Young Lives

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Informing Early Childhood Education in Ethiopia:

Insights from Young Lives Research on the O-Class Programme

Key findings and messages

- The recent rapid scale-up of O-Class to cover over half of all preschool-age children is a major achievement that has important potential equity gains for children from rural areas, poorer backgrounds and Ethiopia's emerging regions. However, this rapid progress masks important differences and raises issues around the quality of education provided.
- More boys than girls are going to O-Class, whereas gender parity has been achieved in primary school. The reasons and parental motivations behind this need to be better understood, and greater preschool access for girls should be promoted.
- O-Class was designed as a preschool year for 6-year-old children to prepare them to enter Grade 1. However, apart from in the Tigray region, children aged 4 and 5 were also attending O-Class, often in the same classes. While this is evidence of parental demand for preschool services, it raises concerns about age-appropriate learning and the ability of teachers to cope with teaching children of different ages.
- O-Class training received less attention than the established three-year kindergarten curriculum in colleges of teacher education. Increased prioritisation of the O-Class curriculum and training is important to bridge the divide with kindergartens.
- Shortages of O-Class teachers resulted in large class sizes, and facilitators on temporary low-pay contracts and with insufficient training, lacked motivation. Prioritisation should be given to improving the training of teachers and facilitators, including providing on-the-job, refresher, summer and distance options.

Photo credit: Antonio Fiorente

- O-Classes were often in poor-quality locations or required extensive travel, demotivating parents and children. More emphasis is needed on improving facilities, including providing separate access from primary class areas, classrooms with appropriate windows and ventilation, age-appropriate desks and chairs, safe and dedicated toilets and water access, indoor and outdoor play areas and materials, rest areas and mattresses, sufficient numbers of appropriate books and guides for facilitators, and catering for children with special needs.
- School feeding is particularly important for preschool-age children to encourage them to attend classes and enable them to stay throughout the day. School feeding that was absent, inconsistent, or poor quality were reasons for declining attendance. Appropriate school feeding for O-Class should be expanded.
- In terms of preschool provisions, the one-year O-Class contrasts with the three years of kindergarten available to children in urban areas and from better-off families. If O-Class is to fulfil its potential of ensuring school readiness and promoting equity, in addition to measures to improve quality, options for increasing the number of preschool years and the budgetary implications of these deserve consideration.

Early childhood development as a global priority

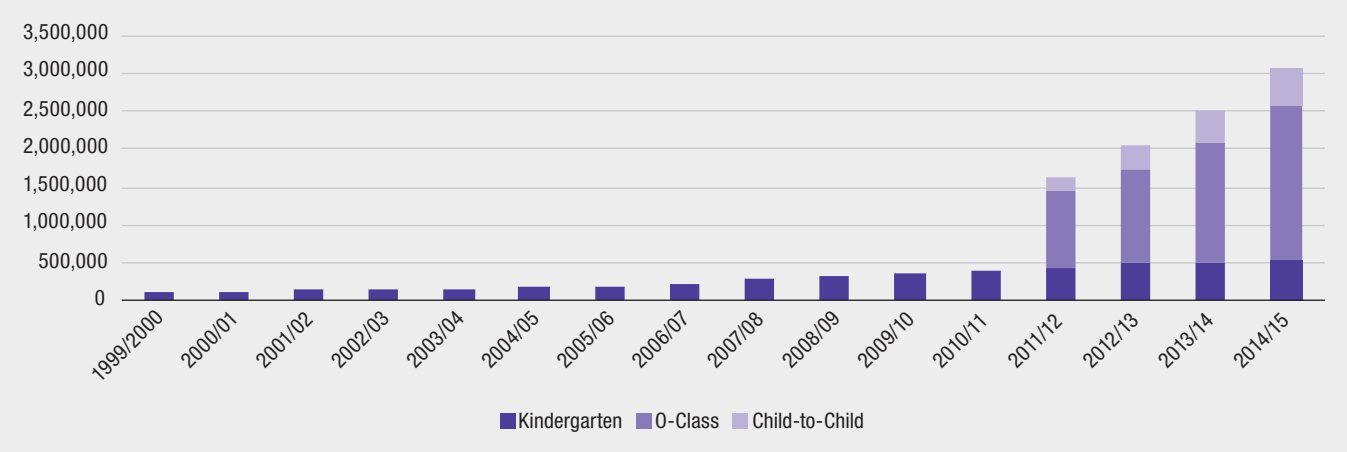
Early childhood is increasingly recognised as a critical life phase and a priority for policy development. Following on from earlier initiatives, the importance of early childhood development (ECD) was reflected in Sustainable Development Goal Target 4.2, which states that by 2030 countries should: 'ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education'. Exposure to good-quality early childhood education is one of the most effective ways to improve children's preparation for formal schooling, and investment in early learning has been shown to yield high returns that contribute in the long term to enhanced human capital. Young Lives research in Ethiopia suggests that the positive effects of preschool can be seen on cognitive performance and school completion.[1]

