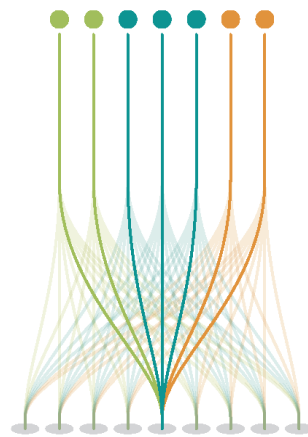


The Governance of ECD

Lighting the LAMP of Locally Adaptable Mono-sectoral Policies



“The rise of populism in donor countries and the subsequent decrease in Official Development Assistance make it all the more urgent to promote a governance concept that is based on – and strengthens - local self-reliance.”

Jan van Ravens, Independent Policy Advisor, 2025

Abstract

The summary table on page 7 serves as this paper's abstract.

Keywords

Early Childhood Development

ECD

Governance

Locally Adaptable

Integrated ECD

Multi-sectoral

Background

This paper is based on the author's experience as a policy advisor in about 30 low- and middle-income countries, as well as his participation in three governance studies:

- The governance and finance of ECD. A study by a team from Harvard and Yale (2012-2016) covering Cambodia, Colombia, Kenya, Laos, Peru and Uganda.
- Decentralization and its impact on preschool education in Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Serbia. A study by a team from Yale, coordinated by the Geneva Office of UNICEF (2015-2016).
- Development of preschool policy at county-level in Kenya, post-decentralization. A study by a team from the World Bank (2015) covering four Kenyan counties.

Author Note

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Abbreviations

ECD	Early Childhood Development
EU	European Union
IECD	Integrated Early Childhood Development
IGO	Intergovernmental Organization
IKC	Integrated Child Center
LAMP	Locally Adaptable Mono-sectoral Policies
LSG	Local Self-Government
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
RCT	Randomized Controlled Trial
U5M	Under-5-Mortality

Introduction and Summary Table

Trend analysis¹ found that unexpected decelerations occurred in the reduction of Under-5-Mortality (U5M) after the turn of the century, especially in aid-dependent countries in Africa and Asia. The analysis also revealed that these setbacks *coincided*, by and large, with the spread of a governance concept called Integrated ECD (IECD), which entails the integration of ECD policies and plans across multiple sectors. To investigate whether IECD actually caused these setbacks, a range of determinants of U5M was reviewed in search of an alternative explanation. This was not found. In fact, all lights were green for an accelerated reduction of U5M between the turn of the century and the outbreak of COVID-19. This leaves IECD as the most probable cause² for the setbacks and underscores longstanding concerns about this problematic governance concept³.

This paper on “the governance of ECD” focuses on IECD *as a governance concept* - not as a program model - and it does not challenge the most commonly used argument for integration: the adage of holistic child development. The summary table on page 7 clarifies this.

The trend analysis also suggests that the spread of IECD has been donor-driven. The analysis found a remarkable positive correlation between countries’ degree of fragility and their chance of having an integrated ECD policy in place. Hardly any country with a low degree of fragility has embraced IECD. Indeed, multi- and bilateral donors have been promoting IECD intensively for the last two decades, imposing it on some of the world’s most fragile government administrations, who accepted the concept in the expectation of financial support.

It should be added that U5M is as the tip of an iceberg. For every child that deceases before the age of five in a context where U5M is generally high, there are several children who survive just barely and fail to develop to their full potential. The implications of the decelerations in the reduction of U5M are significant.

Two recent developments have increased the urgency for the global ECD community to reconsider its governance concept.

In November 2024, The Lancet published two articles about what was referred to as “the next 1000 days”. The second of these articles⁴ focused on the implications for policy and practice, thereby promoting IECD. Because of the exceptional reputation of The Lancet, its endorsement of IECD can be seen as the ultimate legitimation for this problematic governance concept. The journal lends IECD a justification that it does not deserve.

The second development is the geopolitical landslide that occurred in the beginning of 2025. One of its consequences is a decrease in Official Development Assistance (ODA). The closure

¹ “Did “Integrated ECD” Cause the Setbacks in the Fight Against Child Mortality?” (2025). Available at www.janvanravens.com under Global Reports.

² Due to limited availability of data, time and resources, the trend analysis does not yield full certainty regarding the causes of the setbacks in U5M reduction. Therefore, the paper provides recommendations on how to investigate the impact of IECD with more scientific rigor. However, the paper’s mantra is that “more research is needed but should not be awaited”, as the negative impact of IECD is both likely and serious.

³ For example, see <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/21799/chapter/3> (2015)

⁴ Nores, M. et al. (2024). The cost of not investing in the next 1000 days: implications for policy and practice. *The Lancet*, 404(10467), 2117-2130. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(24\)01390-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(24)01390-4)

of USAID was the most notable step in this process, but due to the changing global power balance, many other donor countries feel a need to increase military spending. Cutting ODA is one of the more “attractive” ways to (partly) finance this, not least because of the growing influence of populist leaders who dislike foreign aid anyway. In EU-countries on average, ODA stood at 0.51% of GNI in 2023 (down from 0.56% in 2022) whereas military spending in 2023 stood at 1.7% of GDP with an emerging consensus that it should increase to 3 or 3.5%. Thus, the expected increases in military spending exceed ODA budgets by a factor three, making the latter very vulnerable. Non-EU countries in the Northern Atlantic region (prominent donors such as Canada, the UK and Norway) face similar dilemmas.

Jointly, these two developments result in a dark scenario: in November 2024, The Lancet provides the ultimate justification for a problematic governance concept that relies heavily on the donor community, and a few months later the world witnesses a deep crisis in that same donor community. The only way in which a weakened donor community can mitigate the consequences for IECD-affected fragile countries is to promote a governance concept that builds on – and strengthens – national and local self-reliance.

As noted above, the aforementioned trend analysis showed that the spread of IECD *coincided* with setbacks in U5M reduction, but it did not fully prove causality. This paper on the Governance of ECD fills that gap, pointing at problems that occur both before and after adoption of an IECD policy. Pre-adoption issues are related (i) to the ways in which policies are normally developed; (ii) to the division of roles and responsibilities between and within ministries and other government entities and (iii) and, last but not least, to the complex interplay between government, parliament, stakeholders, and civil society in general. In the post-adoption phase, implementation is frustrated by a mechanism so unique that the literature on governance does not provide a name for it. It is baptized as the “birds-on-an-elephant problem”: an important weakness of IECD which hinders the scale-up of essential (if not life-saving) ECD services. Still not providing the hardest of evidence – governance analysis is not among the exact sciences - this paper shows how IECD causes stagnation both before policy adoption and after, causing the slowdowns in U5M reduction.

