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## Policy brief: enhancing early childhood education in Ethiopia

*Based on the workshop, "Innovative Approaches and Best Practices on Early Childhood Development: Insight from CCFC Saving Brains and LEAP projects," held in Addis Ababa*

### Preamble

Christian Children's Fund of Canada (CCFC) is a child-centered international development organization, which has been working globally for more than 50 years and in Ethiopia for nearly 30 years. The organization has field-tested initiatives, which prove the importance of early childhood intervention programs, with particular emphasis on those aged zero to six. CCFC has shared these cost-effective, culturally appropriate and innovative approaches in cognitive, physical and emotional development of children with key stakeholders to explore opportunities for scaling up early childhood development initiatives regionally and nationally.

### Introduction

CCFC has used innovative approaches, such as Learning Through Play (LTP), to enhance early childhood development, in keeping with the government's plan for early childhood care and education (ECCE). It addressed gaps in parent-to-child interactions and enhanced pre-school learning methodologies. The approach was field-tested through two research-oriented projects — Saving Brains and Lead for Education Achievement and Progress (LEAP). The objective of Saving Brains was to improve the health, physical, cognitive, linguistic and socioemotional development of 3,000 children — aged zero to three — by focusing on early brain stimulation. It was implemented in Arsi Negelle district, Oromia region for two years. LEAP targeted 138,984 children — aged four to six — over five years to increase access to and improve the quality of ECCE services. LEAP was implemented in Ada'a, Arsi Negelle and Tarma Ber districts in Oromia

### Key findings: early childhood development

Children account for nearly half of the Ethiopian population. The latest national census shows those under the age of seven comprise the largest age bracket — an estimated 17,000,000. This demographic has distinct development needs, as the early years of development are fundamental to intellectual, physical and emotional development.

### I. Parental and community engagement

#### Parental education

CCFC has found parents who learn about early brain development, attachment and the developmental needs of their offspring, can play a pivotal role in their child's cognitive health.

#### Use of LTP calendar and audio-visuals

Parents were taught about early brain stimulation through culturally appropriate videos and LTP calendars, which showed child development through illustrations. Both were successful in teaching parents how to nurture their children's growth. Home-to-home support from social workers and health-extension workers was also useful.

#### Involvement of fathers

The father-to-child relationship required cultivation due to lack of awareness and harmful traditional practices in communities, which discouraged fathers from being involved in the early development of their children.

#### Harmonization with traditional education system

Quality child-nurturing is dependent on the competencies of parents *and* the integration of social context as well as traditional education.

## II. Quality education for preschoolers

Preschool (children aged four to six) provides an essential foundation for lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and employability. This calls for a concerted effort to improve quality education at the preschool level to contribute to the economic and social goals of the country, including generating a robust economy and achieving Ethiopia's ambition to become a middle-income country by 2030.

### Curricula

Introducing the LTP approach in preschool has enabled schools to better meet the holistic needs of children aged four to six. The LTP approach enhanced children's creativity, led to better attainment of their social-emotional competence, enhanced gross- and fine-motor development as well as the acquisition of basic life skills. Children who completed the program were better prepared for formal education.

### Infrastructure

Quality primary education is best supported by infrastructure and tools in centres that cater to development, creativity, learning and play. There was an emphasis on investing in play equipment made from local material, incorporating traditional games and creating opportunities for children to explore.

### Teachers/facilitators training program

ECCE teachers/facilitators need specific preschool training, which differs from primary-school teaching. Accordingly, CCFC trained ECCE facilitators on applying the LTP approach. It developed manuals by combining existing training packages used by collage teachers. It also conducted and provided refresher courses as continuous professional development for teachers/facilitators.

### Health and nutrition

Children attending the ECCE programs had better personal hygiene than their peers who did not participate. The daycares were clean, and children had limited direct contact with an unhealthy environment. Due to links between ECCE centres and health facilities, children could have their growth monitored and receive regular medical checkups, leading to the implementation of nutrition and health interventions.

### Leadership and governance

CCFC, through its implementation of ECCE programs, demonstrated the importance of parental cooperation in the governance of ECCE. This provided a platform for ECCE centre leadership to get continuous assessment and feedback from parents. It has also mobilized community resources for building additional classrooms, resting rooms and fencing of the ECCE centres.

## Future policy measures and enforcement of best practices

- **Institutional collaboration and coordination:** To strengthen collaborations between government ministries (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs,) UN agencies, NGOs, media and other specialists working for children. Attention shall be given by the Ministry of Education to mainstreaming the LTP approach in early childhood education and health-extension programs;
- **Curriculum revision:** To increase parental knowledge about early brain stimulation and guide the teachers nationally on the LTP approach;
- **Teachers training:** To enhance the skill-set of preschool teachers/facilitators, the Ministry of Education and its stakeholders need to integrate the LTP approach with existing training packages for pre-school facilitators;
- **Community ownership:** To foster community ownership there should be a guideline for including parents in the governance structures of ECCE centres;
- **Fathers involvement:** To ensure the health-extension system, agriculture-extension worker and others administration bodies are prepared to maximize fathers' involvement in early childhood development; and
- **Financial/budget allocations:** To ensure the Ministry of Education and its stakeholders show their commitment to early childhood development through the allocation of financial resources at grassroots/woreda levels.