

# Vietnam case study:

## Drivers of policy change towards providing integrated early childhood development

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### 1. Introduction

This case study is implemented within the project 'Fostering policy support for child and family wellbeing - Learning from international experience'. Using a thematic and analytic framework for the project that draws on Kingdon's multi-streams theory,<sup>2</sup> we are gathering and sharing evidence and learning on what has led to increased policy recognition of and policy change in family and child health and wellbeing (FCHW). In specific countries that have demonstrated policy recognition and change in FCHW post 2000, we are exploring within their context how different policy actors have come together to raise policy attention, develop policy options and promote their political adoption as processes for policy change, taking advantage of windows of opportunity for that change. The case studies were implemented with a local focal person with direct knowledge or experience of the policy process and include evidence from published and grey literature and interview of key informants involved in the policy processes.

**This case study explores the transition from no government policy for early childhood education (ECE) to a having a government policy in place post 2000 for mandatory preschool education for all five-year olds and an integrated early childhood development policy informed by international best practice.**

In 2000, Vietnam publicly committed to achieving the *Education for All* target of all children benefitting from at least one year of preschool education by 2015. The commitment to ECE was made in the 2005 *Education Law* and one year of preschool became compulsory in 2010. Parents and communities were expected to contribute towards the cost of preschool and the state funded schools only in deprived communities.

Monitoring of the policy's implementation showed that inequalities between urban and rural areas were declining, probably due to the sharp overall reduction in poverty. Inequalities were, however, widening between ethnic minority and ethnic majority children, with children from remote regions also disadvantaged. This led the government to modify its policy and to put more resources into the provision of schools in areas where there is a concentration of ethnic minorities and in remote areas.

In 2017, the government introduced a further shift in policy: An integrated early child development scheme was introduced, providing for integrated education, health and social policies for children from 0 to 6 years. Policy making in Vietnam occurs behind closed doors, making it difficult to track how political support was built for policies. The main international development partners, most notably the World Bank and UNICEF, have had some influence on policy options. The Women's/Mother's Union, a mass membership organisation affiliated to the government, played an important role in building support among parents.

## 2. The context

Vietnam is a lower middle-income country located in South East Asia. It is a [socialist country](#) with a market economy. In 2000, the population was about 76.3 million, with 73% living in rural areas. Vietnam has 54 ethnic groups, of which Kinh (Viet) people make up about 87%. Vietnam had achieved relatively high human development but inequalities between different groups remain, with poor children, women and ethnic minorities exhibiting significantly poorer health. Vietnam made the transition from a command to a neoliberal market economy in 1986, when the historic 6th Party Congress launched the *Doi Moi* or 'Renovation' reform programme (Cox et al., 2011). Since the early 1990s, Vietnam has been through [one of the most dramatic economic transformations in history](#). In 2000, it was a lower-income country, mainly dependent on agricultural production and still recovering from the Asian financial crisis. Since 2000, its [average GDP per capita growth rate has been 5.4%](#) and it is now a middle-income country. Poverty has also fallen dramatically: in 1998, 35.5% of the population lived on less than US\$ 1.9 PPP; by 2016 this had fallen to just 2%. However, children are more likely to live in poverty than the general population (Nguyen, 2008). Since 1989, Vietnam has received assistance from Official Development Partners (ODPs) (Kamibepu, 2009).



Map of Vietnam, Source: Wikimedia Commons, undated

Reports indicate that the state has a low [democracy score](#) of 3.1. It is ranked 139 out of 167 countries on the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index and scores poorly on the World Governance indicators for 'voice and accountability'. There has been little change in scores before or since 2000 and the country has a [poor reported human rights record](#). The space for civil society advocacy is limited and the lack of a legal framework for this makes it difficult for international NGOs to work with local NGOs (Nørlund, 2007). The state has a mandate to provide basic services to its citizens. The findings of the [Vietnam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index](#), carried out annually since 2010, show that although the public think that there has been some improvement in the delivery of basic services there is still room for considerable improvement.

There is respect for and protection of children's rights and the government promotes gender equality (CRC, 2011). Vietnam ratified the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1990 and committed to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and *Education for All* targets (Kamibepu, 2009). It remains a patriarchal society, with mothers responsible for nurturing children and fathers being the head of household, although women are expected to have paid employment. There are strong intergenerational family and community ties and grandparents play an important role in the upbringing of children (Mestechkina et al., 2014).

Vietnam has a long history of providing day care for children to enable mothers to work. In 1945, the newly established Democratic Republic of Vietnam set up state-run nurseries and kindergartens. However, it was only in the 1990s that government acknowledged responsibility for supporting parents and communities in raising preschool children, with the 1998 Education Law legislating for ECE (Boyd and Phuong, 2017). The main motivation was to enable mothers to work (Kinh and Chi, 2008). The enrolment rate in nurseries in 2000 was 11% of 0-2-year-olds, in kindergarten 49% of 3-4-year-olds, and in pre-school 72% of 5-year-olds (UNICEF, 2010). Regional differences were slight, but attendance varied significantly by household income (Chien et al., 2006). The non-government sectors played an important role in provision, but quality was poor outside urban areas; teachers were poorly qualified and their terms and conditions of employment were poor. In 1999, the budget for ECE was only 5.4% of the national budget for education.

### 3. The policy change

This section describes reforms in policy, law and institutional practice undertaken towards the adoption of the ECE policy. The next section describes how these reforms came about.

Since 2000, the government has adopted an ambitious twin-track approach to providing ECE, increasing access and improving quality, including moving to a more play-based curriculum. This was officially launched in 2009 (McAleavy et al., 2018). The main aims were to ensure that every child was ready for school by the age of 6 years and to reduce inequalities between children from deprived and non-deprived communities and ethnic minority and majority groups.

