Children’s early experiences can either augment or inhibit their overall development, depending on their access to, and the quality of, nutrition and health services, family and community care practices, learning opportunities and protection.

Holistic Development of Young Children in Asia and the Pacific – Preamble

Young children\(^1\) develop holistically. They need support in health, nutrition, care, protection, early stimulation and learning. The development and learning goals of young children are therefore multi-dimensional. They are achieved when young children survive and become physically healthy, mentally alert, emotionally secure, socially competent, able to learn, culturally and spiritually aware and aesthetically creative. They grow up to become responsible and productive adults. Thus holistic development of young children is both the aspiration and guiding principle of early childhood interventions, and a key determinant of national development.

Children’s early experiences can either augment or inhibit their overall development, depending on their access to, and the quality of, nutrition and health services, family and community care practices, learning opportunities and protection. They need support from multiple sectors. Such support impacts not only on children themselves, but also on the environments in which children live and which, in turn, influence on children’s development.

This advocacy paper primarily addresses policy-makers whose decisions can have a make-or-break influence on young children.

This advocacy paper primarily addresses policy-makers whose decisions can have a make-or-break influence on young children. It conveys messages about the indisputable value of holistic early childhood development and the daunting realities of insufficient and poor quality services in meeting children’s needs in Asia-Pacific. It puts forward a range of policy actions which are critical for enabling young children to realise their rights, develop their potential and contribute to their nation’s advancement. The advocacy messages in this White Paper echo and reinforce other messages about ECD previously voiced by ARNEC and other regional professional bodies and fora.

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\(^1\) The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines early childhood as extending from the prenatal stage through to the transition to primary school or age 8.
A Call to Action

We all must do our part to fulfil responsibilities towards young children and build a strong foundation for our nations’ future. This is imperative. Multiple stakeholders have made resounding calls for putting holistic early childhood development at the centre of the policy discourse and development priorities. Through country and regional consultations, they have put forward proposals for action.

The following recommendations reflect the results of those broad-based consultations on the one hand, and research, reviews and meta-analyses, on the other. Action is needed at different levels, along different dimensions, in support of holistic early childhood development:

1. Expanding access to holistic early childhood development and promoting equity

- Ensure provision of maternal and infant care according to established national standards, starting with prenatal checks, supplementary nutrition for pregnant mothers and skilled birth attendance.

- Provide children with integrated services encompassing health, nutrition, early stimulation, protection and early learning based on the needs of each age sub-group from pre-natal to age 8, with special attention to conflict and disaster contexts.

- Establish crèches, child care centres, play groups, kindergartens, community-based and home-based programmes, catering to all young children, and proactively targeting those from marginalised and deprived groups.

- Support early detection and family-based early interventions for children with disability. Ensure that child care workers and preschool teachers are prepared to support children with special needs. Promote family care over institutional (foster) care for children with disabilities. Ensure all children aged 4-6 have access to two years of age and context-appropriate pre-school education, conducted in their mother tongue.

- Ensure all children aged 6-8 have access to child-friendly primary schools where they are enabled to acquire early literacy and numeracy, and develop social-emotional skills. Support bridging strategies for the transition towards learning in the national language.

- Ensure regular monitoring and evaluation with disaggregated data on the access to early childhood services, with particular attention to underprivileged children.

2. Ensuring good quality of early childhood interventions

- Determine, and ensure the implementation of, key quality standards that are adaptable to the local context, including:
  - Early learning and development standards
  - Curriculum standards ensuring seamless continuity across age sub-groups
  - Programme and service standards, for both centre-based and home-based contexts
  - Teacher / caregiver standards
  - Standards for ECD centres
3. Building an enabling policy environment for holistic early childhood development

- Develop, or update, a comprehensive national early childhood policy addressing health, nutrition, education and protection of young children. Reflect national early childhood policy in the respective sectoral policies and action plans to ensure implementation.
- Determine goals, standards and play-based curriculum for holistic early childhood development, accompanied by an adequate budget, and with scope for contextualisation at sub-national level.
- Legislate a mechanism to mandate coordination among sectors concerned with ECD (for example, education, health, social welfare, etc.) to ensure the implementation of national early childhood policy.
- Accountability mechanism, for early childhood service providers, and put in place measures for enforcement.
- Institute a system of regulation and accreditation for ensuring standards.
- Conduct regular monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the policies, also with a view to identifying bottlenecks and opportunities and taking corrective action.

