Bridging the Gap: *A Case Study on How NGOs and International Organizations Expand Access to Early Childhood Education in Afghanistan*

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***Abstract*— Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is known worldwide as an important foundation for children's lifelong learning and development. The paper will discuss how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other international agencies can improve the accessibility to ECCE in Afghanistan, what challenges they face and whether their programs are sustainable. The qualitative case study design was used, including semi-structured interviews with the employees of the NGO and the analysis of documents, such as the reports and policy materials. Thematic analysis has demonstrated that there are some recurrent themes, which are capacity building, community-based strategies, teacher training, inclusion, and sustainability. The findings suggest that NGOs have stopped their supportive roles in ECCE to take up the dominant roles in the delivery of education, which involves integrated education, health, and social participation. However, the barriers are the insufficiency of funds, gender limitation, and unpredictable policies. Findings are minimal and cannot be generalized to other weak environments. The limitations are the limited sample size and inaccessibility to organizations that may influence the field of views elicited. The paper concludes that sustainable ECCE with regard to fragility requires long-term investment, ownership of the communities, and policy coherence.**

Keywords: early childhood care and education, access, NGOs, role, Afghanistan

I. INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is internationally recognized as an integral part of lifelong learning and socio-economic development. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) focus on the claim that early childhood education enhances cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes through supporting the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2, which calls out for access to quality preschool education by 2030 (UNICEF, 2019 and UNESCO, 2016).

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is one of the most ignored parts of the education system in Afghanistan. According to the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC), Afghanistan has no ECCE policy, but mainly these preschool learning platforms are managed by three different ministries in Afghanistan, namely the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Public Health.

As a developing country, Afghanistan has been the center of war, poverty, and political instability for decades, leading to little or no focus on early childhood education and care. Reports show that only a small number of children under six are enrolled in this type of preschool or early learning class (UNICEF, 2022). Studies also point out that the lack of ECCE often leads to children starting school unprepared, which increases dropout rates and increases gender gaps (World Bank, 2018; Jones & Pherali, 2020). Yet, compared to primary and secondary education, ECCE is rarely prioritized in policy discussions, creating a serious gap in both practice and research.

In this challenging context, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have taken the lead in many areas where the government cannot provide services in early childhood care and education, primarily in rural Afghanistan. The Nai Qala Association, for example , runs about 90 preschool classes in provinces such as Bamyan, Daikundi, and Ghazni, reaching more than 2,000 children. Their approach focuses not only on early learning skills but also on community and parental involvement (Nai Qala Association, 2022). The Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL) has been active since 1995, first setting up secret home schools for girls during Taliban restrictions, and today continues to work on ECCE and teacher training (Afghan Institute of Learning, n.d.). Other grassroots groups are also making an impact, such as the Afghan Child Education and Care Organization (AFCECO), which provides safehouses for children that combine care with access to education (AFCECO, n.d.). A different but equally innovative model is used by Skateistan, which combines skateboarding with education to build confidence and school readiness for girls and boys in Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif (Skateistan, 2025).

Nevertheless, these efforts have created the obvious research void on how NGOs and international organizations can aid the efforts of expanding ECCE in Afghanistan. Past research (Jones and Pherali, 2020; UNICEF, 2022) notes the structural obstacles and policy failures but does not offer much empirical evidence on practical strategies, successes, and sustainable ways of NGOs. The research aims to fill this gap by a qualitative case study which deals with the functions, strategies, and issues of NGOs and international organizations.

On the other hand, international organizations have also rolled up their sleeves to contribute positively to early childhood care and education. For instance, UNICEF has introduced community-based ECCE models, especially in rural areas, while the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) has developed culturally relevant curricula and teacher training programs that now reach tens of thousands of children across Afghanistan (AKDN, 2024). Together, these local and global efforts show that even in fragile conditions, it is possible to create opportunities for young learners.

Despite the profound understanding of ECCE, access remains scarce in the Afghan context, mainly in remote and rural Afghanistan. International organizations and NGOs have put forward collective efforts to address the issue of ECCE in Afghanistan, but there is a lack of empirical evidence on how these programs provide access, their effectiveness, and most importantly, their sustainability. This study seeks to address the gap on how NGOs and international organizations contribute to providing access to early childhood education. Using a case-study approach, it provides insights that can inform both future practice and policy in Afghanistan and similar fragile contexts by looking at NGOs' and international organizations, approaches, successes, and challenges.