There has been a strong commitment since 2000 to ensuring that all children have access to ECE of high quality, including ethnic minority children, those living in rural and other disadvantaged regions and those living with disabilities. The government set ambitious targets for increasing the number of children attending ECE, including committing in its *Education for All* action plan (2003) to have all 5-year-olds attending ECE by 2015, and in 2009, it made ECE compulsory for all 5-year-olds (but not free).

The state is responsible for quality and standards and their enforcement, standardising the curriculum and training teachers. It has also taken on responsibility for the provision of services for poor and disadvantaged children, but parents and communities, employers and the private sector are expected to provide services for other children. State-run provision, outside of the areas designated as disadvantaged, has been transferred to parents/communities to run. This process is referred to as *socialisation*, meaning that it is the collective responsibility of families, communities and other communist and youth societies to educate children.

In 2000, the government made a commitment at the World Education Forum to improve education, including ECE and to achieve the 2015 *Education for All* targets (Chien et al., 2006). The *Education Strategy 2002-2010* included a commitment to improving the quality of ECE, including regulating ECE establishments and making ECE available in all parts of the country, especially rural and deprived areas. It also included plans for providing parenting education.

The *Education for All Action Plan (2003-2015)* reiterated these commitments and indicated that the Government was giving priority to a pre-school year for preparing children for school and that communities and parents were to be responsible for provision otherwise. However, ECE, including for the pre-school year, was not made compulsory (MOET, 2003). In 2004, the *Law on child protection, care and education* was adopted. This made the provision of state policies for ECE mandatory, including fee exemptions and reductions for disadvantaged children to ensure social justice.

It was the 2005 *Education Act* that made ECE part of the education system for children aged 0-6 and mandated the development of a universal, high-quality sub-sector. Pre-school was to become child-centred and the provision of parenting education increased. Parents and communities were to be responsible for meeting the costs of children attending ECE.

In 2006, the ECE development plan for 2005-15 was launched, implementing this law. It included targets for increasing the proportion of ECE institutions meeting national standards, the numbers of qualified teachers and the proportion of children going to ECE. State-funded preschool institutions were to be located in deprived areas, and in other areas they were to be run by parents/communities or provided by the private sector. A reformed curriculum was introduced in 2009 and state provision of ECE for children from the six smallest ethnic minority groups was increased (MOET, 2009).

The 2009 amendments to the *Education Law* were the next important step. These made pre-school attendance compulsory for all 5-year-olds, but did not make it fee-free. This was followed in 2010 by a *Prime Ministerial Decision* approving a national strategy for the universalisation of ECE, with all 5-year-olds to be enrolled by 2015. This commitment was reiterated in a 2012 *Prime Ministerial Decision* on the educational development strategy, and additional new targets for 2020 were set of at least 30% of the 0-2 age group and 85% of those aged 3-5 attending pre-school.

In 2011, the government introduced free or subsidised preschool and free lunches for children in remote regions and deprived communities. The government also announced plans for providing more state preschools in very deprived rural areas and mountain villages, and encouraged local people's committees to build more preschools elsewhere. To improve the quality of pre-school education, the terms and conditions of employment of pre-school teachers working in state schools were improved, with teachers working in parent/community-run schools given state support for in-service training. To improve the quality of education for children from minority ethnic groups, all 5-year-olds in remote areas and in North-Western, Central Highland and Mekong River Delta provinces were required to attend public schools but they paid fees unless exempted.

In 2016, a revised *Children's Law* was adopted. The law mandated that priority be given to ensuring equality of opportunity in educational spending at all levels, including ECE. At the same time policies for the universalisation of education for children aged 0-5 were brought forward. To achieve this, the government was to provide financial support for services for children of pre-school age in line with the available financial resources as well as encouraging non-government investment in pre-school education.

In *Vision 2035*, launched in 2017, the government indicated that its priority for ECE was increasing its quality for children from ethnic minority communities, as they continued to be disadvantaged in comparison with children from ethnic majorities. In 2019, an Education Law introduced free education for 5-year-olds in remote and mountainous regions, upgraded the qualification requirement for preschool teachers from a secondary school diploma to at least a college-level degree, increased the salaries of ECE teachers and permitted the establishment of non-profit private schools.

### Timeline of policy and reforms in early childhood education

Year	Policy/ law/ program/institution
1998	Education law Introduction of new ECE curriculum and pedagogy
2002	<a href="#">Education Strategy 2002 -10</a>
2004	<a href="#">Law on child protection, care and education</a> adopted
2005	<a href="#">Education Law</a> makes ECE part of education system for children 0-6 years
2006	<a href="#">Prime Ministerial Decision</a> approving ECE development plan for 2005-15
2009	<a href="#">Education Law amended</a> : attendance compulsory for all 5-year-olds, not made fee-free Launch of new national ECE programme
2010	<a href="#">Prime Ministerial Decision</a> : all 5-year-olds to be enrolled in ECE by 2015 <a href="#">Prime Ministerial Decision</a> : state to increase ECE provision for the 6 smallest ethnic minority groups
2011	<a href="#">Prime Ministerial Decision</a> : free school meals for children living in deprived areas
2012	<a href="#">Prime Ministerial Decision</a> on educational development strategy: all 5-year-olds enrolled. in preschool by 2015 and by 2020 at least 30% of under-3-year-olds and 85% of 3-5-year-olds
2016	<a href="#">Children Law</a> adopted. Priority to be given to ensuring equality of opportunity
2017	<a href="#">Publication of Vision 2035</a> - priority, increasing quality of ECE for ethnic minorities National Integrated Early Child Development (IECD) scheme launched
2019	Education Law

Source: Boyd and Phuong, 2017



Going beyond planning for universal ECE, since 2018 the government has begun to implement a programme for integrating delivery of education and health services for young children (Nam, 2017). UNICEF in collaboration with the government is also implementing a nationwide awareness-raising campaign to help parents understand why they need to nurture, protect and stimulate young children and how to do so. Later sections provide further detail on this.

