

Concept Note

Strategic Plan for Community and Decision-Maker Engagement and Dissemination of Parenting and Early Childhood Research in Lebanon

Few randomized controlled trials (RCTs) have explored the implementation and impacts of early childhood education and parenting programs in very fragile contexts and humanitarian settings. In partnership with the Arab Resource Collective, a Lebanese NGO that leads early childhood and family programming in the country and region, our team from Yale University conducted an RCT and implementation evaluation of the Mother-Child Education Program (MOCEP). The program, developed by the ACEV Foundation in Turkey, applies practice-based activities in group settings to promote school readiness and holistic child development in contexts where access to quality early childhood education programs is low. MOCEP has been translated to several languages, and implemented and taken to scale in several countries. Our RCT, conducted among two refugee and one marginalized community in Beirut, is the first experimental assessment of MOCEP's impact, and one of the few studies to empirically explore the effects of a high-intensity, structured parenting program in a context affected by displacement, food and human insecurity, and socioeconomic instability. Our study demonstrated that MOCEP reduced harsh disciplinary practices and reduced parenting stress among the target populations (Ponguta et al., under review). These findings are remarkable in that they substantiate the measurable impact of a social intervention on key markers of parental practices and wellbeing in contexts of high stress and despite multiple structural risk factors. Our study also explored the implementation of the program to identify enablers and challenges to the delivery process and the feasibility of robustly evaluating parenting interventions in this study context (Ponguta et al., in press). The data emerging from the study is also being utilized to characterize family processes, the role of father's involvement, and ways to address parenting practices and child development – all in the backdrop of limited validated instruments to assess these and other constructs in a complex study setting (e.g., Hein et al., submitted).

Despite the importance of our study, and of others of similar nature and scope, empirical evaluations of social interventions have been shown to have limited influence in communities, practitioner, and policy contexts. This is a concerning paradox as one of the key goals of social intervention research is to inform practice and ultimately provide an evidence-base to drive policy options. In part, it is believed that a reason why translating research into practice and policy is difficult is because communicating findings to study participants and a broad stakeholder base tends to get overlooked (McDavitt et al., 2016). Often, research efforts are mostly targeted to academic, expert, and thematic/specialized networks. Ultimately, the failure to include communities and a broader stakeholder base in the dissemination of research outputs undermines the ethical imperative to leverage the study results and can ultimately undermine community relationships (McDavitt et al., 2016). This is particularly relevant to research conducted among “vulnerable populations”, where limited dissemination and engagement of the community in research processes can minimize benefits, unintentionally override principles of ethical non-maleficence, and place communities as only the *subjects* of the study rather than partners in the research process (Mackenzie, et al., 2007).

To date, there is limited literature that explores strategies for community and wider research dissemination. There is scant data on the way in which data is framed and communicated into lay and practical language

and on the mechanisms to measure the impact of research outcomes on practice and policy (Cashman, et al., 2008). To this end, we aim to design, apply and document a communication strategy to share the findings of our trial, primarily. We also aim to grant our project partners, ARC and ACEV, a space to jointly engage in knowledge-sharing of similar programmatic models and evaluations that have been implemented in the Middle Eastern and North Africa Region. There are two stakeholder groups we aim to engage: (1) community leaders and the communities with whom the research partnerships took place; and (2) government and key international and national support agencies who are involved in planning and decision-making processes of social programs for at-risk communities.

Community and community-leadership engagement. There are critical justifications for engaging community leadership in the research design and dissemination processes. In essence, communities have a right to access the knowledge generated thanks to their participation (Chen et al., 2010). Through this process, there is an opportunity to also assess the implications and relevance of the research from local perspectives, as well as inform the application and cultural adaptation of research findings to practice (Bero et al., 1998; Israel et al., 2005; Bogart & Uyeda, 2009; Hacker, 2013). These efforts are particularly important in high-risk contexts, where community disengagement in marginalized communities can lead to mistrust and unintended stigmatization (Christopher, 2008). In our work, we partnered closely with community leaders to ensure that the scope of research was contextualized, oversee that the instruments applied acceptable to the community, and grant that the research protocols protected and promoted the trust of families and the communities with the leadership and relevant partners (Ponguta et al., in press).

Decision-maker engagement. Decision makers, which we hereby operationally define as actors involved in public policy planning and implementation as well as key national and international non-government partners (e.g., NGOs, iNGOs, donors) are key actors in the provision, scalability and sustainability of social programs. However, because of the differences in the organizational setting of researchers and decision-makers, research-to-policy gaps are prevalent. For example, decision-makers tend to operate in settings where program options must be cost-effective and of sometimes rapid implementation (Mackenzie et al., 2007). The way in which research is communicated across academic networks is not always suitable for policy-oriented audiences and objectives, making knowledge-brokering inefficient and of low penetration.

Work and action plan. This concept note aims to outline our proposed strategy to communicate and engage community, community leaders, and decision makers in the dissemination of our findings in Lebanon, in order to engage in a two-way dialogue to: (1) contextualize the findings to the community settings where the research was implemented; and (2) broker key results with decision makers to enhance the policy and financing prioritization of social, family and early childhood programming. We propose to roll-out the initiative by applying a dissemination framework anchored in a systematic analysis of the literature and structured around four overlapping phases (McDavitt et al., 2016):

- 1) *Planning:* Drawing from the rationale provided here, we will define the key parameters for the strategy, such as **who** will be the target audience, **why** (time-bound outcomes) and **what** information needs to be disseminated, **how** (which mechanisms will be applied and how the information will be framed and structured to enable a two-way communication), and **when** will the communications occur.
- 2) *Outreach:* Once the parameters of the strategy have been designed, we will activate an outreach strategy through the relevant identified mechanisms, to ensure the engagement of stakeholders during the dissemination phase.

- 3) *Content development and presentations with discussions*: Drawing from the planning outputs, we will create the content of relevant communication modalities (e.g. policy brief, participatory discussion tables, targeted social media campaign).
- 4) *Follow-up*: We will determine effective and purpose-oriented mechanisms to follow up on the achievement of intended outcomes (to be defined in the planning phase).

Our group is currently conducting a whole-sector analysis of Early Childhood Education on Emergencies (ECEiE), with the funding support of Dubai Cares. The study includes an in-depth country analysis of the policy and programmatic landscape in Lebanon. We plan to capitalize on that ongoing effort to inform and rollout this process. We are in the process of securing support to operationalize the four phases described above and welcome the opportunity to discuss this pursuit further.

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