

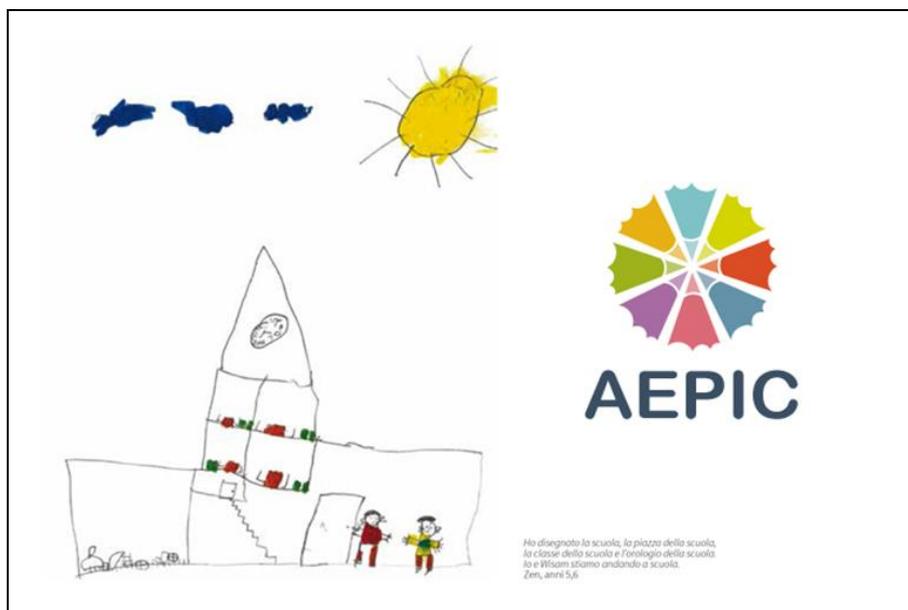


Cooperazione Italiana
allo Sviluppo
Ministero degli Affari Esteri
e della Cooperazione Internazionale
Direzione Generale per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo - Ufficio III - Sezione Valutazione

Impact evaluation of the initiative:

“AEPIC - Alliance for Inclusive and Quality Education”

AID N. 010327/RTM/TOC



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

18/02/2022



AGRISTUDIO S.r.l.
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This independent evaluation has been commissioned by Office no. III of the Directorate General for Development Cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation to the Company Agristudio s.r.l by means of a competitive bidding procedure as per art. 36 of the Code of Public Procurement.

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The opinions expressed in this document represent the point of view of the evaluators and do not necessarily coincide with those of the commissioning body.

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«My experience with the AEPIC Project has been extraordinary. I had never been exposed to such training in my whole academic and professional life. The Project gave me the opportunity to depart from traditional patterns to reach creativity and excellence ».

Teacher, pilot school

LIST OF ACRONYMS

AEPIC – Alleanza per un’Educazione Inclusiva e di Qualità della Prima Infanzia in Cisgiordania
PA – Palestinian Authority
ANERA - American Near East Refugee Aid
BECRC – Bethlehem Educational Creative Reuse Centre
ECD – Early Childhood Development
ESDP - Education Sector Development Plan
ESSP- Education Sector Strategic Plan
ELDS - Early Learning Development Standards
EFA – Education for All
GER – Gross Enrolment Rate
JFA – Joint Financing Agreement
KG – Kindergarten
KTM – Kindergarten Teacher’s Manual
MOEHE – Ministry of Education and Higher Education
M&E – Monitoring and Evaluation
NIET – National Institute for Educational Training
NPA - National Policy Agenda
PACE – Partnership for a new Approach to early Childhood Education
TES - Teacher Education Strategy
PT – Palestinian Territories
TVET – Technical and Vocational Education and Training
PCBS – Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics
PTWG – Preschool Technical Working Group
SMART – Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound
RTM – Reggio Terzo Mondo
SROI – Social Return on Investment
SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals
ToC – Theory of Change
UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund
UNRWA - United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees in the Near East
UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
OPEC – Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
WB – World Bank

1. DESCRIPTION OF THE EVALUATED INITIATIVE

The Project *Alleanza per un'Educazione Inclusiva e di Qualità (Alliance for Inclusive and Quality Education)* -AEPIC- (AID N. 010327/RTM/TOC) was implemented in the West Bank between 2015 and 2018 by the NGO Reggio Terzo Mondo (RTM) -whose current name is "Volontari nel Mondo RTM"- in collaboration with the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, the Reggio Children Foundation, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education of the Palestinian National Authority (MOEHE), the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the Greek Catholic Patriarchate and the IBDA Association. The project was funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), the Municipality of Reggio Emilia and local partners, for a total budget of 1.78 million Euros. Following law no. 125/2014, the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) was established. Operational since January 2016, AICS has inherited responsibility for the implementation and financing of initiatives launched under the previous cooperation law (l. 49/1987).

The AEPIC Project aimed to improve the quality and inclusivity of the services in the pre-school and early childhood education sector. The project strategy aimed on the one hand to improve and strengthen capacities at various levels (MOEHE at central and decentralised level, teaching staff and managers), and on the other hand to increase the inclusiveness of pre-school education services through the opening of new classes in disadvantaged areas (already involved in the MOEHE-UNESCO *Education for All Programme* -EFA-) and the inclusion of families in school activities. A central role was given to **strengthening the public-private partnership in Bethlehem Governorate and disseminating good practices in the rest of the West Bank.**

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGIES OF THE EVALUATION

The impact assessment was commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Directorate General for Development Cooperation, Office III, Evaluation Section.

