

# Convening Day 1- 8 October 2025

## Overview of Day 1

The first day of the convening was dedicated to establishing a shared understanding of the global context, regional realities, and strategic direction for Early Childhood Development (ECD).

The day was framed by two powerful keynotes. **Professor Amina Abubakar**, in her address "Reimagining ECD in a Shifting Landscape," detailed the rapid changes—from demographic shifts to funding constraints—demanding a critical re-evaluation of the ECD agenda. She challenged leaders to ask, "Who owns, sets, and drives it?" and called for evidence-based interventions, long-term investments, and strong collaborations. This was complemented by an **inspirational address from Mama Graça Machel**, who framed ECD as a non-negotiable, time-sensitive imperative for social justice and breaking the cycle of poverty, urging the generation of "unquestionable commitments."

The session on **National Level Priorities** provided a snapshot of country-specific contexts. Representatives from Kenya, Mozambique, and Tanzania, including Zanzibar, highlighted progress in coordination and system integration but shared common challenges, including service quality, coverage, and the need for sustained capacity building at the community level.

A panel on **Regional & Global Trends** featuring UNESCO, WHO, the World Bank, and UNICEF underscored the need to reposition ECD within broader development goals. Key messages included the necessity of rethinking advocacy, demonstrating concrete impact in a tight funding environment, and ensuring ECD is "everyone's business."

The **Hilton Foundation** reiterated its established approach of combining grant-making with strategic, non-financial support to achieve measurable and systemic impact across ECD systems.

The day culminated in the **Country Roundtable Conversations**, where teams from Kenya, Mozambique, and Tanzania conducted a candid reflection on the last five years. These dialogues crystallized the core challenges of fragmented coordination, chronic underfunding, and data-policy gaps, leading to a Synthesis of Cross-Cutting Learnings that would inform the subsequent days' work.

## Keynote Address

The core message from Professor Amina Abubakar's keynote address, "Reimagining ECD in a Shifting Landscape," for the Hilton Foundation East and Southern Africa ECD Partners Convening was that the landscape of Early Childhood Development is undergoing rapid and unpredictable changes, requiring a critical re-evaluation of the ECD agenda to lead with purpose and impact.

She described key shifts in the Landscape, namely:

- **Global Changes:** The influence of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- **Technology:** The digital and technological revolution, including AI, is shaping the future of early education.
- **Geopolitical & Social Factors:** Increasing conflicts, population displacements, and rapid urbanization.
- **Demographics:** A significant demographic shift, with 40% of the world's children projected to be born in Africa by 2050, many in urban informal settlements.
- **Funding:** A changing and challenging funding environment.

Professor Abubakar made a Call to Action for ECD Leaders, urging partners to critically examine the ECD agenda by asking:

- Who owns it?
- Who sets it?
- Who drives it?

She highlighted the importance of Political Determinants of Health in shaping outcomes.

As a Way Forward, Professor Abubakar encouraged participants:

- To navigate this shifting landscape.
- To craft evidence-based interventions.
- To commit to long-term investments.
- To form strong collaborations, focusing on collective contributions rather than individual attributions.
- To foster continuous skill development (upscaling) for professionals.
- To maintain a sharp focus on quality even as programs scale up to meet growing needs.

## Summary of the Inspirational Address by Mama Graça Machel

Mama Graça Machel's core message is that **investing in early childhood is a non-negotiable, time-sensitive imperative for Africa's future.**

She argued that the period from gestation through the first years is a scientifically proven, critical window for developing human potential. Failing to invest during this period has severe consequences, as it **"plants the seeds of underdevelopment," perpetuates social injustice, and condemns generations to poverty.**

Conversely, she framed this investment not just as a moral duty but as **the most effective strategy to break the cycle of poverty, drive inclusive social transformation, and build sustainable development.** She made this personal by challenging every adult to offer all African children the same "best" care they would demand for their own children.

Finally, she issued a clear call to action for the convening: to generate **"unquestionable commitments"** that will move governments and partners from policies to tangible results, ensuring this vital agenda remains a central priority.

### National Level Priorities

The discussion on National Level Priorities brought together government representatives from Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Zanzibar to reflect on the progress, coordination, and challenges in advancing ECD across their contexts.

Across all four countries, participants emphasized **the growing recognition of ECD as a national development priority. In Kenya, coordination across ministries and counties is strengthening,** with mechanisms in place to track outcomes from the community level through to national policy. Data tools, including those focused on the first 1,000 days of life, are being used to inform planning and resource allocation.

**In Mozambique, ECD has been integrated into multiple sectors, particularly within health and social action.** Maternal and child health platforms were highlighted as strong entry points for integrated service delivery, supported by trained community health workers who provide counselling and caregiver support. However, challenges remain around quality and coverage—particularly in ensuring that service providers and caregivers have the necessary knowledge and awareness to deliver nurturing care effectively. Coordination mechanisms under the National Council for Social Action and a multisectoral technical working group are supporting joint planning and oversight, though sustaining engagement and validation processes were noted as ongoing areas for improvement.

