

# Upscaling community-based early childhood programmes to counter inequality and foster social cohesion during global uncertainty

**Mathias Urban** (Dublin City University)

**Alejandra Cardini** (Centro de Implementación de Políticas Públicas para la Equidad y el Crecimiento (CIPPEC)) ,

**Claudia Costin** (The World Bank)

**Rita Flórez Romero** (Universidad Nacional de Colombia),

**Jennifer Guevara** (Centro de Implementación de Políticas Públicas para la Equidad y el Crecimiento (CIPPEC)) ,

**Lynette Okengo** (African Early Childhood Network),

**Dwi Priyono**

November 24, 2020 | Last updated: December 10, 2020 *Tags:* [Social cohesion and the State](#)

---

**There is global consensus that enabling universal participation in early childhood development, education, and care programs is one of the most effective tools available to policy makers. It improves individual and societal outcomes on a wide range of indicators. This includes social cohesion in increasingly unequal societies that are affected by COVID-19, and has been recognized by the Group of Twenty and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. While progress has been made, there are persistent inequalities in both access to and quality of programs. This policy brief emphasizes the importance of universal policy frameworks that enable diverse, locally responsive solutions as part of a “Competent System.”**

---

## Challenge

There is a broad global consensus that the first years of life are crucial for a child in ensuring 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 many countries. Research shows that high quality early childhood programs are beneficial to children, their families, and their communities.

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, p. 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/ ECEC programs. However, as the previous SDG report reminds us, there is no time for complacency as stark inequalities persist in terms of access to and the quality of services between and within countries as well as regions (United Nations, 2017).

Although access to ECD/ECEC has widened in recent years, ensuring that this access does not come at the expense of equity and quality

goals is crucial. Many children experience inadequate programs, and their cost is often a major obstacle for families. Children from disadvantaged, marginalized, impoverished, indigenous, and minority communities are most affected by these inequalities: services for the poor tend to be poor services.

The upbringing of young children is an inevitably local phenomenon: it takes place at a particular time and place and is embedded in complex social, cultural and political systems (Powers and Paulsell 2018; Urban, Cardini, and Flórez-Romero 2018). ECD/ ECEC programs can only be effective and sustainable when they are embedded in the local context and are responsive to the local community. This presents three pivotal challenges:

1. **The challenge of vision:** the need to (re)contextualize and (re)conceptualize the purpose of ECD/ECEC, and to develop a shared vision and coordination between sectors, actors, and levels of government.
2. **The challenge of implementation:** how to ensure universal access AND diverse, locally responsive solutions.
3. **The challenge of diversity and complexity:** the dilemma of forward planning and policy making in contexts of unpredictability, uncertainty, disruption and crisis.

The following is a proposal for how and why these challenges can and should be addressed by the Group of Twenty (G20) as a transnational entity and by its member states.

---

## Proposal

### **Global leadership based on shared values and principles in a fragmented world**

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the critical function of early childhood services beyond the improvement of individualized early learning outcomes. These outcomes are often cited as the central effect of children's participation in ECD/ECEC. The current situation has demonstrated that ECD/ECEC is a vital public service that enables societies to function during crisis. Urgent attention is required to (re)build the role of ECD/ECEC services as sites of community engagement and social cohesion. This will focus on the (re)defined role of the state as central actor in the light of current and future uncertain and dramatically changed circumstances. The policy (re) orientations and choices outlined in this proposal concern, first and foremost, adopting principled and value-based approaches to ECD/ECEC policy making. The G20 is a global organization committed to multilateralism, collaboration, and shared voluntary implementation. It is ideally placed to provide the leadership needed to support countries in translating these orientations into national policies that respond to the diverse and specific contexts of its member states.

### **Interconnected challenges as starting points for policy (re)orientation**

This proposal addresses three areas where urgent action has become necessary. They mirror the challenges identified in the previous section.

#### **1. Vision:**

- (a) Acknowledge the potential of locally driven solutions that are contextually and culturally appropriate.
- (b) Revise and replace ECD/ECEC programs that focus on externally predetermined and decontextualized models, and narrow and instrumental conceptualizations of educational achievement and school-readiness.
- (c) Embrace and promote a vision for ECD/ECEC as a universal children's right, a common good, and an essential public infrastructure.