The evaluation covered both the **period of implementation of the Project (2015-2018)** and the **following period (2018-2021)**. The analysis of the latter period made it possible to carry out an analysis of the effects of the initiative in the field of intervention and beyond the direct beneficiaries. The evaluation exercise sought to integrate **summative and accountability aspects with training and policy learning aspects.**

The evaluation activities were conducted between October and December 2021, through a series of qualitative and quantitative tools administered both virtually and in person. In particular, the following evaluation activities were conducted:

- **Desk review** of the documents related to the Project AEPIC and to the follow-up Project *Partnership for a new Approach to Early Childhood Education (PACE)*; existing literature on early childhood education; and sectoral development strategies and plans of the MOEHE and other ministries;
- **38 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews** (see Annex F);
- **administration of a questionnaire to the 7 pilot schools of the AEPIC Project and 14 schools of the *Education For All (EFA) Programme***, also involved in the AEPIC Project (see questionnaire "Schools, Field visit and Questionnaire", Annex I);
- **visits to the 7 pilot schools and 14 EFA programme schools**, conducted through the use of a checklist of observable criteria at school facilities;

- **administration of a questionnaire through the MOEHE E-school Platform**, which reached all kindergartens and pre-school classes in the West Bank, **with a response rate of 255 schools** (see Questionnaire "Online Questionnaire for Kindergartens and Pre-schools West Bank", Annex J)
- **focus groups conducted at two schools in Tulkarem Governorate**, one targeting teachers (**7 participants**) and the other parents of children attending the two schools in the period 2015-2021 (**48 participants**) (see Annex H);
- administration of a **Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis** questionnaire to parents participating in the focus group mentioned above (**38 questionnaires completed**, see "AEPIC- SROI Questionnaire", Annex K).
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3. RESULTS OF THE FINAL EVALUATION

The evaluation exercise identified the following conclusions, good practices and recommendations. For more information, a full version of the final report is available.

3.1. RELEVANCE AND COHERENCE

The AEPIC Project has been highly relevant to what the country's pre-school and early childhood education needs were during the implementation period (2015-2018), in particular regard to the situation in the public sector. In the school year 2013/2014, in fact, there were 4 preschools, and a small number of children were enrolled in public preschools (636 enrolled). The Project contributed to the **opening and qualification of new pre-school classes**, thanks to the collaboration and synergy with the United Nations *Education For All Programme* -EFA-, thus contributing to the **increase in the enrolment rate**, both objectives already set by the ESDP II 2008-2012.

The Project activities have included several **low-income areas** where enrolment in pre-school classes was rather low due to limited public provision and parents' lack of awareness of the importance of children's education. In particular, the Project involved several **schools located in Area C or Hebron 2**, thus promoting access to pre-school education in areas of priority interest to MOEHE. **These are areas where the improvement of existing pre-schools, the opening of new pre-school classes and raising awareness among families is still a priority for the Ministry.**

The Project also appropriately addressed the need for **qualification of teaching** in kindergartens and pre-school classes, a problem caused by the lack of adequately qualified teachers, the insufficient number of educational supervisors and the -at that time- lack of a curriculum to guide teachers in their activities. Other needs considered by the project included the **poor coordination capacities of the MOEHE, the lack of interaction between schools**, the need for **greater involvement of families and the community** in early childhood education issues, the need for **adaptation and qualification of facilities and spaces**, and the need for **teaching equipment and materials**.

In this way, the Project proved to be fully aligned with MOEHE's priorities, policies and strategies in place at the time of the project design (**ESDP II and III**) and those more recently enacted (**ESSP 2017-2022 and Education Law 2017**), as well as with broader policies such as the **National Policy Agenda 2017-2022** which considers early childhood and pre-school education as one of the priorities for intervention to foster adequate early childhood development.

Considering that the pre-school education sector had been quite neglected until 2015 by the Palestinian Government and the main international actors, **the AEPIC Project took on particular**

relevance, in line with the progressive interest that was gradually building up in the country around the issues of pre-school and early childhood education.

The Project and the Reggio Emilia Approach, introduced through the initiative, also contributed significantly to the **development of the Palestinian approach to early childhood education.** According to MOEHE managers, prior to the AEPIC Project, there was no strategic vision for children's education and the teaching offered in most kindergartens was traditional and not inspired by any pedagogical philosophy. Thus, in addition to demonstrating relevance and coherence, the project brought significant **added value.** According to many of those interviewed, **this added value was made possible also by the peculiarities of the Reggio Emilia approach, which is configured as an educational approach that can be adapted to the context, without being a model to be taken *tout court.***

However, **some of the priority themes under the national objectives in the field of education, related to gender and inclusion of children with special needs, have been given limited consideration.**

The Project was also consistent with the donor's approaches and strategies (AICS Three-Year Programming Document 2013-2015), the *European Joint Strategy in Support of Palestine 2017-2020* and the documents and strategies of the United Nations Agencies involved in the education sector, which recognise the centrality of pre-school and childhood education in the process of children's development (*Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals*, UNICEF, UNESCO and World Bank Sector Strategies). **The local partners in the project were also able to catalyse a new approach in the country based on the centrality of the child, the value of active learning and the recognition of the plurality of factors -families, community, school environment, teacher-child relationship- that intervene in the educational process.**

The **Project design phase** was accurate and allowed for the participation of local actors, as well as the valorisation of the experiences accumulated by the Italian partnership. This is reflected in a solid and clearly focused strategy. However, the Project's intervention logic showed several weaknesses, in particular regarding the vertical logic (objectives, results, activities) and horizontal logic (indicators and external conditions) of the Logical Framework and with regard to an approach that should have been more *outcome*-based rather than *output*-based (Results-based Approach).