Since 2002, ECE provision has increased, with much of the expansion in non-state parent/community and private facilities. By 2018, the target of a universal pre-school year had been achieved, with 98.8% of all five-year-olds enrolled in pre-school education, compared to 72% in 2000. This achieved the 2015 *Education for All* target (MOPI, 2018). The proportion of children under three years attending pre-school increased from 11% in 2000 to 28% in 2018 and the proportion in the 3-5 age group from 49% to 92%. The proportion of children judged not to be school-ready at six years had declined to 29% by 2016 compared to 50% in 2012; 41% of preschools had been accredited as achieving at least Quality Level 1 compared with none in 2012 and more than 90% of teachers and managers had completed compulsory in-service training (World Bank, 2019).

However, challenges remain: limited investment in provision for children aged 0-3years; limited parenting skills; many teachers still struggling to switch to a more student-centred pedagogy; a high turnover of teachers because of poor employment terms; shortages of qualified teachers; poor physical infrastructure in the Mekong Delta and South Eastern regions and inequalities of access and quality between deprived and non-deprived children (Nam, 2017; Nwaigwe and Sasa, 2018).

This is despite the government's redistributive policies, which have mitigated the uneven spending on ECE across regions. It is mainly due to differences in the ability of parents and communities to contribute towards the cost of ECE provision. Teachers, while generally enthusiastic about the reforms, have struggled to implement the child-centred curriculum because they have themselves had difficulty in understanding the new approach. The child-centred approach challenges teachers' and parents' deeply rooted Confucian beliefs about adult superiority, teacher authority and child submission (Hien, 2018).



Children in pre school Kon Tum, Vietnam, USAID 2011

## 4. The story of the change

### 4.1 Raising the issue

This sub-section explores the actors, processes and evidence that raised motivations to address the issue of ECE and all children being entitled to one-year free pre-school education.

Several factors came on the agenda in the late 1990s and early 2000s, driving the shift from the care and education of young children being seen as mainly the responsibility of families to ECE being seen as a collective responsibility and one in which the government should play a leading role. The changes in policy discussed in *Section 3* responded to the main issues that were raised as the government developed its policy for ECE and subsequently for Integrated Early Child Development (IECD). They addressed concerns that: the curriculum and teaching methods did not educate young children for a modern economy; there was insufficient provision to meet demand; there were inequalities in access to ECE which disadvantaged poor and ethnic minority children and that making the pre-school year compulsory to meet the 2015 *Education for All* target stretched both family and school resources. Advocacy for ECE was mainly by international organisations including the World Bank and development partners such as UNICEF and by international NGOs delivering pilot projects. Advocacy was mainly through raising the issue at policy engagement meetings with the government and through the publication of policy briefs and reports, discussed below.

The shift was strongly influenced by international evidence on ECE highlighting the importance of physical, social and cognitive development in the early years as the foundation for all subsequent learning, on the returns to society and the returns to children. The government recognised the need to enable all children to achieve their full potential and for the workforce to be qualified and skilled to meet the demands of a modern economy. While primary-school completion was virtually 100%, there was a need for more children to transfer to and complete junior and senior secondary school. Increasing preschool attendance was seen as a foundation for achieving this.

The government commitment to the 2015 *Education for All* targets focused attention on how to achieve the target of all 5-year-olds enrolling in kindergarten by 2015 (Chien et al., 2006). The government raised not only expanding provision for children aged 0-5 years, but also for the compulsory preschool year and a need to meet quality targets. The government argued that this demanded a student-centred, play-based curriculum and increased well-qualified preschool teachers, delivered through pre-service and in-service training (Raffin, 2014). For the government, the most important driver was meeting the needs of a modern market economy for an educated and skilled workforce with the necessary technical, behavioural and cognitive skills. The government saw ECE for all children as important in laying the foundations for this (Bodewig et al., 2014).

[The 8th Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam](#), for example, passed a resolution requiring a complete review of the education system to ensure that it met the needs of an industrialising and modernising country. The shift was also influenced by the findings from child development research showing that ECE is important for child wellbeing and lifelong learning and that investing in human capital brings returns to society that significantly exceed the cost of the investment (Chien et al., 2006). Chien et al., carried out a situational analysis of early child development for the government's *Commission for Family, Population and Children* that summarised research evidence on the benefits of ECE for children and society, discussed below.

Development partners, especially the World Bank, which has regular policy dialogues with the government, were influential in advocating for investment in ECE. They stressed that having highly skilled workers needed to drive economic development and transformation in a market economy meant transforming the education system to one that could graduate students with the requisite skills. They argued that an essential element of this was pre-school education from birth and ensuring that all children were school-ready when they started primary school (Bodewig et al., 2014).

Development partners in consultative meetings and briefings with the government and in reports and briefings also pointed out that it was not just a question of increasing provision, but also of a cultural shift in how children are educated. Early-year teachers had been trained in didactic methods and were struggling to switch to more student-centred approaches. While parents saw education as important, they tended to prioritise an education taught by traditional methods. International NGOs delivering pilot projects reported that parents found it difficult to understand the value of student-centred teaching in preschool, or the importance of a stimulating environment for children under 3 years to develop social and cognitive skills. Most parents saw preschool as a service for looking after children while they were at work. However, the preschool year is also seen as important for preparing children for primary school. The competition for getting into and performing well in primary school is high and parents want their children to be able to read and write and have learnt some English before enrolling in primary school.

