



National Multisectoral Strategy for Early Childhood Development

Executive Summary



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Context

According to the 2017⁽¹⁾ Kids Rights Foundation's report, Tunisia is considered to be among the countries that most highly respect children's rights, since it is ranked 9th in the world and first in the MENA region. This ranking is the outcome of a political commitment in favor of children's rights that emerged since independence, and it is marked by strong regulatory, organizational and technical processes. An example of such efforts is the current action that consists of developing and implementing an Integrated Early Childhood Development Strategy (ECD). The Strategy is coordinated by the Ministry of Family, Women and Childhood (MFWC) and carried out in collaboration with several concerned ministries, representatives of professional groups from the public and private sectors as well as the civil

1- <http://www.kidsrightsindex.org/Tunisia> has obtained the score of 0.867/1. This was calculated using five evaluation criteria: the right to life, health, education, protection and environment enabling for the child's rights.

society, with the technical and financial support of the World Bank and UNICEF.

Indeed, children in Tunisia have always been at the heart of various strategies and regulations. Nowadays, however, scientific data have revealed the primary importance of a specific period in children's lives called "early childhood" (EC) that starts from preconception and extends to the age of 8, during which the child's brain develops most rapidly. As a moment of significant transformation and extreme vulnerability, EC is recognized today as a crucial period for the development of young children, both in terms of their physical health as well as their motor, sensory, socio-emotional, cognitive and linguistic development. For this reason, many countries, under the impetus of the United Nations specialized bodies and donors supporting children, are devoting major attention to EC, often in the form of a national strategy. This is the decision that was taken by Tunisia on April 2016 following an analysis of EC policies and programs using the World Bank assessment tool SABER-ECD⁽²⁾.

2- SABER-ECD is a specialty in the World Bank's initiative. The Systems of Ap-

It is worth mentioning that ECD offers a range of services to young children in order to improve their holistic development and to ensure they are well cared for and effectively protected. ECD includes health, nutrition, hygiene and sanitation, early learning and stimulation, protection, culture, recreation and sports. As a result, the ECD National Strategy can only be a multisectoral strategy and should endeavor to integrate and coordinate various activities undertaken by several specialized departments.

proaches to Better Education Results (SABER) is designed to provide comparable and comprehensive assessments of country policies.



Methodology and implementation steps

The development of the Tunisian Strategy was based on existing programs and activities, and their improvement and harmonization with international standards, which entailed undertaking various steps. The first among them was to establish a detailed baseline analysis allowing the identification of existing services with their strengths and weaknesses. The other methodological feature of this Strategy is its participatory and consensual approach. This interactive feature can easily be traced at all stages, from municipal to regional and central consultations and high-level interviews, during the initial stage, to identify the perceptions and expectations of all stakeholders. In addition, consultations were held during the second phase to discuss the draft Strategy itself, alongside with meetings and other workshops that were organized with representatives of stakeholders, the ECD Strategy Steering Committee and the Multilateral ECD Technical Committee.

Thus, in addition to international data and advocacy carried out by the United Nations, the interest in the Strategy was confirmed by the baseline analysis study. In fact, and despite all of the investments in favor of children, access to health care, education for all, organizational and legislative measures, support to vulnerable families as well as two national plans for children⁽³⁾, field indicators revealed the relatively low impact of prior initiatives on early childhood, particularly with regard to conditions required to accelerate the achievement of targets 4.2, 2.2 and 16.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030). It is precisely this first bibliographic step, which allowed the analysis of existing ECD related policies and programs in Tunisia, comparing them with other countries of the region as well as with standards and other results obtained in most developed countries.

The team of national and international experts was engaged in the development of the Strategy, in consultation with the

3- National Action Plans (NAP) for children covering the periods 1992-2001 (NAP1) and 2002-2011 (NAP2).

specialized services of the MWFC and representatives of stakeholders, which were organized into a Steering Committee and Technical Committee. From the beginning, they opted for an interactive and participatory approach, aimed at bringing all the protagonists of early childhood together and producing a multisectoral and integrated strategy.

The first consultation targeted representative and critical regions and localities. In the same way, interviews with high-level national figures were conducted to complete this step of collecting their perceptions and expectations.⁽⁴⁾ All of these reported elements were studied, along with documented data on EC (collected from numerous national surveys, sector studies, international agencies and institutions' reports, program and strategies monitoring reports). All of these inputs were synthesized into a national report presenting the situation of children aged between 0 to 8, their families and existing ECD resources as well as implemented policies and programs. Attention was given, where possible, to program outcomes including efficiency, with

4 - Report « Regional and local consultations for the setting up of the multisectoral strategy for early childhood development 2017-2020 in Tunisia (May - June 2016) », Nouredine Kridis, November 2016.

reference to recognized indicators in the field. The planning committees reviewed this first document,⁽⁵⁾ which also presented recommendations and strategic orientations. On the basis of the consultation workshops, high-level interviews and the situation analysis, the team of consultants submitted a first draft of the National Multisectoral Strategy, 2017-2021/25, for early childhood development for a national debate.