3.2. EFFECTIVENESS

The inconsistency of several of the Logical Framework indicators did not allow an adequate analysis of performance against the expected objectives and results. In addition, several indicators lacked expected final target values, which did not allow for measurement. For those indicators that could be measured, performance was very good, but several of these indicators were not fully relevant to the linked objectives and results. The achievement of results and objectives was therefore analysed mainly through a qualitative methodology, rather than on the measurement of indicators.

The qualitative analysis allows us to state that **the AEPIC Project has triggered a series of significant changes in the schools involved.** The changes observed relate to the areas of design and organisation of school spaces, pedagogical approach and teaching methodologies, interaction between school and its environment, and the involvement of families in the educational process. **The supervisors of the educational districts, the teachers and the managers of the 7 pilot schools showed a remarkable level of appropriation of the Reggio Emilia approach, although this did not completely replace the previous methodologies but rather flanked them, giving them a more proportionate importance than they had in the past.**

The process of change also affected the EFA programme schools, with reference to the organisation of school spaces, where the level of appropriation with respect to the pedagogical approach was more limited, due to the lower level of involvement in the project trainings. However, **the methodologies of the Reggio Emilia approach are also practised in the schools of the EFA Programme, although there is less and, in some cases, very limited awareness in this regard. The MOEHE was aware of the added value of the approach proposed by the Project, both at the decentralised (supervisor) and central level, and actively supported the schools in applying the new method.**

The level of local satisfaction with the results achieved through the AEPIC Project is very high. All the stakeholders interviewed on a MOEHE level (central and decentralised) and on the level of the 7 pilot schools recognised that the initiative had made an important contribution not only in terms of the qualification of school environments, but above all in terms of spreading an innovative and effective educational approach in the pre-school education sector.

The AEPIC trainings, and in particular the exchange visits to Italy, have proved to be particularly effective in fostering new knowledge and skills on the part of the District Education Supervisors. **All the supervisors interviewed showed a very good knowledge and strong involvement in the Reggio Emilia approach.** In addition to pedagogical skills, the Project also contributed to foster a different conceptualisation of the role of the supervisors with respect to the schools to be supervised and the teachers to be trained.

The changes observed in the schools involved in the project were fostered not only by the training activities and exchange visits that took place during the implementation of the initiative but, to a considerable extent, through the pedagogical exchange between teachers and the training/dissemination activities carried out by the supervisors of the Educational Districts. **The peer-to-peer exchange among teachers and the work of the supervisors of the educational Districts had an important role in building and sharing local knowledge about the Reggio Emilia Approach.** Exchanges of knowledge between teachers were documented in all the pilot schools involved and to some extent in the EFA programme schools. These exchanges took place both during the course of the AEPIC project, through feedback from teachers who had taken part in the trainings and visits to Italy, and after its closure through informal exchanges.

A central role in terms of dissemination and training of other teachers was played by the educational supervisors, who organised various training sessions for the in-service teachers and the return of their experiences. In this case, the regularity and professionalism of these knowledge transfers varied, depending on the motivation and skills of the different supervisors. Although no official module on the Reggio Emilia approach was developed by the MOEHE and disseminated to the educational districts, this knowledge continues to be disseminated through the work of the supervisors and with the support of the Ministry.

The AEPIC Project represented an important opportunity for comparison and interaction between public and private schools, and the added value of these exchanges was fully recognized by stakeholders, as well as their innovative character in the Palestinian context. However, the Bethlehem Kindergarten Forum remained limited to the 7 pilot schools and the Project did not contribute further to the creation or expansion of national and international networks. The stakeholders involved in the Forum recognise it as a space for continuity of exchanges between schools and as a useful tool for promoting joint initiatives, but its capacity for strategic planning is limited and restricted to the opportunities that arise.

The **external conditions** described in the Logical Framework occurred to a good extent, thus favouring the achievement of the expected results. The assumed **risks** occurred partially, with

reference to staff turnover, the cultural and religious diversity of the participating schools and the security conditions of some areas involved in the Project. However, these risks did not substantially affect the achievement of the results.

3.3. EFFICIENCY

The Project management was efficient and based on international standards. A clear and smooth system of internal co-ordination and communication was put in place and the project team was responsive and punctual in responding to the needs of the local partners. Local partners demonstrated a clear understanding of the project strategy, and the project was flexible in accommodating their proposals. However, although a monitoring plan including monitoring missions and a final external evaluation was prepared, **a solid monitoring system of the Project's outputs and outcomes was not adopted, nor was a mechanism for evaluating and accrediting the skills acquired by teachers and supervisors.** The latter would have been useful according to some stakeholders, especially if aligned with the national accreditation system.

From the point of view of the correspondence between the planned quantitative indicators for the outputs and what was achieved, the project proved to be extremely efficient, with few indicators slightly below the expected final values and most exceeding the planned values. From the perspective of the correspondence of the qualitative characteristics of the outputs produced with respect to what was planned, the evaluation could not go into the details of the individual outputs, given the time elapsed since the conclusion of the activities.