#### **2. Implementation:**

- (a) Ensure access to high-quality ECD/ECEC for all children, which has so far not been achieved through traditional means (i.e., top-down implementation or large-scale roll-out of programs by governments or non-governmental organizations).
- (b) Address the dilemma that acknowledging the need to ground and localize early childhood programs often appears to rest on the assumption that these programs cannot be easily transferred to other contexts.

#### **3. Diversity and complexity:**

- (a) Address the persistent inability of macro-level ECD/ECEC policies to respond to the diverse, developing, and changing capabilities, rights,

and needs of local communities and unforeseen circumstances.

(b) Shift from a deficit-based to a capability-based approach. ECD/ECEC programs tend to highlight deficiencies rather than build on the capabilities, desires, aspirations, and needs of families and communities (Gupta 2014; Murray 2017; Urban 2009).

(c) Embrace the opportunities that arise from systematically engaging families and community members as strategic partners to widen access, improve quality, and reduce inequity.

The fundamental dilemma lies in attempts to bring locally responsive programs to scale. Traditional scalability theory, policy, and practice cannot orient the upscaling of programs and innovations that are locally driven and build on children's, families' and communities' capabilities, desires, aspirations and needs. In fact, context and culture are often understood as constraints to scalability.

During the current COVID-19 pandemic, the "façade of universality" (Steiner-Khamsi 2013) is cracking and challenges are exacerbated. Early childhood services in affected countries have been shut down. In countries that rely heavily on private-for-profit provision, services have gone out of business on short notice, leaving early childhood provision at risk of collapse even after the eventual end of the pandemic. This has direct consequences, not only for children and families, but also for entire societies and economies. While this has caused immediate, predicted problems, it also offers a pathway to possible, sustainable solutions as the need for action is no longer contested.

### Effective and sustainable early childhood systems

In 2018 and 2019, consecutive T20 policy briefs drew attention to the role of G20 governments in developing effective and sustainable early childhood systems. The 2018 brief focused on the challenge to develop 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. The potential for G20 to play a lead role in shaping the globally emerging "systemic turn" (Urban et al. 2018) was also discussed. The 2019 policy brief (Urban et al. 2019) built on the foundation laid the previous year and emphasized the essential contribution of early childhood development, education, and care to building a sustainable and more equitable future. The manner in which this would assist in achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals in their entirety was also examined. The brief 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.
- 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.



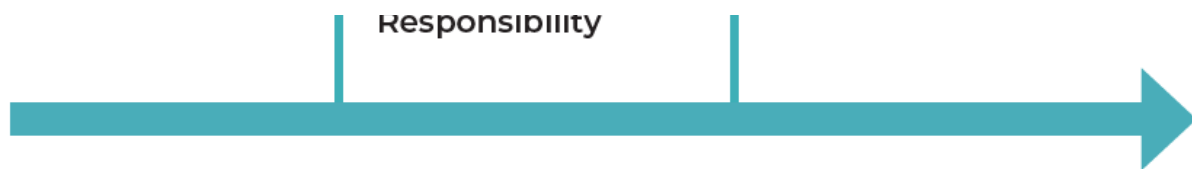
**Competent  
Systems**



**Locally and  
culturally  
appropriate ECDEC  
for all children  
Common Good  
Government  
Responsibility**



**Local to Global Upscaling  
community based ECDEC  
programmes to counter  
inequality and foster  
social cohesion in times  
of global uncertainty**



**Figure 1: ECD/ECEC policy briefs are consistent and provide direction**

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 to be brought to scale.

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. However, “the state” does not constitute a monolithic actor with a unique and linear directionality, but rather a heterogeneous and even contradictory conglomerate (Villalta, 2010). Early childhood is inevitably local, and so are early childhood programs. Therefore, the 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. They also require a shared vision across the different sectors and levels of government, which should be constructed in a deliberative process that includes all relevant actors and expressed in a national integrated framework (OECD 2006; Urban et al. 2012). Recent integrated early childhood policy frameworks that take an explicitly systemic approach can be found, for example, in Uruguay (Uruguay Crece Contigo), Colombia (De Cero a Siempre), in the European Union (European Quality Framework for ECEC), in Ireland (First5. A whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families) Experiences of G20 countries with federal structures should be carefully examined as they can guide policy development.

