

Brief report on the achievements of the Early Learning Challenges Project (2nd CCF/ 2002 – 2007)

Over the last 5 years (2002/2007), the Early Learning Challenges (ELC) Project witnessed some remarkable achievements that bear witness to the potential impact governmental organizations can achieve when adopting a participatory approach while working collaboratively with non-governmental organizations (NGO) and civil society organizations (CSO). The following brief report highlights some of the outstanding achievements of the ELC Project which are listed in chronological order.

2002 / 2004

The ELC Project kick started its activities with providing technical assistance to Kuwait Dyslexia Association (KDA), a CSO dedicated to assisting individuals with dyslexia and their families overcome challenges posed by this specific learning disability. The KDA requested technical assistance to conduct a nation wide survey study of dyslexia in Kuwait in order to identify the scale of the problem. The survey study was completed in 24 months and is, thus far, the only survey study conducted across the whole Arab World which highlights the alarming prevalence rate of dyslexia in Kuwait (6.3% of the number of students attending primary schools in Kuwait). Following the completion of this survey study, many other organizations in the Arab World have shown keen interest in replicating this study across their respective countries. However, to date, no such studies exist apart from Kuwait. The result of the survey study was subsequently published and the UNDP experts who worked on this survey study submitted papers to international conferences¹ discussing the findings of this important study.

2004/2005

Following the success of the survey study of dyslexia in Kuwait, the UNDP Office in Kuwait agreed to provide further technical assistance to the KDA to develop an Arabic localized computer-based tool for the early identification of at risk Kuwaiti Arabic speaking children: The Cognitive Profiling System (CoPS). The tool is the only one of its kind in the Arab World that is used to identify at risk individuals starting from the ages of 4 years till 8 years and 11 months, thus providing, for the first time, a valid and reliable computerized tool in Arabic to be used by kindergarten and early schools years in Kuwait. The project was a huge undertaking from the part of the KDA, and the ELC Project was instrumental in providing technical expertise for the execution and follow up at various stages of the project. In July 2007, the project was completed (following a nationally standardized sample of 2400 children across Kuwait), and the tool becomes available for use in nurseries and schools across Kuwait from September 2007. Phases of this project were also documented in published papers and articles in both Arabic & English as well as in presentations at international conferences². A training course was also developed during this year, the first of its kind in Arabic, dedicated to parents and teachers who come in contact with individuals with dyslexia. The course was recognized by international experts in the field as a well grounded foundation course. Towards the end of 2007, the course was

¹ The Fourth International Conference of the Gulf Disability Society, Doha, Qatar, March 2003. The Sixth International Conference of the British Dyslexia Association, University of Warwick, UK, March 2004. The Fifth World Dyslexia Congress in August 2004 in Thessalonica, Greece

² The First Egyptian Conference on Dyslexia, February 17th–19th 2005, Cairo, Egypt/ The Regional Conference on Learning Disabilities in Amman, Jordan in July 2005.

conducted over 14 times already with an average of 20 participants each time. In addition, the ELC Project has also enabled the KDA to upgrade its awareness outreach by providing technical expertise for the KDA to improve its website and its information leaflets.

2005/2006

The ELC Project witnessed a peak in its delivery and impact throughout 2005 and 2006. The following list highlights many achievements of the ELC Project during this period:

- A. Due to the impact of the rigorous awareness campaign initiated by the KDA with the support of the ELC Project, His Excellency, the Kuwaiti Minister of Education at the time, Dr. Rasheed Hamad Al Hamad, issued a Ministerial Decree for establishing a Dyslexia Higher Educational Committee to raise awareness of dyslexia in mainstream schools in Kuwait. The Ministerial Decree was issued in August 2005 and the Committee included 7 members and was chaired by the Chairman of the Kuwait National Committee of the UNESCO at that time, Mr. Abdul Aziz Al Jar Allah.
- B. From April 2005 till June 2006, the ELC Project helped various beneficiaries in Kuwait conduct 37 public lectures and talks, 4 National TV appearances, 2 Radio contributions “including one with the BBC World Service in Arabic” in additions to innumerable media and press interviews.
- C. From April 2005 till June 2006, 5 General Training Courses on dyslexia and learning disabilities were delivered as part of the ELC project in addition to 2 Specific Training Courses and 5 Workshops. These were all given as part of the work of the experts working via funding from the ELC Project.
- D. The first ever issue of a dedicated magazine for Dyslexia in Arabic was published in August 2005 with technical assistance from the ELC Project. Now, the same Magazine continues to be published in both English and Arabic and has reached its fifth edition.
- E. The ELC Project provided technical assistance and capacity building for the KDA and the Centre for Child Evaluation & Teaching (CCET) to conduct a strategic study and a restructuring plan which resulted in enhanced services and accelerated performance in both CSOs.
- F. In 2005, a paper was published in English by the UNDP expert working on the ELC Project entitled: “Dyslexia in Arabia: The Kuwait story”, which clearly highlighted the role of the UNDP and the ELC Project in raising awareness, building capacity and improving the situation for dyslexia in Kuwait and the Gulf region³.
- G. Work and research studies resulted from the ELC Project were presented at the following six international conferences around the world:
 1. July 2005, 3rd International Multilingualism & Dyslexia Conference, Limasol, Cyprus.
 2. November 2005, 56th Annual Conference of the International Dyslexia Association, Denver, Colorado, USA.
 3. March 2006, 5th Dubai International Rehabilitation Forum, Dubai, United Arab Emirates.
 4. September 2006, 3rd International Conference on Spatial Cognition, Rome, Italy.

