

# **The Disparity Between Intention and Reality:**

The Pre-Primary O-Class Context in Three Rural  
Young Lives Communities in Ethiopia

**Kiros Birhanu, Agazi Tiumelissan and Alula Pankhurst**



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## Summary

Although the 1994 Education Policy highlighted the importance of kindergarten education, early childhood education was restricted to urban areas. The National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Framework in 2010, led to greater emphasis and commitment which has improved access to pre-primary education especially in rural areas, notably through the provision of a one-year preparatory O-Class. However, inequalities and disparities in access persist. Based on data collected in three Young Lives communities this working paper reviews the recent local context of pre-primary education.

This study found that community members and service providers are well aware of the benefits of pre-primary school. However, though access to pre-primary school has improved in recent years, there are still serious limitations especially regarding lack of teaching aids, suitable classroom infrastructure and play equipment and materials. In most of the schools in the study communities, there were shortages of trained facilitators, who were not motivated due to lack of attractive salaries and benefits. The paper therefore recommends promoting improvements regarding teaching aids, classrooms, play materials, and the skills and motivation of facilitators. Moreover, there is a need for better monitoring and evaluation so that local priorities and needs are identified and addressed.

# 1. Introduction

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) has become a focus area in the education sector in recent decades, and reflected in governments' budget allocations, planning and policy designs. The inclusion of specific indicators in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also indicates the global attention given to ECCE. Ethiopia has undertaken considerable endeavours to make early childhood education accessible to all children, including introducing the O-class programme. Studies have shown significant increases in enrolment in pre-primary education, but with pronounced variations among communities in Ethiopia. This working paper aims to understand the reasons for these variations. The study incorporates views from service providers and service recipients to provide balanced insight on pre-primary education. As this pre-primary education programme is at an early stage, with little known about its implementation, this paper can contribute to future improvements.

## 1.1 The global push towards early childhood care and education

In the last two decades early childhood care and education (ECCE) has become a key area of attention for policy, research and practice, and a growing priority in many countries. This focus has been driven notably by international movements which emphasised ECCE. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990), Dakar Framework (UNESCO, 2000), and more broadly the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, are the most important milestones which played an indispensable role in encouraging countries to promote the implementation of ECCE.

The United Nations defines early childhood to be below 8 years of age. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which was ratified in 1989, prompted many countries to safeguard children's rights. Article 28 states that parties recognise the right of the child to education, with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity. There was no mention of pre-primary education in this article; however, UN General Comment No. 7 (2005) (CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1, 2005) on 'implementing child rights in early childhood' provided broader understanding and specific direction on early childhood.

The World Declaration on Education for All and its companion Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs, adopted by the World Conference on Education for All in Thailand in March 1990, has proved to be a useful guide for governments, international organisations, educators and development professionals in designing and implementing policies and strategies to improve basic education services. Article I states that 'Every person – child, youth and adult – shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs'. Another important milestone, specifically on pre-primary education, is the Dakar Framework for Action: Education for All, adopted by the World Education Forum in April 2000. In doing so, its participants reaffirmed the vision of the World Declaration on Education for All ten years earlier. The Dakar Framework for Action has six goals, with Goal 1 being 'expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children' (UNESCO 2000).

Two of the MDGs adopted at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000 had direct relevance to early childhood development: MDG4, on improving maternal health, with targets to reduce maternal mortality rates by three-quarters and provide universal access to reproductive health; and MDG5, on reducing the under-5 mortality rate by two-thirds between 1990 and 2015 (MDG5). Thus, the child and maternal health aspects of ECCE became part and parcel of a global 'effort to meet the needs of the world's poorest', while childcare and early education aspects were left out (UNESCO 2015).

The SDGs seek to build on the MDGs and complete what they were not able to achieve. SDGs 3, 4, and 16 have direct relevance to ECCE. Target 3.2 states 'By 2030, end preventable deaths of new born and children under 5 years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births; and under 5 mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births'. Target 4.2 states 'By 2030, 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', and Target 16.9 states 'By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration'. There are also other SDG targets which, if implemented, can improve the status of children at early age. The SDGs therefore have more specific targets, including around ECCE, compared to the MDGs.

Currently a number of international organisations, notably UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank, play a crucial role in supporting the global movement to improve early childhood care and support services. There is increasing worldwide recognition of the benefits of pre-primary schooling. Decades of research on child development and ECCE as an intervention indicate that high-quality programmes result in both short and long-term benefits to young children (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). Findings from European countries also reveal that ECCE has been associated with improved educational, labour market and social outcomes, such as higher earnings, better chances of completing high school, and improved health (Michel et al. 2018). Such individual benefits are not limited to the child but also extend to the family, as ECCE provision, for example, enables the labour market participation of mothers and single parents (Michel et al. 2018). Findings from Young Lives show that access to some form of pre-primary school at an early age is associated with better performance in education in later grades (Pankhurst et al. 2018).

## 1.2 Pre-primary education in Ethiopia

Until recently, in Ethiopia access to pre-primary education was restricted to some urban areas, where it was provided by the private sector or faith-based institutions. The government played a limited role in reaching most children in this age category. For example, although the Education and Training Policy of 1994 acknowledged the key role of kindergartens in the all-round development of children in preparation for formal schooling (MoE 1994), progress was limited due to the lack of focus on providing access to preschool aged children. The National Early Child Care and Education Policy Framework in 2010 is seen as the single most significant factor in the improvement of government commitment and increased access to preschool education. To guide this policy framework, a strategic operational plan and ECCE guidelines were endorsed in 2010 by the Ministries of Education, Health, and Women and Children Affairs. These acknowledge that previous ECCE services were limited to urban areas and benefitted only better-off families, and that unless the government is involved in service provision, marginalised and disadvantaged children will be left out. Thus, the improvement of



access to pre-primary education in Ethiopia, especially in rural areas, is a phenomenon of the last decade.

To provide pre-primary education for all children, the strategic operational plan mentions kindergartens and child-to-child programmes as non-formal ways of reaching children before they join primary school. The fourth Education Sector Development Programme (ESDP IV) followed similar lines. ESDP V contained two further options, the O-class and accelerated school readiness, with the aim to improve access to preschool education for all children (Rossiter 2016).

Although kindergartens are considered by many to be the ideal option for children before joining primary school, these have been limited to larger urban areas, and are mostly run by the private sector, meaning only better-off families can access them. Some faith-based organisations also provide kindergarten services, though their geographical distribution is very limited. The other three options were developed to mitigate the challenge of equitable pre-primary access, as it will take time to provide the standard kindergarten option throughout the country. The second option, O-classes, are supposed to run the year before children start primary school and should be available in all primary schools, using trained facilitators. Third are child-to-child programmes, where children in the second cycle of primary school (Grades 5 and 6) are trained and supported by teachers to teach younger children informally by playing and storytelling within their neighbourhood. The last option, accelerated school readiness programmes, are run for two months prior to children joining primary school. Since kindergartens are accessible only for a small proportion of children, these other options are meant to reach most children in order to provide some access to pre-primary education.

## 2. The study context

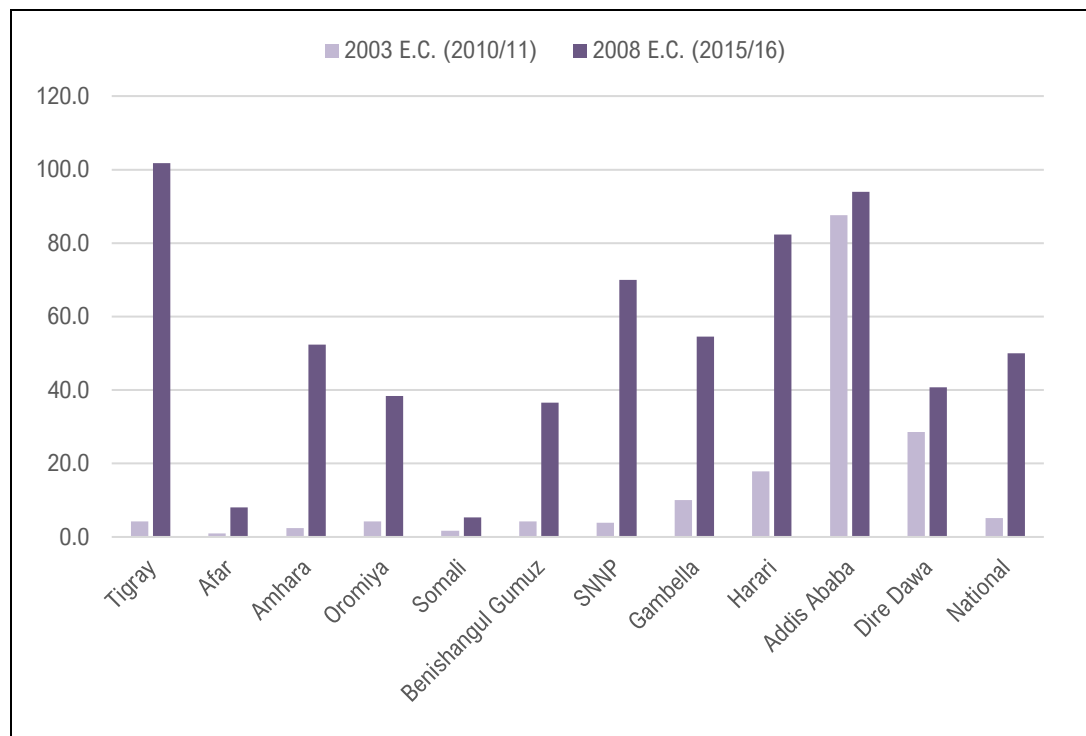
In recent years, Ethiopia has seen an increase in children accessing pre-primary education. Until recently, Ethiopia's education system was based on the Education and Training Policy of 1994, which included pre-primary education for the first time. Subsequent Education Sector Development Programmes (ESDPs) did not prioritise pre-primary education until the National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Framework in 2010.

