Key issues in East Asia and the Pacific

Evidence shows that children who do not receive adequate nutrition, early stimulation, learning opportunities, care and protection tend to have lower academic achievement in primary school and are more likely to drop out of school. Early Childhood Development (ECD) is critical to shaping brain development and function. Since 2000, important progress has been achieved in the East Asia and the Pacific region as more young children survive to their first birthday. Nevertheless, many children continue to live in adverse environments that prevent them from reaching their full potential. Data shows that 9 in 10 children in Thailand, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Viet Nam and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea are on track to achieve their potential in at least three of the four domains of ECD (literacy-numeracy, physical, socio-emotional and learning). In Mongolia and Cambodia, 2 to 3 in 10 children are developing poorly. In all countries, the share of children who are developmentally on track is lowest for literacy-numeracy – ranging from 9 per cent in Mongolia to 69 per cent in Thailand. The percentage of those who are not developing well in the social-emotional sphere is highest in Timor-Leste and Cambodia. Key challenges include: inadequate infrastructure and lack of inter-governmental coordination, limited knowledge and understanding of ECD issues and inadequate pre-school quality.

Source: MICS and DHS
[*] UNICEF estimate based on Malaysia’s National Health and Morbidity Survey 2016, father involvement included
[+] For children age 36-47 months
[#] For children age 36-59 months living with their mothers

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics
[+] Based on other national data sources

1 Child survival rates have improved in all countries since 2000 (Source: State of the World’s Children 2016).
Driving results for children

The goal of ECD is to ensure all young children, especially the most vulnerable, from conception to school entry, achieve their developmental potential, including in humanitarian settings. UNICEF’s approach to ECD prioritizes: (1) expanding access to essential health, nutrition, protection and early learning services of good quality that address the developmental needs of young children; and (2) enriching early environments for children at home and in the communities where they reside.

Key programme strategies

Systems and capacity
- Support national and regional ECD/parenting entities to strengthen coordination, effective communication and collaboration between systems (governance and continuum of care services for children and their families – from conception to school entry).
- Increase capacity of frontline workers to deliver integrated ECD interventions – ‘topping up’ existing programmes and only adding new services where gaps exist.
- Strengthen capacity to analyze, plan, implement and monitor ECD programmes across sectors.

Data, evidence and knowledge
- Improve national data and evidence platforms to track progress and improve services for young children and families.
- Generate and disseminate ECD/Early Childhood Education (ECE) research, reports, and other materials to increase political and social commitment to investment in children in the early years.

Governance, policy and budget
- Convene regional and national high-level advocacy events to promote increased public and private sector investment in ECD.
- Advocate for enhanced services for young children.
- Raise social demand for ECD and ECE by developing and disseminating simple, core ECD/ECE messages to communities and families, and across sectors.
- Raise awareness of holistic and inclusive ECD and advocate for improvements in policies on early years as well as on responsive and stimulating caregiving.

Partnerships and alliances
- Coordinate appropriate policies, advocacy messages and ECD programmes with UN agencies and non-governmental organizations, share knowledge, spotlight emerging practices and facilitate learning opportunities.
- Collaborate with centres of excellence and academic institutions on evidence generation and capacity building.
- Leverage capacity of international financial institutions to advocate for investment in health infrastructure and quality ECD services.
- Establish and strengthen alliances with regional and inter-governmental networks and institutions to promote an ECD legislative agenda.
- Involve the private sector in designing approaches to increasing access to and quality of ECD for children and their families.

Behaviour change
- Promote positive ECD practices from household to policy level through integrated communication initiatives.