Ethiopia's recent rapid prioritisation of preschool

Until recently access to preschool has been very limited in Ethiopia, and almost non-existent in rural areas, although church schools did play a role in promoting literacy. In urban areas preschools were largely run by the private sector, privileging children from better-off families, although NGOs also played a role. Young Lives household survey data for 2006 provides a snapshot of access to services among our 2,000 Younger Cohort children. At that time, nearly 58 per cent of the Younger Cohort in *urban communities* had attended preschool, but only 5 per cent went to a government-run programme. In contrast, less than 4 per cent of *rural children* had attended preschool of any kind (Woodhead et al. 2009). Access to pre-primary education has expanded from about 5 per cent in 2010 to 46 per cent in 2016, of which O-Class contributed 33 per cent (MoE 2018).

The inter-ministerial National Policy Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), followed by the Strategic Operational Plan and Guidelines, represent an important shift and provided a catalyst for rapid growth in government ECCE provision. Enrolment levels across all forms of preschool rose nine-fold in five years.[2] These included Child-to-Child schemes,[3] multi-year kindergarten programmes, and Accelerated School Readiness initiatives.[4] However, the biggest increase resulted from the government school readiness O-Class year that was established in primary schools (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Enrolment in kindergarten, O-Class and Child-to-Child, 1999/00 to 2014/15*



Source: Woodhead et al. (2017).

1 Preschool attendance was shown to have positive effects on cognitive performance measured in terms of vocabulary and mathematics tests, with the differences found at age 5 continuing to be significant at 8 years old (Woldehanna 2016). Furthermore, urban preschool children were more than 25 per cent more likely to complete secondary school, with the returns higher for those who attended two and especially three years (Woldehanna and Araya 2017).

2 From just over 340,000 in the 2009/10 academic year, to over 3 million in 2014/15 (Rossiter 2016).

3 Government schemes promoted by UNICEF that involve older primary school children mentoring younger children.

4 Schemes that involved teachers preparing preschool children in the holiday months prior to Grade 1, or providing intensive tuition early in the school year.

The importance of promoting preschool is reflected in the Education Sector Development Programme V 2015, which asserted that the government, in addition to its role in coordinating private sector providers, will 'engage in full provision of pre-primary education, from teachers to classrooms to learning materials', towards an 80 per cent enrolment target for 4-6 year olds. ESDP V also recognised that government preschool provision was cost effective in terms of both fostering school readiness foundation skills and promoting equity.

Young Lives research and engagement with the Ministry of Education

Young Lives has been following the lives of 3,000 children in Ethiopia, a Younger Cohort of 2,000 children born at the turn of the millennium and an Older Cohort of 1,000 children born seven years earlier, in 20 sites across five regions. The research has involved working with local research partners with strong policy engagement on wide-ranging topics and age groups, including poverty and inequalities, nutrition and health, education, child protection, youth and gender. Young Lives has worked with the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth through the Child Research and Practice Forum.

