



# Laying the foundations

**Early childhood care and development**

*“Education opportunities are shaped long before children enter classrooms. The linguistic, cognitive and social skills they develop in early childhood are the real foundations for lifelong learning.”<sup>1</sup>*

A child’s first days, months and years – particularly from prenatal until the age of eight – are crucial. Those first years will determine how well a child’s brain matures, their ability to develop language skills and to interact with society. Ultimately, this period will shape the rest of his or her childhood, adolescence and adult life.

Worldwide, more than 200 million children aged under five do not reach their full developmental potential due to the absence of early childhood care programmes.<sup>2</sup> In developing countries, poverty, a lack of good nutrition, care and stimulation means nearly 40 per cent of children under five fail to reach their milestones for cognitive development. Those who do reach primary school often lack the basic skills to develop or learn in a classroom

setting. This leads to high numbers of children dropping out of education, potentially adding to the 67 million children who are already out of school.<sup>3</sup>

Early childhood care and development (ECCD) is the main foundation for child survival and holistic human development.<sup>4</sup> Investing in ECCD is one of the best ways in which governments can reduce primary school drop-out rates and the number of children who repeat a year. Such an investment will optimise a government’s spending on education, offsetting higher costs that governments would otherwise face if having to adopt measures later on to ensure all children have equal access to primary school and complete primary education.



### **ECCD interventions and programmes are vital because they:**

- Remain critical to achieving Millennium Development Goals 2, 3, 4 and 5.
- Help governments achieve equity in education from children’s very early years.
- Ensure that parents value education from children’s very early years onwards.
- Guarantee **all** children a strong developmental foundation.
- Are one of the best investments countries can make to improve children’s lives, ultimately bringing high returns in investment.

## Revisiting the global ECCD goals

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has outlined states' responsibilities to protect children's rights in early childhood. ECCD is also an obligation under international and regional education frameworks.

The Education for All (EFA) goals, adopted in Dakar in 2000, provide a clear framework for governments. The first EFA goal outlines a key obligation for governments to focus on children's early years. Governments should expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. Despite this being the first EFA goal, it remains one of the least implemented.

There has been an increased global push to implement key interventions in the early years, with wide disparities across regions. However, there is still a long path towards governments effectively intervening at the right age to tackle children's needs holistically, and to address inequalities from the very beginning.

Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 emphasises equal access to primary education for every boy and girl. This commitment cannot be fully implemented if children are not ready for school when they start, and if their learning experience, especially in the early primary

grades, is compromised. Early years interventions help children to enter school at the right age, to stay there for longer, and to improve their learning outcomes. In particular, they benefit girls, thereby contributing significantly to the second EFA goal and MDG 3, which both focus on gender parity and securing equal access to education for girls and boys.

It is also crucial to make stronger links between progress made in the early years and increased child survival and reduced maternal mortality (MDG 4 and 5 respectively). Early years interventions have a strong impact on children's survival and development beyond the age of 5.

The 2010 Moscow Framework of Action and Co-operation, *Harnessing the Wealth of Nations*, issued new commitments to accelerate progress on the first EFA goal and provides key recommendations for all ECCD stakeholders. If the recommendations were followed through, many more children would benefit from ECCD interventions and governments would accelerate progress on all EFA goals. As outlined in our final recommendations, a number of key measures need to be adopted to ensure states move ahead on all their commitments.

