

## **NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION (ECCE) IN PAKISTAN, MARCH 27-28, 2017**

Early Childhood Development Network of Pakistan (ECDNP), in collaboration with The Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, and key partners including Rupani Foundation, Allama Iqbal Open University, UNICEF, UNESCO, JICA, PLAN International, Foundation Open Society Institute, PARWAAN and POWER 99 Foundation organized the first ever National Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Pakistan. The two-day Conference was held on March 27-28, 2017 at the Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad. The theme of the conference was: '*Envisioning Holistic Early Childhood Care and Education for Pakistan: Creating an Equitable, Pluralistic and Sustainable Society*'. The Conference brought together ECCE experts and practitioners to a platform to share experiences and highlight the ECCE need in Pakistan. Another key objective of the Conference was to identify and recommend strategies and actions to consolidate and expand ECCE services in Pakistan.

The President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan graced the closing session of the Conference at the invitation of ECDNP and the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training. Prior to that the Minister of State for Federal Education and Professional Training inaugurated the Conference and the Minister of State for Health presided over the plenary session on health and nutrition care in early childhood. Professor Manzoor Ahmad, a well-known expert and founder of the Bangladesh ECD Network delivered the keynote address. In addition to the opening, closing and plenary sessions, the Conference featured 10 well-attended parallel sessions.

Around 500 registered delegates including senior government officials from federal and provincial governments, ECCE experts, academics, practitioners, planners, health professionals, teachers and representatives of national and international NGOs participated in the Conference. The Conference sessions listed below kept alive the interest of the participants who attended the jam-packed halls and side rooms set up for the concurrent sessions. Over 100 delegates from Pakistan and abroad presented their research and expert views at these sessions and key organizations from around the country presented their work on ECCE.

### Day-1

- **Inaugural Session** presided over by the Minister of State for Education
- **Plenary 1:** ECCE: Initiatives and Practices
- **Session 1:** Current Status of ECCE in Pakistan
- **Session 2:** A holistic early childhood vision for Pakistan
- **Session 3:** Policy discourses around ECCE
- **Session 4:** Approaches to a holistic early childhood curriculum
- **Session 5:** ECCE Funding: Challenges and opportunities

### Day-2

- **Plenary 2** on Health and nutrition care presided over by the Minister of State for Health
- **Session 6:** Innovations and best practices in teaching, learning and assessment of ECCE
- **Poster Presentations**
- **Session 7:** Teacher preparation for ECCE

- **Session 8:** ECCE: Community-based models and practices
- **Session 9:** Advocacy, awareness-raising and social mobilization for ECCE
- **Session 10:** Interactive Workshops on Early Childhood
- **Closing Session** presided over by the President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan

Every session of the Conference generated engaging discussions on the Conference theme and sub-themes. In addition to local presenters, key speakers from abroad including the WHO Representative, UNICEF, UNESCO, JICA, and Deputy Regional Head of PLAN International Asia enlightened the audience with their impressive talk. Another key feature of the Conference was showcasing of ECCE work implemented across various parts of the country. Several organizations such as Rupani Foundation (the main sponsor of the conference), PARWAAN, Power FM99, Teachers' Resource Center, Right-To-Play and Roots International Schools displayed a variety of materials developed for early childhood classrooms and teacher training. Over the two days, these stalls remained the center of attraction for everyone. Participants gathered around the stalls in large numbers and took keen interest in information on ECCE disseminated from the stalls.

Another attractive piece of the National Conference was poster presentations on ECCE projects and best practices that captured the attention of the participants. The poster presentations made by Beaconhouse School System, Right to Play, Mehnaz Fatima Educational and Welfare Organization, and Kitabi Dost were well-received by the participants. The presenters got the audience engaged in informal discussions to explain the content of their posters encompassing the various ECCE components ranging from the concept of inclusive and holistic ECCE to new instructional approaches.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the Conference, Dr Shahid Saddiqui Vice Chancellor of the Allama Iqbal Open University announced that this conference will be an annual feature from now onwards and the university will take a lead in organizing the conference. Talking about the importance of research on ECCE he said that the university will publish a journal on ECCE annually so that ECD practitioners and academicians have an opportunity publish their work in this journal.

Interactive sessions, discussions and presentations at the Conference resulted into solid recommendations and actions for the future that were presented before the President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan who was the chief guest at Conference closing. The Honorable President commended the efforts to hold the important Conference and congratulated the organizers and supporters for taking the initiative. The Honorable President lauded the Conference recommendations and expressed his keen interest to see the progress on the recommendations before the next conference in 2018. He assured his full support to ensure quality ECCE services to all the children of Pakistan.

To organize the Conference a Conference Management Committee (CMC) and several sub-committees were constituted. Convener of CMC JEA Education chaired the CMC meetings along with the Vice Chancellor of the Allama Iqbal Open University and Vice Chairperson of ECDNP who co-chaired the CMC and the sub-committee meetings. These sub-committees included the Academic Committee, Conference Program & Planning Committee, Travel & Accommodation Committee, Food & Catering Committee, Program Execution Committee, Conference Finance Committee, Printing & Publications Committee, Registration & Materials

Distribution Committee, and Provincial Coordination Committee. These committees played key role in developing a well-knitted Conference Program and eye-catching printed materials. All the sponsors and stakeholders lauded the conference organizers for the Conference Program Book and materials.

ECDNP under the leadership of The Ministry led the overall planning and coordination for the Conference and other partners that sponsored the Conference included Rupani Foundation, UNICEF, UNESCO, JICA, PLAN International, Foundation Open Society Institute, PARWAAN and POWER 99 Foundation. Rupani Foundation, UNICEF, PLAN International, Foundation Open Society and UNESCO provided financial support to organize the Conference. Allama Iqbal Open University provided the Conference venue and JICA sponsored printing of conference materials. POWER 99 as media partner played a major role in getting a wide coverage in print and electronic media. PARWAAN's in-kind support was vital in conference planning and execution. Given the crucial role of all these stakeholders and conference delegates, it is proposed to issue letters of thanks to all of them from the Ministry.

Based on the momentum created by the National Conference on ECCE in Pakistan and as desired by the Honorable President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the below recommendations were presented to the Federal Minister of Education & Professional Training who had graciously approved and guided the Mr Rafique Tahir Joint Advisor Education to initiate work on the below recommendations:

- i. Standard definition of ECCE in Pakistan to focus on early childhood as the age from pre-natal to 8 years.
- ii. National Policy for ECCE needs to be formulated to address the specific needs and set the goals for ECCE (Pre-natal to 8 years).
- iii. Develop an integrated curriculum for holistic ECCE from pre-natal to 3 years of age.
- iv. Review of ECCE curriculum in collaboration with National Curriculum Council
- v. Review and development of teacher and facilitator's training manuals
- vi. National budget and developmental plans to allocate funding for ECCE.
- vii. ECCE Centers of Excellence to be established at universities and the first such center to be established at the Allama Iqbal Open University.
- viii. Social and Cultural Diversity needs to be addressed in the awareness campaigns that should be run to empower the communities in connection with ECCE.
- ix. All the stakeholders at national, provincial, district and local level need to join hands and remain connected through a web portal for sharing information beyond boundaries.