But more than a critique of IECD, the paper is a plea for its alternative called LAMP: Locally Adaptable Mono-sectoral Policies. LAMP is an occasional name for a widely applied governance concept that emerged in recent decades in response to decentralization and multi-sectorality. LAMP entails policies that are on the one hand provisioned at the national level⁵ by individual ministries based on a shared vision, and are on the other hand formulated with such a large degree of flexibility that Local Self-Governments⁶ (LSGs) have the scope to build the service configurations that best fit their unique local contexts and local preferences. This may or may not lead to integration of services - this is a local choice. LSGs are also in a much better position than the national level to detect and correct problems if they occur, and in as far as this

⁵In most countries it is the national government that has legislative power for ECD services. But in larger countries, ECD policy can (partly) be the purview of intermediate levels such as Cantons, Prefectures, States, Länder, Provinces, et cetera. For brevity, however, this paper assumes that it is the national level that has legislative power.

⁶ In the literature on decentralization, the term “Local Self-Government” (LSG) is used to refer to the (local) level to which functions have been decentralized, deconcentrated and/or devolved. Depending on how the decentralization process has been shaped, and depending on countries’ governance architecture, these LSGs can be a municipality, a community, a district, or a county, to restrict it to the English language. Globally, there is an even richer nomenclature. This explains the use of an abstraction such as LSG.

requires vertical coordination (with the relevant ministry), this can be done more effectively with the single ministry than with multiple ministries or a coordinating agency.

The key task of the national level is to ensure that services are available and adaptable. The goal is that the adaptable services *converge* at the local level, to be configured by communities. The table on the next page juxtaposes LAMP and IECD, showing where the two governance concepts are in agreement and where they diverge.

ECD is not unique in its multi-sectorality: nearly all fields of policy span multiple sectors and they respond to this situation in ways that ECD can emulate. This is the theme of the first two sections of this paper. Section 3 introduces decentralization, which can be beneficial to the implementation of child services provided that there is a carefully crafted relationship between the national and the local. Section 4 then shows how decentralization and multi-sectorality work together under LAMP for the best possible ECD service configuration. Sections 5 and 6 focus on pre-adoption-issues, highlighting the mismatch between IECD and the processes by which policies are normally developed and adopted. And after policy adoption, says section 7, the implementation is frustrated by the interconnectedness of services: the birds-on-an-elephant problem. Section 8 shifts the focus back to LAMP, underscoring that integration is a local choice and that it can even be hindered by pre-integrated policies that are parachuted from the national level. Section 9 questions what it refers to as the synergy-argument. Section 10, finally, reflects on the paradigmatic difference between philanthropy and policy. The section concludes that while “holistic early childhood development” has proven its great value as an analytical concept, it is naïve to translate it directly into a governance concept, as this ignores the primacy of LSGs and the idiosyncrasies of policy development and implementation.

The time has come to light the LAMP. The rise of populism in donor countries and the subsequent decrease in ODA make it all the more urgent to shift to a governance concept that is based on – and further strengthens – local self-reliance.

Summary Table: similarities and differences between IECD and LAMP

Level	IECD	LAMP
Child	Children must develop <i>holistically</i> . Not only must they grow up healthy, they also need to develop cognitively and emotionally, while being socially protected against poverty, abuse, exploitation and trafficking.	True.
Program	Because children must develop holistically, they must benefit from interventions that span multiple sectors, including at least health, learning, and social protection. ECD is a multi-sectoral field.	True, but ECD’s multi-sectorality is far from exceptional. ECD can learn from the ways in which other fields of policy have addressed their multi-sectorality.
	Because ECD is multi-sectoral, ECD programs must be integrated across multiple sectors. RCTs prove that integration creates synergy between ECD programs: the joint impact of two programmatic interventions is bigger than their separate impacts.	<p>RCTs found synergy in integrated programs because that is where RCTs looked for it. Synergy would be found in <i>converging</i> programs just as well, if only RCTs would investigate these. What really matters is that ECD programs come together in the child. Once this is achieved, it is up to the LSGs (not the national level) to decide how to <i>configure</i> the programs and to closely monitor their integral delivery.</p> <p>For LSGs, integration is an option (not an imperative) and it has very serious consequences when programs are pre-integrated at national level in countries where these programs are not yet universal.</p>
Policy	Because programs must be integrated, policies, too, must be integrated.	Section 8 proves the very opposite. If an LSG chooses to integrate programs at local level, it can only do this if policies are <i>not</i> pre-integrated at national level, because it would only be by coincidence that the national “package” fits local context, needs and preferences.

1. Multi-sectorality is far from exceptional

Nearly all fields of policy are multi-sectoral. ECD is by no means an exception. Therefore, ECD has the opportunity to benefit from what has been learnt about governance in other policy fields.

Labor market policy is one of many fields that can serve as an example⁷. Its central activity is to match the supply of and the demand for labor. This is a task for specialized agencies and professionals who mediate between job-seekers and employers with vacancies. These mediation processes can be governed by a single ministry, but to do this successfully, employment policies are needed to create and maintain jobs. This requires, on its turn, innovation and expansion in every potentially viable sector of the economy, bringing a whole range of ministries into the picture. In fact, in periods of high demand for labor, mediation activities (the core activity in labor market policy) may become close to irrelevant as job-seekers become scarce and find their way on their own. On the supply side of the labor market, education and training are critical to ensure the required competency of workers, while public transport and housing policies are needed to enable workers to reach their jobs on a daily basis. Accessible healthcare can enhance productivity and reduce job-absenteeism. There are not many ministries that are not involved in labor market policy. Similar stories can be told for youth policy, regional development, infrastructure, and practically every other policy field.

Indeed, two of the biggest challenges of our time require multisectoral action. Inequality does not only have economic dimensions but also social, psychological and political dimensions, addressing practically all spheres of public life⁸. Global warming can only be confronted by efforts that encompass all sectors that emit carbon dioxide and other pollutants as well as by creating mitigation strategies to deal with the inevitable, and these strategies always involve many sectors, from agriculture to public infrastructure to jobs creation⁹. The education sector has a double role: to enhance young people's awareness of the need for behavioral change and to create the human resources necessary to confront the crisis.

We might as well reverse the question: is there any field of public activity that is *not* multisectoral? One could argue that the military is fairly self-contained, with its internal education and training system, its own medical infrastructure, its exclusive vehicle maintenance facilities, et cetera. But this has causes that are unique to the military: the need for secrecy and the need for self-reliance in times of conflict. Apart from the military, all fields of policy are multi-sectoral. ECD can and should learn from others.