4. Strengthening capacities of parents, families and communities

- Make skilled parenting a key goal of early childhood development programmes, accompanied with necessary parental support and peer learning.
- Expand initiatives for women’s literacy and support in their multiple roles, responding to local patterns of women’s work and time.
- Mobilise parents, family members, local youth and communities to advocate for holistic development of young children and give recognition for their contribution.
- Strengthen the capacity of community institutions and local governments in promoting holistic early childhood development.
- Use local media to raise awareness about holistic early childhood development to parents and community-level stakeholders.

Support age and context-appropriate early childhood programmes focusing on school-readiness and early literacy to enable children to transition successfully to, and perform well in, primary school.

Professionalise preschool education in terms of teacher’s training, status and career opportunities, as well as conduct joint in-service training for pre-school and primary school teachers on child development and psychology.

Improve the quality of learning environments and processes in the lower primary grades, especially in early literacy and numeracy through training teachers to effectively address young learners’ needs, through the use of child-centred approaches and remedial assistance to those with learning difficulties.

Put in place, and ensure the implementation of, a simple monitoring mechanism for the quality of both process and outcome of early childhood interventions in both public and private ECD centres and preschools.
5. Creating a movement to support holistic development and learning of young children

- Make investments in holistic early childhood development integral to national, sectoral and donor-funded development aid programmes, especially targeting poor regions and communities and disadvantaged groups.

- Ensure equity-based resource allocations for early childhood development, including through legal measures.

- Communicate key messages about holistic, inclusive early childhood development, including the “8 by 8” package to all institutional levels and stakeholders, which includes:
  1. Four pre-natal checks and birth attended by a skilled professional
  2. Birth registration
  3. Full immunization and growth monitoring, development assessment and promotion
  4. Adequate nutrition, including exclusive breastfeeding for six months
  5. Healthy and safe environment, including social protection measures for mothers and children, especially of disadvantaged groups
  6. Skilled parenting and family support
  7. Two years of high quality preschool programmes
  8. High quality education in early primary grades

- Organise networks or facilitate stakeholder partnerships in view of creating ECD support groups and fora with extended partnerships, making maximal use of evidence and insights from programme evaluations, action research, social audits, national reports and cross-country exchange.

- Promote promising or noteworthy initiatives – both at country and regional level - in support of holistic development, learning of young children and inter-country learning.

Actions in the above dimensions reinforce each other. They complement one another in making sure young children have the opportunity to achieve their full potential, especially the most disadvantaged. The key messages are clear that support in early years is critical for realising a child’s right and development; that caring for children should begin at home in a nurturing and stimulating environment; that early childhood services must be multi-dimensional, of high quality and inclusive, and conducted seamlessly across different stages of the child’s development. An enabling early childhood policy is a prerequisite for bringing all this about.

It may not be possible to carry out all actions at once. Some will be concurrent while others will be consecutive. Yet, only through the commitment and determination of policy makers and other stakeholders will they be implemented. At stake are not only the rights of the young generation, but also the well-being and future of their nations. This is a call to action to policy makers in whose hands lies the future of national development. It is a call to action to those who care about the advancement of their country.
Positioning Early Childhood Development for Post-2015 Era

The Millennium Development Goals and Education for All goals reaffirmed the joint commitment of governments, donors, UN agencies, NGOs and civil society groups to shared responsibility in reducing the disparity between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ by 2015. Despite considerable progress in meeting many of these goals, disparities have not been eliminated. With regard to early childhood development, much more needs to be done. Targets related to ECD laid out in the framework of Education for All goals are yet to be reached. Progress made so far in ECD will have long term impact only if efforts are sustained and expanded, and existing gaps are filled.

