



What is Early Childhood Development (ECD)?

Experiences from Rwanda

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ECD and its Importance

What is ECD?

Early Childhood Development is defined as the period from conception up to school entry (age 8). ECD is an integrated concept that cuts across multiple sectors – including health and nutrition, education, and social protection¹. It is a unique window of opportunity for children’s cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, which occurs as a result of interaction between the environment and the child.



Importance of ECD

The early years of a child’s life are quintessential determinants of their wellbeing and success in the future. This is the period during which majority of brain development in children takes place. Although traditions and practices have concentrated on childcare practices that encourage learning and stimulation, scientific findings have only recently corroborated these practices due to advancements in neurological science and technology.

The findings in this area have shown that the basic architecture of the brain develops during the first 5 years of a child’s life. A Harvard study has demonstrated that during the first few years, brain development takes place at an astounding pace², a rate that is never repeated later in life³. Thus, it lays the foundation for the development of early language skills and higher cognitive functions⁴.

ECD’s scope is beyond that of just education. By enhancing this scope, we augment its positive transformative impact on individuals and societies. Brain development takes a lot more than education⁵; multiple inputs like health, nurturing and responsive

¹ <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/en/glossary-curriculum-terminology/e/early-childhood-development-ecd#:~:text=An%20integrated%20concept%20that%20cuts,emotional%20development%20of%20young%20children>.

² More than 1 million neural connections are formed every second

³ *Center on the Developing Child (2007). The Science of Early Childhood Development (InBrief). Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu.*

⁴ Habib Kouame (2019), Early childhood development: The foundation of a sustainable and prosperous society. Retrieved from <https://www.humanium.org/en/early-childhood-development-the-foundation-of-a-sustainable-and-prosperous-society/>

⁵ Anderson, Shinn, Fullilove et al (2003), The effectiveness of early childhood development programs: A systematic review, American Journal of Preventive Medicine

care, protection and enrichment are important contributors⁶. Research has also found that comprehensive programmes focusing on parental support, early stimulation and education, nutrition and health, and income supplementation have had the largest effects on cognitive development of children, thereby further corroborating the inter-sectoral nature of ECD⁷.



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Why Invest in ECD?

James Heckman, a prominent economist, has rightly said – “*Early childhood development is a smart investment. The earlier the investment, the greater the return.*” Research shows that each additional dollar invested in quality early childhood programs yields a return of between \$6 and \$17⁸. This is further supported by a longitudinal study over 20 years in Jamaica which found that due to the ECD intervention, consisting of psychosocial stimulation to growth stunted toddlers, there was a 25% rise in their earnings in adulthood, enough for them to catch up with their non-stunted peers⁹.

This goes to show that ECD is an important factor in reducing inequality. Inequality starts at birth, and ECD provides an avenue to level the playing field for children from various socio-economic backgrounds. It has been estimated that globally about 1 billion children are multidimensionally poor, lacking access to necessities such as nutrition and clean water¹⁰. The consequences of child poverty are grave – these

children develop fewer skills for the workforce and thus earn lower wages as adults, stemming into a vicious circle of poverty with intergenerational consequences. Thus, the eradication of child poverty is another viable argument in favour of investments in ECD¹¹.

The inherent importance of ECD is not only limited to the above-mentioned factors. Investments in ECD also bring about wider social benefits through spillover effects. For example, investments in early childhood education and care can provide avenues for mothers to seek work and further boost family’s income, through a safe learning environment for their children¹². In addition to this, other benefits of quality ECD services include better health, reduced likelihood of individuals engaging in risky behaviours and wider civic and social engagement.



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Even after having scientifically established the importance of these early years and the higher returns from investment in ECD, public expenditure remains low in many countries. The developed countries fare comparatively better in ECD related indicators in comparison to the developing and least developed countries. While this disparity is clear, this gap is even wider for the poor and vulnerable population in the developing and least developed countries.

⁶ Keith Hansen (2016), Early childhood development: A smart investment for life, World Bank. Retrieved from <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/early-childhood-development-smart-investment-life#:~:text=ECD%20also%20has%20the%20added,preschool%20program s%20targeting%20vulnerable%20groups>.

⁷ Rao N, Sun J, Wong JMS, Weekes B, Ip P, Shaeffer S, Young M, Bray M, Chen E, Lee D (2014) Early childhood development and cognitive development in developing countries: A rigorous literature review. Department for International Development.

⁸ Early Childhood Peace Consortium, Economic benefits of early childhood development investments. Retrieved from <https://ecdpeace.org/work-content/economic-benefits-early-childhood-development-investments>

⁹ Gertler, Heckman, Pinto, Zanolini (2014), Labor market returns to an early childhood stimulation intervention in Jamaica, Science Vol. 344, Issue 6187, pp. 998-1001

¹⁰ UNICEF, Child Poverty. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/social-policy/child-poverty#:~:text=With%20the%20Sustainable%20Development%20Goals,o%20end%20extreme%20child%20poverty.&text=As%20part%20of%20this%20commitment,povetry%20in%20all%20its%20dimensions>.