I.1 Research Objectives:

Given the context of NGOs and international organizations currently working in ECE in Afghanistan, the present study attains the following objectives:

1. To explore the contributing role of NGOs or international organizations in providing access to early childhood education.
2. To discover the strategies applied by NGOs and international organizations to overcome socio-economic and cultural barriers.
3. To analyze the challenges NGOs and international organizations face in implementing ECE programs

I.2 Research Questions:

1. How do NGOs or international organizations contribute to expanding access to ECE in Afghanistan?
2. What models and strategies have been most effective in reaching out to underserved populations?
3. What challenges hinder the sustainability of NGO-led ECE programs?

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) refers to the range of processes, settings and services that support the development, care and learning of children from birth to age eight, so most often focuses on the preschool years before entry into primary school. It combines nutrition, health, protection, early education and stimulation to ensure that children develop social, cognitive and essential emotional skills for lifelong learning (UNESCO,2016) ECCE is not about preparing children for formal schooling but also about nurturing holistic development and reducing inequalities that appear early in life (Haslip & Gullo, 2017).

internationally, ECCE is linked to the sustainable Development goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 4.2 which dedicate countries to ensure that all boys and girls have access to quality early childhood development, preprimary education and care by 2030(UNESCO,2016). UNICEF (2019) emphasis that contribution in ECCE is a cost-efficient strategy for nations because it improves equity, prevents learning gaps and builds human capital. The most countries in the world, including the United States (UN) Nordic countries, and parts of Asia, have incorporated ECCE into national policy frameworks with strong public funding (Haslip & Gullo, 2017) international organizations for instance UNICEF, UNESCO and the world bank upholder the ECCE as a global priority, emphasizing that early education is critical in delicate and conflict affected contexts (UNICEF, 2019; UNESCO ,2016).

I.3 Positive Impact of ECCE on later schooling

The literature on ECCE brings about a diverse range of perspectives, focusing on its importance in development and educational contexts. Its long-term effects positively contribute to academic achievements in mathematics, reading, and social sciences (Cortázar, 2015). This signifies ECCE's role in foundational skills leading to educational achievement later on. Similarly, Mundia (2007) highlights the notion of positive effects of early childhood education on later schooling. There are plenty of studies (Tang et al., 2023; Shamsu, 2023; and Raikes et al., 2023) voicing the likewise issue of the positive contribution of ECCE to lifelong learning and achievement in later learning stages. On the other hand, the quality of ECCE is also a determining factor of the positive impact of early childhood care and education programs. For instance, Ma et al. (2011) find that enhancing the quality of child care systems provides better developmental outcomes, meaning that the quality of programs affects children's growth. In another instance, Young et al. (2021) discover that early childhood education reduces future challenges in education, and ECCE provides protective factors serving as opponents to learning difficulties later on. Another potential benefit of ECCE is that Olao et al. (2021) argue that early childhood education not only develops cognitive skills but also contributes positively towards character and socio-emotional learning. ECCE has plenty of positive impacts on children and helps better prepare them for learning in the future. All in all, literature shows language skills improvement (Elek et al., 2022), positive learning experiences (Arya et al., 2023), and better phonics learning (Mantei et al., 2023) as a result of early childhood care and education. This could unveil the essential role ECCE plays in children's development and future.

Several landmark studies single out ECCE as a success. The Perry Preschool Project in America found that children who attended quality preschool had higher educational attainment, higher employment rates, and lower crime rates compared to those who had no preschool (Heckman, 2011). Similarly, developing countries' longitudinal evidence shows that ECCE interventions have a powerful impact on literacy, numeracy, and social skills and decrease late-education dropout rates (World Bank, 2018).

Better socio-emotional outcomes, lower repetition of grades, improved educational attainment, and more school readiness are just some of the long-term advantages of early childhood education and care (ECCE) (Heckman, 2011; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Cost-benefit analysis suggests that investment in ECCE yields some of the highest education returns with a payoff of $7 to $10 for every $1 invested (Heckman, 2011). Further, recent UNESCO study in 2021 emphasizes ways ECCE enhances gender equity through enabling more mothers to become employed. Further, by providing disadvantaged children with chance for lifetime learning and development of skills, ECCE contributes to breaking cycles of poverty (Haslip & Gullo, 2017).

