

Monday, 27 May, 2024

## ECRN Fund Annual Meeting Session Report: The Power of Networks

At the 2024 ARNEC regional conference in Penang, Malaysia, representatives from the four regional networks currently supported by the [Early Childhood Regional Networks Fund \(ECRN Fund\)](#), as well as the Latin American network Somos Crianza, were part of a session designed to explore the different kinds of impact generated by regional networks, national networks and their members and partners that advance ECD. The session also explored the challenges and opportunities in communicating impact to both internal and external audiences. A full list of attendees can be found at the end of this report.

The session was designed by the four regional networks and organized around the following learning questions:

- How do different networks define and understand impact?
- How do different networks communicate their impact *internally* to members and partners to share what's working, and *externally* to advance ECD, and support strategic partnerships and sustainability?

### How is impact being defined by local, national and regional networks working to advance ECD?

At the outset of the session, participants were asked to reflect on the past year, and contribute an example of a specific success or impact from their network. They were asked to consider the following three questions as prompts:

1. *How did you know it was successful?*
2. *Was it expected or unexpected?*
3. *What were you able to do as a result?*

Nearly every participant contributed, and taken together, those examples clustered around six areas of impact, with concrete examples of the evidence used by networks to identify their success<sup>1</sup>:

Type of impact achieved	As evidenced by...
National and local policy change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ECD plans approved by ministries</li> <li>• Validation of national 5-year action plan</li> <li>• Inclusion of ECD in national 10-year governmental plans</li> <li>• Increased public investment in ECD</li> </ul>
Increased influence of the network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy-makers turning to the network for technical assistance</li> <li>• Policy development by network members</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> A list of examples contributed by participants can be found at the end of this document.



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Global influence on policies and practice</li><li>● Raised the profile of ECD at local, national and regional levels</li><li>● Increased demand for better ECD</li></ul>
<b>Increased national and local policy-maker capacity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Increased ability to identify gaps and address workforce improvements</li><li>● Increased engagement by policy-makers in ECD</li><li>● Increased ability to map, track and address ECD issues</li></ul>
<b>Increased civil society engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● NGOs and community organizations engaging in initiatives to hold government accountable</li></ul>
<b>Increased the evidence base in the ECD field</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Increased attention to early years workforce well-being and self-care</li><li>● Increased attention to the need to support a more sustainable and better equipped workforce</li><li>● Joint evidence base created across networks</li><li>● Context-sensitive and evidence-based knowledge that can be built on for programmatic and policy change in the region</li></ul>
<b>Increased network capacity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Increased shared ownership and engagement of network members</li><li>● Increased connections to other networks</li><li>● Stronger network mindset and the ability to produce impact through relationships based on close cooperation and trust</li><li>● Ability to activate the network for emerging issues like climate change, war, refugees</li><li>● Increased network members and connections between them to support more effective advocacy</li><li>● Ability to scale up network building approach to increase knowledge production and advocacy</li><li>● Creation of new cross-sector national networks and collaborations</li><li>● Increased peer learning</li></ul>

## What capacities do networks leverage to achieve these impacts?

Participants reflected on what resonated with them about the stories of impact that were discussed, and noted advantages that networks have that help them achieve impact:



### Network advantage

- Placing an intentional emphasis on the elements of trust, integrity, commitment and capacity over time
- Supporting a network mindset so that members and partners are invested in collaborating to advance network goals, are committed to collective and distributed ownership of the work, and agree on shared responsibilities
- Creating a network structure built for perseverance and adaptability over time
- Building strong relationships across sectors, including government, and the ability to partner with, support or pressure government when needed to advance the work

## What communications approaches and strategies are networks using to communicate their impact?

In the second part of the session, attendees reflected on what communications strategies their networks have successfully used to capture and share their impact. While the networks could clearly articulate how they know they are having an impact, it was more difficult for them to articulate ways to effectively communicate that impact. Participants provided examples of a range of strategic communications and public affairs strategies, from direct communications such as producing materials like newsletters and annual reports, and indirect strategies to communicate impact by demonstrating influence and their unique contribution to advancing ECD.