## An equal start in life

*"Respecting the distinctive interests, experiences and challenges facing every young child is the starting point for realising their rights during this crucial phase of their lives."*<sup>5</sup>

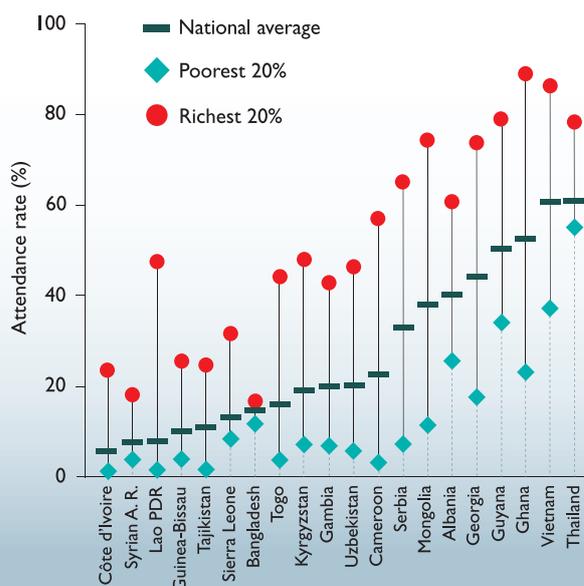
Early childhood care and development helps to give all children an equal start in life. ECCD interventions aim to reach all children during their early childhood and to tackle some of the key issues that will affect them later on in their lives.

The most marginalised and vulnerable children may:

- Experience discrimination because of their gender, ethnicity or disability that will impact on their access to school.
- Be at higher risk of malnutrition or stunted growth.<sup>6</sup>
- Be at risk early on, including from violence and abuse, which will limit their chances of developing to their full potential.<sup>7</sup>
- Struggle to attend school because they need to work to support their families.

### Children in richer households are more likely to attend early learning programmes

Percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds attending early learning programmes, by wealth, selected countries, 2005-2007



Note: Data are for the most recent year available during the period specified  
Source: Nonoyama-Tarumi and Ota (2010)  
Graph taken from Education for All – Global Monitoring Report 2011

Figure 1

By investing in ECCD, including through supporting families and parents, governments are tackling barriers that emerge in early childhood but only become apparent later on. They are making smart decisions that have the potential to significantly reduce the number of children who drop out during the first or second grade. Ultimately, this will bring down the total number of children who are out of school.<sup>8</sup>

ECCD interventions also tackle gender barriers in education, contributing to girls being more likely to access primary schooling.<sup>9</sup> A study conducted in northern Nigeria found that girls who enrolled in ECCD programmes and benefited from early exposure to education had better access to primary school. This motivated them to carry on studying, and also raised the awareness of their parents and communities from the start.<sup>10</sup> Research from Brazil showed that girls aged 10-18 who had not attended preschool were more than twice as likely to get pregnant as teenagers compared to girls who had attended ECCD programmes.<sup>11</sup>

ECCD interventions have limitless potential to raise awareness among parents and communities, and to safeguard children's all-important access to education from their very early years onwards.

A study of 24 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa found that increased preschool enrolment boosted primary completion rates and lowered dropout and repetition rates. In places where children had no access to preschool, grade repetition rates were twice as high as in places where half the children had access to preschool (12 per cent versus 25 per cent) and dropout rates were 2.5 times higher (20 per cent versus 50 per cent). The benefits of ECCD were greatest among children from the poorest families with the least educated parents.<sup>12</sup>

## Equitable approaches to ECCD

It is important that governments acknowledge the close relationship between ECCD programmes and reducing poverty. Children tend to inherit the same inequities their parents have faced. Therefore, children from poor backgrounds start out at a disadvantage, and remain so throughout their education – particularly if their schooling fails to meet their particular needs. This trend continues through the generations.

Families that live in poverty often struggle to provide for their children's basic needs to flourish as individuals: good nutrition, care, protection,

motivation and academic support. Many parents also depend on their children to supplement the family income. Children who grow up in poverty are therefore less likely to go to school, or to stay in education long-term and achieve good results. This leads to lower wages in adulthood.



Figure 1 shows how children from richer households are more likely to attend early learning programmes than their poorer counterparts. Unless this problem is addressed, the poorest children will remain stuck in the poverty cycle that continues from generation to generation. Quality ECCD programmes have been shown to tackle this challenge by starting with children who are most marginalised in education, and supporting their access to early learning programmes.

