

ECDE provisions strongly featured in newly developed SADC Children's Protocol

Following a review of international and the regional conventions at SADC level, it became apparent that the right to education or early childhood learning in the commitments of respective countries was weak and not in practice. The development of the SADC Children Protocol, a key requisite for addressing these challenges, had stalled for 21 years owing to lack of funds and a unified team to push for it.

However, within a year, TRANAC's strategic partnerships and funding has seen the draft protocol developed, finalised to a point where it is ready for consideration by SADC Council of Ministers and Heads of States. This finalised protocol now has strong sections highlighting the need for early childhood education and other components around inclusion of people with disabilities, nutrition, health, gender among others also integrated in the protocol.

Furthermore, increasingly issues of ECD are now being discussed and embedded in development policy across the region thanks to the influence brought by the TRANAC project. A stakeholder noted: *"That is critical for me because when the protocol comes through the SADC Level, it becomes a law that is then adopted by all countries.* In addition, these processes have ensured fast tracking of the ECD framework, with a standardised framework across the SADC countries.

The TRANAC project indicator performance tracking table of 2022 shows a good percentage between (63-100) in terms of being on track in achieving its objective 2, which is to engage national and transnational advocacy to influence development of comprehensive and inclusive ECDE policies, and legislation and systems by governments Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Malawi and other Southern African Countries by December 2023.

To achieve this success, TRANAC project team worked with a consortium of implementing partners. Specifically, TRANAC partnered with Child Rights Network of Southern Africa (CRNSA). CRNSA, which is based in South Africa and operates in 11 SADC countries, also hosts the secretariat for the CSOs that implement the African Charter on the rights and welfare of the child across Africa. The other key players behind this endeavour included the Zimbabwe Early Childhood Education Actors (ZINECDA), National Early childhood Education Lesotho (NECDOL), and the Early childhood Development Coalition Malawi (ECDC Malawi). The other partners were ECD networks from SADC countries namely, Eswatini, Mozambique, Zambia, and SADC Secretariat. Furthermore, after realizing that there was a draft Inclusive ECDE policy framework, which was developed by Southern Africa Federation for the Disabled (SAFOD), TRANAC engagements established consensus on

broadening ECDE to be holistic and thus a draft framework has also been developed.

The process to develop the SADC Children Protocol commenced in October 2001 but it wasn't until 2022 that the final draft was produced with support of TRANAC.

Initially, the delay to finalise the protocol was partly caused by lack of funds and impetus to transform from youth focus to including children. The broadening of buy-in of the protocol from CSO membership to country wide, inclusive of government was also limited as a base to influence the SADC region's heads of states. This changed once the TRANAC project brought on board the requisite funds, and cost-shared the validation of the second draft of the protocol, and fully financing the editing and finalisation. Further, TRANAC's advocacy prowess and engaging the CRNSA secretariat, board members and national chapter representatives has been commended. After the analysis of the initial stages of the protocol, Articles 33 and 37 on ECDE were formulated and added in the draft Protocol. These articles put emphasis on state party prioritisation of integrated holistic ECD, ensuring that legislation, policies, and guidelines are embedded into whole-of-government, inter-ministerial and multi-sectoral approaches to ECCE planning and budgeting, and increasing resource funding among others. Subsequently, the support from TRANAC through NECDOL, ZINECDA and ECDE Malawi led to the development and validation of the second draft and finalisation of the protocol.

TRANAC has since lobbied to have the draft holistic and Inclusive ECDE policy framework to be submitted together with the protocol for SADC at the Ministers Conference and Heads of Government Summit scheduled for 2023 in DRC. These two processes were the basis of organising a civil society side event, the Education Ministers' Conference in Malawi where a position paper was developed and submitted to the Ministers. In order to disseminate the protocol, get endorsement by SADC countries, mobilisation efforts are underway with key stakeholders to support the adoption.

Going forward, the next steps will be finalising the Protocol by the end of March 2023, then TRANAC implementing partners and stakeholders will embark on mobilisation of member states to support the endorsement of the protocol by the SADC forum. In terms of advocating for signing of the Protocol by SADC countries, initial meetings with key strategic partners in the SADC region have been held to build a business case with emphasis on the significance of the protocol. In addition, a social media campaign to sensitise other organisations on why the protocol is also underway.

The development of the Children's protocol has been enabled by the cooperation between TRANAC implementing partners and other partners that joined efforts to ensure that the ECDE sections are strongly featured.

One of the TRANAC project stakeholders interviewed noted that: "The strong and strategic approach of working together devised by TRANAC has been very instrumental in increasing a strong and enhanced ECDE framework into the Children Protocol".

Another stakeholder also observed: "We would still be stuck on the first draft of the protocol that has taken us 22 years if not for TRANAC. TRANAC's coming on board was timely and helped us to move forward."

Policy advocacy often takes a long period of time to bear fruit. In some cases, depending on the complexity of the policy being advanced, policy results may take a few years to achieve or actually fail to come to fruition at all.

In conclusion, the whole process of developing a holistic Children's protocol has been timely and all encompassing. Looking at the processes the protocol has undergone, every aspect of children has been enhanced in terms of education, ECDE importance and access, nutrition, health, and inclusion of people with disabilities, among others. Most importantly, it is apparent that the sections for ECDE are strongly highlighted in the holistic children's protocol. The TRANAC project's quick turnaround of the process of the initially delayed protocol reveals the power of teamwork in pursuit of advocacy results.