The on-going discussions on shaping post-2015 development goals, albeit not yet conclusive, give grounds for concern that early childhood development faces the risk of not being part of the post-2015 goals. Everything should be done to avoid such eventuality. Compelling evidence of the positive impact of early childhood development on the individual and national advancement proves beyond doubt that it is critical to reflect ECD in post 2015-goals. Should nations wish to achieve equitable socio-economic progress and sustainable development, ECD cannot afford to be omitted or neglected. Failure to expand and enhance ECD as a strategy to improve health, education, and to reduce poverty and inequality will put countries at great peril.

The multi-sectoral nature of early childhood development allows it to be anchored in different development goals of the post-2015 era, including, but not limited to: health; nutrition; education; gender empowerment; poverty reduction; environmental sustainability; disaster reduction; and peace building. The need for integration is an opportunity and a great challenge. Early childhood professionals, advocates and policy-makers need to work together in identifying ways and means to make sure holistic early childhood development gets on the national and global development agenda for post-2015. The stakes are high. They call for joint effort and commitment. Sustained advocacy through all possible channels is essential, including in particular the national, regional and global consultations on post-2015 development goals.
Achieving Holistic Development and Learning Goals for Young Children – Building the Health and Wealth of Nations and Advancing Social Justice

Research has shown that holistic early childhood development brings multiple benefits and is a determinant of national development.

Holistic early childhood development improves child health and nutrition and builds healthy nations:

Early childhood support for both mothers and young children improves maternal and child health and nutrition, and combats HIV/AIDS. This goes beyond their ability to survive or the absence of disease, and signifies physical, mental and social well-being. Good nutrition and health care for mothers and young children have a positive influence on foetal life, infancy and childhood, enabling children to grow up healthy and resist diseases in their adulthood. This directly contributes to averting epidemics. Interventions in early years assist children with disabilities to mitigate their disability and achieve their potential to the highest degree possible. When interventions to improve health and nutrition are provided in early childhood, rather than later in life, they require fewer resources yet yield greater effectiveness. They help reduce costs for families, communities and government. Healthy children become healthy and productive adults, who help build a healthy and wealthy nation.

In the absence of health and nutrition support, children’s physical development is constrained. A poor health and nutrition condition leads to children’s lower cognitive development, resulting in low learning achievement in schools and subsequently lower productivity. This has a direct negative consequence on the process of national wealth creation.

Holistic early childhood development educates the young generation and promotes nation-building:

Education, similar to health, is a primary building block and the foundation of national progress. Holistic early childhood development is the foundation for achieving education goals and cumulative life-long learning. Research from Asia-Pacific countries has shown that children who participate in high quality early childhood education programmes outperform their peers who do not have access to such programmes in both cognitive and non-cognitive aspects. Neurobiological evidence shows that the foundation for skills and competences is laid in early childhood. Skills and knowledge gained through early stimulation and education programmes in the mother tongue enable children’s acquisition and expansion of academic and social competences in primary school and beyond. Hence the early years provide a critical ‘window of opportunity’ for ensuring long-term benefits for the individual, and the country.

High quality early stimulation and age-appropriate education in early childhood help reduce grade repetition and dropout, and increase school completion rates. Hence, investment in early childhood education leads to a reduction in overall education costs and improves the internal efficiency of the education system as a whole. Young children, stimulated and ready-to-learn today, help build the solid foundation of their country’s progress tomorrow.
Investment in early childhood development brings high economic returns:

Economists have found that investment in ECD yields higher returns than investment later in life. In low and middle income countries, the increased enrolment in preschools or other ECD programme can bring between US$ 10 and US$ 34 billion in benefits to society. The benefit-to-cost ratio of ECD programmes can be between 6.4 to 17.6. The higher the children’s enrolment rate, the higher the benefit-to-cost ratio. The high economic return on investment in ECD programmes is evident on the “Heckman Curve”. It shows that investment in children’s early years - before they get into primary school - brings the highest return. The return levels out during secondary and higher education. Investment in early childhood development is among the most cost-efficient human capital investments and lead to greater national productivity.

Holistic early childhood development alleviates inequity and promotes national harmony:

Research from Asia-Pacific has demonstrated that the effect of early interventions is even higher for improving outcomes of children and families from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds than other families. Hence early childhood programmes are effective in reducing the gaps between disadvantaged children and their peers in health, cognitive development and school readiness. They narrow the gap in children’s growth trajectories – a gap which would otherwise widen as they grow up.