### To break down socio-economic barriers through ECCD interventions, governments should:

- Target and increase quality ECCD programmes or initiatives for the most vulnerable and marginalised children
- Reduce the costs for families, gradually guaranteeing free access
- Extend free access policies to the first years of primary school.

As explored below, many countries' ECCD policies stress the role communities play in identifying and providing early learning opportunities for their children. However, this does not mean that governments can waiver their responsibility for providing all children with access to such opportunities. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child suggests that countries should develop high-quality programmes that support children's development and are culturally relevant. Governments can achieve this by working with local communities instead of imposing a standardised approach to ECCD.<sup>13</sup>

ECCD stakeholders gathered in Moscow in September 2010 at the first ever World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, organised by UNESCO.

They adopted the **Moscow Framework of Action**, which recommends that governments:

- Take innovative measures to overcome all forms of discrimination in compliance with all conventions on human rights and make quality ECCD provision available to children from poor and disadvantaged groups, to children with disabilities, and to marginalised populations as well as those in emergency situations affected by conflict and disasters. Special attention should be devoted to overcoming gender discrimination (EFA goal 5);
- Value cultural and linguistic diversity, especially in regard to indigenous and minority languages, and encourage the use of familiar language in ECCD and provide adequate resources as part of good teaching. Value multilingualism as an asset;
- Take targeted measures to put in place early detection interventions for children at high risk of developmental delays and disability.



Credit: Elin Martinez/Save the Children

## Optimal timing for the right type of investment

Achieving visible results quickly is often a priority for donors. It also suits governments' short-term tenures. However, quick results and short-term agendas do not necessarily enhance children's education. For ECCD programmes to have a positive impact on children over a lifetime, long-term thinking is vital.<sup>14</sup>

Enough evidence exists to prove the added value of ECCD investment. For example, increasing the learning component of ECCD programmes, by increasing preschool enrolment rates to 25 per cent in every low-income and middle-income country could yield an estimated US\$10.6 billion through higher educational achievement. A 50 per cent increase could generate US\$33.7 billion.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, according to the German Development Agency, GIZ, "improvements in

educational efficiency alone are calculated to pay back close to 85 per cent of the costs of ECD interventions for underprivileged children."<sup>16</sup>

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries spend an estimated 1.6 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on family services and preschool for children aged 0-6 years, and 0.43 per cent of GDP on preschools alone.<sup>17</sup> Countries should initially spend at least 0.5 per cent to 1.5 per cent of their GDP on ECCD programmes. However, many countries continue to allocate funding below the recommended level, particularly developing countries.<sup>18</sup> The Consultative Group on ECCD recommends that governments should progressively invest 14 to 20 per cent of their education budgets in ECCD over a period of five to ten years, with the ultimate goal of investing up to 25 per cent.<sup>19</sup>

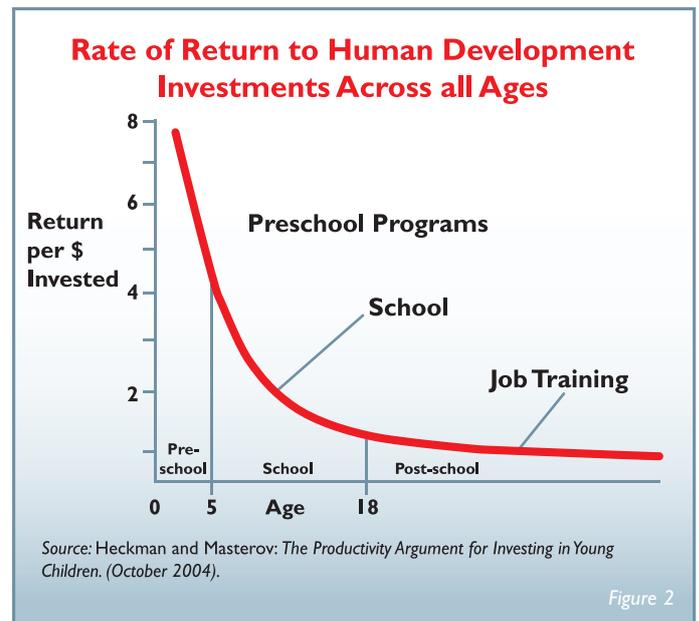
Governments have often introduced ECCD after other aspects of the Education For All agenda have been fulfilled. In such cases, centre-based ECCD interventions could seem expensive, particularly because they often involve setting up basic infrastructure, such as buildings adjacent to existing infrastructure, and employing qualified staff.

