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The Path of Progress: achievements and challenges of ECD policy implementation in St Kitts and Nevis

An Early Childhood Policy Brief

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Introduction

St. Kitts and Nevis, the smallest sovereign state in the Americas,¹ adopted a new Early Childhood Development Policy in 2009. Given its strong tradition of commitment to the development of the early childhood development (ECD) sector, the country makes a valuable case for policy analysis within the Caribbean region and beyond. The present brief will examine ongoing policy implementation with reference to key areas defined in the new policy, specifically looking at main achievements to date, obstacles encountered, and lessons learned. While a number of activities have been delayed, considerable progress has been made, highlighting the inherent strengths of the St. Kitts-Nevis ECD sector.

A brief overview of ECD in St. Kitts and Nevis

St. Kitts and Nevis stands out among CARICOM² Member States in its prioritization of ECD as a primordial factor in nation building. It is one of the few Caribbean countries where state involvement in ECD has gone beyond provision of basic birth and immunization services to developing a range of related services. It is also observed to sustain a high level of positive staff-child interaction and programme quality in ECD services compared to other Caribbean countries.³ In March 2009, following a comprehensive policy revision process spearheaded by the Early Childhood Development Unit (ECDU) within the Ministry of Education (MOE), St. Kitts and Nevis government approved in Cabinet a new ECD Policy, replacing the one in operation since 1982.

State involvement in ECD came to the fore when women entered the workforce in large numbers during the 1970s and 1980s.⁴ In response to the rising demand for extra-familial childcare, the Government multiplied actions to promote quality ECD provision. These included the establishment of centres for delivery of ECD services; provision of level training opportunities for early childhood personnel;⁵ establishment of the ECDU within the MOE with support from international partners such as UNICEF and USAID; introduction of the internationally acclaimed High/Scope curriculum⁶; improved remuneration of early childhood teachers; adoption of an ECD Policy in 1982 and the passing of legislation on licensing ECD services in 1994. Government leadership is also reflected in its high level of spending on ECD. Between 2006 and 2009, St. Kitts and Nevis devoted 7-12% of its education expenditure to this sector, comparable

¹ The twin island state, which gained independence from Great Britain in 1983, has an estimated population of nearly 52,000 and nearly 2,000 children of pre-primary school age (5- and 6-year olds) in 2009. <http://status.uis.unesco.org>

² The Caribbean Community, including the Single Market and Economy comprises Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Grenada, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago and Suriname as Member States, and Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Turks and Caicos, as Associate Member States.

³ UNESCO. *Early Childhood Care and Education. Latin America and the Caribbean*. Presented to the World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, Moscow, 27-29 September 2010, p. 124.

⁴ St. Kitts and Nevis, Ministry of Education, 2008. *Early Childhood Development Policy*, p. 1.

⁵ A certificate programme in ECD was introduced consisting of 1-2 years' training in Trinidad and Tobago at the Regional Training and Resource Centre of SERVOL, an indigenous development organization, and one year in St. Kitts and Nevis, the latter period spent on site at ECD centres. Some practitioners were also trained in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and in Israel.

⁶ The High/Scope [early childhood education](#) approach, used in [preschool](#), [kindergarten](#), [childcare](#), or [elementary school](#) settings, was developed in the [United States](#) in the 1960s. It is now common there and in some other countries. Active Participatory Learning is at the core of the High/Scope Curriculum which advocates that learning best occurs when five key ingredients are present: materials, manipulation, choice, language/ thought and support from adults. Under an agreement signed with the High/Scope Foundation in 1981, St. Kitts and Nevis adopted its curriculum in all government-run early childhood (EC) centres, the only CARICOM country to do so during a twenty-five year period.

with numerous developed countries including Switzerland, Norway and Canada.⁷ Earlier data (2004) shows St. Kitts and Nevis spending more on pre-primary education than most other CARICOM countries.⁸