At about the same time, ESDP IV planned for the establishment of pre-primary education in all rural and urban schools, with the increase of the gross enrolment rate (GER) from 6.9 per cent at the beginning of the programme to 20 per cent at the end (FDRE 2010: 29). ESDP V brought about an even more ambitious plan 'to provide all children with access to pre-primary education for school preparedness...' (FDRE 2015: 35)

During the 2010/11 academic year the GER for pre-primary education nationally was 5.2, with disproportionately high enrolment rate in the capital city, Addis Ababa, at 87.5 per cent, followed by Dire Dawa (28.6 per cent) and Harari (17.8 per cent); while the lowest was Afar with just 1 per cent followed by Somali (1.7 per cent) and Amhara (2.4 per cent) (MOE 2011). Five years later, the figure was much higher. The overall GER for the country was 49.9 per cent, Tigray making the highest leap at 101.7 per cent; followed by Addis Ababa (94 per cent)

and Harari (82.3 per cent). The lowest GER was registered in Somali (5.4 per cent), followed by Afar (8 per cent) (MOE 2017) (Figure 1).

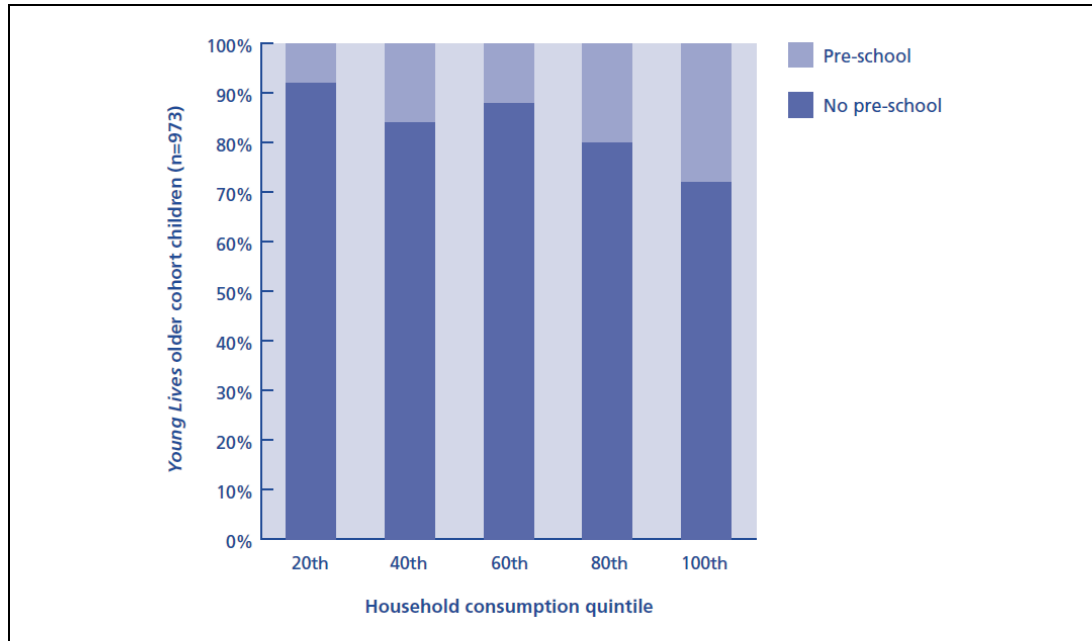
**Figure 1.** *Pre-primary gross enrolment rates, 2010/11 and 2015/16*



Sources: adapted from MoE (2011: 22) and MoE (2017: 16).

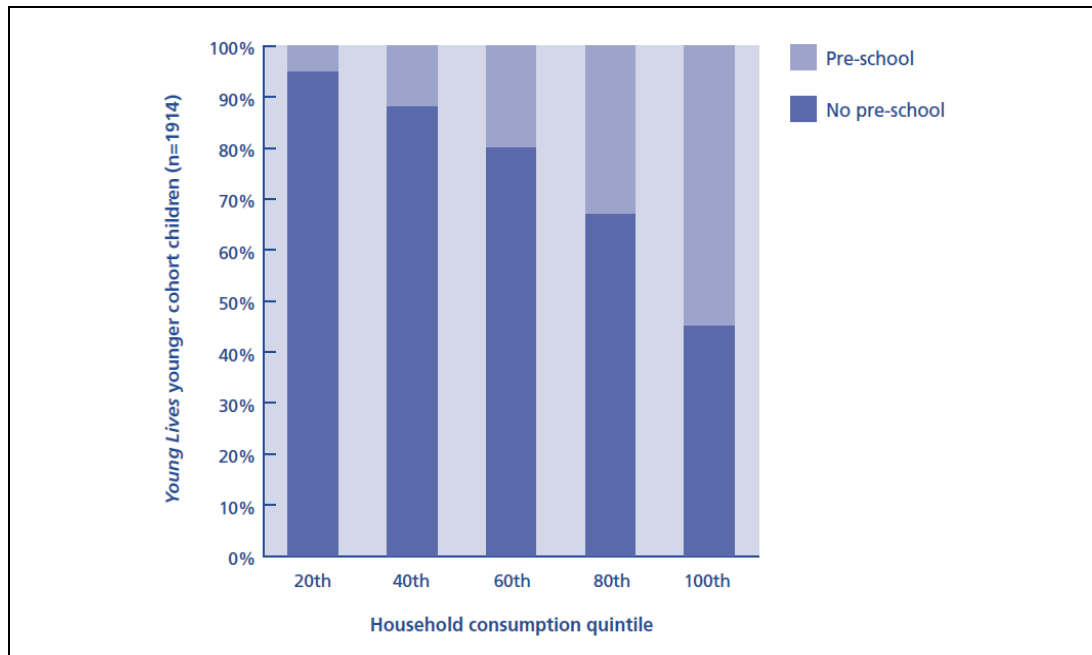
Young Lives evidence echoes this improvement in access to pre-primary education. Younger Cohort children enjoy more access to pre-primary education than their Older Cohort counterparts, who are 7 years older (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2(a).** *Preschool attendance among the Older Cohort between ages 3 and 5 (between 1997 and 1999), by poverty levels*



Source: Orkin et al. 2012 p.35

**Figure 2(b).** *Preschool attendance among the Younger Cohort between ages 3 and 5 (between 2004 and 2006), by poverty levels*



Source: Orkin et al. 2012 p.36

Though the commitment of the Ethiopian government to expand early learning opportunities is commendable, expanding early learning has its own challenges. Woodhead et al. (2017) identify six challenges – scaling up, equity, age appropriateness, cross-sectoral coordination, human capacity, and research evidence. They contend that:

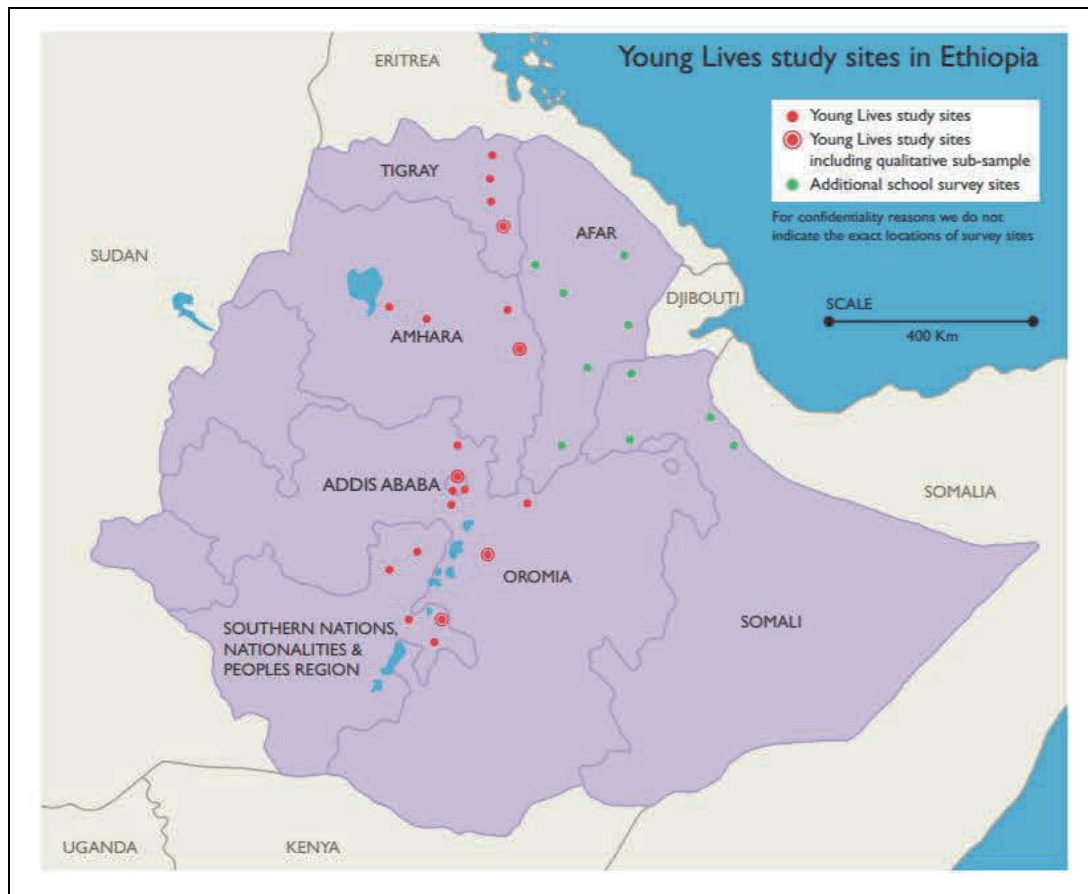
While all the evidence points to the potential of investment in early childhood, when it comes to delivering on that potential, many of the same challenges will face early childhood services as face primary education: namely ensuring good governance; sufficient resources, well-trained and remunerated teachers, and ensuring quality, age appropriate, child-centred curricula and pedagogy. (Woodhead et al. 2017: 26)

The increased enrolment in pre-primary education has been achieved through the expansion of O-classes. However, enrolment has varied across the regions, as has the enrolment age, which have impacted on children's learning outcomes. To examine the reasons for this, this study utilises the insights of stakeholders who are directly and indirectly involved in providing pre-primary education at various levels. It brings together grassroots views from those who receive the O-class teaching and their parents, up to *woreda* level, where regional resources and guidelines are channelled. Understanding the perspectives and practices of the various actors and communities, including those at the grassroots, is important in shaping the achievement of the goals of pre-primary education. Gaining a broader understanding can improve future actions as the government's policy interest has shifted from just expanding access, towards also improving the quality of O-class provision. Increased interest from national and international organisations to implement pre-primary programmes also makes the findings valuable.