Young Lives research in education became increasingly important as the cohorts grew up. Young Lives had previously studied the early stage of preschool scale-up from 2006 to 2010 (Orkin, Yadete, and Woodhead 2012). In 2015 Young Lives initiated an ECCE study with funding from the Child Investment Foundation Fund. This coincided with the Ministry of Education drafting ESDP V, and Young Lives was able to offer input from international experience to inform the ECCE details of the ESDP V plan. Strong links were established with the ESDP V drafting team and other Ministry of Education officials, as well as major ECD/ECCE-focused donors and NGOs based in Addis Ababa, (notably UNICEF, the World Bank and Save the Children). A workshop presentation subsequently developed into a policy paper, identified six features of effective ECCE systems: (i) equitable and inclusive access; (ii) curriculum, teaching and learning materials; (iii) teachers and school leaders; (iv) parental and community support and engagement; (v) standards, monitoring and learning; and (vi) systems, financing, management and leadership (Rossiter 2016).

In order to support the Ministry of Education in its efforts to scale up O-Class provision, Young Lives worked with experts in the School Improvement Programme (SIP) directorate in three phases to better understand: (1) the rollout of O-Class, through an analysis of available data and consultation visits to regional education bureaus in seven regions; (2) the supply side of teacher training, through visits to colleges of teacher education in one region; and (3) the demand side for early learning, with a qualitative study in four Young Lives sites in different regions.

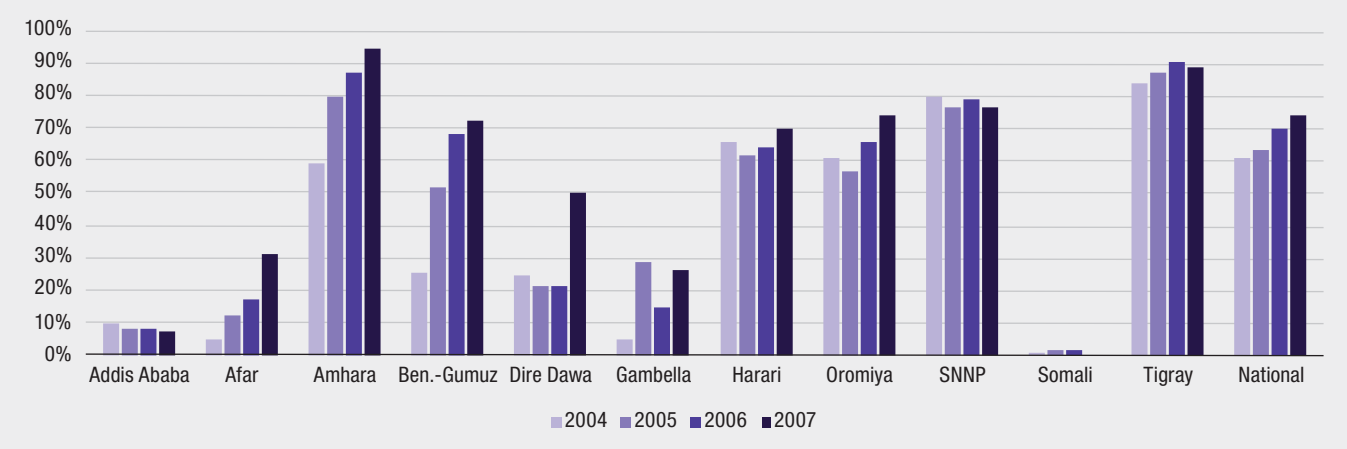
Regional variations in scale up of early education

Analysis of the National Education Management Information System (EMIS) data was undertaken with SIP ECD experts to visualise regional variation in the reach of O-Class supply, the rate of change in O-Class enrolment, and patterns of enrolment by gender, location and age. The analysis showed that the emerging regions had made substantial enrolment progress from low bases. The more established regions had consolidated gains through strong community participation, with some regional variations. Tigray had the highest enrolment, whereas Addis Ababa did not require O-Class expansion given the prevalence of kindergartens. Teacher training plans were prioritised in Oromia and Amhara. Amhara also focused on the provision of food, establishment of water and sanitation facilities with community materials and labour, and innovation through standalone O-Classes to minimise travel distances in remote areas.