I.4 Afghanistan: ECCE, ECE, and ECD

The history of war, poverty, and unreliability provides a special environment for ECCE development in Afghanistan. There is no unified policy for ECCE in Afghanistan, and services are disjointed between several ministries (ARNEC, n.d.). Early education is available to most children because fewer than 1% of them are enrolled in formal preschool (UNICEF, 2022). NGOs and international agencies, however, have sought to close the gap. In Daikundi and Bamyan provinces, for instance, there are community preschools with an emphasis on child education and parent participation under the Nai Qala Association (Nai Qala Association, 2022). World Vision Afghanistan has established early childhood development (ECD) programs aimed at getting children ready for primary school and enhancing school readiness (World Vision, 2021). Similarly, culturally responsive ECCE programs involving curriculum development and teacher training are supported by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) (AKDN, 2024). Studies have shown that Afghan children who are exposed to community-based early childhood education and care (ECCE) programs learn more than their counterparts without preschool exposure in terms of preparation for primary school and retention in primary schools (Jones & Pherali, 2020). Despite the above efforts, ECCE continues to be underfunded and disproportionately distributed, especially to displaced groups and rural communities (ARNEC, n.d.; UNICEF, 2022).

I.5 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

To place this study in an analytical context, systems theory and the Education in Emergencies (EiE) framework are adopted. With the Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the interaction of different systems, which are individual, community, institutional, and policy level, culminates in early childhood development. It is the lens that can contribute to the understanding of the character of interactions between NGOs and communities, governments, and international donors as interdependent parts of the bigger educational ecosystem. Such systemic interaction is then required in weak environments like Afghanistan in order to sustain the delivery of ECCE. It is further developed in the Education in Emergencies (EiE) framework (UNESCO, 2021) demonstrating the need to be flexible and stable in case of crisis and rely on community intervention to ensure learning continuity. It is the combination of these visions that would allow this study to consider the NGO inputs in the form of not isolated interventions but of key processes of a resilient learning system that is adaptive in a weak state.

II. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative research design with a case study focus using semi-structured interviews and document analysis. This design is important for finding how NGOs and international organizations are working to expand access to early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Afghanistan. As the study is mainly investigating the role in terms of contribution to enhance access to ECCE in Afghanistan, qualitative research comes as a perfect methodology to integrate the voices of currently involved experts in ECCE in Afghanistan. Similarly, the case study approach provides detailed understanding about a phenomenon about which little is known (Creswell & Poth, 2017), for the reason that this research applies the case study approach to get detailed information about the ECCE phenomenon in Afghanistan through the work of NGOs and international organizations.

II.1 Data Collection:

The primary source of data in this study comes from interviews with NGOs and international organizations. On the other hand, secondary sources of the study are documents, NGO reports, published articles, and documents from organizations like UNICEF, the World Bank, and the Agha Khan Development Network (AKDN). There were two main criteria for selecting the documents. First, the documents were directly related to early childhood education in Afghanistan and mostly contain the approaches and their outcomes in ECCE in Afghanistan. Secondly, they were selected based on their relevance and credibility to ECCE in Afghanistan. The interview participants were selected purposively, focusing on NGO staff with direct involvement in ECCE program design or implementation to get real-time data about the success, challenges, and approaches of ECCE in Afghanistan.

To make the data credible, the study involved six respondents (two in each organization) directly involved in the management of ECCE program or implementation of the program in the field. The interviews took 45-60 minutes each and were held in English and Dari and audio-recorded with the interviewee's consent. The process of data collection resumed until thematic saturation, by which a new insight could no longer be brought forth despite subsequent interviews (Creswell and Poth, 2017).