### 3. Data sources and methods

Young Lives is a longitudinal research study on childhood poverty that has been following 12,000 children in four countries – Ethiopia, India, Vietnam and Peru – since 2002. In each country, this has involved a Younger Cohort of 2,000 children born in 2001-02 and an Older Cohort of 1,000 children born in 1994-95. In Ethiopia, Young Lives works in the four major regions and the capital city across a total of 20 sentinel sites (Figure 3). It has carried out five quantitative survey rounds in the 20 communities, and five waves of qualitative studies in five of the communities, one from each region and the capital city. The qualitative component was conducted with a total of 100 children, both boys and girls, in both cohorts and their caregivers (20 children and their caregivers in each of the five communities) in an effort to understand what it meant to grow up in these communities. Young Lives has also carried out additional sub-studies on pertinent issues.

**Figure 3.** *Young Lives study sites in Ethiopia.*



This current sub-study on early learning was undertaken in three of the qualitative sites. These communities were selected because Young Lives has rich data from both the survey and qualitative research. The selection also took into account regional variation and the presence of prior Young Lives research on pre-primary schooling.

In each community, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with *woreda* education office staff and the *kebele* cabinet. Interviews were also conducted with school principals, teachers and pre-primary facilitators. FGDs were carried out with fathers, mothers, and with boys and girls who were part of the Young Lives Younger Cohort. These students, referred to as reference children in this paper, were in Grades 7 and 8 and were interviewed to compare the pre-primary situation during their time with the current provision. FGDs were used to map out important places for children. Classroom and school observations were carried out using structured checklists (Table 1).

**Table 1.** *Data collection activities*

Activity	Communities			Total
	Tach Meret	Leki	Zeytuni	
Reference group boys' FGD	1	1	1	3
Reference group girls' FGD	1	1	1	3
Fathers' FGD	3	1	2	7
Mothers' FGD	3	1	2	7
Director interview	3	1	1	7
O-class teacher/facilitator interview	3	1	1	7
Community leaders' FGD	1	1	1	3
<i>Kebele</i> committee FGD	1	1	1	3
<i>Woreda</i> experts' FGD	1	1	3	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>45</b>

The study was conducted in three regions of Ethiopia, Amhara, Oromia and Tigray, and in one community/*kebele* from each region:

**Tach Meret**<sup>1</sup> is a community in Amhara, located quite close to a *woreda* town;

**Leki** is a rural community in Oromia, located adjacent to a lake; **Zeytuni** is a rural community in Tigray region.

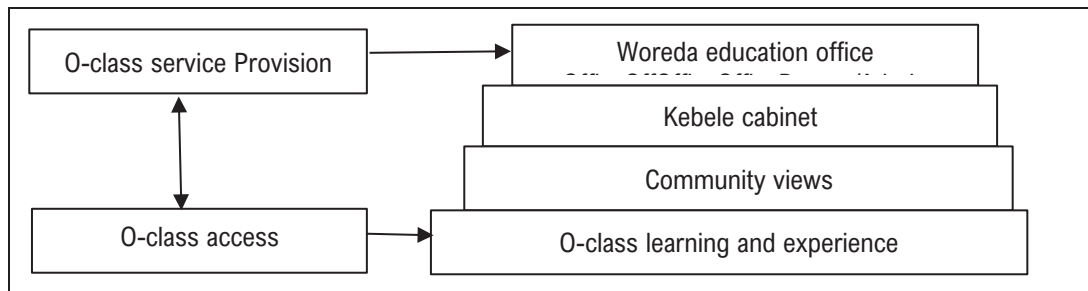
All the communities are rural but have distinct features in terms of access to O-class and factors affecting O-class. In Tach Meret, three schools with pre-primary education were included in the study. In Leki, the only pre-primary service, which was not part of a primary school, was included. In Zeytuni, two *kushets* (neighbourhoods) were included, the first with pre-primary education, while in the second the O-class was no longer functioning at the time of the study.

## 4. Results

To help understand O-class from different vantage points, we collected data from stakeholders at different strata of service delivery and local administration: from the *woreda*, where regional provisions and guidance are channelled, to the *kebele* administration, the community level – community elders, parents and reference group children, and school principals and O-class facilitators at the school level. Figure 4 shows the different stages.

<sup>1</sup> All community names are pseudonyms.

**Figure 4.** *Data collection*



## 4.1 Early learning in the communities

The status of early learning and the role of O-class show some similarities across the communities and also in Tach Meret where more than one school was included in the study. However, there are also striking differences, not only between communities, but also among different schools within the same community.

### 4.1.1 Early learning opportunities

In Tach Meret in Amhara, where three schools in the *kebele* were included in this study, there were O-classes in each school, and all four of the schools in the *kebele* were said to have O-classes. Child-to-child teaching had been started in these schools, but had not run for very long and was not functioning at the time of the study. Although some respondents included *kes timhirt* (priest education/church education) as one form of early learning, others within the same community disagreed, suggesting that it did not necessarily entail early learning and that it is only for boys who are more than 7 years old.

In Leki in Oromia there was only one O-class, which had been built in the centre of the community separate from the primary school to make it accessible for all the children, unlike the other O-classes in the study that were found within primary school premises. Some respondents also mentioned religious teaching, both by the church and the mosque, which involved literacy and numeracy lessons, as other forms of learning opportunities for children. However, others did not consider these to fulfil the criteria for early learning for children under 7 years of age.

Zeytuni, in Tigray had an O-class in one school, with the O-class in another school no longer functioning. In this community, unlike the other two communities, child-to-child-centres were available. These centres were found in both *kushets*. The child-to-child lessons were held in the houses of parent-teacher-student association (PTSA) member parents. They also serve as 'reading spots' with books available for children to read.

### 4.1.2 Role of O-class and provision of early learning

All the study respondents, including the reference group children, emphasised the importance of and the need for early learning provision, even though there were challenges. For instance, in one of the *kushets* in Zeytuni, where O-class was available, mothers mentioned that the O-class was a clean and safe environment for children, and was also nearby. Moreover, the PTSA parents are actively involved in awareness raising, and host the child-to-child centres in their houses. In one school in Tach Meret resources are far better than in the other two schools, so that people in all the schools saw it as a model to follow.

However, most caregivers felt that even where there were O-classes and early learning opportunities were good, the O-classes did not receive the attention they deserve. They felt that this was a disservice to the children, as the benefits they get could be improved with a little support and organisation if the government believes in the importance of O-classes.

Most O-classes in the communities and schools have low levels of resources, which impacts how they were established, organised and run. These shortfalls in the provision of early learning can be categorised into two major areas – issues with the facilities of early learning centres, and with the facilitators and/or teachers.

#### 4.1.3 O-class facilities

None of the early learning facilities had the necessary materials they needed to run a smooth teaching process. The problems faced by the facilities include: lack of age appropriate seats and desks; lack of books for the children and teacher guides for the facilitators/teachers; lack of indoor and outdoor play materials; absence of sleeping areas and mattresses for the children; and no school meals, which discourages children from staying in school after mid-morning (as opposed to kindergartens in towns, as mentioned by some respondents, where children are able to stay in the school until mid-afternoon, and even in some cases until 5 pm). Water shortages and a lack of toilets were common problems. One facilitator mentioned that “there were cases when older children in the primary school were urinating on the children who were attending O-class in the latrine”.

Most of the classrooms were not appropriate for children and did not comply with the standard set by the Ministry of Education. The classrooms were small, did not have proper ventilation, and in the O-class in Zeytuni, part of the classroom was used as a store by the *kebele*. In this school, the narrow room coupled with overcrowding affected the quality of education. The facilitator said:

When the children are put in one classroom, they fight with one another and they do not listen to the teacher. The teacher cannot tell which child is [being] beaten and who is crying because the classroom is [so] crowded.

The problem with O-class rooms was pervasive not only in other communities where O-classes were integrated with primary schools and use the same type of rooms as other grades, but also in Leki, where the O-classes were purpose-built. Children do not have a chair to sit on, and it was only when people heard that the researchers were going to study the O-class that desks were brought from the primary school. Many children also came to attend the O-class on the day of the research [increasing attendance beyond the usual numbers]. In Zeytuni, most children sit on stones in the O-class.

In some of the communities, the O-classes are considered to be too far away for the children to walk, or the neighbourhood in which they are located is not conducive for the children – for instance due to having to cross roads with heavy traffic (the school with the better O-class facility in Tach Meret), or the school location not being conducive for small children because the landscape is hilly and sloping (the second school in Tach Meret). The location of this school was mentioned by mothers as a major reason for not sending their children to O-class. Mothers in Leki revealed that it did not feel safe sending their children to the O-class, as it did not have a fence and the children were being exposed to diseases by people urinating and defecating near the classrooms. They added that the only place mothers felt their children to be safe was at home with them. They also complained that there was no guard to assure the



safety of their children. Even though the classroom was specifically constructed for the O-class, it was not appropriate and it does not have windows for ventilation, only small openings. Respondents said that the construction did not take the weather of the area into account.