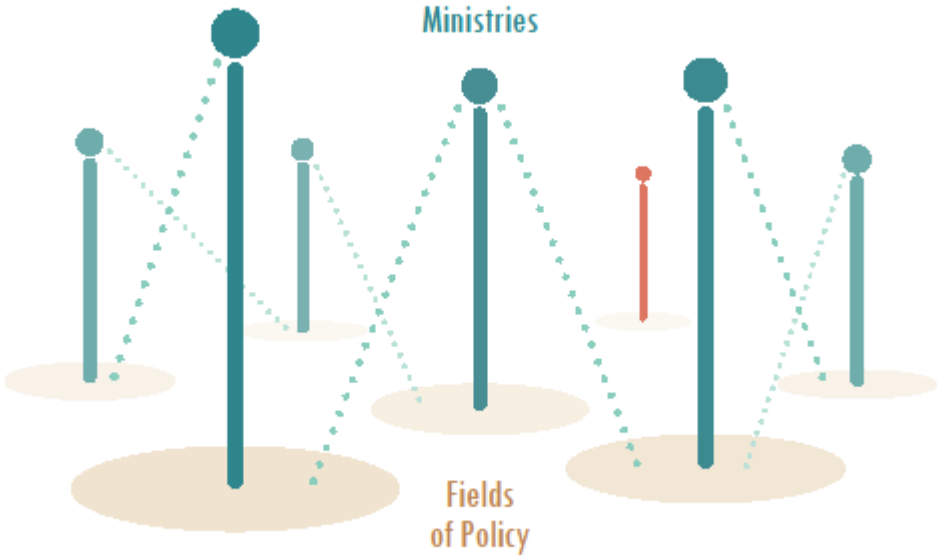
Figure 1 visualizes how most fields of policy are governed by multiple ministries, and, conversely, how most ministries are addressing more than one policy field, with the military (red) as the one possible exception. The continuous lines represent the relations between ministries and their "own" fields of policy, whereas the dotted lines represent "flanking policies", a term to be clarified in the following section.

⁷ file:///C:/Users/Gebruiker/Downloads/Multi-dimensional_preferences_for_labour_market_re.pdf

⁸ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jiec.13222>

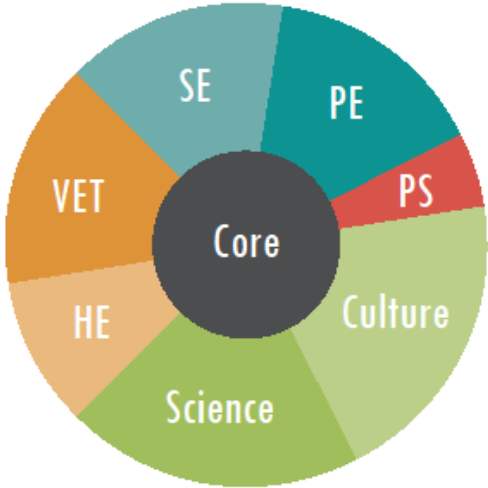
⁹ <https://www.rti.org/announcements/rti-building-experience-providing-multisectoral-solutions-climate-change-resilience>

Figure 1. Ministries and Fields of Policy



Clearly, figure 1 is a simplification of reality. In practice, most governments have between 10 and 20 ministries, with linkages to a multitude of fields of policy. Figure 2 zooms in on the level of the ministries. Using a Ministry of Education, Culture and Science as an example, it illustrates how the ministerial core (consisting of units of finance, legislation, HRM, public relations, and the minister’s personal staff) is surrounded by a number of field directorates such as Preschool Education (PS), Primary Education (PE), Secondary Education (SE), Vocational Education and Training (VET), Higher Education (HE), Science and Culture. Each of these directorates has its own links to external fields of policy; these are not shown in the figure.

Figure 2. Structure of a Ministry of Education, Culture and Science



In figure 2, the preschool directorate (PS) is linked to the policy field of ECD, with further links to health and social protection. The directorate of vocational education and training (VET) has strong links with any sector of the economy that is in need of qualified workers. Via these sectors, the ministry has links with ministries of economic affairs, agriculture, infrastructure, healthcare, et cetera. The department of higher education (HE) has similar connections with the world of work, but is also maintaining relations with a range of research institutes, covering all disciplines of science. The departments of primary education (PE) and (non-vocational) secondary education (SE) seem relatively self-contained, but even here we see increasing links with the outer world. Community schools, for instance, are rooted in local communities, which connects them with local service providers from sectors such as healthcare, social affairs, cultural affairs, sports, police, et cetera. Secondary education can be a communication channel for other sectors. Ministries of health and justice, for example, may request prime-time in the curricula of schools in order to convey messages about healthy behavior and crime prevention. In section 6 – about the implications of IECD – we will return to figure 2.

2. Some responses to multi-sectorality

There are many unproblematic ways in which a ministry can respond in a satisfactory manner to multi-sectorality without IECD. One of the standard responses to inter-ministerial entanglement is the appointment of one or more *contact-persons or gatekeepers*. For every external organization – whether it concerns a ministry or other - with which a ministry needs to connect, it can appoint a designated official who will keep track of all ongoing interaction and who will inform and guide colleagues who embark on new joint activities.

More in general, it is important to build a *culture of coordination*: to strive for a situation in which civil servants consider it normal rather than exceptional to constantly move in and out of the four walls of the ministry, consulting and negotiating with external stakeholders. Turning line-ministries into open organizations can be done by means of training, on-job-coaching, and staff exchange. Silos to dovecots.

Another way to address multi-sectorality is the creation of *inter-ministerial working groups*. Whenever inter-ministerial cooperation around a certain subject or policy area becomes substantial, ministers may consider the creation of an inter-ministerial committee or working group, either ad hoc or on a permanent basis. Such a working group can be guided by a common vision statement from the Cabinet, or it can request such a statement if it is lacking.

A concrete outcome of inter-ministerial interaction can be a *flanking policy*. A ministry of health, for example, may be concerned about the local availability of healthy food and urge the ministry of agriculture to stimulate production for local consumption rather than for export. The treasury and the ministry of social affairs might be involved to mitigate the loss of income for the farmers. From the perspective of the ministry of health, this agricultural production shift is a flanking policy, while it is a core policy for the ministry of agriculture.

In today's complex modern world, arrangements such as the ones described above have become business as usual throughout the government apparatus. Generations of policy makers have grown up with these practices. Inter-ministerial entanglement requires absolutely no integration of policies. In fact, policy integration (at national level) may take out the flexibility that is needed so urgently in multi-sectoral policy development, as this paper will demonstrate.

3. Decentralization

Whereas multi-sectorality is as old as mankind's first structured attempts to exercise control over societal development, it is easier to put a date on the genesis of "decentralization". When the French Revolution of 1789 dismissed monarchy rather abruptly as an unacceptable governance concept, the French were urgently in need of something new to replace it. But soon it appeared that La Republique was as centralized as the old monarchy¹⁰, so that decentralization became a regular theme in the ongoing debate on how best to govern a country, first in France and then beyond.

Various thinkers and leaders kept decentralization on the agenda until it became the most prominent governance theme in the second half of the 20th century. This had two main dimensions: ideological and pragmatic. The ideology of decentralization rests on the fundamental human desire for self-determination: a value in its own right. But in addition, decentralization brings decision making closer to the citizen, and there is the basic belief that people at local level know better than those in the capital which policies – or policy adaptations – work best for their community. This is generally known as subsidiarity: the principle that social and political issues should be dealt with at the level that is consistent with their resolution, whereas a central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed at a more local level¹¹.

