



Source: UNICEF

Early Development and Learning in **Timor-Leste**

Background

Timor-Leste's population of 1.2 million consists primarily of three ethnic groups: Austronesian (Malayo-Polynesian), Papuan and a small Chinese minority. Nearly half of all Timorese live under the poverty line at an estimated US\$0.88 per capita per day (National Statistics Directorate, Ministry of Finance, and ICF Macro, 2010).

About 17% of the population of Timor-Leste is under the age of five. The country has an under-5 mortality rate of 76 deaths per 1,000 live births and 58% of children under five suffer from moderate to severe stunting (UNESCO, 2014).

In the school year 2010/2011, there were 180 pre-schools attended by 10,159 children and staffed by 238 teachers (Timor-Leste Government, 2011). Only 10.2% of Timorese children between the ages of three and six currently attend pre-school (UNICEF, 2008). Enrolment rates are much higher in urban areas than in rural regions (Timor-Leste Government, 2011). Standard basic curriculum and teaching standards are yet to be developed.

Pre-school education is being expanded (especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children) with a target gross enrolment ratio of 50% by 2015. There are also plans to implement a new, local language-based national pre-primary school curriculum (Timor-Leste Government, 2011).

Objectives

Timor-Leste was one of six countries that participated in the East Asia-Pacific Early Child Development Scales (EAP-ECDS) project, supported by UNICEF-East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO), the Open Society Foundations, and the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC).

The main objective of this project was to equip stakeholders across East Asia and the Pacific with a common measurement tool to assess the holistic developmental progress of children ranging in age from three to five years. It was felt that stakeholders in Timor-Leste including governments, universities, research institutions and donor partners would be able to utilise the data garnered from this project to promote early development and learning, and prevent the loss of human potential by investing in the early years.

Methodology

As part of this project, direct assessments of the holistic development and learning of 3- to 5-year-old children residing in urban and rural settings were carried out in the second half of 2013. Children were administered the EAP-ECDS. The items on these Scales were developed based on the Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) from countries in the East Asia and Pacific Region through an iterative process. The EAP-ECDS includes seven domains and 85 items. Caregivers were also interviewed, in individual sessions to obtain: (i) standard demographic data; (ii) reports on the child's early learning and development; and (iii) information about the child's health and habits.



Timorese children's book

Conclusions

- The EAP-ECDS are valid and reliable measures of developmental functioning in Timor-Leste. Older children performed better than younger children in all domains of the Scales.
- Less than 7% of this study received early childhood education. Participation in early childhood programmes in Timor-Leste did not have a significant positive effect in child development. However, this finding must be interpreted with extreme caution as it may be due to the quantity and type of the early childhood service provision.
- Early childhood education in rural areas should be enhanced to improve the performance of children in rural areas.
- Caregivers should be provided education and support to encourage them to be more involved in the early development of their wards.

Sample

Age	Rural		Urban		Total
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	
3Y	96	97	98	108	399
4Y	100	100	101	94	395
5Y	101	96	99	98	394
Total	297	293	298	300	1188

The total sample size was 1,188 children recruited from nine provinces. The sampling strategy was determined in conjunction with the Statistical Department, and the sample was stratified by region, urbanicity and child's age and gender. In addition to the child assessment, one parent or caregiver of the child was interviewed in an individual session.

Among these, 75.3% were mothers, 20.8% were fathers, and 3.9% were other family members. Tests confirmed that the EAP-ECDS as a whole, and the different sub-scales (domains) were valid and reliable measures of the early development and learning of children from Timor-Leste. Comparisons of average scores on each domain were made across age, sex, and urban/rural settings. Further, the relationship between findings from direct assessments of children's performance and parent reports were also compared. Predictors of child development and learning, participation in early childhood programmes, home learning environments, children's health condition and health-related practices were also examined.

Early Child Development

There were significant developmental differences in the EAP-ECDS. Older children performed better than younger children in all domains of the Scales. This finding is not unexpected as the EAP-ECDS is a developmental scale with adequate validity and reliability.

Cognitive Development

- Urban children showed significantly better performance than rural children.

Socio-emotional Development

- No significant effect other than age was detected.

Motor Development

- Urban children showed significantly better performance than rural children.

Language and Emergent Literacy

- Urban children showed significantly better performance than rural children.

Health, Hygiene, and Safety

- Girls tended to show better performance than boys among 3- and 4-year-olds, and the pattern was reversed among 5-year-olds.