The proportion of schools with an O-Class increased to almost three quarters in four years (Figure 2).[5] Benishangul-Gumuz had the fastest increase, but five regions had only 50 per cent or fewer schools offering O-Class.

5 From 60 per cent in 2011/12 to 74 per cent in 2014/15.

Figure 2. *Percentage of primary schools with an O-Class, by region over four years: 2011/12 to 2014/15*



Source: Woodhead et al. (2017).

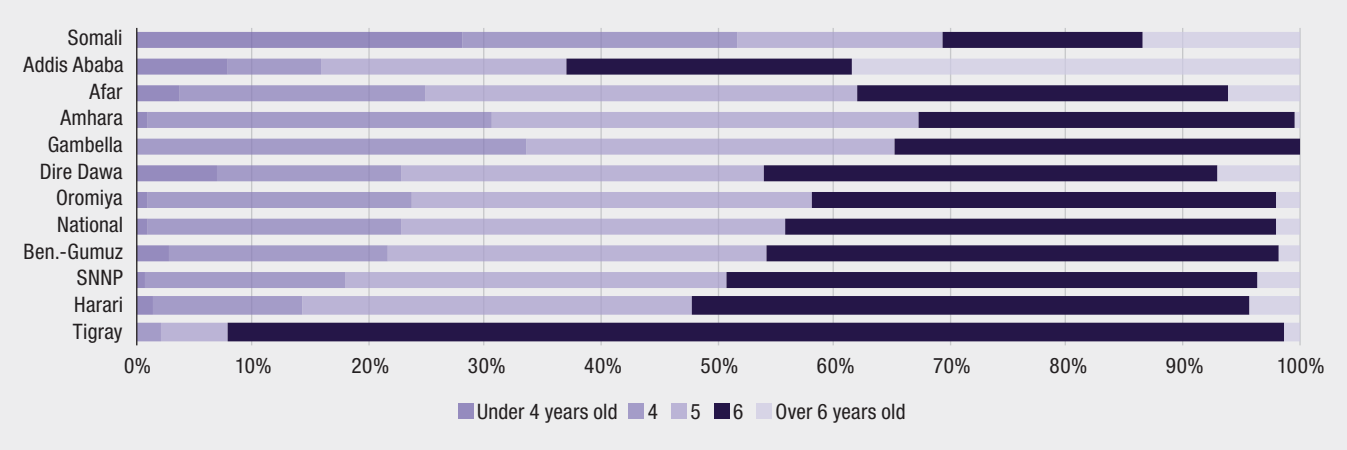
The impressive growth in O-Class enrolment masks two important trends, related to gender and age. First, more boys than girls were attending O-Class in 2015. With a gender parity index of 0.95 across pre-primary, there is a need to improve gender equality in the sector.

Second, the initial policy vision for O-Class was as a single year for 6 year olds before entering Grade 1, at age 7. However, O-Class was accommodating students as young as 3 years old, and only 42 per cent of students enrolled in O-Class were 6 years old. The trend varied between regions (Figure 3). Tigray had 91 per cent of enrolees at 6 years old, whereas in Somali and Addis Ababa, for example, fewer than one-quarter of enrolees were 6 years old. This pattern of O-Classes attracting much younger children can be interpreted as a positive reflection on families' appetite for early learning opportunities, which prompted further research on the demand side of preschool (see below). However, a wide range of ages in the same class makes teaching and learning processes targeted at a child's developmental level hard to define and deliver.