Governments must acknowledge that investing in ECCD programmes is an investment in the future of their citizens. Implementing quality ECCD programmes effectively can have broader social benefits, ensure optimal financial returns and secure economic benefits for the whole country.

In practice, communities often develop ECCD programmes themselves in the absence of government support. Communities value ECCD because they can see the positive impact it has on their children and the “return on their investment”. However, when government under-investment directly transfers financing responsibilities to households, it has the effect of “pricing the poor out of the system”<sup>20</sup> and can put a strain on parents’ ability to send their children to ECCD centres.

Even when budgets are highly constrained, it is possible for governments to widen the reach of pre-primary education and establish ECCD centres.<sup>21</sup> For example, by using existing community infrastructure and mobilising caregivers and teachers from within the community, particularly in remote areas.

The responsibility for ECCD budgets often falls with education ministries. However, ECCD investment and budget allocations need to be linked across many other sectors and government offices, including health, nutrition, care and protection, child and gender welfare. By establishing effective coordination systems or inter-agency task forces, ministries can communicate, implement initiatives together and make their investments as efficient as possible. Other ECCD stakeholders should also be included in decision-making processes, such as representatives of the public and private sectors, and civil society organisations.



## Why is ECCD such a powerful form of government investment?

### Short-term benefits of ECCD:

- When parents know how to raise a healthy child from pregnancy onwards, healthcare costs come down.
- It increases awareness of sanitation among parents and children, reducing diarrhoea and other diseases.
- Empowered parents can better support children’s development and their ability to reach their full potential.
- It reduces socio-emotional issues in children, enabling them to interact, learn and develop better.
- It protects children, because parents become aware of the benefits of positive discipline and the negative impact of physical and humiliating punishment.

### Long-term benefits of ECCD

- It has a positive impact on communities, societies and nations because it reduces violence, poverty, anti-social behaviour and crime.<sup>22</sup>
- A healthier population increases productivity, leading to a greater gross national product (GNP) and decreasing gender and social inequalities.
- High returns on initial investment: ECCD programmes can yield an estimated 15-17 per cent return.<sup>23</sup> Every US dollar invested in children can guarantee a saving of approximately US\$13.<sup>24</sup>

## Holistic benefits for children

As well as having long-term benefits for national economies, ECCD programmes have major benefits for children. Early childhood initiatives enhance children's cognitive growth and improve their social, emotional and behavioural attitudes.<sup>25</sup> With the right kind of nutrition and interaction with adults and other children, children develop quickly, stay healthy and cultivate their basic skills.

## The benefits for children's education

Parents of children who regularly attend ECCD programmes can see the difference it makes on their behaviour and performance in primary school. Children are better prepared to start school and continue making good progress up to secondary education.<sup>26</sup> They have better social and emotional skills, which increase their general achievement levels, particularly in reading and mathematics.<sup>27</sup>

By enrolling in quality ECCD programmes, young children are exposed to language, reading and print-rich environments. This helps children to build their literacy and numeracy skills, with a positive effect on their learning outcomes in primary education. The skill of "learning to read" leads to "reading to learn", and this is crucial.<sup>28</sup> Children who attend quality ECCD programmes are exposed early on to quality teaching and resources that can support their learning over the long-term.