The same two dimensions – ideology and pragmatism - were prominent in developments in industrial democracy and in the governance of higher education in the 1960s: workers and students alike began to claim the opportunity to co-govern their company or university, arguing that this was their right *and* that it leads to better outcomes for all. Earlier, in 1954, Peter Drucker¹² reconciled the two dimensions in his holistic theory of management in which the empowerment of employees is central, both in their own interest *and* in that of the organization.

"Participation" and "community-driven development"¹³ are the banners under which ideas about self-determination and self-reliance entered the realm of development assistance. In recent decades, aid agencies became self-critical about their own western bias and banned prescriptive approaches to development assistance, in favor of localized models with communities in a central role. This may represent a strange twist of history in that in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, local communities have played a central role for ages, and it wasn't until the classical western governance model – the centralized nation state – was imposed on this continent, that distances and tensions were created between the national and the local. Nevertheless, allowing communities to take back control does yield results, with community-based healthcare practices in Ethiopia¹⁴ as an excellent example.

Decentralization begot a bad name when the recession of 1982-1983 inspired governments to decentralize functions to LSGs without disbursing sufficient funds to fulfil those functions properly. Casey (2018)¹⁵ confirms that swinging the pendulum radically from centralized to

¹⁰ https://www.jstor.org/stable/1009475#metadata_info_tab_contents

¹¹ [Subsidiarity - Wikipedia](#)

¹² Drucker, P.F. (1954) *The Practice of Management*. New York, Harper and Row

¹³ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/communitydrivendevelopment>

¹⁴ <https://cdn2.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/32/2014/09/HSPH-Ethiopia4.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/publications/radical-decentralization-does-community-driven-development-work>

decentralized governance is not an option because communities cannot operate public service systems without adequate financial assistance and regulatory guidance from the national level. Ponguta et al (2019)¹⁶ investigated the impact of decentralization in Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Serbia, finding that preschool education is often “orphaned” at the local level, being one of the few local functions in the sphere of human development, with other education levels as well as healthcare remaining national functions. A result is a local culture that prioritizes physical infrastructure and leaves limited capacity, funding and political support for ECD. Devercelli et al (2016)¹⁷ confirm this for Kenya, where the decentralization of preschool education to the county level was not backed up by funding. The quest is for a governance concept that cautiously balances local autonomy and national responsibility.

4. Multi-sectorality and decentralization in LAMP

Figure 3 (next page) presents the core message of this paper. Similar to the figure on the cover of this paper, it illustrates how the LAMP governance concept makes multi-sectorality and decentralization work together to optimize ECD.

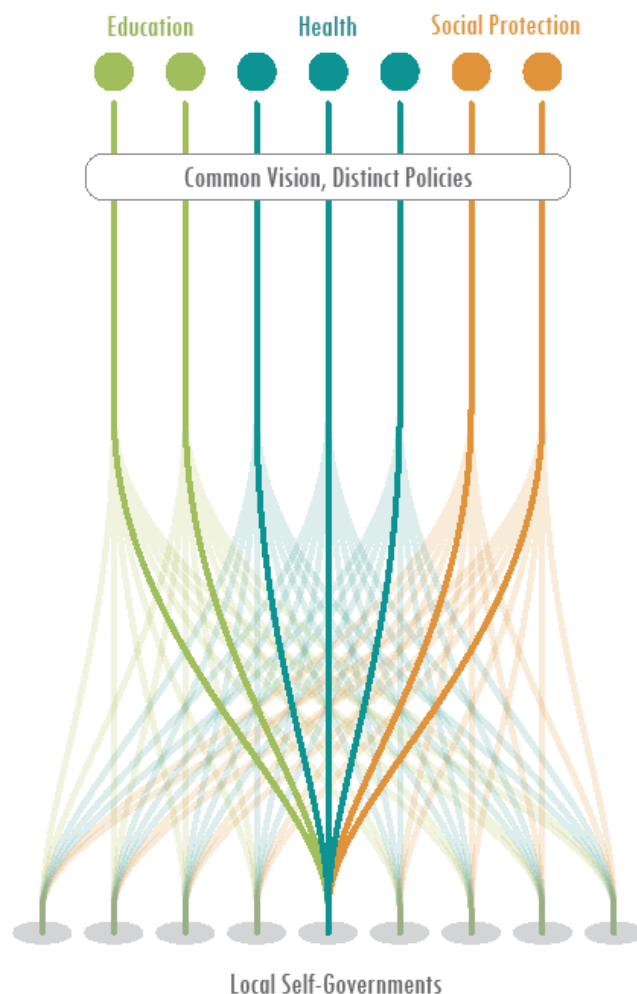
Based on a common vision on child development, arising from horizontal and vertical consultation, the ministries of education, health and social protection issue distinct *mono-sectoral* policies. Even within sectors, programs remain separate. In the health sector, for example, growth monitoring is a very different kind of service than immunization in terms of timing, logistics and human resource requirements. The two are best kept separate until they “land” and converge at the level of the LSGs, where local actors are in the best position to decide how, if at all, they should be combined or integrated. *The locals configure the services.* LSGs where preschool is universal may want the provision of nutrition and the testing for intestinal worms to take place in the preschool, whereas that same measure would be disastrous in LSGs where only a minority of the children is attending preschool.

In the LAMP governance concept there are multiple decision points: at the national level (ministerial policy decisions) as well as at local level, where the leadership of the LSGs adapts programs and makes decisions about the most appropriate service configuration. But LAMP also provides the opportunity to have multiple adjustment points in the downstream. If an early evaluation of a single program reveals flaws, it can be adjusted right away, precisely because it is a standalone program. It is much harder – as section 5 will elaborate - to correct a program if it is intertwined in one legally fixed multi-sectoral intervention package upon which a large number of ministries and stakeholders have reached hard-won agreement and which cannot be adjusted without renewed negotiation.

¹⁶ <https://ecdpeace.org/exploratory-analysis-decentralized-governance-and-its-implications-equity-early-childhood-0>

¹⁷ <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/762961482316633811/pdf/111215-BRI-ELPPolicyBriefKenya-PUBLIC.pdf>

Figure 3. Policy development and implementation under LAMP



It should be emphasized that the empowerment of LSGs must go hand in hand with the strengthening of the oversight function¹⁸. Inspectorates and district education offices must monitor and ascertain that quality standards are being met when the national level eases its grip on public service provision. A concrete example of LAMP is The Preschool Entitlement¹⁹ which entails the universal provision of 600 hours of preschool education (3 hours per day; 5 days per week; 40 weeks per year) at a cost to the government of 0.2% of GDP. The program is shaped in such a flexible manner that communities can expand the 3 hours to full daycare, using local resources and opportunities. Another example is available for parenting programs²⁰. A toolkit called Primokiz was developed to support the configuration and implementation of ECD programs at local level,²¹ while in Sri Lanka, the World Bank²² is supporting communities