Unlike the 2008 financial crisis, the current pandemic has triggered unprecedented state intervention in some countries to ensure critical infrastructure stays functional. Looking beyond the hardship caused by COVID-19, the emerging crisis responses offer an opportunity to reclaim the role of the state as central actor in providing the conditions needed 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 crisis**

Building upon each other, the 2018 and 2019 recommendations prepare the basis for the 2020 proposal. As in previous years, the brief is 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 essential personnel (e.g. health professionals and other ‘key workers’) without vital childcare support. Children from the most marginalized groups have often been deprived of fundamentals like daily nutritious meals and a safe space outside the home. Solidarity between countries has been severely tested as countries compete for scarce resources (e.g. personal protective equipment or PPE) and opt for uncoordinated national crisis responses defying the purpose of transnational alliances, including the European Union. Meanwhile, governments have been left with no other option than to intervene in economies and markets in unprecedented ways. Critical infrastructure (including private health services) has effectively been taken into public ownership and wage subsidies are paid to private businesses, for example. 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 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 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 strive for more equitable outcomes for young children that involve coordination across different sectors and levels of government. Existing examples show how local stakeholders can be successfully involved in the policy process. Local and regional levels of government are progressively getting more involved in ECD/ECEC with the intention of providing locally grounded and community responsive ECD/ECEC programs. Leading policy examples can be found in all global regions, while transnational actors (e.g. EU, AU, World Bank, Philanthropy) are beginning to acknowledge the need for systemic approaches to complex issues, which can be (cautiously) interpreted as the beginning of a 'systemic turn'.

It will now be crucial for policy actors, including governments and non-governmental organizations, to fully recognize the potential and contribution of comprehensive, accessible, locally grounded, community responsive, and well-resourced early childhood programs to social cohesion. Consequently, policies that allow these initiatives to flourish will need to be developed and implemented. Achieving the interconnected goals of increasing access and local and cultural responsiveness are crucial for societies to combat fragmentation and inequality.

### **Policy choices**

#### **Adopt social cohesion as an acknowledged, central goal of national early childhood development, education, and care policies.**

Many countries have already adopted ambitious integrated ECD/ECEC frameworks. Examples include policy frameworks in Uruguay, Colombia, and the European Union. However, the reality and vision of service provision can differ. Too often, early education is understood as supporting pre-academic learning with an overemphasis on the preparation of children for compulsory schooling. Large-scale disruption caused by the pandemic has put a spotlight on the importance of local emergency response, children's well-being, and community resilience. Well-organized and integrated early childhood systems with effective coordination and monitoring structures at all levels of government have already proven to be more effective in rapid transitions from center based to locally distributed supports for young children and their families.

#### **Ensure that comprehensive early childhood services are responsive to the capabilities and needs of communities.**

This has emerged as particularly relevant in the context of marginalized communities (e.g. indigenous communities in Colombia and Roma communities in Europe). The G20 should position itself clearly and encourage member states to place ECD/ECEC as an essential element of national strategies to counter inequality, social division, and where pertinent, post-conflict tensions in society.

#### **Adopt national governance strategies that combine central guidance and funding with equally strong and autonomous local democratic structures.**

Effective whole-systems-approaches reach across all levels of government, both horizontally and vertically. This is of particular relevance in countries with devolved (e.g. federal) structures (e.g. US, Argentina, Brazil, Germany). National early childhood policy frameworks should reflect the structures of governance at national, regional and local levels. In this structure, the central government has a crucial responsibility to enable and uphold democratic structures across the system.

#### **Resource and fund local democracy and governance to ensure that communities are empowered and supported to develop and implement locally and culturally responsive services for young children and their families.**

This includes the responsibility of ensuring that local decision-making structures reflect the composition and the diversity of communities. Democratic processes at the local level should determine how national early childhood policy frameworks are realized at the community level. Meanwhile, central governments are responsible to initiate, facilitate, and safeguard these participatory processes, and protect the rights of children and families from minority groups.

#### **Initiate and facilitate national democratic debate about the purpose, possibility, and aspiration associated with comprehensive early childhood development, education and care programs.**

Effective, rights-based, and universal early childhood development, education, and care programs thrive on shared understandings of their purpose and vision. Broad participation in democratic debate is essential for establishing such a vision. National governments are responsible to initiate such debate and act on its outcomes.