In 2006, the government's *Commission for Family, Population and Children* published an influential situation analysis of early child development (Chien et al., 2006). The Commission, chaired by a cabinet minister, was set up in 1991 to oversee implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and was responsible for coordinated implementation of child policies. The project steering committee for the situation analysis included members of the government (including representatives of all relevant line ministries) and members of the Commission, with the Asian Development Bank also contributing. The researchers carrying out the situation analysis interviewed teachers, parents and children as well as government officials, international organisations working in the sector (including UNESCO, UNICEF and international NGOs) and experts on ECD. Although it was not until 2017 that the government announced that it was moving to adopt an IECD programme and giving greater priority to services for those under 3 years, the Commission's situation analysis included the health as well as the education of young children to provide a holistic picture of early child development in Vietnam.

In the report, the Commission argued that there was a need for the government to promote integrated services for young children. The authors pointed to the importance of early years, and especially the first three years, as the foundation for all children developing their full potential. They also argued that investing in young children's development is one of the best investments that a country can make, as well as enabling women to take paid employment. They concluded that there was a strong case for the government playing an important role in promoting and financing ECD as a social service, with societal benefits from the investment. They also argued that there was a need to coordinate services for young children to better address their physical, social, emotional and intellectual development. They pointed out that services were not well coordinated at either central government or commune/village level, and that there were several actors delivering different ECD services, with services vertically implemented rather than horizontally coordinated.

Furthermore, the Commission argued that ECE provides preparation for children entering school and enables children from ethnic minority groups to learn Vietnamese before starting formal education, thus reducing their disadvantage compared to children whose first language is Vietnamese. They also pointed out that improving the quality of ECE enables mothers to have access to a quality service for their children when they return to paid employment rather than having to rely on relatives or neighbours. However, the Commission pointed to gaps in access between urban and rural areas, between regions and between poor and non-poor groups. For example, in 2003, only 44.9% of 0-5-year-olds were enrolled in kindergarten in the Mekong Delta, compared to a national average of 60% and 80.4% in the Red River Delta. While the national average enrolment for the pre-school year was 90.3%, it was only 78% in the Mekong Delta, compared to 99.7% in the Red River Delta. They were also concerned about the affordability of ECE for poor families. The Commission pointed out that the research on which the report was based had found the quality of non-public services to be very poor outside urban areas, with a lack of government support to improve them. They also argued for measures to build the capabilities of ECE teachers and provide parenting education, especially for parents with children under 3 years.

International NGOs delivering ECE have found that Vietnamese parents take a generally indulgent attitude towards children, but that they are also over-protective and give young children few opportunities to learn by trial and error (Hien, 2018).



Parental respect for education, while at times positive, is also a barrier to curriculum reform. Parents focus on educational achievement as they think that a good kindergarten is one where their children are taught to read, write and calculate rather than one that enables young children to develop communication skills, critical thinking, problem solving and provides for social-emotional development. Recognising the importance of changing parental attitudes and values, the Women's Union set up clubs in five provinces to inform parents about innovations in educational methods and to provide a forum where parents can learn about child development (VVOB, 2013).

National and international researchers argued that the top-down uniform curriculum with an emphasis on teacher-directed formal learning was not appropriate for developing the skills necessary for 21st century workers (de los Angeles-Bautista, 2004; Hien, 2018). Teachers were poorly qualified, poorly paid and had poor quality working conditions, resulting in low morale and high turnover (Chien et al., 2006; de los Angeles-Bautista, 2004). A 2006 report by the Department of Early Childhood Education concluded that ECE teachers underperformed. Other research found that teacher training institutions were failing in pupil-centred methodologies (Hamano, 2010). Parenting skills were reported to be poor, with parents not always providing a stimulating environment for socialising children (de los Angeles-Bautista, 2004). Private and family-based childcare groups, often used by working parents for children under 3 years, focused more on caring and nurturing, with less emphasis on the learning activities important for child development (HCMCPC and UNICEF, 2017).



A young Hmong girl in Vietnam carries her brother on her back while their parents are working. © 2017 Danny Bach, Courtesy of Photoshare

The government also saw inequalities in access to ECE as important. The government was especially concerned about the low participation rates of ethnic minority children, their poor performance in the education system and the differences in participation and attainment between children living in urban and rural areas. Children from wealthier homes, living in urban areas and from the majority ethnic group had much greater access than children living in rural areas and/or from poor homes and ethnic minority groups (de los Angeles-Bautista, 2004). This was seen to reflect a capture by higher income groups of the benefits of public investment for children from advantaged homes rather than being redistributed to benefit children from disadvantaged homes where parents could not afford to pay the costs of ECE (Holsinger, 2009).

Research findings showed that materially disadvantaged children were more in need of ECE than children from advantaged homes. They were less likely to be ready for school, having started school already behind their more advantaged peers (Anh et al., 2016). Researchers also reported that there was a need for more ECE provision for working mothers, especially those migrating to urban areas who did not have grandparents or other relatives living with them to look after their children while they were at work (Thao and Boyd, 2014).

Concerns about the social and cognitive development of young children, inequalities in access and benefit from ECE and poor quality of provision, especially in deprived communities, were kept on the agenda by the periodic reporting on progress towards *Education For All* and MDG targets. Research showing what progress had been made in implementing the universal ECE policy, especially for the pre-school year, was an important source of information for this monitoring. The prime minister and cabinet are held accountable on these findings by the Communist Party, to which they report, and the government is also concerned about its international reputation.



In 2009, for example, a background paper for the 2010 *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* found that, while there were policies in place for providing equal opportunities for ethnic minority children, the majority-minority gap persisted (Truong Huyen, 2009). The reasons for this included the uneven allocation of resources across regions, income inequalities, administrative dysfunction and time taken by children to get to schools in remote areas. The elective nature of the national curriculum for local culture also alienated children and parents, as local officials translated what was taught into a modern and progressive outlook, but with little dialogue with the community.