**In Tanzania, ECD is positioned within the national Vision 2050 framework as part of the human capital development agenda.** Integration of ECD into health systems continues to be strengthened through workforce capacity development and national training programs. Efforts to embed ECD within local government structures are also taking shape, with social workers leading service integration in community spaces such as marketplaces.

**Zanzibar has made notable progress in institutionalizing ECD as a presidential priority.** Within months, the government completed a national baseline assessment, established coordination structures with a dedicated secretariat, and introduced a budget code that allows ECD allocations to be tracked across ministries. Community Health Workers are now on the payroll and trained on Nurturing Care, while partnerships with the private sector have expanded access through the establishment of ECD centres in marketplaces.

Overall, the discussion underscored the importance of multisectoral coordination, clear governance structures, and sustainable financing mechanisms to translate policy commitments into tangible outcomes for young children and families.

## Regional & Global Trends

The session brought together representatives from key international agencies (UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO, the World Bank) to share perspectives on the evolving ECD landscape and the implications for countries in East and Southern Africa. The discussion highlighted a shared recognition that while ECD is increasingly acknowledged as a driver of human capital and inclusive growth, the global context is shifting rapidly—financially, politically, and institutionally—requiring renewed approaches to advocacy, coordination, and investment.

Participants underscored the persistence of critical challenges in education and early learning, including the global learning crisis, limited financing, and the need to build resilient and transformative education systems. At the national level, attention must focus on improving access, inclusion, quality, and governance—supported by stronger data, policy alignment, and sustainable funding mechanisms.

From the health perspective, partners emphasized that nurturing care in the first 1,000 days remains central to human development, noting that children cannot learn or thrive without good health and nutrition. Achieving this requires investment in health facility readiness, workforce capacity, and integrated models of care adapted to country contexts. The discussion also called for greater digital innovation, stronger monitoring systems, and enhanced collaboration among UN agencies to ensure a coherent and multisectoral response.

The conversation reflected a shifting global funding landscape in which traditional development assistance is declining, bilateral funds are constrained, and private philanthropy is increasingly filling the gap. This has placed greater pressure on governments and partners to demonstrate measurable results and link ECD investment to job creation, productivity, and national priorities. Participants agreed that public sector leadership and sustainable domestic financing will be key to long-term success.

Finally, the session emphasized the need to reframe the ECD narrative—from a donor-driven agenda to a collective societal priority. Partners called for renewed advocacy that positions ECD as integral to health, education, and economic outcomes, urging stronger local ownership and coordination. The discussion closed with a shared commitment to scale what works, support parents and caregivers across systems, and bring new energy and evidence into the next phase of the ECD movement.

## Hilton Foundation Presentation

The Foundation reaffirmed its core values and ECD priorities while refining its focus and approach for greater impact. It acknowledges the collective progress made and emphasizes its commitment to playing a more supportive role beyond just grant making.

The Foundation shared Key Updates and Refinements as described below.

- **Rooted in Legacy, Refined in Approach:** The Foundation's work remains guided by Conrad N. Hilton's will, with a specific focus on sheltering children. While core values are unchanged, they are using this moment to refine their portfolio and refocus their definition of impact.
- **A Clearer Definition of Impact:** Grants and partnerships are now expected to demonstrate:
- **Direct Impact:** A measurable, positive difference in people's lives today.
- **Lasting Change:** Enduring alterations to policies, practices, and institutions to scale impact and reach more people.
- **Global ECD Strategy:** The initiative works in the US and East & Southern Africa, sharing lessons across regions. The strategy focuses on three critical pathways:
  - Supporting Parents
  - Integrating ECD into Healthcare Services
  - Expanding Access to High-Quality Childcare

These pathways lead to intermediate outcomes (e.g., improved parenting, trained workforce) and longer-term goals (e.g., improved health and learning for children).

The Foundation celebrates "great progress" made with partners, including Collective Progress & Learnings in East & Southern Africa, namely:

- Improved well-being for children and caregivers.
- Better national ECD policy frameworks and data.
- Improved coordination and positioning of ECD as a priority.

The Foundation shared key learnings from the collective work that include:

- The need for parental support (more than just education).
- The challenge of addressing families' complex needs.
- The difficulty in unlocking funding.
- The need for more targeted technical assistance.

The Foundation's Commitment & Supportive Role signalled a clear intention to be more supportive, explicitly stating:

***"The Foundation has an important role to play beyond grant making."***

This commitment is underpinned by the acknowledgment of the challenges grantees face. It suggests a move towards providing more strategic, non-financial support to build on the "great foundation" already established. This likely includes addressing the learned needs for targeted technical assistance and helping partners navigate complex challenges to unlock lasting change.

In conclusion, the presentation outlined how the Foundation is sharpening its strategic focus on measurable, systemic impact while simultaneously pledging to be engaged and supportive partner to its grantees.

The presentation sparked questions around the Foundation's approach towards direct funding to the government, the rationale behind investing in only three countries in Africa and its plans on investing more towards the youth.