¹⁸ <http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/decentralization/admin.htm>

¹⁹ <https://doi.org/10.3768/rtipress.2023.op.0082.2301>

²⁰ van Ravens, J. (2021). Locally Adaptable Parenting Programs. Available at www.janvanravens.com

²¹ <https://jacobsfoundation.org/activity/primokiz/>

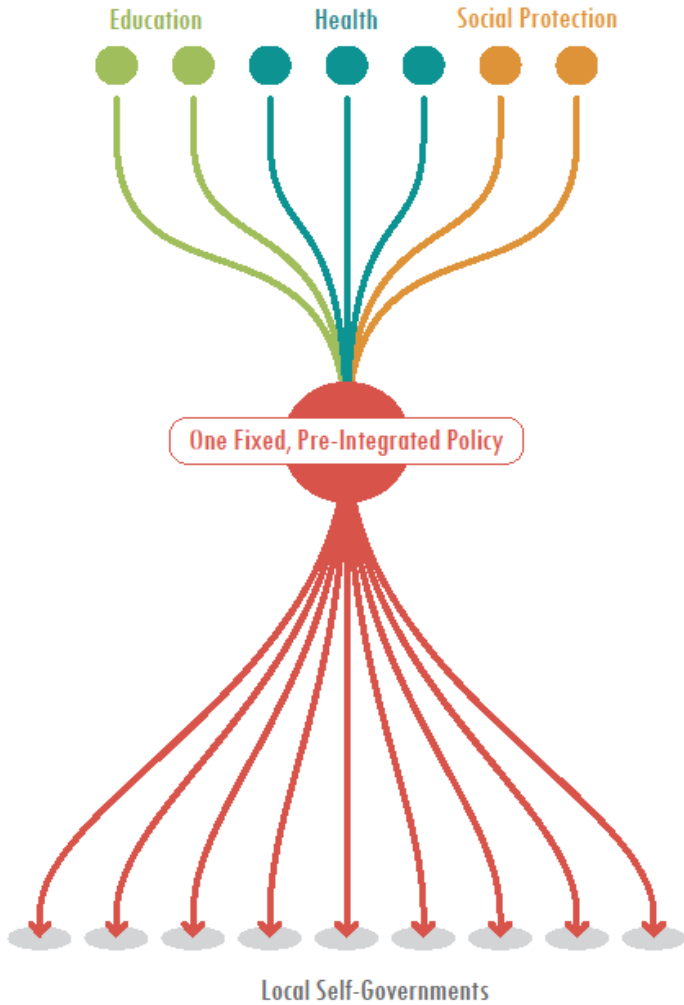
²² <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2020/10/05/enhancing-equitable-access-quality-early-childhood-development-sri-lanka>

in building ECD arrangements by means of an approach in which the structured *brokering* between stakeholders is a crucial element.

5. Pre-adoption (1): policy development and implementation in IECD

Figure 4 presents the process of policy development and implementation under the governance concept of IECD. Typical is the *single decision point* (red circle): the single moment in time at which a very broad range of governmental and non-governmental entities must agree upon a very wide-ranging policy. The experience is that this complexity can create years of delay prior to adoption. But in addition, the single decision point allows limited space for policy adjustment during implementation. If flaws are observed in just one element of the policy necessitating changes in the planning and the funding arrangement, the full range of stakeholders must gather once again to adjust the policy.

Figure 4. Policy development and implementation under IECD



There might be a degree of exaggeration in figure 4, in the sense that in practice IECD does provide some opportunity for adjustment and some space for local decision making. But the difference between figures 3 and 4 remains essential: the flexibility that LAMP offers by allowing ministries to develop and implement policies independently, in their own pace and in their own consensus building strategy, is absent in IECD's rigid structure.

This problem is even more apparent if meso-levels of governance are taken into account. Thus far, we simplified the analysis by assuming just two levels: the level that issues the policies and the local level that receives these. But if policies are integrated at the highest level, they must also be "passed down" through one or more intermediate levels in an integrated format. Bottom-up correction would require "unzipping" the integrated policy: a nearly impossible task.

The single decision point also creates a financial bottleneck. Investment in human development is normally hindered by fiscal constraints. For example, in one year the ministry of education might gain some budget, while in another year the ministry of health might have some luck, with the ministry of social affairs following a year later. On the longer run, there is progress across the board. But if the Treasury is requested to grant an unprecedented budget increase to all, and to all at once, they may not be able to accede to this request, and the result is usually the kind of stagnation that we observe in countries that negotiate an IECD policy. The interconnectedness of the three ministries has a paralyzing effect on the budget process (this might be imagined as three athletes who hold hands during a hundred meter sprint race).

Multi-sectoral policy development also brings a risk of tactical maneuvering. Teacher unions, for example, may resist budget increases in social protection to finance child benefits, fearing that these limit the fiscal space for increases in their own salaries. In recent decades, the practice of integrated policy development has shown in several countries that inviting everybody to talk about everything is not the quickest way to progress.

Moreover, in the downstream there is limited scope for local autonomy because the multisectoral intervention packages are pre-designed at national level. LSGs receive these packages as they are, which creates a kind of shadow play²³. There seems to be no clear place for decentralization in the IECD governance concept, which also tends to ignore some of the basic rules of policy development, as the next section elaborates.

6. Pre-adoption (2): integration of policies - disintegration of ministries

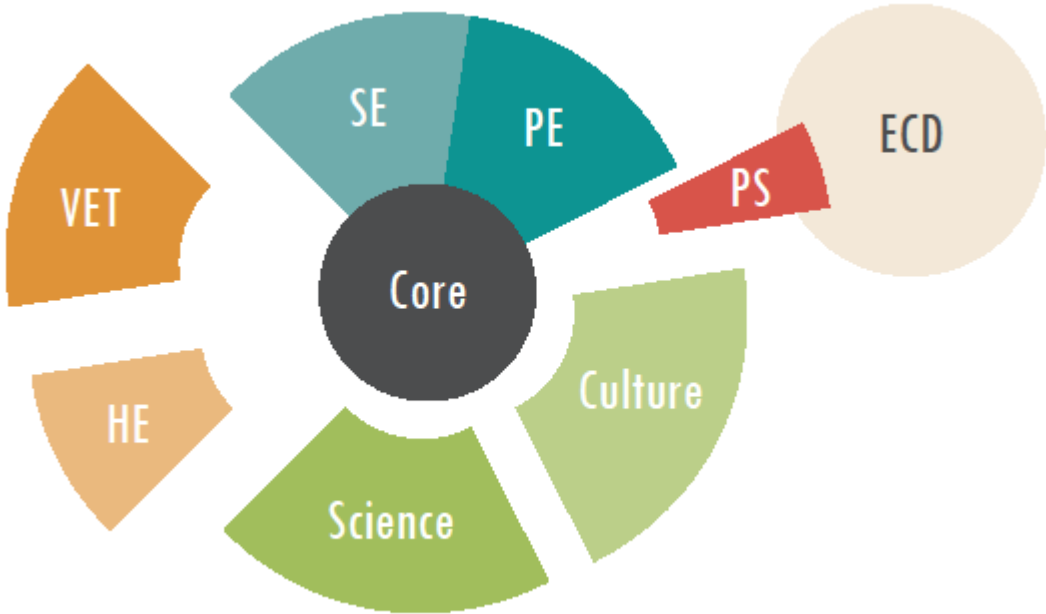
Figure 5, on the following page, is an adaptation of figure 2, showing the same ministerial core and the same circle of field directorates within a ministry of education, culture and science. The difference is that in figure 5 it is assumed that the preschool department (PS) is no longer under full control of the ministerial core. As part of an integrated ECD strategy, the ministry has ceded much of its authority over (and budget of) the preschool department to an inter-ministerial body,

