



Institute of Policy Analysis  
and Research - Rwanda



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# **EARLY DEVELOPMENT CENTRES:**

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**What rural Rwandan  
mothers would find most  
useful**

**October, 2023**

## INTRODUCTION: WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AND CHILDCARE POLICY

1. Empowering women by getting them into the workforce is part of Rwanda's social policy but is also essential for its economic growth and poverty reduction plans. Women's productive employment boosts GDP and supports households' incomes, thereby lifting families out of poverty. At the same time, having an income of their own gives mothers more influence and bargaining power within the family, a lever to counteract customary norms and patriarchal control. Even with such a change, however, a major practical problem remains – what to do with the children. The favoured policy in recent years has been institutional childcare – nursery school for children who attain the age of four. Policy for the years before the age of four are still being developed, but Rwanda recognises and accepts the evidence published in the Lancet over recent decades that variety in the diet when solids are introduced alongside breastfeeding is crucial for avoiding irreversible developmental delay and that a safe but stimulating environment is essential for the development of cognitive and social skills. Policies for children, women, and poverty reduction come together in Rwanda's plans for children's right to early social and educational stimulation, the provision of which reduces women's unpaid burden of care and frees them to take their place in the productive labour force. However, the current policy for children younger than four tends to assume that individual mothers will take responsibility for children's early socio- cognitive development, supported by early development centres (EDCs), which they can attend with their children.
2. Something has to change if women are to become free to be integrated into the labour market. At present, they can use childminders (home-based EDCs) - mothers who take in other people's children and earn money by looking after them – or take the children with them to work or the family farm. Mothers see neither of these as a satisfactory solution. As part of a wider research project on the empowerment of rural mothers, IPAR conducted participatory action research workshops in two rural districts, Rwamagana and Gicumbi, for mothers to identify childcare problems and suggest solutions with our help. They told us that very few can afford childcare that would give them time to take a full-time job on equal terms with men or unmarried women. Public provision exists in most cells, but if it is not located in their village, taking the children to it may require an hour in each direction. This does not fit the hours of paid jobs- ... 'We have jobs, and the EDCs begin later than when we need to leave for work. We don't [even] have time to get the child ready - or even with doing their share of cultivating the family plot: you are [supposed to be] working together ... in the same field ... and he has to start ... [long] before you'. They, therefore, keep the children with them. This doesn't work even for little things like washing your hair, let alone taking paid employment or running a small business. What the women want from EDCs is the life they have not known as married women and mothers, where they are free to join the workforce and are empowered to play their part in the community. They also need time for personal care, savings clubs, getting to work, and not being bothered by children while working, and having time to talk to friends. They are also receptive to the message that a well-

equipped Early Development Centre could be better for the child, offering opportunities not available in the individual home.

“*you cannot even take a shower privately. mine always wants me to breastfeed him while am showering*”

“*Sometimes [at market] you have to stop [the child] destroying other sellers' goods ... [it] keeps disturbing your conversation with a customer.*”

“*I am a tailor, ... my baby does not like being held by other people, cries all the time, I have to sew while holding her on my lap, I have to use one leg and hand. It is very slow!*”

## INADEQUATE SOLUTIONS

3. If no affordable childcare is available, the mother has to stay at home or take the children with her wherever she goes. This is not an acceptable solution. It brings no extra money to the household, is disempowering and leaves the woman's subordinate status unchanged. It fails to deliver the planned impact on GDP and lift women out of poverty.

