

**Arab Regional Agenda for Improving Education Quality
Arab Program for Early Childhood Development
Arab Resource Collective**

Status of ECD in the Arab region

Desk research for a regional workshop

(Final draft, 18 November 2012)

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1. Introduction

The research leading to this paper has been done with two overall purposes in mind:

- a) Elaborate an overview of the situation of early childhood in the Arab region, and select the strategic programmatic recommendations that may enhance service provisions.
- b) Ensure that “food for thought” is offered for the possible work programmes of the three functions of ARAIEQ/APECD¹, i.e. think tank, networking and tools and resources.

After this introduction, the main section of this paper is organised around two complementary sets of approaches: first by age categories, and second by cross-cutting and generic topics. For each topic, it presents what we know of the current situation, and then suggests programmatic priorities.

1.1 The documentation.

This desk research draws on sources compiled from 2010 to 2012 (list of major documents in Annex 2):

- A number of mappings were commissioned for the regional workshop on “Advancing the ECCD Agenda in Arab Countries”, convened by ARC in March 2010, and attended mostly from NGOs.
- In September 2010, UNESCO and the Ministry of Education in Syria convened a regional High Level Conference on “Early Childhood Care and Education: Policies and Programmes”, for which a number of reports and mappings were also commissioned. The central document was a regional report based on responses to a survey questionnaire by 15 Arab countries. This regional report was also presented later in 2010 at the international Moscow conference on ECD.
- In 2010-2011, the Wolfensohn Centre, based at the time at the Brookings Institution, facilitated four studies for scaling up early childhood programmes in four Arab countries: Lebanon, Morocco, Syria and Yemen (commissioned by the World Bank) and another study on the Parenting Program in Jordan (commissioned by UNICEF). The written reports have not been published yet

¹ The Arab Programme for Early Childhood Development (APECD), hosted by ARC, is one of five components of the Arab Regional Agenda for Improving Education Quality (ARAIEQ), managed at ALECSO (the Arab League’s Education, Culture and Science Organisation) and supported by the World Bank and other partners. For a brief presentation please refer to the concept paper of the workshop, or see Annex 1.

and cannot be used, but the author of this document participated in the process as an advisor, including a regional workshop in March 2011 where the findings of all the studies were presented and discussed.

- The General Monitoring Report of 2007 was on “Strong Beginnings: Early Childhood Care and Education”. The annual GMRs since then have updates on progress, including on goal 1 related to ECD and on primary education. Statistical data for all Arab countries, received and processed by UNESCO's Institute of Statistics, can also be found on the website of the GMR.
- Other relevant documents were also consulted and listed in annex 1.
- Also, other events have happened and continue to happen, such as the workshop for the launch of the Arab Early Childhood Working Group earlier this year in Lebanon, or the very recent conference in Riad (13-15 November). It has not been possible to study their documentation, but there is no doubt that their findings and conclusions will feed into the processes started with APECD.

1.2 A framework for programming

Those events, studies and mappings are all accompanied by recommendations for action, which will also be taken into consideration in this paper, in an attempt at suggesting priorities for the ECD agenda in the Arab region to be discussed at the workshop, which is the main purpose of this survey.

For the presentation of findings and the selection of priorities, two conceptual frameworks are used:

- The Holistic Integrated Approach to ECCD, elaborated along many years by a group of EC professionals convened by the Arab Resource Collective, and best developed in the Manual “Adults and Children Learning” published by ARC in 2003 in Arabic. (A digital English version is also available).
- The Four Cornerstones of ECCD, which were developed by an international group of ECD actors (including ARC) convened by the Consultative Group on ECCD in connection with the launch of the Education For All General Monitoring Report (EFA/GMR) on early childhood in 2007. This framework for programming has been regularly updated since. The version available in 2010 was translated by ARC into Arabic. (They can be found on the CG's website: ecdgroup.com)

1.3 General trends

It is relevant for this introduction to briefly highlight some of the general trends, particularly in EC education, that emerge from those documents and events:

- a. Progress in ECD services coverage has been made by Arab countries in the past decade on all fronts, most notably on health, pre-schooling and in the primary grades, but this progress is slow and the proportion of young children accessing formal ECD programmes in the Arab region remains well below the world average, and ranks with sub-saharan Africa at the bottom of the tables.
- b. The status of ECD in the Arab countries is marked by large discrepancies, between those few countries that have made sustained advances in both enrolment and pioneering quality programmes and those few others where

- quality ECD services are still at the initial stages and reach mostly the urban elites. Most Arab countries congregate at the medium level.
- c. From the perspective of a holistic and integrated approach to early childhood, that addresses all dimensions of child development (physical, cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social), and encompasses all stages from conception to 8 years of age, the existence and quality of programmes vary considerably, and are generally compartmented within their own confines. On the whole:
 - Services focus on health and nutrition in the stage from conception to three.
 - Programmes are still at the initial stages of developing pre-schooling (4 to 6) in most Arab countries.
 - Although coverage tends to be consistently higher in the early grades of the primary (6 to 8), the quality of learning for the majority is in urgent need of attention.
 - d. Recent data from some Arab countries indicate a slight deterioration in earlier achievements in pre-schooling and early primary, due mostly to conflicts, occupation and emergencies (such as in Palestine and Iraq). In all probability, more cases of setbacks will emerge following the fundamental changes that are still happening in several countries.

The general findings, summarised here, indicate that, while progress is being made, huge challenges still lie ahead of the ECD sector in the Arab countries as a whole and within most national contexts. At the same time, the foundations for developing the sector are present and need to be built upon through concerted efforts.

It is inevitable, as we look at the general trends for ECD, that we should at least note the fundamental changes that are taking place as a result of the upheavals transforming societies in many Arab countries. There are tremendous challenges for families with young children who are facing direct violence within their living space, and displacement and exile with little for a decent life, let alone for appropriate care to the little ones. Emergency and relief services usually give little attention to the care for children, and only specialised agencies think about it, and it is often a big challenge to do what is appropriate.

However, having noted that, let's consider how we can address the issues related to ECD that may emerge. For a time of reflection and planning, as this workshop is meant to be, perhaps we should look at the social transformations of the "Arab Spring" as an opportunity for reforming education in general, and more specifically for opening the doors to more effective approaches to all aspects of the early childhood agenda. It is hoped that we will find time to at least start a process of reflection about this.