ECD in St. Kitts and Nevis officially covers the ages 0-8. In addition to pre-school services, this age range encompasses the first three years of primary school, i.e. kindergarten to Grade Two (ages 5-8). There are three types of pre-primary ECD services: (1) nurseries, catering for children ages 0-3 (including private home-based nurseries); (2) daycare centres, catering for children 0-5; and (3) preschools catering for children ages 3-5 (see Table 1). Home-based nurseries are monitored under the Reaching the Unreached (RTU) programme - initiated by the ECDU and supported by UNICEF - that provides training and material support. Approximately 18% of pre-primary ECD services (i.e. eighteen centres) are provided by the government, and the rest by non-government actors. Among non-governmental provision, 64% are privately owned and 11% are run by churches. Generally, government-run services have a higher quality of service provision.⁹

Table 1: Number and type of pre-primary ECD institutions in St. Kitts and Nevis, 2009-2010¹⁰

Type of centre	St. Kitts	Nevis	Total (St. Kitts and Nevis)
Govt. nursery	4	0	18 (18%)
Govt. daycare	9	0	
Govt. preschool	2	3	
Total (Government)	15	3	
Private nursery	28*	15**	80 (82%)
Private daycare	5	1	
Private preschool	25	6	
Total (non-government)	58	22	
Total (Govt. and non-government)	73	25	98

*Nineteen nurseries are listed as being part of the Reaching the Unreached (RTU) Programme.

** Twelve nurseries are listed as being part of the Reaching the Unreached (RTU) Programme.

Due to the larger numbers of non-governmental ECD services, a much higher number of children overall is enrolled in these services as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Access rates to pre-primary ECD services in St. Kitts and Nevis¹¹

⁷ Charles, L.D.; Williams, S. (2006) *Early childhood care and education in the Caribbean (CARICOM states)*. Background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2007, p. 133.

⁸ Paris, UNESCO, 2006. *Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education*. EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007, p. 182.

There was, however, a decline in the amount devoted to ECD since 2006 with a reduction of over \$1 million in 2007 and 2008. Overall education expenditure for 2008 was XCD \$58,251, 000 with XCD \$4,139,000 devoted specifically to early childhood education. (Response by St. Kitts and Nevis to questionnaire intended to inform the Caribbean Regional ECCE Report 2010 prepared for the World Conference on ECCE, Moscow, 27-29 September 2010.)

⁹ *St. Kitts and Nevis. Quality of Learning Environments in Early Childhood Centres*. Report of a survey undertaken in 2007 by the ECDU, MOE, St. Kitts and Nevis with technical assistance and support from UNICEF.

Type of centre	Enrolments (rates in %) in St. Kitts	Enrolments (rates in %) in Nevis
Govt. daycare	716	-
Govt. preschool	97	148
Total Govt. enrolment	906 (40%)	148 (28%)
Non-government nursery	406	126
Non-government daycare	242	51
Non-government preschool	724	198
Total non-government enrolment	1342 (6 v vb0%)	375 (72%)
Total enrolments	2248	523

The ECDU located within the MOE is responsible for the overall supervision of ECD services in the country with a specific focus on children ages 0-5. The Unit reports to the Minister of Education through the Permanent Secretary, Education. The ECDU is managed by a national coordinator, six early childhood resource personnel in St. Kitts and two in Nevis, and support staff. Other governmental agencies providing ECD services to children include the Ministries of Health, Social Development and Gender Affairs and National Security. The MOE and these Ministries regularly collaborate in key areas such as baby and toddler clinics, supervision of health, nutrition and safety in ECD centres and child protection.¹²

The need for a revised ECD Policy

While much progress was made due to the Government's pioneering initiatives in ECD over three decades, a number of areas still needed improvement. Quality and statistical surveys carried out in 2007 revealed that the existing ECD policy – which had only been revisited in a piecemeal fashion since the early 1980s– was insufficient in supporting the introduction of the needed improvements effectively and sustainably. The decision to revise the policy was also in keeping with a region-wide move in all CARICOM member states to develop comprehensive national ECD policies, regulatory frameworks and strategic plans, which were to be completed and made fully operational by 2015.¹³

The revisions sought to address key deficiencies in access, quality and system support¹⁴, identified through the 2007 surveys.

