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Scaling what works for early childhood development:

Compendium of good practices in ECD policies and
programmes in Eastern and Southern Africa and beyond

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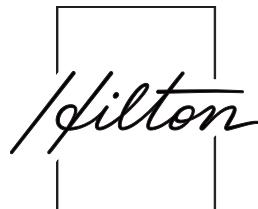
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Compendium of good practices in ECD policies and programmes in Eastern and Southern Africa and beyond



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Contributors from country offices (in alphabetical order):

Afghanistan (Ivan Coursac, Qurban Ali Waezi), Cambodia (Davy Chhean, Botumroath Keo Le Bun, Sina Sam), China (Chongjun Bi, Suying Chang, Jin Cheng, Xiaona Huang, Usha Mishra, Hongfeng Niu, Ali Shirazi, Mengming Yu), Indonesia (Moh Adi Amirudin, Katheryn Bennett, Clarissa Jazzlyne Gunawan, Kyoko Ito, Nugroho Indera Warman), Mozambique (Fanceni Balde, Julia Eduardo Nhacule, Belinda Soares), Kenya (Hellen Jepkorir Chemnyongoi, Laura Kiige, Akiko Sakaedani Petrovic, Robert Simiyu, Ismael Teta), Pakistan (Anteneh Girma Minas, Jahanuddin, Saba Shuja), Rwanda (Samson Desie, Josephine Kayumba, Pierre Nzeyimana), Serbia (Mila Vukovic Jovanovic, Ivana Vojvodić, Jelena Zajeganovic-Jakovljevic), Uganda (Daphne Mugizi, Barno Mukhamadieva), United Republic of Tanzania (Alinune Nsemwa, Mary-Ann Schreiner), Uzbekistan (Olga Kim, Komila Narkulova, Maria Vivas), Zambia (Zewelanji Natashya Serpell), Zimbabwe (Mara Nyawo).

Contributors from UNICEF regional offices and headquarters (in alphabetical order):

East Asia and the Pacific (Meenakshi Dogra, Ana Maria Rogriguez), Eastern and Southern Africa (Wongani Grace Taulo, Alicia Jones, Dheepa Pandian, May Saad), Europe and Central Asia (Ivelina Borisova, Aleksandra Jovic), South Asia (Mita Gupta), Headquarters (Boniface Kakhobwe, Nicole Petrowski, Shreya Prakash, Chemba Raghavan).

Writing and editing: Julia D'Aloisio

Graphic design: Cori Park



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Foreword

By prioritizing health, nutrition, responsive care, early learning and safety and security in the earliest years, we lay the foundation for lifelong health, learning and productivity. This strong start not only helps children thrive, it also fuels the development of human capital across Africa – driving inclusive growth, reducing inequality and shaping a more peaceful and prosperous future for all.

The idea for this *Compendium of Good Practices in Early Childhood Development (ECD)* emerged in 2024 during the *Investing in Early Childhood: Building Human Capital Along the Life Course* conference in the United Republic of Tanzania. I witnessed a powerful shift there, seeing high-level government officials expressing clear commitments to investing in ECD, to learning from each other's experiences, and, most importantly, to scaling up what works across nations.

The resulting report is a rich tapestry of powerful stories and innovations. It includes impactful policy shifts in Kenya, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania, the integration of ECD into health systems in Mozambique, the expansion of services in Rwanda to reach the youngest children near their mothers' workplaces, the scale-up of community-driven ECD services in Zambia, and the strengthening of coordination mechanisms in Zimbabwe. These examples, and many more, illuminate the path forward and show what is possible when commitment meets collaboration.

This report is also a testament to the power of partnership. It showcases how UNICEF's technical expertise and multisectoral approach, combined with strategic investments from key global and local partners, including the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, and leadership and financing from national governments, are driving transformational change for children, communities and nations.

UNICEF remains steadfast in its commitment to advancing the rights, well-being, and development of every child, and we call on all partners, governments and communities to join us in ensuring that all young children across Africa get the best start in life.



Etleva Kadilli
Regional Director
UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa

Acronyms

ECE	Early childhood education
ECD	Early childhood development
ESARO	Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office
HI-ECD	Holistic and integrated ECD services
KES	Kenyan Shilling
MDAT	Malawi Developmental Assessment Tool
NAP-ECCD	National Action Plan on Early Childhood Care and Education
NICHE	Nutrition Improvement through Cash and Health Education programme
NCF	Nurturing Care Framework
NCPP	Nurturing Care Parenting Package
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
WHO	World Health Organization
ZIMSTAT	Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency





Introduction: Nurturing care for every child

Every child's earliest years hold the greatest promise — and the highest stakes. In this brief but powerful window, the foundations of health, learning and resilience are built, shaping not only individual futures but the social and economic fabric of entire nations. For development partners and donors, investing in these years offers one of the most cost effective and transformative opportunities to drive sustainable change.

The earliest years of life are a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to shape the trajectory of a child's future. From birth to age 8, a child's brain develops at a pace never again matched in life — every moment enriched by nurturing care. This care includes good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning. When these elements come together, alongside warm and attentive relationships with caregivers, children are equipped to grow, learn and realize their full potential.

This *Compendium of Good Practices in ECD Policies and Programmes* turns these principles into action. Through compelling, real-world examples from Eastern and Southern Africa and beyond, it demonstrates how evidence-based policies, empowered communities and strengthened systems can create the enabling environments that support parents and caregivers and set children firmly on the path to thrive.

Early childhood development in Eastern and Southern Africa

Over the past three decades, Eastern and Southern Africa has made inspiring progress in early childhood development — under-five mortality has been cut by more than half and stunting rates have declined, proving that change for children's survival, growth and development is both possible and achievable.

Yet, the gaps remain profound: in 2022, more than 900,000 children died before their fifth birthday, 26 million were affected by stunting and 8 million missed out on early learning opportunities, fuelling a regional learning crisis.¹ Public investment in the early years is still too low and the cost of inaction is high — from weaker economies to entrenched cycles of poverty and disadvantage that undermine equitable growth.

Amid these challenges, momentum is building. More countries are putting in place multisectoral policies that address children's needs holistically, and public investment in ECD is beginning to rise, signalling a growing recognition of its transformative potential for societies and economies alike.

UNICEF has been at the forefront of this shift — providing sustained advocacy, technical expertise and policy support to governments, helping them design and implement scalable solutions that deliver measurable results for children. By convening partners across sectors, UNICEF has strengthened national capacity and inspired collective action to prioritize the youngest and most marginalized.

With governments, civil society and international partners now mobilized, the region has a pivotal opportunity to turn promising policies and rising investments into lasting impact. The path forward demands unwavering commitment, bold leadership and coordinated action — ensuring that every child's early years become the foundation for a healthier, more prosperous and more equitable future.

About this Compendium

The Compendium of Good Practices in ECD Policies and Programmes showcases inspiring examples of what works for young children and their caregivers in Eastern and Southern Africa — and beyond. It brings together success stories in:

- Strengthening the delivery of multisectoral ECD services across the five pillars of nurturing care — good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, opportunities for early learning, and safety and security;
- Designing, implementing and enhancing ECD policies, strategies, financing, coordination and monitoring and evaluation frameworks;
- Mobilizing communities to support caregivers and promote the well-being of young children.

While its primary focus is on the experiences of countries in Eastern and Southern Africa, this Compendium also draws on achievements from other regions, offering a rich source of adaptable lessons. Each featured practice demonstrates tangible results for children and holds strong potential for scale-up, providing a roadmap for those seeking to strengthen ECD systems and outcomes.

The **Compendium** is organized into three chapters:

Chapter 1 presents good practices from Eastern and Southern Africa, featuring stories about strengthening ECD policies and investments (including leveraging cash transfers, counselling and caregiver support) in Kenya; embedding nurturing care within the health system in Mozambique; expanding services for young children through diverse ECD models in Rwanda; scaling up quality early learning opportunities in Uganda; catalysing an enabling ECD environment in the United Republic of Tanzania; applying community-based solutions to enhance child development in Zambia; and strengthening policy coordination in Zimbabwe.

Chapter 2 highlights good practices from East Asia and the Pacific, South Asia and Europe and Central Asia, including piloting playful parenting programmes in Afghanistan; extending nurturing care to remote communities in Cambodia; strengthening family-friendly policies in China; recovering lost learning opportunities in Indonesia; championing parenting support in Pakistan; integrating ECD services within the health system in Serbia; and expanding a home-visiting programme in Uzbekistan.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of global initiatives and outlines opportunities to accelerate development outcomes for children — both across Africa and worldwide.





Stories of impact:

Lessons for change from Eastern and Southern Africa



Young children across Eastern and Southern Africa continue to face significant barriers — from inadequate parenting support to limited access to early learning, high rates of malnutrition and underfunded services — that undermine their development and jeopardize their own futures and the future of their nations. Despite these challenges, notable progress has been made in expanding multisectoral ECD programmes, strengthening policies and engaging communities to support young children and caregivers. UNICEF, in partnership with governments, communities, parents and development partners, has played a pivotal role in this transformation by providing advocacy, technical expertise and policy guidance that have led to measurable improvements in children's development outcomes.

This chapter captures stories of successful ECD policies and programmes from across the region — including in Kenya, Mozambique, Rwanda, Uganda, the United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe — offering proven, scalable lessons that can inform and inspire action in other contexts.

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Powering change through collaboration in Eastern and Southern Africa



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Ending malnutrition in Kenya through cash support and nutrition education

Poverty-driven malnutrition among Kenya's children

Kenya has made commendable progress in child health, with national efforts reducing stunting rates to 18 per cent. Yet this achievement is overshadowed by a triple burden of malnutrition – undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and rising overweight and obesity – which continues to undermine children's growth, learning and future potential. This challenge is driven by poor diets, inadequate care and persistent gender inequality, creating a cycle of deprivation. At the root lies multidimensional poverty, with nearly half of Kenya's children lacking access to essential services such as health care, education, clean water and sanitation – the critical foundations for healthy development. The situation is most acute in rural, arid and semi-arid regions, where limited infrastructure, recurrent climate shocks and scarce resources deepen vulnerability.

The power of NICHE: Cash and health education to stop malnutrition before it starts

To confront this challenge, and under the leadership of the Government of Kenya – specifically the Ministry of Health and the State Department for Social Protection – UNICEF partnered with the United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and the World Bank to design and implement the Nutrition Improvement through Cash and Health Education (NICHE) programme. This landmark collaboration united national leadership, global expertise and community-level action to deliver an integrated response that tackled both the immediate and root causes of child malnutrition.

The NICHE programme builds on Kenya's existing social protection and health platforms, including the Inua Jamii cash transfer schemes,

the Hunger Safety Net Programme and the Government's Baby-Friendly Community Initiative. Designed as a multisectoral 'cash plus' intervention, NICHE combines four core components: (1) targeted cash top-ups to the poorest households with pregnant women and/or children under 3 years to improve dietary diversity; (2) regular nutrition counselling delivered by trained Community Health Promoters and Assistants to promote optimal feeding practices during the first 1,000 days; (3) social and behaviour change communication through the Baby-Friendly Community Initiative framework to address cultural and behavioural barriers to good nutrition; and (4) parenting education with a child protection focus, equipping caregivers with skills in responsive caregiving, early stimulation and safe, nurturing environments. Together, these elements form a community-driven, integrated approach that equips young children with the solid foundation they need in their earliest years.

In 2018, UNICEF supported the launch of the NICHE pilot in Kitui County – one of the regions with the highest stunting rates at the time. A rigorous randomized control trial demonstrated significant positive impacts on both the immediate and underlying determinants of undernutrition, with notable improvements in key indicators such as minimum acceptable diet (+44 per cent), treatment of drinking water (+40 per cent), use of a household handwashing facility (+29 per cent), optimal complementary feeding (+11 per cent), early initiation of breastfeeding (+8 per cent) and exclusive breastfeeding (+7 per cent). These results provided strong evidence for scaling up the programme, which was subsequently integrated into the national Kenya Social and Economic Inclusion Programme. In 2019, with funding from the World Bank and additional grant support from the United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, NICHE was expanded to five counties identified as malnutrition hotspots, significantly broadening its reach and impact on the poorest children and their families.

Box 1

UNICEF's role in driving the NICHE programme's success

UNICEF has played a central role in the NICHE programme, providing technical assistance, building capacity, strengthening delivery platforms, generating evidence, supporting multisectoral coordination and leading robust monitoring and evaluation. Through its social policy section and multisectoral teams in nutrition, child protection and social behaviour change, UNICEF has trained health workers, community health promoters, children's officers and social development officers, while establishing mother-to-mother support groups to promote optimal feeding, hygiene and dietary practices. UNICEF also developed a National Parenting Manual to equip community health volunteers with tools for positive parenting, and ensured that government officers at both national and county levels had the skills for effective programme delivery, grievance redress and case management. UNICEF has enhanced NICHE's shock-responsiveness by linking it to early warning systems and defining anticipatory action measures, supported the development of national and county nutrition policies and action plans, and strengthened supply chains for essential commodities such as ready-to-use therapeutic foods, micronutrient powders and vitamin A supplements. It has also established and improved the NICHE Management Information System, enabling real-time data collection and analysis to guide decision-making, track progress and sustain impact in reducing malnutrition across Kenya's most vulnerable counties.

From proven pilot to national promise

A recent joint study² by the World Bank and UNICEF on fiscal incidence in Kenya found that the NICHE programme delivers strong results in reducing poverty and inequality, reaching nine out of ten multidimensionally poor children. Its potential, however, is limited by modest transfer values and restricted coverage. Simulations show that increasing both would significantly amplify its impact.

Lessons from NICHE's implementation confirm that integrating social protection with nutrition services – combining cash transfers with regular nutrition counselling – improves access to nutritious food, health services and positive feeding practices. To maximize results, the study recommends expanding coverage, raising transfer amounts, strengthening multisectoral coordination, investing in shared digital systems for joint targeting, ensuring timely payments, building sustainable financing mechanisms and embedding robust monitoring and evaluation to guide scale-up.



NICHE's success rests on strong government leadership and the integration of cash support with behaviour change interventions. This is a pivotal moment to move from proof to nationwide impact. It is time for development partners, donors and all stakeholders to

stand alongside the Government of Kenya in advancing this proven model – working together to optimize the potential of all young children in the first 1,000 days of life and set them on the path to thrive.





Growing bright futures: Policies and investments for young children in Kenya

Policy gaps and barriers to young children's development

Kenya has long recognized the importance of ECD, yet the National ECD Policy Framework, developed in 2006, was outdated. A new policy was needed to incorporate recent advancements in neuroscience, programme effectiveness and best practices for supporting young children. The policy revision was also critical to reflect the Constitution of Kenya 2010, including the devolution of responsibilities for ECD services to county governments.

There was also a need to address the lack of adequate investment in ECD. UNICEF analysis showed that while 93 per cent of ECD funding in Kenya came from domestic sources, government spending remained alarmingly low – just US\$81 per child aged 0–8 years, which is

far below the regional average of US\$138. This represented only about 13.5 per cent of total government spending (national and counties) and only 13.6 per cent of county government spending, exposing a significant gap in financial commitment to ECD.

Driving change: Strengthening ECD policies with UNICEF expertise

Recognizing the need to enhance ECD policies and investment, the Government of Kenya partnered with UNICEF to navigate this complex process. Leveraging its expertise in budget analysis, policy reform and multisectoral coordination, UNICEF played a pivotal role in shaping policy and financing strategies and reinforcing Kenya's commitment to children's rights and sustainable development.

Key UNICEF contributions included:

- **Public expenditure tracking:** Analysis of ECD spending across three fiscal years in nine counties and five key sectors, providing detailed insights into budget allocations at national and county levels.
- **Technical guidance:** Support for public financial management reforms, including contributions to the 2025/2026 budget guidelines.
- **Sector costing:** Initiating the process of service costing within sectors as part of the zero-based budgeting framework to improve accuracy, including for ECD services.
- **Best practices:** Introduction of successful multisectoral policy strategies from other countries to strengthen Kenya's approach.

- **Policy dialogue:** Leading and facilitating policy discussions on effective ECD interventions, ensuring decisions are informed by international evidence.
- **Stakeholder engagement:** Collaboration with government officials and key ECD stakeholders to drive policy development and revision.

To further strengthen ECD efforts, UNICEF partnered with the Council of Government to promote awareness, enhance sector-wide understanding and advocate for the integration of ECD into County Development Plans, ensuring increased financial backing.