Holistic early childhood development also plays a crucial role in achieving gender equality, and in more than one way. Childcare and development programmes, community-based early stimulation and learning, formal and non-formal preschool education improve the development and learning outcomes for girls. Experience in many countries in the Asia-Pacific region demonstrates that ECD programmes have led to girls’ increased enrolment, learning achievement, completion of primary school and progression to secondary level. Early childhood programmes also benefit other female members of the family, through their participation in health, nutrition and education services. Parenting programmes greatly improve a mother’s knowledge, her parenting skills and behaviour, self-esteem and confidence, leading to greater empowerment to do what is best for her children.
Holistic early childhood development interventions are critical to impact of disaster situations:

In disaster- and conflict-affected areas, ECD programmes have multiple positive effects. In addition to preventing malnutrition, chronic illnesses, delayed development and toxic stress, they help children to overcome anxiety and to increase confidence and resilience, thus reducing behavioural problems in later life. Holistic ECD interventions in disaster situations are life-saving and life-sustaining, enabling young children, their families and communities to best prepare for and better cope with the devastating effects of a disaster.

The evidence is clear: holistic development and learning have transformational effects for young children and for society as a whole, bringing benefits in health, nutrition, education, protection and gender empowerment. It is integral to fulfilling children’s rights to survival, development, protection and participation. ECD is an equaliser in terms of compensating for social and economic deficits. Hence, holistic early childhood development contributes to poverty reduction and social justice and is a determinant of national progress.

GAPS!

Despite the fact that holistic early childhood development yields multi-dimensional gains, considerable gaps remain in the Asia-Pacific region in making it accessible to all children from birth to age 8. So far, progress towards this end is mixed.

The lack of basic healthcare for mothers and infants and an increase in sex-selective abortions are daunting realities in some countries. Although the under-5 mortality rates have declined considerably in the region as a whole over the past decade, they are still high in South Asia, and higher than the world average. South Asia also has the highest rate of stunting and malnutrition among children aged 0-4 years. Those in the poorest 20% of households are twice as likely to be stunted as those in the richest 20%. Low levels of immunization persist in a number of countries, despite progress in the 1990s. Where integrated child care services exist, the attention to health and nutrition care for children under three years remains inadequate. Children with disabilities face a particular plight with some placed in child-unfriendly institutions, others altogether neglected and most ostracised.

As for education, while the gross enrolment ratio in pre-primary education has increased between 2000 and 2009 in most countries in Asia-Pacific, inequitable access to quality ECD programmes persists in underserved communities in rural areas, and for children from families of low socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Disparity in the access and quality of preschool education is marked not only between countries, but also within countries - with private preschools far outnumbering public ones in some cases. For many young children, learning and playing are beyond reach as they are forced into work. In disaster and conflict situations there is inadequate preparedness for, and provision of, good quality ECD services.
The quality of early learning leaves much to be desired. High quality educational services are either non-existent or accessible only to a small group of children, resulting in persistent inequality of children's learning outcomes. The early childhood curriculum in many preschools is not appropriate for children's age and development stage, or delivered in a language that is not children's mother tongue, making learning a stressful undertaking for many. A great number of preschools are crowded and child-unfriendly, with poorly-qualified, under-appreciated and unmotivated teachers. Children end up not receiving the necessary knowledge, skills and behaviours that prepare them adequately for primary school and beyond.

Further, when young children enter primary school, they are often placed in over-crowded classrooms which follow a highly formalised teaching/learning environment and curriculum that is at times conducted in a language that is not their mother tongue. Early primary grade teachers, lacking in the knowledge about child development and child psychology, fail to provide the kinds of interaction and a language-rich environment that are conducive to children's learning and social emotional development. Not surprisingly, children's learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy in early primary grades are low, and the rates of repetition and dropout are high.

Sector-based services for children tend to provide fragmented support while the provision of integrated services that attempt to address all aspects of development during early childhood is insufficient.