- *Relatively low participation level, particularly for children ages 0-2: Only 53% of children between the ages of 0-5 were recorded as participating in formal ECD services – 38% of the birth to two age group and 76% of the three to five age group.*

¹¹ These Ministries as well as those of Finance and Sustainable Development participated in national consultations to develop the draft revised policy.

¹³ UNESCO. *Early Childhood Care and Education. Latin America and the Caribbean*. Presented to the World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, Moscow, 27-29 September 2010, pp. 100-101.

¹⁴ St. Kitts and Nevis, Ministry of Education, 2008. *Early Childhood Development Policy, p. 1-2*.

- *A number of inadequacies in various areas of service provision:* Deficient areas included indoor space, gross motor equipment, critical activities including dramatic play and nature/science, and provision for children with disabilities.
- *Inadequate provision of staff training and development,* due largely to the absence of an institution in the country providing professional qualifications in ECD; and
- *An outdated regulatory framework:* The roles and responsibilities of the Probation and Child Welfare Board established in 1994 to regulate registration and licensing of ECD centres needed reviewing as did the institutional structure for monitoring standards and issuing licenses.¹⁵

The process of revising the ECD policy, undertaken during 2008, was led by the MOE and UNICEF. It involved consultations with a wide range of stakeholders, including parents, teachers, ECD supervisors, representatives of all government ministries, the Probation and Child Welfare Board, NGOs and the general public. The public was kept abreast of the process through regular media releases.

The new policy and its implementation

Subsequently, a new Early Childhood Development Policy was adopted by the cabinet in March 2009. Its strategic objective is to ensure that “all children of St. Kitts and Nevis are adequately prepared for entry into primary school and for life in general”.¹⁶ Eight inter-related strategies were outlined to achieve the policy’s strategic objective and specific goals (see Table 3).

1	Provide access to EC services to all children in the Federation with special emphasis on children from poor and disadvantaged families and communities
2	Strengthen monitoring and supervision of learning environments (in both centres and homes)
3	Enhance the quality of learning environments
4	Strengthen programming for transition between nursery, daycare, preschool and primary school (kindergarten to Grade Two)
5	Professionalize and recognize the role of early childhood practitioners and educators
6	Provide opportunities for children with special needs to participate in inclusive ECD experiences
7	Enhance opportunities for parental education and participation
8	Strengthen inter-agency coordination and collaboration

¹⁵ The Probation and Child Welfare Board, responsible for children 0-18, is a statutory body presently operating under the Ministry of Social Development and Gender Affairs. Its multi-sectoral membership includes representation by the ECDU of the Ministry of Education. This institutional disparity creates some challenges of smooth coordination of the licensing process.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 3-4.

The implementation of the new policy is coordinated by the ECDU in close partnership with UNICEF. It is guided by a two-year implementation plan (2008-2010) as well as the four-year development and policy implementation plan (2010-2014), which forms part of the Government's White Paper on Education. The ECDU is also responsible for monitoring and reporting on the implementation process (e.g. preparation and submission to the Permanent Secretary, Education of periodic progress reports regarding the above-mentioned four-year development and implementation plan, as well as annual reports to UNICEF). In their annual reports to the ECDU on their achievements over the past year, individual ECD centres will provide updates on their progress with regard to the Policy. A full evaluation and review of the Policy framework is scheduled to take place every three years.

The Government is responsible for funding key aspects of the policy reforms, and sources new funding for a number of activities. UNICEF provides major financial and technical assistance and supports overall coordination of the policy implementation. Funding has also come from the Venezuelan government, the Organization of American States and UNESCO.

