

## New Information Hub/Portal boosts understanding of ECDE in Southern Africa

Globally, about half of all three to six-year-olds have access to pre-primary education. Comparatively, only 27% of children in sub-Saharan, attend preschool, and only 26% of children in the Middle East and North Africa<sup>1</sup>. Information was required to improve the ECDE situation in Southern Africa. Access to information is prerequisite for improving ECDE understanding and access.

Yet the TRANAC baseline report of 2021 found that absence of information on Early Childhood Development Education is a major hindrance to effective advocacy on ECDE in Southern Africa. The report also indicates that in all the countries sampled, there was no specific information gathered on ECDE. Stakeholders were only using information gathered for primary education by ministries of education and other information system platforms.

Apart from this, information sharing at national level was weak, and there was no information hub in the target countries and at regional level. A key respondent said: *“The absence of data on ECDE was a huge challenge since there were neither national level information sharing hubs nor a regional information hub”*.

Worse still, at the beginning of the project, out of the five coalitions under the TRANAC consortium, four coalitions indicated that they had not successfully advocated for the inclusion of ECDE indicators in reporting management information systems and decision position papers due to lack of valid information on ECDE<sup>2</sup>.

In addition, when available data and usage of ECDE data at national and transnational levels for advocacy were assessed as part of the TRANAC baseline study, it became apparent that coalitions did not have Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEAL) systems in place at national level/institutional level.

Indeed prior to the TRANAC project, all five coalitions depended on MEAL systems of active donor projects and data from ministries of education that actually focused on primary education. The coalitions also indicated that they did not have information sharing systems prior to the TRANAC project. M and E data was inadequate and functional social accountability systems had not yet been established by the coalitions.

In order to improve ECDE access and strengthen the capacity of ECDE national coalitions on areas of internal governance, advocacy and research for them to facilitate the formulation and implementation of ECDE policies and strategies

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<sup>1</sup> TRANAC Advocacy Strategy december 2021

<sup>2</sup> Baseline Evaluation for a Transnational Advocacy Capacity Building Project in Southern Africa (2021)

related to SDG 4.2<sup>3</sup>, the TRANAC project established a virtual/online information hub for the Horn, East and Southern Africa and beyond to produce information on ECDE and provide data to be used in evidence-based advocacy.

As such, TRANAC project implementers devised a bottom-up approach of working with respective country coalitions to conduct research and gather information on the status of ECDE at national level, so as to build a basis for establishing a transnational information hub.

HESA in collaboration with OXFAM IBIS had been planning to create an education wide hub. When TRANAC's idea was submitted to establish a hub for ECDE, OXFAM found it fit to merge the goals and create one portal focussing on education and not just ECDE, and have it run and connected to the ZINECDA website. The Link to the information portal is <https://africaeducationhub.org/>. The hub is also aimed at empowering partners in respective SADC countries and beyond to develop and implement ECDE policies and ensure that these are part of the development agenda.

Different TRANAC implementing team members and partners have noted that establishing the information hub on ECDE has been a process. TRANAC implementing partners first gathered information on the available data on ECDE in the SADC region and more specifically in the respective TRANAC implementing countries<sup>4</sup>, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Lesotho, Zambia, Eswatini and Mozambique.

As a result, TRANAC decided to advocate for Monitoring & Evaluation and research right from national level to regional level. This was intended to create a good base for the development of a strong transnational ECDE information hub to support the advocacy interventions with the help of a consultant.

To ease data collection by all TRANAC partners, Monitoring and Evaluation tools and TRANAC reporting templates have been developed and shared with all partners to collect data and submit to consultants to consolidate, analyse, validate, and upload to the information Hub, which would then be accessible to all countries. It is in this regard that learning platforms were created and utilised to promote ECDE knowledge exchange/ learning at transnational level. Thanks to these efforts, ECDE focused research/policy analysis is now published/disseminated at transnational level.