Following meetings and technical contributions, this first draft of the Strategy was reviewed, revised and enriched, thanks to the collaboration of various technical specialists, including professionals of the MWFC and other ministries involved, civil society representatives, and other engaged stakeholders resulting in the preparation of this second draft of the Strategy.

During the next stage, the second version of the ECD strategy project was submitted to the stakeholders for their comments and suggestions for improvements.⁽⁶⁾ This process was also

5 - Report « Situation Analysis for Early Childhood Development in Tunisia », Fayçal Ben Salah, June 2016.

6 - See « ECD Strategy L-R Consultations Report- Jan.Feb.2017 », Fayçal Ben Salah and Thouraya Annabi, March 2017.

carried out through regional and local consultations and with the Strategy's beneficiary population and stakeholders, including groups of children and adolescents. This step resulted in the preparation of an enriched third version of the Strategy, which is the reference version validated by the Steering Committee.

The implementation of the National Multisectoral Early Childhood Development Strategy was the subject of the final stage of Strategy preparation, which entailed the development of an Operational Plan. This final stage was divided into various steps, including a consultation with stakeholders in the form of a workshop held from 18 to 20 April 2017.



Outcomes

Situation Analysis of Early Childhood Development in Tunisia



The baseline analysis, based on a global context in which Tunisia has distinguished itself by signing the majority of international conventions pertaining to early childhood⁷, reviews the demographic, geopolitical and social data of Tunisia in order to focus on the child, family situations, and status of future parents.

The situation of young children is addressed in various components:

- **Health:** The report mentions the package of health ser-

⁷ - In particular: Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC General Comment 7 Implementation of the Rights of the Child in Early Childhood), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Convention on the Rights of the Child persons with disabilities, the Dakar Framework for Action for Education for All.

vices provided and the health indicators for young children and mothers, which put Tunisia in a good position within the MENA region, while underlining shortcomings in terms of regional inequalities and relative inequities regarding rural areas. The report also highlights some shortcomings, including mental health and parenting education, as well as the lack of provision of universal developmental screening.

- Nutrition: Despite the disappearance of most deficiency-related syndromes, the report focuses on the persistence of anemia and the emergence of obesity as a public health problem. The most sensitive point, however, remains the low rate of breastfeeding at the national level.

- Education: Preschool education is the weak point of the Tunisian education system, suffering from serious inequalities between urban and rural areas, but also in terms of the family's socioeconomic level and cultural perceptions. Primary Education provides an excellent coverage throughout the country but problems exist with respect to the quality of teaching and insufficient inclusion and integration of children with special needs, including developmental delays and disabilities.

- Protection: It is a sensitive point, despite multiple program

initiatives, there is a lack of evidence-based data and quantitative and qualitative services are insufficient to meet the needs of vulnerable young children. In particular, the report highlights the challenges that need to be addressed in terms of vigilance, systems of alerts and rapid intervention.

- Culture, recreation and sports: Despite the importance of activities carried out for other age groups, early childhood lacks guidance for these sensitive areas.

The report then analyzes ECD policies, both in terms of allocated resources (which remain very low for the targeted age group) and in terms of staff dedicated to training, noting also, at this level, a low level of specialization in the early childhood field and parenting education. The monitoring and evaluation of early childhood status should be improved, even though some strengths are recorded, especially with respect to the “Child Info” database. Furthermore, there are multiple ECD programs, many of which are effective, but with mixed results in terms of effects and impacts. For example, the PASS case, the National School Integration Program for Disabled Children, or the PCIME, that includes a set of health programs targeting mothers and children.

As for the analysis of the legislative and regulatory frameworks, it allows to highlight the good coverage of most ECD areas and the positive alignment with the international guidelines. Challenges remain linked to the implementation of regulations and the measures that should be taken to achieve a better compliance with existing standards. The most sensitive points demonstrated by the ECD policy analysis concern, in particular, the lack of coordination between various stakeholders, a system that is not sufficiently decentralized (few policies are adapted to regional conditions, let alone to local conditions), and some inequities (i.e., programs, equipment, staff, etc.) to the detriment of rural areas. The inventory review also identifies efforts to be conducted in terms of the service quality (guides, procedures and other standards). In conclusion, still more efforts should be carried out to build a quality culture in the field services of ECD.

The report concludes by recalling all the challenges that the Strategy must address to ensure that ECD services for all children living in Tunisia are fair, sustainable and achieve stated goals, objectives and results.