1.4 Methodological remarks:

- a) In all the surveys, mappings and reports listed above, there is a common acknowledgment that detailed and segregated data about ECD in Arab countries remain on the whole at the very general level, and focus on health in the early years, and education around the age of entry to school.
- b) The large discrepancies noted between the Arab countries, even within each country, apply not only to the availability of early childhood services, but also to the existence and quality of data that are indispensable for policy and programming.
- c) Such discrepancies make it difficult to reach general applicable conclusions, or to recommend joint approaches to policies and programmes. These are better thought through in national contexts, and should be even addressed through decentralisation of services.
- d) One consequence is that statistics, while useful, may not enhance the analytical approach, since they may divert attention from the essential. Hence, we will not overload this draft with detailed statistics. The main purpose of this paper/presentation is to propose a framework which can help the participants in the workshop, and later in ARAIEQ/APECD, to acquire a coherent view of the status of early childhood in the region, and target their thinking and action plans towards inter-related priorities.
- e) Nevertheless, for those who still want to see figures on progress made, an overview of the data about EFA Goals 1 and 2 in the Arab States has been included in Annex 2. The overview was produced by UNESCO's GMR team in 2011, and is very useful for a quick understanding of the global trends related to education in the Arab regio. (For even more statistical details, tables produced by UIS for GMR 2011 can be downloaded from the GMR website).
- f) One final remark: this paper is not concerned with making the case for ECD: it is assumed that its audience is already knowledgeable, and totally committed to advancing the ECD agenda.

1.5 A new index.

In 2012, the GMR team designed a new index related to Goal 1, as an attempt at translating the integrated approach to early childhood in numbers, and it is worth presenting here. (Excerpts from the report in italics).

Definition:

The ECCE index summarizes the results of early childhood development policies on:

- *health, measured by the percentage of children who will survive beyond their fifth birthday; this ranges, among countries with a full set of data, from a low of 82% in Guinea-Bissau to a high of 99% in Chile;*
- *nutrition, measured by the percentage of children under 5 who do not suffer from moderate or severe stunting, which ranges from 45% in the Niger to 98% in Chile;*
- *education, measured by the percentage of children aged 3 to 7 who are enrolled either in pre-primary or in primary school, which ranges from 20% in Ethiopia to 95% in Belarus.*

It is to be noted that only 68 out of 205 countries had a full set of information on all indicators. Notably, the developed countries were not included, generally for lack of data about stunting.

Here is a selection of all Arab countries covered by the index, with a few more in the same range for the sake of comparison:

Rank	Countries	ECCE index	Under 5 survival rate	Children under 5 not suffering from moderate or severe stunting	Age-specific enrolment ratio of children aged 3 to 7
High ECCE index (0.95–1.00)					
1	Belarus	0.967	0.991	0.955	0.955
Medium ECCE index (0.80–0.94)					
3	Chile	0.914	0.992	0.980	0.894
4	Kuwait	0.914	0.990	0.962	0.789
5	Thailand	0.911	0.987	0.843	0.902
14	Serbia	0.843	0.987	0.919	0.622
15	Oman	0.841	0.989	0.902	0.632
16	Colombia	0.835	0.977	0.873	0.654
Low ECCE index (<0.80)					
27	Jordan	0.796	0.978	0.917	0.495
28	Palestine	0.795	0.978	0.882	0.495
29	Algeria	0.794	0.973	0.851	0.559
30	Turkey	0.794	0.977	0.897	0.506
36	Honduras	0.755	0.967	0.706	0.592
37	Syria	0.754	0.984	0.725	0.554
39	Azerbaijan	0.733	0.957	0.749	0.494
41	Egypt	0.724	0.975	0.711	0.486
43	Indonesia	0.706	0.969	0.632	0.516
50	Iraq	0.681	0.959	0.736	0.347
67	Ethiopia	0.531	0.904	0.493	0.196
68	Niger	0.508	0.856	0.452	0.217

Sources: EFA Global Monitoring Report team calculations (2012); Annex, Statistical Table 3A; UIS database.

Some of the analytical notes offered by the GMR team are:

- *There is uneven development across the three dimensions, as a comparison of the country rank for each of the three component indicators shows. Some countries score almost equally well (such as Belarus and Chile) or equally poorly (such as the Niger) on all three. Others have a very high or very low score for one dimension relative to their overall standing in the index scale, which reveals specific challenges.*
- *Although the poorest countries are also the ones with the lowest values on the ECCE index, the relationship between income and early childhood development outcomes weakens among middle income countries. For example, Botswana had an annual per capita income of US\$13,700 (in purchasing power parity terms) in 2010, yet was ranked just above two countries with less than a fifth of its per capita income — the Lao People's Democratic Republic (which had a higher enrolment ratio) and Senegal*

- (which had a lower stunting rate).*
- *The ECCE index highlights the need for all countries, regardless of income, to invest in integrated approaches that give equal importance to all aspects of early childhood development.*

A quick look at the scores of Arab countries shows that most of them score well on mortality, while a few of them score low on nutrition. But the low scores on education indicate where the real challenges are.

2. The status of ECD and programmatic priorities in Arab countries

2.1 Approaches by age categories.

For each age category, we start with a principle drawn generally from the four cornerstones drafted by the Consultatif Group, then a brief presentation of the situation, before presenting programmatic priorities.

2.1.1 Age category from conception to three.

Principle

Learning starts at birth, and children have rights from birth. Families, communities, and governments must work together to ensure the realisation of these rights. From pregnancy through to age 3:

- Every child has a right to responsive parenting, good primary health care, a nutritious diet, and a safe, clean, and stimulating physical and social environment in which to grow and develop.
- Support from families and communities is essential to encourage young children's optimal development, beginning even before birth.

Current situation

In most Arab countries, children in this stage of their life, and their parents, particularly mothers, are generally in the care of the health and social welfare sectors. Although there is a deficit of data to provide an accurate picture, there are clear indications that care for the health of mothers and children is making steady progress in the Arab countries, for example through immunisation and nutrition programmes.

Nevertheless, a substantial number of children in Arab countries face developmental risks, including:

- low birth-weight
- malnutrition, ill health, and developmental delays
- family or community violence
- environments affected by conflict and displacement...

Furthermore, the holistic development of the child in the first years, beyond a healthy physical growth, is very rarely addressed. Opportunities for the child to

develop all his/her cognitive, emotional and social potential through interaction and stimulation tend to be largely limited to the elites and urban middle classes, which have already reached high standards of living, including access to education, knowledge and information. Programmes to support families in the less advantaged social sectors for quality parenting practices are very rare.

Research on brain development, which has expanded significantly in recent years, has confirmed the evidence-based knowledge acquired through practice in early childhood. Both sources firmly establish that early stimulation, sustained interaction with carers, play and discovery within a safe social and physical environment, protection from risk factors, etc. are essential to set in motion the blossoming of all the child's potentials from the very early stages. They confirm the strong belief of the early childhood sector that learning begins at birth!

It is a fact, however, that there is a big deficit in care and development programmes for children aged 0-3, and their parents, throughout the world, particularly in developing countries. The situation is no different within the Arab countries.

Programmatic approaches

The following key programmatic components will have a significant impact in this field:

a) Strengthen the health system that caters for mothers and infants, and establish cooperation and cross-nurturing between the ECD sector and the health sector.

A key approach is to expand the components related to child development in the curriculum and training of relevant health personnel (paediatricians, midwives, specialised nurses, community health workers, etc.). Such injections in the curricula exist and need not be reinvented.

b) Pre- and peri-natal programmes for young mothers and fathers that can prepare them to becoming parents, and support active parenting.