From action to impact: Joint efforts to advance ECD investment

The collective efforts led by the Government of Kenya, with UNICEF's support, have resulted in significant policy advancements benefiting young children and their families.

National-level achievements

- **Strengthening ECD policy:** In 2024, the Government of Kenya validated a new ECD policy – the *Kenya Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy 2024* – which is awaiting Cabinet approval. The policy enhances governance, coordination, the measurement framework and accountability.
- **Establishing national budget guidelines:** For the first time in Kenya's history, new budget guidelines were adopted directing Government agencies to prioritize children's and women's needs, ensuring dedicated funding.

- **Increasing social sector investments:**

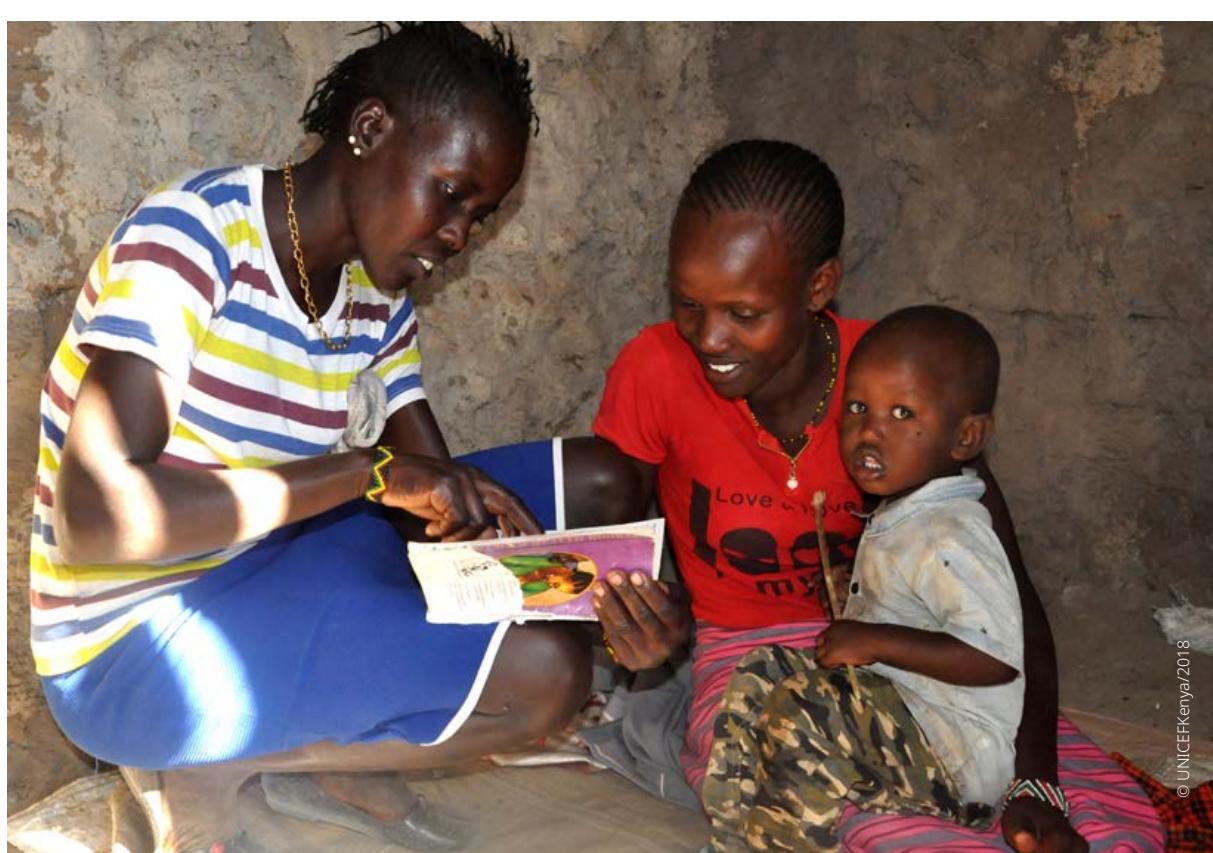
The child protection budget grew by 11 per cent (in 2024/2025), and 3 billion KES (US\$24 million) was reinstated for the school feeding programme – funding that had previously been removed during budget cuts.

- **Introducing health financing reforms:**

The National Facility Improvement Financing Act was established as an accountable, secure system for managing public health revenues. Five counties (Mandera, Wajir, Garissa, Isiolo, West Pokot) adapted the Act to the county context, resulting in the ringfencing of facility-generated revenue for continued health investments.

County-level advancements

- **Fostering sustainable policies and budgets:** Several County Development Plans incorporated ECD services, with corresponding budget increases to support ECD.





- **Boosting budgets for ECD:** Eight county assemblies approved 1.78 billion KES (US\$14 million) for social sectors, including ECD. This means that for every dollar invested by UNICEF, the government contributed a game-changing \$222.
- **Mobilizing county investments:** in Garissa County, the health funding surged by 378 million KES (US\$2.9 million) in 2024/25, strengthening medical supplies, primary health care and family health services; in Makueni County, budget allocation for ECD increased from about 124,800,000 KES in 2022/2023 to about 192,240,000 KES in 2024/2025, and all ECD caregivers – close to 1,000 – were officially added to the government payroll.

The success of ECD policy improvements and budget allocations was driven by strong government leadership, UNICEF's evidence-based advocacy, including expenditure tracking and data-driven recommendations, multisectoral collaboration across key sectors, and effective stakeholder engagement at the county level.

Turning ECD policies into action for every county and community

Moving forward, there is a strong opportunity to advance ECD policy implementation and increase investment across counties. UNICEF will deepen its engagement with the Council of Governors with an aim to strengthen advocacy to ensure ECD remains a priority in policy and budget decisions at the highest levels. To support counties in development planning, UNICEF will provide technical assistance to integrate ECD interventions into County Development Plans. Support will be needed to expand workforce training, offering targeted capacity-building programmes for ECD caregivers, health workers and other service providers to improve service quality.

UNICEF will facilitate knowledge exchange by documenting and sharing best practices and fostering cross-county learning to accelerate ECD improvements. Support for strengthening data-driven decision-making will also be important, including generating and sharing critical insights and supporting the development of an ECD indicator dashboard for policy and budget planning. With strategic coordination and sustained commitment, UNICEF stands ready to support the Government to drive full implementation of ECD policies, creating lasting impact for children across all counties and communities.



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Better health, brighter future: Embedding nurturing care within Mozambique's health system

From unregistered births to unmet needs: Barriers to nurturing care in Mozambique

Limited access to essential social services and insufficient support for caregivers have severely constrained ECD in Mozambique. Postnatal care coverage remains low and vaccination and malaria prevention rates have fallen. Birth registration is also decreasing, restricting children's legal identity and access to social services. Existing parenting programmes lack sustainability and integration within the health system, focusing primarily on basic caregiving without promoting responsive interactions or early stimulation at home.

These service and support gaps have translated into alarming child outcomes. In 2022, the infant mortality rate was 39 deaths per 1,000 live births. Stunting affected 37 per cent of children under 5 years, undermining physical growth and cognitive potential. Just 39 per cent of children aged 2–5 years were developmentally on track, leaving the majority at risk of delayed learning, social-emotional difficulties and long-term impacts on health and education.³

Effective health sector coalition to address ECD challenges

To address persistent gaps in child health and development, Mozambique has integrated early childhood development interventions into its national health system, using maternal and child health services as the primary entry point to support nurturing care. By embedding counselling on nutrition, guidance on play and stimulation, systematic developmental screening and structured caregiver support into routine antenatal, postnatal and well-child visits, the country aims to reach every family with key ECD services during the first 1,000 days – the developmental window when nurturing care yields the greatest returns for cognitive, social and physical growth.

This system-wide integration was led by the Ministry of Health in coordination with the Ministry of Education, Gender and Social Action and Provincial Health Departments, with technical and financial backing from WHO, UNICEF, Doctors with Africa CUAMM, the Mozambican Paediatrics Association, ChildFund, PATH Global Health and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. These partners aligned mandates and pooled resources to drive policy change, develop tools and build capacity across all levels of care.

The coalition has embedded the following practices within Mozambique's health system, yielding measurable outcomes:

- Nutrition, play and stimulation counselling is a standard component of antenatal, postnatal and well-child visits. This ensures consistent caregiver support and demonstrates gains in child growth and development benchmarks. A systematic analysis of these counselling services is currently being conducted by the UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office, the findings of which will further refine the approach and serve as a learning resource for other countries in the region.
- Standardized developmental screening protocols are fully integrated into facility workflows, enabling timely identification of delays and appropriate referral. Screening coverage and follow-up rates are routinely monitored. A parallel systematic review of these screening protocols is underway to inform continuous quality improvement.
- A national parenting programme is delivered through primary health care, equipping caregivers with interactive, evidence-based techniques for responsive care. Success is reflected in higher caregiver engagement scores and accelerated achievement of developmental milestones.



- ECD modules are incorporated into all pre-service and in-service training curricula for health professionals. This has produced a workforce competent in nurturing care and sustained high-quality ECD service delivery across facilities.
- Community health workers complete specialized certification in play-based stimulation, responsive feeding and nurturing care during the first 1,000 days. This certification is operationalized through routine home visits and tracked via improvements in ECD indicators.
- Work is underway to produce masterclasses on ECD, aimed at raising awareness and promoting best practices.

UNICEF's contributions to these achievements

Many of the results achieved to date stem from UNICEF's targeted support – anchored in strategic collaboration with the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation – and a steadfast focus on strengthening the health system's capacity to deliver effective ECD interventions. UNICEF's key inputs included:

- Collaborating with the Ministry of Health to integrate ECD modules into all pre-service and in-service training packages

for maternal health and nutrition. UNICEF produced a robust suite of trainer and participant manuals, counselling cards and job aids, and conducted workshops for community health workers on play-based stimulation, responsive feeding, management of feeding challenges, and nurturing care during the first 1,000 days of life.

- Introducing the Malawi Developmental Assessment Tool (MDAT) in Monapo (Nampula) and Zambezia provinces – covering 28 priority districts – and mobilizing funds to finalize training materials and expand the tool's roll-out into Cabo Delgado, Sofala and additional provinces.
- Integrating a combined Nutrition-ECD package into community nutrition sites across four focus provinces and leading on-site coaching for community health workers to deliver integrated counselling on infant and young child feeding alongside age-appropriate stimulation activities.
- Partnering with government agencies during National Breastfeeding Week and other campaigns to weave responsive caregiving and play into public messaging.



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Moving towards scale: Learning from provinces to drive national impact

In 2024, UNICEF's integrated Nutrition-ECD package reached 61,480 children under 2 years of age and their caregivers across four provinces. With additional backing from the World Bank and other partners, that number surged to 730,930 children – a near doubling from the 370,620 reached in 2022. Communication initiatives delivered nurturing care messages directly to nearly 19,000 caregivers and engaged more than 2.5 million people via social media.

Key lessons for scaling include the urgent need for a national ECD policy and a dedicated multisectoral coordination mechanism to align health, nutrition, education, child protection and social behaviour change efforts. Embedding ECD modules into existing training curricula – underpinned by MDAT and ECD Index 2030 data – has helped build cross-sector capacity,

optimized resources and safeguarded quality. Leveraging health sector working groups and strategic civil society partnerships has ensured accountability and sustained momentum for ECD, despite budgetary and policy gaps.

Now is the moment to convene a broad national coalition – expanding engagement from government ministries and current civil society partners to include media, academia and the private sector – to develop a comprehensive ECD strategy, secure dedicated financing and replicate these proven interventions across all provinces. By uniting around shared objectives and harnessing our collective expertise, we can ensure every Mozambican child thrives.



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Expanding ECD services across Rwanda's homes, workplaces and communities

Rwanda's vision to tackle the barriers to nurturing care in early life

The Government of Rwanda set a clear national vision to reduce poverty and build human capital, recognizing that this ambition could not be realized without strong investment in the early years. Yet countless young children, particularly those aged 0–3 years, still lacked meaningful opportunities for early learning, whether at home or in structured settings. As the economy and population expanded, work opportunities multiplied, with some mothers taking up work on tea plantations, in public markets and other public spaces, and engaging in cross-border trade. However, quality childcare was a significant challenge: many mothers were forced to choose between

earning a livelihood and safeguarding their children's development, with childcare often unsafe, unstable or dependent on older siblings being withdrawn from school to care for younger children. In public markets across the country, many infants and toddlers were spending long, unstimulating days beside working parents, without the interaction, protection and nurturing care they needed.

In parallel, a national survey revealed multidimensional child poverty at 49 per cent and stunting at 38.35 per cent⁴ among children under 5 years – stark indicators of the deep gap between Rwanda's aspirations and the conditions young children face daily. This reality highlighted the urgent need to scale quality, affordable childcare and early learning opportunities across diverse settings to give every child the strongest possible start in life.

From a single centre to a multi-model system at scale

Rwanda embarked on an extraordinary transformation to tackle these challenges — expanding from a single, pioneering ECD centre to a nationwide, multi-model system anchored in reach, sustainability and community ownership.

It began in 2013 with the flagship ECD and Family 'Centre of Excellence' in Kayonza — an integrated hub combining early learning, health care, nutrition, hygiene, child protection and dynamic parental engagement — which was established by the Imbuto Foundation with UNICEF support, under the leadership of the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion. By 2014/2015, the Centre of Excellence model had been replicated in 10 districts with support from the IKEA Foundation and a rigorous evaluation⁵ confirmed its profound impact: greater caregiver involvement in learning and play, stronger home environments, wider access to sanitation, safe water, early education and health insurance. The model also measurably improved child outcomes in nutrition, health and core developmental skills.

Guided by this evidence and under the leadership of the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, Rwanda adopted the 2016 National ECD Policy and established the National ECD Programme in 2017, a government entity to ensure nationwide coordination of ECD services. In 2020, the Government merged the mandates of National ECD Programme and the National Children Commission to form the current National Child Development Agency, therefore consolidating efforts and resources to provide comprehensive support for child development. In 2018, UNICEF secured funding from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Rwanda to expand low-cost ECD models — community-based, faith-based, market-based, work-based and a model for children of mothers in prison. With UNICEF's support, ECD services were embedded within workplaces, churches, and in locations near public markets and border towns (see Box 2). In addition, UNICEF partnered with the National Agricultural Export Development Board to scale up ECD services across all 19 tea companies in Rwanda (see Box 3).

Box 2

Reaching children where families work and trade

Rwanda's market-based and cross-border ECD models bring quality early childhood services directly to the places where families live, work and trade. In eight districts, ECD centres in and around marketplaces — renovated or newly built from local government facilities — offer integrated early learning, nutrition, health, WASH and child protection services. Trained caregivers deliver play based learning in numeracy, literacy and social skills, while parents access regular parenting sessions and financial literacy training. In high-mobility border areas with the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, UNICEF and partners have established centres mirroring the same integrated model, tailored to transient and underserved communities whose livelihoods depend on cross-border trade. Together, these 10 market-based and eight cross-border sites have reached thousands of young children with integrated ECD services, reduced reliance on older siblings for childcare, empowered women to work and grow incomes, and are now directly benefiting over 3,000 children aged 0–3 years old.

Box 3**The tea sector breakthrough**

In 2016, a pilot with Sorwathe tea company introduced mobile crèches and on-site childcare for mothers in the tea sector, enabling women to work longer hours, progress in their careers and reduce turnover for employers. The economic gains were striking: tea plucking volumes per worker rose sharply and the sector recorded a 20.71 per cent return on investment, alongside certification and benefits to their reputation. By 2018, through a partnership with the National Agricultural Export Development Board, the model was expanded across all 16 tea companies and 20 cooperatives in the country – with strong potential to be replicated in other agricultural and manufacturing sectors, benefiting children, empowering women and boosting the economy.

The contributions of a range of partners propelled the vision forward: the IKEA Foundation's early investment supported expansion of the Centres of Excellence; funding from the Government of the Netherlands and Dutch Embassy helped scale low-cost models; the National Agricultural Export Development Board mobilized the tea sector; faith leaders, local authorities and the private sector extended the reach of the growing network of ECD services and centres; and donor collaboration culminated in a game-changing US\$80 million investment from the World Bank to integrate a home-based ECD approach into the national social protection programme.

A 2024 country-wide service mapping⁶ showed that 31,182 ECD facilities now exist nationwide across nearly every village — an extraordinary journey from a single ECD model centre to a nationwide network serving more than 1 million children, including those with disabilities, supported by more than 117,000 caregivers.