Young Lives consultations with the regional education bureaus

Ethiopia's federal system decentralises the delivery of government policies to its regions. Regional education bureaus (REBs) within each state have primary responsibility for operationalising policy targets. Consultation visits were arranged in seven regions with SIP ECCE experts to better understand the differential rollout of O-Class implementation, and the findings presented to the ECCE Taskforce in December 2015.[6]

Figure 3. *Share of O-Class enrolment, by region and age, 2014/15*



Source: Woodhead et al. (2017)

6 A semi-structured protocol asked senior REB administrators about: (i) their preparedness to deliver ECCE (their skills, training, attitudes and support from above); (ii) their past, present and future plans for ECCE; (iii) their training, deployment, remuneration and supervision processes for ECCE teachers; and (iv) the available standards and current resourcing levels in ECCE classrooms.

The consultations revealed the challenges of delivering ambitious national policies when there are a shortage of specialist ECCE administrators and little orientation or training has been provided on the national plans for ECCE expansion. REBs had, however, set enrolment goals and used population data to estimate demand for services. Some REBs had targeted rollout for pastoral communities, girls and language minorities, and all REBs used similar approaches to mobilise demand, with village-level mobilisation programmes.

REBs also faced similar delivery constraints. No region had a budget allocated for ECCE services, which raises important concerns about how the sub-sector can be promoted. All REBs recognised the shortage of qualified personnel and had received little guidance on ECCE implementation standards, monitoring and supervision approaches. The human capacity shortage extended to classrooms, with O-Class teachers, in particular, often untrained and locally contracted, or assigned from lower primary grades.

The consultation with REBs and analysis of EMIS data revealed many points about plans and enrolment trends, which Young Lives reported back to Ministry of Education officials, SIP and the ECCE Taskforce. For example:

- What accounts for regional variations, even among regions with much in common? Benishangul-Gumuz is enabling access to O-Class for huge numbers in remote areas. Could other emerging regions learn about innovative planning to make progress on ESDP V targets?
- Is Tigray's standout performance in enrolling 6-year-old children – the year before they join primary – part of a regional strategy for age-targeted ECCE, and might such a strategy be applicable elsewhere?
- Who is O-Class for? If it remains a programme for 6 year olds, then more needs to be done to restrict access to only this group and consider providing additional, age-appropriate early learning opportunities for 4 and 5 year olds.
- How can gender equity be strengthened given that girls are currently underrepresented in O-Classes?

Many questions were left unanswered. Research, monitoring, evaluation and inspection systems are still at an emergent stage within Ethiopia's education system so there is urgent need for basic data, notably about the capacities and skills of teachers working in O-Classes, what curriculum and pedagogy they are actually practicing, what resources are available in the classroom, and about children's learning and preparedness for formal schooling.

Young Lives study of O-Class teacher supply

In presenting the findings of the REB consultations it became apparent that the issue of human capacity is critical: how are regions servicing such a rapid increase in enrolment in O-Class with trained teachers? And what plans are needed to achieve the projected requirement for 100,000 additional teachers?

During early 2016, Young Lives carried out a focused study of these issues in Amhara region along with SIP experts.[7] Amhara region has seen the largest O-Class enrolment increase in recent years and the highest number of colleges of teacher education (CTEs) – ten of the 36 in the country, although only 17 of these offer ECCE training. Amhara stated that it aimed to achieve 100 per cent trained ECCE staff during the ESDP V period. Three major issues were identified as constraints.

Top-down planning and weak communication

With a regional plan to train and deploy approximately 20,000 ECCE teachers over five years, there was an acknowledged urgency to scale up Amhara's teacher training system for ECCE. Fieldwork suggested, however, that this target will not be reached within current programmes, plans and resources.

ECCE training programmes were typically organised towards either a diploma or a certificate, but these appeared similar in terms of content, entrance and graduation requirements, and prepared teachers only for 'universal ECCE' without

7 Semi-structured interviews were carried out in six *Woreda* Education Offices and four of the ten CTEs in the region. Interviews were carried out with senior administrators, as the trainers responsible for ECCE programmes, as well as with students training for ECCE, with the aim to understand how teachers are being prepared and deployed, as well as their knowledge and beliefs, especially about O-Class teaching.

targeting any particular type of service delivery, age group, or later placement. Instructors reported that programme modules were relevant to ECCE teaching, but concerns were expressed that the content was too theoretical, and had too much overlap with primary-level training programmes. They also recognised the importance of specialist modules for ECCE training.

