

Post-Covid-19 to 2030: Early childhood programs as pathway to sustainability in times of global uncertainty

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Enabling universal participation in early childhood development, education, and care programs is one of the most effective tools available to policymakers for improving individual and societal outcomes on a wide range of indicators. This has been recognized by the Group of 20 (G20) and the 2030 SDGs. While progress has been made, inequality in terms of access to and quality of programs persists. The current COVID-19 pandemic has exposed structural weaknesses in many countries' societal institutions and has exacerbated existing inequalities within and between countries. It has put a spotlight on the need to re-orientate all societal institutions—including those aimed at supporting and educating young children—toward sustainability, equality, and, ultimately, survival. This policy brief provides a systemic framework for reconceptualizing early childhood development, education, and care as a central element of achieving these global goals.

Challenge

There is a broad global consensus on the importance of the first years of the life of a child for lifelong well-being and achievement. This is reflected in countless initiatives that promote, support, and deliver early childhood development (ECD) and early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs in countries in all regions, north and south. A solid body of research evidence demonstrates that early childhood programs, provided they are of high quality, are beneficial to individual children, their families, and their communities.

Arguments about the benefits of comprehensive early childhood programs for society, on the whole, have traditionally focused on socio-economic gains at both the individual and macro-economic levels. Early childhood education, in particular, is seen as the foundation of lifelong learning and educational achievement and as an effective measure to realize the twin goals of increasing countries' ability to compete in the global market and alleviate the effects of persistent poverty (Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development 2016).

The global consensus further manifests in the inclusion of an early childhood focus in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. The 2019 Sustainable Development Goals Report states:

Evidence shows that good quality early childhood education is one of the best investments a society can make in its children—one that builds a strong foundation for learning in later years. In fact, early childhood

education has been found to be one of the strongest determinants of a child's readiness for school, in both high-income and low-income countries. (United Nations 2019, 30)

The global recognition of the importance of early childhood is welcome, and much has been achieved to ensure young children and their families have access to ECD and ECEC programs. However, as the previous SDG report reminds us, there is no time for complacency as stark inequalities persist in relation to access and quality of services—between and within countries and regions (United Nations 2017). Children from disadvantaged, marginalized, impoverished, indigenous, and minority communities are most affected by these inequalities; subsequently, services for the poor tend to be poor services.

The current COVID-19 pandemic raises urgent questions about the resilience of early childhood systems; in particular, their ability to withstand disruption, and their capacity to provide continued support to young children and their families when center-based services are forced to close. It also challenges prevailing conceptualizations of the purpose of ECD/ECEC provision and their ability to respond to the challenges that humanity faces in the first decades of the 21st century. Both locally and globally, human society faces threats to survival on an unprecedented scale. In order to contribute to a global response, early childhood programs must radically shift their focus from narrow and often individualized goals (e.g., school-readiness and the standardized assessment of predetermined early learning outcomes) to community practices that ensure individual and collective well-being, survival, and sustainability. In short, those in charge of developing and implementing early childhood programs will have to embrace that “we cannot continue as we are” (Moss 2010).

Proposal

A sustainability framework for integrated early childhood development, education, and care

The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals provide an accepted global framework that can be applied to re-orientate early childhood policymaking. This will require policy changes that may appear radical only where programs for early childhood development, early childhood education, and childcare are seen through the lens of individual, disconnected sectors.

While many countries have adopted the globally emerging systemic turn (Urban, Cardini, and Flórez-Romero 2018) by adopting more integrated and holistic early childhood policy frameworks, experiences from the ground demonstrate that implementation remains difficult. Too often, the local delivery of programs remains segmented and follows established practices rooted in distinct traditions, professions, and disciplines: for example, health, pre-primary education, and developmental psychology. Additionally, an increasing presence of private providers operating for profit in a supposed market makes it difficult, if not impossible, to implement public policies aimed at the integration of services for young children, their families, and communities across different sectors.

The current COVID-19 global pandemic is another manifestation of the “complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet” identified in Edgar Morin's Manifesto for a New Millennium (Morin 2018; Morin and Kern 1999). He urges us (humanity) to “relearn our terrestrial finiteness and renounce the false infinite of technical omnipotence, of mental omnipotence, of our own yearning for omnipotence.”:

We must learn to be, to live, to share, to communicate and commune as human beings of planet Earth. We must transcend, without excluding, our local cultural identities, and awaken to our being as citizens of the Earth. (Morin 2018, 4)

This learning has to begin as early as possible in children's lives; it can by no means be limited to traditional curricular and (pre) subject area approaches of formal schooling. Integrated, holistic early childhood development, education, and care programs can provide the necessary framework and spaces for it to take place in meaningful ways. Having early childhood specifically included in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4.2) is a significant achievement as it focusses global and national policy approaches on the importance of access to high-quality early childhood development, education, and care programs. However, for early childhood to fulfill its potential to contribute to the necessary radical re-orientation of all aspects of humanity's sustained existence, a radical shift of perspectives within early childhood policy and practice has to be the starting point.