As far as the **synergies** developed are concerned, the project design was not based on a review of existing good practices in Palestine in the pre-school education sector, nor did the Project establish significant synergies that could offer an opportunity to enhance the results achieved, beyond the synergy with Palestinian institutional actors and the UNESCO EFA Programme. The synergy, in this context, concerned the inclusion of 25 schools from the MOEHE-UNESCO EFA Programme as beneficiary schools of the qualification and teacher training interventions of the AEPIC Project. However, this synergy did not translate into an effective exchange between the RTM and UNESCO on pedagogical approaches, nor into joint actions, for example in the area of teacher capacity building. In this area, it was emphasised by both RTM and UNESCO that the educational approaches of the two organisations are quite different and that a more intensive collaboration would have been hardly feasible.

There was no interaction with other **NGOs** that were involved in the pre-school education sector in the country during the AEPIC Project, such as ANERA, Right to Play, World Vision, OFID. Participation in the Pre-school Technical Working Group allowed for some dissemination of the Reggio Emilia approach, but no significant interaction took place.

Important synergies were subsequently developed between the results of the AEPIC Project and the activities of the PACE Project. The PACE project continued the work begun with the seven pilot schools (but not with those in the EFA programme), intensified the training of supervisors, and produced the *Licensing Instructions For Private Preschools 2020/2021*. The pilot schools in the AEPIC Project were taken as a model in the PACE Project, e.g., in developing pedagogical exchange activities with other schools. In addition, through the PACE Project, the *Bethlehem Educational Creative Reuse Centre* (BECRC) was initiated as a tool to strengthen pedagogical exchanges between schools, thus supporting the results achieved through the AEPIC Project. Future areas of collaboration can be further explored with the World Bank Project, which is aimed at training in-service teachers in private pre-schools.

3.4. IMPACT

According to several MOEHE managers, the Project has made an important contribution to **increasing enrolment rates** by opening new pre-school classes and rehabilitating existing schools, especially in disadvantaged areas; it has produced a **change of mindset regarding the educational approach of many schools**; it has promoted a **greater awareness of the importance of involving families in children's education**; and it has promoted **greater interaction between schools and families**, which in turn has had positive effects on increasing families' awareness of pre-school education. Moreover, at a central level, the project made a strong contribution to raising awareness about the importance of early childhood and pre-school education. The contribution in terms of **drop-out** reduction was only indirect and given by the awareness of families, thus contributing to the prevention of the phenomenon.

To date, based on the sample of schools visited during the evaluation, 112 children are enrolled in the 5 classes that did not exist before the AEPIC Project. In addition, the Project has enabled the use - and child-friendly use - of an additional 10 EFA classrooms, two of which were part of the Project's pilot schools, thus facilitating the enrolment of an additional 257 children from vulnerable areas. To these data should be added those of the EFA schools not visited during the evaluation.

The pedagogical approach proposed by the Project is well introduced in the school structures of the majority of the 7 pilot schools, with a lower impact in 2 of the public schools, mainly due to external conditions. In the schools of the EFA Programme the main aspects introduced through the Reggio Emilia approach are found, although there is limited awareness of them. Exposure to the Reggio Emilia approach on the part of teachers not trained during the AEPIC Project is moderate in some schools and very strong in others; in general, the new method was adapted to the context and placed alongside the pre-existing teaching methodologies. None of the schools involved in the project became part of the Reggio Children International Network.

The impact of the Project on the capacities of the MOEHE was evident at the decentralised level, where a clear strengthening of the role and pedagogical and training skills of the supervisors was observed, who were then active agents of dissemination of the new method. Their ability to relate to schools within their area of responsibility, including public schools, has also been strengthened. Educational supervisors are, in fact, the key figures in the Ministry at territorial level delegated to direct relations with schools, in terms of teacher training and school accreditation. These skills were then spread to other supervisors and other schools through regular training. In addition, according to some stakeholders, the Project fostered the development of a different conceptualisation of the role, which began to be perceived no longer purely in terms of "control" but rather as a supporting role in the qualification paths of teachers and schools. This change in attitude was also noted by public schools, who reported a change in the private school/supervisor relationship.

At the central level, the Project facilitated the process of coordination with respect to the 7 pilot schools and increased interaction with the private sector, but there were no appreciable results with respect to the more general and transversal capacities in terms of planning, programming, management, monitoring and evaluation of educational interventions. This was subsequently addressed by the PACE Project, which strengthened the MOEHE's monitoring capacities on school buildings and environments.

The dissemination of the Reggio Emilia Approach in the schools which weren't part of the AEPIC Project was good; from the data collected through the evaluation, it can be estimated that the approach has reached at least 270 additional classes through the joint efforts of the supervisors, the

Bethlehem Training Centre, the BECRC and the PACE Project. **The level of knowledge and appreciation of the added value of the Reggio Emilia approach within the MOEHE is good and concerns several Directorates and Departments in addition to the Early Childhood Department of the Directorate General for Education. This dissemination within the MOEHE was initiated by AEPIC and further strengthened through PACE Project.** In particular, the Head of the Directorate of Construction stressed that the way in which school building interventions are planned, as well as the analysis of the needs of different schools, is currently conducted considering what was learned during the AEPIC Project, in terms of child-friendly environments. **The Project has therefore contributed to developing a broader vision of children's needs and of the role of the environment in fostering a context of learning and development of potential.** This view influences the monitoring that the Department carries out, although there is no standardised licensing procedure that considers the criteria of the Reggio Emilia approach in public schools. For private schools, however, for which monitoring and licensing falls under the direction of the MOEHE, this impact has been more institutionalised through the *Licensing Instructions for Private Preschools 2020/2021* developed through the PACE Project and elaborated with the contribution of the Building Department itself.