These should include a combination of health and developmental components, for example: knowledge about pregnancy and child development (including the importance of stimulation, interaction and play), birth attendance by trained personnel, early and regular development screening of every infant, special support for disadvantaged and vulnerable children and their families, etc.

c) In cooperation with the health sector, implement programmes for working with parents.

Such programmes on parenting have been developed by UNICEF and others, and implemented in various contexts in Arab countries. They are available in

Arabic. Building on existing experience to adapt, expand and scale up is achievable in national and local contexts. (See example of a new Arab programme for all age categories in par 2.2.5 below).

d) In some Arab countries, special action is urgently needed to ensure birth registration for all new-borns. This is crucial for the inclusion of all children into the public services of the country, including schooling at the appropriate age.

2.1.2 Age category from three to six.

Principle

Children at this age have the right to be safe, cared for, and stimulated at home, in school, and in the community. Child development science recognises that the child's capacities evolve rapidly between the ages of 3 and 6 years. During this period, children develop more effectively their intellectual and social potential in safe, caring, play-based, and stimulating environments, and gain tremendous benefits through engaging in organised early learning and development activities in their communities.

Studies of the field indicate that ensuring two years of quality, organised pre-schooling is a sure predictor of success in primary and further education, as well as in adult life.

Current situation

Legislation and regulations in many Arab countries have been introduced to set the age of entry, and the number of years in pre-schooling. These conditions differ from one country to the other, and the data on actual enrolment also tell a varied story.

Data on enrolment in nurseries are on the whole not available in Arab countries, but it is generally assumed that this type of services is very limited, and provided almost exclusively by the private sector to high-income urban households, more rarely through community based initiatives.

Enrolment in KGs is steadily increasing within the Arab countries. The gross enrolment rate in pre-primary education was raised from 15% in 1999 to 19% in 2008 of children in this age category (from GMR 2012). However,

- enrolment varies widely between the countries, from 1 to 5% in some, to 70-85% in others, and
- the average in the Arab countries (19-20%) is among the lowest compared to other regions.

Pre-school services come in various forms: the public sector, mostly through the ministries of education, is expanding its provisions, particularly towards the poorest. In some cases, other ministries are also involved, such as social welfare

in nurseries. On the other hand, the private sector, operating either for profit or out of social responsibility, provides a substantial and often pioneering range of pre-schooling programmes.

Although most pre-schooling is provided in institutional school settings, there are also some community-based programmes that provide organised activities to prepare children for entry into primary.

Programmatic approaches

In societies where services for this age category have been substantially developed over the years, they tend to come in two institutionalised formats: starting with the care for groups of children in nurseries (in some contexts even earlier than 3 years of age), they move without interruption into pre-schooling, generally in kindergartens (KGs), often attached to schools. This leads normally to planned enrolment in primary.

In a good number of Arab countries, the pre-schooling sector has established a healthy capital of knowledge and practice, which constitutes a solid foundation for enrolling greater numbers of children into pre-schooling.

Given the variety of situations, even wide discrepancies existing among the Arab countries, it is impossible to recommend strategies to fit all situations. However, key components need to be identified as the main building blocks that can ensure a dynamic approach to developing the sector in each national context, and even at the local/municipal level. In implementing new services, or further developing existing ones, individual countries should take care of the balance between expanding the enrolment numbers and nurturing the quality of care and education provided. The following strategies are suggested for reaching such goals:

a) Establishing a coherent policy for pre-schooling is critical.

Various legislations and regulations generally exist in every Arab country, and they affect the way services are provided to this age category. Most Arab countries need to re-assess the legal situation and develop a consistent policy that addresses the following aspects:

- This sector lies generally within the mandate of the ministries of education. However, MOEs generally focus their resources on primary and above, and give little attention to pre-schools. A dedicated structure should be either created, or further strengthened where it exists within the ministry, and given enough authority, qualified human resources and designated budget to develop this sector.
- It has been established through experience that, for pre-schooling services to be successful, they should receive a range of between 10 to 20% of the education budget, depending on the national situation. Such

proportions can be reached through gradual increments from a generally low starting position.

- Specialised academic and/or teacher training courses may already exist, but in most Arab countries, the sector of professional training for early childhood professionals, including KG teachers, is still in its early stages of development, particularly compared to the needs at a time when demand is increasing. The development of this key component should be made a high priority through a national approach coordinated by the Ministry of Education.
- In most Arab countries, this sector cannot be expanded with quality without the contribution of the private sector, with all its components, be they for profit, or by community organisations (trade-unions, religious institutions, NGOs, etc.). The public sector, in this case most likely the Ministries of Education, should create structures for consultation and coordination to ensure the engagement of all into the national strategy for pre-schooling.
- A set of quality standards should be agreed, coordinated by a dedicated department within the Ministry of Education, in consultation with all significant actors in the field. These standards should regulate key dimensions such as: the training and employment of KG teachers, the curriculum and learning pedagogies, conditions for the granting of permits to KGs, the mechanisms of supervision, the role and engagement of parents in the governance of KGs, etc. Obviously, such standards have to be in harmony with the degree of development of pre-schooling in each country, and should be introduced with a long-term and gradual approach.

(A possible joint project on quality standards: The Step-by-Step programme, developed over two decades by/with support from the Early Childhood Programme of the Open Society Foundation in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, has designed and used a systematic approach to principles, standards and indicators in early childhood services, particularly in education. Tools and expertise can be requested from ECP-OSF to introduce such an approach in the Arab region.)

b) Other programmatic components for children aged 3 to 6.

Although pre-school services in the Arab countries take mostly the form of KGs, generally attached to schools, two types of other services also exist in certain contexts, and have the potential to be significant contributors to the national capital of services to children aged 3 to 6.

- With their flexible approach to age (as they may start before the age of 3), nurseries provide young children opportunities to engage with their peers in play and other stimulating activities. They are becoming a necessity as more mothers go to work. But they also provide specific benefits to the development of the child at this age. Countries should consider developing this sector as one building block on the continuum of care for children in

the period between infancy and entry into pre-schooling. This can be done particularly well through the delegation of this mandate to the local or municipal authorities, and encouraging the introduction of nurseries in large work places.

- In many national contexts, initiatives have emerged, generally implemented by community organisations, or even by individual teachers and/or youth volunteers during the summer period, and targeting children who have not had any access to systematic pre-schooling and are getting ready to enter the primary school. Through an organised programme of various lengths, groups of children are given an opportunity to engage in peer activities that prepare them for the learning and socialising processes within the school system. Examples include the Child-to-Child programme piloted in Yemen, The Building Blocks approach adopted by Mentor Arabia, the transition project of the Aga Khan Development Network in Syria, and other more recent initiatives. Countries may want to encourage the development of such initiatives, en route to expanding pre-school coverage.