³ Elbeheri, G. (2005) Dyslexia in Arabia: The Kuwait story. *Dyslexia Review*, Volume 17 Number 1. Dyslexia Institute: Staines, UK.

5. November 2006, 57th Annual Conference of the International Dyslexia Association's, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA.
 6. November 2006, International Conference on Learning Disabilities, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
- H. September 2005 witnessed the start of a national initiative, Dyslexia Friendly Schools in collaboration with the British Dyslexia Association. And the Kuwait National Committee of the UNESCO. Experts from the UK and the US were made available via the ELC project to build capacity and train local teachers on methods of identification, differentiation and remediation of individuals with dyslexia amongst main stream schools in Kuwait. The Dyslexia Friendly Schools National Initiative started with two main stream schools and has now reached 10 schools!
- I. During 2005 and 2006, discussions were underway between Kuwait University and the KDA which eventually paved the way for signing a Memorandum of Understanding between the KDA and the Faculty of Education, Kuwait University. These discussions and the eventual by product were only facilitated and made possible because of the technical assistance and support of the ELC Project.

2006/2007

The ELC Project moved from strength to strength during this period. Technical assistance for the Centre for Child Evaluation & Teaching was facilitated by the ELC Project which led to:

- i. Appointing a Testing Expert to facilitate the process of nationally standardizing Arabic-based abilities and cognitive tests in order to fill the existing gap in Arabic assessment and evaluation tests.
- ii. Organizing the first ever Early Learning Challenges Workshop Series (4 Workshops in total) and building capacity amongst various beneficiaries within Kuwait. The media coverage of these Workshop Series, the impact it created and the satisfaction of the attendants all bear witness to their success.
- iii. The Workshop Series lasted for a whole month, were attended by more than 300 participants, and 6 international experts were invited to contribute.
- iv. Providing technical assistance (Media Expert & Scientific Content Editor experts) to produce a Toolkit for Teachers and a Toolkit for Parents of individuals with Learning Disabilities in Arabic in Kuwait.
- v. Providing technical assistance for CCET to produce the first ever Documentary Film on Learning Disabilities in Arabic. The Documentary is near completion and is produced according to international standards with funding from the Kuwait Awqaf Public Foundation and technical assistance from the UNDP.
- vi. Providing technical assistance to CCET in the form of an Inclusion Expert, an Awareness Expert and an Intervention Curriculum Development Expert, all of whom are currently working in boosting the services offered in Kuwait for individuals with learning disabilities and their families.
- vii. Based on the success of the ELC Project, the MoE requested the Public Authority for Applied Education & Training (PAAET) to provide qualified teachers (650 teachers over the next 10 years), who specialize in learning disabilities to enable the MoE to enhance its offered services for individuals with learning disabilities in both private and mainstream government schools across Kuwait.
- viii. Various UNDP Experts working on the ELC Project provided feedback and assistance to PAAET (Faculty of Basic Education) who requested the

feedback of the UNDP Experts on their proposed Programme of Study for introducing a dedicated programme on learning disabilities for student teachers at both kindergarten, primary and intermediary stage levels.

- ix. Providing expertise and capacity building for the CCET to establish its own Media & Public Relations Unit as well as its awareness outreach activities in the form of an enhanced and advanced web presence as well as informational leaflets and publications.

The above list of achievements is outstanding, notably the success of the vigorous awareness campaign. It is anticipated that over the next 5 years, the ELC Project can provide much needed continuity particularly in the field of Assessment, Intervention and Training.