



Vietnam General  
Confederation of Labour



Vietnam Ministry  
of Health



Research and Training  
Centre for Community  
Development



Monash University

# Early Childhood Development

## LEVERAGING EVIDENCE FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE IN VIETNAM

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### Workshop Report

**HANOI, 23 MAY 2023**





# BACKGROUND

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The first 1,000 days of a child's life from conception to age 2 is a phase of rapid neurological and physical growth. Early childhood development (ECD) plays a crucial role in shaping a child's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development during the early years of life, which influences subsequent learning and earning capacity into adulthood.

In Vietnam, ECD is recognized as a crucial investment for human capital and the foundation for national development. Vietnam is a signatory to the implementation of the Nurturing Care Framework which promotes strategies to ensure that every child has a healthy start to life and receives optimal parental care. A joint agreement was signed between 4 Ministries, Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), and Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism (MCST), on 17th February 2022 to implement Prime Minister's Decision 1437 to promote ECD nationally. This workshop was a vital step for further collaboration of 4 Ministries to improve ECD in Vietnam.

The Early Journey of Life (EJOL) program provides life stage specific information and learning opportunities for parents in 20 sessions, including 19 facilitated small group meetings covering multiple risks for child development and 1 home visit. It focuses on all domains of the child development and teaches parents about how to provide sensitive and responsive care, early learning opportunities, and a safe and health promoting home environment. The aim was to enable children to grow and thrive. This approach was tested in a cluster randomized controlled trial in which children (aged 0-2) from 84 communes in Ha Nam province offered usual standard of care and 42 of these communes were also offered the EJOL program. The findings showed that children in the EJOL arm had significantly better cognitive, motor, language and social-emotional development than those in the standard of care arm, and the program was cost-effective. In April 2023, the findings of this cluster randomized controlled trial were published in the Lancet Child & Adolescents Health. The findings of EJOL's cost-effectiveness have been accepted for publication in the Lancet Global Health.

# OBJECTIVES

This national workshop aimed:

**1**

To present the findings of EJOL to stakeholders in Vietnam with interests in ECD and maternal health

To discuss the implications and strengthen evidence for national policies for ECD

**2**

**3**

To identify how EJOL can be made available in different modes to all, including more vulnerable groups like children of industrial zone workers and children in families in remote areas

The workshop was under the auspices of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor (VGCL), Vietnam Ministry of Health (MOH), the Research and Training Center for Community Development (RTCCD) and Monash University (Australia).

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# PARTICIPANTS

Nearly 100 participants attended the workshop both in-person and online, including representatives from the MOH, MOLISA, VGCL, as well as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, USAID, INGOs, LNGOs, local institutes, national and provincial health facilities, Trade Union agencies, and national print and broadcast media. Representatives of the RTCCD and Monash University presented the new evidence and joined the panel with the MOH, MOLISA, and VGCL to discuss the implications.

# PRESENTATIONS

The workshop consisted of **five formal presentations** and **a panel discussion**



## PRESENTATION 1.

Vietnam Policy Framework Supporting Early Childhood Development



## PRESENTATION 2.

Early Journey of Life: Community Impact and Research-based Evidence of an Early Childhood Development Innovation in Vietnam



## PRESENTATION 3.

Cost-effectiveness of Early Journey of Life for promoting child development



## PRESENTATION 4.

Implementing e-learning program on the first 1000 days of children's life to industrial zone workers



## PRESENTATION 5.

Leveraging Science for a New Era in Early Childhood Policy and Practice



## PANEL DISCUSSION

# PRESENTATION 1

## Vietnam Policy Framework Supporting Early Childhood Development

Dr. Nguyen Mai Huong, Senior Official, Head of the Breastfeeding Division from MOH, presented maternal and child health background in Vietnam, the policy framework and key stakeholders, and the Health sector's significant achievements and national priorities to support ECD.

Dr. Huong reported that although advances have been made, maternal, newborn, infant, and child mortalities continued to be higher in Vietnam than in high-income countries. Additionally, less than half children aged under two received appropriate supplementary feeding; only one in five had at least 3 picture books; harsh punishment was common; and at least 5.5 million children experienced deprivations in education, health, nutrition, or social inclusion.



National and Ministry-specific policies, including Decision 1437/2018/TTg about comprehensive development in the first years of life, were presented with the key stakeholders such as MOH, MOLISA, MOET, and MCST. In the Health sector, the main focus is on nutrition in the first 1000 days, and there is an opportunity to bring all sectors together to achieve ECD collectively. National priorities for action in the next 5 years include increasing resource investment and creating a favorable environment for ECD.

Dr. Huong concluded that three Ministries, MOLISA, MOH, and MOET, have parenting education missions requiring mapping to ensure no overlap and that messages are consistent and scientific. It was noted that considerations need to be given to what innovations are suitable for a nationwide scale-up and what criteria are necessary to assess the best innovation.