Building the case – How evidence and investments are powering Rwanda's ECD transformation

Over just a decade, UNICEF's investment of US\$16 million in ECD services, policies and systems became the spark that lit a nationwide movement — unleashing more than US\$150 million from the donor community, including the World Bank and the European Union, and rising commitments from key philanthropic organizations, including the ELMA Foundation and Big Win Philanthropy. That catalytic push ignited sustained and growing investment from the Government of Rwanda, mobilized local communities and drew in the private sector, creating a united front that transformed ambition into action at unprecedented scale and pace.

"Before, it was very hard. The market is always busy with many bicycles carrying green bananas, packing and unpacking for the importers. I was always worried they might hit my son... Having him at the ECD centre allows me to focus on my banana business without worrying about his safety. He is not only safe but also learning and eating well. It is reassuring to know he's receiving the care and nutrition he needs to grow."

Laurencie Nyirandinabo,
a banana seller who frequently crosses into Uganda to procure her goods

A powerful driver of Rwanda's ECD journey has been its evidence-driven approach — beginning with the inclusion of six core early childhood indicators in the 2014–2015 Demographic and Health Survey, which provided the first national baseline. A national monitoring framework and scorecard were also developed to track policy and programme implementation. These efforts were reinforced by robust studies, including economic analyses, such as a 2023 ECD investment case, which quantified long-term social and economic gains, securing a US\$20 million European Union grant and attracting interest from the European Investment Bank, the private sector and local banks.

Learning from Rwanda's extraordinary ECD journey: Vision, evidence and impact at scale

Rwanda's remarkable ECD progress has been powered by decisive government leadership — with the National Child Development Agency, established in 2018, steering a bold national vision, backed by strong accountability and strategic partnerships. UNICEF brought multisectoral expertise and global reach; the Imbuto Foundation infused deep community engagement and policy influence; and donors channelled resources into proven, results-driven initiatives. Local authorities unlocked public financing, while civil society, parents and communities embraced the model and witnessed its transformative impact firsthand.

This shared commitment — fuelled by collaboration and anchored in local ownership — has delivered important results: more than 76 per cent⁷ of young children in Rwanda are now developmentally on track, one of the highest rates in the region. Rwanda's journey is more than a success story; it is a living blueprint for how vision and partnership can unlock the full potential of a generation.





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Raising the bar: Strengthening policies and standards for early learning in Uganda

The early learning gap in Uganda

Lifelong learning ignites in the first formative years, when responsive caregiving, community engagement and high-quality early education build the cognitive, language and social foundations that drive poverty reduction, higher lifetime earnings and healthier societies. Yet in Uganda, only about half of 3- and 4-year-olds are developmentally on track, and far fewer acquire foundational literacy and numeracy skills. This shortfall stems from limited stimulation at home and scarce learning opportunities beyond it: fewer than one in ten children attend a licensed ECD centre.⁸ Those from the poorest households and children with disabilities, who would benefit most, remain overwhelmingly excluded.

A strategic journey from community play to Cabinet-approved policy

Recognizing the urgent need to expand inclusive, quality early learning, and give every Ugandan child the chance to thrive, the Government – supported by UNICEF and development partners – launched a comprehensive initiative to raise community awareness of ECD, strengthen policies and legislation for young children, build the capacities of ECD managers and frontline workers, and empower parents to provide responsive care at home.

As the first step, the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development – with UNICEF's backing – transformed Uganda's multisectoral ECD Technical Committee into a fully functional coordination body. The coordination body is led by the Government

Commissioner in charge of children and youth and members include technical experts from Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Sports, Ministry of Local Government, the Office of the Prime Minister, National Planning Authority, academia, and members from civil society and faith-based organizations. UNICEF commissioned a cost-benefit analysis to make the economic case for early childhood investment at the highest levels. UNICEF also organized regional learning exchanges and workshops, bringing high-level government officials together with peers from across Africa to share experiences and strategize next steps. Uganda's delegation, consistently among the most active, demonstrated its commitment to ECD leadership and sharpened multisectoral coordination across ministries.

Building on this foundation, UNICEF supported Uganda's inaugural National Play Day⁹ in April 2024 – a high-profile celebration that convened political leaders, private-sector partners, civil society, academics and families in play-based demonstrations and community activities. The event elevated public awareness of play as a critical driver of learning, social skills and responsive caregiving. Riding this wave of enthusiasm, the Government endorsed three cornerstone frameworks: (1) the Early Childhood Care and Education Policy (approved by Cabinet in April 2024) as a roadmap for service expansion; (2) the Basic Requirements and Minimum Standards for Pre-primary Education, which harmonize curriculum, staffing qualifications, licensing criteria and infrastructure norms; and (3) the costed National Integrated ECD Multisectoral Strategy 2025–2030, which maps interventions for children aged 0–5, assigns lead ministries, strengthens coordination and secures sustainable funding.



Scaling early childhood education: Skilled workforce, diverse delivery models

With national frameworks in place, Uganda is expanding ECD services through a mix of fixed, community-run and mobile models to reach every child. Traditional community-based centres, formal pre-primary classrooms in primary schools, and private preschools are being complemented by innovative approaches, such as urban play spaces and "ECD boda bodas"¹⁰ – which are mobile tricycles launched in 2024 that bring play-based sessions, learning materials and caregiver coaching directly to cities, villages and hard-to-reach areas.

To tailor delivery to local contexts, UNICEF supports the Government in implementing:

- Community-based centres in partnership with faith-based organizations.
- Home-based and parenting group models for areas without formal centres.
- ECD centres within primary schools to extend access in resource-constrained settings.

This integrated approach fosters community ownership, ensures equitable access for children in urban informal settlements, rural villages and refugee-hosting districts, and is reinforced by UNICEF's collaboration with districts and the Ministry of Education and Sports to strengthen systems, build capacity and embed ECD into national planning and financing frameworks for long-term sustainability and scale.

A central joint investment focuses on workforce capacity, the strongest predictor of service quality. Pre-primary teachers and ECD caregivers have received intensive training to enhance pedagogy, deepen knowledge of nurturing care and strengthen community and parent engagement. Management committees at both licensed and community-based centres have also been trained and equipped with learning kits, ensuring consistent quality standards from Kampala to Uganda's most remote areas.





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Key outcomes: Delivering integrated ECD to the hardest-to-reach

These comprehensive actions are delivering tangible impact. In 29 UNICEF-supported districts, more than 52,300 children are now enrolled in ECD centres offering a full package of integrated services – from nutritious meals, WASH facilities, and basic health care (including immunizations) to child protection and parenting programmes that strengthen nutrition, responsive caregiving and hygiene practices. This holistic approach is giving children a stronger start in life, improving their readiness for school, and laying the groundwork for healthier, more resilient communities.

Progress has been driven by strong partnerships and multisectoral collaboration. Coordination among government ministries, UNICEF, partners, civil society, media, communities and parents has turned policy

into quality services on the ground. Locally adapted delivery models – such as community-based centres and the innovative “ECD boda bodas” – have proven effective in reaching underserved areas, with community ownership and workforce capacity at the heart of success.

Building on this momentum, the next phase will focus on expanding coverage so that every child in Uganda – regardless of location or circumstance – can benefit from quality early learning and nurturing care. This will require scaling proven models, deepening integration of services and securing sustainable financing within national and district budgets. By continuing to strengthen systems, invest in skilled ECD workforces, and foster innovation, Uganda can close the early learning gap and ensure that all children have the opportunity to grow, learn, and thrive in their earliest years.



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Reforming support for young children in the United Republic of Tanzania

Fragmentation, funding shortfalls and capacity gaps in supporting young children

The United Republic of Tanzania had laid the groundwork for early childhood development through its draft Integrated ECD Policy (2011/2012) and the 2012 National ECD Forum, where key ministers had pledged greater investment in children aged 0–8 years. Yet services remained fragmented and uncoordinated, hindered by a policy environment that failed to support comprehensive service provision. Moreover, public financing for young children was inadequate, workforce capacity to deliver integrated interventions was weak, and there was no robust system to resource, monitor and scale evidence-based interventions to support holistic ECD – issues that needed to be addressed to allow young children to develop to their full potential.

Catalysing an enabling ECD environment in Tanzania

In partnership with the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, UNICEF took the first step toward transforming the ECD landscape in the United Republic of Tanzania. By strengthening government capacity, engaging parliamentarians and senior officials, convening policy dialogues with the Social Services, HIV/AIDS, and Budget Committees of Parliament, and consulting permanent secretaries and directors across the Ministries of Education, Health and Community Development, these efforts culminated in the establishment of an Early Childhood Development Parliamentary Champions Group. This group – dedicated to improving policies and increasing public financing for young children – actively engaged development partners and communities and developed the groundbreaking first National Multisectoral ECD Programme (2021/22–2025/26).

Why is the National Multisectoral ECD programme so important?

Anchoring the approach in a proven framework – the programme adopts the Nurturing Care Framework pillars – good health, adequate nutrition, early learning, safety and security, and responsive caregiving – to define the essential services that every Tanzanian child needs to flourish.

Weaving together multiple sectors – it dissolves silos between health, nutrition, education and protection to create a unified strategy where advances in one area amplify progress in the others for truly holistic development.

Driving coordination at all levels – a government-led mechanism aligns ministries, agencies and development partners, streamlining implementation, preventing duplication and ensuring every actor moves in concert.

Linking investment directly to impact – each flagship intervention is assigned clear targets and budgets, guaranteeing that every resource translates into measurable benefits for children.

Tracking progress in real time – the programme leverages the ECDI2030 population index and a UNICEF-supported dashboard to monitor outcomes, sharpen accountability and enable swift course corrections.

Elevating service quality – the programme strengthens the early childhood workforce, refines referral systems, generates local evidence and enforces rigorous standards so that high-quality care reaches every child.

Empowering caregivers and communities – the programme delivers hands-on training and grassroots initiatives that equip families to provide nurturing care at home, transforming every household into an environment where children thrive.

Stronger policies, services, and communities

Since its endorsement, the programme has attracted unprecedented political support and brought together stakeholders at every level – community, subnational and national – under a shared commitment to young children's well-being. Crucially, these coordinated actions are reaching the most vulnerable children: in 2025 alone, more than 400,000 children have accessed quality childcare services, laying the foundation for healthier, more resilient families and communities.

The United Republic of Tanzania's multisectoral ECD model stands as a blueprint for East Africa, inspiring neighbouring countries to adopt and adapt this comprehensive approach to accelerate early childhood gains across the region.



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Hubs of change: Nurturing Zambia's young minds for a brighter future

The unmet needs of Zambia's children

Young children in Zambia thrive on the love and support of their caregivers and communities, yet many need an extra boost to reach their full potential. While access to vital health and nutrition services is expanding, important gaps remain. Not all children are registered at birth, limiting their future opportunities, while early learning options outside the home remain out of reach for many. Parents, despite their commitment to their children's well-being, often have limited time, skills and resources to nurture their development. These challenges highlight the need to invest in Zambia's youngest children – through strong community support and essential services in early childhood to bridge the gaps and unlock their full potential.

Growing together: Community-led solutions for early childhood development

To tackle these challenges, UNICEF and the Government of Zambia (through three key ministries: Health, Education and Community Development and Social Services) joined forces with local authorities to launch the integrated ECD Community-Based Hub initiative. This effort leverages one of Zambia's strongest traditions, the Insaka – a dedicated space within villages where community members come together for dialogue and collective action – to deliver essential ECD services. Rooted in a deep sense of community, the initiative taps into local leadership structures, including chiefs and volunteers, while also leveraging existing social services, particularly primary health care.

UNICEF spearheaded the initiative by strengthening community structures, building the capacity of frontline service providers and community volunteers – key players in delivering interventions – and investing in critical infrastructure to support the programme. To ensure effective service delivery, UNICEF implemented two key training packages: Care for Child Development, which enhances parenting skills and fosters strong bonds between caregivers and young children; and Caring for Caregivers, which provides mental health and psychosocial support to caregivers, equipping them to nurture children effectively. Additionally, UNICEF provided training on nutrition promotion, cooking demonstrations, sanitation and hygiene awareness, organized parental counselling sessions, and developed and deployed an ECD social and behavioural change toolkit.

To complement these training efforts, UNICEF invested in community infrastructure improvements to enhance accessibility to essential services for families with young children. These efforts included installing boreholes, tanks and pumps to provide clean water; constructing new Insakas in collaboration with local communities; and

equipping them with play and learning materials, age-appropriate sanitation facilities, kitchens, and demonstration gardens to support nutrition education.

The Government of Zambia played a vital role in expanding services for children and parents in Insakas. The health sector led efforts to deliver immunization, growth monitoring and micronutrient supplementation, while also training and supporting community volunteers to conduct monthly home visits for households with young children and pregnant women. These visits provided counselling on responsive parenting, along with mental health and psychosocial support when needed. Meanwhile, the education sector focused on strengthening early childhood education by training community volunteers in play-based learning, ensuring that young children received quality foundational education as part of the initiative.

To document the impact of the intervention, UNICEF implemented a state-of-the-art research study, using a controlled trial with a baseline and midline survey to ensure rigorous assessment.



"I think [ECD hubs] have empowered people with knowledge and there's a change in terms of perception and attitude towards a child and also on the general development of a child."

Ministry of Health Coordinator, Chipata District



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Leveraging traditional community structures to transform young lives

UNICEF and the Government of Zambia's efforts have yielded impressive results for communities, parents and Zambia's youngest children:

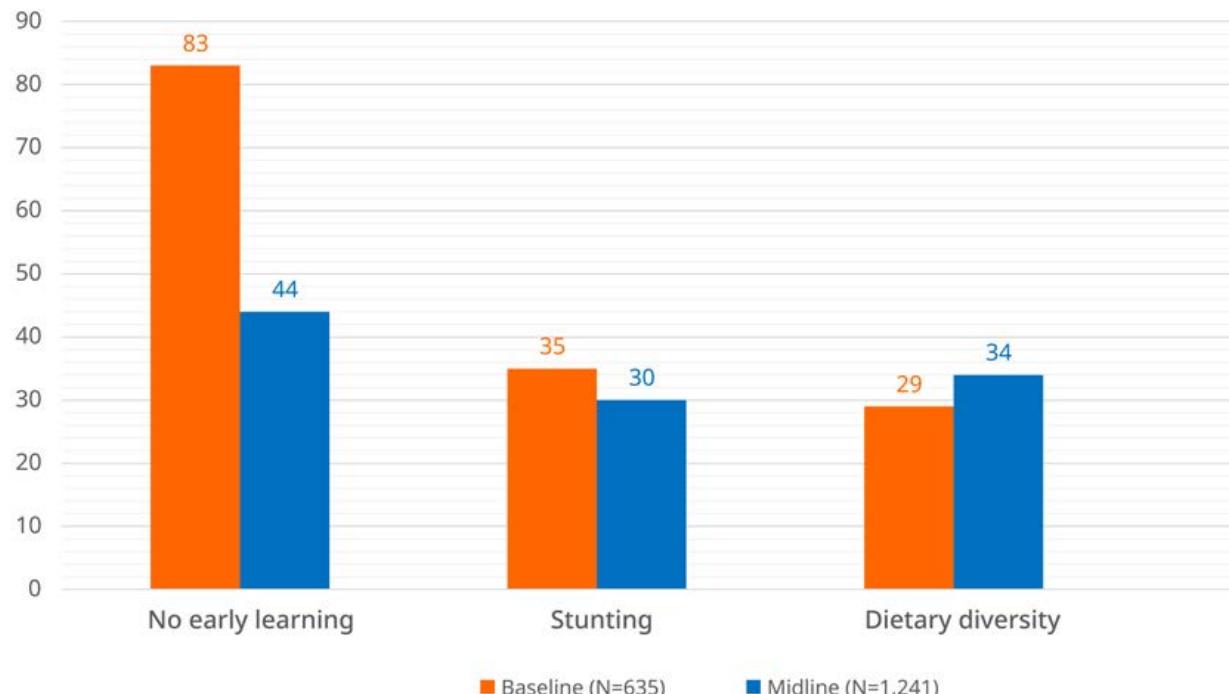
- Young children now have access to play-based learning to support their cognitive and social development and access to key health and nutrition services to boost their survival, growth and development.
- Parents have access to counselling on parenting and caregiving, offered both at community hubs and in their homes, and the knowledge and tools to better nurture their children.
- Community chiefs and volunteers have a deeper understanding of ECD to strengthen community support to families with young children.

Parents' ability to support child development has improved in two key areas: play and nutrition. Parents and caregivers engaged more often in activities such as storytelling, singing, counting, drawing, outdoor play and reading, which help foster children's cognitive and emotional growth.