In 2014, research carried out for the World Bank found that inequalities remained in delivery across the country and that poor children were still behind in school readiness. Seventeen of 58 states still did not have a universal preschool year, and lack of access was highest for children living in areas prone to natural disasters and for children with disabilities (Bodewig et al., 2014). The researchers also found that a quarter of children under 5 were stunted and at risk of being left behind because of irreversible cognitive damage, and that there was an urgent need to improve parenting skills. As recently as 2017 the government itself, as well as development partners in the sector, continued to express concern about inequalities in access to ECE for ethnic minority and poor children (World Bank and MPI, 2017). International NGOs that support preschools have also expressed concern that preschool teachers remain resistant to the new curriculum and pedagogy and that they and school leaders are inadequately prepared for working with ethnic minority pupils (Hien, 2018).

There are no official channels in Vietnam through which civil society can influence government policy and the government expects citizens to support policies rather than be critical of them. The Women's/Mother's Union play an important role in sensitising parents to the importance of ECE, discussed later. Local NGOs generally go along with government policy and implement it. In recent years, spontaneous demonstrations and advocacy have however become more common. People more commonly use the internet to voice their views of government policies and service delivery.

In this context parents, teachers and the general public have begun to be more critical of ECE policy as expectations have changed. They have been especially critical about large classes for those under 3 years and poor management and inspection of private schools (eg Hường, 2018). In 2018, for example, local newspapers reported that parents expressed concerns about government proposals to amend the regulations on private nurseries to allow an increase in the number of children in a classroom from 50 to 70 students (Anon., 2018). They argued that teachers would not be able to offer quality care and education with this number of children in a class. Other news reports suggest that parents are concerned about revised regulations permitting nurseries to reduce the age at which children can start attending from six months to three (Hường, 2018).

While the government has invested in in-service professional development, international NGOs in the sector argued that this was largely ineffective because training has been theoretical rather than practical and teachers have found it difficult to apply the child-centred approach in daily practice (Anh et al., 2016). Teachers and school leaders are reluctant to deviate from formally assigned task. It is difficult for teachers to make innovations in teaching if they do not have the approval of school leaders. Pre-school teachers and school leaders also find it difficult to make the cultural shift from Confucian beliefs on the hierarchical teacher/pupil relationship and from transmission of knowledge from teacher to pupil to Western student-centred learning.

The government committed in 2017 to a further policy shift from universal ECE to IECD, recognising the need to focus on the development of the whole child in the early years. From 2000, the World Bank and other development partners had argued that the government should have an integrated policy for 0-6-year-olds. This was also recommended, as discussed above, in the government's 2006 Commission for Family, Population and Children report (Chien et al., 2006). The shift has been influenced by the [World Health Organisations nurturing care framework](#), launched in 2018, emphasising the importance of children's physical, cognitive and social development from birth and of governments having policies for IECD to ensure that all children achieve their full potential (WHO, 2018). In Vietnam, the World Bank advocated for this programme along with UNICEF, discussed below.

## 4.2 Developing the policy options

This subsection outlines the various actors and processes that informed policy options.

There is little in the documentary evidence or information from key informants that identifies policy options being developed and discussed prior to the policy shift to address the issues described above. This is largely because policy processes are centralised in Vietnam and decisions about desired policy outputs are made early in the policy development process, with little assessment of alternative policy options. Specific policy approaches are selected, often from international initiatives, and customised. The process is dominated by government organisations.

Civil society activity comes in mainly through the government-sponsored organisations such as the Fatherland Front and the Women's Union, discussed further below. Development partners often provide funding and technical expertise and have a strong influence on agenda-setting, but only once there is government support for a policy. International academic research findings influence policy makers, as does national statistical data and local and international experts are consulted. Evidence is mainly used to set the agenda and to reject policy alternatives (Green et al., 2011).

In the case of ECE, there is no public domain record of any discussion or consultation on policy for young children's education and care prior to the government committing to the *Education for All* agenda. The policies implemented were based on what the government saw as affordable, in line with its policy of cost-sharing with parents, increasing provision to meet its targets, reducing inequalities and improving the quality of ECE. An important influence on what policy options were adopted was the level of resource the government was prepared to make available to fund ECE. The government was not prepared to make the resources available to provide state-funded ECE to meet its targets and the demand from parents, preferring instead to prioritise a drive for free universal primary and junior secondary education (Hien, 2018).

However, as discussed above, ethnic minority children and children from disadvantaged communities benefited less than ethnic majority and non-disadvantaged children from government investment in ECE in the 2000s. In response to this, the government has invested in state ECE provision in disadvantaged communities and areas with a high proportion of ethnic minority children, subsidising fees for children attending non-state ECE and providing free school lunches. At the same time it has withdrawn funding from ECE facilities in non-deprived communities, with local community groups taking over responsibility for them.

In terms of specific options, the World Bank argued for an ECE policy covering children aged 0-6, rather than the more common 3-6, and also advocated for parents paying fees for ECE services (Rao and Georgas, 2015). The World Bank was also a strong advocate of improving quality as well as access. The Asian Development Bank and the World Bank both supported low-cost community-based provision, in line with the community-based provision that was already part of the ECE landscape in Vietnam before the policy shift (Asian Development Bank, 2003; World Bank, 2008).

The main development partners and international NGOs with an interest in ECE all worked globally and were able to draw on knowledge of ECE policies being successfully implemented in other low and middle-income countries (LMICs) when advocating for policy options. In 2014, for example, the World Bank, UNICEF, Save the Children and other international development agencies co-hosted a forum, [Towards Quality Early Childhood Education in Vietnam](#). The forum facilitated discussion of how to improve the quality of ECE, with representatives from the Ministry of Education, teachers, the Vietnam Women's Union and INGOs delivering early years projects in Vietnam (including Plan Vietnam, WVOB and World Vision).