One of the O-classes in Tach Meret, according to the director of the school and respondents from other schools in the *kebele*, was better off in terms of school materials than the other schools in the *kebele*, thanks to support from Amhara Development Association (ADA). The classroom was also better equipped with age-appropriate chairs and desks, and a sleeping area and mattresses for the children. However, they were still in short supply of indoor and outdoor play materials, and did not have books and posters for the children. Although USAID donated books for the O-classes, these were appropriate for primary school students and not for O-class education.

#### 4.1.4 O-class facilitators

The main challenges in terms of facilitators took two forms. First, most facilitators had not received any formal training to teach O-classes. The second challenge was regarding facilitators' satisfaction with their work and especially the terms of their remuneration, and hence their motivation to continue working as facilitators.

In one of the O-classes in Tach Meret, in the previous year there was a male facilitator who did not have any training to teach O-classes: although at the time of the study there was a qualified woman facilitator. In the other two schools two men facilitated the O-classes, but they did not have any formal O-class teaching training. The facilitator in one of these schools was a full-time farmer who was teaching on some saint days, when he was not meant to engage in farming.

In most cases the facilitators/teachers had not received formal training to teach O-classes. Most had completed either Grade 10 or 12, and some were volunteers who had other full-time engagements. However, the facilitators in the Tigray site were able to attend summer schools to receive training. The only O-class facilitator in the three schools in Tach Meret had also received additional training on children's education and could prepare teaching aids.

Although children from ages 4 to 6 should be in different classrooms according to their age, in most cases, except for the site in Tigray, all the children between ages 4 to 6 were in the same classroom. This was mainly because there was a shortage of facilitators. However, in the community in Tigray where there was an O-class, there were two facilitators because of the high number of students at the beginning of the year. In another *kushet* in Tigray, the O-class from previous years was not operating at the time of the study because the facilitator had left the area. The people in the area were hopeful that their children will attend O-class again in the coming academic year.

Facilitators' remuneration also contributed to their dissatisfaction and attrition. Most of the facilitators felt they were underpaid in relation to their workload, and some were not yet permanent employees as they did not have formal training for the job. For instance, one facilitator in Tigray did not receive a salary from the *woreda* during summer breaks, because she was not full-time staff and the *woreda* did not have the budget. The facilitator in Leki lived with her parents in the nearest town, and complained that she could only cover her expenses with support from her parents. Similarly, in Tach Meret most of the facilitators were not qualified and therefore were not included on the school payroll. Instead, they were paid by the school from internal revenues.

Participants in the *woreda* FGD in Leki also highlighted the low salaries of facilitators who had not had training, who only received 694 birr per month, compared to trained and certified facilitators whose salary was 1,828 birr.

## 4.2 Community understandings about children's needs and abilities prior to going to school

Stakeholders in the communities have broadly similar understandings about children's needs and abilities at different stages prior to going to school. These include health and nutrition (health care provision and particularly vaccinations, and exclusive breast feeding for six months), and pre-primary education (kindergarten and O-class). Some parents also mentioned safe water as a need for children. A father from Tach Meret explained the importance of health services:

In the past many mothers used to die while giving birth and children were also highly exposed to various types of diseases, but today our children are healthy and happy due to the follow up by the health extension workers.

Young Lives reference children also stated that O-class has made a big difference in children's lives, compared to their experience of starting school directly at Grade 1.

### 4.2.1 Important places for young children

Health facilities (health centres, health posts, traditional healers) education facilities (school and pre-primary religious institutions), community play areas and home were noted as very important places for young children. Children obtain vaccinations and treatment at health facilities. Traditional healers' residences and holy water points were also mentioned as important places for children in the Tigray and Oromia sites, as there are various illnesses which modern medicine is not believed to cure. Moreover, parents from Oromia and Amhara sites mentioned that religious places such as churches and mosques are important for young children. Irrigation fields in Tigray and the lake in Oromia were also mentioned. A father from Oromia explained the importance of the lake:

After the age of 3 children start to go to the nearby lake and learn to swim together with their older siblings and friends. Now they are not more curtailed at home, as they feel freedom to move within the community including swimming in the lake.

The *kebele* nutrition committee was mentioned as an important body for young children in one of the schools in Amhara.

### 4.2.2 Abilities and knowledge expected of children between walking and O-class age

The different study communities suggested similar abilities and knowledge which are expected of children between walking and O-class age. The government has set 6 years old as the age for entering O-class, although this differs in practice. Children between walking age up to the age of going to O-class are expected to do many types of activities and have certain skills and capabilities. These include language and communication, expressing their needs, understanding advice and commands, distinguishing between good and bad, playing with other children, and taking care of themselves. While these abilities are not gendered,

when it comes to learning skills to start helping their parents, gender roles begin to become differentiated.

Language and communication are among the most important skills that the study communities expected children to acquire. Children should start to repeat words fluently at 3 years old, although some already do so at 2 years old. They should be able to say words clearly and express what they want between the ages of 3 and 4. Children between walking and O-class age should be able express their ideas and be able to identify family members. They should also be able to listen, understand advice and commands, and read the facial expressions of their parents and other family members between of the ages of 4 and 5.

Children should identify between good and bad: some thought that this could be expected between the ages of 2 and 3, whereas others suggested between the ages of 5 and 6. In particular, children between walking age and O-class age should know that fire is harmful and should protect themselves from such danger. Parents mentioned that children should be able to walk on their own at age 5, and be able to understand what they should do alone. Participants indicated no difference for boys and girls in this regard.

Playing was mentioned as one of the skills that children should be able to have in this age range. Community members expressed varying views on the age at which a child should be able to play. Some mentioned the age of 3 because they start to walk properly at this age. Others said that children can play normally from 2 years old. Children should be able to play and communicate with other children like them starting from 3 to 4 years old, and some said they should be able to play games with rules from the age of 4. There was no gender difference mentioned between boys and girls regarding their ability to play.

The time between walking age and O-class starting age is a critical period in which children start to take care of themselves. They should be able to feed themselves from the age of 3, and put on their clothes and use the toilet or ask their parents to help from 4 to 5 years old. In Oromia, they should be able to learn how to swim in the lake at early age.

Some community members also mentioned that children at this age are expected to know the letters of the alphabet if they have educated parents. Others added that children should be able to attend religious places to pray and learn moral education.

What children should be able to do between walking and O-class age applies to both boys and girls. However, there were different expectations of girls and boys in relation to certain work skills, and this is mainly visible when children start to learn how to support family activities. Children at this age are expected to acquire skills that enable them to contribute family labour. They should be able to start herding at the age of 5 to 6 (mainly boys), and start to help, soothe and feed younger siblings, and carry babies (mainly girls). A father from Tigray said:

The child should be able to do work like fetching water with a small container at the age of 5, and he should play with children and start socialisation with others at the age of 4.

A mother from Tigray explained what roles boys and girls are expected to perform at home:

Girls start cleaning the floor at 6 years old. Boys do not clean a lot; they feed cattle and they herd. Girls also feed straw to cattle. Boys are not expected to clean the house. Girls up to the age of 6 also collect animal dung. Boys herd cattle until the adults eat breakfast. Girls also herd. Girls do boys' work, but boys do not do what girls of their age do.

### 4.2.3 Responsibilities for socialising children

Parents, older siblings, relatives, neighbours and community members at large are responsible for enabling children to know and perform what is expected at their age. Parents have the greatest responsibility to shape the behaviour and protect the well-being of their children, followed by older siblings, neighbours and relatives. Mothers have the largest responsibility in enabling children to do what is expected at their age, because mothers spend more time with children in this age range than other family members. Fathers seem to have a limited role in this regard. However, fathers play a role mainly in initiating boys and teaching them appropriate skills for 'male' farming and other work. Fathers are also expected to help children socialise according to community norms.

Mothers should teach their daughters how to do household activities such as sweeping floors and washing dishes. They should care for their children by preparing food and caring for their hygiene, and provide them with advice to shape their behaviour and instil discipline. Parents should look after their children to protect them from dangerous places. They should take children to the health posts for follow-ups and vaccinations, and mothers should follow health extension workers' advice. Parents should follow the progress of their children and take them to O-class when they are of the right age. Parents from Amhara added that fathers and mothers should take their children to church. A community leader from Amhara elaborated his view on how nature has made mothers closer to children:

Nature by itself makes mothers closer to their children. For instance, we cannot give our children breast milk. We cannot carry our children in our womb. The other reason is, in our case, it is not like urban areas, fathers are so busy on the farmland and when they get back home they are very exhausted.

Older brothers and sisters are expected to help their younger siblings in different ways, including with counting and learning the letters of the alphabet before the child joins O-class. Respondents from Amhara emphasised that older sisters have more responsibility for taking care of the children at this age than older brothers. Siblings have a responsibility to be a role model, and to teach children how to play games. A community leader in Amhara stated that:

Siblings are very active in child rearing. My older daughter, for instance, has helped her mother a lot in taking care of her younger brothers ... but, the mother is always the main actor.

Relatives and neighbours should also give advice to children this age whenever they find them outside their home. A community leader from Tigray explained the important role of neighbours in bringing up children, given the communal community spirit and role in child socialisation:

Neighbours and relatives have a big responsibility for a child. In our community, my child is not only mine. He is of my relatives, neighbours and friends too. Neighbours should advise children to do good things and not to be present in risky places. For instance, when we go out of the home, we leave our children with our neighbours, and they treat and protect them.

