



# WORKING ON THE IMPOSSIBLE

## Early childhood policies in Namibia

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Key words:  
aid-giving, early child development,  
Namibia, World Bank

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SAGE Publications. Los Angeles, London,  
New Delhi and Singapore, Vol 15(3): 379–395.  
www.sagepublications.com  
10.1177/0907568208091669

This article discusses the complexities of aid-giving using the example of early childhood policies in Namibia. It supports a critical view of aid processes and of World Bank endeavours in particular. Using an analysis of the World Bank funded education sector-wide improvement plan (ETSIP) in Namibia and three Namibian local case studies, it shows how the local circumstances of young children and their parents are ignored in order to fit in with donor preconceptions, and how senior officials come to adopt those views. It argues that universally derived policies on early childhood development are misapplied, and poverty and inequality are ignored in the search for technocratic solutions.

### Introduction

The efforts of multilateral and bilateral funders such as the World Bank and the EU, and charities (or international non-governmental agencies) to improve the circumstances of people living in poor countries are characterized by a kind of relentless optimism. Addressing poverty in the South, however apparently unsuccessful so far, merely requires a more sophisticated analysis, more funding, an extra input of expertise, or more time for the results to show up (Quarles van Ufford and Giri, 2003).

Critics of development agencies have been arguing for some time that the aid project is itself misconceived (Sklair, 1994). The neoliberal and technocratic model of economic development that underpins aid efforts, promoted above all by the World Bank, produces, rather than resolves inequality. George and Sabelli (1994), for example, regard the World Bank as akin to the Medieval Catholic Church in its hegemony. Just as it would have been heresy and punishable by death to disagree with the Church, so it has been unthinkable to disagree with the theologians of the World Bank on pain of financial excommunication. More recently, Kumar (2003) describes the voluminous literature of the World Bank as a kind of Gothic outpouring, the fantastical creations of a megalith.<sup>1</sup> These largely moral critics of the development process have recently gained an additional recruit in Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel prizewinner and former chief economist of the World Bank. He now argues from an economic point of view that the current neoliberal economic policies are too *inefficient*

to deal with poverty, inequality and ecological threats, and a profound review of global economics is politically and economically necessary for rich and poor alike. He also believes this kind of radical reformulation to be possible (Stiglitz, 2006).

The critical view that international development and aid efforts are inevitably flawed raises many questions about how aid is delivered – and whether half a loaf may still be better than none. Mosse (2005) has argued that these processes of aid delivery warrant wider study, a kind of ethnography of aid. He also argues that sophisticated critiques of the aid process may come from within as well as outside, and those involved in the process may be well placed to observe and comment. Green (2003) uses a Tanzanian example to show how donors and aid agencies typically apply globally conceived formulae to try to collect evidence and arrive at local solutions, which are nonetheless co-options into a particular world view. Stirrat (2000) similarly describes the ‘culture of consultancy’, where one consultant after another comes from outside the recipient country to try to secure legitimacy for a particular aid initiative. These consultants’ reports act as markers for policy around which change and implementation is planned.

In this article, I provide a small-scale example, that of early childhood policies in Namibia in Southern Africa, to support a critical view of the aid process. I attempt to show that the application of universalized prescriptions overrides or ignores local circumstances but succeeds nevertheless in co-opting local political elites to the donors’ universalistic views. The article is based on a consultancy review I carried out for the Namibian Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare (MGECW) in Namibia in 2006. I was asked to provide costings for the ministry’s new policy document on early childhood development and care.

The government of Namibia, influenced by the World Bank, has issued an ambitious policy document, drawn up by the MGECW, that aims to provide some kind of child development support to all young children in Namibia (MGECW, 2005). The reality is that there is little provision of any kind; nor is there infrastructure to support the development of provision. I explore the way in which the recommendations contained in the World Bank consultancy reports, and the resulting government policy document are being enacted, despite overwhelming evidence that the task is impossible.