Achievements to date

Notable progress has been made in the implementation of the new ECD Policy. The 2008-2010 implementation plan developed through multi-sectoral participation¹⁸ includes four action areas drawn from the goals and key strategies of the Policy.¹⁹ These include: (1) expansion of access, (2) improvement of quality, (3) strengthening of support for ECD services and (4) cabinet approval of policy and legislative amendments. The progress made in these four areas is summarized in the following sections.

Expanding access to ECD services equitably

The new ECD Policy pays special attention to vulnerable children, specifically those from low income brackets²⁰ and those with special needs. It aims, through private-public partnership, to increase overall participation in ECD services to at least 67% by the end of 2010 for children ages 0-5 (including raising participation of children 0-3 from 38% to at least 51% and of children 3-5 from 76% to 90%). This foresees an increase in the number of preschool/nursery spaces by up to 576, with 250 to be provided by government.²¹ A detailed mapping study will be undertaken to devise a strategy for increasing the participation of vulnerable children. This process will be assisted by a costing study of ECD provision which will recommend a package of financial strategies for increasing access within the public and private sectors.

To date, some additional spaces have been constructed in government-owned ECD services, and new centres are being built. However, as the current rate of progress will not allow the target to be attained by 2010, the completion date has been pushed back by up to two years.²² Admission guidelines, which already exist for public services, still need to be adapted for private services.

¹⁸ Priorities were proposed by participants at a National Consultation held in November 2008 and the plan drafted by a team consisting of ECDU officers, UNICEF personnel and the Director of Community and Social Development.

¹⁹ St. Kitts Nevis National Early Childhood Policy Draft Implementation Plan for 2008-2010.

²⁰ Includes children in care and children of teenage parents.

²¹ This involves the provision of 150 additional ECD spaces in St. Kitts and 100 in Nevis where plans include building the first government nursery on the island.

²² White paper on Education. Development and Policy Implementation for period 2010-2014.

Initial efforts are underway in conjunction with the Department of Community and Social Development to map and define vulnerable communities. Meanwhile a study to assess, the costs of and need for ECD services involving 33 public and private centres, was completed in February 2011, and its findings are now being analyzed. The results will serve as guidelines to bring all services in the country up to standard. Several financial incentives for private/non-governmental ECD institutions, such as duty free concessions on building and educational materials, free teacher training, and waiving of registration and licensing fees, were already in place before the introduction of the new policy. Discussions are currently underway to design and introduce new incentives for increasing access.

Improving quality of early childhood services

The Policy seeks to increase the number of staff trained in ECD from the current 21% to 50% by the end of 2010, with salaries reflecting levels of training and qualifications.²³ It also aims to promote children's smooth transitions between different ECD services. Reflecting the policy, the implementation plan defines key actions in favour of quality, such as: standardization of the High/Scope curriculum across all centres with support to private sector institutions; introduction of an associate degree in early childhood education; development of competency-based certification for nursery workers; and consolidation of the preschool to primary transition programme initiated since the early 2000s.²⁴

There are some major achievements in this area. For example, the plans to fully roll out the High/Scope curriculum are on track. Three "Focus Classrooms" have been established, two in St. Kitts and one in Nevis. Here, the curriculum has been fully introduced and adequate supplies of materials acquired. Since 2008, teachers in all government and private pre-schools have undergone High/Scope training/retraining with further training envisaged. Government and private ECD centres across the Federation have adopted the curriculum but are at varying levels of implementation. The qualification of two ECDU officers - one from each island - as certified High/Scope trainers will assist in refining curriculum implementation.