Religious leaders play key roles in educating young children about spirituality, and moral and ethical education. A religious leader from Oromia explained that:

Children from Muslim parents begin Quran education from the age of 4. We encourage parents to bring their children to spiritual education from the time when they start to walk.

Some community members mentioned that civil servants, notably health extension workers, have also a responsibility to teach children hygiene practices.

#### 4.2.4 Children's needs and abilities at O-class age

At O-class age, children were described as needing love and affection from family members, food, vaccinations, hygiene and clothing, physical and mental well-being, play and pre-primary education. However, there were differences among the sites in terms of priorities. The water source in the site in Oromia contains high sodium chloride and is unsuitable for drinking, therefore clean water was mentioned as a priority for children in that community. Community members in the Amhara site said that health services were the most important need for children because there used to be acute diarrhoea, though that problem is now resolved.

Respondents suggested that by the time children enter O-class they should be able to understand basic communications, and know their parents' language and be able to talk and communicate with their families and children their age. They should also be able to remember things, recognise family members, know their neighbours and members of their village, and be able to ask for what they want.

Children should be able to play with many different children in the community; they should also be able to herd cattle alongside older children. Fathers from Oromia mentioned that children at this age should be able to socialise and play with other children independently. A father from Tigray said that children at O-class entering age:

should be able to play different games with peer children as well socialise and handle his exercise books properly, sing songs and the anthem alone and with other children, know how to handle a pen to write as well as practice *Ha Hu* [Tigrigna alphabet].

By the time children enter O-class they should be able to walk and eat, drink, and wear clothes, wash their faces and maintain their overall hygiene by themselves. They should be able to assist their family in certain activities, such as herding, taking messages and feeding animals. In this period many of the tasks begin to be gendered. Girls should be able to assist their mothers in baking *injera* by providing water and fuel. Boys should be able to make farming implements and oxen ready for ploughing. Fathers from the Tigray site mentioned that a girl at this age should be able to fetch up to three litres of water and support her mother at home by doing simple activities such as bringing materials to her mother and sweeping the floor, while boys should support their fathers in outdoor activities such as carrying small weights and herding sheep and goats.

Children at O-class entering age should be able to know and do certain things in relation to the school's social and physical environment. Walking to school and knowing the time when to go and to come from school is expected. Children should also have the patience to stay at school, should be able to make friends and play with other children, ask for what they need (such as water when they get thirsty and food when hungry), respect their teachers and listen to what they are told by their teachers and parents. Parents from Tigray added that a child must be strong enough to walk the relatively long distance to school.

Responding to whether children should know alphabets before they enter O-class, one participant from Tigray said:

It depends on the family members' awareness. But there are many children who know *Ha Hu* and ABCD and there are even children whom their parents teach and know how to write [letters of the alphabet] before entering O-class. For instance, my daughter was even able to write her name and her father's name in Tigrigna before she entered O-class. This is because I am literate to some extent and able to teach her about the alphabet and how to write words by buying and posting the alphabet poster at home before she entered O-class. However, children who have illiterate parents and who do not have [family] who attended school before do not even know how to handle a pencil before they enter O-class.

#### 4.2.5 What children need to know or be able to do to be ready for O-class

##### **Readiness for O-class**

School readiness is very important because many studies indicate that children who have been in some kind of pre-primary education perform better than those who have not. The fact that pre-primary schools are flourishing in cities and towns has also highlighted issues around inequality of access. The Ethiopian government has decided that 6-year-old children should enter O-class for one year to prepare them to start primary school. However, many communities send their children at an earlier or later age.

The important things that children need to know or to be able to do to be ready for O-class relate to a child's mental and physical growth. O-class children should be able to speak fluently, understand what is said by teachers, communicate with other people (such as to ask for water if thirsty or food if hungry), and protect themselves from danger. In addition, children should be able to understand their local language and letters of the alphabet. Community members from Amhara said that children must be strong enough to walk relatively long distances from home to school. In general, by observing a children's activities inside the house and with their friends, families can then decide whether to send their children to school.

##### **Community views about appropriate age for children to start O-class**

Communities use a combination of factors, including age, physical and mental development, in order to decide the appropriate age to send children to O-class. In the Tigray site, most fathers mentioned that children should be sent to O-class at the age of 4 or 5. However, some mentioned 5 or 6 years old, and yet others suggested a child could start at 5 years old and repeat O-class. In the Oromia site, community members said that children should start O-class or kindergarten at the age of 3 or 4, so they begin learning early in order to perform better when they join formal primary school.

Many community members from Amhara said that they advise parents to send their children to O-class at 4 years old; however, they also suggested that this depends on children's mental and physical growth, and that children who are not strong or active at age 4 should join O-class at 5 or 6 years old. They said that students could spend three years at O-class if they start at 4 which makes them more active when they start Grade 1. Mothers in Amhara said that most children in their community start O-class at age 4. However, for children who are weak by nature and cannot cope with walking and staying at school without food, it is advisable to start O-class at age 6. There were also parents who said that they advise people to send their children at the age of 4 if they are strong enough to go with friends and active, but sometimes children are active and capable enough for O-class even at 3 years old.

Community members from Tigray site mentioned a gender difference, in that girls are better at attending O-class and Grade 1 at an earlier age than boys. The reason given was that girls speak at an earlier age than boys and are also stronger than boys of the same age. It was also mentioned that the main criterion to join O-class is being 6 years old and it does not matter whether children are physically smaller or not. Other community members believed in delaying O-class until 7 or 8 years old, the justification being that older children are more mature and stronger, as a mother from Amhara explained:

The school registers children starting from age 4 for O-class but I think it's too early for the child to start school at this age. It would be good if a child starts when he is ... 7 or 8 when the child is strong enough to go to school with his friends and stay there.

### **Readiness to join Grade 1**

To be ready to join Grade 1, community members believed that children should know the letters of the alphabet in local languages and English, and know numbers. Some community member from Tigray added that a child should also be able to know the English alphabet, understand some English words, and write words, draw and understand shapes such as straight and zigzag lines. Parents in Oromia suggested that in addition to being able to identify numbers and letters, children should be aware that education at Grade 1 will help them to lay the foundation for subsequent grades. Community members from Amhara said that children should be able to stay in school for long hours and to touch their ears using the opposite hand crossing over their head. Parents from Amhara also stated that a child needs to complete O-class in order to be ready for Grade 1, and be able to count from one to one hundred.

### **Community views about the appropriate age for children to start Grade 1**

Community members from across the sites suggested that children should be 6 to 8 years old to start Grade 1. Parents justified this in terms of physical and mental growth of children and school rules. Some parents related this to their experience in sending children to Grade 1. Fathers from Tigray said that 6 years old is an appropriate age because the child is able to understand and do things independently. Some community members said that it is advisable to send children at the age of 7 and not below that, since otherwise they cannot learn properly in school. They added that a child at this age is ready to write and read things easily. A father from Tigray suggested 8 years old is the appropriate age:

I started to send them at the age of 7 and 6 but they did not grasp knowledge, it was simply going and coming. The time when they properly grasped the lessons they are taught is at the age of 8.

Parents from Amhara had differing views about the appropriate age for children to enter Grade 1. Most participants stated that age is not the only criteria, and that the child's activeness also matters. They said that some children become mature at an early age while others are not mature even at 8 or 9 years old. One of the fathers said:

For me, 8 years of age is appropriate for a child to start Grade 1, particularly, if he/she has not received pre-primary education ... if he/she receives pre-primary education, 7 years of age is appropriate.

Another group of fathers from Amhara said that if children stay in O-class from ages 4-6 then when they can count numbers and identify letters they can join Grade 1 at the age of 7.

Mothers from Amhara said that they would advise people to send children to Grade 1 at age 7, following teachers' advice. Another group of mothers from Amhara said that they advise people to send their children to school at age 8 because at this age children become active and can communicate with their friends, and can understand what their teacher says.

#### 4.2.6 Direct and indirect costs of sending children to O-class and Grade 1

##### **Direct and indirect costs for families to send children to O-class**

O-class is provided by the government free of charge. However, parents indicated that sending their children to O-class incurs direct and indirect costs which they would otherwise not have. Direct costs incurred by families included buying exercise books, pens, bags, playing materials and clothing. The fact that children start to contribute to household labour means that families also incur indirect costs. This differs by community depending on the extent of child labour. Children's enrolment in O-class increases the work burden on other family members, and in some cases requires parents to hire outside labour, although children also work when they come back from school.

Parents mentioned that they also give bread to their children to eat while in class, although some parents noted that this is what children normally eat at home, so there is no additional cost. Children can wear any clothes in O-class, so there no additional costs for clothing and shoes. A mother from Amhara recounted her experience of sending children to O-class:

If our children stay at home we do not worry about their clothes or food because they can eat anything they get in the house; besides we do not expect to get up early and prepare breakfast for the children. On the other hand, younger children wear their older sibling's clothes so we don't worry about their clothing.

A father from Tigray recounted how parents take care of herding in order to send their children to O-class:

For instance, we are six people here, we employ someone to herd our cattle collaborating together in order to send our children to O-class. There are also people who herd and do the work at home and outside the home by themselves in order to send their children to O-class.

Some participants mentioned that they accompany their children to O-class, while others stated that their children go alone or with other children. Some fathers mentioned that they do not interrupt work to take children to school and pick them up because the children travel alone. The participants suggested that this does not vary by gender or wealth. However, parents from the site in Amhara mentioned that the costs in terms of food and clothing is not affordable for some families and this is worse when parents have many children.