One programme for working with parents merit a specific mention in this context: it's the "Mother and Child Education Programme" developed by the ACEV Foundation in Turkey. It works with parents of children in pre-schooling age who have no access to KGs, to prepare them, along with other educational dimensions, for entry into the primary. In close cooperation with ACEV, ARC translated and adapted the tools of the programme into Arabic. Both ARC and ACEV have established a track record in Arab countries for training trainers and implementing the programme in various contexts.

c) Other forms of engaging parents

More generally, parents remain children's first and most important carers and teachers. Though this applies to children in any age category, involving the parents systematically as their children are benefiting from pre-schooling, whether in KGs, nurseries or other organised programmes, is strategic in setting a pattern of parent engagement with the educational system.

2.1.3 Age category from six to eight.

Principle

The right to basic education is universally recognised, and the early grades of the primary are considered the foundation for achieving it. Primary level schooling is solidly within the mandate of the education system. Nevertheless, almost all actors in the early childhood field also consider the early grades of the primary level as requiring specific attention:

- On the one hand, the characteristics of child's development still require a holistic and integrated approach similar to that in earlier years;

- On the other, a successful transition into primary schooling is crucial for consolidating and nurturing the positive patterns acquired by children in pre-schooling programmes, particularly for active learning.

The continuum of care and education requires that “children are ready for school”, and this is ensured through the right strategies adopted in earlier years, and the “school is ready” for children, which is the focus of the strategies suggested in this section.

Current situation

Urged by commitments made under international agreements, such as Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals, and driven by their own desire to fulfil their obligation to basic education, the Arab countries have made good progress in enrolment into primary schooling. Gross enrolment in primary years (all ages) was 97% in 2008, rising from 90 % in 1999. However, the net enrolment (of children of primary school age) was only 84% in 2008, rising from 75% in 1999. (EFA GMR, 2012)

It needs to be noted that over 6 million children of school age, 58% of them females, were still out of school in 2008 in the Arab countries (over 9 million in 1999). About 50% of those children were expected never to go to school, whereas about 20% (i.e. over 1 million) of them have been enrolled and have dropped out of school. There are no figures available for repetition in the early grades, but whatever the numbers, they are a drain on the resources, and an indication of failure in the early grades. (For a full description of the situation, please refer to the GMR’s overview in annex 2).

Beyond those figures, all reports generally point to big variations in the quality of primary education, and indicate that in many developing countries, and this applies to some Arab countries too, a good proportion of children leave basic education with very low levels of literacy and numeracy.

The early childhood sector, which has researched in particular the first years of primary education, contends that the crisis in education for the majority of students in the primary schools lies within the early grades. The teachers allocated to those grades are generally the least qualified, the teacher/student ratios tend to be high for the poorest social sectors, and learning methodologies and resources are scarce.

In conclusion, one could safely say that, for a substantial proportion of primary students in the Arab countries, the early grades are in crisis.

Programmatic approaches

The primary education systems are well established in the Arab countries, and they are broadly coping with the numbers. They also contain a capital of quality education, generally concentrated in the urban areas, and targeting the high and

medium income social sectors. Every country should be able to build upon this capital to reach out, with improved quality, to the less privileged sectors in both urban and rural areas. Following are some key approaches.

a) Nurture the quality of teaching in the early primary grades.

In all developing countries, there are shortages of qualified teachers and appropriate learning resources, such as attractive textbooks, for early primary. Most Arab countries need to increase the capacity and quality of teacher training institutions to cope with the demands of all schools. But, from the perspective of ECD, which concerns itself mostly with the first 2 grades of primary, there are specific actions that Ministries of Education should take to make a difference for students throughout their primary years, in subsequent education, and indeed in adult life and employment. They can be summarised in one motto: invest your best in the first primary grades.

The following concrete examples of actions will make a difference:

- Put the most qualified and experienced teachers in charge of the first grades. It is at that stage that children need to familiarise themselves with a system that is alien to what they have experienced before they enter school, whether they had pre-schooling or not. They need to acquire and strengthen child-centered patterns of learning that only teachers with appropriate pedagogical methods can impart.
- Provide regular in-service training to current teachers of the early grades.
- The status and salaries of teachers in the early grades have to be at least at par with the rest of the primary, if not higher.
- A necessary condition for success in education is learning to read. On average, 75% of children enrolled in the primary have not had any pre-schooling, and cannot read and write. Teachers in the early grades should be equipped with special skills and resources that will allow them to focus with effective methods on teaching reading and writing, ensuring that all the children in their care read and write from the very beginning of the primary.
- This can only be done if Arabic reading and learning materials are made available, which are appropriate and attractive to children aged 6 to 8.
- Both the physical environment and the teacher/student ratios are critical to success too and should be at the optimal that can be afforded within the country.

b) Prioritise early primary in reforming the educational system, and ensure the continuous improvements of the schools.

This implies a change of perspective in education sector planning. For example, large-scale school improvement programmes need to be reoriented to ensure a more supportive environment and more systematic and appropriate learning opportunities for children in the first grades. This reorientation requires shifts in

perspectives at all levels, from teachers' own professional development, to the school management of human and financial resources, to the priorities of ministry officials and international donors where relevant. Such a change of thinking must be embedded, not only in national policies for education, but also in national development and poverty reduction strategies, EFA plans, MDG programmes, and so forth.

c) Continue building on the patterns of the pre-school sector.

Although pre-schooling is not as widespread as the primary grades, there is nonetheless an established capital of practice in most Arab countries. Close cooperation between the KGs and the early primary grades will ensure a smooth transition into schooling, not only for students who have had pre-schooling, but also for all new entrants. Methodologies and resources for active learning which are used in pre-schooling should constitute the bedrock of the "teaching" in the early grades.

d) Engaging the parents

Whether started at the pre-schooling stage or not, engaging the parents in all aspects of the entrance of their children into the school system, in the learning processes, particularly in reading and writing, as well as in the general running of the school, is a guarantee of success. It ensures continuity from life at home and pre-schooling into all aspects of the school system.

2.2 Cross-cutting and generic approaches to ECD.

Approaching ECD through age categories allows for specific strategies relevant to each stage, both in response to the child's evolving patterns of development, and because different sectors and institutions are mandated, or opt to provide services specific to that stage. However, no other sector requires a more holistic and integrated approach than working with young children and their families. In this section, approaches that are relevant to ECD as a whole will ensure that the field is also integrated.

2.2.1 National ECD policies and strategies.

Most Arab countries have a set of legislation, regulations, ministries, departments, etc. which regulate various aspects and stages of ECD, as it relates to the care, development and education of children from pregnancy to age 8. On the other hand, not only the public sector, but also a broad range of community organisations and actors in the private sector contribute substantially to the delivery of ECD services, and they are under the supervision of diverse Ministries. Establishing synergy and continuity of care for young children before they are absorbed into the "basic education" system must be at the heart of any national policy for ECD. Such national policies should also receive high level

attention in broader national policies and plans for development, as well as in budgeting.

Only a few Arab countries have succeeded in elaborating specific national policies or strategies for early childhood, and even less have reached the stage of transforming such policies into plans of action, and have started implementation and regular reviews. (A good example to study can be found in Jordan).