“*your child is always bothering you, trying to eat soap or wash with you*”

“*I am with my child, and every time I try to dig, and the baby holds the hoe, ... It makes me wonder why I gave birth to her*”

4. One of the workshop teams reported an improvised solution available in their area but described it as not meeting the children's needs: “we do not have an EDC ... but there is a nursery school nearby, so we just take them [there]. That school was not the answer because it had relied on parental contributions and nearly failed. “Every parent was required to pay 500 frw a month ... but the parents could not afford that amount.... [in the end] the Government decided only to have one teacher.... The teacher cannot even ... take care of all children at the same time ... [and she had only one year of lessons] which they attended in the first year, the second, the third, the fourth, until they reached five, which the children found extremely boring. The feeling in the group was that it would not have been satisfactory in any case, even if there had been progression between years because children not much older than two years need different handling from those of four or five years. For example, they are very young and need to sleep at least every three hours ... [and they give them] the same food as the primary school pupils ... [always] maize... which is inappropriate for the young ones”. (They cannot yet digest it.).

5. The mothers told us that what was needed was an age-appropriate service in every village. The apparent solution is childminders – mothers taking other families' children into their houses or taking it in turn to host each other's children. All the teams spent time

considering this but had, in the end, to reject it as unsuitable. The first problem was that it was necessary to pay for childminding, and most households were said not to be able to afford it, but those who had themselves functioned as childminders were clear that it could not be a free service.

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[Parent]

*The person who takes care of our children needs to be paid, but we don't have money to pay, which is a challenge for us.*

“  
[Caregiver]

*The person who is caring ... cannot do so for free..... we have family needs, such as school [costs] .... which we cannot afford when we are not working.*

This question of payment is central to childminding: where a fee is charged to cover staffing costs, centres of any sort tend not to attract enough children to remain financially viable, or else they fail to retain their staff. The Imbuto Foundation set up centres and trained their staff and continued to see that they were paid, and workshop participants spoke well of them. However, they are too far away to provide a solution for poorer families. In contrast, the fact that they became the preferred solution for the more affluent families who had their transport and lived in areas where the roads were not prone to flooding in the rainy seasons undermined the client base for more reachable centres: *parents in Category 3<sup>1</sup> (or C as per new categorisation) prefer not to pay because they can take their children elsewhere for free.* Across the different workshop teams, the Government is consistently seen as the solution to the problem: *the Government should provide incentives because citizens will say they will [pay] but will not do it.*

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*EPR (a development partner) came and trained the caregivers, but they did not provide any material support. The Imbuto Foundation, on the other hand, provided training and financial incentives to its trainees, and those who were trained by EPR realised they were not being cared for and stopped.*

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*Parents prefer to send their children to far-flung ECDS in Imbuto, so those who are home-based do not receive children.*

6. A second problem with local home-based childminders was more cultural: the villagers did not always trust other mothers to look after their children, *it feels like taking your child to another person's house*, one participant said and did not need to say more to get the point across to the rest of the team. Both workshop groups reported rumours that childminders would 'poison' the children, presumably meaning that the food would not be suitable for them – a diet of maize even for the youngest, for example. Specific interpersonal difficulties were also mentioned as a problem; villages are not as uniformly harmonious as their outside image would suggest. Some of this might be overcome if the childminders were qualified/trained, paid, and their facilities inspected – *if the Government can be the one to train caregivers and be the one to give them incentives, and ensure the security of those EDCs* – but the fact would remain that these were just neighbours who had chosen to take on the role for their own convenience and perhaps profit.

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*Sometimes it is hard to trust that such a young baby as yours will be safe without you. And you are worried whether they will be able to accept being fed by another ... It is very hard for some mothers.*

## VILLAGE CENTRES – THE IDEAL AND THE ACCEPTABLE: RECOMMENDED

There is a reasonable consensus across workshops on what is acceptable and what would be ideal. The preferred solution is a purpose-built centre within short walking distance. This should accept all children from perhaps as young as 18 months if extra care could be drafted in, or else from about two years and six months. *The available EDCs are not equipped; they do not have areas for children to eat, drink, sleep, or learn. This is why we believe a child cannot go there earlier. But if they had facilities; a 1.5-year-old child [could do so]. ... However, a baby under 1.5 years old still requires more attention from the mother.* The building should have distinct areas for teaching and play, sleeping, eating and the kitchen and toilets. Ideally, they would be set up to provide basic meals and hygiene: supplying breakfast and lunch adapted to the state of development of their digestive systems and sending them home washed and cleaned up would maximise the gain in usable time experienced by the mothers. One group suggested that a kitchen garden and perhaps keeping some animals could provide much of the required food, supplemented by what parents produce from their farms. Participants' more detailed thoughts on planning and operation are given in the Appendix to this Brief.