#### **Establish monitoring, evaluation, and data collection mechanisms that ensure that all stakeholders at local levels 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.**

Beyond democratic and participatory debate, system reform must be supported by reliable data. Monitoring and evaluation protocols should mirror the underlying values and vision of the early childhood system. They should be open to democratic debate and scrutiny. The G20 should encourage member states to develop such protocols and support joint learning between countries. This cannot be achieved by decontextualized testing of children in frameworks of standardized comparison between countries, which is an approach currently promoted by international organizations, including OECD. Rather, it requires careful interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative data in the context of the complexity of early childhood systems in each country and region.

## **Conclusion**

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 track record of setting global agendas with a focus on reciprocity, collaboration, and multi-lateral policy approaches. It has aligned itself with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, and acknowledged the role of early childhood as an enabler to achieve the SDGs. It has already endorsed, in 2018 and 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.

## **References**

- Gupta, Amita. 2014. *Diverse Early Childhood Education Policies and Practices: Voices and Images From Five Countries in Asia*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203797846>
- Moss, Peter. 2009. "There Are Alternatives! Markets and Democratic Experimentalism in Early Childhood Education and Care." Working Paper No. 53. The Hague, Netherlands: Bernhard van Leer Foundation and Bertelsmann Stiftung.
- Moss, Peter and Mathias Urban. 2010. "Democracy and Experimentation: Two Fundamental Values For Education." In German. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung.
- Murray, Colette. 2017. "What's Wrong with Equality? Developing a Critical Conceptual Understanding of Equality of Condition in Early Childhood Care and Education." In *Feminism(s) in Early Childhood: Using Feminist Theories in Research and Practice*, edited by Kylie Smith, Kate Alexander and Sheralyn Campbell, 89–104. London: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-3057-4\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-3057-4_8)
- OECD. 2006. *Starting Strong II. Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264035461-en>
- Powers, S., and D Paulsell. 2018. *Strengthening Early Learning with a Systems Approach: Diagnostic strategies with an application to over-age enrollment*. Paper presented at the Comparative and International Education Society annual conference, Mexico City.
- Steiner-Khamsi, Gita. 2013. "What Is Wrong With the 'What-Went-Right' Approach in Educational Policy?" *European Educational Research Journal* 12 no. 1: 20–33. <https://doi.org/10.2304/eerj.2013.12.1.20>
- Think20. 2019. "T20 Summit 2019 Communiqué." Paper, Think20 Japan website.

<https://t20japan.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/t20-japan-2019-communiqueeng.pdf>

Unger, Robert Mangabeira. 2004. *False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory In the Service Of Radical Democracy*. New York: Verso.

United Nations. 2017. *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2017*. New York: United Nations. <https://doi.org/10.18356/3cff8bc0-en>

United Nations. 2019. *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2019*. New York: United Nations. <https://doi.org/10.18356/55eb9109-en>

Urban, Mathias. 2009. *Early Childhood Education in Europe. Achievements, Challenges and Possibilities*. Brussels: Education International.

Urban, Mathias, Alejandra Cardini, and Rita Flórez-Romero. 2018. "It Takes More Than a Village. Effective Early Childhood Development, Education and Care Services Require Competent Systems." Think20 Argentina 2018. <https://t20argentina.org/publicacion/it-takes-more-than-a-village-effective-early-childhood-developmenteducation-and-care-services-require-competent-systems>.

Urban, Mathias, Alejandra Cardini, Jennifer Guevara, Lynette Okengo, and Rita Flórez-Romero. 2019. "Early Childhood Development Education and Care: The Future Is What We Build Today." In *Realizing Education for All in the Digital Age*, edited by Peter J. Morgan and Nobuko Kayashima 9-16). Tokyo: Asian Development Bank Institute.

Urban, Mathias, Michel Vandenbroeck, Arianna Lazzari, Katrien Van Laere, and Jan Peeters. 2011. "Competence Requirements In Early Childhood Education and Care: Final Report." Brussels: European Commission. Directorate General for Education and Culture. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED534599.pdf>

Urban, Mathias, Michel Vandenbroeck, Katrien Van Laere, Arianna Lazzari, and Jan Peeters. 2012. "Towards Competent Systems in Early Childhood Education and Care. Implications for Policy and Practice." *European Journal of Education* 47 no.4: 508–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12010>

---

## Existing Initiatives & Analysis