Every country should adopt a comprehensive and inter-sectoral policy framework for early childhood care, development and education. Such policies should be built on a compilation, assessment and integration of all the relevant legislative, administrative and programmatic elements existing in separated parts. And while it is important that every sector (health, social welfare, education, etc.) should still have its own policy and plans for early childhood, these should also be coherently articulated with a national policy for ECD.

Experience shows that, when national policies are a result of a participatory process involving all actors in the ECD field (public sector, private sector, NGOs, etc.), they are on the one hand guaranteed to be holistic and integrated in their approach and on the other, more likely to engage all active sectors in the promotion of the policies (with families and communities, for example), and in their implementation and review.

Once adopted, national policies or strategies have to be translated into time-defined plans of action that will guide their gradual implementation. Such plans should also include mechanisms for monitoring progress and assessing quality.

One of the ways of monitoring progress in ECD is to include it specifically in the reporting to the UN Committee on the Convention of the Rights of the Child. A lot of work has been done following the issuing by the Committee of General Comment 7, spelling out how the articles of the CRC apply to early childhood. This work includes the design of indicators through which progress can be monitored.

2.2.2 Collection, compilation and analysis of segregated data about ECD.

Appropriate policy and programming can only be built on the basis of accurate knowledge of the situation of children and parents in the national context. As it is the case for services, information and data are generally fragmented:

- Data on pregnancies, child mortality, nutrition, immunisation, etc are compiled through the health structures.
- Data on pre-schooling should normally be available in the Ministries of Education and Social Welfare, but the situation of the majority of children who are out of pre-schooling and before they enter the primary is generally out of any data gathering system.

- Data about enrolment, gender parity, repeat years, drop-outs, etc., as well as about teacher training and qualification, are normally available through the Ministries of Education.

From the perspective of a holistic and integrated approach to ECD, there is a need to identify a central service in every national context to establish and continuously improve a data collection system for all dimensions of ECD. Such a system should also be able to cumulatively aggregate and analyse data, and make them relevant for national planning and policy making.

A golden opportunity to initiate a system of data collection may become available within individual Arab countries, either within the framework of ARAIEQ/APECD, or through direct cooperation with the World Bank. The World Bank has been administering in a number of countries a tool for collecting all relevant data that can lead to assessing the status of ECD policies and benchmarking ECD services. The instrument is the “Systems Approach for Better Education Results” (SABER), which has developed a specific tool for the ECD sector. (A brief introduction to SABER-ECD is in annex 3).

Although the ultimate purpose of SABER-ECD is for policy analysis and benchmarking, the process leading to achieving that will result in collecting a comprehensive set of reliable statistical data, and building expertise in the country for compiling and analysing such data.

2.2.3 Inter-sectoral coordination.

ECD, like no other sector, requires a holistic and integrated approach for working with young children and their families. General practice, however, is rooted in the fragmentation of services, generally in separate operational systems of the ministries of health, social welfare, education, etc. Furthermore, national economic planning and budgeting rarely engage the early childhood sectors on their own merits, and as part of decision-making processes. This lack of voice for ECD at the table results in early childhood being low in the list of priorities for budgeting purposes. As a consequence it receives minimal financial and human resources, and, at best, fragmented allocations.

In many Arab countries, there are national structures dedicated to motherhood and childhood, generally in the form of Higher Councils, which are mandated to address ECD concerns in an integrated way. However, they tend to have in most cases limited mandates, generally confined to research and advisory roles, and in some cases perform capacity building functions.

In order to enhance the status of early childhood in the decision-making processes in all aspects of national development, structures of coordination need to be established between the departments in charge of early childhood in all ministries concerned. This of course can take a variety of formats, in line with the administrative traditions of each Arab country. But in all cases, it is imperative to

create or strengthen one inter-sectoral body for early childhood, which has an appropriate level of authority, and will act as the “motor” for policy development, implementation and annual reporting. Such a body should also drive the production and implementation of a national policy, as well as the formal adoption and integration of key early childhood legislations, standards, regulations and inter-agency agreements for the provision of services, whether delivered by the public sector, private sector, or civil society organisations.

Such a body could also have the mandate (described in 2.2.2) to ensure that segregated data about all aspects of the ECD sector are centrally compiled, aggregated and analysed, and that data collection is continuously improved.

2.2.4 Projects and tools for engaging the parents.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that parents are a child’s first and best educators and caregivers. In the approaches recommended for each age category in the first section, special recommendations described ways of engaging parents in the care and education services provided for themselves and their children.

Nevertheless, parents’ engagement should also be viewed as a continuum, and provisions must be included in national ECD policies and strategies. Such provisions should allow not only the engagement of parents as individuals in the care and education of their own children, but also as a specific group of stakeholders in the processes related to ECD. Mechanisms should be created to organise their participation in the elaboration of policies, strategies and plans, as well as in the governance and running of services.

One promising project for working with fathers and mothers in the Arab region.

Rare are the projects in developing countries that organise working with parents on both

- a continuum covering all age categories from conception to age 8, and
- an integrated approach addressing multiple programmatic components: health, education, social protection, etc.

ARC has started implementing such a project in 2012, concomitantly in Egypt and Lebanon. The work is being developed over two cycles:

- Cycle one is currently in full deployment, and is working, in the two countries, with two groups of mothers and fathers with children aged 0 to 3, and 3 to 6.
- Cycle two is expected to start in mid-2013, when the outreach of what has been developed in the first cycle will be expanded in geography and numbers, and work with mothers and fathers with children aged 6 to 8 will be initiated.

The tools of the projects are designed by a group of ECD professionals and trainers from both countries, with an integrated approach to child development,

covering all dimensions: physical, emotional, cognitive, etc. and addressing issues of social protection and interaction with the context within the community.

It is also expected that the fathers and mothers engaged in the first cycle will themselves engage in the process of expansion as “ECD professionals” in the second cycle and beyond. (It is hoped that a time will be given at the workshop for a presentation of the project. Obviously, more information can be obtained from ARC’s team).

It is also worth looking at the experience of UNICEF in several countries, particularly in Jordan, in implementing a parenting programme over a number of years. The scaling up study carried out in 2011-12 is worth circulating, after authorisation from UNICEF.

2.2.5 Issues of quality and standards.

Despite the recent impressive increases in investment in ECD around the world, and in most Arab countries, there is evidence that such investments have focused on increasing access, rather than the quality of services and settings. Studies have demonstrated that, without a concurrent commitment to quality, intended gains for children’s care and education, and their prospects as future citizens may be lost and disparities maintained. Including quality along with more access is also a way to support improvement in equity of outcomes for children: access to services in itself is insufficient in achieving good outcomes for all children. The improvement of quality in ECD is an urgent issue, as Arab countries expand access.

The quality of services in ECD varies widely, and is generally concentrated in provisions afforded only to the elite. This is linked to the complex technical and knowledge-related processes required for establishing the definition and standards of quality in ECD, including within the global movement for early childhood. It is also connected, within the Arab countries, to the slow accumulation of the capital of knowledge and expertise in early childhood at the national level and regionally.