## **Namibia – background**

It may be useful to briefly set the scene. Namibia, or South West Africa as it was once called, was a colonial possession of Germany until the First World War. Then it was administered by South Africa and in effect became part of the South African apartheid system. Namibia only became independent in 1990, when the liberation movement SWAPO (South West African People’s Organization) assumed power. Namibia is semi-arid, with a wild Atlantic coast,

ancient deserts and remote mountain ranges. It has great wealth – precious minerals, including diamonds and uranium, possibly oil and gas, and a thriving tourist trade centring around its wildlife and its untamed landscape. Despite its remoteness, it has an excellent infrastructure – superb roads built by the Germans, and carefully maintained by the South African military in the covert war against Angola.

It is a sparsely populated country, a population of around 1,500,000 people spread over a vast area. There are many language groupings within Namibia. The European languages are German, Afrikaans and English. African languages include Ovahero, Damara and a variety of other dialects belonging to the Bantu and Khoisan language groups. Many non-European Namibians are bilingual or trilingual or multilingual and switch readily from one language to another. About 3 percent of the population are nomadic San people or bushmen, whose art or rock paintings are thought to be the oldest in the world. The progressive marginalization of the San people, and the diminution of their foraging existence has been well chronicled (Gordon, 1992).

Namibia has the dubious distinction of being the world's most unequal country in terms of its income distribution – its Gini coefficient, the usual index of inequality, is 74.3 (UNDP, 2007). The richest 10 percent consume more than 65 percent of GDP (UNDP, 2003). Namibia's inequality arises partly out of its apartheid past; the country's diamond and mineral mines were sold long ago to South African or multinational companies, whose considerable profits are minimally taxed (Simon, 1983). Large tracts of land in the south of the country are closed off – they have become the private territory of the mining consortiums. The apartheid system caused further inequalities. The black populations were pushed out of the towns and cities and forced into townships and squatter camps. Much of the good cattle-ranching land was taken over by and is still owned by white farmers. The SWAPO government, despite its declared intentions, has been unable to redress these historic inequalities (Wood, 1988).

Black women frequently work as domestics, in private homes or in the tourist industry, but a majority are subsistence farmers or market traders. Over 55 percent of the population live on less than US\$2 a day. There is no unemployment or sickness benefit, even although an increasing number of men and women have HIV/AIDS – an estimated 40 percent in the Caprivi strip, a province in the north of the country. The average life expectancy for blacks is 44 years (UNDP, 2003).

Namibia has a stable democracy, good infrastructure and surprisingly, given its inequalities, relatively low crime rates. The good governance, apparent lack of corruption or violence and the very valuable resources make it a potentially attractive country for investors. There are various investment projects: some commercial, mainly Chinese; some South African; and some from international donors like the EU Development Fund and the World Bank.

## Education in Namibia

Since independence in 1990, there have been many reports issued by donors, and by the government of Namibia, about educational reform, including reform on early childhood (Taylor, 2000). Like most countries in the South, one donor initiative succeeds another according to current international donor priorities with little reference to the past or indeed to locality (Penn, 2005). The latest tranche of donor initiatives in education in Namibia, as elsewhere, is focused on the idea of human capital theory. Investment in education is likely to result in a variety of enhanced opportunities for individuals, which in turn leads to a more productive economy (Heckman, 1999; Sen, 1999). This time, using human capital theory as a justification, a consortium of donors, led by the World Bank, have offered to invest (and/or loan) approximately US\$30 million in education in Namibia if the government comes up with a coherent plan to improve education. The World Bank has produced a report with the title *Namibia: Human Capital and Knowledge Development for Economic Growth with Equity* (Marope, 2005), which summarizes the measures it considers necessary to improve education. This sophisticated analysis, provided by international consultants, points to weaknesses in the education system. It is failing to produce the skilled workforce – the engineers, the computer literate workers in service industries – that multinationals want as an enticement to further investment. There is a high education primary enrolment rate at age 7, when children begin school – about 90 percent of children enrol. Yet around 20 percent of these children fail school in their first year. They either have to repeat the year, or they drop out altogether. They carry on failing at school, and only 38 percent go on to secondary school. Only 4 percent go on to tertiary education in technical or science subjects. These figures are worse than other countries in Southern Africa. In neighbouring Botswana, for instance, the repetition and drop-out rates are far lower, and 70 percent of children go on to secondary education (Marope, 2005).