While policymakers and advocates have to continue to focus on realizing SDG 4.2, we will have to re-view, re-imagine, and re-structure all early childhood development, education, and care activities to achieve the SDG framework in its entirety. This, in a nutshell, is the core of this

Build on and support whole-systems approaches to ECD/ECEC (Competent Systems)

(Re)claim ECD/ECEC as public good and public responsibility – counter privatisation, corporatisation, and phase out for-profit programmes

Extend the ECD/ECEC agenda from SDG4 to all 17 SDGs

Initiate programme and policy review with a focus on content, values and ethics rather than access and enrolment only:

- what should we be *developing*?
- what should we be *educating for* to achieve sustainability on a finite planet?



Figure 1. A roadmap to integrated Early Childhood Development, Education, and Care for Sustainable Development

Four dimensions of sustainability

The G20 should and can encourage and support member countries to future-proof the ways in which they provide early childhood development, education, and care services that are beneficial to ALL—children, families, communities, and society. This can be achieved by carefully and systematically taking stock, sharing learning, and exchanging knowledge across countries and regions.

We suggest G20 governments can move better from disjointed and siloed ECD/ECEC to integrated systems that can respond to the challenges of the necessary postCOVID-19 re-orientation and sustainability if they foreground the following four policy dimensions:

1. Focus on **upscaling** diverse, locally grounded, and responsive programs guided by national frameworks that guarantee universal access to high-quality ECD/ECEC for all children and enable diverse locally responsive solutions with the involvement of local and regional levels of government and stakeholders at all levels (progressive universalism).
2. Focus on **sustainability and future-proofing** as part of national strategies to develop a shared intersectoral vision for ECD/ECEC programs beyond narrow and instrumental conceptualizations of educational achievement and school-readiness.
3. **Ensure responsiveness and flexibility** at all levels of the ECD/ECEC system through continuous processual evaluation that encourages adaptation to the diverse, developing, and changing capabilities, rights, and needs of local communities under unforeseen circumstances. This requires systematic monitoring and data collection across all levels of the system.
4. Prepare and plan for **anti-cyclical resourcing** of ECD/ECEC systems, acknowledging that they are essential public services that have to be secured in times of crisis.

Competent and sustainable early childhood systems

In 2018 and 2019, consecutive Think 20 (T20) policy briefs drew attention to the role G20 governments play in developing effective and sustainable early childhood systems. The 2018 brief focused on the challenge of developing policies that recognize the intersectoral characteristics of effective early childhood development, education, and care provision. As countries in both the global south and global north are increasingly adopting ambitious integrated early childhood policy frameworks, the brief addressed the challenges of developing necessary “whole-systems-approaches” and the potential of the G20 to play a lead role in shaping the globally emerging “systemic turn”

(Urban et al. 2018).

The 2019 policy brief (Urban et al. 2019) built on the foundation laid in the previous year. It emphasized the essential contribution of early childhood development, education, and care to building a sustainable and more equitable future and achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals in their entirety. It proposed and outlined public policies based on three interconnected pillars:

- Recognition of early childhood as a common good.
- The right to locally and culturally appropriate and responsive early childhood development, education, and care for all children.