The AEPIC project and subsequently PACE have made a significant contribution to the promotion of an enabling environment for early childhood education. The Reggio Emilia approach is now complementary to the MOEHE Strategy, i.e., the new method has not replaced other methods, nor has it been institutionalised, but it has contributed to spreading an approach based on child-centredness and active learning, concepts that, in turn, have influenced the *new Palestinian Curriculum Framework for pre-school education*. Although this curriculum refers to a variety of educational practices centred on the concept of active learning that are the result of a pathway that the schools and the Ministry have started since 2015 with the support of several international partners, it is interesting to note that many of the themes dear to the Reggio Emilia Approach have been integrated. These include the central role of interaction with families; the principle of exchange and teacher-pupil dialogue; distancing oneself from educational methods based on the concept of 'indoctrination' and the centrality of play as a pedagogical tool; the use of recycled materials and interaction with the environment; the centrality of the school environment as an element that affects the predisposition to active learning and the organisation of spaces into 'learning centres', i.e. distinct spaces dedicated to different educational activities, each with a precise educational objective.

The Bethlehem Early Childhood Forum, which was supposed to strengthen the public-private partnership, as mentioned above, remained very limited in its objectives. Among the schools in the EFA programme reached by the field visits, only one had heard of the Forum, while the others had no knowledge of it at all, although they considered such a coordination tool useful. The dissemination of knowledge of this Forum was therefore very limited. Moreover, 5 out of the 7 pilot schools (one did not answer the question), i.e. 83% of the sample, judged the participation of the MOEHE in the Forum as "very limited", on a scale ranging from "Not at all" to "Completely". This was confirmed by interviews with MOEHE managers who showed limited knowledge of it.

From what has emerged, there are no other similar forums, nor has the public-private partnership model introduced by the Project been extended to the management of pre-school services or other sectors in the educational field. **The public-private partnership model has therefore had a limited impact and has not been extended to other realities or sectors.**

The Preschool Technical Working group has remained restricted to international actors and no school is a member.

Other factors that reinforce the creation of an enabling environment for early childhood education and that have had an impact on the MOEHE can be found in the PACE Project. The **BECRC** is receiving visits from schools in Bethlehem, which are requested by the MOEHE itself and organised by RTM, and which represent a space for dissemination of the Reggio Emilia approach. At the same time as the visit to the BECRC, a visit to the public kindergarten is normally made to show how the approach is put into practice.

The above-mentioned ***Licensing Instructions for Private Preschools 2020-2021*** contain references to the Reggio Emilia Approach, such as the focus on the use of recycled materials, and in the trainings and workshops that the PACE Project was carrying out during the evaluation, to promote awareness and adherence by schools, it was reported that the principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach were regularly mentioned. Educational supervisors are also involved in the dissemination of the guidelines. The adherence to the guidelines should progressively concern all private schools, including those that have already obtained a one-year or five-year licence, so it is expected that the principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach contained therein will be further disseminated. At the time of the evaluation, however, and according to RTM, the process of their dissemination had slowed down due to the pandemic, and recommendations were being considered for the MOEHE to enable their wide dissemination.

The **Social Return on Investment (SROI)** analysis exercise, conducted on a sample of parents from two of the EFA pilot schools involved in the AEPIC Project, quantified that **every Euro invested in activity 1.3 generated 4.11 Euros of social benefit.**

3.5. SUSTAINABILITY

The continuity of the Reggio Emilia approach in the 7 pilot schools is good and the level of sustainability is high in 3 schools (two private and one public), good in 1 public school and weaker in 2 other public schools. The latter are also affected by factors such as limited school space and their location in particularly vulnerable areas. In particular, **the Reggio Emilia approach is currently fully integrated into the Bethlehem Public Kindergarten, which is also the model school of the adjoining Training Centre and directly linked to the BECRC. These links generate a very positive flow for the sustainability of the approach.**

Sustainability in EFA schools is less evident but can be supported through the training of supervisors. Supervisors are an important factor in sustainability and their skills have been further strengthened through the PACE Project. In this regard, it is worth noting that the Project involved 5 out of the 16 supervisors in the AEPIC implementation period in the trainings and that more were involved through the dissemination events. Moreover, the PACE Project involved all the 34 supervisors currently present. **This aspect is confirmed by the data collected from the EFA Programme Schools, where the training organised by the MOEHE through the supervisors seems to have been the main way in which the new method was disseminated within the school. On the contrary, in the pilot schools the main mode seems to have been teacher exchange.**

Regarding the sustainability of the **Bethlehem Early Childhood Forum**, schools responding to the questionnaire reported that the pandemic had a very negative effect on the continuity of meetings and events, as well as a lack of follow-up, communication and teacher turnover at participating schools. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the actual participation of the MOEHE in the Forum was judged to be limited and one of the school's judged sustainability without RTM support in terms of launching initiatives and coordination to be at risk. Others among the pilot schools were more optimistic about this, in particular the private schools, who pointed out that RTM had not been

coordinating the Forum for some time, yet exchanges continued with the support of a group coordinator who is elected periodically.

From this perspective, **the BECRC can offer support for the continuity of the Forum because it represents a place for schools to meet and exchange experiences**, as well as a tool that can facilitate the implementation of joint activities, such as the event organised in November 2021 in Beit Sahour (organised through the PACE Project). The BECRC was in fact the factor that allowed the 7 pilot schools to meet again after the interruption of exchanges due to the pandemic.

The state of the renovation works carried out and the equipment provided was found to be "rather sufficient" to "good" in most of the schools.

The Kindergarten Teacher's Manual, considered to be the cornerstone of the new pre-school curriculum, will contribute significantly to the dissemination of active learning principles and methods in the country, although complementarity rather than explicit adoption of the method is noted here.