²³ The argumentation for calling this a shadow play is as follows. Under LAMP, it is the LSG that configures the programs *as available*. If a village does not have a nutrition program, for example, it will obviously not include it in the local configuration. One cannot include something that one does not have. Yet this is precisely what happens at the national level under IECD: nutrition will be included in the national "package" even if countless villages in the country do not have it. The villagers will receive the policy as an absurdity, unable to act upon it.

or to a First Lady’s office, or to a pre-existing ministry with a coordinating role for ECD; or to some sort of exotic organizational entity that was created for the occasion.

But the outsourcing of the preschool directorate does not only create a kind of regulatory fog around preschool, it also creates a *precedent*. Various sectors of industry, for example, would be encouraged to claim influence over courses in vocational education and higher education. Ministries involved in youth policy, as well as their circle of stakeholders, may claim influence over secondary education. The field of science may be claimed by the ministry of industry and by large corporations, whereas the field of culture may come under the influence of ministries and stakeholders involved in strengthening national identity. In other words, a precedent in outsourcing can cause strong centrifugal forces, as Figure 5 illustrates.

Figure 5. Centrifugal forces as a result of IECD



The situation depicted in figure 5 raises the question how the field directorates will perform the functions of the ministerial core from which they became detached. How can the preschool directorate be accountable to Parliament? How does it pass new legislation? How does its teacher policy relate to the Ministry’s overall teacher policy? How does the ministry maintain policy coherence across the fields? Who watches over the transition from preschool to primary school? How does the footloose preschool department obtain its budget? Via the Ministry? Directly from the Treasury? Not at all?

The risk of centrifugal forces is one of the reasons why ministers normally resist ceding authority, power and budget in one of their fields of policy. Many courses in vocational and higher education originated within sectors of the economy. Over time, and not rarely after years of political struggle, these courses were integrated in the formal education system on the grounds that the internal coherence of education systems – which allows learners to progress through the system and which enables ministers to ensure quality – is more important than tight

connections between educational content and workplace demands. Few ministers would allow a reversal of this hard-won reform. They may pay lip-service to IECD if there is a reward in the form of funding²⁴, but they will not effectively cooperate.

Ministries of education would disintegrate if they would cede authority and power to multi-sectoral constituencies that knock on their doors for influence. It would no longer be possible for an education ministry to perform critical functions such as (i) managing the education budget; (ii) maintaining control over actual disbursements²⁵; (iii) exercising oversight and inspection in the various sub-sectors of the education system; (iv) safeguarding the internal coherence of the education system; and (v) enabling learners to make smooth transitions between pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary education. Similar things can be said about health ministries and their responsibility to ensure proper referral between primary, secondary, tertiary and quaternary healthcare, and about ministries involved in social protection and their responsibility to prevent overlap and gaps in their palette of social interventions.

This multitude of objections against IECD may explain why the prevalence of IECD is by far the highest in poor and fragile countries in Africa and Asia²⁶. These are some of the world's most aid-dependent countries, experiencing the highest pressure from donors to integrate policies. Unfortunately, these are also the countries with the highest levels of U5M, generally, which may explain the correspondence between the prevalence of IECD and the deceleration in the reduction of U5M.

But the most important reason why ministries are averse to ceding power to poorly structured external entities, is that the minister would no longer be fully accountable to parliament. This is the key imperative for any minister: to have sufficient control over the ministry's operations to be able to show parliament that policy objectives are being met and that public resources are well spent. This is one of the very foundations of democracy. *A minister cannot be accountable for a policy over which he or she has lost control.*

7. Post-adoption: birds on an elephant

In addition to delays in policy development, IECD also tends to create delays in the downstream, after policy adoption.

In most developing countries the coverage of ECD services is generally not universal. But services do expand, normally, and they do so at a different speeds. Preschool education typically expands at a slow pace as it requires (i) the appointment of one qualified and sufficiently paid teacher for every 20 children of ages 3 to 6 in a country; (ii) significant upfront investments in

²⁴ The author of this paper heard it said many times: “we apply integrated ECD because the donors like it”, or words to that effect.

²⁵ This point can be illustrated by the “single administration” with “combined fiscal support” that is said to be required for the ideal implementation of IECD (see: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK327247/>; Figure 2.1). An empirical example of such a single administration was studied as part of a multi-level governance analysis conducted in 2013/2014. The study revealed serious integrity problems associated with this institute. The degree of corruption was qualified by a high-level interviewee as “overflowing” and by others as “overwhelming”. This was confirmed by interviewees at local level.

²⁶ Van Ravens, J. (2025). Did “Integrated ECD” Cause the Setbacks in the Fight Against Child Mortality? Available at www.janvanravens.com under Global Reports.

classrooms, inventory, materials, and sometimes in kitchens and dormitories; and (iii) the continuous maintenance, cleaning, guarding, replacement and replenishment of all these inputs. Indeed, the expansion of preschool education has generally been very slow and it recently came to a standstill²⁷.

By contrast, a potentially lifesaving service like immunization can be rolled out much quicker, as many countries have recently demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. In each child's life there are but a few moments at which standard immunizations need to be provided. One well-prepared team can cover hundreds if not thousands of children during a campaign of a few days. Food fortification costs only \$0.05 to \$0.25 per child per year²⁸, making it one of the most cost-effective interventions to address malnutrition. In the same order of magnitude are the cost of curing a child from intestinal worms²⁹. The costs of equipment for growth monitoring are negligible, on a per child basis. Exclusive breastfeeding comes entirely for free; promoting it may incur some costs, but on a per child basis these are dwarfed by the costs of six months of baby-food. Parental education costs about ten times less than preschool education³⁰.

If such low-cost, quickly expanding and lifesaving ECD services are integrated in one multisectoral intervention package together with a slowly moving service like preschool, the pace of expansion of the entire package will slow down. It is like forcing birds to travel on the back of an elephant. Able to move five times quicker and to fly over canyons and rivers, the birds will slow down to the pace of the colossus.