There may be all sorts of explanations about why the education system in Namibia is performing so poorly – for example its apartheid past, which explicitly taught black children that they were inferior. Or, as SWAPO officials once claimed, gross inequalities of income affect people's hopes and aspirations and sense of achievement (Wood, 1988). These broad explanations are hard to address and harder to prove, but in any case they are an irrelevance, since the World Bank report regards Namibia as a specific illustration of a general economic prescription, using techniques of analysis, that have, in their view, been already successfully applied in many other countries.

The view of children encapsulated in the World Bank document is as passive recipients, who will be reshaped by more effective interventions. There is nowhere in the report any acknowledgement of their agency. The World Bank and its EU and other partners, now assume that the failure of the educational system is a technical one. The education system, so the argument

runs, can be cured; it merely needs to be readjusted and realigned at all levels; a better reception year, better textbooks, better examinations, better inspections, better teacher training, better deployment of school buildings, better management and administration, better monitoring and a more flexible workforce. A better education system will provide more productive workers, which in turn will lead to more economic development. With better education, poverty will be reduced.

The donor consortium has requested Namibia to produce an education and training sector-wide improvement plan, or ETSIP for short, to put forward as a basis for grant aid and/or loans (West, 2004). For about three years now, work has been taking place in drafting and costing these proposals. The donors spend a significant amount of their funding on hiring consultants from the North, at international rates, to provide technical expertise, because the expertise is perceived to be lacking within the country.

### **The World Bank's view of early childhood**

Human capital theorists have argued that early childhood is a particularly fruitful area for investment, because the greatest changes to children's attitudes and outlook can be wrought while children are very young. The fallacies of this argument, and the flimsy evidential base on which they rest, have been raised elsewhere (Penn et al., 2006; Penn and Lloyd, 2007). Generally, the World Bank Early Child Development Group, based in Washington, argues that 'results' come from an approach to early childhood that understands developmentally appropriate practice: that is, what children's needs are at each stage of their development and how staff and especially parents and the community can be trained to meet them (Young, 1996). Developmentally Appropriate Practice, or DAP (Bredekamp and Copple, 1997), is a system for describing young children's development and what could be done by the adults caring for children to enhance it. It was produced for a US organization, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and draws exclusively on evidence from the US to substantiate particular practices. I have previously argued that DAP is informed by an individualistic and consumerist and uniquely North American understanding of early childhood and family life. It also requires a considerable level of resourcing (manufactured toys and equipment, books and printed matter) to underpin it (Penn, 1999). Despite its limited evidence base and cultural narrowness, DAP is widely used as a model by the World Bank Early Child Development Group. The World Bank and its linked organizations such as the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development (an international consortium of donors including UNICEF and charities concerned with early childhood) use this model of early childhood to justify particular kinds of intervention in the South (Penn, 2005). The influence of this model is evident in many of the non-governmental initiatives in Namibia – for example the UNICEF programme – as well as in the World Bank background report (UNICEF, 2002).

In Namibia, as part of the ETSIP programme, the World Bank commissioned a special background report on early child development.<sup>2</sup> This report draws on general World Bank Early Child Development (ECD) material which claims that investing in early childhood leads to:

- Improved nutrition and health;
- Higher intelligence;
- Higher school enrolment;
- Less repetition;
- Fewer drop-outs;
- Help for the disadvantaged;
- Long-term cost savings to society ranging from a 1:2 ratio to a 1:7 ratio.

In particular, preparedness for school at age 7 is viewed as a prerequisite for coping with formal school systems and doing well within them. Some familiarity with and understanding of the purposes of numeracy and literacy before the age of 7 are regarded as necessary to succeed at school. The most well-off families have access within the private sector to such early child development, and the best nurseries, often the privatized former nursery schools, offer a standard of education and care that is of an international standard. However, the majority of children either have no access to such early education and care, or attend very poor quality provision (see later). Since Namibia has such high rates of drop-out and repetition, providing a general programme of early education and care is considered by the World Bank as a necessary ingredient of educational reform.