<sup>1</sup> Category of self-reliant households that benefit from social protection interventions and multi-sectoral interventions and have to sign performance contracts (Imihigo) for graduation within a period of 2 years.

## The New Centres



**Four functional areas:** teaching/ play, Sleeping, Toilets and washing, Cooking and eating



**Equipped for play/entertainment, sleeping, toilets and hygiene, eating.**



**Outside:** possibly kitchen garden with provision for keeping small animals

## Staffing the centre



**'Teacher'** – may do some formal teaching, but also supervises play activities, reads to children etc...



**'Carer'** – mostly toileting and cleaning up, but available to help teacher.



**'Cook'** – primarily preparing and serving breakfast and lunch, but available otherwise to help the carer.

7. The minimum staffing required for the centres would be three: a teacher, a caregiver (and a cook). The Government could arrange and fund some basic staff training – particularly for the 'teachers' - to increase staff credibility and help overcome interpersonal mistrust. (One workshop group suggested the community might choose teachers – elected – as with CHWs.) More staff might be needed if there are many very young children, as they require more help with toileting and more individual attention as they learn to play. Perhaps, the mothers could organise a rota for sending in an additional carer, to have enough spare capacity in this respect for one of the carers to work some of the time in the class, dealing with children's problems. The essential three staff would have full-time jobs and should be paid a salary – by the Government, as all the evidence is that parents do not always pay. It was also suggested in one district that the Centre staff collect children in the morning from the homes or a designated collection point and possibly take them back in the evening, extending their work hours but freeing mothers to work longer. The other district had a rota of parents taking them in the morning.
8. Land would need to be provided by central or local Government. As with the expansion of schools to cope with fee-free basic education, the labour for building the facilities should be provided by the community (probably through umuganda) and the cost of building materials, provision of skills not to be found in the village, furnishing (mats, mattresses, bedding, wall-nards for writing or more probably drawing), provision of materials (play and learning materials, cooking equipment and utensils, appropriate cutlery and crockery) would be contributed by Government or its partners. Parents also suggested the Government or its partners should cover running costs and salaries.
9. Finally, parents should be sensitized to the benefits of providing a stimulating environment for young children. The workshops were structured in three sessions, with the first one focusing on understanding causes and mapping the impacts, followed by assessing the benefits of teaching children discipline and good manners, while the relationship of stimulation to children's cognitive and emotional development came at the end.

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## APPENDIX: CONSENSUS PLAN FOR VILLAGE ECDC CENTRES

**This Appendix goes into more detail about mothers' views of the childcare choices open to them if they take paid work outside the home or even want to do housework and subsistence agriculture unencumbered by childcare responsibilities. It moves on to mothers' view of what ideally they would like from childcare provision, what would be regarded as at least adequate, and how the establishment of appropriately conceived and constructed childcare centres might be achieved.**

### PURPOSES of the ECDC (Early Child Development Centres)

1. To lighten the burden of unpaid care on women, and specifically the gender-unfair position of women as the ones mainly responsible for the children and their care; to give them some period of the day for productive labour, taking part in social relations, enhancing their status within the family and community, building and maintaining their quality of life.
2. To give the children a stimulating environment and a healthy diet, enhancing their social and cognitive development.

[The first of these emerged almost without prompting. The second, the value for the child, developed under guidance from the facilitators over the sessions and is seen as a credible and acceptable message but something to which the average mother still needs sensitising.]