Dimensions of ECD program quality that are considered central to child outcome goals include the following

- safety and adequacy of physical environments,
- the nature of teacher-child, or caregiver-child interactions,
- education and training of early childhood professionals, and their pedagogical and content knowledge, and
- a holistic and integrated approach that addresses multiple domains of family and child functioning.

In the programmatic suggestions for the age category 3 to 6, we mentioned the Step-by-Step project related to principles and standards: although it applies mostly to pre-schooling, it also contains elements relevant to other services, and

can be expanded to cover the whole gamut of ECD services, once it has taken roots within the sector.

2.2.6 The capital of knowledge and human resources

One of the most pressing challenges that are of concern in all components of ECD, whether considered by age categories or by service sectors (health, education, etc.) is that of the capital of scientific and professional knowledge. This capital is to be addressed on two main lines: the library of resources in Arabic and the pool of ECD professionals.

a) The resources on early childhood in Arabic have multiplied in the last two decades, whether imparting scientific knowledge, dispensing methodologies for programming, or providing tools for training. This production represents a solid foundation, which is continuously in progress. Nevertheless, the field is nowhere near what is required for nurturing the development of the field, and the dissemination and availability of the resources is still very limited. A mapping of such resources has been carried out by colleagues within ARC, and it is possible to have an analytical look at what exists, identify gaps, design methods for addressing pressing needs, etc.

b) As it was said earlier on several occasions, the will and demand for expanding ECD services in all directions are increasing. However, they are often thwarted by the lack of qualified human resources. Developing the capital of ECD professionals at national and regional levels cannot be done overnight, and a strategy is necessary, and is better designed and implemented within a collective approach. Such an approach has to be multi-pronged, expanding programmes and departments in academic institutions that provide pre-service training, and multiplying the formats and levels of in-service training. The use of on-line models for the latter have become a necessity.

2.2.7 Issues of equity: reaching out to deprived and marginalised children

It is important to mention, however briefly, the concern for equity. Current provisions of ECD services remain very unequal within most Arab countries, keeping the knowledge poor urban sectors, as well as the rural and marginalised communities, at a disadvantage in the pursuit of human development. ECD provisions to the sectors marginalised for reasons of gender, disability, displacement, emergencies, ethnic or religious identity, etc. require special and additional attention, as young children in those situations are most at risk of not achieving their right to equal development, and in fact can benefit most from ECD provisions.

2.2.8 Collaboration among Arab countries and regional scope.

Given the wide discrepancies in the status and advances of the ECD sectors within and among Arab countries, it makes sense to adopt approaches and mechanisms of mutual support. On the one hand, cooperation will expand the culturally appropriate capital of knowledge available in the Arabic language, and

on the other, knowledge-rich sectors can nurture the quality of approaches, programmes, and services available to Arab children, and reach out to those children who are still excluded from ECD provisions.

2.2.9 Networking and advocacy

Establishing a network for ECD, and advocating for appropriate policies and priority programmes should be one of the primary concerns of the networking function within ARAIEQ/APECD.

There are a variety of models for establishing networks. The basis and criteria for convening an Arab network for ECD should be agreed collectively by a core of ECD actors in the region.

Such a network would act as a platform for early childhood professionals for advancing the ECD agenda in policy and outreach at the national and regional levels. Some of its objectives could be, for illustration:

- Convey to stakeholders at the policy and program level key messages that emerge from latest research findings and best practice experiences.
- Improve the status and work conditions of ECD professionals.
- Activate and contribute to expanding the capital of ECD professionals in order to respond to the increasing demand created by the scaling up of ECD services in most Arab countries.
- Become the “pool of experts”, who will provide support and expertise for the design and implementation of programmes, and nurture innovative approaches in ECD in Arab countries.

For a brief conclusion

The overview advanced in this paper, along with the programming priorities suggested, indicate, if anything, that the tasks and challenges facing the early childhood movement in the Arab region (if we are permitted to give ourselves and all our colleagues such a name), are multiple and enormous. Nevertheless, the mere fact that we can organise them in a coherent approach makes them seem feasible, at least. They will become a manageable programme if we are able to mobilise the resources, human and financial, in an approach that combine both collective initiatives and individual programmes and projects.

In one of the pictures published by a news agencies about the “occupation” of Tahrir Square in Cairo, pop-ups were included to show in more details some of the activities organised around the square: kitchen, first aids, etc. One of the pop-ups showed a group of young children seated on the ground, with their mothers and probably their fathers standing around them. The children were drawing on papers spread on the floor: I want to believe that they were drawing their dreams for a better present and future. Such dreams can become a reality if we invested very early in nurturing the development of all Arab children.

Annex 1: Arab Regional Agenda on Improving Education Quality (ARAIEQ) and Arab Program of Early Childhood Development (APECD)

1. Arab Regional Agenda for Improving Education Quality (ARAIEQ)

Improving the quality of education has been for decades one of the most important and urgent challenges for the future of the Arab countries. This has been acknowledged at several events during these past years and by many actors at the local, regional, and international levels, including field workers, academicians, policy makers and governments. The Arab Regional Agenda for Improving Education Quality (ARAIEQ) is a response to the request of “The Doha Ministerial Colloquium on Quality of Education” that took place in 2010, organized by ALECSO (the Arab League Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization), the Qatar Foundation, and the World Bank. Eighteen Arab countries were present, and they all agreed on the following:

- There are serious challenges concerning quality of education in the Arab Region, and it is urgent to take action.
- A coherent and ambitious Action Plan at the regional level was designed to move forward.

It is significant that this process comes at a time of radical changes in the region. While long-term disruptions, violence and increased poverty are seriously affecting Arab societies, positive trends in social participation are also emerging. Obviously, consequences on ECED are still to be assessed.

The general goal of the Regional Agenda is to enhance learning outcomes for all by improving the quality and relevance of education services. More specifically, enhancing learning outcomes entails shifting education policy making in the region from a focus on inputs to a focus on results. Improving the quality of educational services calls for institutional strengthening in relation to every school factor that has a determinant impact on service delivery and, as a result, on learning outcomes.

ARAIEQ is an umbrella initiative that aims at tying many existing and new programs into a coherent and efficient network. Five programs constitute the pillars of the Regional Agenda:

- Arab Program on Research and Evaluation of Education Quality
- Arab Program on Teacher Policies and Teacher Professional Development
- Arab Program on Early Childhood Development (APECD)
- Arab Program on Curriculum Innovation, Qualifications, and Information Communication Technologies in Education
- Arab Program on Entrepreneurship

Though each of these programs is hosted by an institution, network, or organization in an Arab country, they are organically interlinked and will find ways of cooperating towards the common goals. Each host consults and works closely with the World Bank and ALECSO through ARAIEQ Program Office, an Executive Council, and a Scientific Advisory Board.

2. The Arab Program on Early Childhood Development (APECD)

The Arab Resource Collective (ARC) hosts APECD. ARC and its partners have been developing through the years a holistic, integrated and inclusive approach to Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD). These conceptual foundations of this approach will guide APECD. We will also use the ‘Four Cornerstones’ developed and promoted as a programmatic tool by the international Consultative Group on ECCD, which are:

- Start at the beginning (conception to 3)
- Provide new opportunities for discovery and learning (3 to 6)
- Make schools ready for children (6 to 8)
- Ensure the development of policies on early childhood.