The background report tries to build on past Namibian ECD policy statements (Otaala, 1995). These policy statements, themselves drawn from earlier attempts by international non-governmental agencies to promote the DAP model of early childhood development, claim that early childhood development should be 'holistic' and meet *all* the needs of the child, from conception to school age. This extremely wide brief is praised in the background report, but cautions are expressed about the present inadequate situation, whereby most ECD services currently offer poor quality care, and where training programmes for ECD staff and volunteers are very inadequate. As a solution, the background report recommends that the Namibian ECD policy should be updated and there should be wide consultation about its proposals. This consultation should involve all stakeholders, including donors and volunteers. (In fact, as in Green's [2003] account, the stakeholders are typically co-opted by senior officials to legitimate their activities. In one region I visited, the stakeholders meeting was made up of two local ministers, three local government workers and a woman who was an elder in the local Damara community.)

The background report said that the poorest groups should be prioritized in offering child development support, especially the San people. However,

the policies regarding San children are left vague. (San children need to learn about the modern world but the modern world appears to have nothing to learn from the San – despite for example their very striking artistic history or their survival strategies in a harsh terrain).<sup>3</sup> The background report does not mention linguistic traditions or heritages or the need for a multilingual approach. By omission, the implication of the report is that all children will speak and understand English, and all carers and educators will be proficient in that language.

The background report ends with three basic recommendations. These are:

- Implement a preschool year for children aged 5–6, beginning with the poorest groups first;
- Commence a consultative networking process about a vision for a new holistic policy;
- Improve data collection.

### **Implementing the World Bank ECD proposals**

As with other consultancy reports for the ETSIP plan, the government took the World Bank background report recommendations seriously as their marker for policy development. The MGECW developed their implementation plans for ETSIP according to the recommendations in the report and rewrote their main policy document. As I have indicated, the assumptions behind the World Bank proposals were based on universalistic imported models of early childhood. The recommendations inevitably posed problems. They are considered in turn.

#### *Implement a preschool year (5–6) in schools*

Before the SWAPO government took power, there were good nursery classes and 3-year teacher training for nursery work, but since the nursery classes were all in white areas and attended by white children, the SWAPO government discontinued them as a symbol of white privilege. Because of population growth and higher levels of school attendance, the schools are now very full and there is little space to expand – elsewhere in the main report the World Bank recommends double shifts of schools. There is also a chronic shortage of early years teachers. None have been trained for a long time. But in any case, there is a general shortage of teachers because of the attrition of HIV/AIDs – teachers like everyone else are dying. So the proposal put forward in the ETSIP plan is that each of 13 Namibian regions appoint a teacher coordinator, to work at upgrading the best childcare facilities in each region and turning them into classrooms for 5–6 year olds. The current workers in those childcare facilities will receive extra training. Money is available only for 3 years, and no further thinking has been done about what will happen in

3 years' time, other than that the 13 coordinators will be put on the permanent roll of the education department. All ECD provision, apart from that supported by donors, is self-funded and has to generate income through charging parents fees. The case studies presented later illustrate the difficulties of any kind of reliance on these private or voluntary childcare facilities as a basis for expansion of the system.

### *Consult over a new holistic policy*

As a result of the World Bank background report, the MGECW updated its previous policy documents. The present document spells out a vision of a situation where all children will have the maximum opportunities for early child development, health, care and education combined from conception onwards. This aim is set out as a series of largely incomprehensible programme strategies, as listed in Table 1. The fact that they are incomprehensible is partly because of the difficulty officials faced in understanding the implications of the policy they had been persuaded to adopt.

It is hoped that young children will attend some kind of centre-based ECD facility before school, which will give them a needed boost to their school careers. But the holistic plan assumes that parents themselves can also play a part in transmitting the important aspects of ECD. However, unless they are informed and trained in some way, parents' knowledge is likely to be inadequate.

