

UZBEKISTAN: Home-based preschool care taking off



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FERGHANA VALLEY, 24 November 2003 (IRIN) - [REDACTED], a four-year-old girl, proudly recites a poem she learnt at the [REDACTED] home kindergarten in the Kuva district of the densely populated Ferghana Valley in eastern Uzbekistan. She seems happy being there, as she is learning new things, playing with her friends and feeling secure in familiar surroundings at the same time.

"Children here [at a home kindergarten] are under better conditions. They differ greatly from those attending crowded kindergartens," a Kuva District education official told IRIN.

The old system of kindergartens during the Soviet era was based on massive, impersonal but generously funded institutions. However, after Uzbekistan gained its independence in 1991, the enrolment of children of preschool age dropped substantially due to lack of funding and qualified teachers.

The Common Country Assessment of Uzbekistan, a report drawn up by the UN Resident Coordinator in the country in 2001, said the most worrying trend in education was the dramatic decline in the number of children aged three to six years enrolled in pre-primary schools.

The report noted that before the collapse of the Soviet Union, attendance at kindergartens was widespread, with more than one-third of children in that age group enrolled. However, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), that figure dropped from 35 percent in 1991 to 17 percent by 1998 and has continued to drop.

In an effort to tackle the issue, UNICEF launched a home kindergartens project in Ferghana Province in 2000. Initially, three such kindergartens were established in Kuva District's Tol-Mozor village. UNICEF donated what was needed in the way of furniture, blankets, crockery, educational materials and trained teachers.

"There are fewer children in these [home] kindergartens, which is good," [REDACTED], a methodologist at the Kuva education department told IRIN in Tol-Mozor, pointing out that it was easier to look after seven children than 30 or 40, as during the Soviet era. Smaller numbers, she said, facilitated a personal approach to each child, which had a positive impact on their development.

The UN report said that the decline in kindergarten enrolment was of particular concern in that such establishments indirectly served to improve the welfare of households by freeing up the parents to participate in other activities, particularly paid employment.

"Here is a safe, neighbourhood place where a child can go to play and learn, so that's important. But also from a women's point of view, the system provides work for women and also meets their child care needs at the same time. So this is a great way to address both women's and children's rights," ██████████, a UNICEF early childhood development consultant, told IRIN in the Uzbek capital Tashkent.

██████████, a local official in the province responsible for women and children, told IRIN in Ferghana that home kindergartens were very convenient for rural people with their flexible schedules, especially during the cotton-picking season. "Parents generally work in the fields and have an opportunity to drop their children earlier and take them home later [than standard working hours]," she said, adding that this had been impossible during the Soviet era.

██████████, the deputy head of the Kuva District education department, told IRIN in Tol-Mozor that there were now 13 home kindergartens in the district, as they had been seen to be useful. The additional 10 were accordingly established by communities in 2003 at the request local parents. There are about seven children in the kindergarten, each run by the owners of a house with a teacher and a nurse looking after the children, whose parents are usually neighbours.

There has been concern that home-based preschool care may not be effectively monitored, because of the fact it takes place in people's houses rather than an institution, but ██████████, head of preschool education in the ministry of education in Tashkent said she was satisfied that inspections of such facilities were adequate. "The mahallah [home-based] system is an extension of the public education system where inspection and monitoring are good," she said.

██████████ added that the ministry was hoping to make the mahallah nursery system universal throughout the country by 2005 if resources can be identified.

Theme(s): (IRIN) Children, (IRIN) Gender Issues

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