## The benefits for children's development

Governments are encouraged to "adopt and promote an approach to ECC[E] that is both holistic and multi-sectoral to ensure good birth outcomes (prenatal stage), neonatal health and nutritional well-being, care and education of children aged zero to eight, with special focus on children aged zero to three".<sup>29</sup>

The experiences of young children, in particular from nought to five years, as well as a future mother's health and education, will have an impact on children's learning experiences.

- Experiences such as long-term starvation, abuse and neglect, or being exposed to violence, compromises brain development in young children.
- A future mother's health is key to ensuring that her child survives and thrives during his or her early years.<sup>30</sup> However, stimulation is also an important way to help children to achieve their

full potential.<sup>31</sup> Raising parents' awareness of the combined importance of nutrition and early stimulation will improve overall developmental outcomes for children.

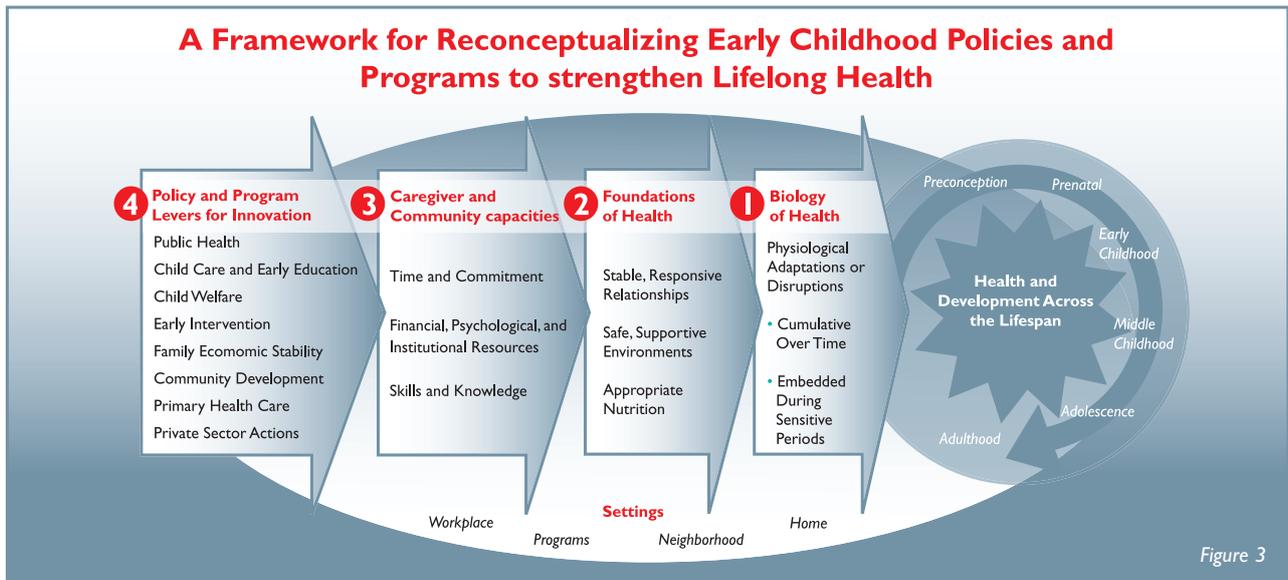
- Malnourished children will struggle to reach their potential, physically or mentally. Save the Children's recent report on global malnutrition showed that 156 million children below the age of five are stunted.<sup>32</sup> Stunting doesn't only affect a child's physical growth, but also his or her intellectual development. Evidence shows that a stunted child is more likely to enrol late, miss classes or repeat a year in school. To save children's lives and ensure they are able to develop fully, nutrition in early childhood – and specifically infant and young child feeding – must be highly prioritised in national policies and strategies, and widely implemented.