The entire budget for the first year of the ETSIP plan was for consultation with stakeholders about this policy, without any subsequent budget for putting the recommendations into practice. The MGECW was itself a new ministry, whose officials in the field were recently transferred from the Ministry of Regional and Local Government and Housing. Many were originally trained as agricultural support workers. These officials are now required to undertake community development, which includes advice on small businesses, community liaison and the ECD advice to parents. In all these activities, they are hampered by the lack of transport. There are very few vehicles at regional offices, and ECD projects are likely to be visited, at most, once every two years. There is a small capital expenditure budget in each region for ECD, but in some regions this was unspent because of the difficulties in visiting sites. There are two officials and two trainers for ECD located at the ministry itself, but there are no other arrangements for supporting ECD within the ministry.

The World Bank background report recommended consulting widely with stakeholders over this 'comprehensive' policy. Leaving aside the appropriateness or otherwise of the policy, consultation is difficult and expensive to organize. There is a dearth of printed materials, no translation facilities, little access to email or even telephones, and no affordable transport to bring people from very different communities together across vast distances. The notion of 'stakeholder' is seen as entirely unproblematic.



**Table 1** ECD policy in Namibia

<i>Programme approach</i>	<i>Participants/ beneficiaries</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Models</i>
1. Educate caregivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents, family</li> <li>• Siblings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create awareness</li> <li>• Change attitude</li> <li>• Improve/ change practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home visiting</li> <li>• Parental education</li> <li>• Child-to-child programmes</li> </ul>
2. Deliver a service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The child (0–8)</li> <li>• Parents and communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survival</li> <li>• Holistic</li> <li>• Development</li> <li>• Socialization practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home daycare</li> <li>• Integrated child development</li> <li>• Preschools</li> <li>• Add-on centres</li> </ul>
3. Promote community development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community</li> <li>• Leaders</li> <li>• Activators/ promoters</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create awareness</li> <li>• Change conditions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technical mobilization</li> <li>• Social mobilization</li> <li>• Training</li> </ul>
4. Strengthen national resources and capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programme personnel</li> <li>• Professionals</li> <li>• Para-professionals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create awareness</li> <li>• Improve skills available</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experimental demonstration projects</li> <li>• Strengthen project's infrastructure</li> </ul>
5. Advocate to increase demand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy-makers</li> <li>• Public</li> <li>• Professionals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create awareness</li> <li>• Build political will</li> <li>• Increase resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social marketing</li> <li>• Ethos creation</li> <li>• Knowledge dissemination</li> </ul>
6. Develop supportive legal framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Families with young children</li> <li>• Working children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase awareness of rights, resources</li> <li>• monitoring and compliance with Convention on the Rights of the Child</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employer-supported childcare</li> <li>• Daycare facilities</li> <li>• Maternal/ paternal leave</li> <li>• Support for breastfeeding</li> </ul>
7. Develop national and child support policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Families with young children</li> <li>• Society</li> <li>• Children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish family-sensitive programmes/ laws/ regulations/ provisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovative joint public–private cooperation</li> <li>• Tax incentives</li> <li>• Children's trust</li> <li>• Government subsidy</li> </ul>

*Improve data collection*

The third recommendation in the report was to improve data collection. The most recent data available on the take-up of ECD places in centres come from a population and housing census conducted in 2001. Attendance at ECD centres varies across regions from 13 percent to 50 percent. Data from the MGECW were more recent, but more unreliable, because of the difficulties of collecting information from projects. A study by Haihambo et al. (2004) suggested that data were dubious, and likely to be a considerable overestimate of what was available. One potential source of data is the registration of ECD centres. The guidelines for registration were drawn up in 1998 and all centres are supposed to be registered (Ministry of Education, 1998). However, the minimum standards specified were too high for all but a very few private centres in wealthier areas, and the overwhelming majority of ECD centres are unregistered, a tacit admission of the precariousness of the care offered to young children, as well as of the weakness of the infrastructure. Reliable data collection, although desirable, is unlikely without considerably more resources.