### PERCEIVED OPTIONS

1. EDCs available somewhere in the cell: rejected as a useful solution by those who do not have it within the village, traveling to another village can take an hour each way on foot, and the Centres do not open early enough for mothers to drop their children and get to work on time or even to get to the farm in time to do a good morning's work; Centres do not keep the children long enough to wait till the end of a non-farm working day before picking them up. Some women use the Centres when they can – particularly if the husband or an older child can conveniently go in that direction; some keep the young children at home and take what work they can get, leaving older children in charge of the younger ones; others take the children with them to work or give up the idea of paid non-farm work altogether and somehow cope with doing agricultural work with the children in tow. All of these 'solutions' are disempowering and the problem cannot be solved by shifting the childcare burden to the husband on a regular basis or by negotiation; there is no profit to the family in losing men's jobs or work hours in order to give them to the women.
2. Childminders (home-based EDC centres): again not considered a satisfactory solution. The home is too small to make an adequate centre, they do not have chairs/mats and mattresses for children (and the youngest need to nap quite often), there is nowhere for them to sleep, there are no or insufficient toys and play objects and the house's resources may be insufficient to cook for and feed the children. The childminders are insufficiently trained and not always trusted by the mothers who are leaving their children with them.

3. In one region children were allowed to join the local nursery school at below the usual age. However, nursery schools, aimed at those at least as old as 4 and has, insufficient and inappropriate provisions for younger children, who need mats instead of chairs, provision for taking frequent naps during the day, a different diet, more direct care (more attention, and more help with toileting and cleaning up), and the toys and educational materials which are appropriate for an older child might not be suitable for a two-year-old. The particular school was worse still for this purpose – understaffed to the point where a single year's 'curriculum' was repeated year after year to the single mixed-age class.
4. The preferred option: was EDCs at village level, purpose-built, staffed with trained personnel in areas appropriate to the age of the 'pupils' and adequately equipped to ensure good physical care of the children and their cognitive and social development. Some of the current burdens of unpaid care, mothers insisted, should be transferred from the family to the Centre: the ideal centre would provide two meals, some personal care (e.g. a shower), and the responsibility for them during several hours of the day. (Transferring these duties from mother to father would not bring any benefit to the family if it meant that husbands were less able to seek paid work and/or work on the family land.) Ideally, the Centre would even take responsibility for them by collecting them from home or some collection point and delivering them back at the end of the session; this would give the mothers the maximum opportunity to engage with social and work life outside the home.

### SETTING UP THE CENTRES

**PROVISION OF LAND** is a matter for the Government or perhaps the Local Government. Ideally, this should be large enough for a kitchen garden in addition to a 'school' building, or even a farmable plot to be worked by a cooperative of parents, to feed the children while they are at the EDC (see below).

### CONSTRUCTION OF THE BUILDING

**Labour** could be supplied by Umuganda (unpaid), perhaps supplemented by VUP (paid), particularly where some skill was required which was not available in the village – plumber, roofer, brickmaker. We would add (it is not in the plans developed by participants) that someone would be needed to organise the workforce (the Village Leader?) and probably someone appointed by Government or Local Government to act as Project Manager (ordering and ensuring timely delivery of materials, inspecting the quality of the work, drawing up or at least approving the plans and seeing to a 'health and safety' inspection of the finished building).

**Materials:** Some might be found, salvaged, or collected by the community, and the community might have the skill to make bricks from the local clay (though baked bricks are more durable), but mostly these would have to be bought in, or at least the skill to teach others how to make them. A water tank (home-made tanks are possible but not as reliable, particularly when dealing with large amounts of water), doors, windows, wiring if any, plumbing (e.g. from a tank), and roofing (probably tin sheets) would have to be bought. In principle, the mothers' position was that they and their community had no money to spare. Materials would therefore need to be funded by the Government, development partners, or charities.