Table 1. Demographics of the Study Participants

No.	Name	Age	Position	NGO
1	Participant A	23y	Early Childhood Program Assistant	Organization X
2	Participant B	45y	ECD Program Monitor	Organization X
3	Participant C	34y	ECD Program Officer	Organization Z
4	Participant D	46y	ECD Project Lead	Organization Z
5	Participant E	32y	Early Childhood Program Assistant	Organization Y
6	Participant F	30y	Early Childhood Program Assistant	Organization Y

II.2 Data Analysis:

In the present study, the data analysis is carried out through two different strategies. First, the primary data of the study is analyzed using thematic analysis. Secondly, document analysis for available literature analysis on the topic of the study. The documents are mostly reports of ECCE working organizations. The document analysis followed a process through which documents are selected based on their authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning (Morgan, 2022). The study uses the analytic process of Lochmiller (2021) for analyzing the primary data of the study. This process mainly

consists of three stages, i.e., setup, analysis, and interpretation. To elaborate, the first stage of setup involves organizing and preparing for data analysis. Lochmiller (2021) talks about using computer-assisted software (CAQDAS, as he refers to it in his study) to upload the video and audio files while also talking about writing down the field notes into MS Word. Particularly, this stage is preparing files and notes using computers and scanners to set up everything for the next stage. The second stage in this form of thematic analysis includes the analysis phase as referred to by Lochmiller. This stage mainly involves familiarizing oneself with data, developing initial codes, and identifying categories. The third or final stage of the thematic analysis is the interpretative phase, where the categories created in the analysis phase are looked for connections and are developed into themes. The themes are created based on the evidence from the data. In this study the researchers used Lochmiller (2021) for three reasons. First, this thematic analysis is flexible toward analyzing qualitative data, as it's not based on any theoretical framework, making it highly adaptable. Secondly, this thematic analysis approach perfectly aligns with the case study approach, which finds in-depth thematic insights. Furthermore, Lochmiller's (2021) thematic analysis brings a clear, phase-by-phase guide that leads to a systematic and transparent process of analysis.

An inter-coder validation was conducted to increase reliability: two researchers coded one-third of the transcripts independently and compared them to achieve consistency in the interpretations of themes. Checking of the members was also done where the participants were presented with the summaries of findings to check their accuracy. This facilitated the credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study, as mentioned in the data collection part, mainly come from two sources. These two sources are from three different organizations currently working in early childhood education in Afghanistan. For the reason of confidentiality and ethical consideration, the study will use pseudonyms for the organizations (Organization 1, 2, and 3). The findings are divided into two categories: primary and secondary findings. Here, we start the findings with primary first, followed by secondary findings and discussion. The primary findings of the study are derived from the primary, or firsthand, data collection and analysis. After following through with the data analysis process, the result yielded the following Two main categories of themes. The findings of the study kick off with the role of the NGOs in early childhood education in Afghanistan. The qualitative analysis has provided an opportunity to obtain the thematic structure, which is presented in Figure 1 and summarizes the roles of NGOs and their major challenges in the provision of ECCE.

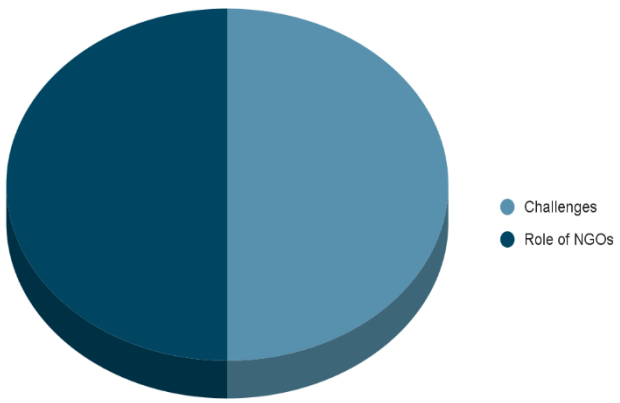


Figure 1 Findings of primary data analysis

III.1 Role of NGOs in Early Childhood Education in Afghanistan:

In the context of Afghanistan, not many local or international organizations work in early childhood education. The findings revealed that all three organizations work in early childhood education as side initiatives while mainly focusing on healthcare (Organizations 1 & 2) and education (Organization 3).