##### **Direct and indirect cost for families to send children to Grade 1**

Similar to O-class, Grade 1 education is provided by the government free of charge; however, sending children to Grade 1 incurs direct and indirect cost to parents. The direct costs include buying exercise books, pens, clothes and shoes. Sending children to Grade 1 also forces the household to incur costs, due to the decrease of children's contribution to household labour. Parents also hire people to help them with farming activities when their children attend school, although children still help when they return from school. Other parents said that they have a time cost to cover what their children do, as these parents herd the cattle and do household activities instead of their children when they go to school. Some



parents also mentioned that mothers ask for neighbours' help with domestic chores when they send daughters to Grade 1.

Participants from Tigray mentioned that the costs do not differ for boys and girls. However, the clothes they buy for their sons are more expensive than those for their daughters. They added that they send their children to school with *ambasha* (bread) to eat in case they feel hungry during lessons.

#### **Differences in costs for O-class and Grade 1**

Although the costs for sending children to Grade 1 are similar to O-class there are some differences in terms of direct and indirect costs. The main difference is the quantity of items required for Grade 1 and O-class. Parents mentioned that they buy more items for children attending Grade 1, such as exercise books.

More importantly, parents from Tigray mentioned that the key cost difference is the requirement for school contributions in Grade 1. There are also greater costs to sending children to Grade 1 in terms of replacement costs related to children's labour contribution, since children in Grade 1 are more helpful to their parents than those in O-class.

#### **4.2.7 Changes in attitudes and practices around sending children to pre-primary**

Parents' attitudes and the care given to children from birth until they enter Grade 1 have improved. The reference children from the different communities compared the current provisions with the care that they had received in early childhood. They explained that children at this age now get better provisions in terms of health treatment, school materials, clothing and food. A girl from Tigray said:

In our time there was no parent who wanted education, it was with force, but now everyone wants education and everyone is sending their child to school.

Reference children from Oromia recalled parents previously who were not even buying pens, exercise books or educational materials for their children. Parents now have a better attitude towards sending their children to pre-primary education. Children from birth until entering Grade 1 are currently getting better quality and quantity of food, clothing, shoes and school materials. A boy from Tigray explained that:

Currently children need to get modern and many clothes such as jeans, and shoes like trainers and leather shoes. But, in our time, we had only one pair of shoes and clothing and we had to wear them for a long time

Likewise, a reference child from Oromia recalled the previous attitudes and practices of parents:

In the past we did not get sufficient educational materials and our parents did not have a positive attitude on the advantage of education. So, the support we were provided was not satisfactory. But at this time, they have the awareness of the benefits of education and how to handle or care for their children in terms of providing the compulsory educational materials.

Similarly, a reference girl from Tigray compared the experience of care given to children now and in the past:

At this time children need pre-primary school; they get better care and better food from [their] family ... There are also differences in food eaten in the past and now. Children at this time eat *pastini* [small pasta added to soup]; in the past they used to eat *hinbasha* [bread]; there was nothing else. There is better care and health treatment.

According to reference children from Tigray, nowadays children are taken to health facilities and treated when they get sick. The children mentioned that although there were health facilities in the past, parents did not take them. Reference children from Oromia said that there was no health extension work or kindergarten in the community when they were younger. The reference children in the Amhara site said that the current young children up to Grade 1 entering age were well aware of their rights to education and were 'smart' compared to when they were children:

Now because children know about the opportunity of early learning, they ask their parents to send them to school. But during our childhood we followed our big brothers to the field to keep cattle and we spent our time playing.

#### 4.2.8 Officials' and school staff understandings of children's needs prior to going to school

The views of government officials and school staff are crucial in implementing what has been designed at national level since their understanding plays a key role in achieving the desired targets.

*Woreda* officials mentioned health and pre-primary education as services that make the biggest difference for children from birth until they start Grade 1. *Woreda* officials from the different sites highlighted kindergarten and O-class as the education services making the biggest difference, by shaping children mentally in terms of discipline and knowledge. *Woreda* officials from Amhara emphasised that pre-primary school centres should be attractive and entertaining places where children can learn about the alphabet in an enjoyable way. Nutrition was also mentioned as important, as it makes the biggest difference for children's overall well-being at this age, which may be irreversible if it is missed.

Similarly, school principals mentioned O-class as the most important education service for children until they start Grade 1. School directors from Tigray and Amhara also mentioned kindergarten and child-to-child programmes as other important education services at this age. School directors from Tigray also included day care, while their counterparts in Amhara mentioned *kes timhirt* (priest/church education). However, pre-primary school services are important only when these are delivered to the correct standards.

O-class teachers across the sites mentioned various needs of children from birth until they enter Grade 1. Children at this age need care, protection and love from their family, and need to be protected from accidents related to fire, electricity and water. Children need someone to take them to school and return them back home.

*Kebele* cabinet members said that children from birth until they enter Grade 1 need vaccinations and medical care. Vaccination has brought great changes in the health of children. Children at this age need hygiene, exclusive breast feeding until 6 months old, and food. Nutritious food is important for children after six months. Children in this age category also need to play and know their family.

There were no gender differences mentioned in the needs of children from birth until they enter Grade 1.

According to O-class teachers, the purpose of O-class is for children to understand the school environment before they start formal education in Grade 1. They should be able to read and write letters and numbers, and they should also learn school rules and regulations. O-class is therefore necessary for a child before entering Grade 1. Children need to speak before joining Grade 1 and they also need hygiene. O-class teachers mentioned that children should learn in their mother tongue.

O-class in the different sites is contributing to meeting the needs of children at pre-primary school age. However, this goal is currently not fully achieved for reasons linked to quality of O-class education in the sites.

### **4.3 Changes in provision and opportunities**

#### **4.3.1 Positive changes**

In Zeytuni, there was improvement in the number and quality of facilitators in both the O-class and the child-to-child programme. When the O-class was started there was only one facilitator. A second facilitator was needed due to the increase in the number of children attending the O-class. Recently, facilitators were also able to get training during the summer vacation in collaboration with the regional education bureau and teacher training colleges. The number of children taking part in the child-to-child programme has also increased, and the initial two facilitators for the programme had also doubled recently.

#### **4.3.2 Negative changes**

In Zeytuni, some of the play materials had been damaged and could no longer be used. There was also school feeding the previous year, which increased the number of children attending the O-class. This was interrupted this year, resulting in reduced attendance. In one of the villages, there was an O-class in the previous year, but it was currently not operational. Some respondents said the lack of salary forced the facilitator to quit; others that the facilitator left to give birth and didn't come back; and others said that the facilitator left for Saudi Arabia.

In some of the communities the policy change from male to female facilitators was viewed as a good thing. However, in two schools in Tach Meret there were male teachers, as women could not be found, and the use of male teachers was apparently disliked by the community.

#### **4.2.3 Historical changes in access to pre-primary education**

None of the adults in the study had the opportunity to pass through pre-primary education. This was also true for the reference groups of Grade 7 and 8 students in the study sites in Amhara, Oromia and Tigray.

Prior to O-classes being established in these communities, and the child-to-child programme in the Tigray site, children relied on the support of their elder siblings or their parents to learn the alphabet and numbers before going to attend Grade 1. The exception was the site in Oromia, where students who completed Grade 10 and 12 were organising summer schools for two months to help children to learn about the alphabet and numbers before joining Grade

1. Some children got the opportunity to attend for two summers, while others only attended for one summer. Those who did not attend at all before Grade 1 were seen as being adversely affected when they joined primary school. For instance, among the six boys in the reference group discussion in Leki, all except one had repeated grades in primary school. Three of them repeated twice, and three repeated three times. They attributed this to not having the opportunity of quality preschool education.

All the adults and reference group students thought that currently the children are lucky to be able to attend O-classes, even though they realise that a lot more needs to be done to ensure that children receive quality education.

A girl in Zeytuni who did not get the opportunity to go through O-class said that the current children were better off:

We did not know anything when we joined Grade 1, now they know everything before entering Grade 1. They know *Ha, Hu* [local alphabet], different shapes and ABCD ... they know addition and multiplication in mathematics but we did not know anything. They read in Grade 1 but we were not able to. They can read Tigrigna and English.

One woman from Zeytuni compared her children – one who directly entered Grade 1 and is now in Grade 4, and the second who attended O-class and is in Grade 1:

My son, who is in Grade 4 currently, attended the O-class. It was four or five years ago. And, I have a son who is currently in Grade 1 who did not attend O-class. My child who attended O-class before entering Grade 1 was able to know about *Ha Hu* [Amharic alphabets], ABCD, making lines and shapes before he started Grade 1. But, my second child knew none of these before attending Grade 1. He does not [even] know about alphabets so far. He does not know how to write letters and numbers.

In Leki, the school was established in 2013 and initially teachers from the primary school were used for the O-class. The following year a male facilitator was assigned from the *woreda* and according to the school director, the current female facilitator has taught O-class students since last year. However, fathers mentioned that the O-class did not run the previous year because there was no facilitator, and that the current facilitator started teaching this year. In the previous year there were school meals for the children and many children attended O-class. However, this year attendance is very low because the meals were stopped.

In the site in Amhara, *woreda*-level interviews with experts revealed that the child-to-child programme was started the previous year. However, it was paused due to a lack of coordination between the *woreda*, *kebele*, and the schools, and because there were no incentives given to the facilitators, who were Grade 5 or 6 students and were not paid. The experts were concerned that similar might happen to O-classes, especially those in rural areas, given the decline of the number of children attending O-classes.

In one of the O-classes in Tach Meret, the previous teacher used to collect children from their homes and return them after the class. However, as the current teacher does not do this, most mothers are not sending their children to the O-class.