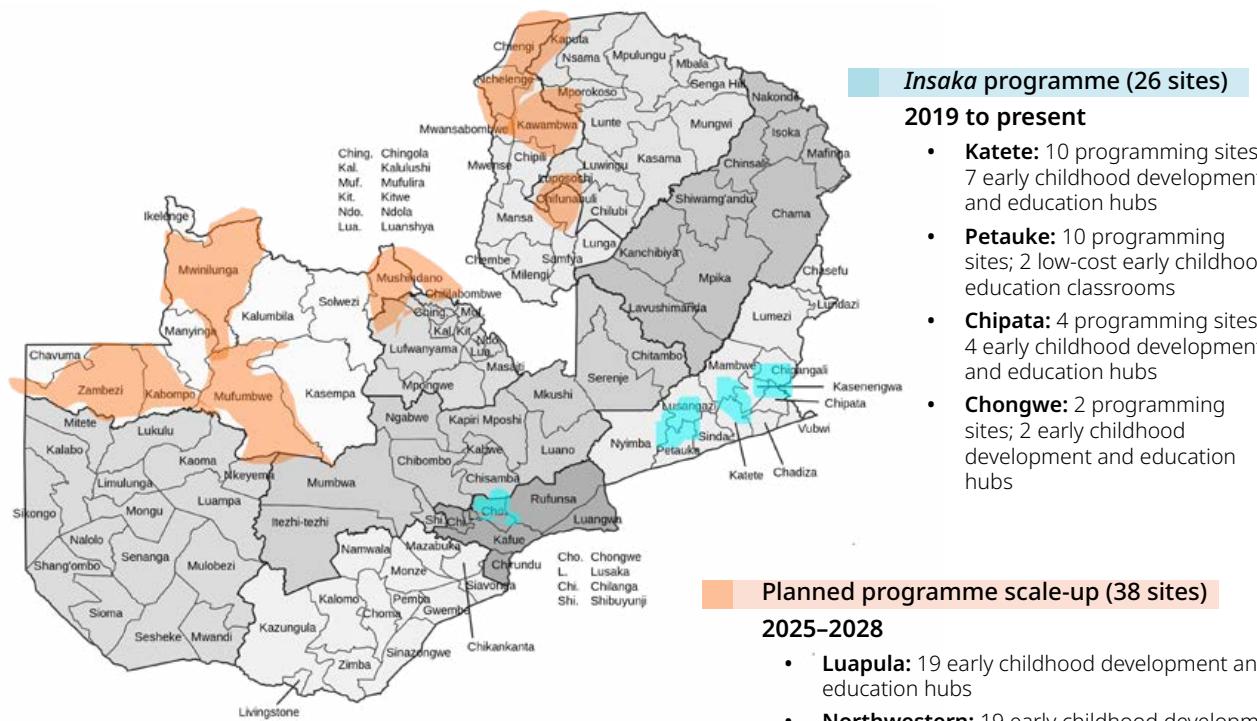
Parents and caregivers also improved feeding practices by adopting positive reinforcement and responsive feeding techniques, such as talking to their child or offering alternative foods when the child refused to eat. In addition, the proportion of children receiving a minimum diverse diet increased from 29 per cent to 34 per cent. With these improvements in child feeding practices, stunting declined by 5 percentage points – from 35 per cent at baseline to 30 per cent at midline (see Figure 1).

Child development also improved across cognitive and social domains and the proportion of children accessing early learning opportunities increased by 39 per cent.

Figure 1. Impact of the *Insaka* programme



Source: UNICEF Zambia, 'Baseline Study for the Community-Based Integrated Early Childhood Development (ECD) 'Insaka' Programme', 2021; and UNICEF Zambia, 'Midline Assessment of the Community-Based Integrated Early Childhood Development (ECD) Programme', 2023.

Figure 2. Initial implementation areas and scale-up plan in Zambia

Source: UNICEF Zambia Country Office, 2025.

Scaling success: From model to nationwide transformation

The ECD community hubs initiative, which began in three districts in the Eastern Province of Zambia (Katete, Petauke, and Chipata) and one district in Lusaka Province, has already made a significant impact. More than 91,000 caregivers and more than 93,000 children aged 0–6 years have been reached with more than one ECD service. Building on this success, the initiative is now set to scale nationwide, driving a broader transformation in ECD across Zambia.

From an initial investment of US\$3 million, the proven impact of this intervention has attracted substantial support from the international development community, particularly the European Union. This momentum has led to

the mobilization of close to US\$50 million, enabling the expansion of the initiative across Zambia to protect children's development and strengthen human capital at a national level.

The Zambia experience highlights the transformative power of integrating ECD services within existing community platforms, making essential support more accessible to families and young children. Its success demonstrates how strong partnerships, well-designed interventions, and effective implementation can drive lasting change. By leveraging national systems, mobilizing traditional authorities, and fostering community engagement, this initiative not only strengthens early childhood development but also lays the foundation for a more prosperous Zambia.



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Catalysing change through coordination and integrated community care in Zimbabwe

Gaps and opportunities in providing optimal care for young children

The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) and the Zimbabwe National Development Strategy 1 (2021–2025) mandate bold investments in early childhood development as engines of poverty reduction and socioeconomic transformation. However, Zimbabwe's youngest still face stark challenges: an under-five mortality rate of 69 per 1,000 live births, chronic malnutrition affecting 27 percent of children under five,¹¹ and 29 percent of three- to four-year-olds who are developmentally off-track.¹² These outcomes reflect siloed health, nutrition, protection and education services, unclear accountability across ministries and service providers, and a policy focus on pre-primary education for four-year-olds and above that overlooks the critical first 1,000 days of life.

From policies to people: Driving change through coordination and community

To address these challenges, UNICEF partnered with the Government of Zimbabwe on two key fronts: strengthening the policy environment and reinforcing community-based platforms to support early childhood development.

In 2024, the Government launched a process to expand ECD programming and coordination for children aged 0–7 years – a critical shift from the previous focus on pre-primary education beginning at age 4. This initiative culminated in the Cabinet's March 2025 endorsement of the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy Coordination Framework, which defines operational guidelines for the Ministry of Health and Child Care, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, the Ministry of Social Welfare,

and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development. Under the Framework, nutrition, health, education and protection services are integrated and coordinated by the Food and Nutrition Council, with oversight elevated to the Office of the President and Cabinet. This high-level stewardship is vital for sustained political commitment, strengthens accountability and serves as a regional exemplar for embedding ECD coordination at the highest level of government.

UNICEF's contributions were pivotal: UNICEF provided technical and financial support to draft the Framework, led comprehensive policy-mapping exercises and convened multi-stakeholder consultations to ensure the policy reflected on-the-ground realities and secured broad ownership.

To extend essential services to children and caregivers at the household level, the Government of Zimbabwe and UNICEF bolstered Care Groups – an innovative

community engagement platform woven into the national health system. Deeply embedded in the health system and communities nationwide, Care Groups were poised to deliver the coordinated, comprehensive support that young children and their families urgently needed.

Care Groups operate under the Ministry of Health and Child Care's National Care Group Guidelines. Each group is linked to a local health facility and led by Village Health Workers – trained volunteers who deliver health and nutrition education directly in people's homes. Multisectoral oversight comes from Ward and District Food and Nutrition Security Committees, governed by the Food and Nutrition Council. Over the past decade, some 12,000 Care Groups have been established nationwide, providing interventions that prevent malnutrition, promote early childhood development, and strengthen household food, nutrition, and water security for children, adolescents and women.

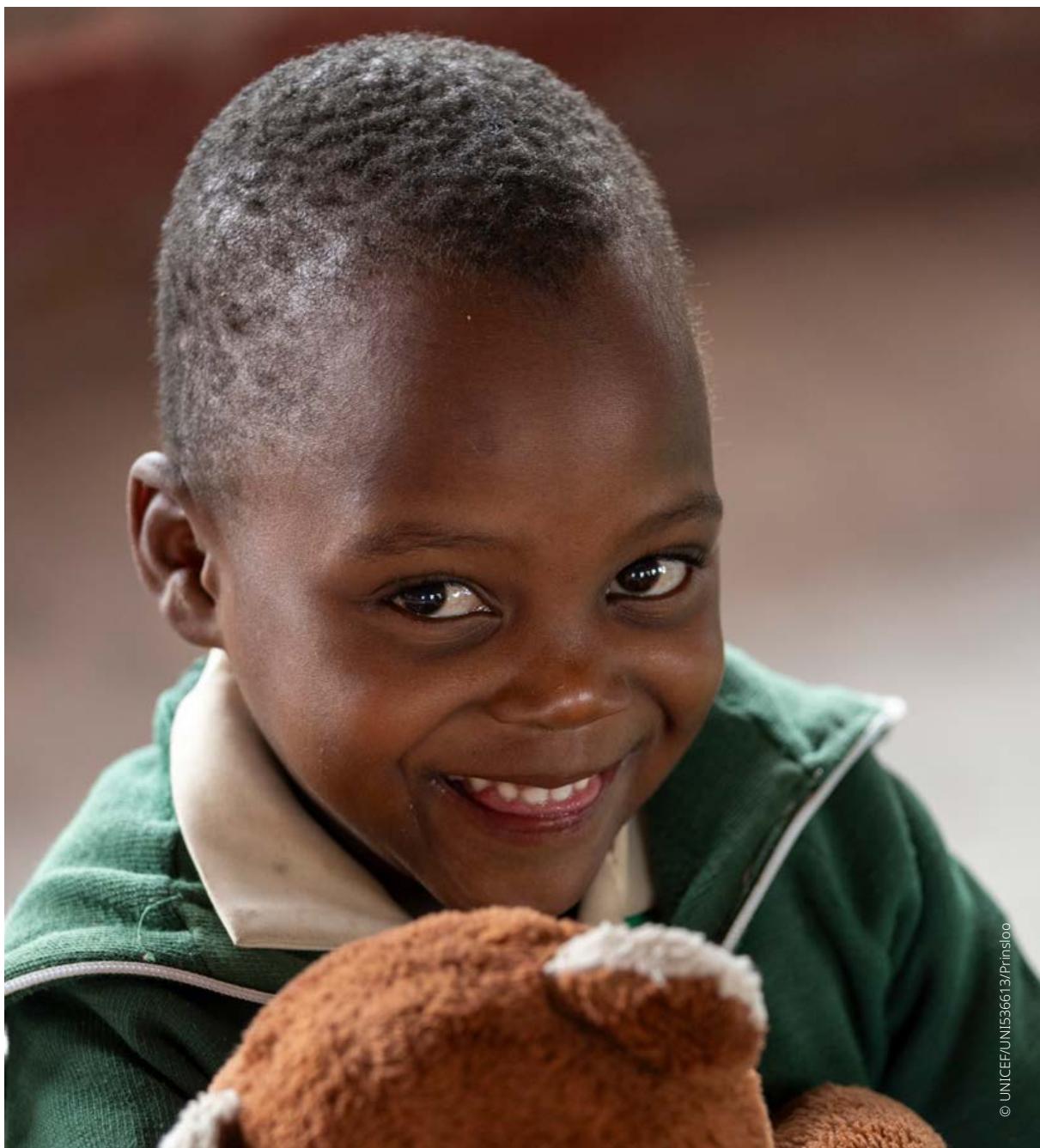


To enhance the capacity of Care Groups, UNICEF and the Government reviewed and updated the national package of early childhood interventions, embedding the full Nurturing Care Framework – covering health, nutrition, safety and security, early learning and responsive caregiving – into guidelines, training curricula and job aids. A national ECD training manual was created for Provincial and District Food and Nutrition Security Committees, and 23 district teams completed specialized training. Supported by thematic funds from the Government of the Netherlands, UNICEF led policy mapping and multisector stakeholder consultations, co-managed rollout with government counterparts, and underwrote materials development, capacity-building workshops and ongoing monitoring through existing coordination structures.

Lessons learned in fostering ownership and building on the strategies that work

A main lesson learned is that transforming early childhood development requires a trifecta of high-level political stewardship, grounded community platforms and strategically aligned partnerships to weave policy into practice and sustain impact. Zimbabwe's decision to situate responsibility for the National ECD Policy Coordination Framework within the Office of the President and Cabinet shattered inter-ministerial silos, secured unwavering political commitment and elevated accountability. Embedding implementation within the Food and Nutrition Council harnessed existing technical capacity and a clear mandate to streamline rollout, avoid duplication and keep ECD at the top of the national agenda – a powerful model for multisectoral coordination.





Building on that political foundation, the country wove ECD services into established Care Groups and the Provincial, District and Ward Food and Nutrition Security Committees. Trusted community volunteers carried out household-level outreach, while integrated monitoring across health, nutrition, education and protection ensured that programmes remained coordinated and responsive. By leveraging these familiar structures, Zimbabwe delivered scalable, community-driven interventions that bridged national policy with everyday realities.

Crucially, none of these achievements would have been possible without the power of partnership. By combining government leadership, UNICEF's expertise and funding from the Government of the Netherlands, this partnership united political will, technical skills and resources to make early childhood development a national priority.

Childhood Conference

11th - 14th March | JNICC hall, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Guest of Honor

H.E DR. SAMIA SULUHU HASSAN

The President of the United Republic of Tanzania

Conference theme:

Investing in Early Childhood: Building Human Capital Along the Life Course



Powering change through collaboration in Eastern and Southern Africa

"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

In Eastern and Southern Africa, the ECD agenda is fuelled by a dynamic and interlinked network of regional, continental and global actors working to support national governments to protect children's right to development.

Core alliances bring together the UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office; the African Early Childhood Network; the WHO Regional Office for Africa; the World Bank; the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation; continental and regional bodies, such as the African Union and the East African Community; paediatric associations; leading academic institutions;

and global ECD networks, such as the Early Childhood Development Action Network and the Global Initiative to Support Parents.

Each partner plays a distinct yet complementary role: UNICEF provides convening power and on-the-ground technical support, the African Early Childhood Network mobilizes grassroots action, WHO delivers authoritative technical expertise, the World Bank drives investment and financing, academia leads with research and evidence, global ECD networks facilitate cross-regional knowledge exchange and advocacy, and donors bring catalytic funding. Together, they ensure ECD remains visible, prioritized and integrated as a cross sectoral driver of child well-being and sustainable development.

Joint achievements and milestones for child development

These partnerships have delivered milestone initiatives with tangible impact. Notable highlights include the All-Africa Convening on Parenting Support (2022), the ECD Measurement Workshop in Kigali (2023), and regional ECD conferences across Eastern and Southern Africa – culminating in the Continental Conference on Childcare in Addis Ababa (2025). Technical platforms such as the Regional Dialogue on ECD Financing (2023), the Regional Meeting on Accelerating Early Childhood Education (2023) and the Nurturing Care Framework meeting in Nairobi (2025), have strengthened peer learning and accelerated ECD integration into health, nutrition, education and social protection systems.

These gatherings have resulted in concrete outputs that are highly valuable for governments and technical experts: compendiums of African parenting initiatives, harmonized measurement roadmaps, investment roadmaps, national plans embedding ECD into health systems, and policy workplans endorsed by the African Union and East African Community. Such outputs are evidence of a collective commitment to turning shared commitment into policy and practice.

The power and promise of partnership

At the heart of these collaborations lies a shared vision and mutual trust – elements that multiply both reach and impact. The partnerships bridge policy influence, technical mastery and sustainable financing to create a solid platform for scaling quality ECD services, strengthening local capacity and embedding change for children into systems. The Hilton Foundation's multi-country investment is a clear example: flexible, strategic funding combined with active technical engagement has unlocked momentum, enabling countries to test, adapt and sustain solutions that directly improve outcomes for young children.

Looking ahead

Building on this momentum, UNICEF and partners will continue to work with governments at both national and decentralized levels to advance the ECD agenda. In countries without multisectoral ECD policies, the focus will be on finalizing and adopting them; where policies exist, the priority will be to support effective implementation down to the community level, reinforced by stronger coordination, institutionalized measurement and transparent accountability. These efforts will aim to embed ECD interventions across health, education and social protection systems; expand affordable, high-quality childcare; and scale evidence-based parenting support.

UNICEF and partners will also intensify their advocacy through the African Union and East African Community platforms, while academic partnerships and engagement with professional associations will deepen the knowledge and skills of the ECD workforce to deliver results for children. The ultimate aim is to give every child in Eastern and Southern Africa the strongest possible start in life, paving the way for a more equitable, resilient and child-centred future.