### Direct general communication from the network about the network...

- Newsletters, annual reports and stories of impact published through the network's channels including websites, blogs and social media. These are typically for both internal and external audiences.
- Consistent communication about the focus of the network and its areas of impact in every proposal for funding or support
- Advertising, or buying space on media channels, to increase awareness about the network, its issues and its impact

### Taking a relational approach...

- Pre-communication research to better understand audiences and what they need
- Create targeted communication strategies for different audiences
- Leverage members' networks to increase the overall profile of the network
- Build trust about the network's ability with key stakeholders
- Use word of mouth networks when other channels are not effective or available

### Sharing the network's "bird's eye view" as a powerful and unique asset...



- Networks, often through their members and through their partnerships, have a view on the issues facing their region, country, or local environments, as well as the spectrum of solutions to address those issues, that others do not have. When networks share that view, which is informed by work on the ground, it builds their own credibility as messengers, and presents a completely new way of looking at things in a systemic way that can be very powerful.

#### Translating members' work and perspectives into context-specific data and evidence...

- Networks have a reach into communities on the ground that many other organizations, including global organizations struggle to have. By generating and sharing evidence rooted in local, national and regional contexts, networks demonstrate a unique capacity and value
- Simplify the language used to talk about the work and its impact for greater reach, especially at the community/grassroots level

#### Cultivating ambassadors...

- High profile members from government or politics can help make the case for the effectiveness of the network as a core partner, and raise the visibility of priority issues

#### Creating an echo-chamber...

- Using multiple channels and messengers to increase overall visibility and influence of the network, and to show that the network is an ever-present for accountability, and so that decision makers feel pressure from various places all broadcasting a consistent message
- Building the capacity of community members to carry network messaging through public feedback and pressure
- Collaborating with others on communications strategies to show extended reach and influence

## Challenges and opportunities

At the end of the session attendees were asked what challenges they faced. For each challenge mentioned, the other participants were asked how that challenge could be addressed.



<p>Low social media and other media engagement by communication targets; Communicating new ideas</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverage personal networks and word of mouth</li> <li>• Mobile messaging using existing community infrastructure</li> </ul>
<p>Communicating to multiple audiences that require targeted messaging</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broad communications initiatives and campaigns that can accommodate multiple perspectives in a “big tent” approach</li> <li>• Audience research on the best messengers for different audiences</li> </ul>
<p>Lack of strategic communications capacity, including staff and costs related to communication strategies and materials, including translation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider, should the network:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Recruit that capacity?</li> <li>◦ Partner for that capacity?</li> <li>◦ Build internal capacity?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>Members with different or competing agendas</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address competing interests or priorities in governance and onboarding documents, for example, specify non-compete clauses, and have a transparent process for setting network priorities</li> </ul>

## Looking ahead

In addition to direct support for the regional networks, the ECRN Fund supports a process for joint learning for the networks and their members and partners on issues that they prioritize. The following topics emerged from this session as opportunities for future joint learning and knowledge sharing as work at the regional level moves forward:



### Joint learning and knowledge sharing opportunities

- How can networks build their strategic communications capacity?
- How can networks effectively demonstrate the scale of impact networks have in ECD?
- Measuring the effectiveness of different communications strategies



Select examples of impact by RN members and partners noted during the session:

City/Country/Region	What is an example of the impact your network has had?	What were you able to do as a result?
Bhutan	Increased capacity of network leaders in all districts, as well as their key stakeholders; increased public funding for those districts through the Central Finance Ministry	Increase engagement of the networks because of the increase in funding for their work
Gambia	Supported a diagnostic assessment of the early learning workforce with the active engagement of government to identify gaps in data for monitoring	Support the government's next step to address data gaps and move into policy engagement
Indonesia	Cultivated a strong network mindset and shared accountability among cross-sector network members at the national level in order to support the government as a "think tank" on ECD issues	Expand network relationships vertically to elevate their work to the regional and global levels, and learn from other work being done at those levels.
Malawi	Achieved a national 10-year plan that includes ECD and advocated for implementation.	Continue to engage the government and advance their policies in support of quality ECD. The ministry that oversees ECD became more engaged and the government is moving toward implementing pre-primary education for all children.
Nepal	Developed a national, integrated, multi-sectoral strategy for ECD; successfully advocated for the implementation of that strategy in five out of seven provinces	Scale that model to successfully advocate for implementation and increased ECD commitment public financing at the local level.
Slovakia	The train-the-trainer network that was created as a peer learning activity on Play Hubs was successfully activated to respond to the crisis of an influx of Ukrainian refugee children into member countries. Opened 10 play hubs for Ukrainian refugees and parents that served 16,000 children 0-8.	Scale the model throughout the network by opening more than 50 Play Hubs in 10 countries; expanding advocacy for the model at the local level; and presenting the model to influential stakeholders like the European Parliament and the European Commission. A Quality Framework for this type of non-formal provisions was also created.
Tunisia	Established a cross-sector network within a tense national political context, which provides a mechanism for exploring and advancing ECD issues	Advocate for the government to put an ECD plan in place to explore curriculums at the intersection of ECD, adaptation and resilience in the face of climate change



## Examples of impact by RNs noted during the session

City/Country/Region	What is an example of the impact your network has had?	What were you able to do as a result?
AfECN	As a result of peer learning at the 2018 conference: Inclusion of ECD indicator in national monitoring system in Ethiopia, creation of two new national networks	Advocate for more conferences to engage the ECD field
ANECD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Established networks working to advance ECD that include organizations, ministries and national-level partners.</li> <li>Designed a replicable process that is adaptable to different contexts, which was then applied to six countries.</li> <li>Established a regional research committee (i.e. the Arab Working Group for Research in Early Childhood).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The new national networks were able to implement programs and initiatives independently outside of ANECD because of their increased capacity.</li> <li>As a result of the regional committee, a new multidisciplinary knowledge-production entity from different countries exists that contributes to mapping the ECD research work in the region, identifying gaps and needs, and conducting responsive research work.</li> </ul>
ISSA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Created a Train the Trainer program on Psychological First Aid (PFA) and Trauma Informed Approaches. More than 200 Master Trainers were trained in 20 countries. An important part of this program is the wellbeing of the workforce itself.</li> <li>Through Primokiz, local governments in eight municipalities in Hungary analyzed their local early childhood systems and ECD cross-sectoral strategies addressing local priorities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The program has been translated into nine languages and as a result tens of thousands of practitioners working with refugees have been equipped with new knowledge and skills. It was also integrated into the accredited in-service training and pre-service training of early years professionals in countries.</li> <li>Grow the ISSA network's community of Primokiz licensed implementers (six countries – 42 municipalities) to make a compelling case for strengthening the capacity of local governments to create competent ECD local systems</li> </ul>
ARNEC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elevated the need to put young children at the center of COVID-19 response at the height of the pandemic by working on an ECD and COVID-19 response strategy based on a baseline that was undertaken by ARNEC with the countries, right after the WHO declared COVID-19 as a pandemic. Initiated baseline research about the state of ECD and ECD partners at the community, local, and country levels at the start of the global lockdowns in April 2020 to inform our COVID-19 strategy and pivot quickly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The response strategy and baseline research findings were used to guide the network in adapting an approach that responded to the needs of the regional ECD community due to the pandemic. It enabled ARNEC to pivot quickly and organize activities such as a webinar series (400-1000 participants within and beyond the region) that showcased how countries adapted their ECD programs in the context of COVID to respond to the learning needs of young children. ARNEC then generated knowledge products with insights from the</li> </ul>



	to respond to needs of the ECD community in the region.	webinars, including a Strategy Brief for Policy Makers on managing public health emergencies and other crisis with an ECD lens and entry point.
Somos Crianza	Increased participating network from four countries to seven countries, and successfully connected to academia and the United Nations to advocate for national commitments to commemorate the 35 <sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Children's Rights Convention.	Elevate the voices of civil society organizations to continue to hold governments accountable to children after a period of a lack of accountability.