Serious challenges remain in ensuring children’s development and learning goals are realised. Sector-based services for children tend to provide fragmented support while the provision of integrated services that attempt to address all aspects of development during early childhood is insufficient. There is a lack of convergence of services across the sectors. Children’s development and learning goals in many Asia-Pacific countries are not clearly defined across age sub-groups and developmental stages. Despite the clear evidence of the benefits of investment in ECD, holistically-designed ECD policies are not in place in all countries. The multi-dimensional nature of young children’s development is not always reflected in the curriculum, not least because of the lack of consensus on the definition of early childhood development goals and what the curriculum should aim at and include. Interventions for infants and toddlers are often limited to their physical health and nutrition with little attention paid to early stimulation and early learning or to social emotional development. On the other hand, interventions for children aged 4-8 years usually emphasise academic subjects while neglecting health, nutrition and social emotional aspects. Most countries lack a seamless continuity between preschool and early primary grades in learning objectives, teaching methods and outcome assessments. This makes it difficult for children to build on their preschool experience in order to be ready for, and do well in, primary school and beyond.

In countries where holistic development goals are defined, the gaps between the stated goals and their implementation present considerable challenges. Such disconnect may be due to several factors, including the lack of implementation guidance and necessary measures, varying practices of implementation, inadequate and poorly trained human resources and severe shortages of basic
learning materials. Despite recommendations by national curricula against testing young children, regrettably the use of tests – with inappropriate objectives and methods – leads to widespread practice of teaching to the test rather than focusing on children’s needs. All this adds to children’s predicament, constraining their learning process and dampening their motivation for learning. There should be an emphasis on the actual learning process and not merely the outcomes of learning.

Other important gaps can be seen at the system level. Although more and more countries in Asia-Pacific now have a policy framework for ECD, a number of countries are still in the process of policy development. As for the implementation of ECD policy frameworks already in place, considerable gaps remain. Funding for public provision of good quality early childhood services is at a very low level. Cross-sector coordination for implementing early childhood interventions remains sadly inadequate. Furthermore, the lack of monitoring and evaluation of the quality of early childhood programmes prevents timely corrective measures and inhibits improvement.

Holistic early childhood development builds the health and wealth of nations and advances social justice by:

1) Improving child health and nutrition;
2) Educating the future generation and promoting nation-building;
3) Bringing about high economic returns for nations and
4) Alleviating inequity and promoting national harmony

However, it is highly unfortunate that ECD has been placed on the backburner at higher level initiatives, such as the Millennium Development Goals, which are due to be renewed post-2015. This White Paper, titled ‘Promoting Holistic Development of Young Children – An Imperative for the Advancement of Nations in the Asia-Pacific’ seeks to highlight the importance of addressing such existing, perilous gaps in policy planning, implementation, monitoring and review.

In advocating for holistic development of young children in the Asia-Pacific region, this paper makes recommendations for policy-makers to:

- Expand access to holistic early childhood development and promote equity;
- Ensure good quality early childhood interventions;
- Build an enabling policy environment for holistic early childhood development;
- Strengthen capacities of parents, families and communities; and
- Create a movement to support holistic development and learning of young children
This White Paper emerges from regional and country consultations with the participation of a wide range of early childhood stakeholders - from ECD field practitioners and experts to national policy makers and international development organisations. In addition, the White Paper has benefitted from the insights provided by relevant documents originated from the Asia-Pacific region as well as globally, including:

• UNESCO- ARNEC commissioned three Asia-Pacific Regional Reviews of 1/ Quality in early childhood care and education, 2/ Learning and development goals of children in preschools and early primary grades, and 3/ Transition in early childhood programmes and to primary school (October 2012)

• Two studies commissioned by the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development on early learning and positioning early childhood development in post-2015 agenda (October 2012)

• Results of Asia-Pacific regional consultation organised by ARNEC on post-2015 goals (November 2012)

• Results of South Asian regional consultation on the Strategy Framework for Early Childhood Development (August 2012)

• Discussions of the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development on post-2015 goals (November 2012)

• Asia-Pacific End of Decade Notes on Education for All (UNESCO-UNICEF, 2012)

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