholders expect to see results soon after the consultation process concluded. Maintaining momentum was therefore important and proved challenging at times, especially in the latter stages of the process, when scheduling participation of Government ministers and other senior personnel proved very difficult.

Lessons Learned

A number of factors contributed to the success of the policy development process in Antigua and Barbuda that could serve as useful lessons for other countries. These include the necessity for government and public sector support, the importance of local ownership by stakeholders and the catalytic role that donor agencies could play in moving the process forward.

a) Government and Public sector Support:

- Political support for the process - Political support from the Minister, demonstrated through participation in community level consultations, provided credibility to the process and sent a signal to the rest of the country and the public service that government was serious about the policy.
- Information exchange with Cabinet - Discussion of draft proposals with the Cabinet provided an opportunity for the policy process to respond to key political concerns, before the policy was submitted for formal approval. This paved the way for a quick formal approval.
- Trusted Sectoral leadership - Sectoral leadership that is trusted by the national authorities is essential for embarking on and sustaining the policy process.

- Cooperation from mid-level and senior public servants -This smoothed the internal decision-making processes which could have been a source of resistance that could have blocked the process.

b) Local Stakeholder Ownership

- Situation Analysis - The ability to contextualize the problem in the local setting, generated ownership among stakeholders and assisted in convincing people of the need for change, thus making it easier to develop and implement the policy.
- Stakeholder participation - Use of this process reduced resistance and enabled immediate reactions to negative responses. This made it difficult to spread rumours, as there was a forum for discussion of all concerns.

c) Donor Support

- Demonstration of support by the donor community in the provision of technical assistance and resources to initiate the process was key to its successful implementation.
- Donor support for the initial phase of the Implementation Plan, was a key factor in the final Cabinet approval process.