More recently, UNICEF has worked with the government to develop an IECD policy. The policy is based on the recommendations of a WHO, UNICEF and World Bank report on nurturing care for young children, aimed at a global audience (WHO, 2018). The report was informed by a [Lancet series](#) in 2007, 2011 and 2016, setting out scientific evidence for investing in ECD and suggesting how interventions could be implemented at scale.

An important policy that the government has adopted is the *socialisation* of preschool education, with the government arguing that it should be the responsibility of everyone and that the cost of provision should be shared by parents, the community and the government. This is in line with the recommendations of the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (Hamano, 2010). Cost sharing is seen as a way of ensuring the quality of education for all children, given limited financial resources for government funding, allowing the state to concentrate on service delivery to the most disadvantaged and needy children. The 2005 Education Law sets out this policy, with the government encouraging local community organisations and the private sector to provide nurseries, kindergartens and pre-school facilities.

The [Women's Union](#), a mass socio-political group, tied to the regime, that advocates for gender equality and the rights of women, plays a key role in organising parents in family groups to run nurseries. This builds on a cultural tradition of community support for the socialisation and education of children (Hamano, 2010). However, the socialisation of education in the sense of responsibility for costs can have negative effects, with more affluent and better educated parents and communities more able to organise and run facilities and more affluent parents better able to pay the fees (Hamano, 2010). The government has tried to overcome this by supporting poor and ethnic minority families and deprived communities, prioritising building government facilities in deprived areas and subsidising fees for the poor. However, as we have discussed above, children from poor communities and disadvantaged regions and ethnic minority children are still much less likely to benefit from early years provision, with the notable exception of the now nearly universal pre-school year.

The 2006 report of the government's *Commission for Population, Family and Children* made several specific policy recommendations, most of which have been implemented. The main recommendation was that ECE should be promoted as an important first step in children's education and that the government needed to invest more in it to increase the capacity and quality of provision. It also recommended that information on ECE and its importance should be disseminated to all parents through mass organisations such as the Women's Union and the media. The cost of ECE should be shared by the government, parents and communities and the provision designed to break the cycle of disadvantage. The Commission argued for a greater role for the private sector in the provision of ECE, as was already happening in urban areas, with the government subsidising the costs for children from poor families.

To enable and encourage poor parents to access ECE for their children, the Commission recommended that the government provide cash vouchers or purchase places from non-government services. As an alternative to subsidising the cost of ECE, they suggested conditional cash payments as an incentive for parents to send their children to ECE centres. To increase access for under-3-year-olds, they suggested a specific strategy for developing home-based care, with the government providing parenting education programmes and a home visiting service especially for poor families. In addition, the Commission recommended that the government provide technical and financial support for community-based initiatives that provide ECE for 0-3-year-olds.

In terms of the supply side, the Commission recommended that government set standards for the physical quality of facilities and improve the quality of provision by training teachers in student-centred methods, providing annual in-service training and giving teachers permanent contracts of employment. They also recommended that children be offered health and nutritional services when attending centre-based care, including meals. They recommended bilingual education for ethnic minority children, to ease the transition from ECE to formal education. Finally, the Commission recommended integrated ECD service delivery as the most effective and efficient way to meet the needs of young children and promote their wellbeing (Chien et al., 2006).

To raise the quality of ECE and provide an education that would prepare children for employment in a modern economy, the government itself proposed a number of policy options. These included increasing the numbers of qualified ECE teachers, reforming pre- and in-service training to ensure teachers were trained in student-centred methods, standardising and raising the qualifications requirements for ECE teachers and incentivising qualified and experienced teachers to remain in the profession, especially those teaching in disadvantaged communities and regions.

The more recently introduced *Integrated early childhood development programme* (IECD) aims to increase young children's access to services and to improve the quality of service and the provision of parenting education. Education services for children under 3 are to be expanded; interventions focusing on the first 1,000 days are to receive increased investment; parents are to be trained in IECD; early years professionals in education, health, social protection and social assistance are to receive in-service training in IECD; and the quality of services is to be improved (Nam, 2017).

Delivery of IECD will be led by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, with the Ministries of Education and Training, Health, and Culture, Sports and Tourism responsible for sector tasks assigned to them. The evaluation from the UNICEF-funded IECD programmes in *Dien Bien, Gia Lai* and *Kon Tum* provinces will provide the basis for scaling up the programme (Nwaigwe and Sasa, 2018). UNICEF is implementing a nationwide awareness-raising campaign to help parents understand why they need to nurture, protect and stimulate young children and how to do so. Parenting programmes will be delivered in rural and remote areas by trained facilitators who will be recruited from the communities. Technical expertise for designing the training programme is being provided by academics from Queens University Belfast and Harvard University.

Following policy shifts, international NGOs piloted ECE delivery projects, often with funding from official development partners and in collaboration with the government, to provide further evidence to inform government policy. The projects are mainly offered in disadvantaged communities and/or to ethnic minority children. They have included: school-readiness projects to facilitate transition from pre-school to primary school and improving the quality of ECE for ethnic minorities; in-service training for ECE teacher development; improving the implementation of policies for ECE for ethnic minority groups by training administrators at all levels from the Ministry of Education and Training to the commune; and improving curriculum development for ethnic minority children. They are intended to improve learning in the classroom and increase parents' and communities' understanding of the importance of pre-school and early child development through the creation of community ECE networking groups, parental education and information campaigns (e.g. Anh et al., 2016; VVOB, 2019; World Bank, 2008). The local NGO [One Sky](#) has, for example, piloted ECE services for the children of factory workers in partnership with the government (Bowen, undated). While the international NGO VVOB has produced research reports and technical briefs on, for example, on the importance of young children learning through play (RCGED, 2018; VVOB, 2018).