Organizations 1 and 2 are working on providing healthcare, and with this they also provide early childhood education. Organization 1 has created a program called *Parwaz* covering both pre-delivery and post-delivery care for both mother and child, and this program is compulsory for both mother and child. Their main learning items include cognitive learning, nutrition, language learning, basic numeracy and literacy, basic sciences, religion (mainly the religious beliefs of the community), moral and behavior education, and early development. The integral role of Organization 1 is to prepare, facilitate, deliver, and take care of the early childhood educational programs. The unique point about this program is that it covers both mother and child, and it is compulsory for the community it operates in. One of the participants said, "Our Parwaz program is a health and educational program—it is the initial move to transform the attitudes of people regarding the learning of children in the community. According to Organization 1:

> ***"This program for the development and growth of children is one of the crucial and effective approaches in their realm of organizational scope."***

Organization 2 works through a different approach to early childhood education. According to Organization 2:

> ***"Our organization works to enhance the quality and accessibility of early childhood education in Afghanistan. We design and implement programs that help children learn basic skills and prepare for school."***

This organization works in rural Afghanistan similarly to Organization 3. They view their role in ECE in Afghanistan as crucial and central to both providing access and quality. According to one of the program coordinators, the primary goal of our mission is to visit children who have never been in the classroom in remote locations Opposite to Organization 1, this organization mainly focuses on girls and rural and displaced children, but they do not focus on children with an aim to provide access and equal early childhood education opportunities. On the other hand, this organization considers itself a pioneer in integrated local wisdom through consultation with local communities to bring in local cultural tradition and be responsive to local religion. They also keep close contact with local authorities and governmental establishments for the alignment of educational programs that benefit local support.

Organization 3's role is secondary to the Ministry of Education Afghanistan's general program for early childhood development (ECD). They primarily coordinate with the Ministry of Education to enhance and prepare children for school. This organization is mainly active in support ECD in eastern Afghanistan has nearly 222 centers for ECD with two main ingredients: skills and preparation for school. Both organizations 2 and 3 focus on rural, displaced, and conflict-affected communities. They also have a formal MoU with the Ministry of Education to supervise ECD centers and also integrate local communities' voices in their programs. One of the top managers pointed out that they consider their mission to be capacity building- to train teachers and communities to continue learning without them.:

> ***"Our organization strives to implement long-term and quality programs for ECD in Afghanistan. Our programs are mainly designed to build local and governmental authorities' capacity in ECD"***

III.2 Challenges Organizations in Early Childhood Education Face:

Afghanistan is a developing country, and the context of the country still requires more efforts, programs, and policies in ECD to turn it into a publicly aware and culturally accepted phenomenon. In this regard, these organizations have a number of challenges, as they highlight during the interview. We have categorized the challenges into one table as follows:

Table 2. Challenges faced by NGOs while delivering early childhood education in Afghanistan

No.	Organization X	Organization Y	Organization Z
1	Lack of standard ECE learning	The current situation for ECE is complicated	Lack of resources
2	Lack of Competent pedagogical staff	Lack of teachers	Lack of public awareness of ECE
3	Distance between ECD and children's houses	Lack of learning facilities	Security issues
4	Restriction of De facto authority	Security issues	
	Delivery of learning materials	Lack of cultural awareness	

The study finds that each organization has different sorts of challenges when providing ECE in Afghanistan. Lack of teachers, security issues (restriction of de facto authorities for organization three), and lack of public awareness are the common challenges across these organizations. These challenges are hard for the organizations to tackle and get to every community with early childhood education programs.

Through our document analysis, we have found that these organizations are actively engaging in early childhood development in Afghanistan. Mostly Organizations Y and Z are committed to ECD, while Organization 1 is focusing on accelerated learning, community-based education, and education in emergencies. This organization has one program named Non-formal Education and Childcare Support (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2014). Their main activity comes in the form of providing learning kits to aid caregivers who provide support to parents attending educational programs. On the other hand, Organization Y is actively engaging with MoE Afghanistan to run and prepare children for primary education through early childhood education programs. Similarly, this organization also provides teacher trainings on ECD and creates child-friendly spaces and psychosocial support (Shezad and Shepherd-Johson, 2017). The study also found that this particular organization has created over 750 child-friendly centers across the country (UNICEF, 2024), facilitating learning, playing, and emotional support for children. Finally, the third organization of this study plays an essential role in early childhood development in Afghanistan. This organization has taken the approach to lead 70 ECD centers through pre-primary ECD programs and community-based non-formal ECD programs for children (The Aga Khan Educational Services, 2025). Teacher training, monitoring, and parent engagement are also at the core of the ECD program design of this organization. The approach seems to be holistic, as it works together with caregivers and communities and focus on teaching (Bayat, 2018)

The findings of this study present a reality of nongovernmental organizations that have shifted from being only supplementary actors to main funders, implementers, and architects of early childhood education in Afghanistan. These organizations operate in complex and largely restrictive conditions in post-conflict Afghanistan. Navigating a country with systemic challenges, ideological constraints, and profound need for humanitarian aid. Here, the research discusses the findings by connecting them to recent reports and literature.

