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2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

# Early Childhood Development Education and Care: The Future is What We Build Today

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## Abstract

Early Childhood Development, Education and Care (ECD/ECEC) has become a priority for governments and international bodies. ECD/ECEC is explicitly included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4, 4.2), underlining the global consensus. In 2018, G20 acknowledged the key role of ECD and, in their Leaders' Declaration, announced a G20 ECD initiative. Access to high quality early childhood development, education and care programmes is unequal between and within countries, which remains a major cause for concern. However, in the context of local and global sustainability a new focus on the purpose of ECD/ECEC should become a complementing priority of the G20 process.



## Challenge

Early Childhood Development, Education and Care (ECD/ECEC) has become a policy priority for governments and international bodies. There is a broad consensus between policy makers, ECD/ECEC professionals, scholars, and advocates on the importance of ECD/ECEC as effective means to ensure individual and collective well-being and achievement, and to addressing wider societal issues including social cohesion, equality and inclusion, and persistent inter-generational cycles of poverty. Having ECD/ECEC explicitly included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4, target 4.2)<sup>1</sup> underlines the global consensus. Moreover, the G20 acknowledges the key role of ECD and in their 2018 Leaders' Declaration announce a G20 ECD initiative<sup>2</sup>.

At global and local levels, an emerging 'systemic turn' (Urban) has brought about broad consensus that policy frameworks should address early childhood from a holistic perspective. Examples include the integrated policy framework 'De Cero a Siempre' in Colombia and the Irish 'whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families'. Adopting whole-systems approaches to developing ECD/ECEC policy and practice ('Competent Systems') is key to providing quality ECD/ECEC for all children (Okengo, 2011; Urban, Vandebroek, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2011, 2012)

The ECD/ECEC policy brief adopted by T20 in 2018, *It Takes More Than a Village. Effective Early Childhood Development, Education and Care Services Require Competent Systems* (Urban, Cardini, & Flórez Romero, 2018), outlines concrete policy recommendations that should be taken by G20 governments collectively and individually.

However, there has been little attention to questions of purpose and content of ECD/ECEC in the context of sustainability. 'Yesterday's solutions' continue

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<sup>1</sup> ECD/ECEC is included in Goal 4: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all"; specifically mentioned in target 4.2: "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education."

<sup>2</sup> The T20 Communique handed to former G20 leaders includes ECD/ECEC as a priority in its proposal 4, based on the promotion of equal opportunities for quality education.



to be supported by policy makers and donors alike:

- Focus on deficiencies rather than capabilities of children, families and communities
- Focus on (externally) predetermined models and outcomes, rather than culturally and locally appropriate approaches
- Focus on decontextualized and ‘borrowed’ education practices and approaches (e.g. Reggio, Montessori, HighScope, Project Zero etc.) rather than culturally appropriate and locally developed sustainable solutions
- Focus on narrowly defined ‘early learning’ curricula (literacy / numeracy), extending from countries in the global north to the global south; backed up and promoted by the democratically unaccountable ‘soft power’ of international organisations including OECD, and increasingly extended to and imposed on countries in the global south, e.g. Africa
- Focus on narrow and unsustainable notions of ‘development’ – at individual, collective, country and global levels – that originate in supremacist and colonialist thinking
- Naïve extrapolation of today’s socio-economic contexts into the future, including the taken for granted assumption that, for instance, ‘digital’, and AI, are both the main challenges and the solution to development and education.

## Proposal

### ECD/ECEC for Sustainable Development

#### *Background and context*

Undeniably, every child has the right to access to, and meaningfully participate in, high quality early childhood development, education and care



programmes. Pre-primary education is, in fact, considered an important part of a holistic and robust educational system (United Nations, 2017, p. 24). Participation in ‘pre-primary or primary education in the year prior to the official entrance age to primary school’ (ibid) has increased to around 9 out of 10 children in Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean and North America; the rate in the least developed countries remains much lower (4 out of 10).

However, effective early childhood ECD/ECEC does not start one year before compulsory school age. Children learn and make significant experiences from birth, long before they enter schooling. Early learning is embedded in children’s holistic development that comprises physical, emotional, cognitive, social, cultural and spiritual aspects from birth.