# PRESENTATION 2

## Early Journey of Life: Community Impact and Research-based Evidence of an Early Childhood Development Innovation in Vietnam

Professor Jane Fisher, Monash University and Tran Thi Thu Ha, Director of RTCCD presented the impacts of EJOL with global evidence and shared their recommendations on ECD.

The WHO's Nurturing Care Framework highlights that children need nurturing care to reach their full potential. The framework encompasses 5 areas: good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, security and safety, and opportunities for early learning.



EJOL is a structured, multicomponent, and community-based parenting program to improve women's health as well as infants' health and development. To tackle multiple risks for child development, following the guidelines for nurturing care, the program addresses pregnancy health, nutrition needs, newborn care, infant care, perinatal mental health and gender equity. EJOL was tested a cluster randomized controlled trial, and the findings demonstrated that the program improved child cognitive, language, motor and social-emotional development (see our [publication](#) in the Lancet Child & Adolescent Health). In addition, more fathers who participated in EJOL were involved in ECD, and home environment was improved. Meanwhile, there were no significant differences in maternal mental health, child stunting and wasting, and childhood illness between EJOL and standard care, which indicates that more intensive components are needed.

Professor Jane Fisher and Director Tran Thi Thu Ha concluded that EJOL had substantial benefits for ECD with quality evidence. Further research was suggested to investigate which program components are the most effective, what level of program intensity might be sufficient, and whether alternative methods of program delivery such as online would work. Similarly, follow-up studies were proposed to examine the long-term benefits of this program.

# PRESENTATION 3

## Cost-effectiveness of Early Journey of Life for Promoting Child Development

Yeji Baek, PhD Candidate from Monash University, presented a cost-effectiveness analysis of EJOL program. The cost-effectiveness analysis aimed to estimate how much it costed to improve ECD using EJOL innovation and to determine its value for money compared to the usual standard of care in rural Vietnam.

The total intervention cost was around 4 billion Vietnamese Dong (VND). Among these, start-up cost including EJOL package development, materials and supplies, workshops, and training cost accounted for 3 billion VND. The start-up cost was one-time cost to implement EJOL and would not occur every year. Recurrent cost, which would occur regularly, including personnel cost, session cost, supervision and management, and household participation cost, was around 800 million VND for 42 communes in 18 months. The total cost of intervention per child was around 6 million VND and total recurrent cost per child was around 1 million VND.

The incremental cost-effectiveness ratio of EJOL was 314,443 VND (around US\$14) per child, meaning to increase one score in cognitive development, alongside other benefits in language and motor development, only \$14 was spent per child. This cost was at 0.5% of Vietnam's GDP per capita, which is lower than G20's benchmark of 2% of GDP for investment in ECD, indicating EJOL is cost-effective. The findings of the cost-effectiveness have been accepted for publication in the Lancet Global Health.

In addition, the findings showed that EJOL could promote equity with greater benefits and cost-effectiveness in children from low socioeconomic backgrounds than their counterparts.



# PRESENTATION 4

## Implementing e-learning program on the first 1000 days of children's life to industrial zone workers

Ms. Do Hong Van, Director of the Women's Work and Policy Department from VGCL presented an overview of labor force in industrial zones, the Trade Union's priorities to improve the quality of life and healthcare of workers and their children, and the results and lessons learned from implementing EJOL to workers.

In Vietnam, there are 11 million employees, and 55.7% of them are female employees. Around 12% of female workers are pregnant and raising infants under 1 year old. Trade Union's priorities to workers and their children include 1) improving quality of female worker's policies and activities, 2) creating an atmosphere of dignity, contentment, understanding, and constructive connections in the family lives of workers through instruction on population, family, children and gender empowerment, and 3) taking improved initiatives to support the children of employees.

EJOL has been implemented for industrial zone workers by RTCCD and VJOL. As a result, four e-courses on the first 1000 days of children's life and child safety at daycares were developed, e-learning was piloted in 10 factories, 1065 workers attended the in-person workshops, 971 workers were enrolled, 212 Union Leaders were introduced to the e-learning platform. Learners' childcare knowledge increased after the courses, and participants provided positive feedback.

Do Hong Van noted that high involvement and completion of the course among workers indicate the potential of expanding EJOL to more industrial zones. Trade Union plans to collaborate with EJOL and other organizations to carry out Prime Minister's Decision 1437 and Decision 1268/2022/TTg about 'Encouraging Lifelong Learning among Workers in Enterprises until 2030'.



