

Child care and early childhood development programmes and policies: Their relationship to eradicating child poverty ^[1]

CHIP Report no. 8

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Source: Childhood Poverty Research and Policy Centre

Format: Report

Publication Date: 1 Jan 2004

AVAILABILITY

[Report in pdf](#) ^[2]

Abstract:

Early childhood development (ECD) covers a variety of interventions with young children and their carers/families, including health and nutrition, child care, education and parent support. While the World Bank, World Health Organisation, UNICEF and UNESCO have all emphasised the importance of ECD in improving physical and psycho-social wellbeing, promoting cognitive gains in young children, and directly or indirectly combating poverty, it is largely North American influences, assumptions and extrapolations which underlie these assertions. Using two country case studies, Swaziland and Kazakhstan, the paper reveals three significant issues arising from the direct transfer of these international approaches and conceptualisations of ECD from the North to developing countries.

Firstly, the inappropriateness of ECD recommendations and programmes in developing countries which have been based on evidence from the North, has underlined the importance of the context in which ECD interventions take place. The paper notes that extrapolation and transfer from North to South is likely to be simplistic and inaccurate. Secondly, the evidence about the efficacy of ECD programmes in developing countries lacks robustness. Thirdly, the loss of quality (of ECD) in the transfer from the North is an outcome of the under-resourcing of such initiatives in developing countries.

The paper suggests that ECD needs to have a pro-poor orientation to support poor families. It can also provide practical relief specifically to mitigate childhood poverty in particular circumstances, by providing child care for time-poor working mothers with subsistence earnings, child care for orphans and other vulnerable children, especially those affected by HIV/AIDS, and child care and support for children experiencing war and conflict. The paper recommends that, given the long-term poverty reduction potential of ECD, donor support is critical in many countries which are too poor to provide short-term finance. It stresses that all ECD initiatives need to be carefully evaluated.

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