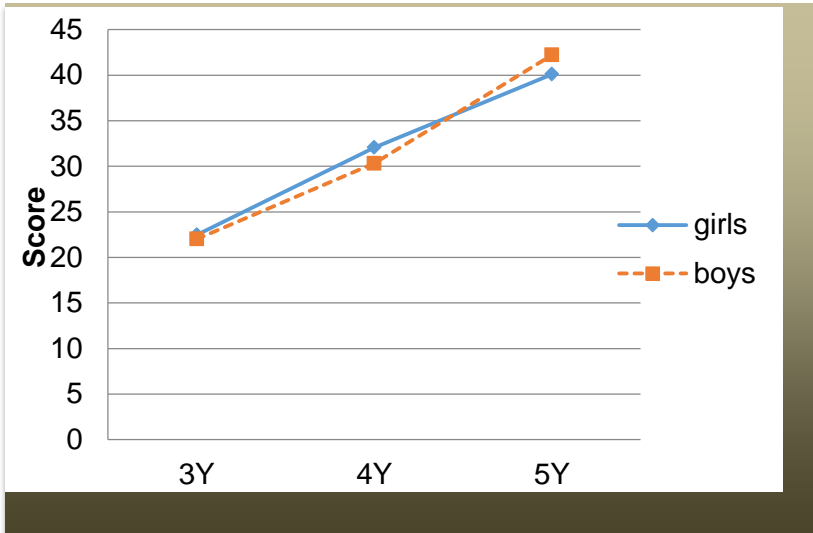
Cultural Knowledge and Participation

- Unlike in other domains, children from rural areas significantly outperformed their urban peers.

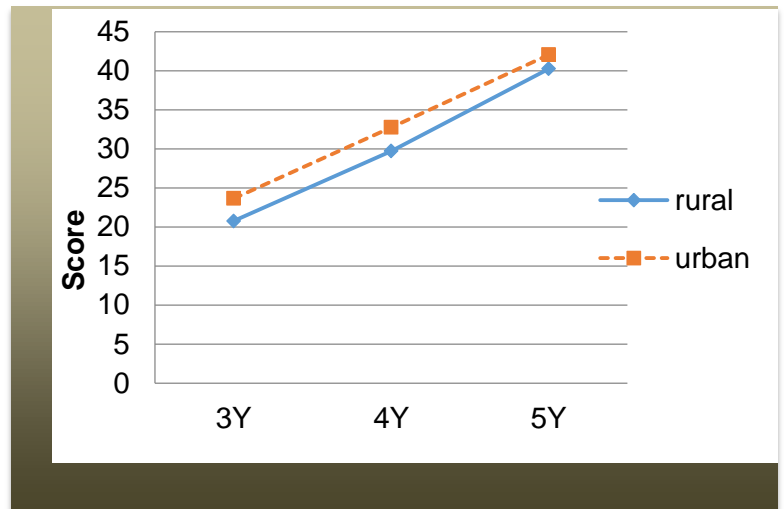
Approaches to Learning

- Children from urban areas did significantly better than rural children.

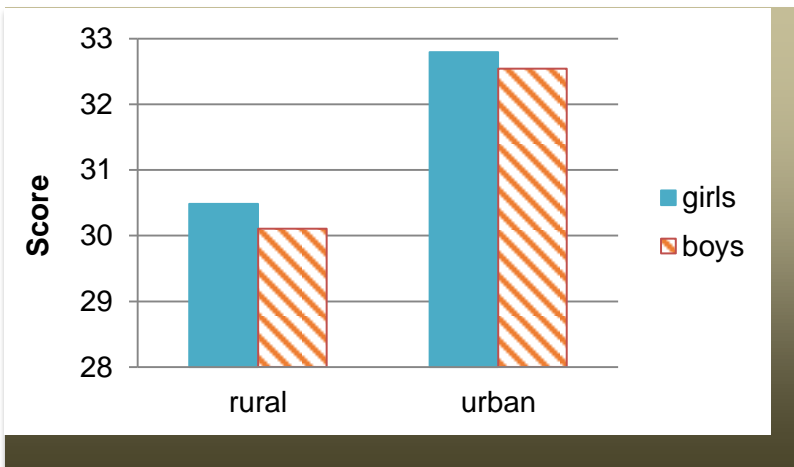
Age and Gender differences in Cognitive Development (Timor-Leste)



Age differences in Cognitive Development in children living in rural and urban areas (Timor-Leste)



Gender differences in Cognitive Development in children living in rural and urban areas (Timor-Leste)



Early Learning and Development

- Less than 7% of the participating children attended some form of early education programme.
- While the gross enrolment ratio for pre-primary education (for 3- to 6-year-olds) was 10.2% in 2008, there are disparities within the country with relatively low coverage rates among the rural population.
- The children who were older, including those in urban areas, were more likely enrolled in an early learning programme than other children.
- About 45% of the children who attended an early childhood programme went to kindergartens (the rest went to community and drop-in centres), and 66.7% of them spent 10 to 20 hours a week in the programme.
- Less than half of mothers reported having involvement in early learning-related activities at home. Timor-Leste was an exception however, in that “other family members” were more involved than either parent in early learning-related activities at home. That stated, urban children and those with better educated parents were more likely to have activities with mothers at home; while in rural areas and in families with less educated mothers, other family members were more likely to be involved in such activities.

Health and Hygiene

- Almost all children (93.3%) had had their vaccinations.
- Interestingly, families with girls and those living in rural areas were more likely to have better health facilitation practices.
- Results indicated that older children, those living in urban areas, and those with more educated fathers tended to have better health and hygiene habits (e.g., always washing hands after using the toilet and before meals without adults’ directions, and eating vegetables without adults’ directions) than other children.
- Rural children and those of less-educated fathers were more likely to have reported health problems.