Neither the instructors nor administrative staff responsible for ECCE training programmes expressed a clear understanding of what was expected of them by the federal or regional government, including: which training approaches might be appropriate; which curricula were to be used for trainees or be applied in O-Classes or kindergarten centres; and how ECCE-trained teachers would fit within salary scales and career progression opportunities. As one CTE instructor put it, the expansion of ECCE was launched as a 'campaign where both resources and teachers are not ready'. There were also apparent weaknesses in communication to CTEs, with core policy documents scarce. CTEs' senior management saw themselves as passive implementers who train teachers as advised by the REB.

The capacity of CTEs to support O-Class teacher training

Despite these constraints, instructors showed initiative in strengthening ECCE capacity using limited resources. Ideas included arranging ad hoc events to share information on ECCE; gathering experience by visiting local ECCE facilities: 'for instance I visited a community school personally to understand what the environment and the ECCE provision look like. This is just my initiative'; and using internet resources to learn from other national ECCE systems and to obtain teaching materials. CTEs had established a number of ad hoc networks and links with schools, NGOs or universities. CTEs were also aware of shortcomings, and called for a technical link to federal and regional ECCE planners for training and awareness purposes – to improve understanding of programme objectives and constraints on all sides.

Models of pre-service training and in-service support

Even if planning and coordination processes can be improved, it is unlikely that traditional, and relatively expensive, pre-service training approaches are going to be sufficient to service demand for capable teachers. Two major challenges need to be overcome.

First, O-Class is seen as an ECCE approach with potential to reach most children in Ethiopia. Among CTEs interviewed, however, there was scepticism about the feasibility of scale up, combined with a belief that designating primary school classrooms for an O-Class would be a temporary fix. In support of this view, community mobilisation efforts have resulted in rapid infrastructure expansion for O-Class. Quick wins have been achieved by adapting primary school classrooms and using local resources to furnish and supply ECCE-specific facilities. However, moving towards fully-resourced ECCE environments will be slow. Many classrooms remain sparse or ill-adapted to ECCE, with inadequate sanitation and water services nearby and often lacking sufficient designated outdoor space and resources for play.

Second, clarity is needed from federal and regional governments about the continuation of certificate training programmes as a one-year ('fast-track') route to ECCE teacher status. Certificate training is generally considered by CTEs to be inferior to the three-year diploma course. Yet questions surround the feasibility of delivering this extended route on the scale required to meet the shortfall in pre-primary teachers, and the capacity development needs of the thousands of temporary and often locally contracted individuals working in classrooms. Short-term training options – such as summer rainy season courses during typically quiet periods for CTEs – could help to rapidly increase the capacity of a system that is trying to respond to ambitious demands. Work has begun to develop a professional development course for these individuals which may include complementary approaches via radio or 'teacher packages' of training for basic skills, as well as the use of increasingly accessible new technologies.

Based on its research into O-class teacher supply, Young Lives produced a paper outlining six key challenges for improving ECCE delivery: scale up; equity; age-appropriateness; cross-sectoral coordination; capacity building; and research and evidence (Woodhead et al. 2017).

Community stakeholder perspectives on O-Class provision

In order to gain a better understanding of the demand side for early learning, Young Lives carried out a study in four communities in different

regions.[8] The study found that parents believe that O-Class helps children: to read and write letters in both local languages and English; to familiarise themselves with the school environment, teacher-student relationships, school regulations, discipline and hygiene; as well as to play and communicate with other children and gain the confidence to ask questions and express themselves. Parents contrasted the current situation with their older children who had not benefitted from preschool, and who had poorer language skills and were less well prepared for Grade 1 (Tiumelissan and Berhanu forthcoming).