## Country Roundtable Conversations

These reflective roundtable dialogues, led by country teams from Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, aimed to use evidence, knowledge and experience to think about the last five years (2020-2025) and reflect on:

- What has worked across the three countries—and why?
- What has not worked—and why?
- What key learnings we should collectively take forward over the next 5 years to build a better future for young children.

The table below summarises country-specific discussions on the three areas, with the more detailed narratives summarised in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.

*Table 1 Outputs from Country Roundtable Conversations*

Country	What Has Worked	What Has Not Worked
Kenya	<p><b>Multisectoral Coordination</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>County-led blocs (e.g., Lake Regional Economic Bloc) &amp; national networks enabled collaboration.</li> </ul> <p><b>Policy &amp; Legal Frameworks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strong laws (e.g., Children Act 2022) provided a solid foundation.</li> </ul> <p><b>Devolution</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Counties drove localized programs and data systems.</li> </ul> <p><b>Data Generation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ECD indicators were integrated into national surveys.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Fragmented Implementation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Siloed ministries caused duplication and inefficiency.</li> </ul> <p><b>Policy Bottlenecks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Slow, donor-dependent processes left policies unimplemented.</li> </ul> <p><b>Underfunding</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unclear costing and delayed budgets made "free" pre-primary unaffordable.</li> </ul> <p><b>Data Silos</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No central repository; data was not used for decision-making.</li> </ul>
Mozambique	<p><b>Grassroots Coordination</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effective local-level collaboration between government sectors &amp; NGOs.</li> </ul> <p><b>Community Engagement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Religious &amp; community leaders secured local buy-in.</li> </ul> <p><b>Civil Society Advocacy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strong advocacy pushed the ECD agenda forward.</li> </ul> <p><b>Integrated Vision</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Investments built a shared understanding of ECD.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weak National Coordination</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Poor communication and unclear roles hampered strategy development.</li> </ul> <p><b>Partner Duplication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NGOs worked in isolation, repeating efforts in the same areas.</li> </ul> <p><b>Limited Government Ownership</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government was not adequately involved in planning or monitoring.</li> </ul>
Tanzania	<p><b>Government Ownership</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strong national structures &amp; a parliamentary group to champion the ECD agenda.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Overwhelmed Workforce</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community Health Workers were under-resourced and stretched thin.</li> </ul>

Country	What Has Worked	What Has Not Worked
	<p><b>Community Integration</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programs were personalized at the local level for strong buy-in.</li> </ul> <p><b>System Integration</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ECD was embedded into government policies, guidelines, training packages, and digital systems across different sectors, including health , education and social welfare.</li> </ul> <p><b>Media Campaigns</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Champion journalists raised public awareness nationwide.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weak Data Systems</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could not track financing or progress due to poor MEL systems.</li> </ul> <p><b>Exclusion of Vulnerable Groups</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Issues of Children with disabilities and mental health needs were not well captured in different government packages including the multisectoral program resulting to poor services provision.</li> </ul>

## Synthesis of Cross-Cutting Learnings for ECD Advancement Arising from the Country Roundtable Conversations

The roundtable dialogues from Kenya, Mozambique, and Tanzania reveal several critical, universal themes that must be addressed to accelerate progress in Early Childhood Development. A consistent finding is that **functional, multi-stakeholder coordination acts as the single greatest accelerator for ECD**. However, **establishing this coordination** beyond isolated projects or local levels **remains a pervasive challenge, hampered by institutional silos** and a lack of overarching frameworks. To overcome this, it is imperative to **invest in building permanent, funded coordination structures** at both national and sub-national levels, moving beyond short-term project-based models.

Underpinning all efforts, **government ownership emerges as the non-negotiable cornerstone for sustainable impact**. The successes in Tanzania, where ECD is integrated into national systems, and in Kenya, driven by county-level leadership, stand in stark contrast to the limitations faced in Mozambique where government engagement was weaker. This underscores that **all partner support must be deliberately designed to strengthen and work through government systems and leadership**, rather than bypassing them.

Furthermore, **a significant gap persists between data collection and its practical application**. While all three countries generate evidence, this information rarely informs policy and planning in a systematic way due to fragmented data systems and a lack of centralised repositories. A



strategic shift in focus is required—from merely generating data to building robust national knowledge management systems that are directly integrated into government planning cycles.

**Domestic Financing remains the most unresolved challenge.** Chronic underfunding, an absence of clear costing guidelines, and the underutilization of innovative financing mechanisms like public-private partnerships universally constrain ECD initiatives. **A concerted effort is needed to develop compelling national ECD investment cases** and costing frameworks, **while actively engaging the private sector as a strategic partner** in implementation, not merely as a donor.

Finally, **the power of localization is a clear driver of success.** The most effective interventions across all contexts were those tailored to local realities and led by county or district governments, community leaders, and religious institutions. This points to the **critical need to decentralize funding and decision-making to the lowest feasible level** and to concurrently **invest in capacity building for these local authorities and community structures.** By acting on these five cross-cutting insights, stakeholders can collectively build a more effective, sustainable, and equitable future for young children.