APECD will be a clearinghouse for good practice on policies and programs through the following:

- Promoting quality through program innovation.
- Supporting the assessment of cost-effectiveness and impact of approaches to ECD.
- Activating regional professional exchange and technical assistance.
- Increasing the utilization of the media and ICT in scaling up delivery of quality ECD.

The program will also be driven by the following priorities:

- Reaching out to the less privileged majority of young children and their families who remain beyond the reach of current ECD services.
- Making current knowledge available in Arabic, using a language accessible to information-poor communities.

APECD will work in cooperation with other ARAIEQ programs under the umbrella of three interrelated functions: Think Tank, Networking, and Resources and Tools Production

- The Think Tank function will focus on processing and generating knowledge for building the capital of early childhood expertise in the region.
- The Network will be a platform for ECD professionals and organizations to build communities of knowledge and practice. Together, they will aim at advancing the ECD agenda in policy and outreach.
- The function of the Resources and Tools Production is precisely that, with a focus on linking knowledge to implementation at project level.

Annex 2: Studies, mappings and other sources of information and data.

1. ARC's regional workshop on "Advancing the ECCD Agenda in the Arab Region", Amman, March 2010:

- Ghanem Bibi: The map of resources on ECCD, bibliography and report (in Arabic)
- Basma Faour: Mapping Early Childhood Services and Programmes in Arab countries
- Bushra Kaddoura: Mapping pre- and in-service teaching and training programs for early childhood professionals available in Lebanon.
- Report and programmatic recommendations of the workshop.

These documents can be requested from ARC, or found on ARC's website: www.mawared.org (NB: the site is currently under construction).

2. UNESCO's "Arab High Level Conference on ECCE: Policies and Programmes", Damascus, September 2010.

- "Early Childhood in the Arab countries: Status and Challenges", Arabic report prepared by Basma Faour, revised by Siham Swaigh and Higazi Idriss. A synthesis in English was submitted to the Moscow conference in October 2010. The descriptive overview was compiled as a result of a questionnaire filled by fifteen Arab countries, and findings from a number of sources, particularly EFA's General Monitoring Reports and regular statistical data issued by such bodies as UNESCO and UNICEF.
- Bushra Kaddoura: Mapping pre- and in-service teaching and training programs for early childhood professionals available in Dubai, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Tunis (in Arabic).
- Innovative Projects in ECCD: examples from Arab countries and the world, prepared by Ghanem Bibi and Rania Saheli, and revised by Higazi Idriss.

These documents can be requested from Higazi Idriss (h.idris@unesco.org) UNESCO Beirut. Some of these and other useful documents related to ECD can be found on the site of the Arab Early Childhood Working Group: www.aecwg.org.

3. The General Monitoring Reports on Education For All. Of particular interest to ECD are:

- EFA GMR 2007 - Strong Beginnings, Early Childhood Care and Education
- EFA GMR 2011 – The hidden crisis: Armed conflict and education
 - Arab countries Overview of progress on six goals
 - Statistical data from UNESCO's Institute of Statistics (UIS)
- EFA GMR 2012 – Youth and skills: Putting education to work
 - Part 1: monitoring progress towards the EFA Goals
- EFA GMR – Policy Paper 3: Expanding Equitable EC Care and Education is an urgent need. April 2012.

4. Other documents consulted:

- General Secretariat of the Arab League, Family and Childhood Department - Conceptual framework for developing early childhood: standards, policies and programmes. Unpublished draft, September 2011.
- Dr Eshya Mujahid-Mukhtar - An Evaluation of Selected National and International Assessment and Policy Documents in the Arab countries. Unpublished draft, May 2010.
- Jan van Ravens and Carlos Aggio - Expanding ECCD in the Arab countries: A study on the costs of making significant progress towards EFA Goal One in the Arab world. Unpublished, October 2006.

Annex 3

Education for All General Monitoring Report 2011

Regional Overview: Arab States

Goals 1 and 2

The past decade has seen some important advances towards Education for All (EFA) in the Arab States.¹ The region has increased primary net enrolment ratios by more than one-tenth, despite an increase in the school age population. Gender gaps have narrowed at the primary and secondary levels and more children are moving from primary school to secondary education. The Arab States region spends a high share of national income on education, well above the world average. External aid to basic education has increased, despite stagnation in overall levels. Yet major challenges remain. More than 6 million children were not enrolled in school in 2008, levels of learning achievement are low, more than one-quarter of the adult population is illiterate and the learning needs of young children and adolescents continue to suffer from widespread neglect.

Goal 1: Early childhood care and education

Children's education opportunities are shaped long before they enter primary school. The linguistic, cognitive and social skills they develop through early childhood care and education (ECCE) are the foundations for expanded life chances and for lifelong learning. Indicators of child well-being are still relatively poor for the Arab States, although disparities exist between and within countries.

Child mortality rates are falling in the Arab States. Child mortality is a sensitive barometer of progress towards goal 1. Over the past decade, child mortality rates have fallen in all the world's regions, including the Arab States. On average, 50 of every 1,000 children born in the region will not reach age 5. There are, however, huge differences in the under-5 mortality rates across countries, ranging from 10‰ in Kuwait and Qatar to 120‰ in Mauritania and 125‰ in Djibouti.

Education saves lives. The risk of childhood death is closely linked to household wealth and maternal education. In Egypt and Morocco, under-5 mortality rates are about twice as high among children of mothers with no education as among those having mothers with some secondary education. More educated women have better access to reproductive health information, and are more likely to have fewer children and to provide better nutrition to their children, all of which reduce the risk of child mortality.

Malnutrition is a major barrier to achieving EFA. Poor nutrition prevents children from developing healthy bodies and minds. A sharp rise in food prices in 2008 combined with the global recession continues to undermine efforts to combat

hunger in several countries in the Arab States region. Nearly one-fifth of children under age 5 in the region are affected by moderate or severe stunting (short for their age). The prevalence is particularly high in poor countries such as Djibouti, the Sudan and Yemen, where one-third or more of children suffer from stunting.

Participation in pre-primary education is far from universal. In 2008, around 3.2 million children were enrolled in pre- primary education in the region, an increase of 31% since 1999. However, the regional gross enrolment ratio (GER) of just 19% indicates that the majority of children in the Arab States were still excluded from pre-primary education in 2008. Pre-primary GERs ranged from only 3% in Djibouti to 87% in the United Arab Emirates.

The rate of progress in increasing enrolment in pre-primary education has been uneven. Some countries made initial advances in the first half of the 2000s while others began to progress more recently. Pre-primary enrolment rates grew faster in the first half of the decade in Egypt, while in countries including Algeria, Qatar and the Sudan, progress before 2004 was much slower than rates registered since. Several countries, including Kuwait, Morocco and the occupied Palestinian territory, registered declines in the pre-primary GER from 1999 to 2008.