Monitoring the quality of learning environments is an integral part of the licensing process for ECD centres. Efforts are being strengthened through upgraded service standards and an accompanying monitoring check list developed through a UNICEF initiative for member countries of the Organization of East Caribbean States (OECS).²⁵ The upgraded licensing instruments have been piloted but are yet to be finalized. They are based on the *CARICOM Regional Guidelines for Developing Policy, Regulation and Standards in ECD Services* adopted by CARICOM countries in 2008. A second, separate check list will be developed by the ECDU for the specific needs of home-based centres.

²³ Presently there are 3 officers qualified at Masters level, 4 with Bachelor or Associate degrees, 5 with diplomas and 26 who have completed the two-year certificate programme in ECD.

²⁴ This programme seeks to ensure an effective and harmonized transition between the different levels of early childhood development. Preschool children are briefly introduced to kindergarten settings during the year preceding their entry to primary school. To date all kindergarten teachers in both the public and private sectors have undergone training in facilitating transition to primary school and toys and manipulatives have been supplied to schools. Annual transition training of kindergarten teachers is anticipated. The transition programme is supposed to last throughout the kindergarten year.

²⁵ A nine member political and economic grouping comprising Antigua and Barbuda, Commonwealth of Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia and St Vincent and the Grenadines. Anguilla and the British Virgin Islands are associate members.

Meanwhile, the associate degree course in early childhood education, planned for introduction by the Clarence Fitzroy Bryant College (CFBC) in St. Kitts by September 2010, is now foreseen for commencement in September 2012. To date a curriculum has been selected.

Although the focus of the pre-school to primary transition programme is on kindergarten, in principle it includes pupils up to 8 years old (Grade Two). Manipulative materials have now been provided for Grade One.

Strengthening support for early childhood services

Actions to reinforce support for ECD services include strengthening of the institutional base for the management of these services with the construction of new administrative offices and a demonstration centre; support for children with special needs; increased opportunities for parental education and participation; and establishment of a Council on Early Childhood Education, an inter-sectoral body mandated to advise on and monitor policy development.²⁶

Considerable ground remains to be covered in the area of special needs. Mapping of the numbers and specific needs of these children is yet to be done and criteria for their inclusion in ECD services remain to be developed. Further effort is needed to provide adequate equipping/retrofitting of ECD centres. Presently, some centres possess ramps while ramps have been included in the design of new ECD services. Two ECD teachers have been posted to the Special Needs Unit in St. Kitts, which has established a pre-primary class. In view of the country's small population, it is not planned to have a special needs teacher attached to every ECD institution, but rather, a small number (i.e. four) trained as resource persons in each of four designated zones.

Good progress has been made in expanding and enhancing opportunities for parent education. A two-month series of parenting workshops was organized in different parishes between 2009 and 2010. In the context of predominantly matriarchal family structures prevailing in the country, advances have been made in working with fathers and bringing about their greater participation in their children's early education and upbringing.²⁷ Discussions have been held on the formation of an inter-agency Council and collaboration between government ministries/departments has intensified.²⁸

Cabinet approval of policy and legislative amendments

The new ECD policy was approved by Cabinet in March 2009 while amendments to the 2005 Education Act have been submitted to Cabinet. The amendments addressed an anomaly whereby ECD services provided by both government and private sector operators included children below the ages of three but the Education Act did not make provision for this group.

Challenges encountered and lessons learned

Despite visible progress made in a number of areas, it has not been possible to ensure the timely carrying out of all major activities outlined in the implementation plan. Notwithstanding strong

²⁶ The establishment of such a body is provided for in the 2005 Education Act. A previous inter-sectoral body, the National Policy Council for Early Childhood Development was founded in 1981.

²⁷ Fathers were the focus of the 2010 Child Month (theme: *Children Need Fathers Too*).

²⁸ It has been suggested that once established the Council become responsible for licensing ECD services, presently the remit of the Probation and Child Welfare Board. (Interview with Vanta Walters, former Director, ECDU, February 2011).

government support and sound, highly committed leadership within the ECDU, a major challenge has been for the staff to continue the routine activities of the Unit while attempting to successfully undertake and complete the numerous newly scheduled actions on time.