**Examples of current ECD practice**

I illustrate the difficulties with implementing the World Bank background report recommendations by giving three examples. The ministry arranged a field tour for me, and I visited 20 ECD projects at different sites throughout Namibia. At each place I visited, I obtained information about income and expenditure. This information was mostly given verbally – there were very few account books.

*A donor-funded nursery in Ojitiwarongo province:  
the Blue House project*

The Blue House was part of a squatter housing project funded by European donors. The squatters were mostly black labourers who had been made homeless and thrown off white farmland after SWAPO took over. The European group had hired an architect to work with local people in the squatter camp to design housing, and they came up with a more traditional shape of round houses made with clay bricks, and faced with clay, a design which meant the houses were much cooler in the hot sunshine than the usual tin roofed breeze block buildings. The houses also had an ecologically designed toilet, a great improvement on a pit latrine. Local people built the houses and received free food as payment, from another donor project. The municipality contributed communal water taps and electricity. In this way, a small estate had been built.

The Blue House nursery was part of this estate. It consisted of five small huts in a fenced, flowery courtyard, colourfully decorated by a local artist. One hut was a classroom for the 5- to 6-year-olds; another for the 4- to 5-year-olds; and a third for the 3- to 4-year-olds. The remaining huts housed a kitchen and

office and a sick bay and washroom. A Swedish teacher volunteer had spent a year there, developing programmes and resources, and one black member of staff had even been on an exchange trip to Sweden. But the Blue House nursery, despite these efforts, had fallen on hard times. It still served a very poor neighbourhood, even if some people were now better housed. The adjacent land had been cleared of squatters, in order to build more project houses, so there were, temporarily at least, a lot fewer children. This meant that the fees had to be raised to try to cover costs. But parents just could not afford to pay any more, and about half the remaining parents in any case did not pay. One of the members of staff was permanently sick, almost certainly with HIV/AIDs. The one who had been on the exchange programme had left for a much better paid job in a private nursery. The nursery had stopped giving the children meals, and these were children who were very hungry. The remaining member of staff, a young girl who did not speak English and was new to the project, had to do everything, and often did not get a living wage. Not surprisingly, she seemed dispirited.

The Blue House nursery illustrates the problem of charitable interventions. They are almost always short-term interventions, for a year or two, in a neighbourhood that is chronically short of money. The local authority or government cannot cover the gap, but in any case may not always be informed about what the donor is doing. These ad hoc donor initiatives almost always peter out without regular reliable funding, because they assume in the end the government will step in, or that the project will somehow become income-generating, or, in the last resort, that local people will sustain it, which means that very poor and hardworking women will work for nothing when the money runs out.

*Private for profit care in Katutura township: a training and support project*

The second example is a training and support project for childcare workers in Katutura, the black township on the edge of Windhoek. Katutura is the Soweto of Namibia. In Katutura, there are dozens of backyard nurseries for women who work, mainly as domestics and in relatively unskilled occupations for white households or businesses in Windhoek. The women leave very early in the morning, and often don't get back until late, so the hours of care are long, from 6 or 7 a.m. to 5 or 6 p.m. The nurseries mostly operate from someone's house or shack, sometimes 20 or 30 or 40 or 50 children crowded into a very small space. Often there are no resources: no paper, no crayons, no water, no electricity and no chairs. It is unusual for meals to be provided – children have to bring a packed lunch which consists as often as not of a piece of bread or a packet of crisps. The staff are paid a pittance, around 250–400 Namibian dollars a month, less in the poorest communities. UNICEF had given a grant to a local woman activist to run a childcare training project in the township. Twelve local women in turn were employed by her as 'community trainers and

motivators'. They visited the nurseries, they supplied materials, they supported the staff in keeping records and other basic activities, they offered training, they helped obtain the smallest grants from the local council for roofing or water or drains. Their work was widely praised, and visitors were often referred to them.

But UNICEF programming is in 3-year cycles, and priorities and strategies for funding are derived in turn from headquarters programming in New York (Justice, 2000). When UNICEF pulled out, everyone lost their jobs. The activist applied to many different donors, but no one would continue to fund the project. The UNICEF representative explained to the activist that she should have known the project was only for 3 years, and it was up to her to find alternative funding. The local authority and the government had no money to support the project. However, the activist was still called upon as a 'stakeholder' by the MGECW and was part of a stakeholders group with whom the policy documents were discussed.