In fact, ECD/ECEC practices, despite being of global concern, are inevitably local (Urban, 2014). Caring for, teaching and upbringing young children comprises physical, emotional, cognitive, social, cultural and spiritual aspects from birth (Cardini, Díaz Langou, Guevara, & De Achával, 2017). This means ECD/ECEC needs to be shaped through democratic debate of all stakeholders within countries, and at all levels of government (Urban, 2008, 2009).

Countries in both the global north and south are increasingly adopting policy frameworks that address early childhood from a holistic perspective. Examples include the integrated policy framework ‘De Cero a Siempre’ in Colombia (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, 2015; Republic of Colombia, 2013) and the Irish ‘whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families’ (Department for Children and Youth Affairs, 2018). Adopting whole-systems approaches to developing ECD/ECEC policy and practice (‘Competent Systems’) is key to providing quality ECD/ECEC for all children (Okengo, 2011; Urban, Vandebroek, Van Laere, Lazzari, & Peeters, 2011, 2012).

Based on the policy brief, *It Takes More Than a Village. Effective Early Childhood Development, Education and Care Services Require Competent Systems* (Urban, Cardini, & Flórez Romero, 2018), policy recommendations adopted by the T20 summit 2018 spell out concrete actions to be considered by G20 governments at three interconnected levels:



- *At national level*, make systemic approaches sustainable by providing leadership, resources and support
- *At G20 (international) level*, initiate and support cross-country learning with and from forward-looking systemic ECD/ECEC initiatives in countries in the global south and north
- *At the level of monitoring, evaluation, and research*, adopt whole-systems approaches, and all-stakeholder participation (including participation of children, families and communities)

The majority of the initiatives have focused on increasing access to, and participation in, ECD/ECEC programmes (as spelled out in SDG4). In most regions there have been increases in access to ECEC/ECD programmes (UNESCO, 2014) Worldwide, half of all three to six-year-olds have access to ECD/ECEC programmes (World Bank, 2017).

However, access to high quality early childhood development, education and care programmes remains unequal. In the global South, just one in five children have access to ECD/ECEC (World Bank, 2017). Furthermore, younger children from low-income families and children in rural communities have significantly less access to ECD/ECEC programmes compared to their peers in more affluent and urban areas (Cardini, Díaz, Guevara y De Achával, 2018).

Increased access and enrolment figures alone are not a sufficient measure for meaningful participation in high quality programmes that are effective in making a positive difference in children's lives. Even when more children access ECD/ECEC services, they enter and participate in very diverse and unequal programmes. Quality of services, as experienced by children, families and communities, varies widely and often continues to be inadequate.

Despite some encouraging developments (e.g. the emerging 'systemic turn' (Urban, Cardini et al, 2018) in most countries, fragmentation at all levels of the ECD/ECEC system remains a major challenge. For historical reasons, policies for the 'care' and 'education' of young children have often developed separately. This remains the *de facto* governance situation in most countries (Bennett, 2008). Hence, ECEC services are structured in different ways, and they embody diverse understandings of children, aims, and approaches (Kaga,



Bennett, & Moss, 2010). This effectively prevents integrated service provision, inter-professional cooperation, integrated policy generation, and systemic evaluation of processes and outcomes.

However, ECEC/ECD services are, by nature, multi-sectorial and hybrid. Given the sectorial tradition of social policies, countries face difficulties in achieving coordinated and coherent approaches to ECEC (Cunill-Grau, Repetto, & Bronzo, 2015).

There has been little attention to questions of purpose and content of ECD/ECEC in the context of sustainability. ‘Yesterday’s solutions’ continue to be supported by policy makers and donors alike:

- Focus on deficiencies rather than capabilities of children, families and communities
- Focus on (externally) predetermined models and outcomes, rather than culturally and locally appropriate approaches
- Focus on decontextualized and ‘borrowed’ education practices and approaches (e.g. Reggio, Montessori, HighScope, Project Zero etc.) rather than culturally appropriate and locally developed sustainable solutions
- Focus on narrowly defined ‘early learning’ curricula (literacy / numeracy), extending from countries in the global north to the global south; backed up and promoted by the democratically unaccountable ‘soft power’ of international organisations including OECD, and increasingly extended to and imposed on countries in the global south, e.g. Africa
- Focus on narrow and unsustainable notions of ‘development’ – at individual, collective, country and global levels – that originate in supremacist and colonialist thinking
- Naïve extrapolation of today’s socio-economic contexts into the future, including the taken for granted assumption that, for instance, ‘digital’, and AI, are both the main challenges and the solution to development



and education.

