

## **The Cost of Inaction: The Case for Investing in Early Childhood Development (ECD) in Namibia**

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of January 2015, the Economic Association of Namibia partnered with UNICEF Namibia to stage a presentation and discussion about the importance of investing in Early Childhood Development in the country. This event was attended by senior officials from the education and health sectors, the cabinet, diplomats from foreign missions as well as members of the EAN. It coincided with the release of the examination results for Grade 12; which have once again revealed the entrenched struggles within the country's education system.

Dr Chris Desmond, an economist and expert on ECD, gave a presentation where he highlighted the cost of inaction with focus on investing in ECD. He cited the Angolan case study where an economic evaluation has shown that investing in ECD has led to increased incomes as it improves the quality of human capital. This suggests that in Namibia, where poverty and income inequalities are pressing issues at the moment, investing in ECD might just be one of the best investments a country can ever make.

The presenter also emphasised that ECD does not mean pre-school education as most people tend to think. Early childhood development starts right from conception through to pre-school and it's especially the first 1000 days that matters the most. Science suggests that this is because the brain is more receptive at an early age. While it's never too late, investing in ECD as early as possible therefore reduces the cost and maximizes the return on the investment. The presenter suggested that the approach to ECD be focused more on providing care to expecting mothers as opposed to pre-school. By the time the child reaches pre-school a lot of damage has already been done and the investment will be more expensive and the returns not as high. Hence, if governments do not invest in ECD from an early stage, the cost will increase substantially over time. Potential effects of not investing in ECD include complicated pregnancies, and later in life, social disorders such as violence, poverty and widening of the gap between the rich and the poor.

The Ministry of Education has, over the years, been allocating a relatively high proportion of its budget to tertiary education and spending less on pre-primary and primary education. Studies, however, suggests that the opposite be the approach in order to maximize returns.

At the end of the presentation a discussion of the topic followed and the audience eagerly contributed. Some suggested that ECD remain under the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare; since it's a cross-cutting issue. Others wondered if the lack of innovation in the country is another effect of poor investments in ECD. Yet others asked how investments in ECD can be balanced with other developmental goals given the limited financial resources.