Sustainable development rests upon strong foundations, beginning in early childhood

Hundreds of millions of children (aged 0-8) will not have the best start in life and develop to their potential because they grow up facing a broad range of risks, most notably poverty; poor health including HIV/AIDS and malnutrition; high levels of family and environmental stress; and exposure to violence, abuse, neglect, exploitation, and inadequate levels of care and learning opportunities. This includes risks that result from emergencies related to conflict, climate change and global demographic shifts through migration and urbanization (Lancet Journal Series on ECD, 2007 and 2001).

A compelling body of cross-disciplinary research and practice highlights the importance of investing in the early childhood years especially during critical and unique periods of brain development. Adverse risks and experiences can be mitigated by strengthening the environments in which young children grow through evidence-based strategies: i.e. parent support; early detection and intervention for developmental delays and disabilities; early childhood programs of care, support and learning; targeted health, nutrition, sanitation and social protection services; good quality preschool and early primary grade experiences.

Investment in development and learning during early childhood results in greater cost savings than investment later in the life cycle (Heckman 2012) with a return ranging from $8-18 for every dollar invested. Good quality early primary education (grades 1-3) combined with quality early childhood services prior to children entering school improves the efficiency of the schooling system and saves money by reducing repetition and drop-out and improving completion rates and achievement, especially for girls and other marginalised groups.

A measurable and actionable Early Childhood Development (ECD) goal – that all children get the best start in life and for learning in order to reach their developmental potential through ECD policies and programs is part of a human development and rights-based framework that promotes equitable and sustainable development and needs to be implemented in partnership with multiple sectors and multiple partners. This will help advance other important development goals. In particular, improving birth and achieving key health outcomes, improving access to quality basic education and learning outcomes, promoting social justice, advancing women’s rights and gender equality and ultimately reducing inequality and poverty.

Event hosted by the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, OMEP, UNICEF, SOS Children’s Villages and the ADEA Working on ECD

Presentations and Discussants: Moderated by Judith T. Wagner, Deputy President, OMEP and Nurper Ulkuer, Child Development Expert

Louise Zimanyi, Director of the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development (CG) highlighted the work of the CG to position ECD on the global development agenda, the 6th OWG’s theme on the right to development and the need to ensure this includes implementing rights in early childhood as supported by key and compelling global documents/agreements that may not be as well known: 2005 General Comment 7 on Implementing Rights in Early Childhood, 2010 Secretary General’s Report and Resolution, as well as a new Monitoring Tool using 16 indicators to support state parties in their reporting on ECD.

Pablo Stansbery, Early Learning Consultant with UNICEF and steering committee member of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa’s Working Group on ECD reported on the significant movement of ECD in Africa including through the inclusion of ECD as the eighth area of focus of the Action Plan for the Second Decade of Education for Africa in 2009 and subsequent adoption of 14 indicators across various ministries to monitor progress. He articulated 3 messages: given what we know in the area of brain science, we must start as young as possible; focus on families, recognising indigenous knowledge and practices and go beyond education to address ECD across multiple sectors.
Bernadette Daelmans, Coordinator, Policy, Planning and Programmes, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health, World Health Organisation spoke about the role of the health sector to play a unique role, especially during the critical 0-3 period. Despite progress in child survival, many children are impacted by stunting, under-nutrition, violence in the home and family mental health issues. Integrated interventions that support caregiving, safe environments and better nutrition outcomes include the WHO/UNICEF Care for Child Development program that support health workers and counselors to promote ECD and positively influence parents of young children. Also referenced: WHO’s Executive Director Margaret Chan’s global call for post-2015 to include a focus on child development and the 2013 report on nurturing human capital along the life course through investment in ECD.

Ingrid Pramling Samuelson, President, OMÉP and UNESCO Chair in Early Childhood Education and Sustainable Development spoke about the 3 pillars of sustainability including just societies, health environments and strong economies which must be addressed through integrated actions – the business of ecd is everyone’s businesss. A Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) initiative in 29 countries reaching over 10,000 children and teachers highlighted the power of integrated ECD programs to empower and mobilise communities as agents of change.

Aigly Zafareikou, Senior Education and Human Development Specialist, The Global Partnership for Education highlighted that despite the increase in access to school, there is learning crisis in sub-Saharan Africa with180 million children unable to master basic literacy and numeracy skills by grade 4 and efforts to address this early through ECCE. This includes supporting ECCE through education plans at country level. The GPE model is ready to work in defining and implementing an ECD/ECCE indicator at global and country level.

Sofia García-García, Advocacy Advisor, Post-2015 Agenda, Liaison & Advocacy, SOS Children’s Villages International articulated that the key to sustainability is ECD. When member states define targets, they cannot do this in silos given the life of a child is not in silos. Often social protection is linked to employment, although many parents and children are not working. A goal on reducing poverty and inequality must directly impact children, strengthen families and social protection mechanisms.

Discussants:
Vinicius Pinheiro, Deputy Director, International Labour Organization, New York indicated there can be no ECD without family and household development, decent employment and child care; a lifecycle approach is essential (ECD supports a smooth transition to primary school which is linked to youth employment) without which impacts social cohesion and political instability at all levels. There is a need for social protection systems that protect and empower parents to participate in the labour market including cash transfers linked to ECD, health and education services.

Hiro Yoshikawa, Co-Chair, UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network Workgroup on ECD, Education and the Transition to Work called for the ECD community to communicate broadly and strategically the uniqueness of an ECD goal, it’s link to all other goals, reduces the impact of poverty which is particularly harmful to developing brains, the strong economic and ROI arguments and the impact of integrated ECD programs especially for the most disadvantaged.

Pia Rebello Britto Senior Advisor, Early Childhood Development, UNICEF articulated that given what we know on the why and the how, there is no better time to advocate for ECD and a goal that all children start life with the best opportunities, ready to learn and succeed in life. There are tools, interventions and measures with data that show ECD outcomes. We need to start with targets that can be measured. Of note, Pia mentioned the high correlation between the ECD Index and the Human Development Index – the more investment in ECD, the higher a country ranks on the HDI. She quoted a sentence that made her reflect on the risk we may face if ECD is not at the center of the new development agenda “young children are a living message for a world we may never see.”

Remarks from the broad range of participants included that we must start with the status of the mother, focus on the Importance of brain development, ensure the increase in the use of conditional cash transfers, school feeding, tell the ECD story through a compelling narrative, make the connection of ECD to the lifecycle, mobilise parents and support governments in their efforts to commit to ECD, develop policies and finance adequately.