### *Rural local authority projects in Oshana province*

The third example is in the rural north. Here there are very few white businesses or employers, and most people are subsistence farmers. The land is overcrowded. When I was there, there had been floods and there were warnings of malarial outbreaks. The local authority had taken a lead; inspired by World Bank and UNICEF material, they argued that an understanding of the principles of child development should be encouraged and parents and the community should be assisted in promoting it. They had used their capital expenditure budget to fund the building of a small number of huts in 'communities' that had expressed an interest in childcare. But when we went round with them, one of the huts had obviously been unoccupied for a long time; another two were closed when we visited, although the manager argued that they might just have closed for harvest time. Another group, supposedly meeting under a tree, had also long since disappeared. Only one of the huts was open and it only had 7 children, who were just about to leave. One child was pushed towards me: 'This one has just lost her mother. She is an AIDS orphan', the childcare worker said. I asked who was looking after her and how far she had come. No one seemed to know. 'Oh she just stays with someone in the village', was the reply. The notion of community is itself something of a fiction, a composite of many competing interests of gender, class and generation (Shiva, 1994). This particular example of 'community' childcare in a rural area exposed the rhetoric cruelly.

The Haihambo report, cited earlier, investigated the situation of parents and carers in more detail, and in particular considered the way in which ECD centres were able to cope with children living in adverse circumstances (Haihambo et al., 2004). The authors noted the 'here today, gone tomorrow' nature of ECD centres in rural areas and described an attitude of 'benign neglect' towards children living in adverse circumstances. Children were not discriminated against,

but nothing was done to support the most vulnerable, and any problems of incapacity or vulnerability were simply ignored.

### The costs of ECD provision

Since all childcare is entirely self-funding, the richer the parent and the more she or he can pay, the better the service. My rule of thumb calculations clearly illustrated the difficulties of self-funding. On the basis of the information obtained from the field trip, I provided approximate costs for running a centre.<sup>4</sup>

In order to set up an ECD centre there needs to be some kind of capital outlay; some kind of shelter, some kind of designated outside space, preferably fenced, and some kind of equipment. The site may be very basic indeed, no more than a tree, unusable in the rainy season. Any kind of capital outlay is problematic in poor communities.

There are also questions of scale. The bigger the centre, the more viable it is likely to be financially, although the bigger the centre, the more capital outlay is required.

With these caveats in mind, standard costs for a small centre would be roughly as follows (see currency chart at end for calculation of amounts):

Caregiver salary	400 Nd per mth (excluding school holidays)
Equipment and consumables	75 Nd per mth
Services and communal charges	100 Nd per mth (depending on site)
<b>Total</b>	<b>575 Nd per mth</b>

In order to make ends meet, (and with no margins for capital repayments, transport to attend training or registration or any form of contingency) there would have to be a minimum of 20 children, all paying 30 Nd every month without fail, and with no food provided. This expenditure simply cannot be met under present conditions. The poorest centres usually have fewer than 20 children, because they cannot afford the capital outlay for bigger premises. They charge no more than 20 Nd per month, and *still* face considerable problems of non-payment. Under these circumstances, the caregiver receives little or no money, and cannot afford to purchase or replace equipment or meet any other costs. She is likely to be dealing with hungry children, some of whom may be orphans or children living in difficult circumstances.

In poorer communities, any kind of early childhood development programmes could only be provided through women volunteering. Informants suggested to me that women took up this role initially in the hope that it would lead to better employment or would be a way of generating an income. It rarely did, and attrition rates were very high – as in the examples cited. The background report recognized this by arguing for a ‘career structure’ for those working in ECD, whereby completing training courses would lead to better

employment conditions. The MGECW was very keen to promote it. But since the employment conditions were entirely dependent on self-generated income, this was unlikely to happen.