Children living with high levels of poverty are in greatest need of ECCE, yet they are the least likely to attend such programmes. In the Syrian Arab Republic, attendance rates in pre-school programmes vary from less than 4% for children in the poorest quintile of households to just above 18% for children from the wealthiest households. Similarly, in Mauritania, the national average attendance rate is very low at 7%, and children from the wealthiest households are more than seven times as likely as poor children to attend early learning programmes.

Goal 2: Universal primary education

The past decade has been one of rapid progress towards the goal of universal primary education (UPE). Many countries in the Arab States region have registered important advances. But the pace of progress has been uneven, and the region as a whole is not on track to achieve UPE by 2015.

Many countries have made important strides towards UPE.

From 1999 to 2008, an additional 5.9 million children enrolled in primary education in the Arab States. Despite a 6% increase in the school age population, the region has increased the primary adjusted net enrolment ratio (ANER: measures the proportion of children of primary school age who are enrolled either in primary or secondary school) by 11% since 1999, to reach an average primary ANER of 86% in 2008. Progress towards UPE was particularly impressive in Djibouti, Mauritania, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen, with primary ANERs increasing by at least fourteen percentage points between 1999 and 2008. By contrast, four countries registered declines in the

ANER, including a dramatic fall of twenty-one percentage points in the occupied Palestinian territory.

Numbers of children out of school are declining, but at varying speeds. More than 6 million children of primary school age in the Arab States – 58% of them girls – were not enrolled in school in 2008. This is more than 3 million less than in 1999. Reductions in the number of out-of-school children slowed from 495,500 annually in 1999–2004 to 165,185 a year in 2004–2008. Some countries with relatively large out-of-school populations, including Algeria, Mauritania and Yemen, registered a slippage in the rate of progress over time. In Yemen, out-of-school numbers declined by an average of 94,000 annually from 1999 to 2004 but rose by 24,600 a year from 2004 to 2008. By contrast, progress has recently accelerated in some countries, such as Djibouti and Kuwait.

Many children in the region will remain out of school in 2015. Trend analysis provide insights into plausible scenarios for the numbers of children out of school in 2015. In Yemen, which had the most children out of school in the region in 2008 – more than 1 million – a continuation to 2015 of the trend from 1999 to 2009 would see the country's out-of-school number fall by nearly half, to reach 553,000 by 2015. However, a continuation to 2015 of the shorter 2004–2009 trend would mean an increase in the out-of-school population to almost 1.3 million by 2015.

Less than two-thirds of children starting school are of the right age. Getting children into primary school at the right age, ensuring that they progress smoothly and facilitating completion are key elements to advance towards UPE. Many countries in the Arab States region are struggling to get children into primary school at the official starting age. In 2008, only 64% of children starting school were of official primary school age in the region, and the figure was as low as 37% in Mauritania in 2009. However, rapid change is possible. In Morocco, the share of children starting school at the official age increased from 51% in 1999 to 79% in 2008.

Progress in survival to the last grade of primary school has been rapid. Once children are enrolled at the right age, the challenge is to get them through school. School survival is high in the region: in 2007 nearly 97% of children starting school survived to the last grade. However, school retention remains an important issue in Morocco, where the survival rate to the last grade was 76% in 2007. Country-level data show that the large majority of countries improved survival rates over the period. Several countries that are still some distance from UPE, including Mauritania and the Sudan, have seen their survival rates increase significantly since 1999; Mauritania's rate rose by an impressive twenty-one percentage points.

Prospects for entry, progression and completion of primary school are closely linked to household circumstances. Children who are poor, rural or from ethnic or

linguistic minorities face higher risks of dropping out. Coming from a rural home in Morocco more than halves the probability of school completion.

Tackling school dropout requires action on several fronts. The scale of the dropout problem is not widely recognized. Dropout profiles vary across countries. In Djibouti, with a dropout rate of 8% in the first grade, some children have trouble negotiating their way through the early grades. On the other hand, higher dropout rates in the last grade in Morocco partly reflect the effects of school examination failure. High dropout rates in later grades can also be associated with late- age entry to school. Evidence from many countries shows that the risk of primary school dropout increases with age, though the strength of the association varies.

In most cases, children drop out because of poverty-related factors, problems linked to the quality of education or school- based factors that influence progression through grades. Research in Egypt found that children in better-performing schools were far less likely to drop out than children in schools with lower levels of achievement. Reducing the risk of dropout requires a broad set of policies aimed at reducing underlying vulnerabilities.

Annex 4 - SABER- Early Childhood Development Overview

(Excerpts from an introductory document of the World Bank)

Introduction

The Human Development Department of the World Bank has initiated a work program called *Systems Approach for Better Education Results*, SABER, is a tool to diagnose education systems, policies and programs across countries. SABER- Early Childhood Development is one of several topics within SABER and will collect, synthesize and disseminate comprehensive information on Early Childhood Development (ECD) across different systems. This framework presents three core ECD policy goals:

- **Establishing an enabling environment.** This goal refers to the existence of an adequate legal and regulatory framework; the degree of coordination within sectors and across institutions to deliver services effectively; and, the availability of adequate fiscal resources.
- **Implementing widely.** This goal refers to the extent of coverage (as a share of the eligible population) and gaps in coverage, as well as the scope of programs offered. A robust ECD policy should include programs in all essential sectors, high degrees of coverage and should reach the entire population equitably— especially the most disadvantaged young children.
- **Monitoring and assuring quality.** This goal refers to the development of standards for ECD services, the existence of systems to monitor compliance with those standards as well as the implementation of systems to monitor ECD outcomes across children. Ensuring the quality of ECD programs is essential because evidence has shown that unless programs are of high quality, the impact on children can be negligible, or even detrimental.

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The framework can be used to benchmark countries' levels of development in each of the three ECD policy goals. It also presents a comparative lens through which to view countries' ECD systems; through such comparisons, lessons can be drawn from the experiences of other countries and policy options discerned to strengthen ECD at the national and sub-national level.

Assessment and Benchmarking Processes

The SABER- ECD approach relies on the following three steps:

1. **Stocktake:** Take stock of the ECD programs and policies that already exist in a specific country.
2. **Analyze:** Use information on ECD programs to classify programs as Sectoral, Cross-Sectoral, Multi-Sectoral, and Comprehensive; and use information on ECD policies to evaluate the level of development of ECD policies at the national and/or subnational level along the three critical policy goals of ECD.
3. **Identify Options:** Based on international comparisons, use the SABER ECD policy classification rubric to identify country-specific policy options to strengthen ECD policies to attain the three ECD policy goals.

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SABER – ECD Products

For each country that participates in SABER- ECD, a country report (approximately 15 pages in length) will be produced with an analysis of ECD policies, regional and international comparisons and country- specific policy options to improve ECD policy within each of the three policy goals. Country reports and data will be publicly available on a World Bank- sponsored SABER – ECD website. It is important to note that *countries will not be ranked according to any overall level of ECD policy development.*