### Session attendees:

NAME	ORGANIZATION/AFFILIATION
Lynette Okengo	African Early Childhood Network (AfECN)
Given Daka	African Early Childhood Network (AfECN)
Joylet Gende	Malawi National ECD Network
Ghassan Issa	Arab Network for Early Childhood Development (ANECD)
Mohamad Albekaai	Arab Network for Early Childhood Development (ANECD)
Beya Guezzi	Tunisian Network for Early Childhood
Joel Lasam	Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC)
Evelyn Santiago	Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC)
Jiahao Lee	Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC)
Cliff Meyers	ARNEC, Board of Directors
Sheldon Shaeffer	ARNEC, Board of Directors
Karma Gayleg	Bhutan National ECD Networks
Newelle Magas	ECCD Council, Philippines
Himigbayan Santiago	ECCD Council, Philippines
Mega Indrawati	HI-ECD Coalition, Indonesia
Dwi Purwestri	HI-ECD Coalition, Indonesia





Mahmuda Akhter	Bangladesh ECD Network
Nicole Rodger	Plan International
Syifa Andina	Plan International, HI-ECD, ARNEC National Rep for Indonesia
Jayanti Prakash	Sesame Workshop, India
Liana Ghent	International Step-by-Step Association (ISSA)
Zorica Trkic	International Step-by-Step Association (ISSA)
Miroslav Sklenka	Wide Open School NGO, ISSA Member in Slovakia
Giulia Barnhinsel	Early Childhood Regional Networks Fund
Rosemary Heenan	Early Childhood Regional Networks Fund
Carolina Turriago	Somos Crianza: ECD coalition in Latin America
Jane West	Two Lilies Fund
Joan Lombardi	Independent
Amanda Welsh	Network Impact
Alan Barbieri	The Human Safety Net
Hui Fang	UBS Optimus Foundation (TBC)

### About the ECRN Fund

The Early Childhood Regional Networks Fund (ECRN Fund) is a philanthropic initiative that supports strong, resilient and representative networks to advance early childhood development. The ECRN Fund currently supports and uplifts the work of four regional early childhood networks, spanning over 100 countries:



**Arab Network for Early Childhood (ANECD)** – Established in 2014 and hosted by the Arab Resource Collective (ARC), the Arab Network for Early Childhood (ANECD) is a participatory and collaborative network of local, regional, and international organizations, governments, experts, and academics in Arab countries.



**Africa Early Childhood Network (AfECN)** – The African Early Childhood Network (AfECN) is a registered non-profit, established in 2015 to serve as a platform to champion excellence and collaboration in protecting children's rights, influence policy and practice, strengthen partnerships, and share experiences and knowledge in ECD on the African continent.



Early Childhood  
Regional Networks  
Fund



**ARNEC**  
Asia-Pacific Regional Network  
for Early Childhood

**Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC)** – Established in February 2008, the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC) builds strong partnerships across sectors and different disciplines, organisations, and institutions in the Asia-Pacific region to advance the agenda on and investment in early childhood.



INTERNATIONAL  
**STEP by STEP**  
ASSOCIATION

**International Step by Step Association (ISSA)** – Established in 1999, the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) facilitates learning and collaboration across sectors, disciplines and borders in Europe and Central Asia, to advocate for and support competent Early Childhood Systems.

### About Network Impact



This session was facilitated by Network Impact, who also prepared this report. For more than a decade, Network Impact has been a field leader in network strategy and evaluation. They support networks and their members and partners, funders, and the emerging field of network builders who are building networks for social impact by providing consulting, tool-building, and research services. Learn more at: <https://www.networkimpact.org/>