¹¹ Antonio Franco García (2015), Child poverty indicators can help end global poverty, UNICEF. Retrieved from <https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/child-poverty-indicators-can-help-end-global-poverty/>

¹² OECD, Investing in quality Early Childhood Education and Care, Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/48980282.pdf>



Rwanda's Experience

In Rwanda, children and families lack access to basic ECD services. Children's health issues are rampant, with malnourishment and stunting affecting their growth and development.

On top of that, they have limited access to education and learning opportunities, especially at the pre-primary levels. With only 1 in 5 parents in Rwanda engaged in activities that support early learning, the home environments are not stimulating enough and, more than half of the child population under the age of 2 is affected by instances of violence¹³.

Therefore, ECD has emerged as a priority area for the government of Rwanda with its integration into policies related to child development and education. This is reflected in the introduction of the Early Childhood Development (ECD) Policy and its Strategic Plan as well as the emphasis laid on it in the National Strategy for Transformation. However, the impact of these policies and plans is yet to be seen, especially for the marginalized population.

Early Childhood Development and Family (ECD&F) Programme



To meet this policy gap and augment the sector's achievements, UNICEF, in partnership with Imbuto Foundation and under the leadership of the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, launched the Early Childhood Development and Family (ECD&F) programme in 2014¹⁴. The ECD&F programme is designed to cater to the holistic development of children under the age of 6, creating momentum using specific interventions in areas such as health and nutrition, WaSH, responsive parenting, early learning and play, child protection and social awareness.

The main intervention under the ECD&F programme is the establishment of ECD centres in selected districts. These centres target children between the ages of 3-6 years and provide play and learning activities, nutritious food as well as regular health check-ups. The ECD centres are a safe and nurturing space where the parents can leave the children under the care of trained teachers. Given the financial

burden of setting up these centres, home-based ECD was also introduced. Home-based ECD is situated in a family's home with the parents being trained as caregivers. Further, in the second phase of the programme (2017 – 20), ECD centres were set up near marketplaces and in religious institutions, thereby expanding the reach of these services.

The acceptance and ownership of the local communities, who have made the programme their own, is a paramount reason for its success. The proactive engagement of the communities and district governments for the upkeep of the centres ensures the sustainability of services offered. Further, the ECD centres act as knowledge hubs, bringing the entire community together to initiate knowledgeable and interactive discussions on issues related to children.

ECD&F programme encourages communities to make the best possible use of the available resources around them in providing quality ECD services to their children. They are taught to make play items using local and household material and the meals in the centres are prepared using the contributions from the parents.



The programme not only tries to initiate a dialogue at the community level but also at the family level. Under the programme, the parents in the communities receive training on responsive parenting and early learning in homes for children in the 0-3 age groups. This includes training on the importance of stimulation and play activities. The programme also strives to enhance fathers' engagement in their children's lives by educating them on their role and its benefit on the child's development.

The programme also makes use of home visits to reach out to young children and their families. These

¹³ UNICEF Rwanda, Early childhood development. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/rwanda/early-childhood-development>

¹⁴ The programme has been implemented in two phases: Phase I (2014-17) and Phase II (2017-20)

visits are carried out by the community health workers (CHW), ECD caretakers and Inshuti z'Umuryango (IZU) workers. The CHWs use these visits to monitor the health of the children, provide information to parents, encourage enrollment in the community insurance scheme and adoption of health initiatives such as use of mosquito nets. With child protection as another essential component of the programme, IZUs as trained individuals have the responsibility to conduct home visits to ameliorate conflicts in the household and cater to instances of child violence. They raise awareness about the need to follow non-violent punishment methods for discipline of children in the communities.

The ECD&F programme also takes account of the larger social impact that such a programme can have on the community. As part of the programme, parents of children (especially women) in the ECD centres are encouraged to form savings and lending communities, enhancing the economic participation of women in society. The programme has also tried to augment the private sector's participation in the expansion of ECD services – an example is the set-up of ECD centres in tea plantations. Due to the provision of ECD at work, women workers can work extra hours while their children receive proper care and nutrition.

The benefits of this intervention can be gauged by the experience of David, a 5-year-old child of a tea plantation worker¹⁵. Due to prolonged periods of isolation with no cognitive stimulation or proper nutrition, when he joined the ECD centre he was unable to walk or sit by himself and did not socially engage with other children. David benefitted immensely from the ECD centre and became healthy, physically active and more social. On top of that, his mother was able to work a full day, supplementing her family income.



The ECD&F programme provides a fresh glimmer of hope for the marginalised and vulnerable child

¹⁵ Veronica Houser (2019), For the first time in his life, David stood up: How a childcare centre on a Rwandan tea plantation halted one boy's stunted development, UNICEF Rwanda

population in Rwanda to escape the vicious circle of inequality and poverty. Thus, the ECD&F programme has the potential to revolutionize the ECD space by making it more accessible for developing countries, and more affordable for the impoverished.

More Information about the programme can be found in the evaluation reports. The Phase I endline report can be accessed [here](#). Athena Infonomics, along with FATE Consulting, conducted the endline evaluation of Phase II of the programme, the report for which can be accessed [here](#).

