



## THE PARLIAMENTARY NETWORK

On The World Bank & International Monetary Fund

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# EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES

## 1. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Researchers around the world agree that the first three years of a child's life are the most important period for laying a foundation for cognitive and social functioning, as well as physical health far beyond his/her childhood years. It is the period when the brain's neural pathways responsible for communication, language, social, emotional and intellectual development are being formed, which requires adequate nutrition and environment, care and stimulation. **Studies have shown that simple and low-cost health and education interventions, such as counseling mothers on feeding practices and providing iron supplements in early childhood<sup>1</sup>, can increase adult productivity and future earnings by 25%<sup>2</sup>. Investing in early childhood development (ECD) is therefore crucial for breaking the cycle of poverty and boosting growth in developing countries.**

Today, millions of **children are born malnourished or become stunted from chronic under-nutrition** in the first years of life in the developing world. The nutrition deficits from birth to age five, as well as lack of care and stimulating activities, **have been linked to low educational achievement and low economic productivity.** According to the World Bank research, early malnutrition and neglect weaken not only children's physical and cognitive potential, but also traits such as motivation and persistence, so it impacts their future health, educational accomplishment, and socioeconomic success.

The new issue of the P&D Series of the Parliamentary Network illustrates the importance of early childhood development and provides practical recommendations as to how parliamentarians can contribute to this global goal. **ECD can be divided into three main areas: (1) health & nutrition; (2) parent education and family support; and (3) pre-school education.**

1. One of the biggest challenges in the world today is providing adequate nutrition to all children during the first years of their lives. Failure to provide such nutrition leads to stunting – a reduced growth rate and physical and mental development which has long-lasting

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Jukes, *Early Childhood Health, Nutrition and Education*, UNESCO, 2006

<sup>2</sup> *Snapshot: Improving Learning Outcomes for Early Childhood Development*, World Bank Group Education Global Practice, 2016

harmful consequences on an individual's life. Today, a quarter of all children in the world are stunted due to chronic malnutrition and other factors such as the lack of access to water, sanitation and hygiene, which increase their chance of infection and illness<sup>3</sup>.

2. Responsive parenting, care and psychosocial stimulation are crucial for brain development. Interactions with parents, such as play, help a child develop communication, problem solving and sensory skills. However, in socially adverse environments this type of stimulation is often lacking due to hard and sometimes dangerous living conditions (situations of conflict, displacement, natural disasters, droughts, etc. provoke exhaustion and depression in parents, who are then unable to give their children adequate care)<sup>4</sup>. Parental support programmes and social protection are necessary to improve maternal wellbeing and therefore a child's development.
3. The system of preschool centres is the most practical and efficient solution for providing education to children aged three to six. However, according to the World Bank, nearly half of children this age worldwide are deprived of access to it, while in sub-Saharan Africa this number attains 80%. Today, investing in early childhood development is not a priority for most governments and development partners. Many lower- and middle-income countries spend only 0,1 - 0,2% of their GNP on ECD, while in the OECD countries this number is about 2,3% of GNP.

Yet the social and economic returns from investments in ECD could be exceptional: earlier development means improved health outcomes, higher academic performance, decrease in criminal rates and higher earnings in the future. The existence of healthy and skilled competitive workforce will encourage investments and advance the country's economy. Providing ECD programmes to disadvantaged children will also mean preventing the achievement gap between poor children and their well-off peers, and ultimately reducing inequality and preventing social tension.

## 2. WHAT IS BEING DONE & WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

In view of the risks listed above, there is a strong case for investing in early childhood development. Various international organizations have included ECD in their list of priorities, notably the World Bank Group's Education Strategy 2020, UNESCO's Education 2030 agenda, UNICEF's ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) programmes, and WHO Early Childhood Development Knowledge Network. Numerous non-governmental organizations are dedicated to the issue, such as Save the Children, ACTION, Global Health Advocates, Aga Khan Foundation, RESULTS, etc.

However, today the number and scale of existing ECD initiatives are increasing very slowly. In low-income countries, children from wealthy families are more likely to be enrolled in one of a limited number of preschools than children from disadvantaged families. According to the World Bank, this insufficiency is likely due to the general fall in political and financial commitments around the world which started with the global recession and continues to this day.

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<sup>3</sup> *Unequal Portions : Ending malnutrition for every last child*, Save the Children, 2016

<sup>4</sup> *The State of the World Children 2016: a fair chance for every child*, UNICEF, 2016

A child's development is intrinsically related to his/her environment on every level, from the family to society as a whole. Families require a variety of services, such as healthcare, quality childcare and basic education, as well as social protection. On the community level, children need accessible physical space for learning, safety and access to basic services. It is important to promote social integration and gender equity on this stage, because the community is a primary influence on the way that children identify themselves. In their turn, the regional and national environments are the ones who determine policies and resources dedicated to families and communities, and thus affect ECD. They manage distribution of resources and therefore are responsible for inequalities which affect children's health outcomes and, more generally, their life chances.

The local, regional and national authorities must engage in developing and promoting ECD policies and programmes (with the support of international agencies and civil society organizations) which should be established on already existing quality frameworks which include, among others, strategies for their monitoring and evaluation. It is important to ensure that these policies include all three areas of ECD: health & nutrition, effective parenting and high-quality early education.