ECCD efforts are usually channelled through education, but other sectors also play a key role in addressing children's holistic needs. ECCD incorporates key components such as learning, protection, health and nutritional needs by focusing on the child, rather than on the service. The first five years of a child's life, including prenatal stages, therefore, provide a unique opportunity for critical interventions to support survival, brain development and learning. Evidence shows that children who have access to health and education services in countries with higher child survival rates, are likely to do better in school.<sup>33</sup>



Credit: Laura Kennedy/Save the Children

Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child suggests a useful framework for strengthening lifelong health benefits through early childhood policies:<sup>34</sup>



### Joined-up ECCD programming in El Salvador

Save the Children has worked with El Salvador's Academy of Paediatricians to design a developmental screening instrument for paediatricians and healthcare workers to use during routine growth check-ups. Following the check-up, each child is now assigned to a community health worker who follows up with activities that support their development. The health workers have a toolkit of resources that enables them to work with young children across different developmental issues and ages. This approach now reaches approximately 90 per cent of all children in El Salvador. It is a powerful example of a successful cross-sectoral approach to ECCD programming.

### The benefits for parents

Parents and families play a central role in children's most critical period of life. Quality early years interventions empower parents, particularly by supporting their own literacy and awareness of their children's rights and needs.

Parents' participation in ECCD programmes has a positive impact because:

- Parents gain a greater awareness of how to interact positively with their children, and how this benefits children's health and development.
- Parents' decision-making powers increase, particularly if they become active members of local parent-teacher committees.
- Families and households increase their income by guaranteeing that parents and older siblings are able to seek employment when freed from child-rearing duties.
- Mothers can work knowing their children are safe and learning in preschool.<sup>35</sup> When more women join the workforce, a country's economic landscape improves.<sup>36</sup>

## First ECCD impact evaluation in Africa shows significant gains for young children in Mozambique

Save the Children's early childhood care and development programme in Mozambique has successfully supported children's early learning skills, prepared them for primary school and promoted their subsequent school enrolment and attendance. This was demonstrated by an impact evaluation carried out with the World Bank in 2011. The impact evaluation has also provided Mozambique's government with critical information as it embarks on an ambitious national strategy on ECCD.

The evaluation found that children participating in the programme significantly outperformed their peers in problem solving skills, such as completing puzzles, comparing objects, and counting, as well as precise motor coordination. This includes the ability to draw straight lines and copy symbols, which are important emergent writing skills. Parents and caregivers also said that the programme built their children's social and emotional skills, as they became more likely to help their family members and less likely to fight with siblings and peers. It also reduced children's illness and time spent working, and freed up more time for their carers to earn a living.

### School readiness

The evaluation showed that the ECCD programme helped children to make a successful transition to primary school. First grade teachers reported that children who graduated from the ECCD programme were consistently more likely than their peers to have experience in writing; had greater knowledge of numbers and shapes; and showed interest in writing and learning about maths. Teachers also said these

children were much less nervous about starting school than their peers.

The programme significantly increased children's enrolment and participation in primary school. Overall, there was an 18 per cent increase in children's school participation. The evaluation found that the more time children had spent in the ECCD programme, the greater the probability that they had enrolled in first grade on time (aged six). They also spent an average of 43 per cent more time in school than their peers each week. Two main factors that could account for this increase were that children were less likely to be ill and spent less time working on the family farm compared with their peers. Parents supported children's school participation by promoting good hygiene and daily routines.

### Positive effects for other family members

The evaluation showed positive knock-on effects for older siblings' school participation (aged 10-15). These children were five per cent more likely to attend school than peers who did not have a younger sibling in the ECCD programme. Parents were significantly more likely to be earning a living, presumably because the preschool programme freed up several hours of their time every day.

### Planning for the future

Mozambique has some of the lowest ECCD enrolment rates in the world: only four per cent of its children have access to any type of early learning programme. The education system also faces major challenges: more than 27 per cent of primary school-aged children are not in school, and more than half of those who enrol in first grade drop out before completing fifth grade.

Mozambique's Ministry of Education has recognised the importance of ECCD in improving primary school indicators. Our evaluation findings will support their advocacy efforts for a national pilot with assistance from the World Bank. Save the Children will work with the government to scale-up our model and increase access to quality programming for young children.