Figure 6 (next page) visualizes this mechanism for a fictive country. For both LAMP and IECD, the figure simulates the patterns of expansion of four ECD services: preschool, parental education, nutrition and immunization. The red circles indicate the coverage of these services in year X, the blue circles indicate the coverage in year X+10, and the green circles pertain to year X+20. The red circles are the starting points; they are in the same position for LAMP and IECD. The expansion patterns for preschool are also the same for LAMP and IECD because

²⁷ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11125-024-09708-6>

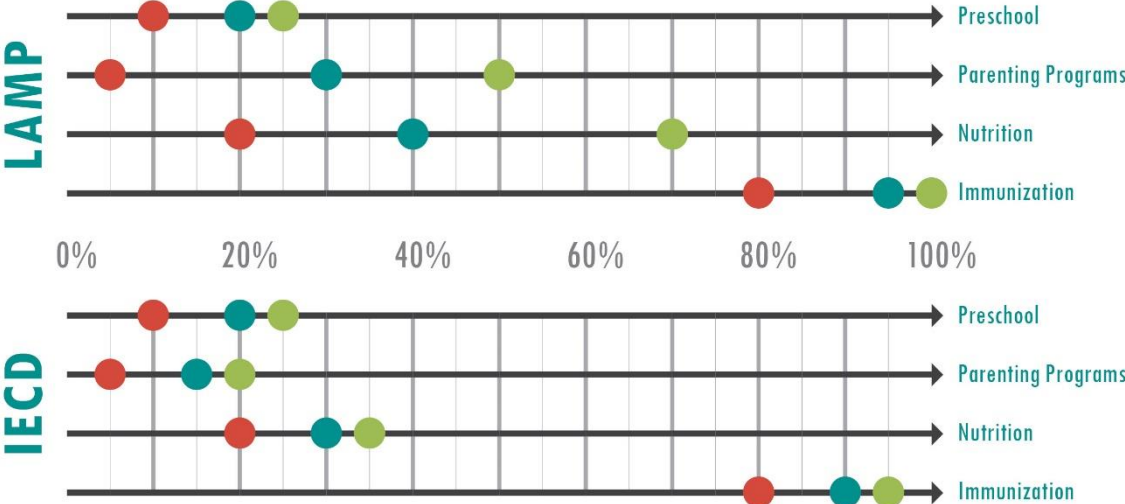
²⁸ <https://www.who.int/vietnam/news/feature-stories/detail/food-fortification-q-a>

²⁹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2657832/>

³⁰ Van Ravens, J. (2021) Locally Adaptable Parenting Programs. Available at www.janvanravens.com

preschool is the elephant; it determines the pace. But whereas the other three services (the birds) expand freely under LAMP reaching relatively high coverage levels in year X+20, IECD slows down these services to the same pace as preschool education.

Figure 6. Expansion patterns under LAMP and IECD



It should be emphasized that Figure 6 is not here to suggest that each and every bird will slow down to the exact pace of the elephant. Some birds will spread their wings and take to the sky. Figure 6 merely intends to illustrate the mechanism.

Yet, the author of this paper recalls a visit in 2012 to a nutrition distribution center in Iquitos, a Peruvian city on the banks of the Amazon river. Many families in the surrounding district live in hamlets and isolated homes near the creeks and branches of the river. Nevertheless, the provision of nutrition was universal thanks to an impressive scheme by which narrow boats would reach every child in the district. Preschool enrolment, in contrast, stood at 70%, with most children outside the city being excluded. Given the challenging social geography, it would be very difficult to reach all children in a more or less regular form of preschool. Universal preschool would require a refined scheme with transportation, home-based provision, and travelling teachers; in 2012, there was no sign yet of a beginning of such a diversification strategy in the district. In that context, however, the government had ordered that nutrition become preschool-based. That would have meant that the coverage of the nutrition program would have decreased overnight from 100% to 70%. Hopefully the manager of the nutrition program succeeded in his attempts to change the government’s plan.

But many more cases underscore the risk of integrating services before they are universal. Taman Posyandu is an Indonesian program for holistic child development in which a pre-

existing health post (Posyandu) has been integrated with a (kinder) garden (Taman)³¹. Excellent in and of itself, the program includes growth monitoring and parental education which raises the question: who monitors the growth and educates the parents of the countless children who are not in that program? In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where only 10% of the children attended preschool, the existence of six wonderful but unscalable multi-sectoral institutions in 2014 hindered the expansion of preschool education by making experts and policy makers averse to the more austere (but cost-effective) preschool models that stood a chance to go to scale. And as in the case of Taman Posyandu it raised questions about health services: if a small minority of the children receive these within the six centers, then what about all the others³². Box 1 elaborates this problem using deworming as an example.

Box 1. Integration of deworming in preschool.

Testing children for intestinal worms and treating them for it is an essential health service. It can be life-saving. In an internal note on Multiservice Community Centers, the Country Office of an IGO promotes the integration of deworming in preschool. The note argues that deworming by going door-to-door is more challenging than doing it in the classroom. The note refers to a study from Kenya for scientific underpinning. Longer term gains in test-scores and cognitive functioning can be expected.

But how many children *are* in preschool? The country in question has been heavily affected by conflict, disaster and the refugee crisis. World Bank Data provides no recent enrolment data, but according to the IGO's Country Office, enrolment stood at 21.3% in 2016-2017.

Time and again, household surveys show that exclusion from preschool is strongly associated with poverty and deprivation. And so is the risk of having intestinal worms. Therefore, the national burden of intestinal worms is unlikely to be concentrated in the 21.3% of the 3 to 6 year-olds who are in preschool. In fact, even if preschool enrolment increases to 80%, one may still miss most of the infected children. Nomadic children in Niger, Roma children in Eastern Europe, children in peri-urban settlements throughout the Global South, and refugee children across the world: they all run the highest risk of infection *and* are the last to be included in preschool. Confronted with such arguments, proponents of IECD usually say "Agreed: universal deworming would require universal preschool. But that is exactly what we are aiming for!" Or words to that effect. But the reality is that preschool stopped expanding altogether. Must the scale-up of deworming really wait for the elephant?

Finally, the study from Kenya does not compare the effect of deworming door-to-door with the effect of deworming in the classroom. It just compares deworming with not deworming:

https://assets-global.website-files.com/61366d43ebd6df56d9b67a11/618560b1319ab15bd8f2e40f_School-Based_Health_Programs_RGB_10-30-21.pdf

³¹ Observation from a mission to Indonesia in 2012

³² Observation from missions to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2013 and 2014

The birds-on-an-elephant problem is exacerbated by the changing balance between public, private and unofficial preschools³³. Integrating child health services in private preschools is often pointless since these institutions are generally attended by children from families with good access to healthcare. Integrating health services in unofficial preschools (by far the largest sub-sector in low-income countries) is impossible because one cannot integrate official government services in illegal institutions. Therefore, the adage of IECD implies that the further expansion of essential child health services be restricted to the group of children who attend public preschools. In low income countries, this is a small group (13.9 gross enrolment in 2020) that practically stopped increasing around 2015. *It is regrettable that life-saving ECD services are integrated in a service that does not expand.* This practice has most probably contributed to the decelerations in the reduction of U5M in poor and fragile countries in Africa and Asia, and it is remarkable that a journal as The Lancet recommends it³⁴.