While the availability of O-Classes with specifically trained facilitators was seen as a positive development, parents expressed concerns about both facilities and the facilitators. In some cases parents felt that the schools were too far for young children to travel to, in one school in Amhara getting to the school was difficult due to the steep terrain, and in another children had to cross a dangerous road, where four children were said to have died from accidents. Within the schools there were concerns about the safety and security of small children where the O-Classes were not separate from the primary school. Mothers in the Oromia site worried that O-Class was not fenced off from the rest of the school and there was no guard to protect the children.

In terms of O-Class facilities, the private kindergarten in the urban site in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's region and one of the schools in Amhara had good facilities. However, overall parents expressed concerns. These included that the classrooms were small and overcrowded; for instance, in the Oromia site the school director claimed that there were 40-45 children in a classroom only meant for 20-25 children. In some cases, the windows were small or there was poor ventilation, and in one Tigray school part of the classroom was used as a store. Desks and chairs were often not age appropriate and in the Tigray site children learnt in shifts, with one group sitting on stony ground under trees and the other in a classroom with desks designed for older children, so the O-Class children had to stand to write. There were shortages of books and guides for facilitators; in a school in Amhara, there were posters on the walls, but these were more appropriate for primary school. The absence of sleeping areas and mattresses for children and inadequate play facilities were also serious concerns. Lack of proper and safe age-appropriate toilets and the absence of tap water were viewed as major constraints. In the Tigray site children fetched water from the communal water point outside the school, or brought water from home in plastic containers which they refilled from a river.

Perhaps the most significant concern was the absence of school feeding, such that children could not stay beyond mid-morning. In the Oromia site there had been school feeding the previous year, but it had stopped, leading to increasing dropout. In the Tigray site the school feeding was meant for primary grades: O-Class children were also fed but some did not like the porridge provided.

There were concerns that most facilitators had not received specific formal training to teach in O-Classes. Many facilitators were dissatisfied, mainly due to low wages. Those on temporary contracts were not included in the school payroll as they were not formally qualified, and their salaries were less than half those of certified facilitators. This resulted in high rates of attrition. Due to shortages of facilitators, across all sites except Tigray, children aged 4 to 6 were in the same classroom, and one O-Class closed when the facilitator left. A woman facilitator in Oromia lived with her parents in the nearest town and said she would not be able to cover her expenses without her parents' support. Another in Tigray complained that she did not get her salary during the summer break since she was not full-time staff. Some of those on short contracts had other jobs and in one school in Amhara, contrary to the guidelines, the facilitator was male and was engaged in farming and only taught on holidays and saints' days. Nonetheless, there was evidence of some useful training provisions. Facilitators in the Tigray site were able to attend summer school training, and one in the Amhara site received training to prepare teaching aids.

Suggestions to improve O-Class provisions related to school facilities, including fenced areas, adequate classroom sizes, ventilation, age-appropriate desks and chairs, access to water and dedicated safe latrines, indoor and outdoor games, visual aids, rooms and mattresses for sleeping and eating, provisions for children with special needs and school feeding. Better training and remuneration for

8 These included one urban community and three rural communities, with one to three schools in each locality. The study involved focus group discussions with *woreda* experts and *kebele* committees, fathers and mothers, and Younger Cohort boys and girls now in Grade 7 and 8, to compare current conditions with when they were at school. There were also key informant interviews with school directors and O-Class teachers and facilitators.

facilitators, including summer and refresher courses, were considered to be very important, as well as better resource mobilisation to involve communities that can contribute in kind, cash and labour.

The rapid scaling up of preschool, especially through the O-Class programme, has resulted in a huge increase in access to preschool, with particular benefits for children living in rural and remote areas, in the emerging regions, and those from poorer backgrounds. However, ensuring that the aim of O-Class to improve school readiness is met and the potential equity benefits fulfilled will require more focus on improving the quality of services, including in the training of teachers and facilitators, and upgrading of the learning environment. The issue of whether a single year of preschool education is sufficient and whether the cost of additional years can be covered requires further consideration. The insights of this qualitative study should be reviewed in the context of further diagnostic work on ECD and the implications of the suggestions deserve additional discussion.

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