Stories of impact:

Lessons for change from around the world



Despite notable progress for young children around the world an estimated 250 million children under 5 are still at risk of not reaching their full developmental potential.¹³ In response, countries across the globe are increasingly prioritizing ECD in national policies and programmes. UNICEF, working alongside governments, communities, parents and development partners, is committed to ensuring that all young children, especially the most marginalized, benefit from ECD policies, services and parenting support programmes.

This chapter showcases inspiring stories of successful ECD initiatives from around the world — featuring examples from Afghanistan, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Serbia and Uzbekistan.

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Playful parenting for the early years in Afghanistan

Untapped potential: Extending nurturing care and parenting support to remote communities in Cambodia

Building a family-friendly future for children and parents in China

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Helping vulnerable young children in Indonesia recover their learning after the COVID-19 pandemic

Championing the power of parenting support in Pakistan

No child left behind: Integrating ECD and parenting support within primary health care in Serbia

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Bringing care to the doorstep: The Universal Progressive Home Visiting Programme in Uzbekistan



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Playful parenting for the early years in Afghanistan

Missing pieces: Identifying the gaps undermining child development

In Afghanistan, a UNICEF quality assessment of early childhood education¹⁴ and an ECD mapping study¹⁵ found service delivery gaps, a lack of early learning opportunities in homes and learning centres, insufficient responsive caregiving at home, and inadequate support for caregiver mental well-being. Very low rates of early stimulation and responsive care¹⁶ and low access to early childhood education services (less than 1 per cent) nationwide are also concerning. There is also a significant shortfall in national level foundational reading and numeracy skills, which are estimated at 14 per cent and 17 per cent respectively.¹⁷

A training to build parenting skills, enhance knowledge and support nurturing care

In line with UNICEF Afghanistan's vision to strengthen the provision of essential services for ECD to more children and caregivers, and in response to the identified gaps in responsive caregiving and early learning opportunities, UNICEF designed an evidence-based, face-to-face Positive and Playful Parenting Programme, which was successfully piloted in education and child protection learning spaces in 2024.

The programme, delivered through multi-modal parenting sessions (parent-only sessions, parent-child sessions and home-based sessions), aims to strengthen parents' skills in communicating and playing with their young children. Aligned with the Nurturing Care Framework, the parenting programme sessions cover all five components of nurturing care (responsive care, opportunities for early learning, good health, adequate nutrition, and safety and security), and also address

child development milestones and caregiver mental health and well-being. The programme provides support for creating handmade toys with low-cost or no-cost materials and WASH kits for maintaining personal hygiene for children and parents.

The programme consists of 12 session plans featuring culturally- and age-appropriate play and interactive activities, which have been field tested and translated into local languages. UNICEF recruited and trained master trainers to deliver parenting sessions directly to parents. This multi-phased training for master trainers includes supervision and coaching during the implementation phase to ensure that master trainers are skilled and well-trained to deliver a quality programme.

Boosting caregiver confidence, capacities and mental health

As part of the pilot, 12 multi-modal parenting sessions were conducted in five districts across eastern, northern and central regions of Afghanistan, reaching more than 1,180 mothers and more than 2,630 children aged 0 to 8 years. To support programme delivery, 18 master trainers were trained and empowered on ECD and parenting knowledge through an extensive training of trainers programme, while 62 frontline workers were trained to provide support to master trainers in delivering the parenting sessions.

Pre- and post-intervention survey findings showed an increase in ECD knowledge – including in responsive care for early brain development and in the importance of play,



positive parenting and quality interactions with young children in the everyday routines of both caregivers and master trainers. As a result of participating in the programme, nearly all the mother participants reported: feeling more confident in supporting their children's development and learning; noticing a difference in how they take care of their children; implementing learnings from the programme in their caregiving; noticing a difference in their children's development and learning; and experiencing a change in their own mental health and well-being.

Closing the gaps in knowledge and services

The multi-phased approach to training master trainers was effective in allowing for experiential learning, mentoring, coaching and reflection. In addition, the various modes and strategies used to train caregivers were effective in reinforcing caregiver learning and knowledge retention. Sessions for caregivers were designed based on the evidence generated about ECD service gaps in Afghanistan and considering local contextual factors, such as restrictions on women's mobility, which led to an evidence-based programme that resonated with caregivers.





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The programme is highly adaptable and scalable to other contexts, particularly humanitarian settings. With funds secured to train additional master trainers, UNICEF plans to expand the programme to reach 10,000 parents in the same districts in 2025. Programme scale-up will also include adding

new session content (e.g., related to early stimulation on pre-literacy and language skills, climate change and screen time management), adding play activities, and developing the capacities of existing master trainers and frontline workers to support the next phase of scale-up.

"My children did not know anything before attending this programme. They have learned stories and rhymes; they play with dolls and are much happier now. One good thing I learned here was on how to make dolls for my children using cloth and other simple materials. I really appreciated when the trainer explained that we should not interact with our children through harsh discipline. Talking with other women about how to raise children has been both helpful and fun for me."

Fatema, mother and programme participant



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Untapped potential: Extending nurturing care and parenting support to remote communities in Cambodia

Disparities in access leaving the most vulnerable behind

Global evidence shows that quality ECD programmes provide significant benefits for young children, predicting their lifelong educational, social and economic success. However, only 38.6 per cent of children aged 3–5 years in Cambodia are enrolled in preschools and only 45 per cent of children receive early stimulation at home.¹⁸

In remote areas of Cambodia, such as northeastern Ratanakiri and Kratie provinces, families with young children face important challenges – such as isolation, persistent poverty and malnutrition – which severely impact children’s growth and development. In Kratie, 22 per cent of children have stunted growth while in Ratanakiri 39 per cent are affected – one of the highest stunting rates in the country.

Empowering parents to nurture the next generation

With UNICEF advocacy and technical support, the Government of Cambodia aimed to tackle these challenges by developing the National Action Plan on Early Childhood Care and Education 2022–2026 (NAP-ECCD). This multisectoral plan aims to bring the Nurturing Care Framework to life in the country, ensuring a comprehensive approach to ECD and building on the existing ECD programme in Cambodia, which was established in 2018 with UNICEF support.

A critical element of the NAP-ECCD is the Nurturing Care Parenting Package (NCPP). First introduced in 2023, the package is now a key initiative under the UNICEF Country Programme for Cambodia (2024–2028), implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and other

key ministries. The package integrates all components of nurturing care and plays a vital role in supporting parents to provide the best start for their young children, particularly in their first 1,000 days. It includes parenting sessions with caregivers to provide them with knowledge and skills on child development, enabling them to improve their care practices in health, nutrition, stimulation, safety and early learning. It offers practical guidance and resources to help parents nurture their children's growth and development and enroll them in preschools when they reach preschool age.

Since 2023, UNICEF has supported Government and implementing partners in rolling out the NCPP to caregivers in remote areas of Cambodia, collaborating with government at both national and subnational levels, as well as NGO partners, to implement parenting sessions in four provinces: Kratie, Ratanakiri, Siem Reap and Preah Vihear. Sessions are tailored to local contexts and

materials are provided in the local languages of ethnic minority groups and supported by Indigenous frontline workers. To complement in-person sessions, and recognizing that social behaviour change requires time and ongoing support, UNICEF developed the "Smart Home Kit" designed to help parents practice positive behaviours at home. The kit promotes essential early childhood care and development practices, including growth monitoring and tracking; early stimulation and learning through play; prevention of malnutrition through appropriate feeding practices; positive gender roles and responsibilities, such as encouraging male partners to participate in feeding; and play-based engagement with children.

In 2024, UNICEF supported training for frontline workers on the NCPP to help them better support parents, including community health workers, preschool teachers, village chiefs and social workers. UNICEF also supported a training of trainers for National and Provincial Master Trainers, preparing them



to assist local governments as needed. To reach a broader audience of parents, UNICEF developed an Interactive Voice Response system, allowing parents to engage via telegram, and a toll-free number to receive tailored parenting tips. A parenting tips chatbot has also been implemented across targeted provinces since 2023, reaching more than 6,000 parents and caregivers.

The programme provides opportunities for partnerships with provincial and district women's and children's consultative committees, who lead advocacy in the targeted districts and are the budget owners at the commune level, making them critical to ensuring that communes in those districts include budget activities for parenting sessions within their investment programmes.

Leveraging local resources and engaging communities for change

By blending traditional child-rearing wisdom with new, evidence-based methods, the NCPP helps children grow cognitively, physically, socially and emotionally. The Smart Home Kit, which provides continued support to caregivers for behaviour change within their home environments, was particularly effective among caregivers from ethnic minorities and those who were illiterate, demonstrating its wide-reaching impact among communities in need.

The success of the Cambodia programme is rooted in:

- **Active engagement with the local community** – including parents, teachers and local leaders – which fostered a sense of ownership and commitment that was crucial for the sustainability and effectiveness of the programme.





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- **A holistic approach** that addresses the social, emotional and physical development of children under 6 years of age, and aligns with global best practices in ECD, which emphasize the importance of nurturing all aspects of a child's development.
- **The innovative use of local resources**, which reduced dependency on external resources and ensured that learning was relevant to the children's immediate environment.

UNICEF successfully advocated for local governments to allocate budgets for the programme in their development plans, ensuring sustainability and local ownership. To secure local buy-in, UNICEF supported capacity building training for provincial administrations, such as provincial and district women's and children's consultative committees, to improve their understanding of ECD planning processes and advocate for the integration of the NCPP within local government investments at provincial, district and commune level.

Finally, the leadership role of communes and budgeting by local governments demonstrate that local resources can be leveraged to drive action for child development and expand support to reach the most vulnerable children and communities.

"The Nurturing Care Parenting Package has become one of my top priorities as I see how this programme has helped my two daughters and so many other children. I want to make sure every child in the three villages I represent has an equal chance at a strong start in life."

Phorng Kdem, Commune Chief,
Ratanakairi province



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Building a family-friendly future for children and parents in China

Quality, affordable childcare out of reach for working parents

Many working parents in China faced challenges in balancing work and childcare responsibilities, including a lack of quality, affordable childcare services. According to the National Health Commission, more than one-third of families with children aged 0–3 years needed childcare in 2023, but only 7.86 per cent of these children were enrolled in childcare centres.¹⁹ While national policies existed to support children and families, such as maternity insurance and tax benefits, they were limited and inefficient, leaving many parents without the support they needed, especially low-income families.

Sustainable policies to put children and families first

To address some of these challenges, UNICEF worked with the Government to produce a comprehensive plan for developing, scaling up and sustaining family-friendly policies (see Box 4), recognizing the need to work directly with businesses while also engaging with the Government at the subnational level to create the foundation for national systems that could support these policies over the long-term. Together with other United Nations partners, UNICEF support ranged from evidence generation, advocacy and policy dialogue with the Government and the private sector, and technical support for policy development, implementation and monitoring.

Box 4**What are family-friendly policies?**

Family-friendly policies are defined as policies that help to balance and benefit both work and family life and that typically provide three types of essential resources needed by parents and caregivers of young children: time, finances and services.²⁰ Examples of such policies include paid parental leave; breastfeeding support; affordable, accessible and quality childcare; and child benefits.

Family-friendly policies give caregivers the support to nurture young children's development. Because women often shoulder a greater responsibility for care work, such policies can also contribute to gender equality and women's economic empowerment.

Starting in 2020, UNICEF crafted a roadmap for collaboration with the Government and private sector partners on expanding family-friendly policies. This was informed by extensive policy analysis at both national and provincial levels, including analysing large-scale surveys and conducting face-to-face interviews in various enterprises and cities to shed light on the needs of working parents.

In 2021, UNICEF launched the Family-Friendly Workplace Pilot Programme in Shenzhen City and the city renewed its commitment to building a child-friendly city during its fourteenth Five-Year Plan (2021–2025), including plans to build childcare facilities;

encourage kindergartens and childcare centres to set up childcare classes; support employers to provide infant care services for their employees; and promote inclusive childcare facilities. The aim is to initiate policies in five sites in Shenzhen, with the goal of scaling to more than 10 companies or one city by 2025. UNICEF also supported the International Council for Toy Industries Ethical Toy Programme in 2021 to develop a comprehensive training curriculum for the launch of a Family-Friendly Factories programme in Shenzhen. By the end of 2025, the programme will reach 50 factories, benefiting 30,000 children.



The country also made strides in adopting family-friendly policy measures to support families in childbirth and enhance children's development in 2024. These measures establish a nationwide childcare subsidy system, broaden maternity insurance to cover a wider range of workers and expand inclusive and quality childcare services. UNICEF generated evidence and recommendations to support these policy advancements through a review of more than 180 global family policies.²¹ UNICEF also led a cross-United Nations working group on family-friendly policies, mobilizing a unified approach and support among agencies.

In partnership with the National Health Commission, UNICEF supported the development of a family-friendly city index to promote the implementation and evaluation of family-friendly policies at the subnational level in China. The framework design will offer valuable insights that can be leveraged to improve the implementation of these policies at municipality level.

Box 5

Prioritizing family-friendly work environments to support children and parents

UNICEF contributions to strengthening family-friendly policies have led to:²²

- More experts and business leaders advocating for family-friendly policies from the lens of gender, child rights and social protection;
- More companies implementing family-friendly policies in the workplace, such as flexible working arrangements, breastfeeding support and childcare services;
- Many local governments launching policies for parental leave;
- The Government has begun exploring the use of tax incentives/policies to encourage employers to support working parents.

In 2024, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Finance in collecting and synthesizing case studies on the first group of inclusive early childhood care pilot cities funded by the central Government's transfer payment. The pilots are part of the Government's effort to expand equitable and quality early childhood education and care to support children and families, including those with special needs. An analysis of the long-term effectiveness of this transfer payment was also initiated to provide evidence for scaling Government-funded inclusive early childhood care services nationwide. UNICEF is working with National Development and Reform Commission to include these scale-up plans within the next five-year national plan for economic and social development.

In 2025, UNICEF initiated joint UN research on investments in the care economy to assess the care and support situation in China, identify challenges and gaps and propose policy recommendations. UNICEF is also facilitating the exchange of global best practices through research and study tours and the strengthening of family-friendly fiscal policies through a strong partnership with Ministry of Finance and a pioneering partnership with the State Taxation Administration.



Towards a brighter, more equitable future for children

China's efforts to strengthen family-friendly policies are evidence-based investments in child development and human capital. Childcare subsidies, for example, can improve child development outcomes in education, health and nutrition, while ensuring that parents can afford to nurture and care for their young children.

Children also benefit from policies designed to support working mothers, such as maternity and paternity leave, childcare support and flexible work arrangements.²³ UNICEF will continue to work with partners in adopting and implementing family-friendly policies to expand and strengthen the policy and legislative environment, which is critical to protect children.



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Helping vulnerable young children in Indonesia recover their learning after the COVID-19 pandemic

Setbacks in learning and development for the youngest children

The COVID-19 pandemic had profound consequences for young vulnerable children in Indonesia. With all of the country's 200,000 ECD centres closed for more than 18 months during 2020 and 2021, access to ECD services was significantly interrupted and around 4 million children (40 per cent) were unable to continue to learn and play.

A programme to put early learning back on track

After pandemic restrictions lifted, it was critical to expand holistic and integrated ECD (HI-ECD) services through local ECD centres to help young children, their families and communities

- particularly those from disadvantaged areas
- recover from lost learning opportunities.

To achieve this objective, from February 2022 to February 2023, UNICEF supported the Government of Indonesia to scale up an early learning and development programme for children 5–8 years of age across 258 ECD centres and 100 primary schools in South Sulawesi, Papua and East Nusa Tenggara provinces, where children were severely affected by COVID-19 due to their heightened vulnerability and disadvantaged status.

The programme included a range of interventions to help children recover lost learning and prepare for the transition to primary school, including play-based pre-literacy and pre-numeracy opportunities, essential water, sanitation and hygiene services, and critical health and protection services. The programme also provided parenting support for caregivers, built the capacities of teachers to support

children's learning and development and engaged the local government, health workers, volunteers and other community members in supporting children's development. Teachers were trained to support early literacy through play, monitor children's health status and screen for malnutrition, promote good hygiene, track children's immunization status and encourage parents to get their children fully immunized.

With UNICEF support, the programme also strengthened the capacity of national and subnational governments to improve access to and quality of HI-ECD services and promoted networking and multisector collaboration and policy advocacy. As a result, subnational governments made commitments to improve HI-ECD services in their areas by adopting supportive policies and technical guidelines.