## Conclusion

Provision for early childhood is so underfunded in Namibia, and the levels of poverty so high among certain groups, that it is a fallacy to suppose that a little tinkering will make a difference to present inequities. Parents who can pay can secure relatively good conditions for their young children. Parents who are poor either have very poor services or none at all, and in depressed conditions, are unlikely to develop their own programmes or transform their children's lives in the home through the magic formula of early child development.

The background ECD report at least shows some understanding of the predicaments children and their parents face. By the time its recommendations reappear in the overall report *Namibia: Human Capital and Knowledge Development for Economic Growth with Equity*, they have become distorted to fit in with overall liberal economic nostrums. The final version reads as follows:

To improve the supply, a national campaign should be launched to expand the base of private providers of ECD and preprimary education programs. Such providers include NGOs, CBOs, churches, communities, and individuals. In addition, incentives should be considered to encourage providers to establish preprimary schools in the poorest communities. These could include: easy acquisition of land, tax breaks, easy access to credit, and easier registration of schools. To ensure equitable access, clear and transparent mechanisms should be developed and applied to exempt the lowest-income households from paying fees. In this regard, the government should provide scholarships for such children. (Marope, 2005: 8.18)

Namibia, like many other countries in the South, is distinguished by high levels of poverty especially in rural areas and in the townships. Many if not most people make an unpredictable and irregular living through casual labour, small trading or domestic work. It has been extremely hard to administer another MGECW programme, which offers schooling grants to HIV/AIDs orphans, because there is frequently little paper proof of need, and it is widely acknowledged that many orphans are not reached. To try to offer scholarships to a majority of all children is nonsensical. It would be much more efficient to fund services directly, if they are considered to be so important in enabling children to benefit fully from their schooling. The MGECW, which is responsible for development of ECD, lacks the infrastructure for any expansion or even support and cannot carry out any monitoring exercises. There is a lack of trained ECD personnel. There is considerable linguistic diversity; English is the official language, but only a small minority speak it as a first language. HIV/AIDs is an overwhelming problem. The range of

demands on NGOs is heavy and most are overcommitted (Erichsen and Muurholm, 2001).

It is hard to think of a recommendation that is less likely to reduce Namibia's gross inequality, or that shows less understanding of the current circumstances of young children in Namibia. The recommendations of the World Bank were inoperable. Donors, particularly the World Bank, expect substantial change as a result of their interventions – human capital development. Leaving aside the instrumental view of childhood that underpins this approach, and the semi-mystical belief in early childhood intervention, what is offered is so very little compared with what might be needed. At the same time, the inequalities and neoliberal policies that create the situation the donors are trying to address are resolutely ignored. In this, it is typical of many aid interventions that rely on universal prescriptions and technological expertise to pursue agendas that have little to do with the place in which they are enacted. As Quarles van Ufford and van den Berg (2005: 209) have remarked 'we must acknowledge disjuncture first'.

## Notes

1. At the World Bank meetings I attended in Namibia, among the many pseudo technical concepts used was 'diagonal assessment to transform implementation culture'.
2. This is an internal consultancy document only, headed as 'ECD in Namibia 2004' but unauthored. It was given to me by MGEWCW to explain the basis on which they had been developing their policies. It states at the beginning of this report 'This chapter was developed as part of a larger technical consultation based on the World Bank Report, *Namibia: Human Capital and Knowledge Development of Economic Growth with Equity*'. However, although clearly influencing MGEWCW strategy, this document is not cited in the main report to which it refers.
3. A joint MGEWCW/UNICEF CD Rom made to accompany the redrafted policy document has a scene whereby a home-visitor volunteer explains that before their ECD intervention 'the San people ate "bush food". Now they eat proper food.' There was a report in the paper while I was there about a distribution of tinned goods to the San, presumably the proper food they were now being encouraged to eat.
4. Apart from the overall cost of the ETSIP programme which is given in dollars, all figures in the ETSIP programme and the figures I collected refer to the Namibian dollar (Nd), which is pegged to the South African rand. The rand fluctuates in value but at the time of writing: 11 Nd = £1; 7.50 Nd = €1.

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