## 4.4 Parents' and other key community stakeholders' views on O-class services

### 4.4.1 Positive aspects of O-class

Community members and stakeholders from all the study sites shared common views on the positive contribution of O-class in helping children get ready for Grade 1. These included helping children to be ready academically by teaching numbers, local and English language letters; and making children familiar with the school's physical and social environment. According to the study participants, children show improvements in getting along and playing with other children, and how to communicate with their teachers; in this way children develop self-confidence. O-class also enables children to gain the confidence to ask questions and participate in answering questions, and reduces confusion that children encounter if they directly enter Grade 1. A father from Tigray shared the experience of his daughter in O-class:

Currently, I have a daughter in the O-class and who is 6 years old. She knows *Ha Hu*, ABCD, numbers and shapes like circles, straight lines, and triangles. She also knows how to write letters and how to write her name in Tigrigna [the local language]. However, my older son who is Grade 5 now, didn't know all these even in Grade 2. There are also other children who entered directly at Grade 1. These children do not know how to handle a pen and they feel troubled even to identify their classroom. But those children who entered O-class before Grade 1 are active in everything. They know all the school rules and the behaviour of teachers and children before they enter Grade 1. This is the difference.

The O-class teacher from the Amhara site mentioned that O-class helps increase the enrolment rate of the primary school, as children are more likely to enter Grade 1 after pre-primary education. Mothers in Tigray mentioned the lesson given by O-class teachers on hygiene, which included to eat food after washing their hands, to wear neat clothes and to wash their hair, as a positive aspect of O-class. They added that O-class is a benefit for parents because it allows them free time to do work while their children stay in school. The O-class school is close by and children do not get bored or tired travelling to it.

The amount of time which children spend in school each day is a positive aspect, according to community members from Tigray. They said that it would have been better for the children if they could stay longer at school, but the half day is better for parents because children can support the family in the remaining time. Boys contribute to family labour by herding and girls contribute by helping to make coffee and cleaning the house.

Mothers from one of the communities in Amhara with better school facilities mentioned the presence of play materials and sleeping space for when the children get tired as positive aspects. They added that the teachers look after the children just like they are their own. These mothers also said that attending O-class prevents children from going to dangerous areas.

Parents in the Tigray site mentioned the concrete floor of the classroom and the fact that O-class students sit on mats as positive aspects. They added that the class environment is safe, clean and there is nothing for the children to be afraid of. The O-class teachers also take good care of the children, soothe children when they cry, deal with children who beat other students, and prevent children from fighting.

#### 4.4.2 Challenges facing O-class

School directors and O-class teachers from all the communities mentioned that O-class aims to make children ready for Grade 1, make friends, become familiar with the school environment, and get knowledge. They suggested that while O-class is achieving some of its objectives, the results are well below the targets. This is because of numerous implementation challenges.

##### **Classroom and school facilities**

There were visible problems in all the O-classes in the study sites. Teachers from Tigray mentioned the O-class classroom is also used to store iron bars and other materials and this makes the room uncomfortable for children. School directors in Tigray mentioned that there is one classroom, but two facilitators and two groups of O-class students. Children use the classroom in shifts; one group of children attend lessons in class and another group have lessons under a tree within the school compound on one day, and then they switch the next day. This makes children resent the O-class and some do not come to O-class the day after learning outside. The school director also said that there are no chairs for O-class children to sit on, and according to him children should not sit on mats.

In Oromia, even though three classrooms had been constructed for O-class teaching purposes, only one class was assigned to the O-class. The school director said that the classroom was too small for the number of children attending O-class. Currently 40-50 children attend the O-class, but the classroom is only large enough for 20-25 children. He added that one of the challenges is the separation of the O-class from the primary school which creates management problems, since the primary school director cannot properly control the activities of the O-class.

Participants from across the three sites mentioned the shortage or absence of tap water in schools as a challenge for O-class teaching in the communities. In Tigray, children fetch water at the communal water point located outside of the school. Children also take water from their home to school in plastic bottles and go to the small river to refill their bottles, but those who guard the water point beat the children. In the Amhara site, two schools have water, but there is no continuous availability in one of the schools and there is no water at all in another school. The school in Oromia does not have access to potable water.

There were no sleeping areas in any of the O-classes except for one of the schools, no dining rooms, and also no age-appropriate toilets for O-class children. Teachers from all the sites mentioned a lack of teaching aids. School directors and teachers also concurred with the problems mentioned by communities and stakeholders. In one of the communities in Tach Meret which is adjacent to the main road, there have been several traffic incidents, in which four children had died. In another community in the Amhara site which is far from the school, parents refuse to send their children to O-class.

The absence of indoor games was mentioned by participants from across all the study communities. The absence of outdoor games was also noted in all communities, except for one of the schools in Amhara. Participants stated that the lack of indoor and outdoor games negatively impacted the O-class teaching and learning process. For example, respondents in Tigray mentioned that lack of indoor and outdoor games leads children to get bored and to come home earlier. Participants stated that this made the O-class teachers' job difficult. A school director in Tigray said:

Most of the children want to go home at 10 am because there are no games and they feel hungry. The O-class is not comfortable for the children because it is not originally prepared for the children. The school's equipment, such as doors and construction steel, is stored in the classrooms. This makes the classroom uncomfortable for the children. In addition, the classroom is not neat, and does not have necessary materials like mats and chairs for the children. There are no indoor and outdoor games ... That is why we give permission to them to go to their home whenever they feel bored and hungry.

School directors from the Oromia site noted the lack of textbooks and other teaching materials in the O-class. They said that the O-class teacher in their school teaches from memory.

### **School feeding**

Many participants mentioned the lack of a school feeding programme as undermining the effectiveness of O-classes. In the Amhara site the lack of a school feeding programme means that the children get hungry early so the teacher is forced to send them home at 10 am. In the Oromia site, there was a school feeding programme in the previous year, but this was stopped, and school dropout increased. In the Tigray site school feeding was mentioned in relation to budgeting. According to respondents, O-class students were not included in the budgeting for the school feeding programme that was active in the primary school during a time of drought. There was school feeding for students in Grades 1-5 but no budget allocated for O-class students. The school management allowed the O-class students to eat alongside the other children in the school. However, when the remaining food was shared at the end of the academic year, only students in Grades 1-5 were allowed a share. Community members from Tigray said that some children were interested in eating the porridge prepared in the school feeding programme, while others were not interested.

### **Community attitudes**

Community awareness of the importance of O-classes is also constraining O-classes. For example, one school director in Tach Meret said that:

... parents believe that their children might be victims of evil eye if they go to school at this age  
... there are some parents who even think that some teachers in the school are evil eyed...

### **Overall O-class management**

Study participants from across the communities mentioned issues with the overall management of O-class. Most of the O-classes in all communities, except for the one in Tigray, are multi-grade. According to the vice director of the school in the Oromia site, the O-class is multi-grade, and children aged 4-6 learn in one classroom taught by the same teacher. They learn the same material and hence the teaching is not age appropriate. The intention is to keep children in O-class for three years. There are even cases in which teachers find 3-year-old children in the O-class alongside overage children who are 8 or 9 years old. Children also go to school from ages 4 to 6 in the Amhara site and this creates difficulties for teachers in handling students who have various learning capacities. The principal of one school said that children of different ages should not learn in the same classroom and have a single facilitator.

Many participants from all the study sites said that the amount of time children stay in O-class each day is very short. They linked this to the lack of school feeding and indoor and outdoor

games. Participants from the Oromia site also related this to a lack of motivation by the teacher who is poorly paid. Mothers from one of the communities in Amhara mentioned the class starting time, 8 am, as a constraint. They said it was not good time to take their children to school because they are busy with domestic chores. There used to be a teacher who would take their children to school and return them after class, but he stopped doing this.

A father from Tigray mentioned the practice of corporal punishment by teachers as a negative aspect of O-class in their community. He stated:

What is not good about the O-class is that the teachers beat the children. For instance, I went to the school twice because my child told me that the teacher had beaten her. This is not good for children. They should be advised instead of [using] corporal punishment.

Participants from the Oromia site said that the school director from the primary school does not follow up on the education of younger children in O-class. Management of the O-class is lax compared to the primary school. For example, there is no replacement when the O-class teacher is absent. Teachers from Tigray also mentioned that the school director and the *woreda* did not pay enough attention to the O-class.

#### **Teachers' qualification and remuneration**

Teachers and school directors from across the sites mentioned issues with teachers' training and remuneration, including a gap in the qualifications of O-class teachers. The majority of O-class teachers in the study areas did not have the relevant training. However, some teachers have obtained training in O-class teaching and others are getting on-the-job training, during the long school break in the rainy season. Teachers who got pre-primary school training mentioned that they found it helpful.

The terms of employment and low salary were also mentioned as challenges by many O-class teachers across the three study sites. The low salary rate for O-class teachers resulted in lower motivation in these teachers. This situation was worsened by the difference in salary based on whether the employment was categorised as temporary or permanent. This unequal pay and unequal terms of employment negatively affected the motivation of teachers in the study sites, and was indicated to have some impact on the quality of teaching delivered.

### **4.4.3 Suggestions to improve O-classes**

Communities and stakeholders provided recommendations for the overall improvement of O-class service provision in the following major areas.

#### **Classrooms and school facilities**

Suggestions for improvements on classroom and school facilities included increasing classroom sizes, improving ventilation, and adding classes for various purposes.

Kindergartens in nearby urban centres influenced communities' demands in terms of the quality of pre-primary schools. Communities were impressed by the outdoor games which entertain and engage children during their stay in school. In addition, some community members said that they prefer urban kindergartens because even children aged 3 years old could go to them. School directors and O-class teachers looked at the standards set by Ministry of Education and indicated that there are many aspects of O-class which need to be addressed to reach these standard.



Additional rooms for dining and sleeping were recommended in the site in Oromia, as well as age-appropriate facilities for toilets and water points. The *kebele* cabinet in Amhara recommended opening satellite schools in the community since many children face problems crossing busy roads to go to the O-class. The cabinet is ready to support building classrooms for these O-classes. Similarly, a school director in Amhara suggested the need for satellite schools to be built in order to increase the attendance of children at O-class.