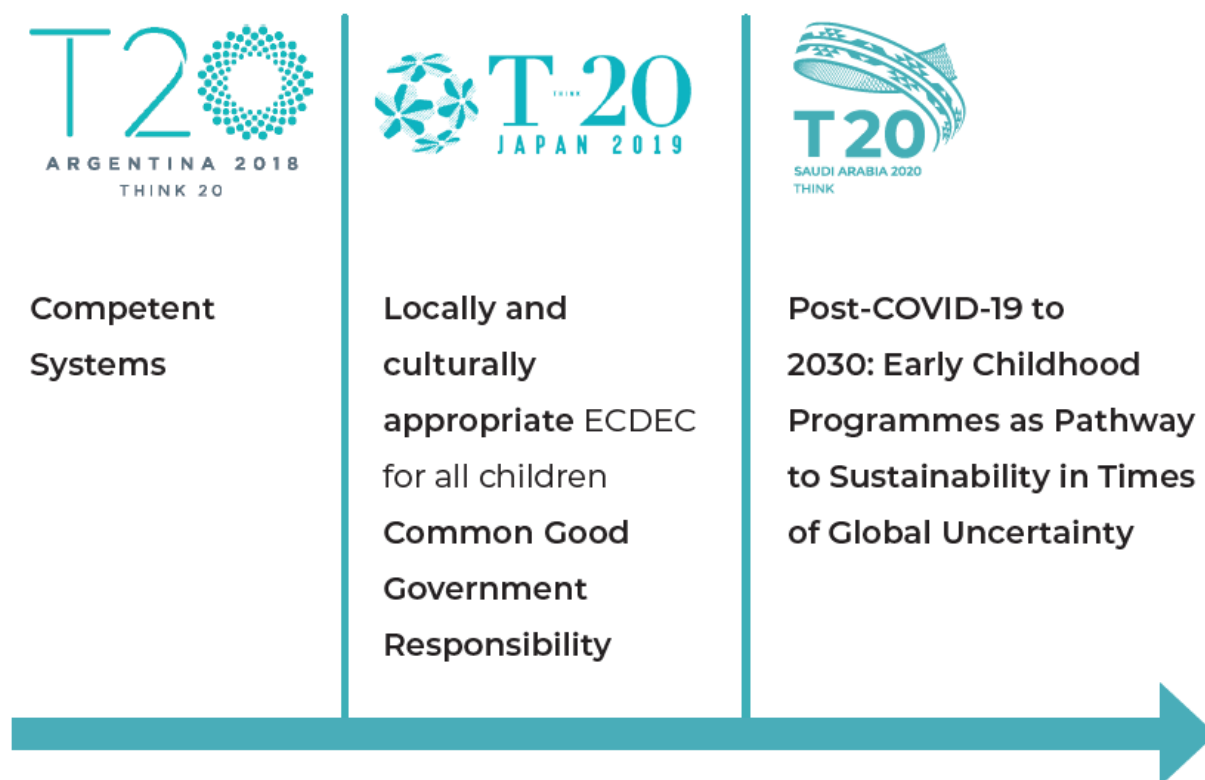


Figure 2: ECD/ECEC policy briefs are consistent and provide direction

- The central role and responsibility of governments in establishing, resourcing, and sustaining such “Competent Systems” (Urban et al. 2011, 2012) for children, families, and communities.

The 2020 policy brief adds to a comprehensive and consistent body of recommendations. It focuses on the role and responsibility of G20 governments in providing the necessary policy frameworks that enable local responses to diverse, local early childhood development, education, and care contexts. These must be scaled and should contribute to achieving sustainability.

The role of government is reconceptualized as an initiator, enabler, and guarantor of a multiplicity of local solutions and democratic experimentation (Moss 2009; Moss and Urban 2010; Unger 2004) within a universal framework. The state does not constitute a monolithic actor with a unique and linear directionality, but rather a heterogeneous and contradictory conglomerate (Villalta 2010). As the upbringing of young children is an inevitably local practice, the subnational (regional and local) levels of government, in partnership with local communities and other stakeholders, are key to ensuring high-quality, responsive, and locally appropriate ECD/ECEC programs.

Competent and sustainable systems require horizontal coordination (across government departments), as well as vertical coordination and leadership across all levels of government—local, regional, and national. These competent systems are more likely to succeed when they are

grounded in a shared vision across the different sectors and levels of government. Creating the shared vision should be a deliberative process that includes all relevant actors, and it must be expressed in an integrated national framework (OECD 2006; Department for Children and Youth Affairs 2018; Urban et al. 2012). Experiences of G20 countries with federal structures should be carefully examined to guide policy development.

Unlike the 2008 financial crisis, the current pandemic has caused unprecedented state intervention to ensure critical infrastructure remains functional. Looking beyond the hardship caused by COVID-19, the crisis response offers an opportunity to reclaim the role of the state as the central actor in providing the conditions necessary for local democracy to flourish. This, in turn, is a fundamental precondition for social cohesion and solidarity. Diverse, locally grounded early childhood services, supported by a national framework, play a central role.

Social cohesion and solidarity in times of global crises

Building on each other, the 2018 and 2019 recommendations prepare the ground for the 2020 proposal. As in previous years, it was written based on the joint expertise of early childhood research institutes, public policy think tanks, and advocacy organizations in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Europe. In times of global uncertainty and crises, exemplified by the current COVID-19 pandemic, social cohesion and solidarity are under threat at various levels. Within countries, social infrastructure has been stretched to the limits as countries are grappling with the sudden loss of entire sectors of the economy.

Closure of schools and early childhood provision has left already overburdened key workers (e.g., health professionals) without vital childcare support, and children from the most marginalized groups have often been deprived of fundamentals such as a daily nutritious meal and a safe space outside the home. Between countries, too, solidarity has been severely tested as countries compete for scarce resources (e.g., personal protective equipment [PPE]) and opt for uncoordinated national crisis responses defying the purpose of transnational alliances, such as the European Union. In many countries, the necessary crisis response has fundamentally changed the relationship between the state and non-state actors. On a global scale, the reaction to the global pandemic has provided convincing arguments for strong, effective, and hands-on governance, as much as it has exposed the inability of the market to cope with the crisis. The collective experience across the G20 underscores the importance of the statement made in the 2019 T20 Communiqué:

Strengthen G20 commitment to advancing access to locally and culturally appropriate quality Early Childhood Development (ECD)/Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for all children from birth, and build international consensus on government responsibility for a 'whole-systems' approach to ECD/ECEC policies.

