

Oral presentation on early childhood development: background paper

1. The early childhood development (ECD) priority reaffirms the centrality of the principle that the young child has rights to survival, development and protection, and that States parties must fulfil their obligation to support parents in providing children the best start to life.
2. ECD contributes to the achievement of the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of reduction of child and maternal mortality, reduction of malnutrition, improved clean water access, reduction in incidence of malaria and other diseases, increasing children's chances of attaining a quality basic education, and reduction of poverty. These interventions are to be measured by changes in the behaviour of caregivers and service providers, in access to basic services, and in policy changes.
3. Programming experience has shown us that two strategic components are required so that children get the best start in life: (a) effective and responsive caring of the young child and of the pregnant and lactating mother by the family and community; and (b) access to and use of quality basic social services by the young child and pregnant and lactating woman. These must be built on enlightened public policies.
4. We know that meeting children's multiple needs is required if investments are to produce the best returns for children. These impacts are likely to be greatest for the most disadvantaged.

Actions

5. The comprehensive review of ECD concluded that:
 - (a) The concept of "the best start in life", or ECD, is clear but putting it into operation is challenging;
 - (b) Even though the MDGs and the Millennium Declaration are based on the premise that every child should have the best start in life in order to break the cycle of poverty, the links between ECD and the MDGs need to be communicated better;
 - (c) As a result of the ECD priority there has been an increased emphasis on improving family care practices, on strengthening families and communities, on child development, and on the rights-based approach that ECD exemplifies;

* E/ICEF/2004/12.

(d) In a number of country programmes, the strategically created synergies among health, nutrition, water and sanitation, child development and child protection interventions have resulted in impacts on families and children, as shown in the country examples below.

6. These country programmes are in varying stages of development, from initiation to final stages. Each relies on partnerships with government, with civil society, and with other partners such as USAID, the World Bank, Canadian CIDA, or WHO. All 158 country programmes of cooperation of UNICEF support ECD policies, approaches and/or programmes. Over 130 million children benefit from health, nutrition and hygiene basic services. In 63 countries, families profit from special efforts to support parenting.

7. Countries have used a variety of approaches to encourage synergies in programming, in cooperation with UNICEF. For example, in Vietnam, a communication package supports child survival, growth and development, and it is being applied along with service delivery in focus districts. In Peru, a five-year programme combining health, nutrition, and child development has increased rate of adequate birth weight and improved caring practices. In Malawi, a community Integrated Management of Childhood Illnesses programme not only improved health practices, but also parents' support for children's learning, the involvement of fathers, and registered 300,000 births. To leverage resources, the programme worked with the Malawi social action fund (Malawi PRSP), World Bank, bilateral agencies and other United Nations agencies.

8. In cooperation with UNICEF, China will initiate a comprehensive model of service delivery, family strengthening and community support for approximately 60,000 young children in four of the most disadvantaged areas in the country. Brazil, through its family competencies kit, is helping families to support children's health and development. Sri Lanka has an ECD policy and a childcare programme which meet children's needs comprehensively. The Accelerated Child Survival and Development programme in West and Central Africa has been successful in increasing care for pregnant women and use of insecticide treated bednets, and is working to find the best ways to improve family care practices such as breastfeeding. In Albania, ECD was defined as a priority in their PRSP by a Task Force of seven ministries and an ECCD network of 50 partners.

Issues

9. UNICEF is convinced that giving children the best start to life has the greatest return on investment. Given this commitment, key policy issues are:

(a) The promising country examples above combined delivery of services at the local level with parenting support, improvement of family care practices and resources, and community capacity building. All converged on the most disadvantaged young children. How can the design and implementation of ECD interventions draw on these positive experiences?

(b) How can UNICEF and partners have an impact on specific governmental ECD priorities - such as child survival, maternal mortality reduction, improved nutrition, improved hygiene practices and water supply, improved child development and school readiness, or birth registration - and still maintain a coherent and rights-based approach to early child development?

(c) Convergent and coordinated ECD interventions should result in cost savings, sustainability, and greater impact. Research shows that there is greater impact with coordinated

interventions, often through strengthened family and community actions. However, benefits often take considerable time and effort to become evident. What are the implications for approaches to ECD?

(d) ECD interventions should contribute to meeting several of the MDGs and targets.¹ Partners need to work together to achieve these goals more effectively. However, because ECD is comprehensive, sectoral partnerships may not be sufficient to develop the synergies needed for children to have the best start in life. How can the contribution of ECD to the MDGs be communicated more clearly so that all contributing partners can work together in a focused way to address the critical needs of young children and families?

—

¹ Reduced child and maternal mortality, reduction of malnutrition, increased access to water, reduction in malaria, and school completion and poverty reduction.