Today, programmes for young children are still mostly operated on a small scale by external donors and NGOs. Their scope therefore remains limited. The main obstacles for scaling up ECD programmes vary from insufficient awareness of the importance of early brain development to fiscal constraints and problems of institutional coordination, as well as unfavourable political context<sup>5</sup>. In order to achieve truly inclusive early childhood development, adequate policies need to be introduced first of all on state and regional level.

- **Mother and child's health and nutrition.** Poor nutrition greatly affects pregnant and lactating women, as they need more macronutrients: children of malnourished women have low birth weight, which leads to poorer mental and physical development, higher rates of disease and infection, and higher risk of death. According to the World Health Organization, half of all pregnant women in developing countries have iron deficiency (anemia); hundreds of millions of infants are born or become blind because of the mother's vitamin A deficiency; lack of access to crucial nutrients such as iodized salt leads to iodine deficiency and eventual brain damage, etc<sup>6</sup>.

Some of the practical solutions to end maternal and infant malnutrition and ensure their protection are: increasing access to education for women and girls, thus increasing their ability to make informed decisions about nutrition; facilitating access to family planning, so that a woman can choose a time when to become pregnant, which improves the chances of delivering a healthy child, and space pregnancies to ensure proper care for her child; preventing gender-based violence; and investing in women as an active economic force in agriculture, entrepreneurship and other fields, which would reduce poverty, allow women more control over household income and improve children's health and nutrition.

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<sup>5</sup> Emily Gustafsson-Wright and Tamar Manuelyan Atinc, *Early Childhood Development: the Promise, the Problem, and the Path Forward*, Brookings, 2013

<sup>6</sup> *Education for All Global Monitoring Report: Expanding equitable early childhood care is an urgent need*, Policy Paper 03. UNESCO, April 2012

- **Effective parenting and childcare.** Early cognitive development provided by parents is a major factor that determines school performance and success in later stages of life. However, in developing countries parents often face tremendous obstacles such as poverty, exhaustion, armed conflict, etc., and lack the necessary skills, knowledge or resources to ensure that their child reaches his/her full potential. Parenting training programmes such as those provided by UNICEF which focus on training parents to understand their children's needs, or on other skills which would indirectly help them be better parents, can be implemented on community level. However, more general approach is needed to channel various international organizations' and NGOs' interventions and make them coherent on the national level.
- **Pre-primary education.** It has been demonstrated that children who have participated in early education programmes generally remain in school and do not have to repeat classes. In Africa, where currently less than 10% of public education expenditure goes to pre-primary education, school retention is a major problem, and increasing the coverage of preschool education could be its solution, creating interest in school and ensuring better academic performance which then translates in higher life chances. On the contrary, children who start learning late are more likely to fail in school or drop out, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty.  
Pre-primary education accessible to all children, aligned with the implementation of learning standards that allow for comprehensive child development, should become a priority for policymakers. It is equally important to ensure that schools are ready for children and able to provide a comfortable and enabling environment for learning.

### 3. HOW CAN PARLIAMENTARIANS HELP?

Due to their legislative, representative and oversight functions, parliamentarians can create policies that reflect and support the development goals. They can therefore play key roles in the defense and promotion of early childhood development, which is not only an aim in itself, but also the key to achieving many other SDGs<sup>7</sup>.

International development organizations usually sign commitments with the ruling government. However, governments depend on parliaments, who can introduce their own policies to the existing agenda. The parliamentarians' main task is therefore to ensure that the needs of their constituents are reflected in these policies, legislations and state budgets, and that the resulting framework prioritizes equitable and inclusive development. ECD should be a priority for MPs in low- and middle-income countries because the economic and social returns on investments in this area are immense.

Parliamentarians can draft legislation in favour of the aforementioned components of ECD: from general policies in the fields of health, nutrition, mother and child support and education, to targeted interventions in particular areas such as providing families with food supplements, trainings, building the pre-schools' capacity, etc. Parliaments have a prerogative of allocating resources to ECD programmes through state budgets, and are, therefore, in a position to promote the ECD agenda.

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<sup>7</sup> *Advancing Early Childhood Development: from Science to Scale*. The Lancet, Oct 2016

In addition, MPs oversee existing initiatives in the field, holding accountable both state agencies and NGOs working on ECD programmes, making sure that the allocated resources do not get diverted and that programmes are being implemented with maximum efficiency. Where the financial support comes from donors who can impact policy formulation and implementation, it is also the parliaments' role to ensure that domestic accountability comes first.

To help parliamentarians examine policies and identify gaps and areas in legislation in need of attention, numerous civil society organizations as well as larger international organizations are ready to provide resources and expertise. The Parliamentary Network provides a channel for dialogue between parliamentarians and the World Bank and IMF, as well as numerous CSOs, and provides a platform for peer learning, allowing its members to exchange ideas and approaches to scale up ECD interventions in their respective countries. The access to expertise and resources of development organizations, on one side, and close contact with constituents, on the other side, gives the parliamentarians a unique perspective and allows them to lead the development of legal and regulatory frameworks to support efficient ECD provision.

Today, the topic of early childhood development receives much attention in academic circles, the media, and in the milieu of development actors. However, the gap still exists between the knowledge of the importance of ECD and its translation into real policies. It is therefore in the hands of the parliamentarians to raise awareness and bring attention to the direct correlation between young children's development and economic stability and growth in the future.

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