(T20 Communiqué, Japan 2019)

The emerging and documented global policy consensus on the importance and efficacy of comprehensive early childhood development, education, and care programs already carries the seeds of the solution. National governments are increasingly adopting integrated policy frameworks that aim at better outcomes for young children. Leading policy examples can be found in all global regions, while transnational actors (e.g., the EU, AU, World Bank, and philanthropic organizations) are beginning to acknowledge the need for systemic approaches to complex issues, which can be (cautiously) interpreted as the beginning of the systemic turn.

A recent statement by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD DAC) underscores the need for holistic, sustainability focused policies:

We recognize that this response [to the global Covid-19 pandemic] will require much more than finance. It needs sustained action by many actors to address the immediate public health and humanitarian crisis and simultaneous support for economic, environmental, and social resilience. The response must take account of the role of women and girls, children, youth, and vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities and the elderly, and aim to reduce inequalities and protect human rights and freedoms. (<http://www.oecd.org/dac/development-assistance-committee/dac-covid-19-statement.htm>)

It will now be crucial for policy actors, including governments and non-governmental organizations to fully recognize the potential and contribution of comprehensive, accessible, community-based, and well-resourced early childhood programs for addressing complex crises and sustainability issues, and consequently, to develop and implement policies that allow these initiatives to flourish. Achieving the interconnected goals of increasing access and local and cultural responsiveness is crucial for societies to combat fragmentation and

interconnected goals of increasing access and local and cultural responsiveness is crucial for societies to combat fragmentation and inequality and work towards global sustainability. An array of policy choices available to policymakers support these goals:

Policy choices

- Adopt sustainability as an acknowledged and central goal of national early childhood development, education, and care policies within the 2030 SDG framework. Many countries have already adopted ambitious integrated ECD/ECEC frameworks. However, the reality of service provision on the ground can differ from the vision. Too often, early education is understood as supporting pre-academic learning with an over emphasis on the preparation of children for compulsory schooling.
- Ensure that comprehensive early childhood services are responsive to the capabilities and needs of communities.
- Ensure that ECD/ECEC is an essential element of national strategies for achieving long-term sustainability goals, aligned with the 2030 SDG framework, to counter inequality, social division, and, where pertinent, post-conflict tensions in society.
- Adopt national governance strategies that combine central guidance with equally strong and autonomous local democratic structures.
- In times of uncertainty and multi-faceted crises, governance has to be understood as an intrinsic element of all societal institutions and civic interaction in order for societies to develop resilience against disruption. This requires embedded lived democracy at every level and cannot be achieved under a mindset of top-down policymaking and implementation.
- Resourcing (funding) local democracy and governance to ensure communities are empowered and supported to develop and implement locally and culturally responsive services for young children and their families. Adopting an embedded model of democratic governance (see above) requires resources to be equitably distributed:
 - Between countries, on a global scale
 - Within countries, to counter regional inequalities
 - Across all levels of government
- Initiate and facilitate national democratic debate about the purpose, possibility, and aspiration associated with comprehensive early childhood development, education, and care programs.
- Adopting a comprehensive sustainability orientation in ECD/ECEC requires a fundamental reconceptualization of how societies and communities collectively share responsibility for the upbringing of young children, and their present and future well-being. This reconceptualization requires a broad societal consensus, which can be better achieved through public debate. While civil society and its organizations and institutions can create space for this debate, governments have a particular responsibility to initiate it.
- Establish monitoring, evaluation, and data collection mechanisms that ensure all stakeholders at the local level are heard in a continuous process of defining and developing the best possible quality of early childhood services. This includes, at the very least, children, families, community leaders, and practitioners.
- Democratic processes to reconceptualize and re-orientate ECD/ECEC within a global sustainability framework can only achieve their goals when they are based on relevant information that is freely available to all. Necessary reform requires reliable data.

Relevance to the G20

The G20 plays a central role in coordinating international collaborative responses to global challenges and crises. As a global forum, it reaches beyond its membership and has a proven track record of setting global agendas with a particular focus on reciprocity, collaboration, and multi-lateral policy approaches. It has aligned itself with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, has acknowledged the role of early childhood as an enabler to achieve the SDGs, and has already endorsed (2018, 2019) systemic approaches to early childhood development, education, and care. By adopting an ambitious ECD/ECEC agenda as a priority, the G20 can provide leadership in times of crisis.

Disclaimer

This policy brief was developed and written by the authors and has undergone a peer review process. The views and opinions expressed in

this policy brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the authors' organizations or the T20 Secretariat.

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