Government partnerships were crucial for ensuring successful programme implementation, including with the Ministry of National Development Planning and its provincial level development planning agencies; the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology; Ministry of Villages, Development of Disadvantaged Regions and Transmigration; Ministry of Home Affairs; Ministry of Social Affairs; Ministry of Health; and Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection.

Recovering lost learning opportunities for the most vulnerable

Through ECD centres across the three provinces, UNICEF and the Government made important strides in supporting vulnerable young children whose learning and development had been left behind in the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **Early learning services** were provided to more than 14,900 young children aged 5–8, while 926 teachers and principals at ECD centres and primary schools and more than 10,000 parents were reached with parenting support/counselling to support their children's play and learning.
- **Health and nutrition services** were provided to more than 11,090 children, while more than 1,300 ECD teachers and 10,000 caregivers were reached with training and support to encourage health service uptake.
- **WASH** services and promotion were provided to more than 25,100 children, caregivers and teachers to prevent disease and protect children's health.
- **Child protection** services reached more than 11,210 young children, 9,300 parents and caregiver, and more than 1,650 teachers, social workers, community child protection volunteers and other service providers.



A study was conducted to assess children's learning and development, as well as overall programme impact, across six target districts in South Sulawesi, Papua and East Nusa Tenggara provinces from 2022 and 2023. The findings suggest that children who attended ECD centres performed better than children who did not attend, in both literacy and numeracy. Furthermore, significant improvements in both literacy and numeracy were seen for children who had attended ECD centres before beginning primary school, with a 25-percentage point decrease in non-readers and a 14-percentage-point decrease in zero-scores in numeracy.

While significant gains were made by children attending ECD centres, greater efforts are needed to address inequities, such as strengthening learning outcomes for children from rural districts to bring them in line with those of their urban counterparts.

Strengthening coordination, planning and financing to build back better for children

UNICEF's partnerships with multiple stakeholders were critical to the programme's success. In addition to working closely with the Ministry of Health, UNICEF also had staff embedded within the national COVID-19 taskforce, providing leadership to the Education, WASH and Child Protection clusters and sub-clusters on behalf of development partners and civil society.

Local governments played a significant coordinating role in all six districts/cities where the ECD programme was implemented, including by adopting and implementing HI-ECD services and streamlining them through policy documents and regulations. Village funds were also allocated to support the scale-up of services and make critical improvements, such as raising teachers' salaries, improving facilities and repairing existing infrastructure.





At the provincial and district levels, UNICEF worked closely with HI-ECD Taskforces and contributed to the development of HI-ECD planning and budgeting at the local level. In South Sulawesi and East Nusa Tenggara provinces, this advocacy work resulted in new Governor Regulations on HI-ECD. In Timor Tengah Selatan district of East Nusa Tenggara, the Bupati Regulation and District Action Plan on HI-ECD were adopted by the local government, thanks to technical support provided through the HI-ECD programme. In Papua province, a provincial regulation was drafted to ensure HI-ECD is routinely planned and budgeted.

UNICEF advocated for the Government to adopt one year of universal and high-quality pre-primary education for children by creating regulations at the provincial, district/city, and/or village levels, and to allocate local government funding to support the development and operation of quality ECD centres. This led to results in 2025, as the new government prioritized 13 years of compulsory education, including one year pre-primary education.

UNICEF is supporting the Ministry of Home Affairs to develop the national guideline on HI-ECD Planning and Budgeting. This is part of the effort to expand and scale up HI-ECD programme coverage in 38 provinces and 514 districts/cities in Indonesia. The guideline is expected to be completed and promulgated by the end of 2025. UNICEF will also contribute towards strengthening play-based approaches to learning in ECD centres, including by providing regular and quality in-service teacher training.

“Initially, people didn’t really know about ECD. After several weeks (at the ECD centre) parents would tell us... about dramatic improvements in their children. Parents say their children are more creative and ready to learn”.

Emy Bifel, teacher at Bethania Tunua ECD Centre in East Nusa Tenggara



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Championing the power of parenting support in Pakistan

Roadblocks to responsive care in early life

Many parents and caregivers in Pakistan face challenges in providing responsive care and stimulating activities for their young children due to lack of sufficient time and resources. There is limited awareness of parenting practices and a need for greater support to address myths and harmful traditional practices related to parenting. Frontline workers often lack the skills and capacities to support caregivers in promoting ECD and there are limited resources and low community engagement in nurturing care practices for young children, particularly the most vulnerable, who often face multiple deprivations in early childhood.

A parenting support programme to put families first

In 2019, UNICEF supported the Government of Pakistan in carrying out an ECD policy dialogue, followed by an ECD policy mapping in 2020 to assess existing ECD interventions, service delivery and policies, and to collect information on ECD programmes, coverage, target ages, delivery platforms and systems. The mapping revealed that key policies and programmes existed across the health, nutrition and education sectors, but they were not well integrated.

The national ECD policy dialogue, convened by UNICEF and the Government, brought together multisectoral stakeholders, including Government officials, parliamentarians, ECD experts, civil society, academia, private sector and the media. The dialogue led to the development of Pakistan's Key Family Care Practices,^{24,25} which were implemented in priority districts and became the central component of Pakistan's first parenting programme.

In 2022 and 2023, UNICEF supported the Government in developing an ECD Policy Framework²⁶ to improve the integration of policies and programmes for young children across the health, nutrition and education sectors. Building on this foundation, UNICEF provided support to optimize the Key Family Care Practices, with the objective of aligning them with the UNICEF Parenting Strategy and Guidance to address gaps and make it part of a comprehensive parenting programme for ECD in Pakistan.

To assess country needs, UNICEF collaborated with a social and behaviour change organization based in Pakistan to convene consultations with communities and co-creation workshops with a range of stakeholders (see Figure 3). Through these consultations, UNICEF identified structural, social and norm-related barriers to and drivers of optimal ECD practices, conducted a critical analysis of the existing UNICEF programme materials and package and identified opportunities for improvement.

This process identified important roadblocks to ECD, such as lack of awareness about responsive caregiving among mothers and

family members. Community members exhibited a good level of awareness and sensitivity towards critical child developmental issues, particularly nutrition, and the need for a conducive physical environment to foster optimal child development; however, there was limited knowledge about cognitive and emotional development. Fathers' contributions were mainly identified as financial, with limited focus on their potential to support child development. Mobile phones were identified as offering an effective means of disseminating ECD content.

With these insights in mind, UNICEF updated the existing training materials for frontline workers – including a manual for master trainers, a handbook for delivering training to frontline health workers, a flipbook for frontline health staff, guidance cards for caregivers, videos and a What's App mobile phone learning tool. The What's App learning tool is a particularly innovative component – it delivers bite-sized modules every day for 12 weeks to frontline health workers, including visuals and stories. The set of 22 Key Family Care Practices was also updated to align with the Nurturing Care Framework and other global guidance and evidence.

Figure 3. Community and stakeholder engagement in optimizing the parenting programme in Pakistan



The parenting programme uses a cascading model designed to build the capacity of frontline workers and empower parents and caregivers to adopt key family care practices specific to age-appropriate developmental milestones. The process begins at the national level with master trainers, who train provincial trainers, who further train supervisors and frontline workers, including lady health workers, community health workers and teachers. This skilled community-based workforce engages directly with parents and caregivers through community sessions and door-to-door counselling. At the same time, the WhatsApp remote learning app enables up-to-date knowledge on parenting practices to guide frontline workers in supporting parents. This multi-pronged approach to reaching caregivers through multiple platforms, including community sessions, door-to-door counselling and WhatsApp, helps reinforce key parenting messages and support.

Putting parenting into focus

To influence social norms and create an enabling environment for positive parenting, the programme leverages digital media, television, radio and community engagement channels, advancing a 'Parenting for ECD' agenda in Pakistan. In 2024, UNICEF launched a nationwide Parenting Month campaign to raise awareness and promote positive parenting and nurturing care across the country, using digital and community-based interventions and engaging health care professionals, religious leaders and local influencers (see Box 6). This initiative aimed to enhance parental knowledge, attitudes and practices, focusing on behaviours that support children's physical, cognitive, social and emotional development and well-being during their formative years.

Box 6

Parenting month social behaviour change interventions

Through the Parenting Month campaign, UNICEF engaged in the following social behaviour change interventions:

- **Advocacy** with stakeholders from both the national and provincial governments to call for positive parenting support, convening high-level policy dialogues to reinforce parenting messages.
- **Institutional engagement and collaboration** with religious and community institutions to reinforce campaign messages.
- **Capacity building initiatives** for master trainers and frontline workers on key family care practices and best parenting approaches.
- **Community engagement interventions**, including street theatre demonstrations to raise awareness on parenting support and engagement with religious and community leaders.
- **Digital media campaigns** and wall art in Karachi and Hyderabad to visually engage the community.
- **Support groups for fathers** focused on the provision of nurturing care and recognition of fathers' critical role in fostering children's holistic development.

Key parenting messages were widely circulated across major social media platforms, which played a critical role in reinforcing positive parenting practices, reaching diverse audiences, and amplifying the campaign's impact through consistent and targeted messaging. Most effective among parents was the PARWARISH mass media and social media campaign of 16 parenting videos.



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Powering positive parenting nationwide

With UNICEF support, the updated and expanded parenting programme in Pakistan has made important strides towards improving ECD in the country:

- The parenting package has been scaled up to 122 districts across Pakistan by 2024, reaching more than 2.9 million caregivers through community engagement and interpersonal counselling.
- Capacity-building sessions on ECD and parenting have been conducted, equipping more than 20,000 staff members from government, implementing partners and academia with critical skills in this area.
- Parenting Month interventions reached more than 700,000 parents across Pakistan, providing support on positive parenting behaviours and other aspects of nurturing care. More than 12,000 community engagement sessions have been carried out with UNICEF support, promoting positive parenting practices, while more than 22.9 million people have been reached via media channels.
- 13 new nurturing care/ECD centres have been established in hospitals and public places across the country through the parenting programme.

Engaging communities to build trust and gain insights that drive lasting change

UNICEF efforts to seek wide community and stakeholder engagement provided insights that allowed it to support the Government in tailoring the parenting programme to the local context and to work with community members and other stakeholders to ensure its effective design. Engagement with local religious leaders and influencers was also important to gain community trust and to address deep-rooted harmful myths and cultural beliefs. The use of digital media engagement played a critical role in generating momentum for the programme.

"The support and guidance provided during Parenting Month have been invaluable for our community, helping us understand the importance of nurturing our children's growth."

Amin Ullah, parent, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa



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No child left behind: Integrating ECD and parenting support within primary health care in Serbia

Disparities in health care and responsive caregiving leave vulnerable children behind

Serbia has made progress in recent decades to improve child health, but social and economic disparities remain. These disparities have contributed to unequal child health and developmental outcomes, with children from poorer families, minority groups and those with disabilities demonstrating greater developmental risks and delays compared with their peers. For example, young children from the poorest quintile lag eight months behind children from the richest quintile, and mortality rates for Roma children are significantly higher than the national average.²⁷

Gaps in access to essential health care services and the absence of developmental monitoring, parenting counselling and early interventions for at-risk groups, have left some children without the support they need to grow, learn and thrive. In addition, a fragmented support system across health, social protection and education sectors has created inefficiencies and complicated efforts to meet the needs of the most vulnerable children, while the lack of integrated local policies has made it challenging to coordinate ECD services and parenting support.

Policies and innovations to improve access to services and support for parents and children

Serbia has made significant strides in elevating the ECD policy agenda to protect young children's development. In 2016, the National Programme for Early Childhood Development was adopted, recognizing the importance of the health sector in promoting ECD, supporting parents and strengthening the broader enabling environment to create the conditions for optimal child development, particularly for vulnerable populations. The programme recognized the need for multisectoral coordination between relevant sectors – including health, social welfare and education. In 2018, the Ministries of Health, Education and Social Affairs and the President of the National Child Rights Council signed a Call for Action for Early Childhood Development, which placed ECD at the top of the national agenda and recognized high-quality and accessible early childhood intervention services as a national priority.

At the service delivery level, between 2019 and 2024 – as part of a LEGO Foundation-funded 'Playful Parenting' initiative, UNICEF supported the Government to strengthen primary health

care services through the integration of ECD and parenting support interventions into regular paediatric health care, home visiting nurse services and developmental counselling units using a holistic approach. Together with a network of partners and donors, UNICEF also supported the integration of family-centred counselling, developmental monitoring and early childhood interventions. The approach establishes a pyramid of support – with universal health services accessed by all young children, alongside progressive and targeted support for the most vulnerable families (see Figure 4).

To improve the quality of maternal, newborn and child health services and monitor progress, UNICEF also supported advancements in the health information system, such as incorporating components of nurturing care within the by-laws regulating the scope and quality of paediatric and home visiting services, developing new digital solutions for paediatricians to integrate developmental monitoring services, and developing a digital registry for children with disabilities based on functional assessment.

Building on work initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF supported tele-counselling services for home visiting nurses and early intervention practitioners in developmental



counselling units to ensure the continuity and efficiency of maternal, newborn and child health services. Support was also provided to enable intersectoral collaboration, including forming local intersectoral bodies for parental support, developing protocols between relevant institutions, introducing new measures within municipal plans and allocating local budgets to support optimal early childhood parenting support.

UNICEF leveraged a range of strategies to drive change:

- **Analysing local public strategies and expenditures** and integrating ECD and parenting support measures into local self-government strategic documents.
- **Collaborating with ministries** on a joint plan of action on ECD, with costed measures and a national analysis of existing policies, programmes and services.
- **Supporting the integration** of ECD and parenting support within municipal strategic plans, enabling better budget planning across sectors.
- **Building the capacities** of frontline workers from health, education and social welfare systems, as well as managers and stakeholders at both local and national levels, and aligning pre-service and in-service education with new evidence.
- **Developing social and behaviour change** strategies to guide Local level ECD programming, budgeting, participatory planning and institutional capacity building in districts and municipalities.
- **Leveraging digital innovations**, such as the [Bebbo parenting app](#), to improve parenting knowledge and self-efficacy.
- **Providing programming and budgeting assistance** for ECD and parenting support, resulting in more than US\$1 million allocated by local self-governments between 2022 and 2024.

Strengthening systems and expanding reach for all children

Together, UNICEF and the Government of Serbia succeeded in strengthening primary health care systems for children and expanding the reach of integrated ECD services through key primary health care touchpoints (Figure 4).

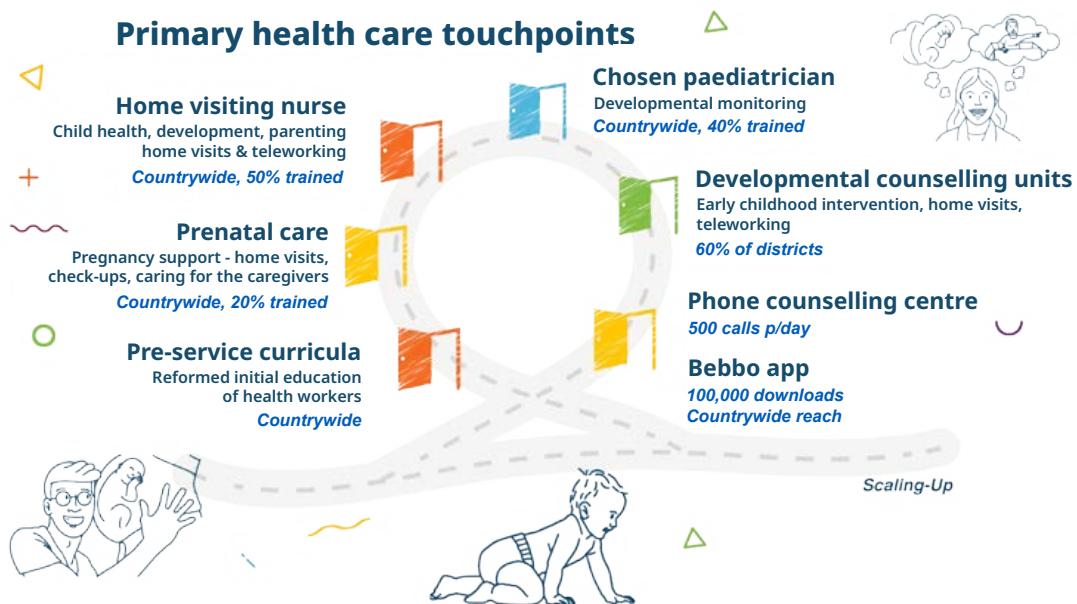
Home visiting nurses – 50 per cent of home visiting nurses have been trained via capacity-building programmes aligned with the Nurturing Care Framework. Nurses now provide day-to-day counselling on nutrition, health, responsive parenting, safety, early development and learning through play, with approximately 10 visits for all children in the first 1,000 days of life.