These findings closely align with system theory, which indicates that NGOs are essential subsystems that offer an educational balance concerning a weak state institution (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Similar adaptive patterns have been replicated by other vulnerable environments such as Syria and South Sudan as NGOs have taken the center stage in maintaining early learning ecosystems (Tzimas, 2019; UNESCO, 2021). This strength is further expounded in the Education in Emergencies (EiE) framework—community-based and flexible models of the NGOs are adaptive strategies that support continuity of learning in case of political and financial instability.

III.3 Filling the Governance Vacuum:

One of the paramount findings of this study comes in the form of the transition from being implementing actors to serving as the de facto education system, specifically in early childhood education. Similar to the argument of Barakat and Milton (2020), in the wake of state retreat or collapse, non-state agents assume central governmental functions. It has turned into a worldwide phenomenon, mostly being observed in fragile and conflict-affected states. As we have found that Organizations 2 and 3 have formal MoUs with the Afghan Ministry of Education, this is pretty similar to Tzimas (2019) referring to the work of international and national NGOs, which primarily deliver services, set standards, and manage infrastructure. This could be referred to as substitute governance in Afghanistan's case, where NGOs have taken over the charge of early childhood education.

The vacuum in governance is more exacerbated after the collapse of government in 2021. A report published by the World Bank (2023) highlights how international aid drastically reduced, crippling the state's ability to fund and manage education across the country. Hence, as the findings showed, the NGO-led models of early childhood education go far beyond being only a supplement but are very foundational to the ECE sector. This leads to a perilous situation where the entire early learning system depends on the shaky flow of foreign humanitarian aid and NGOs' capacity to function in a changing regulatory environment.

III.4 Community Legitimacy and Realistic Integration:

In the context of Afghanistan, organization 1 is doing the form of Parwaz where both mother and childcare are embedded into early childhood development. This can be regarded as the best-practice response to a war-torn context, like Afghanistan. According to a report by UNICEF (2022), integrating families and communities into early childhood education in the form of a family-friendly learning environment works best for both parents' and caregivers' well-being. It is important to mention that collective services/efforts in crises result in several benefits, improving growth, and nutrition. On the other hand, Organization 1 is moving forward with early childhood education through the non-negotiable value of healthcare for education by making their ECD program compulsory.

Alongside this, communities' legitimacy is integral to the work of these NGOs inside Afghanistan. As far as the teacher training is concerned, these organizations work through locally hired personnel for teaching, which comes in the form of community legitimacy, as stated by Ratner et al. (2021), that professional development ECD is best when created as a community practice and locally hired and trained. Not only hiring local teachers but also doing regular consultation with the community, giving space to local norms and cultural traditions, and making early childhood education part and parcel of community life. Masood et al. (2025) found that cultural traditions in early childhood education improve cognitive abilities and are helpful in creating cultural identities with emotional control.

III.5 Challenges amid ECD in Afghanistan:

The issues flagged in the results, from security threats to teaching issues, tend not to be isolated but rather interconnected as different symptoms of a deeply troubled system. The already "lacking" competent teaching staff is greatly compounded by the prohibitions of the de facto powers on female learning. Early childhood education is particularly hit because it relies heavily on female teachers, who, as Human Rights Watch (2024) meticulously documents, are severely impacted by the bans on female teachers and secondary education for girls. Now, NGOs face the consequences of this terrible brain drain and a lack of often minimally trained staff.

Additionally, the phrase "security issues" has evolved in its meaning. It was once linked to physical or aggressive conflict, as indicated by terms like "restriction of de facto authority" (Org. X) and "lack of cultural awareness" (Org. Z), but it now is related more to ideological acceptance and a bureaucratic barrier. The ACAPS (2023) report also explains how the present prolonged and unclear NGO approval

process tends to be a cover for enforcing staff policies and curriculum changes in line with the authorities' directives. In the same way, the organizations have come to identify what they call “no standard ECE learning” and “no learning facilities” as products of this regulatory environment's stifling of innovation and quality.