**Design:** four rooms would be needed: somewhere for the children to work, play, and be entertained and fed (plus possibly a fenced outside area for play), a separate room or area for naps to be taken, a safe kitchen, and a toilet area, probably better located inside in order to be accessible to children during the rainy seasons. A water supply would be needed – piped or more probably a rainwater tank. Thought would need to be given to keeping the water contamination-free. Even if capture of rainwater were the main source, a means of topping it up during the dry seasons would probably be needed and some way of ensuring there was no infestation or bacterial growth would be essential [This is our comment – the participants did not come up with this one].

**Furniture and equipment:** the completed building would need furniture: mats for the children to sit on and mattresses (and bedding) for them to take naps, chairs for adults, blackboards or whiteboards, and something with which to write or more probably draw on them, teaching and play materials (including books for starting to learn to read), a stove of some sort, pans, cups and plates/bowls, and toilet paper, soap for washing hands, etc, cleaning materials and other hygiene supplies. One workshop group suggested it would not be unreasonable for parents to supply their children with pens and exercise books, but otherwise, it was assumed that the Government or its partners would furnish and equip the building.

### **RUNNING COSTS**

**Ideal operational routine:** to give the mothers the maximum of usable time, workshops agreed that it would be useful if children were gathered together and taken to the EDC by one person and brought back to their homes at the end rather than parents transporting them individually. One group suggested that time would be saved in both morning and evening if children had their breakfast at the EDC, ate lunch there, and were toileted and washed before being sent home. It is recognised that there is a high staff cost involved in such a pattern and groups debated what needed to be paid for by Government/development partners and what might be done by rotas of parents.

**Staffing:** the consensus staffing pattern is three members of staff – a ‘teacher’ (instruction, entertainment, supervising play, running the class in general), a ‘carer’ (toileting children and cleaning up after them, helping with feeding, helping in class when not otherwise engaged), and a ‘cook’ (cooking and feeding, feeding any EDC animals and harvesting in the kitchen garden if there is one, helping with cleaning when free). The general feeling was that the ‘teachers’ would

need some training, in elementary education, how to run a class, health and safety issues, and what young children need and are capable of doing), and the others might need brief training in at least the last two of these. The teacher could be further assisted by parents coming in on rota to help with play activities. As well as improving performance, training would increase mothers’ confidence in the EDC.

Staff should be paid, and not by parents; those among the mothers who had tried to run a home-based EDC reported that parents may say they will pay but plead poverty when it comes time for payment. There is no point, in any case, in freeing women for paid work or for growing crops if any substantial share of what they make is eaten up by child-minding costs; given the inaccessibility of current EDCs, many mothers said they had reluctantly decided to keep the child mostly with them rather than sending/taking them to EDC, and a few talked about using older children to mind them or, if they were on the afternoon shift at school, to take them to EDC in the morning, to the detriment of their school attendance.

Some of the staff costs can be covered by parental volunteering, but if the family depends on their paid work and/or agricultural production they cannot afford to volunteer their labour without recompense, so a ‘motivation payment’ proportionate to the hours worked, at a rate comparable to what they could otherwise earn or produce, would probably be necessary.


**Feeding the children:** some suggested that parents could contribute farm produce to feed children. A kitchen garden at the EDC, worked by parents, is another suggestion – to grow vegetables, perhaps potatoes, perhaps maize for those old enough to digest it, possibly with rabbits for meat and a cow for milk (and chickens for eggs might be another suggestion). Any surplus could be sold to parents or on the market to make a contribution to running costs. It is also expected that the Government would supply Inyange milk and perhaps the portion pockets of concentrated food supplied elsewhere to avert stunting in the youngest. Beyond this, or where a kitchen garden is not practical, parents would have to supply food or ready-made meals, or the Government and its partners would have to pay for it.

**Other costs** would include routine maintenance and repair of the building – which could reasonably be carried out by the parents, perhaps under the aegis of Umuganda or VUP, but materials might need to be bought – and the resupply of consumables as listed above. All groups expect the Government or its partners to cover this.

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