# PRESENTATION 5

## Leveraging Science for a New Era in Early Childhood Policy and Practice

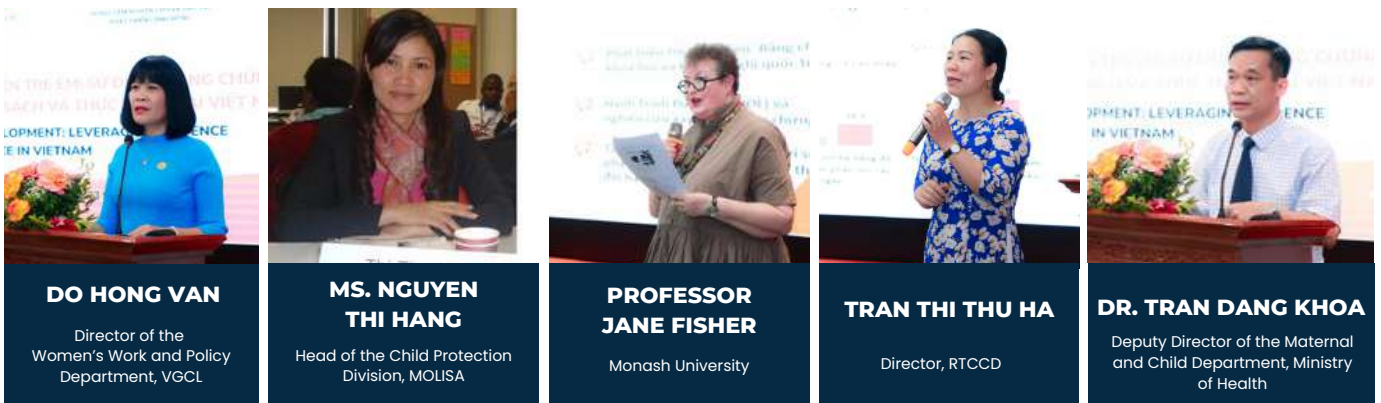
Professor James Cairns, Senior Director at the Center on the Developing Child from Harvard University presented scientific evidence on ECD and shared their work with acknowledging EJOL's impacts through a recorded presentation.



The Center focused on early brain development and the evidence on how the brain is built over time, serve and return interaction between caregivers and children, and how toxic stress can damage brain development which was coined ECD 1.0. With emerging evidence, the Center coined ECD 2.0 to complement ECD 1.0 with focus on connecting the brain to the rest of the body in a broader ecosystem around the caregiver-child relationship. In ECD 2.0, supporting families and young children is important as it builds a foundation for lifelong physical and mental health by considering integrated set of systems that have both health and learning impact. Additionally, ECD 2.0 highlights built and natural environments where families live and how factors in those environments are shaping development and lifelong health. The interaction within the natural and built environment is important to understand what's affecting child outcomes beyond their access to programs and services. For instance, they consider the impacts of air quality, safe green space and playgrounds, housing, neighborhood infrastructure, excessive heat, access to clean water and access to nutritious food on child development, sleep patterns, mental health and stress. Lastly, ECD 2.0 addresses more systemic influences such as current and historic policies that shape the structural inequities. They focus on how policies have shaped where people live, what they have access to in terms of health, education and childcare, and how those things contribute to cycles of poverty across generations. The example 'Child Opportunity Index' in the United States was shared to demonstrate systemic disparities in child development and health by neighborhoods, race, and ethnicity. In conclusion, the importance of collective work from communities, businesses, government and other actors in societies was highlighted to ensure that there is a supportive and healthy environment for all families with young children.

# PANEL DISCUSSION

The final session was a panel discussion to discuss 'Inter-sectoral collaboration and generation of evidence to scale up ECD innovation in Vietnam'. It was chaired by Dr. Tran Dang Khoa, Deputy Director of the Maternal and Child Department, Ministry of Health, with the following panel:



The panel members acknowledged that collaboration between 4 Ministries, MOLISA, MOH, MOE, and MCST, is crucial to implement Prime Minister's Decision 1437 to promote ECD. Reviewing the mid-term implications of how provinces implement the Prime Minister's Decision 1437 has been planned by the MOLISA to foster synergy and joint efforts in ECD. In addition, the panel discussed the need to develop a national action plan and national monitoring system for ECD, as well as the importance of engaging the National Women's Union and VGCL as key government partners for ECD promotion. The panel also highlighted the need to map all local innovations in ECD and existing evidence of those innovations to identify non-state partners and their strengths in ECD.



Regarding EJOL, the positive impacts on child development with high-quality evidence were reiterated. Further research and evidence were recommended to assess the long-term benefits and to strengthen nutrition components to tackle stunting. The discussion included that funding would be required to generate more evidence and scale the EJOL program nationwide.



# CONCLUSION

The workshop included five presentations and a panel discussion. National policies to promote ECD, the impacts of EJOL on child development and its cost-effectiveness, EJOL in industrial zone workers, and global ECD evidence were discussed.

To support ECD policy and practice in Vietnam, collective work among 4 Ministries, VGCL, and the National Women's Union, with adequate resources to accelerate evidence-based ECD initiatives, are necessary.



## Special thanks to our financial supporters