Paediatricians – 40 per cent of paediatricians have improved their skills in early detection of risks, delays, disabilities and development monitoring.

Developmental counselling units – early childhood intervention services have been modelled for the most at-risk children with developmental risks, difficulties and disabilities, reaching 60 per cent of districts in Serbia, with plans to expand nationwide.

Pre-service curricula – digital solutions and blended learning (online and face-to-face) were introduced for health care professionals to improve quality, as well as supportive supervision and on-the-job training for health professionals.

Prenatal care – Home visiting nurses were trained to implement the UNICEF Caring for the Caregiver programme (see also page 81), which supports the emotional well-being of parents. To better support the most vulnerable families, UNICEF and the Ministry of Health also supported the capacity building of health mediators for Roma communities on nurturing care and using the Caring for the Caregiver package. More than 93,000

Figure 4. Primary health care touchpoints

parents and 66,000 children were empowered through in-person counselling in 2024 as part of a 'playful parenting' initiative, with research showing a measurable increase in caregivers' understandings of child developmental milestones, particularly regarding early stimulation and age-appropriate interactions.²⁸

Bebbo app and tele-counselling – These services are widely used and available nationwide, empowering parents with confidence and support.

Lessons learned and next steps in integrating ECD and parenting support for a brighter future

Significant progress has been made in integrating ECD into primary health care, including through family-centred early childhood interventions. While the quality of home visiting and paediatric care has improved, staff shortages and a lack of equity focus remain challenges. As a result, the youngest children – particularly those with disabilities, Roma children and children living in poverty – often lack stimulating and nurturing environments.

UNICEF will continue to work with national and local governments to close equity gaps and reduce stigma for the most vulnerable children by driving changes in legislation, policy, financing, private sector engagement and social norms. Efforts will focus on scaling up well-evidenced, family-centred early childhood intervention models – which are proven to promote nurturing care, gender-responsiveness, disability inclusion and violence prevention – across health, education and social protection systems, ensuring all children, especially the most marginalized, have equitable access to high-quality services.

"I didn't know how to hold my child on the first day when we came home from the maternity ward. I never imagined that I could take a child so small, carry her, change her. My confidence grew over time."

Borivoje, a father, explaining the impact of home visiting nurses



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Bringing care to the doorstep: The Universal Progressive Home Visiting Programme in Uzbekistan

Gaps in access to health care for the most vulnerable children and families

In Uzbekistan, although overall coverage of home visits remains consistently high, some families residing in remote areas face challenges in accessing consistent home-based health care and timely, evidence-based parenting information. Addressing these disparities is essential to strengthening preventive health services, enhancing outreach to vulnerable populations, and supporting equitable child development outcomes across the country. In addition, there is a growing need to provide parents and caregivers with accessible resources and support to build their knowledge, confidence and health literacy – ultimately fostering healthier and more resilient families.

Outreach and innovation for healthier children and parents

In 2018, the Government of Uzbekistan initiated comprehensive and far-reaching reforms of its health system, including fundamental changes in health financing and service delivery systems, with a primary health care approach at its core. These reforms included a Universal Progressive Home Visiting Model, which was introduced within Uzbekistan's primary health care system with UNICEF support to improve child health and development outcomes. The model focuses on enhancing home visiting services by equipping health care workers with training, tools and digital resources to support parents.

The Universal Progressive Home Visiting Model promotes early childhood development by bringing direct home-based support and guidance on ECD to pregnant women, new mothers and children under 5 years of age, particularly from vulnerable families. The approach equips parents with knowledge and skills to ensure safe and stimulating home environments. Through regular contact with families, home visitors can identify health or developmental issues that need extra attention or specialized treatment and that could cause long-term health problems or disabilities if left unchecked. Home visitors also help families to ensure that children have the best start in life by promoting exclusive breastfeeding and encouraging timely vaccinations. They also steer parents towards UNICEF's free Bebbo parenting app (see Box 7) where they can find resources on children's development, growth and nutrition, tools to help them track their child's development, and advice on their own well-being and mental health. Support is also provided to caregivers undergoing socioeconomic difficulties, psychosocial stress and other adverse circumstances, providing the help they need to take care of themselves and their children to ensure optimal growth and development.

With UNICEF support, the Home Visiting Model has been expanded and institutionalized within Uzbekistan's health system. UNICEF worked closely with the Ministry of Health, primary health care institutions, educational institutions and parents to transform home visiting services and empower parents with better knowledge, support and digital tools for child-rearing. To address the lack of workforce training in child health and development, UNICEF implemented a nationwide training programme to enhance nurses' skills in early childhood care and screening for developmental delays. Hands-on training, peer support and step-by-step guidance were provided to nurses to strengthen their capacities and help them effectively integrate Bebbo as part of home visiting services.

Today, the Home Visiting Model and Bebbo app have been systematically scaled nationwide across Uzbekistan, integrating home visits and digital tools into the primary health care system. This includes being endorsed as part of national health policies, with funding from the national and regional health system budget to foster sustainability.

Box 7

Bebbo – Science-backed parenting support for child development

The Bebbo parenting app, developed by the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office and designed to support parents and caregivers of children 0–6 years of age – provides free, expert advice on a range of child health and development issues, from nutrition and breastfeeding to early learning, responsive parenting, protection and safety. It also offers guidance to parents and caregivers on how to ensure their own well-being, and how to record vaccinations, health check-ups and other key development milestones. The app was adapted and first introduced in Uzbekistan in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, in partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education, at a time when parents needed support and guidance when contact with service providers was disrupted. With its progressive expansion, the Bebbo app now has 225,000 registered users in Uzbekistan.

Expanding services, skills and support to make development a priority for every child

The Home Visiting Model and Bebbo parenting app have contributed significantly to improved child health, development and parental support in Uzbekistan. While the Home Visiting Model helped strengthen preventive care, Bebbo provided accessible, reliable and engaging digital parenting resources for caregivers.

The initiative has **improved access to services and care** for the most vulnerable children, including through:

- **Better tailored services for marginalized populations** – Home visiting nurses provide individualized guidance, particularly to vulnerable families, ensuring equitable access to health and development support.
- **Expanded preventive and screening services** – Home visits increase the early detection of health risks, leading to improved preventive care and timely interventions to address them.

With UNICEF support, home visiting nurses have **strengthened their capacities and improved their knowledge and skills**:

- 50,000 home visiting nurses have been trained in child health and development.
- 16,000 home visiting nurses and other primary health care workers have been trained to use Bebbo, enhancing their ability to support parents with evidence-based information via the app.

There has been **high parental satisfaction** and engagement with the Bebbo app:

- 85 per cent of parents using Bebbo report weekly engagement with the app, indicating that it has been widely adopted and used by parents.
- 84 per cent of parents express high satisfaction with the app, highlighting its effectiveness in providing reliable parenting guidance.

The initiative has **fostered greater public trust** in home visiting services:

- Parents increasingly rely on home visiting nurses for guidance, reassurance and practical support on child health and development issues, strengthening the connection between families and primary health care services.

“The ability to see a clear list of skills that my child gradually masters, mark each of his achievements in the Bebbo app, and get helpful suggestions on what to pay attention to – all of this helps me keep better track of my child’s development.”

Umid, new parent



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Lessons on government ownership, integration and innovation

Uzbekistan's experience illustrates the power of a government-led, scalable and innovative approach to improve child health and parental well-being.

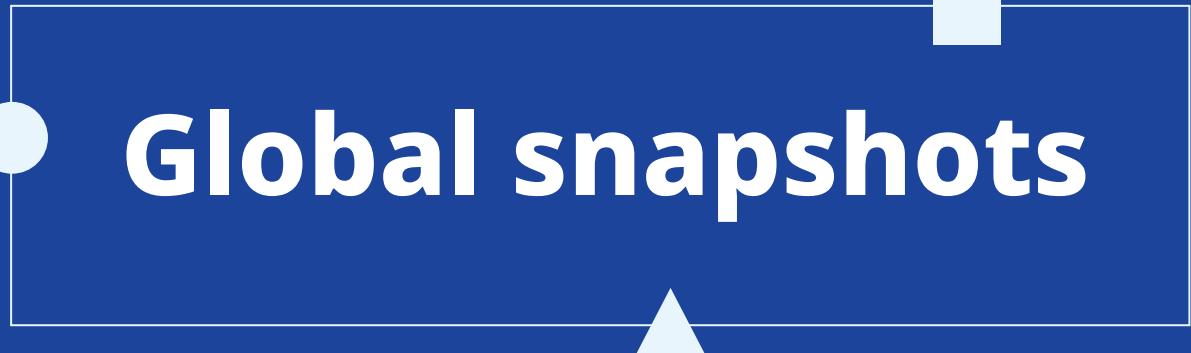
Government ownership and commitment – both national and regional – have been key enablers of the programme's success, ability to scale and sustainability. UNICEF's investments in fostering cross-sectoral collaboration have helped strengthen partnerships between health and education, which have in turn enhanced service delivery and long-term programme sustainability.

Digital innovation, particularly the use of the Bebbo app, served as a catalyst for improving access to evidence-based parenting guidance and strengthening engagement with families. UNICEF engaged parents and health care providers in improving Bebbo's content, which has been vital to ensuring its relevance and usability.

The Universal Progressive Home Visiting Model and the Bebbo parenting app are highly adaptable to different contexts and populations where there is political commitment, health system capacity and opportunities for cross-sectoral collaboration.

“[Home visits] often catch children on the brink, averting hospitalization for newborns. They are a cost-effective way of screening and support on child care and child development.”

Dr. Nazira Allambergenova,
Chief Doctor at Nukus Polyclinic



Global snapshots

UNICEF, in collaboration with partners, is committed to ensuring that all young children survive, grow and develop to their full potential. Guided by its Vision for Early Childhood Development 2030, UNICEF works to strengthen policies and legislation that create opportunities for ECD; expand programmes and services that protect and promote children's development; and support parents and caregivers in nurturing their young children and caring for themselves.

This chapter provides an overview of global initiatives and highlights opportunities to accelerate development outcomes for children worldwide. It features four global snapshots on: advancing ECD policies; elevating financing for ECD; measuring ECD to inform policies and programmes; and strengthening nurturing care and parenting support.

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From policy to impact:
Advancing ECD

Financing the future:
Investing in ECD

Measuring ECD to drive
policies and programmes

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A multi-level approach to
promoting nurturing care for
ECD and parenting support in
the early years

GLOBAL SNAPSHOT

From policy to impact: Advancing ECD

Policies are essential to creating enabling environments in which families can provide nurturing care for young children. These span all social sectors and include measures such as universal birth registration, universal health insurance, policies defining early learning opportunities, affordable childcare provisions, minimum wage protections for parents, targeted social schemes and cash grants for the most vulnerable families, among others. Many of these measures are embedded within sectoral policies, which focus on delivering specific interventions and benefits for young children within a single domain. Complementing these, UNICEF promotes multisectoral ECD policies – comprehensive frameworks that define an integrated package of services for young children and their families, bringing together multiple sectors to ensure a coordinated continuum of support. This integrated approach recognizes that optimal child development depends on the combined impact of health, nutrition, education, protection and family support systems working in harmony to promote survival, growth, learning and well-being in the early years.

Global leadership in ECD policy and monitoring

UNICEF has helped accelerate the adoption of national multisectoral ECD policies, with the number of countries and territories implementing such frameworks rising from 77 in 2019 to 94 in 2025. This significantly broadened opportunities for young children to survive, grow and thrive.^{29,30} To monitor progress and impact, UNICEF, in collaboration with the Nurturing Care for ECD Metrics Joint Technical Working Group of Countdown to 2030, releases updated Country Profiles for Early Childhood Development every two years, covering 197 countries. Launched in 2018, this initiative – which is affiliated with the Countdown to 2030 for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health – has established a robust global monitoring and accountability system, equipping governments, partners and advocates with comparable data and actionable insights to drive evidence-based policy and investment decisions.³¹

In just six years, UNICEF's support helped nearly double the number of countries with multisectoral ECD policies (from 77 to 94 countries), while building a global monitoring system covering 197 nations to keep early childhood high on the agenda.

Sustaining momentum in multisectoral ECD policy in Eastern and Southern Africa

In Eastern and Southern Africa, the adoption of multisectoral ECD policies has gained remarkable traction, with 17 of 21 countries now having policies, strategies or action plans to support the holistic development of young children. This momentum – sparked over a decade ago through UNICEF's support – has been reinforced by the African Early Childhood Network, the African Union's ECD Policy Technical Working Group, and more recently, the engagement of the East African Community. A series of regional and continental events has renewed political attention and strengthened commitments, which are reflected in recent policy endorsements in countries such as Angola, Burundi, Kenya, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zimbabwe, as well as policy revisions in Madagascar, Malawi, Namibia and others. These new frameworks feature stronger accountability mechanisms, earmarked funding, improved coordination and enhanced monitoring systems, including the integration of the ECDI2030 indicator to track the impact of policies on young children's development (see 'Measuring ECD to drive policies and programmes'). While government commitment to delivering priority interventions has significantly increased, gaps remain – particularly in ensuring universal access to quality social services, providing targeted support to the poorest families, improving budget allocation and efficiency, and translating policy commitments into tangible results.

Seventeen of 21 countries in Eastern and Southern Africa now have stronger, better-funded multisectoral ECD policies, yet sustained effort is needed to close service and equity gaps and turn commitments into results.

Turning ECD policies into real results in Eastern and Southern Africa

Sustaining momentum in multisectoral ECD will require targeted technical support for countries that have not yet adopted ECD policies, including prioritizing costed, accountable and well-governed frameworks, while strengthening implementation in those with existing plans. Priorities include translating policy commitments into action through costed plans with clear targets and measurable indicators; integrating ECDI2030 into national monitoring systems; refining budget tracking methodologies; and leveraging evidence to secure greater investment. Regional convenings, strategic partnerships and knowledge exchange will remain central, complemented by innovations such as an Africa-wide ECD Monitoring Dashboard and scorecards to track commitments.

Progress will also depend on stronger accountability through data-driven tools, increased budget allocations via programme-based financing, enhanced national and local capacity for planning, budgeting, and service delivery, investment in a skilled and motivated ECD workforce, and active community participation in planning and implementation. By aligning global standards with local realities, UNICEF and its partners can translate momentum into measurable results, ensuring every child in the region has the best possible start in life.

Accelerating multisectoral ECD now depends on targeted support, robust monitoring and sustained investment to translate strong regional momentum into costed, accountable and fully implemented policies that deliver lasting impact for children and families.

GLOBAL SNAPSHOT

Financing the future: Investing in ECD

Why ECD financing matters

Early childhood investments deliver exceptional value – yielding up to 13 per cent annual returns through stronger education, health and productivity, while reducing long-term public costs. Yet, as [UNICEF's Too Little, Too Late](#) report (2023) shows, global public spending on children is insufficient, often delayed and hampered by low prioritization, fragmented funding and weak coordination. Sustained, equitable, and well-managed financing is essential to close these gaps. Encouragingly, 89 countries now have multisectoral ECD policies, many of them costed, creating a pivotal opportunity to use evidence-based tools – such as budget briefs and investment cases – to influence allocations and secure quality, holistic ECD services for all children.

Unlocking sustainable financing for ECD: UNICEF's collaborative approach

UNICEF, together with governments, development banks, donors, civil society, the private sector, and partners such as the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, as well as networks such as the Early Childhood Development Action Network, is working to transform the way ECD is financed.

At the heart of this effort is UNICEF's Financing for Children Framework, which has evolved from a focus on building evidence to actively shaping fiscal policy and investment strategies. The expanded framework shifts from short-term budgeting to medium- and long-term financing plans; from tracking expenditure

alone to addressing the full fiscal ecosystem of revenue, debt and sustainable investment; and from isolated sectoral approaches to integrated, multisectoral financing pathways for ECD. By applying this framework, UNICEF helps governments map financing flows, identify opportunities across public, private, domestic and international sources, and align resources with national ECD priorities.

UNICEF's work spans four interconnected pillars, implemented at global, regional and country levels.

The first pillar is strengthening public financial management processes. UNICEF provides technical assistance across the budget cycle – from designing child-responsive budgets to costing ECD services and tracking expenditure – working closely with ministries of finance, sectoral ministries and local stakeholders to ensure ECD is embedded in national fiscal systems.