The **Bethlehem Training Centre** for in-service teacher training, with which RTM has just started a new Project funded by the Emilia-Romagna Region, is a further factor for the sustainability of the new approach introduced.

3.6. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

Despite the high participation of women in the project activities, the gender dimension was not adequately considered, while specific awareness-raising actions on gender mainstreaming and gender relations for school staff and families could have been planned, especially since this was a project with significant components of training, awareness-raising and capacity-building.

The topic of inclusion of children with special needs has not been significantly addressed, apart from some work done to facilitate access to buildings for children with disabilities and some discussions during some of the trainings. On the other hand, the inclusion of vulnerable groups has been well integrated in relation to children from disadvantaged and conflict-affected areas. In this context, the proposed educational approach may have positive spillover effects on the development of children exposed to situations of violence and on the educational methods of parents in the home. **The strong school-family interaction fostered by the project made it possible to practise a sort of indirect parental training, which may have a fallout effect on the educational methods used by parents at home.**

The Project has strongly integrated **socio-cultural aspects**, fostering an environment of collaboration with the Christian minorities present in the country. In this regard, it is important to highlight that the main service providers in the early childhood education sector are schools founded and run by Christian minorities. The Project involved and supported these minorities, also promoting dialogue with public schools mainly attended by the Muslim.

The environmental dimension was well integrated in terms of approach, methodologies and renovation of spaces.

The following chart summarises the conclusions of the evaluation with respect to the different evaluation criteria adopted. The scale used is as follows:

GREEN – VERY POSITIVE; **ORANGE** – POSITIVE WITH SOME WEAKNESS; **YELLOW** – SUFFICIENT BUT WITH WEAKNESS FOUND; **RED** – INSUFFICIENT

EVALUATION CRITERIA	EVALUATION
RELEVANCHE	VERY POSITIVE
COHERENCE	VERY POSITIVE
EFFECTIVENESS	VERY POSITIVE
EFFICIENCY	POSITIVE WITH SOME WEAKNESS
IMPACT	POSITIVE WITH SOME WEAKNESS
SUSTAINABILITY	POSITIVE WITH SOME WEAKNESS
CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES INTEGRATION	SUFFICIENT BUT WITH WEAKNESS FOUND ¹

4. GOOD PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. GOOD PRACTICES

The evaluation has made it possible to identify the good practices hereby described.

1. Relevance of the Project

The issues addressed are very relevant in the context of the Country and to a certain extent have anticipated processes that led to a new focus on early childhood education and that have been accompanied by the development of *policies* and laws.

2. Focus on the process

Coherently with what is specified in the Reggio Emilia Approach, the players responsible for its dissemination have done so in respect of the principles supported by the approach itself, giving importance to the process and not limited to the result.

3. Participation and belonging

The process was characterized by a strong participatory spirit and the strong sense of ownership that has resulted lays the foundations for greater sustainability of the project. During the realization phase, there has been an active and participatory reworking of the proposed approach, which has been dropped into the context and then be contaminated by the ideas of the participants, arriving at the formulation of "their" method. The strong sense of ownership that resulted lays the foundation for greater sustainability of the project.

4. Technical support and organizational efficiency.

The development of "personal method" starting from the one proposed, was also possible thanks to the strong technical support of the project experts, who made their skills available during the various meetings held and aimed at deepening the issues that emerged from time to time, facilitating the understanding of the approach by the various beneficiaries, from teachers to parents, as well as supporting the joint development of solutions to the difficulties that emerged. In addition to the content, the organization was also appreciated for the punctuality and regularity of the meetings and for the availability and flexibility offered.

5. Union of diversity

The project has had the merit and the capability to work with different types of schools, institutions, cultures and religious backgrounds, activating previously non-existent exchange processes,

¹ Excellent performance on the environmental dimension and inclusion of vulnerable groups; poor integration of the gender dimension and inclusion of children with special needs.

especially at the level of "government schools having a dialogue with private schools". The added value reported was learning how to overcome some barriers, work together and share information.

6. Effectiveness of the proposed educational approach

Virtually all the people encountered during the evaluation reported that they appreciated the effectiveness of the proposed educational approach: from teachers to school leaders, from educational supervisors to MOEHE leaders. The new method has allowed to revise the role of the different elements in the educational context: that of the child, the teacher, the parent, the school space and the surrounding environment, placing the child and the relationship between the teacher and the child, at the centre. The specific value of a similar educational approach in a context where daily children are exposed to a situation of conflict and to the personal and family stress that this entails.

7. Involvement of parents and non-violent education

If the involvement of parents is one of the key aspects of the Reggio Emilia approach, in this project it has played a role of fundamental importance because, starting from an initial position at the antipodes with respect to that of the parents, who at the beginning were very reticent towards the new method, we arrive at a position of inclusion, both in the activities of the school and in educational activities in general. In fact, the value of school-family interaction is to be found not only in the greater participation of parents in the educational development of the child, but also in an indirect exercise of parental training that is triggered and that assumes particular relevance in a context, such as Palestine, where more than one child in five (20.1%) suffers severe physical punishment and 87.5% experience forms of psychological aggression in the home context.

8. Inclusion of the supervisor

The school-family interaction has facilitated an indirect *parent training* exercise, which is particularly relevant in a context where 87.5% of children experience forms of psychological aggression in the domestic context, according to UNICEF data.

9. Environmental sustainability

Using the environment as "third teacher", the use, dissemination and subsequent increased awareness of environmental waste and the importance of recycling have broadly been implemented in the project. These aspects were then further strengthened through the PACE Project.

