A Transformative Solution: Reducing Poverty and Inequality through a Post-2015 Early Childhood Development Goal
Cover Photo: Children learn through music and dance at the early learning development centre in Dhaka Central Jail.
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CURRENT AND FUTURE GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT GOALS WILL ONLY BE MET WITH ATTENTION TO THE OVERALL DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN.

A measurable and actionable Early Childhood Development (ECD) goal will not only strengthen efforts towards the health, development and well-being of young children but also work to reduce the inter-generational transmission of poverty and inequality. Such a goal should be part of a human development and rights-based framework that promotes equitable and sustainable development and is implemented in partnership with multiple sectors and multiple partners.

When opportunities for a good start to life are so profoundly unevenly distributed, both across and within countries, other fundamental global goals are dramatically more difficult to attain. The proposed goal 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.

BACKGROUND MESSAGES

Over 200 million children under 5 years of age in low-income and middle-income countries – and increasing numbers in OECD countries and emerging economies – will not reach their full developmental potential because they grow up facing a broad range of risk factors, 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 urbanisation.

KEY MESSAGES

- A growing body of scientific research clearly indicates that these risks and adverse experiences, particularly in the first five years of life, have a profound negative impact on a child’s future well-being, especially in regard to health, education and academic outcomes and earning potential.

- Research clearly demonstrates that the impact of these risk factors and adverse experiences can be mitigated by strengthening the environments in which young children grow and thrive through evidence-based strategies including: parenting interventions; early detection and intervention for developmental delays and disabilities; early childhood programs of care, support and learning, where possible integrated into home visiting programs; targeted health, nutrition, sanitation and social protection services; and good quality preschools.

While progress has been made, most governments still do not prioritise early childhood in their health, education, poverty reduction or other national plans, and many countries still lack early childhood development policies, strategic plans and laws:

- Globally, 171 million children under 5 were affected by moderate or severe stunting in 2010 – a clear sign of malnutrition which impact’s children’s physical and cognitive development and capacity to learn. Based on current trends, by 2015, one in four children under the age 5 will suffer from stunting.

- 57% of young children in developing countries have NO ACCESS to preschool – 83% in Sub-Saharan Africa and 78% in the Arab region.

- Children living in the poorest households are up to 10 times less likely to attend early childhood education programmes than those in the richest.
WAYS FORWARD

Indicators\(^{14}\) that employ a multi-generation perspective are necessary to achieve an early childhood development goal. Besides children, caregivers – particularly parents and especially mothers need support. Caregiver well-being has implications for childhood outcomes. Maternal depression, for example, can increase the likelihood of pre-term birth, low birth weight and developmental delays in children.\(^{15}\) In addition, caregivers are responsible for children’s access to health care; proper nutrition; responsive cognitive, social, and emotional stimulation; and protection from abuse, neglect, violence, stress, and trauma. Below is a comprehensive list of indicators that are integral to the goal of reducing the number of children who fail to reach their developmental potential.

- **Nutrition target**\(^{16}\)
  - Reduce by at least 40% the number of children under age five who are likely to suffer from stunted growth\(^{17}\)

- **Health targets**
  - Reduce maternal mortality rates by three quarters
  - Reduce rates of low birth weight, pre-term births and delivery without trained medical attendants
  - Reduce rates of maternal depression
  - Assure universal access to reproductive health care, including comprehensive prenatal screening, education and health care visits that include preparation for delivery, parenting education and support and family planning options
  - Assure universal access to parenting support through health care and other services
  - Provide universal, regular immunisations, screening and treatment, and hygiene and sanitation interventions
  - Prevent/treat paediatric HIV, provide stimulation activities for young children with HIV, and treat parents with HIV

- **Social Protection targets**\(^{16}\)
  - Halve the number of young children who live in households with per capita incomes below national poverty lines through strategies that provide social and income supports, such as cash transfers, daycare provision and employment
  - Eradicate exposure to neglect, violence and trauma in children’s homes, schools, and communities
  - Implement evidence-based child protection programs that promote responsive, nurturing and positive early interactions between caregivers and young children living in impoverished, harsh and/or violent environments
**Learning and Education targets**

- Assure safe, responsive and quality caregiving arrangements for children under 3
- Reduce the rate of developmental delays in children from birth to 5 years
- Halve the number of illiterate adults, particularly women
- Provide for all children at least one year of a quality pre-primary program as part of the formal education system
- Provide all children living below national poverty lines at least one additional year of quality early childhood programming

Early childhood encompasses the period of human development from prenatal through the transition from home or preschool into the early primary grades. Despite commitments and progress in improving access to education at the global level, including Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 on universal primary education and the Education for All (EFA) Goals, levels of learning are still too low. At least 250 million primary-school-age children around the world are not able to read, write or count well enough to meet minimum learning standards, including those who have spent at least four years in school. As such, we also propose the following:

- Increase investment in the early primary grades (1 to 3) to ensure children have well-trained and effective teachers and a teacher-pupil ratio of no more than 1:30. Early grade investments will improve learning outcomes and efficiency at every level of education systems. Primary education budgets, teacher qualifications, and pupil-teacher ratios should be reported by grade so that allocations to early grades can be tracked.
- Invest at least 15% of international education aid into pre-primary and early childhood education programs
- Allocate at least 7% of annual Ministry of Education budgets to the pre-primary grade(s)
- Reduce the learning gap by the age of 8 between the richest and poorest 10%:
  - Ensure all children start school on time, ready to learn and acquire basic learning competencies by age 8
  - Reduce by half the number of children unable to read with fluency and comprehension by age 8
  - Make children’s learning outcomes the metric of success for ECD investment. Whether preschool or early primary, we have ample evidence that “quality” is typically (and only) defined by inputs -- infrastructure, teacher qualifications, and other features -- that are not consistently predictive of children’s learning. We need to ensure equity in both access and learning

Achieving these goals and targets requires improvement in the global collection of quality data on early childhood indicators, cross-sectoral collaboration in developing effective implementation plans and strategies, and increased public and private sector investments.

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**ENDNOTES**

1 Early Childhood Development (ECD) is also known as Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) and encompasses early childhood education (ECE), early childhood care and education (ECCE), and other designations. Early Childhood includes the period of human development from prenatal through the transition from home or ECD centre into the early primary grades, 0 – 8 years of age.


5 Defined as children who are stunted (Height for Age less than -2SD) or living in absolute poverty (<$1 per day adjusted for purchasing power parity

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The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development (CGECCD) convenes, mobilizes, and engages global ECCD actors in order to generate and disseminate knowledge on ECCD for use in advocacy, policy, planning, capacity building, programming and evaluation research, aimed at improving the development of children, families and communities, especially those living in disadvantaged circumstances in low-and middle-income countries.

The CG’s post-2015 task team is working to ensure that early childhood development is an essential part of the global development agenda.

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