The World Bank invested in the *School Readiness and Promotion Project* to address quality issues in the pre-school sector through the introduction of school self-assessment, to enhance training of preschool teachers, and to introduce a more child-centred, teacher-facilitated and play-based approach (World Bank, 2019). The project was system-wide, with, for example, 93% of preschool teachers receiving in-service training by the time it ended. The development of the project was supported by ongoing policy discussion between the World Bank and the Ministry of Education and Training, by technical support and through an ECD conference. The project's design was built on learning from a similar project already conducted in the primary-school sector in Vietnam and was implemented through government education administrative structures. By the close of the project in January 2019, 96% of preschools had completed a self-assessment and 41% attained Level 1 accreditation. The government has continued to fund the activities, has further modified the school self-assessment process and is requiring all providers to achieve Level 1 accreditation. The findings from the analysis of the self-assessments provided evidence of the need for continuing investment in ECE which has been used by the Ministry of Education and Training and the government more generally to justify increased spending on ECE.

[World Vision International](#) supported a pilot project in collaboration with the government to train ethnic minority 'mother assistants' (local language collaborators) working in preschool classrooms, to build their capacity to help ethnic minority children develop reading and comprehension skills in Vietnamese (World Vision, 2017). An evaluation of the model showed significant improvement in the language readiness of the ethnic minority children. The provision has now been mainstreamed into the national education system and local language collaborators are employed in preschools in the 43 provinces where ethnic minority children live.



World Vision also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Education and Training to develop policy, models and training materials for ethnic minority children's education. The government in turn allocated additional budget for the ethnic minority children. The intervention was developed in response to the findings from the World Bank 2016 report, which emphasised that one of the underlying inequalities of opportunity for ethnic minority children was their poor educational outcomes. One of the recommendations had been to have teaching assistants who know the local mother language to support such children in schools.

[The Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance](#) (WOB), in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Training, has introduced preschool teachers to the transition approach which enables children to make a smooth transition from preschool to primary school (Anh et al., 2016). Following the successful implementation of the approach in a small number of districts it has been scaled up nationally.

### 4.3 Engaging and building support of political actors and decision makers

This subsection describes how the attention and support of political actors was engaged.

The [Communist Party of Vietnam](#), or, more correctly, the Politburo, provides leadership and guides the government in developing and implementing policy (George, 2006). Government is by consensus and decisions are made behind closed doors, with policy agreed between the Communist Party, the Government and the National Assembly (Nørlund et al., 2003). While children are said to have been given priority for a long time, no political figures can be singled out who have strongly influenced policies for children. Despite this, the *Commission for Population, Family and Children* has been important for engaging and building political support for ECE. The Minister that chairs the Committee is a member of cabinet and the Commission is represented at all levels of government, down to the commune.

There are no legitimate channels for local NGOs or civil society more broadly to build support for ECE. The Women's Union, responsible for overseeing the running of community ECE services at commune level, including community centre-based facilities and parenting education, is represented at all levels of government. It is mandated to represent women at the commune, district, province and central levels but in practice acts as a government change agent, building support for government policies. It has encouraged women and men to work together as equals, women to have paid employment and parents to ensure the wellbeing of their families. It has an extensive communications network that enables it to engage with the wider population (Smith and Suzie, 2011). The Women's Union is also part of the [Fatherland Front](#), a socio-political organisation led by the Communist Party, whose main role is to act as a party organisation for labour matters.

The [Vietnam Development Partnership Forum](#) (VDPF) is a platform for high-level dialogue on Vietnam's development and is more substantive, action-oriented and inclusive than the Consultative Group which it replaced in 2013. It supports substantive policy discussion between the Government of Vietnam and its main external funders (OECD countries and international institutions) to build consensus and support for Vietnam's broad-based socioeconomic development plans. In addition to the ODPs, four international NGOs are invited as observers, but they share one seat, so that only one can attend any given session. The Forum is convened jointly by the government and the World Bank and is the forum in which support is built with the government for the adoption of policy options for ECE and IECD.

A major influence on the government comes from development partners, mostly ODPs and large international NGOs, especially those with an interest in ECE, particularly the World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF and the Asian Development Bank (Nørlund et al., 2003). By signing up to the *Education for All* agenda, Vietnam was able to gain access to international finance to expand its education system, including ECE, and to improve quality, but this gave the ODAs the leverage to influence policy. In 2003, the development partners formed a preschool education group. The ODPs and international NGOs have, to some extent, taken on the role played by civil society and the political opposition in parliamentary democracies (Forsberg and Kokko, 2007).

The government and development partners meet in the Development Partners Forum twice a year, and smaller working groups meet more frequently with government officials. At these meetings there are policy dialogues and policies are advocated by ODPs that have been shown to work elsewhere, with the partnership process having become a 'second track' policy forum paralleling government and party policy forums (Nørlund et al., 2003). ODPs also shape policy through what they are prepared to fund (London, 2010). The World Bank in particular is a trusted advisor to government (World Bank, 2019). Furthermore, the policy option that the ODPs are advocating, universal access building on community-funded provision, with the government investing mainly in provision for deprived children and communities that do not have the resources to fund preschool services, fits with the government's political philosophy.

UNICEF, on the basis of having learnt from successfully influencing policy in Vietnam, engages and builds support with policy makers and other stakeholders, targets the relevant legislative audience, researches the evidence base, carries out policy and legislative analyses, creates compelling communication materials, liaises with relevant partners or legislative agencies and gathers the key concerns to be addressed, as well as engaging with the media (UNICEF Vietnam, 2012). In taking on the role of knowledge leader for children's issues, UNICEF has built partnerships with other development partners and National Assembly committees, including the Ethnic Minority Committee in the National Assembly. It has successfully advocated for special attention to be paid to inclusive education for children, including for ethnic minority children and disabled children.