The situation of young children is addressed in various components:

The preparation of the Early Childhood Development Strategy was linked to the national legal and political framework as well as to national development plans that define general objectives and strategies aimed at ensuring equitable, integrated and sustainable ECD service delivery in Tunisia. The Strategy is also aligned with international conventions and commitments ratified by Tunisia, particularly those pertaining to child's rights, persons with disabilities, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG -2030).

The National Multisectoral Strategy outlines a vision and general objectives before separating them into Strategic Priorities for ECD interventions. This structural framework would not have been possible without respecting the following general principles:

- The child's best interest is a primary consideration in any measure relating to him/her;
- Equitable access to quality ECD services and non-discrimination are major conditions for respecting the fundamental right of equal opportunities for developing and protecting every child in Tunisia;

- The developed orientations and proposed services in the Strategy Framework are based on scientifically proven foundations and are part of a favorable plan for early childhood development and within familial and community contexts;

- The holistic approach to early childhood development covering all areas of its development (physical, cognitive, social, emotional and linguistic) is fundamental because these areas are intertwined, complementary and of equal importance;

- The multisectoral approach and the adaptation of programs to meet each child's needs according to the life cycle and to social, health and cultural specificities will be among the keys of success of this Strategy;

- The family and community are "the natural environments of the young child's existence and development". Recognition is given to the importance of capacity building for parents and communities, along with optimizing the involvement of local resources and community organizations in child and family development.

The adopted consensual vision of the Strategy was that: *"Every young child in Tunisia lives in a family environment conducive to its balanced development and in a healthy and stimulating environment. S/he benefits, early and in a fair, continuous, harmonious way and adapted to his needs, from promotional, preventive*

and protective services of quality, ensuring his/her well-being, overall and personalized development, growth, dignity and socialization”.

The aim of such strategy is to ensure that by 2025, all young children in Tunisia in an equitable manner, especially the vulnerable and disadvantaged children, will have access to integrated services for physical, psychomotor, cognitive, social and emotional development through implementing a common, harmonized and functional framework of action.

In doing so, the priority planning dimensions will include five areas of action, as diagrammed below:

favorable family environment

community involvement

competent professional

Committed State

This approach enables five strategic orientations:

Strategic orientations

1- Early childhood development services adapted to the child's needs according to life cycles and providing an appropriate response to situations of vulnerability

Improving the motor, sensory, socio-emotional, cognitive and linguistic development of early childhood in Tunisia through the equitable and large-scale expansion of integrated services and the quality of health, nutrition, inclusive education, protection, culture, recreation, sports as well as programs aimed at reducing factors that hinder child development and well-being.

2- Favorable family environment

Strengthened, through parental education, family accompaniment and support, the parents' place in young children's development, and capacity-building, the family becomes the first place for early childhood wellbeing, education and socialization.

3- Strengthening the institutional environment and professionals' skills and abilities in the early childhood sector

Integrate early childhood structures using quality approaches and

reinforce professionalization in the early childhood sector, in the areas of individual and collective care in education, health, nutrition, hygiene, rights and protection disciplines, through new and better adapted standards, and improved pre- and continuous in-service training.

4- Promoting community approach

Promote the awareness and mobilization of community actors through advocacy, information and communication regarding young children's and families' development, training partners and volunteers, encouraging partnerships, and recognizing and valuing contributions made by individuals and associations.

5- Monitoring, evaluation, governance and funding

Develop and adopt effective governance, coordination and monitoring processes for the Strategy through the establishment of a national coordination structure capable of ensuring implementation, adequate funding, and the achievement of objectives.

These general objectives were translated into specific objectives, which in turn were broken down into strategic priorities for ECD interventions allowing the various outcomes selected to be grouped together to provide a better response to identified ECD needs. The rest of the process included the listing and description of services and activities under each of the strategic priorities, and in turn, these were related to specific outcomes. As will be seen below, the Operational Plan presents additional information regarding tasks and steps, responsible parties, indicators, their measures and deadlines, and budgets.

For a pragmatic presentation of ECD interventions, they were subdivided into 7 Strategic Priorities, the first of which was subdivided into 4 Sub-priorities as mentioned below ⁽⁸⁾

However, it is important to emphasize, when it comes to ongoing activities in terms of ECD services and interventions provided by different actors, stakeholders and partners (departments, institutions, community organizations, private sector,

8 - For the activities underpinning the axes, it is necessary to refer to the complete document of the strategy.

NGOs and CSOs), the continuity of young children's lives, from preconception to the age of 8, will be guaranteed independently from the conventional listing of services. This continuity was illustrated by the life cycle interventions matrix presented in Appendix 1 of the Strategy.