In the end, one must consider the 'lack of public awareness' alongside the ongoing economic collapse. With well over 90% of the population living under the poverty line (UNDP, 2024), the primary concern for families is the daily battle for survival. In this context, our research emphasizes the reality that the opportunity cost of sending children to centers, coupled with the inability to afford the relevant indirect costs, remains insurmountable, even in cases where the parents value and aim to prioritize early childhood education.

This research finding agrees with the argument by Barakat and Milton (2020) that NGOs are considered to be alternative forms of governance in weak states, which fill the gaps in the capacity of states to deliver education. It is also in line with the systems theory views, which affirm relationships of actors and structures in maintaining educational ecosystems. When combining these findings with the wider theories of ECCE development, there is evidence to indicate that multi-level cooperation among the NGOs, communities, and the limited state mechanisms forms adaptive systems, which ensure educational continuity even in areas of conflict. The discovery signifies the education-in-emergencies model, which puts resilience and adaptability in program provision in the limelight (UNESCO, 2021).

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This research aimed to understand the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the provision of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Afghanistan. The results paint a stark and grim picture: with the collapse of the state and the departure of international assistance, NGOs have transitioned from being supporting contractors to the de facto system for early childhood education in the country. The three groups highlighted demonstrate remarkable resilience and innovation in ensuring the continuation of ECE to cater to vulnerable and rural populations. Through community-based programs, integrated health-education initiatives, and formal agreements with the Ministry of Education, they ensure ECE is maintained.

The ecology that organizations attempt to develop is completely unviable and functions in very difficult conditions. The critical dearth of qualified personnel, especially female staff, stringent limitations by de facto authorities, staggering poverty, and entrenched public awareness problems depict an entirely different sector but are in fact built-up problems of the socioeconomic and political violence. The operating environment of these groups is marked by a continuous attempt to maintain equilibrium between top-down ideological compliance and bottom-up community engagement, and at the same time, relying on unpredictable, short-term humanitarian aid. Hence, the sustainability of ECE in Afghanistan is at risk, depending on the resilience of these NGOs instead of being backed by a sound government policy framework.

These results directly answer the research questions by establishing the facilitating factors of the NGOs, the strategies they employ and the challenges that pose risks to sustainability. The analytical interpretation of the results indicates that the system is conditional upon short-term humanitarian funding and few policy integrations which reiterates the necessity to institute structural reforms. Sustainability of ECCE is threatened in the absence of a multi-year funding, trained local teachers, in particular women, and greater government coordination. Limitations: The study is limited because it incorporated only a few organizations and interviews and cannot be generalized to represent all the Afghan NGOs. Furthermore, the limited political space limited the access to female educators and government officials. Future Research: It would be valuable to conduct comparative or longitudinal research on the long-term results of NGO-based ECCE programs, rate of donor dependency, and cross-

country research of ECCE sustainability in fragile settings. Policy Implications: To improve the equitable and sustainable impact of ECCE, policy makers should focus on long-term and flexible funding cycles; the NGOs should improve the training of local teachers and ownership of the community; and institutionalize ECCE in the national education systems.

A focused blend of actions is needed to support early childhood education institutions in Afghanistan based on the key findings of this research. First, global donors and financing institutions need to move away from short-term project cycles and adopt multi-year, flexible funding contracts. This will give NGOs the leeway to plan ahead, keep skilled personnel, and build strong program infrastructure instead of perpetually trying to patch through the next emergency. Second, restricted female mobility must be addressed through remote and community-based teacher training models in order to enhance capacity building. At the same time, community ownership needs to be strengthened to improve program legitimacy and security through formalized advocacy groups, which are also important in building program legitimacy and security. Finally, it is vital to encourage coordinated monitoring of the operational environment and provide funds for further research on the long-term outcomes of ECE participants and the wider community attitudes, ensuring the interventions are data-driven and adaptable to evolving circumstances. The current early learning support, which is NGO-led, is already fragile; without sustained and coordinated action, it is likely to collapse, putting the future of an entire generation at risk.

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