### **School feeding**

The absence or interruption of school feeding was raised as an issue. Respondents from Amhara suggested that tea and bread should be provided in schools for O-class students. Community members from Oromia also suggested that school feeding should be resumed because it can play a pivotal role in reducing absenteeism among O-class children. They added that school feeding also helps to increase the length of time that O-class students stay in school during the day.

A health extension worker from the Amhara site outlined the community effort to assist school feeding:

At this early stage, children cannot stay longer at schools without having food and drinks. Thus, a feeding programme should be available at these schools. I remember that a year ago we [nutrition committee] were thinking about collecting *teff* and potatoes from the community and starting the programme, but most of the committee members left their job and the current committee is new.

### **Teacher training and remuneration**

School directors and O-class teachers recommended formal training and refresher courses for O-class teachers on pre-primary education. Study participants suggested that training should be continuous in order to properly build the capacity of O-class teachers and increase their motivation and responsibility. Community participants also recommended developing and implementing a special curriculum for pre-primary schools, as well as follow up and supervision. The example of the facilitator in one of the O-classes in Amhara is a good case in point. She received training and was able to prepare different materials for the children to play and learn with.

### **Overall O-class management and resource mobilisation**

A school director from Oromia, where the primary school and O-class are located in different places said that O-class should be located inside the primary school in order to improve the management. However, another respondent from the same site said that O-classes should not be attached to primary schools because the support from the primary school administration is minimal so far, and younger children learn bad behaviour from older primary level students.

Creating strong collaboration with parents and community members was recommended in order to improve O-class facilities. It was also suggested that improvements in the O-class service provision can help minimise high absenteeism and dropout because children and parents may be attracted to the O-class.

It was suggested that involving NGOs and government bodies could be an important way to tackle the gaps which are seen in O-class service provision. In addition, development

organisations and private investors in communities could support the O-class financially and materially. The primary school, *woreda* education office, and community (local administration) could together organise and mobilise resources from private investors to improve the quality of O-class facilities. Participants from Tach Meret added that harnessing churches' financial power and working closely with them helps to improve pre-primary schools.

### **Reaching children with disabilities**

The school director in the Tigray site stated that children with disabilities used to go to the O-class but they were getting bored because there were no play materials. Those with mobility disabilities also cannot go to school because of the distance and topography. He added that awareness-creating activities around disability are needed for students in the school before deciding to enrol children with disabilities in the O-class. There should also be enough resources such as indoor and outdoor games so that children with disabilities enjoy their time at school. He elaborated that:

The school should hire a special needs teacher who could [work with] the children with disabilities in a comprehensive way before their enrolment in the school. This will help to make them stay in the school happily without being demoralised.

A school director in Amhara argued that they were unable to accept children with disabilities:

Our O-class is not suitable even for able students. We do not have any facilities for our current students. Truly speaking we are not ready to accept these children because the *woreda* has no plan to support the O-class. We are always asking for, at least, books but there is no response at all.

A school director from another community in Amhara said that his school doesn't register children with disabilities because there is no material or qualified staff to address the needs of students with disabilities. He said they transfer such children to a school in the nearest town, which is for students from Grades 1-8 and is well equipped for students who need special treatment. He said the school where he works tries to create awareness and advise parents to send their children to school, but some of them refuse.

### **Increasing community awareness**

An awareness gap about the need to send children to O-class was mentioned by community members from all the sites, which was said to be the main reason why communities do not send their children to O-class. Community members and stakeholders recommended undertaking wide awareness-creation sessions and campaigns to increase the community's understanding of the benefits of sending children to O-class.

Community members from Amhara recommended conducting an education conference during the summer at which concerned bodies, such as the *kebele* cabinet, *woreda* cabinet, teachers, coffee groups, community leaders, parents, NGOs and cluster supervisors, can discuss the major challenges and draw up remedial measures.

## 5. Policy implications and recommendations

Recent decades have provided global evidence about the positive benefits of pre-primary education in the education and life outcomes of children. Although the option of three years of kindergarten is seen to be the better one, providing these services to all children in a country such as Ethiopia is difficult in the short run, due to budgetary and infrastructure issues. The 'leave no one behind' agenda of the SDGs call for equity, which necessitates tackling the inequalities that affect children, starting from their early years. To bridge this gap, the government of Ethiopia has taken the initiative by providing various pre-primary education options, which have greatly increased access in the last decade.

This study was conducted in O-classes found in three rural communities in three major regions in Ethiopia, and aimed to assess the pre-primary education service provision in these areas. The study involved stakeholders in various tiers of local administration, from the *woreda* to the *kebele*, parents and caregivers, and children who were in Grades 7 and 8.

The study findings show that the learning outcomes of children who attended O-classes are far better than those who did not have this opportunity. This was evident in both the language and numeracy proficiency of the children, and their exposure to the school environment which became useful when they start formal primary education in Grade 1. However, despite the benefits of these pre-primary schools for children, the services provided have severe shortcomings in terms of a lack of appropriate classrooms, equipment, and play materials (both indoors and outdoors). There is also the absence or irregularity of support such as school feeding, which adversely affects school attendance. Lack of well-trained and motivated facilitators or teachers was another challenge to delivering quality education. Most of the facilitators and teachers in the area did not have the formal training, and are not included in the civil service salary scale, which is demotivating to them. Due to this even in schools within the same *kebele* discrepancies exist in the quality of O-class service provision. Moreover, in some communities the services have been recently started or improved, and in others the O-class has been stopped.

The findings indicate similar understandings among community members and key actors on pre-primary education at different levels. These are reflected in the needs of children in early childhood. Health and nutrition, mainly vaccinations, exclusive breast feeding for six months, pre-primary education, and protection were seen as priority needs for children in early childhood. The government is making efforts to provide pre-primary education, and the communities also showed interest in pre-primary provision. O-class enrolment varies from 3-9 years old, even though the government has set 6 years as the age for enrolment. This is because different communities use a combination of factors, including age, physical and mental development, in order to decide the appropriate age to send children to O-class.

Communities want to send their children to O-classes with better facilities and services, in many cases comparing the O-class unfavourably with pre-primary facilities they have observed in the nearest towns. Parents and other community members also indicated their willingness to support the pre-primary school programme in cash, materials and labour. O-

class facilitators, school directors, and *woreda* officials emphasised the need to improve the O-class service provision in line with the standards set by the Ministry of Education. Study participants recommended ways to improve and solve the issues that exist in the O-class provision.

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Resource mobilisation at community level needs to be part of O-class management because there is a potential among communities to contribute in kind, cash and labour. It is therefore important to create a system to organise communities and efficiently use resources to improve O-class.
- There should be strong monitoring and evaluation system for the O-class programme across the regions.
- Expanding training and materials on special needs education is important to make O-class accessible for all children.
- Strengthening the collaboration of government sectors working on early childhood care and education is important as ECCE needs wider understanding of children's health, protection and social welfare.
- There is a need to improve O-class classrooms to make them suitable for the young children to attend. The classrooms need to be well ventilated, and there is a need to have several classrooms to satisfy the number of 4-6-year-old children who attend O-class. Classrooms also need a special area and mattresses for children to rest and sleep.
- The provision of equipment needs to be improved. Children attending O-class need to have chairs and tables which are appropriate for their age. Better provision of indoor learning and play materials are also required to help the learning process and initiate students for further learning. Visual aids that help the students learn and assist the teachers should be placed on walls, with the additional benefit of making the classroom attractive.

As far as possible, compounds need to be fenced to protect children from bullying and attacks from older children attending the primary schools. They also need their own age-appropriate toilets, prepared according to the standards set out by the Ministry of Education. The compounds should have outdoor play materials that are age appropriate, and spaces for children to run and play with their peers.

Even though addressing all these needs rapidly may be difficult, if O-classes are to provide efficient and equitable services geared towards bridging inequality in students' future outcomes, these concerns require consideration.

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# The Disparity Between Intention and Reality: The Pre-Primary O-Class Context in Three Rural Young Lives Communities in Ethiopia

Although the 1994 Education Policy highlighted the importance of kindergarten education, early childhood education was restricted to urban areas. The National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Framework in 2010, led to greater emphasis and commitment which has improved access to pre-primary education especially in rural areas, notably through the provision of a one-year preparatory O-Class. However, inequalities and disparities in access persist. Based on data collected in three Young Lives communities this working paper reviews the recent local context of pre-primary education.

This study found that community members and service providers are well aware of the benefits of pre-primary school. However, though access to pre-primary school has improved in recent years, there are still serious limitations especially regarding lack of teaching aids, suitable classroom infrastructure and play equipment and materials. In most of the schools in the study communities, there were shortages of trained facilitators, who were not motivated due to lack of attractive salaries and benefits. The paper therefore recommends promoting improvements regarding teaching aids, classrooms, play materials, and the skills and motivation of facilitators. Moreover, there is a need for better monitoring and evaluation so that local priorities and needs are identified and addressed.



## About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty and transitions to adulthood, following the lives of 12,000 children in four countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam). Young Lives is a collaborative research programme led by a team in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford in association with research and policy partners in the four study countries.

Through researching different aspects of children's lives across time, we seek to improve policies and programmes for children and young people.

## Young Lives Research and Policy Partners

### Ethiopia

- *Policy Studies Institute*
- *Pankhurst Development Research and Consulting plc*

### India (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana)

- *Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad (CESS)*
- *Sri Padmavati Mahila Visvavidyalam (Women's University), Tirupati (SPMVV)*

### Peru

- *Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE)*
- *Instituto de Investigación Nutricional (IIN)*

### Vietnam

- *Centre for Analysis and Forecast, Viet Nam Academy of Social Sciences (CAF-VASS)*
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