The second pillar focuses on mobilizing additional and innovative financing.

Recognizing that public finance alone cannot meet the scale of need, UNICEF promotes private sector engagement and innovative financing solutions. In Rwanda, for example, the tea and mining sectors faced reduced productivity due to the lack of childcare, which limited women's workforce participation. With UNICEF's support, tea companies established on-site childcare facilities, resulting in higher productivity, loyalty and retention. In 2023, UNICEF developed an ECD Innovative Financing Internal Guidance Brief to help staff and partners identify and implement such solutions.



The third pillar is evidence-based advocacy.

UNICEF works with global partners to elevate ECD financing on political and policy agendas, co-leading Early Childhood Development Action Network's Global Technical Financing Working Group to develop tools, guidance and shared advocacy strategies. It also supports the Act for Early Years campaign, championed by Theirworld and other key partners, to unlock new and sustained ECD financing. Investment cases, value-for-money analyses and policy briefs are produced to make the economic and social case for prioritizing ECD.

The fourth pillar is capacity building and knowledge exchange. UNICEF works closely with governments and partners to strengthen the skills and systems needed to manage ECD financing effectively. Its online learning channel equips policymakers and practitioners with knowledge and tools to mobilize, allocate

and track ECD investments. In 2023, with support from the Conrad Hilton Foundation, UNICEF convened a Regional Policy Dialogue on Financing ECD Services in Eastern and Southern Africa, bringing together government officials and partners to share good practices, strengthen monitoring of public and private investments, integrate ECD into public financial management reforms, and identify strategies to expand fiscal space and improve equity in spending.

Through this integrated approach – combining fiscal reform, innovative financing, global advocacy and capacity building – UNICEF and its partners are ensuring that ECD is recognized, prioritized and sustainably funded as a foundation for lifelong well-being and national prosperity. In Eastern and Southern Africa, these efforts are yielding important results (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Driving results with ECD investments in Eastern and Southern Africa

Building momentum for investments in Eastern and Southern Africa

In partnership with the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the Africa Early Childhood Network, and regional bodies such as the African Union and East African Community, UNICEF mobilized governments across Eastern and Southern Africa to jointly strategize on increasing investment in ECD.

Actions

Through its country offices, UNICEF supported governments with two core actions that positioned ECD as a strategic investment in human capital:

-  1 Developing costed multisectoral ECD action plans that translate commitments into concrete investment pathways
-  2 Enhancing budget visibility for ECD to prioritize and protect core programmes in tight fiscal environments

Results

-  Nine countries are implementing programme based budgeting reforms to embed ECD across all sectors of the Nurturing Care Framework
-  Per child spending on health and education for children aged 0–6 increased from US\$48 to US\$152 between 2002 and 2022 – a 217 per cent rise in real terms, with an average annual growth rate of 6 per cent.
-  Regional policy dialogues, technical guidance and targeted budget analyses have strengthened government capacity to monitor and measure ECD investments.
-  Sustained advocacy and evidence building in countries such as Burundi, Eswatini, Kenya, Mozambique, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia have influenced budget frameworks and allocations.

Closing the gaps

Important challenges in the region remain. ECD spending as a share of GDP is still low, hovering between 0.83 per cent and 0.92 per cent, and stark disparities persist between country income groups – from just US\$26 per child in low income countries to US\$573 in upper middle income countries. Official Development Assistance accounts for only 8 per cent of total ECD expenditures, and in the current donor climate, there is a real risk this share could decline without proactive engagement and advocacy with development partners.

Looking forward – Turning ambition into action

Moving forward, UNICEF will work with governments and partners to drive increased and sustained investments for optimal child growth and development, guided by clear benchmarks. This includes ensuring greater investment in health; at least 10 per cent of education budgets for early learning; ECD as a mandatory and significant part of social protection schemes; and stronger funding for child protection and responsive parenting. Across all areas, UNICEF will improve budget analysis, evidence, transparency and efficiency to ensure resources deliver maximum impact.

Key actions include:

- Undertaking an in-depth assessment of investments in nurturing care for ECD in primary health care with WHO and the Conrad Hilton Foundation, defining a minimum package of interventions, establishing current investment levels and setting the foundation for benchmarking ECD investments in the health sector.
- Facilitating high-level advocacy with governments, donors, the private sector and development partners to prioritize and increase investments in ECD, as well as continuing active participation in the Act for Early Years campaign and co-organizing the Global Technical Financing Forum and Pledging Summit in 2026.



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- Supporting governments in costing, budgeting and tracking ECD investments, and in generating evidence – including investment cases – to inform advocacy and policy reform.
- Building the capacity of governments, civil society and implementing partners to mobilize, allocate and manage ECD resources more effectively.

The path ahead is clear – but it will take collective commitment to move forward. UNICEF calls on all partners to join hands in meeting these benchmarks, unlocking the resources needed, and ensuring that every child can survive, thrive and reach their full potential.

Turning today's momentum into tomorrow's legacy: a region where every child grows, learns and thrives



GLOBAL SNAPSHOT

Measuring ECD to drive policies and programmes

Why support ECD measurement?

Measuring ECD is complex because young children's development is multidimensional – with physical, cognitive, emotional, behavioural and other components – and because of the rapid pace at which development occurs in the early years. Measures need to be short and simple, culturally appropriate and applicable for capturing child development worldwide. Traditional approaches to measuring ECD have been based on individual screening and/or diagnostic tests administered by highly trained professionals. These are inappropriate for the type of large-scale population monitoring needed to track progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Early Childhood Development Index 2030 – Measuring SDG indicator 4.2.1

With the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, UNICEF was appointed as the custodian agency responsible for developing a measure to track progress on SDG indicator 4.2.1: Proportion of children aged 24–59 months who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial wellbeing. A five-year process led to the development of the new [Early Childhood Development Index 2030 \(ECDI2030\)](#). The Index was released in March 2020 following extensive consultations with experts, partner agencies and national statistical authorities to identify the best approach to measuring indicator 4.2.1.

ECDI2030 applies to children aged 24–59 months and is based on 20 questions for mothers or primary caregivers about the way their children behave in certain everyday situations, and the skills and knowledge they have acquired. ECDI2030 covers the three domains of ECD included in the SDG indicator: learning, psychosocial well-being and health.

ECDI2030 addresses the need for nationally representative and internationally comparable data on ECD collected in a standardized way. The module can be integrated into existing national data collection efforts. It is accompanied by standard guidance and a framework for technical assistance to support implementation. And because the data can be disaggregated by key demographics and subnational areas, the use of this measure can also help advance the SDG commitment to leave no one behind.

Key results of the implementation of ECDI2030

As of 2025, close to 30 countries (including Kenya, Mozambique and the United Republic of Tanzania) have collected ECDI2030 data, primarily through Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS). ECDI2030 has now been integrated as part of the standard modules included in MICS and is the recommended measure for SDG 4.2.1 reporting by Member States. This information is not only helping to monitor and report on SDG progress, but is also informing ECD policy reforms and programmes.



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ECDI2030 data indicate that in Kenya, 78 per cent of children aged 24–59 months are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being. In the United Republic of Tanzania, 47 per cent of children are developmentally on track, and in Mozambique, 39 per cent are developmentally on track. Findings from these countries also indicate that the percentage of children who are developmentally on track decreases with age; a higher percentage of children in urban than rural areas are developmentally on track, and the percentage of children developmentally on track increases with mothers' education and with increasing household wealth.

Countries are using the data collected in different ways; for example, in Mozambique, the data are being used to advocate for the development of a multisectoral policy and for updates to other relevant sector-specific policies and plans. In the United Republic of Tanzania, the results have been used to: raise awareness and advocate for increased investment in ECD services; inform the development of national policies, strategies and guidelines (including the Tanzania Vision 2050); and influence the implementation of the country's National Multisectoral ECD Programme. Importantly, UNICEF conducted further analysis of ECD2030 data, which has helped guide decisions regarding programme improvements based on identified gaps, regional prioritization (targeting regions with lower developmental outcomes) and resource allocation.

Looking forward to 2030

UNICEF will continue to provide technical assistance to countries that are interested in and planning to implement ECDI2030 as part of their national data collection efforts in MICS and other national household surveys. As of now, there are more than 40 national MICS7 surveys completed, planned or currently underway. It is anticipated that by 2027, as many as 70 countries could have ECDI2030 data. UNICEF plans to use the empirical data amassed across countries to validate or revise the cut-scores that were established to determine children's on-track status.

As of 2024, only around two in three children in 84 countries with data were developmentally on track (based primarily on the previous ECDI measure, which has since been replaced by the ECDI2030). This calls for urgent action to meet Target 4.2 by 2030 – for all girls and boys to have access to quality ECD, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.

Now, more than ever, it is critical to invest in efficient and cost-effective tools for measurement and data collection in order to maximize limited resources, close knowledge gaps and build a robust evidence base to support children's development.

GLOBAL SNAPSHOT

A multi-level approach to promoting nurturing care for ECD and parenting support in the early years

The importance of nurturing care and parenting support for ECD

The Nurturing Care Framework¹ provides a roadmap for creating a stable environment that is sensitive to children's health and nutritional needs, with protection from threats, opportunities for early learning and interactions that are responsive, emotionally supportive and developmentally stimulating. The Framework recognizes the critical role of parents and other caregivers in providing nurturing care and articulates the importance of communities, services and policies to support families of young children.

Parents and caregivers are key architects creating experiences and opportunities for children's health, learning, protection, growth, development and social and emotional well-being throughout the life course. There is clear evidence that quality parenting has a seminal influence on children's well-being and development. As such, providing parents and caregivers with support, including support for their own mental health and well-being, is key to ensuring that every child has the best start in life.

Despite increased awareness and important progress in the provision of quality nurturing care and parenting support in recent decades, challenges persist. Globally:

- One in three children under 5 years of age are not growing and developing well due to malnutrition.³²
- Four in ten children aged 2–4 years do not get enough responsive interaction or stimulation at home.³³
- One in ten children aged 2–4 years miss out on activities with their caregivers that are critical to promoting cognitive, social and emotional development, such as reading, storytelling, singing and drawing.³⁴
- One in five children do not play with their caregivers at home.³⁵
- Children with disabilities are 25 per cent less likely to receive early stimulation and responsive care, compared with children without disabilities.³⁶
- One in three children aged 3–4 years are not developmentally on track.³⁷

Additional efforts are urgently needed to reach millions of young children and their families through quality nurturing care and parenting support.



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UNICEF actions at the global level to promote nurturing care and parenting support

To support parents and caregivers of young children, UNICEF is guided by the [Nurturing Care Framework](#), the [UNICEF Vision for Early Childhood Development 2030](#), and its organizational [Parenting Strategy](#), which outlines UNICEF's multi-level, multi-platform and multi-age approach to parenting support. While UNICEF's Parenting Strategy encompasses the full life course, this case study focuses primarily on how it has been leveraged for the early years.

UNICEF works closely with governments and partners to integrate responsive care, early stimulation and parenting support within policies and programmes across sectors, including health, nutrition, education, social protection and WASH. Since the launch of the Nurturing Care Framework, UNICEF, in collaboration with WHO, the Early Childhood Development Action Network and other partners, has led the development of key global resources that are informing the operationalization of this framework at the

country level. These resources include the [Nurturing Care Practice Guide](#), [Nurturing Care Handbook](#), and [thematic briefs on nurturing care](#) focused on enhancing the provision of nurturing care services in an integrated manner.

UNICEF and WHO, in collaboration with other partners, published the [Nurturing Care Framework Progress Report](#), which reflects on 2018–2023 achievements, while identifying areas that merit further attention to enhance child development outcomes in early life. UNICEF also led the development of key global parenting resources, including a newly released [UNICEF Global Report on Parenting and ECD](#), as well as a Parenting for ECD Toolkit, designed to support UNICEF staff and partners in the implementation of nurturing care for ECD and parenting support programmes.

UNICEF adopts a multi-pronged approach to promoting nurturing care for ECD and parenting support, ensuring support is provided at the level of the broader enabling environment, at the level of service delivery, and at the level of the household, as outlined below.

A multi-pronged approach to promoting nurturing care for ECD and parenting support, globally:

1. At the level of the **broader enabling environment**, UNICEF promotes parenting support in collaboration with governments and partners to: i) adopt family-friendly policies; and ii) integrate parenting support into existing ECD sectoral policies. UNICEF advocates for an increase in the provision of adequate parental leave; paid breastfeeding breaks; affordable, accessible, quality childcare; and child support benefits by governments and businesses. UNICEF also works with governments to integrate parenting support into existing multisectoral ECD policies. For example, South Africa's ECD Policy (2015) prioritizes parenting support as the first of eleven key areas of public policy for ECD.

2. At the level of **service delivery**, UNICEF advocates with and supports governments to strengthen nurturing care for ECD and integrate parenting support into existing health, nutrition and other social services (see Boxes 8 and 9), equipping frontline workers with parenting counselling skills and tools. In Kenya, Mozambique and the United Republic of Tanzania, UNICEF, in partnership with the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, is supporting national and subnational health, nutrition and other social systems to strengthen the provision of nurturing care for ECD.
3. At the level of the immediate **family household**, UNICEF supports the scale-up of parent-facing interventions such as [Bebbo](#), UNICEF's innovative parenting support programme that offers evidence-based, practical guidance and tools to parents of children aged 0 to 6 years to support their child's health, development, safety and care. Launched in 2021, Bebbo is now available in 17 countries and 17 languages, with over 1.4 million downloads.

Box 8

Playful parenting

In Zambia and Serbia, UNICEF, governments and partners are promoting culturally relevant parent-child interactions to nurture children's developmental potential through the broader, global Playful Parenting Programme. In both countries, playful parenting support has been integrated into existing services – including in health, education and social protection sectors, and into national policies, standards and curricula. Both countries have used a range of communications and advocacy strategies to raise awareness on the importance of play and the critical role of parents in children's development. In the five years since its inception, the programme has enhanced playful interactions between parents and their children, reaching 180,843 parents/caregivers and 148,612 children across Serbia and Zambia.

Box 9**Caring for the Caregiver**

UNICEF, in collaboration with the University of the Witwatersrand and WHO, developed the [Caring for the Caregiver](#) package to support governments in promoting caregivers' mental health and well-being and promote nurturing care. A growing body of evidence, including the Lancet (2016), has shown that caregivers' mental health and emotional well-being impact their ability to provide nurturing care to their children. Preventive support for parents' and caregivers' health and emotional well-being is key to promoting optimal child development, and interactions with caring adults can mitigate the impacts of stress and trauma on children. Caring for the Caregiver was validated in six countries (Brazil, Bhutan, Rwanda, Serbia, Sierra Leone and Zambia), and has since been implemented in 17 countries, with more in the pipeline. More than 160 master trainers and more than 600 frontline workers have been trained, benefiting over 15,000 families.

Reaching parents at scale

UNICEF has contributed to positive results across all levels of support for parenting and nurturing care. Between 2022 and 2023, UNICEF reached 1.5 million parents and caregivers across 106 countries. In 2024, 64 UNICEF programme countries (50 per cent) met organizational benchmarks for providing integrated parenting support programmes, compared with 53 countries (41 per cent) in 2023 – an increase of more than 20 per cent – demonstrating parenting support as a key priority for UNICEF offices. Moreover, 87 countries integrated ECD services within primary health care in 2024, up from 65 in 2022. These services included support for early stimulation and responsive caregiving, developmental monitoring, early identification and interventions for developmental delays and disabilities, and parenting support programmes. Additionally, 42 countries are taking action to support care work, through family-friendly policies.

Globally, there is clear evidence on the impact of the Nurturing Care Framework on ECD programming. The Nurturing Care Progress Report (2018–2023) showed wider recognition of ECD as an outcome, not a specific programme or intervention; increased political commitment to child development over the five-year period; and a 48 per cent increase in the number of countries with a national policy or action plan for ECD. While there has been significant progress, there is a continued need for greater investment and areas requiring further attention to enhance child growth and development outcomes. These include the need to involve families and communities in the design of policies and programmes, deepen coordination and collaboration mechanisms, improve public financing and build a workforce fit for purpose.

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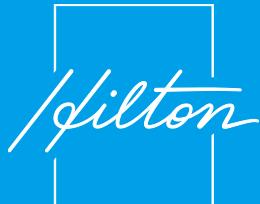
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United Nations Children's Fund

UNICEF Eastern Southern Africa Regional Office
P. O Box 44145, Nairobi, Kenya

www.unicef.org/esa



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