Strategic Priority 1: Early childhood development services

Sub-priority 1.1: Perinatal period to 6 months

Sub-priority 1.2: Period from 7 months to 36 months

Sub-priority 1.3: Period from 37 to 72 months

Sub-priority 1.4: Period from 6 to 8 years

Strategic Priority 2: Family and parental education

Strategic Priority 3: Integrated activities and services for vulnerable children

Strategic Priority 4: Basic Standards and continuous staff training

Strategic Priority 5: Quality, monitoring - evaluation and research

Strategic Priority 6: Advocacy, information and communication for the development of young children and families

Strategic Priority 7: Governance, funding, coordination and partnership

The Strategy contains 11 annexes including, in addition to the ECD interventions matrix by life cycle mentioned above, standards, indicator lists, training topics and other criteria that constitute technical guidelines to be taken into consideration in developing the activities detailed in the Operational Plan.

Operational Plan

As stated above, the Plan is a document attached to the Strategy. The Operational Plan (OP) consists of tables arranged by Strategic Priorities (or Sub-priorities). It details information on the specific objectives of each Strategic Priority and their expected results. In each table, the Strategic Priority is broken down into outcomes, which are themselves broken down into services and activities. The OP used a SMART methodology⁽⁹⁾.

9 - SMART is a mnemonic means of describing the objectives that one wants to express in a clearest, simplest way to understand and for which the results are achievable. An indicator is a variable that provides information for each step of a project to help make good decisions. The analysis of the various indicators selected is based on various criteria such as the amount of information available for a study, the costs generated by the implementation of the project and the resources that can be obtained, etc. (Wikipedia)

For each of the 253 OP services and activities, indicators with their targets and measures were defined with the related sources of verification. The execution time lines were specified over the 5 years of the plan, the responsible department in charge (or leader) as well as the first involved partners were designated. Finally, the state destimated budget per year for each service or activity was listed.

Estimated budgets for each axis and each year were expressed in Tunisian dinars. They were developed during a workshop in April 2017, and then validated by sectoral meetings with the specialized services of concerned departments.⁽¹⁰⁾The summary table, stating the required investmentsfor the implementation of the ECD National Multisectoral Strategy, is as follows.

10- These high-level sectoral meetings took place in June 2017, bringing together the technical managers of the programs concerned as well as the financial managers to ensure that budget harmonization would be carried out at the level of each ministry involved.

sp \ year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	total Axe
sub-p 1.1	70 000	8 070 000	10 390 000	8 050 000	8 025 000	34 605 000
sub-p 1.2	5 000	804 000	760 000	764 000	750 000	3 083 000
sub-p 1.3	170 000	4 070 000	3 920 000	3 860 000	3 890 000	15 910 000
sub-p 1.4	94 000	7 119 000	7 379 000	6 849 000	6 549 000	27 990 000
sp 2	80 000	975 000	1 045 000	795 000	745 000	3 640 000
sp 3	685 000	4 720 000	3 300 000	2 220 000	12 220 000	23 145 000
sp 4	10 000	695 000	1 085 000	1 004 000	754 000	3 548 000
sp 5	340 000	1 720 000	750 000	500 000	550 000	3 860 000
sp 6	500 000	595 000	385 000	270 000	355 000	2 105 000
sp 7	280 000	1 284 000	1 075 000	1 035 000	1 035 000	4 709 000
annual	2 234 000	30 052 000	30 089 000	25 347 000	34 873 000	122 595 000

Summary table of estimated budget for strategy implementation by axis and per year

The choice of OP indicators was a critically important process. They include not only operational indicators regarding inputs and outputs, but also service results (outcomes/impacts), usually in terms of the improvement in the development of

children and families. For each indicator, a target⁽¹¹⁾ and its source of verification or instrument were identified. To the extent possible, indicators were aligned with those used at international and regional levels. However, primary emphasis was given to alignment with indicators already in use at the national level. A summary list of indicators is presented at the end of the OP.

11- It depends in part on the ongoing projects of various departments and their future planning.

In conclusion

The development of the ECD National Multisectoral Strategy 2017-2021/25 was decided in April 2017 in a favorable political context and with the support of specialized international bodies. Its development, although relatively rapid with regard to time, followed a rigorous and participatory methodology to foster ownership by all stakeholders. This participatory approach may constitute a success factor in the sense that effective implementation required good multisectoral agreement and coordination.

For this reason, the Strategy included the development of an Operational Plan with monitoring indicators and an estimated budget, as well as a rigorous organization of operational relationships. This organization provides for several interventions at different levels, ranging from the highest decision-making level (an inter-ministerial council) to the most specific level (local), via a strengthened regional level. All levels will be orchestrated by a dedicated management structure, the ECD Service Coordination Unit – within the MWFC, and focal points representing administrative actors as well as dedicated procedures, to enable good collaboration with the private sector, NGOs and other national and international bodies.