8. Local integration *requires* mono-sectoral policies

The birds-on-an-elephant problem does not occur in countries where all ECD services are universal. But in these countries, ironically, IECD would actually stand in the way of service integration at local level.

Figure 7 shows an Integrated Child Center (IKC) for ages 0-13 in The Netherlands. The center is a Local Adaptation of several Mono-sectoral Policies. The number of IKCs is increasing as LSGs all over the country are convening to discuss their options for integration of services. But it is the LSG that decides (i) whether or not it starts an IKC and (ii) what the exact configuration will be. There is no law on IKCs and there are no national “packages” in this process.

³³ Factual information in this paragraph is from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11125-024-09708-6>

³⁴ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(24\)01389-8/abstract](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(24)01389-8/abstract)

Figure 7. Photograph of an Integrated Child Center



Source. Picture taken by the author in April 2022

IKCs are the cast iron evidence that integration of programs is possible without integration of policies. *In fact, most IKCs would not even exist if programs were pre-integrated at national level, because it would only be by coincidence that the standard national package fits local needs and preferences.* There are no two LSGs with the same contexts and with the same palette of available services to start from.

But the IKCs as such are not universal. Many children in the country are still attended by universal but standalone ECD services. Are they at risk of not developing to their full potential?

9. The synergy argument

The key argument in favor of the integration of programs – it can be referred to as the synergy argument – stems from an erroneous interpretation of Randomized Controlled Trials (RCT) that investigate the impact of integrating two interventions. We use preschool and nutrition as examples. An RCT would monitor the development of four groups of children: those with just the preschool, those with just the nutrition, those who attend a preschool program in which the nutrition program is integrated, and a control group. Consistently such RCTs reveal synergy: children in the integrated program fare better than all others.

But while this research design provides evidence of synergy, it does not provide an argument for integration. For the latter, there would need to be a fifth group: children who attend the exact

same preschool program and benefit from the exact same nutrition program, but without the two being integrated. We might refer to this as *converging* programs: the nutrition is provided by a health dispensary or community center, while the preschool program is provided by the preschool. The two come together in the child. Only if it would appear, by RCT, that children in the integrated program fare better than those in the two converging programs, this would be an argument for integration.

To the best of the author's knowledge, there are no RCTs that offer a comparison between integrated and converging programs. And for a good reason: that comparison would be futile. Nutrition consists of matter, of molecules, that enter a child's body and have the effect of enhancing the child's receptiveness for the preschool program. This is independent of the building in which the nutrition is stored. Whether the molecules are kept in schools, community centers, health posts, dispensaries, warehouses, or town hall: it obviously makes no difference³⁵. *We conclude that RCTs found synergy in integrated programs because that is where RCTs looked for it.* The same synergy would have been found in converging programs.

Thus, we can safely keep ECD programs separate until they converge at the local level, and then leave their configuration up to LSGs. And we can trust that LSGs will refrain from integrating nutrition into preschool in areas where the hungriest children are not enrolled.

10. Policy and philanthropic implementation: a paradigmatic difference

In the foregoing analysis, this paper has highlighted problems associated with the application of IECD in countries with normally functioning governance systems. However, on a more philanthropic basis, IECD is also being applied in emergencies³⁶. This is regrettable because the birds-on-an-elephant problem occurs in these contexts as well³⁷. Yet there is a difference. In countries that are heavily affected by conflict, disaster, corruption, and/or a longstanding absence of rule of law, there is often a need for quick logistical operations in a vacuum of service provision, with (i) no risk of interference with pre-existing programs, (ii) no policy process that can be disturbed, and (iii) no reluctant minister who is concerned about accountability to the parliament. Under these exceptional circumstances, the donor community (UN-agencies, bilateral donors, NGOs, foundations) has free reign to integrate ECD services, and this may have created the impression that service integration actually works.

³⁵ Some would object that by integrating nutrition in preschool, more children are *attracted* to preschool. But this "attraction argument" assumes that demand, not supply, is the bottleneck. It works well in primary education, more in particular in countries where the capacity of the schools would be sufficient to enroll all children, but where many still don't come to school because of distance, parental ignorance, child labor, or other causes. In such cases it is an option to increase the attractiveness of school enrolment by means of incentives such as nutrition or cash transfers. In preschool, however, supply (i.e. the presence of sufficient preschool-capacity) was the bottleneck in all of the 30 countries where the author of this paper consulted. What is the point of enhancing the attractiveness of something that is not sufficiently available?

³⁶ https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/documents/publications/integrating-early-childhood-development-emergenciesacc2fb8-4ea0-4764-85bc-95e5a253f11f.pdf?sfvrsn=2aeeb478_1&download=true

³⁷ If an NGO has a budget that is sufficient to reach an X-number of children in a refugee camp with a multisectoral intervention package that includes preschool, the NGO could reach a multiple of that number of children on that same budget by deleting preschool from the package. In that case, the NGO would save dozens, hundreds or thousands of children's lives, depending on the scale of the intervention.

It must be emphasized that the merits of philanthropy cannot be overestimated. For ages, philanthropy has been providing assistance to children in dire situations. We must be immensely grateful for these interventions, for the people that deliver these, and for the donations of generous citizens all over the world. But it is urgent to appreciate the fundamental difference between philanthropy and policy.

Philanthropy and policy run on different paradigms. In some respects, they are one another's opposites: philanthropy provides instant relief on a charitable basis in emergencies, whereas policy is about providing services on a structural basis by a national government that ensures access and quality using sustainable funding derived predominantly from domestic taxation. GDP growth and decreasing fertility rates have enabled many countries in the Global South to emancipate from philanthropy and to end donor dependency.

Without being able to present hard evidence, the author of this paper became convinced (i) that the global ECD community arose in times when most children in the Global South still lived in life-threatening circumstances; (ii) that this emergency orientation left a lasting mark on the community³⁸; and (iii) that this explains why the community continues to promote a governance concept like IECD in normally functioning government administrations, where it just doesn't fit. As an overarching *analytical* concept, "holistic early childhood development" has proven its immense value – e.g. it gave us the nurturing care framework - but converting it directly into a *governance* concept is an unfortunate mistake as it ignores the primacy of LSGs and the idiosyncrasies of policy development and implementation.

Therefore, it is now time to light the LAMP. The rise of populism in donor countries and the subsequent decrease in ODA make it all the more urgent to shift to a governance concept that is based on – and further strengthens – local self-reliance.

³⁸ While OECD- and EU-networks are dominated by policy makers from the members states (with scholars as occasionally invited experts), ECD networks are dominated by scholars and representatives from UN-agencies, bilateral donors, NGOs, and foundations, with few if any policy makers from countries in the Global South.