*Credit: Per-Anders Petterson/Save the Children*

**Save the Children is a member of the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development. It endorses the four cornerstones developed to secure a strong foundation for young children:<sup>37</sup>**

**Cornerstone 1: Start at the beginning**

Integrate early stimulation, child development, and parenting information into prenatal, early health, nutrition, and education services by:

- Providing access to parenting programmes that address holistic child development, particularly for the most vulnerable families;
- Improving services for young children and families including early stimulation, health, nutrition and child care;

**Cornerstone 2: Get ready for success**

Ensure access to at least two years of quality early childhood programmes prior to formal school entry, beginning with the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

**Cornerstone 3: Improve primary school quality**

Increase investments and improve the transition from home or preschool to primary school and the quality of learning in Grades 1-3 by;

- Providing teachers with knowledge about early childhood, learning environments and styles, and methods for teaching early literacy and numeracy during pre/in-service teacher training;
- Giving children adequate learning materials;
- Ensuring smaller sized classes.

**Cornerstone 4: Include early childhood in policies**

Address early childhood in all national policies and plans across sectors, including Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), Common Country Assessment's (CCA's), UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), One UN Plan documents, Education for All (EFA) Plans, and Global Partnership for Education plans (GPE, formerly, the Fast Track Initiative) Assure adequate resources and multi-sectoral coordination by ensuring that early childhood is integral to development and macroeconomic planning and budgeting.



*Credit: Elin Martinez/Save the Children*

## **Making it happen**

There are many good reasons why governments should implement national and global ECCD policies that can guarantee all children a successful early start in life. This should go hand-in-hand with any attempt to implement broader MDG and EFA agendas, and efforts to increase access to primary education and improving children's learning outcomes.

To successfully harness the potential of ECCD, Save the Children recommends that governments should:

### **Invest in children's early years**

Governments and donors should think long-term when they decide which education areas to invest in. They should look at ECCD as a key intervention that will have a significant impact on children. All children must start holistic learning and development early in order to reach their full potential.

### **Invest equitably**

Quality ECCD programmes are most effective when they target the poorest and most vulnerable children, and the most marginalised communities. This will increase their chances of going to school and succeeding in their education.

### **Support parents and communities**

Governments should work with communities to ensure that the most vulnerable children have access to ECCD interventions, particularly in remote and most marginalized areas. Governments should be responsible for implementing sustainable, quality ECCD programmes by increasing resources for ECCD programmes at a local or district level.

### **Recognise ECCD staff**

Ministries of Education and teachers unions should recognise the growing ECCD workforce as teachers and ensure that they can join and are represented by teachers unions. ECCD teachers and caregivers from both the formal and non-formal sectors should be equally entitled to accreditation, support and training. Ministries should also support medical professionals, social workers, parents and other professionals to learn about and promote holistic child development.

### **Integrate all ECCD approaches and develop holistic data**

Government ministries focusing on children's development should proactively integrate all ECCD approaches into their operational plans. This could be achieved by forming a single agency dealing with ECCD, or establishing a joint task force coordinating mechanism between ministries. Where several interventions target the early years, ministries should integrate data systems to establish holistic child development indices.

### **Provide political leadership, adopt the right policies and funding**

Governments should endorse their ECCD commitments by developing and adopting comprehensive national policies on early childhood as part of poverty reduction strategies and plans for the education sector. Governments should devote at least 0.5-1.5 per cent of their total GDP to spending on ECCD programmes.

### **Provide financial support for the early years sector**

Bilateral education donors and multilateral partners, including the World Bank and regional development banks, should support countries by adequately funding ECCD policies and articulating ECCD targets in their sector plans. The Global Partnership for Education should increase its support for ECCD as part of its renewed approach to increasing education access and enhancing learning outcomes. The private sector and private foundations should continue to support ECCD interventions and increase their support for community-driven projects.

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