



Establishing and/or strengthening national ECD networks



Introduction

The Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC) builds strong partnerships across sectors and different disciplines, organisations, agencies and institutions in the Asia-Pacific region to advance the agenda on and investment in early childhood. ARNEC prioritises sharing knowledge and advocating for holistic and inclusive early childhood.

ARNEC has 25 institutional members and more than 3,000 individual members. To connect partners and stakeholders in the ECD community in the region and provide a platform to discuss ECD priorities, ARNEC has established a learning group to support the development and/or strengthening of national ECD networks in the Asia-Pacific region.

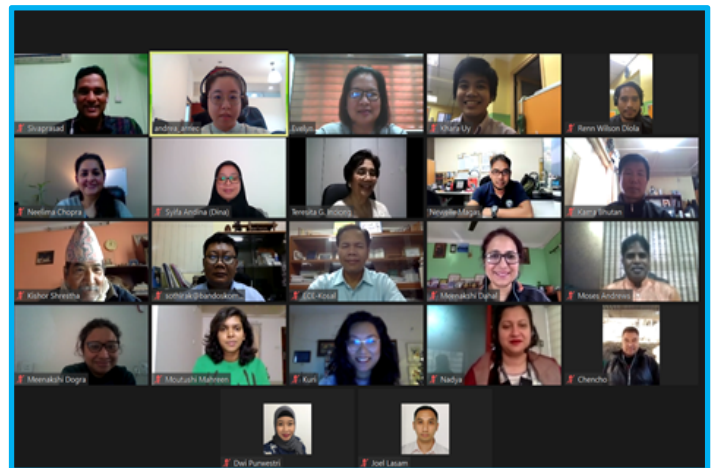
Objectives

ARNEC's learning group aims to:

- generate dialogue about ECD issues;
- promote learning and encourage collaboration among ECD stakeholders from different countries in the region;
- build capacity and mobilise resources for the ECD community;
- facilitate connections among experts in the region; and
- provide a forum for exchange of good practices, researches, innovations, and lessons of implementation.

The learning approach

Guided by the Nurturing Care Framework and the Sustainable Development Goals, ARNEC has supported the learning group to promote multi-sectoral approaches to ECD in the region. The learning group is ARNEC's mechanism to foster nodes and linkages in the ECD community, where people and partner organisations connect to galvanise collective action and impact (Plastrik, 2015) and to facilitate social change to advance ECD outcomes.



The ARNEC learning group held regular virtual meetings in September-December 2020 drawing from the insights and experiences of 21 members from seven different countries, including Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Indonesia, India, Cambodia and the Philippines with a mix of practitioners and experts from the academia, NGO/CSO/INGO, and the government, as well as ARNEC institutional members and National Representatives. The group's 'shared practices' have resulted in new knowledge for the ECD community in the region.

The learning agenda

Following the presentation of institutional models and practices of ECD networks in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Cambodia, Nepal, and the Philippines, there emerged in the Learning Group 'shared practices' and new knowledge.

1 Government-initiated ECD networks

The national ECD network in the Philippines was initiated and is funded by the national government to support the implementation of national ECD policies and laws.

2 Civil society-initiated ECD networks

An alternate model is found in Bangladesh and Nepal. Their national ECD networks was initiated through partnerships between civil society, international organisations, and local NGOs. The networks work with the government to support ECD initiatives in their respective countries. These networks have flexible organisational structures.

3 Government and civil society-initiated ECD networks

ECD networks in Cambodia and Indonesia are government and civil society-initiated drawing from the partnerships among stakeholders and the capacities and expertise necessary to move the ECD agenda forward in these countries.

Despite their differences in structures and working models, all national ECD networks in the region have promoted multi-sectoral approaches to ECD. Networks have engaged diverse stakeholders and contributed in capacity building of ECD professionals, especially in awareness-raising and knowledge creation and diffusion.



The most important role of national ECD networks was observed in building stronger partnerships. Network Impact (2020) in its report on 'The Network Advantage: How Regional Networks Catalyze Impact In Early Childhood Development' reiterated how networks 'link the ground to the global'. National ECD networks create these linkages and connections at different levels from the local to the subnational, the national, and beyond.

The learning harvest: new knowledge for ECD advocacy and action in the region

Synthesis from the learning group resulted in new knowledge for region-wide advocacy:

- **Supportive national laws and policies:** Integrated ECD policies and laws enable durable government support for ECD.
- **Government-led strategy for coordination among different sectors:** National ECD networks and mechanisms provide ease of coordination for multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approaches for ECD.

- **Sub-national ECD convergence plans:** Strategic action plans at the sub-national and local levels foster community-based implementation of ECD services nearest to young children and their families.
- **Collaboration of relevant national and sub-national stakeholders:** Developing strategies for engaging multiple stakeholders, especially voluntary organisations and the civil society, augments capacities of national ECD networks.
- **Well defined organisational structure & roles and responsibilities:** High capacity of ECD networks is reinforced by having structures and enabling policies in place, including the corresponding financial, organisational, and institutional arrangements for ECD services.
- **Peer learning and collaborative learning opportunities:** Collaborations and peer learning opportunities with international ECD experts is crucial. ARNEC facilitated twinning and peer-learning relationships among the Philippines, Cambodia, Bangladesh and Nepal. ARNEC is also supporting India's efforts to establish a national integrated ECD network.



A roadmap for establishing and strengthening national ECD networks	
<i>National Ecosystem for ECD</i>	Is there a national integrated policy on early childhood development?
	Is there a high-level multi-sector coordination mechanism with co-ordination across relevant ECD sectors and stakeholders convened?
	Are there opportunities for peer learning and collaborations at international and national level?
<i>Mapping sub-national opportunities</i>	Have assessments of current situation and opportunities within and across different sectors at sub-national levels been undertaken?
	Is there smooth communication among stakeholders to create common ground and consensus on a vision and mission of national ECD networks?
	Are there strategies to ensure long-term funding streams for the national ECD network?
<i>Implementation requirements and rational action plans</i>	Have common goals and targets for the national ECD network been laid out?
	Is there clarity on roles and responsibilities for participating members?
	Is there a strategic action plan for local level functioning?
	Are there opportunities for collaboration and engaging families and communities?

Way forward: more learning opportunities

- **Productivity:** The need for multi-sectoral policy and addressing the culture of silos is an opportunity for improvement for national ECD networks. Absence of or weak nodal agency and lack of regulations with well-defined priorities are also reform opportunities.
- **Financial:** Sustained investment for research collaboration, documentation of good practices, and knowledge management is essential for informed decision-making and investments for early childhood.
- **Functional:** Diverse and complex institutional arrangements need to be streamlined to allow ease of coordination and collaboration.
- **Support:** The search for incentives to sustain network members, especially volunteers, need to be looked into.
- **Process:** Although engaging multiple stakeholders is beneficial for ECD networks, diverse interests and mandates of the participating members and organisations often pose challenges for smooth functioning of ECD networks.

These challenges may be overcome by enhancing connections among members and finding ways to actively engage the members of the network. These will also form part of future learning agendas supported by ARNEC.

References

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