***Re-conceptualize ECD/ECEC in the context of existential global crises / develop a roadmap to integrated early childhood development, education and care for sustainable development***

The policy measures proposed in this brief address these shortcomings and build on the emerging broad international consensus on the importance of providing access to, and meaningful participation in, high quality early childhood development, education and care programmes and services for all children from birth.

This consensus extends to all countries, in the global south as well as in the global north. It reflects the fact that critical issues facing young children and their families are no longer easily situated in naively defined ‘developed’ vs. ‘developing’ country contexts. For instance, experiences of forced displacement, malnutrition, marginalisation and poverty are, unfortunately, shared by an increasing number of children in the poorest as well as the most affluent countries, with well-documented negative effects on their immediate and future life chances and individual and collective developmental and educational achievement.

This ‘blurring of boundaries between the centre and the periphery’ (Braidotti, 2011) is taking place despite the fact that marked differences continue to exist between countries, and within countries, in terms of children’s access to ECD/ECEC. While country-level figures on access to ECD/ECEC show stark differences between, for instance, countries in Europe and Latin America (*high*) and sub-Saharan Africa (*low*), they tend to mask disparities *within* countries.

Children from vulnerable communities, children growing up in rural contexts, children suffering from forced (internal) displacement, children with special educational needs often have significantly less access to appropriate ECD/ECEC programmes compared to children from more privileged, affluent,



or dominant communities.

A particular target group in a number of African countries are children whose communities are affected by HIV/AIDS, growing up without parents or in the care of grandparents or community members.

Taking this context into account G20 governments can and should take concrete action in line with the 2018 Leaders Declaration to initiate, orient and resource a major early childhood development, education and care initiative.

The approach to the initiative should be three-pronged:

1. Continued and increased commitment to increasing access to, and meaningful participation in ECD/ECEC programmes and services of high quality, in order to address unequal access within and between countries and regions
2. Commitment to ‘whole-systems’ approaches to developing, improving, resourcing and governing early childhood programmes in order to achieve sustainability of programmes and services
3. Reconceptualise early childhood development, education and care across G20 countries as societal, democratic realisation of early childhood as a common good and collective responsibility, and contribution to achieving sustainability on a global scale, i.e. in the context of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals

Strengthening the emerging international consensus on the need to take whole-systems approaches to policy and practice (*Competent Systems*) is arguably the most effective strategy to overcome persistent, wasteful and ineffective fragmentation of services, and of persistent silo-mentality at the levels of administration and governance.

Reclaiming early childhood as a public or common good entails recognising the key responsibility governments have in relation to effective and sustainable ECD/ECEC provision. This is notwithstanding the indispensable





role of a multitude of actors, including civil society actors and local communities in service and programme development and delivery. However, reclaiming government responsibility also requires strategies and concrete action to reduce the influence of large-scale, for-profit provision, privatisation, and corporatisation of programme and service provision. Such a renewed public responsibility also addresses democratically unaccountable exertion of 'soft power' (Morris et al) by actors as varied as international philanthropy or the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

A concrete step to be initiated by G20 governments should be the phasing out of all public funding for services and programmes that aim at returning a profit over an agreed time frame of five years.

Reclaiming public responsibility for ECD/ECEC in the context of local and global sustainability requires re-conceptualisation not only of structures and governance of ECD/ECEC, but of the *purpose*, aims, or more concretely *content* of early childhood programmes. Realising the existential crisis facing humanity on a finite planet, the task is to initiate public, democratic debate leading to programme review in the light of critical questions on content, values and ethics, to complement the necessary continued focus on access and participation.

In the context of a global sustainability framework, realising SDG 4 (education) is an important orientation. It will be crucial, however, to align all areas of education, including ECD/ECEC, with the entire range of 17 SDGs: *what should we be educating for?*



- Build on and support whole-systems approaches to ECD/ECEC (Competent Systems), in order to overcome persistent, wasteful, and ineffective fragmentation and silo mentality
- (Re)claim ECD/ECEC as public good and public responsibility – counter privatisation, corporatisation, and phase out for-profit programmes
- Extend the ECD/ECEC agenda from SDG4 to all 17 SDGs
- Initiate programme and policy review with a focus on content, values and ethics rather than access and enrolment only:
  - what should we be developing?
  - what should we be educating for to achieve sustainability on a finite planet?



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