Nurturing care  
Source: nurturing-care.org, undated

The recent move to IECD illustrates how UNICEF uses these engagement activities to work with government to build support for a policy (Nwagwe and Sasa, 2018). To ensure buy-in, UNICEF made sure that the key pillars of the State were engaged: the Communist Party, the Prime Minister, the Government and the National Assembly. With UNICEF technical support, a series of multisectoral consultative meetings were held with the Ministries of Health, Labour and Social Services, Education and Training and Agriculture and Rural Development, to develop a national ECD strategy for 2017-25 together with a budget. This was then submitted to the Prime Minister. A policy workshop with the National Assembly Committee on Culture, Education, Youth and Children and other important stakeholders was also held to gain their support. The members of the Assembly Committee have been encouraged to advocate for IECD and to support the parenting campaign and the IECD programme.

## 5. Summary of and learning on key drivers of the policy change

### 5.1 Summary of key drivers and processes fostering policy change

The window of opportunity for a policy shift to ECE opened in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Vietnam signed up to the *Education for All* agenda in 2000 and committed to developing quality ECE provision for 0-6-year-olds and to meet the 2015 target of all 5-year-olds attending preschool for one year before enrolling in primary school.

The main drivers of change were: to satisfy the need for education to prepare children for working in a modern economy, with ECE providing the foundation for this; to ensure that all children were ready for primary school before they enrolled in it; to break the cycle of disadvantage by ensuring that children from deprived communities and ethnic minority children did not under-achieve in school; and to ensure that there was an adequate supply of quality nursery and preschool facilities to meet the needs of working parents.

Barriers to the shift have been both cultural and financial. Cultural attitudes have been a barrier to the introduction of student-centred learning. While education is highly prized in Vietnam, parents and teachers continue to value the traditional curriculum driven by didactic teaching of content and Confucian respect for the teacher, a methodology that does not enable students to develop the social and cognitive skills needed to function in a modern economy.

Developing adequate provision in deprived communities and in remote areas and those with a high ethnic minority population has proved challenging, as these are the communities least able to provide community-run facilities. Affordability has also been a concern, with the families of children that would benefit most from ECE being the ones least able to afford it.

Momentum was maintained by the need to report periodically on progress towards achieving the *Education for All* targets, with, for example, the government moving from a policy of making the preschool year compulsory but not fee-free, to making it free for children in the most deprived communities to ensure universal enrolment. Analysis of administrative statistical data and research also helped maintain momentum, with the government, for example, giving more direct support including providing pre-school provision to children from disadvantaged communities and especially ethnic minority children as it became evident that the provision was inadequate in disadvantaged communities and for ethnic minority children and that parents could not afford to pay fees.

Initially, the policy options were driven by two main concerns: the expansion of provision so that all children could benefit from ECE, including offering one pre-school year to all children and making access to ECE more equitable. The government did not prioritise ECE to the extent that it was prepared to invest in public provision across the country. It saw its role as promoting ECE, providing the curriculum, training teachers and regulating the sector but providing/funding ECE only for poor, ethnic minority and other disadvantaged children. It made the pre-school year compulsory in 2009 but not fee-free and is now planning to extend compulsory pre-school education to two years. It provided a new student-centred curriculum which was introduced in 2009 and encouraged the *socialisation* of education, with families and communities contributing to the cost of provision.

More recently it has returned to key recommendations of the 2006 report by its own *Commission for Population, Family and Children*: that educational and health services should be integrated for young children and that greater priority should be given to services for 0-3-year-olds. In 2017 it announced that it was going to implement IECD from 2018.

## 5.2 Learning and insights on a policy shift to providing ECE for all children

This section presents learning and insights that may be shared or adapted for those involved in promoting policy recognition and change.

In raising and keeping the issue on the policy and political agenda: Vietnam has a long-standing commitment to collective provision to meet the socioeconomic needs of its citizens and to inclusive development, and the Vietnamese value education highly. This partly explains why Vietnam committed to the *Education for All* agenda for ECE and to universal preschool education for all 5-year-olds by 2015.

There was high level commitment in government to implement ECE policy and especially to achieve the Education for All Target of one year of preschool education for all children by 2015 and to reducing socioeconomic and ethnic inequalities in access to and quality of preschool provision. Having to report to the *Education for All Global Monitoring Committee* and to the ODPs who were providing financial support on progress towards achieving the targets was important in keeping the issue on the agenda.

**For the development and adoption of policy options:** The use of statistical data on access to ECE and its learning outcomes for different groups of children shaped the policy options developed, with policy designed to enable greater equity in access to quality ECE by disadvantaged groups, including ethnic minority children, children in poverty and children living in rural and remote areas. Funding by development partners working collaboratively with government was employed to test options for implementing the policy and then to scale them up when they worked, ensuring that policy options were implemented at scale only when their effectiveness had been demonstrated.

**In building political and public support and sustaining policy implementation:** In a closed government system it is difficult to find out how political support was built among policy makers. However, the World Bank and other development partners working in the education sector clearly influenced policy choices made at the implementation stage. Public support for ECE was strong because parents value education and because of the demand by working families for ECE.

Support among parents and the general public for student-centred learning approaches has yet to be built. Parents and teachers find it difficult to change their strongly held Confucian values. These values require their children to be deferential to teachers. While the Mother's Union has made a concerted effort to educate parents on the importance of ECE and especially of student-centred teaching methods, parents and teachers have yet to be convinced.



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## Endnotes

- 1 Acknowledgement: Thanks for key informant input integrated in the text from senior staff in the World Bank, Vietnam, and the Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam. Thanks to Rene Loewenson for peer review. All graphics under creative commons/open license or used with permission.
- 2 See Loewenson and Masotya (2018) for information on the conceptual and analytic framework used.