10. Opening of public preschool classes and inclusion of vulnerable groups

Through the opening of public pre-school classes in synergy with the MEAE-UNESCO EFA Program, the Project has promoted the extension of public pre-school services in disadvantaged areas, at risk of conflict and characterized by low schooling. In this way, the project has fostered the inclusion of children from disadvantaged areas in preschool education.

11. Support for the development of an early childhood education center in Bethlehem

The AEPIC Project has launched an intense collaboration with the Public Kindergarten in Bethlehem, where a very good adoption of the Reggio Emilia approach was found. The PACE Project later established the BECRC - annexed to the Bethlehem Public School -. In addition, one of the training centers for in-service teachers is also active at the school premises, the Bethlehem Training Center (TCB), currently being supported through funding from the Emilia-Romagna Region. The AEPIC Project thus launched the process of creating an educational center of national importance that

works on the basis of a close synergy between the three actors that make it up: the School, the BECRC and the Training Center.

4.2. RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation identified the following recommendations that may be useful to optimise the results achieved and increase their sustainability. These recommendations could form part of the strategy for future interventions that the donor, the implementing body or the partners might wish to implement in the same sector.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Develop a Theory of Change for the Project in relation to the Country Program of the Implementing body, which may explain the underlying logic of individual projects and the contribution made to the general objectives**

Responsible Body: Implementing body / Donor

Going forward, it is suggested that a Theory of Change for Country Program implementation be developed that can make explicit the underlying rationale for individual projects, i.e., how projects contribute to long-term goals in the intervention area and the country

- 2. Develop the Logical Framework more accurately, with specific reference to clarifying the outcomes and to the indicators which must be relevant and measurable**

Responsible Body: Implementing body / Donor

It is recommended to pay more attention to the definition of the Specific Objective, which has to be an achievable outcome by the end of the Project and not an action strategy or activity. Regarding the horizontal logic of the Logical Framework, more accuracy in the definition of indicators is important. Results and objectives should be accompanied by indicators of effectiveness and impact, i.e. indicators that can demonstrate the changes that have taken place and the benefits produced by the initiative. In addition, indicators should be relevant to the outcome they are intended to measure and adhere to SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound) criteria. Finally, indicators should always have a baseline and expected final target value to allow for measurement.

- 3. Strengthen synergies with other international actors active in the sector of preschool education in the Country, both at the design and implementing stage**

Responsible Body: Implementing body /Local counterparts

For the future, greater synergy with other international actors active in the field of education and pre-school education is recommended. These synergies should take place both at the project design stage, in order to have the opportunity to develop an initiative that builds on the results obtained through other interventions and on existing good practices, and at the implementation stage, to allow for continuous improvement through comparison and maximum dissemination of the results that are obtained.

- 4. Overcome the ad-hoc project approach in favour of a more programmatic Country approach especially in the case of initiatives with the aim of triggering cultural changes.**

Responsible Body: Implementing body / Donor

The limited duration of projects linked to donor funding mechanisms is an obstacle to projects which aim not only to introduce a new pedagogical approach but to bring about a multi-level cultural

change, affecting both institutions (ministry, schools, kindergartens) and individuals (teachers, supervisors, headmasters, parents and, finally, children). These are processes of change that take a long time and to which various initiatives can contribute. In this sense, a shift from the perspective of individual projects to a more programmatic vision is recommended.

5. Develop ongoing monitoring and evaluation tools for development initiatives

Responsible Body: Implementing body / Donor /Local counterpart

It would be useful to have an in itinere monitoring and evaluation framework of the Project, linked to a data collection system, in addition to the monitoring missions and the intermediate and final evaluations. In this way, the assessment of the Project's progress is easier and more immediate, and it is possible to measure the values reached for output and outcome indicators at any time. This should be a user-friendly tool to be used by the staff and possibly by the partners, who can thus be kept informed on the progress and achievements. Furthermore, although the Reggio Emilia approach is not aimed at evaluating and measuring the skills acquired, it would be important to assess and document the learning processes of the teachers and supervisors, also through informal methods such as focus groups; this would be useful for the staff themselves and also in view of an ongoing evaluation of the project's results.

More generally, the MOEHE's competencies in terms of monitoring and evaluating educational outcomes and in terms of its ability to measure the performance of the new Palestinian pre-school curriculum need to be further strengthened, as does its capacity to collect and manage data related to M&V system indicators.

6. Enhance the inclusion of children with special needs and greater focus on gender in the projects of international cooperation

Responsible Body: Implementing body /Donor

Despite the Government's commitment to the inclusion of children with functional difficulties, the plan is certainly ambitious and lacks the tools, mainly financial, for its full implementation. A project such as the one assessed, which aims to promote inclusion, should always incorporate a dimension that considers children with special needs and encourages their inclusion in the school system, including pre-school.

The gender component also deserved more attention and integration in training and awareness-raising activities. Considering the target audience of the project (managers, teachers, parents), the inclusion of topics such as gender relations, equality and women's empowerment could have had numerous spill-over effects.