Similarly, the limited technical/human resource capacity of other local institutions has caused delays in meeting some targets, such as completion of various building projects by the Public Works Department. Another example is the planned introduction of local certification for early childhood practitioners in St. Kitts and Nevis which demands assistance from external institutions.²⁹

The movement of key personnel through transfer, retirement or voluntary departure constitutes another human resource challenge, particularly acute in small states. Progress has been directly affected by the recent retirement of the coordinator of the ECDU, the head of the Curriculum Development Unit, MOE and a key official in the Department of Community and Social Development.

The lack of an appropriate institutional framework makes closer inter-sectoral collaboration difficult, and is not conducive to a maximized use of existing human and technical resources.³⁰ This situation should however, improve with the official establishment of the inter-sectoral Council on Early Childhood Education.

St. Kitts and Nevis is one of the most heavily indebted countries in the world,³¹ and has been hit hard by the global economic downturn.³² Severe economic constraints have impacted on government spending in ECD resulting in the slowing down of some activities, notably building projects.³³ Delays have also been caused by cuts in funding from donors.³⁴

Setting unrealistic timeframes has been problematic. Deadlines have needed to be adjusted for certain activities – such as the completion of the costing study, introduction of the ECD associate degree, and certification of nursery workers – requiring considerably longer preparatory time than expected. The White Paper on Education (2010–2014) has considerably revised the timeframes outlined in the ECD policy implementation plan.³⁵

St. Kitts and Nevis has not yet signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The signing and ratification of this convention might hasten concrete actions for special needs, an area of the new policy which has not yet received adequate attention.

²⁹ The long term financial viability of these training programmes in such a small country may also come into question.

³⁰ St. Kitts and Nevis, Ministry of Education, 2008. *Early Childhood Development Policy*, p. 1-2.

³¹ The present public debt is equivalent to roughly 185% of GDP. (CIA World Factbook: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sc.html>)

³² The tourism industry declined by 5.5% in 2009 with a further decline projected for 2010 although signs of an economic turnaround were reported by the IMF. (St Kitts and Nevis Statement to the Tenth Session of the Universal Periodic Review to the Human Rights Council, United Nations, 2/4/2011)

³³ Interviews with Mrs Vanta Walters, former Director, ECDU and Mrs Florence Moving, ECD Officer, Nevis.

³⁴ Notably funding foreseen for carrying out the feasibility study for increasing access by vulnerable children.

³⁵ White Paper on Education. Development and Policy Implementation for Period 2010-2014. Development and Policy Implementation Plan in Early Childhood Education.

Conclusions

Despite the various constraints listed above, there has been no major deviation from the original policy implementation plan. While the meeting of many targets has been delayed, their achievement is still envisaged. The strengths of the St. Kitts and Nevis ECD sector have provided a strong foundation for consolidation, expansion and improvement of ECD provision despite the present challenging period. Enabling factors include:

- Strong, consistent government support and investment
- A well trained administration with a history of visionary, committed leadership
- A holistic innovative approach to curriculum development (established since the adoption of the High/Scope programme in 1981)
- A long-established regulatory framework (set up since 1994)
- Growing efforts at multi-sectoral collaboration
- A well-established relationship with the major funding agency.

St. Kitts and Nevis appears to have embraced fully, and to be on track to reach the first Education for All Goal.³⁶ Its efforts can be said to meet the various recommended actions for creating a favorable ECD policy environment. The new policy document is essentially a continuation and strengthening of sound ECD policy and practice which has existed in this tiny nation for over 30 years. Its implementation is an ongoing process which will continue to be reviewed and reshaped as new trends and needs arise. Undoubtedly, however, the full success of ongoing ECD policy implementation will be severely challenged in the years ahead by the constraints of the highly indebted economy and the resulting reform agenda undertaken by government.

³⁶ “Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.”