Dissemination is done in a way that Members of Parliament from respective countries, the SADC Parliamentary Forums as well as country specific coalitions are taken through several induction training and data gathered from respective countries is presented for digestion. Members of Parliament (MPs) in the different

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> ZINECDA Advocacy Report for Transnational Advocacy Capacity Building Project in Southern Africa (TRANAC ) Improving Policy And Legislation Towards ECDE In Southern

relevant portfolios such as education, financing, health are also urged to make commitments to advocate for ECDE enhancement and integration in all education processes and agendas.

The TRANAC project has clearly made great strides in creating a regional online knowledge- information hub. A key stakeholder said: *“TRANAC has acquired a regional advocacy outfit that has facilitated and will continue to facilitate learning and improve capacity by providing information to facilitate evidence-based advocacy and influence policies and actions”*.

Since inception, TRANAC has conducted numerous researches, and studies that have built the evidence needed such as; Budget tracking in Southern Africa, Aid effectiveness for ECD in Southern Africa, Status of SDG 4.2 in Southern Africa, Cost of educating an ECD child, Status of disaster risk and resilient management for ECD, and Status of ECD policy frameworks within Southern Africa.

Several stakeholders, including the Education Coalition of Zimbabwe and officials from Ministry of Education and Ministry of Gender from Malawi and Lesotho revealed that as a result, they have acquired data, which they are using to advocate for ECDE enhancement and on SDG 4.2 and education as a whole in their specific interventions. They also noted that the hub was created in a sustainable way in a sense that any research each country publishes is uploaded, a practice that is likely to continue.

Indeed, looking at the information on the portal and the number of downloads viewed for different key documents that provide basis for ECDE advocacy and resource mobilization, the hub's significance cannot be overstated. It has been noted that insights are showing site visits even from countries beyond Southern Africa, such as United State of America and United Kingdom.

This is evidence that the information hub was timely as it has provided evidence generation to enable policy makers, Parliamentarians and decision makers to advocate for and influence policy legislation, quality education, ECDE financing and resourcing among them.

One of the key respondents noted: *“Data gathered indicates that information that is collected at national level is used at regional level since policies at SADC level have a bearing at national level and at Regional level hence establishing a thread from regional to multiple interdependencies”*. Also the documents reviewed indicated that the focused research published and disseminated at national and transnational levels was at 80 percent, clearly on track and actually towards the target<sup>5</sup>.

As such, it is evident that by establishing this hub, the TRANAC project implementers have successfully met objective 3, which is about improving the availability of ECDE data through research, and monitoring and evaluation, for

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<sup>5</sup> TRANAC Indicator performance Tracking report July - September 2022

use at national and transnational level in advocacy, learning, research and decision making. This is aimed to meet SDG 4.2 and GPE related targets on ECDE in Lesotho, Malawi, Zimbabwe and other Southern African countries by 2023.

To ensure sustainability, stakeholders have recommended that TRANAC lobbies for the information hub to be hosted by the SADC Resource Center for ownership and continuity. One stakeholder who has been instrumental in TRANAC activities from other three countries said:

*“TRANAC should continue to recruit more partners (other SADC countries) to ensure that at the end of TRANAC each SADC country will have earned ownership of the online information hub, hence positioning them to populate and upload materials on the portal from country specific MEALs.”*

The platform also ensures shared standards in terms of ECD implementations across countries, which makes scale and adoption effortless. Besides, success stories shared have also been instrumental, with networks such as Africa Network Campaign on Education for All (ANCEFA) leveraging them for showcasing progress and lobbying.

In conclusion, establishing an information hub was a timely intervention and has filled an information gap that was identified by TRANAC project implementers as seen in the TRANAC baseline report of 2021. The availability of information has empowered TRANAC partners and SADC to advocate for policy changes in ECDE financing, resourcing as well as enhancing the capacity of national coalitions. As a result of information gathered from different SADC countries on the status of ECDE, there has been a change of attitude by government leaders, MPs, policy makers, and implementing partners and they have all embraced the need to advance the ECDE agenda through their oversight and legislative role. A key learning point is that providing information goes a long way in ensuring effective advocacy. Data collected from respective countries shows that after acquiring the requisite information from TRANAC and their peers from different countries, MPs are now able to push issues of ECD separately rather than putting it under education. This has actually created a win-win situation where countries are learning from each other and the science of cross-pollination and replicating best practices in respective countries is evident.