USEFUL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CONTINUATION OF THE INITIATIVE

7. Promote strategies for the dissemination of the Reggio Emilia Approach

Responsible Body: Implementing body / Local counterparts

Several recommendations were identified with the aim of promoting the dissemination of the approach, this being, in itself, a recommendation. The aspect of dissemination, which was emphasised in the final evaluation of the Project, was taken up and strengthened through the PACE Project where more work was done on the dissemination of the Reggio Emilia approach. Some suggestions were collected to further promote the dissemination of the method.

a. Support the process related to the dissemination and implementation of Licensing criteria and materials related to the Reggio Emilia Approach

Make recommendations to the MOEHE to ensure the wide and proper dissemination of the *Licensing Instructions For Private Preschools 2020/2021* to schools and the incorporation of the same within schools that have worked with AEPIC (and PACE). The workshops to present the guidelines organised by RTM and the role of the supervisors will have to be supported in this sense, as well as proper training on how to apply the contents of the Reggio Emilia approach that are mentioned there. Far from being a list of things the school must have; the criteria refer to the ability to use certain objects for pedagogical purposes. In this context, it was also suggested that it would be appropriate to digitise the guidelines and materials attached to the Reggio Emilia approach. As experienced during the evaluation, the E-School Platform seems to be a good channel of communication and dissemination.

b. Widening access to RE approach training through existing structures

Several Departments and Directorates of the MOEHE have shown themselves to be aware of the added value of the Reggio Emilia approach, therefore it will be important to coherently fit into the different existing channels in order to allow a wide dissemination of the method. These channels are represented by: 1) the 6 **Training Centres** for in-service teachers that currently exist; 2) the **NIET** of the MOEHE, which prepares the training modules that are then adopted by the supervisors and is also directly involved in the training of teachers at the various levels of education; 3) the **Universities** that have active degree courses for teaching in pre-school and infant schools. In this context, RTM will be able to further consolidate its collaboration with Al Quds University, which in the PACE Project consisted in the dissemination of material and the experience of the BECRC, but which in the future could include the development of training modules within the degree course; 4) the **World Bank Project** mentioned above; 5) the **BECRC**, which is configured as an institutional initiative and, according to many stakeholders, to be replicated in different governorates, also for the promotion of environmental sustainability issues.

8. Reflecting on sustainable ways of continuous training and updating for supervisors and teachers trained in the two Projects

Responsible Body: Implementing body /Local counterpart

Several stakeholders stressed the need for regular updates on the Reggio Emilia approach. This is particularly valid for some public schools. These may include sharing new developments in the Reggio Emilia approach, so that teaching techniques can be kept continuously updated. Sharing can take place through regular meetings, exchange visits, scientific conferences, workshops, making use of the resources made available locally, such as trained supervisors and the training centre in Bethlehem.

9. Reconsider the role and functioning of the Forum of Early Childhood of Bethlehem

Responsible Body: Local partners

The public-private Early Childhood Forum launched by the AEPIC Project has been important from the perspective of pedagogical exchanges between schools; however, it has not been extended beyond the 7 pilot schools, the MOEHE does not take an active part in it and it is currently proving to be lacking in dynamism, partly due to the effects of the pandemic. Moreover, the Forum is completely unknown outside the Bethlehem area. Its impact as a replicable model of service management is therefore very limited. In this sense, it is foreseeable that the Forum will be able to function more on the basis of concrete opportunities for collaboration (events, pedagogical

exchanges, BECRC-related activities) rather than on the basis of strategic programmes and action plans that may be difficult to sustain.

10. Study and plan the involvement of primary schools in the RE Approach

Responsible Body: Implementing body / Italian partners and counterpart

Many stakeholders have pointed out the gap that can be created between preschools that apply the Reggio Emilia approach and the elementary school teaching method, which is more unidirectional, mnemonic and traditional. One could reflect on the opportunity to expose primary school teachers and the relevant MOEHE directors to the Reggio Emilia approach. The experience is already happening in some schools in Italy. Also in this area, a central role could be played by supervisors and teachers already trained.

11. Reconsider the selection criteria concerning the classes to involve in future projects

Responsible Body: Implementing body

If a new project does follow, several stakeholders recommended that it target a few schools taken in their entirety, rather than one classroom per school. While this may run the risk of creating "model kindergartens" and not exposing others to the approach, it will mitigate the turnover problem and each class will find a trained teacher, and each trained teacher, in turn, will find an organized classroom and available materials consistent with the training acquired. In doing so, the needs of the various kindergartens should also be considered, and financial support should be also proportioned according to the needs found.

12. Continue the awareness-raising initiatives addressed to families

Responsible Body: Local counterpart and local partners

Families typically expect kindergarten to function as a kind of "pre-school" where they teach children the basics of reading, writing, and addition. Teachers and school leadership staff engaged in interactions with parents, clarifying that the teaching and learning processes in kindergarten are aimed at developing critical thinking through play, experimenting with materials, drama, surroundings, and nature, and that this paves the way for more effective learning than "traditional" learning. However, there is still a lot of work to be done in this area, as reported by many of the teachers interviewed and still many parents, and society in general, reject the idea that children can learn through play or interaction with the environment. So, there is still a need for awareness in this regard that can be continued by teachers and the MOEHE itself.

13. Increase the networking and coordination from the MOEHE with regards to the stakeholders in the educational sector, with specific reference to teachers' training.

Responsible Body: Local counterpart

For teacher training to be integrated, it is necessary to develop a unified training for the entire pre-school education staff including an action plan with qualification requirements and continuing professional development aspects. This requires the coordination, carried out by the MOEHE, between all stakeholders involved. Strongly recommended is also the promotion of public-private partnership, without which, in the absence of strong private sector involvement and as argued by the MOEHE itself, the right to pre-school education remains difficult to be guaranteed in the poorest areas of the West Bank. In this context, it was recommended that new training centres should be opened in other areas of the country, to which teachers from public and private schools could have access. The opening of specialised preschool programmes by universities was also encouraged. There is a need to continue working in this area at the policy level.