DUBAI DECLARATION
A Fair Start in Life for Every Child: The imperative to act now

Preamble:
Globally, an estimated 250 million (43 per cent) of children under age 5 are at risk of poor development due to a lack of nurturing care. This deprivation has implications not only for children, but for families and societies.

Thus, there is an imperative to act now to provide a fair start in life for every child.

Science shows that access to health care nutrition, protection, responsive parenting, stimulation and early learning opportunities foster optimal brain development. These elements are the essential ingredients of nurturing care and help build the strong neural connections that are the foundation of a child’s ability to grow, learn and thrive. They are critical early in a child’s life, especially in the 1,000 days that start after conception and continue into the earliest years.

Conversely, a lack of these ingredients can lead to illness, cognitive and emotional challenges and lower earnings as adults; it can trap children and families in intergenerational cycles of poverty.

The science of early childhood development (ECD) is compelling, but so, too, is the economic case. The high cost of inaction for all nations is measured in both the opportunity cost of underutilized human capital and higher costs in health, education and welfare systems. In addition to the loss of individual potential, failure to invest in ECD has profound implications for families, communities and countries.

Evidence-based early childhood interventions can provide children and their caregivers with the health care, nutrition, education and protection they need to optimize early brain development. To be most effective, these interventions can cross sectors and be integrated into existing programmes for young children and families. For example, providing nutrition with stimulation supports learning outcomes; education improves health; and protected and loved children perform better in school and, potentially, earn more in the future.

Providing the best start in life for every child is within reach. But it requires committed and urgent action from governments, the private sector, donors, international organizations and civil society partners.
Declaration:

*Recognizing* our responsibility to children, especially the most disadvantaged, and the societies of their future,

*Acknowledging* that the remarkable advances in the neuroscience and evidence about the importance of ECD are reflected in Agenda 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and in the targets established for achieving these world-changing goals,

*Appreciating* the critical need, impact, and cost-effectiveness of intervening early in a child’s life, starting with maternal health and nutrition before conception, with the essential elements of nurturing care – adequate nutrition, good health, safety and security, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning,

*Understanding* that age appropriate ECD interventions that are integrated into existing programmes and cross multiple sectors maximize effectiveness and cost-effectiveness,

*Recognizing* that to realize a world in which every child has a fair start in life we must continue working with partners, governments, donors, the private sector and civil society,

*Recognizing further* that greater investment in ECD programmes and policies is greater investment in a sustainable future, in shared prosperity and in peace,

*Recognizing* the importance of parenting support in meeting children’s growth and developmental outcomes,

*Confirming* that to help every child not just survive but thrive in childhood and into adulthood and achieve the SGDs, we must commit to concerted, coordinated and urgent action, together.
The Dubai Declaration on Early Childhood Development therefore affirms a commitment to advance the ECD agenda and provide a best start in life for every child by outlining principles and underlying commitments to provide holistic nurturing care to young children and their caregivers rooted in an ecosystem that prioritizes collaboration amongst key sectors and actors.

1. Principle 1 (access and implementation): Advancing ECD requires a holistic ecosystem approach that provides all young children with “the best start in life” and recognizes the cross-cutting nature of ECD programs: A whole of society multi-sectoral approach is necessary for young children to receive the best start in life which would set them on a pathway for lifelong health, wellbeing, learning, and prosperity. Young children need nurturing care: good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, safety and security, and opportunities for early stimulation and learning. Addressing issues of hunger, health, nutrition, and socioemotional well-being for young children and their caregivers are critical parts of responses both for improved stimulation, learning and human development outcomes, including in humanitarian settings.

   a. We commit to expanding access to effective and essential integrated ECD services in homes, communities, ECD centres, schools and health clinics. This will be achieved by integrating and scaling up early childhood interventions seeking to improve children’s nutrition, learning and protection and caregivers’ mental health and well-being into existing services. In addition, we will elevate parenting as an accelerator for realizing child development outcomes.

   b. We commit to advancing access to nurturing care for all young children and centering the most marginalized, including those in emergency contexts. Any efforts to provide young children with “the best start in life” must include a focus on those impacted the most yet left farthest behind including women and girls (with an emphasis on gender justice), children affected by crisis, indigenous communities, and children with disabilities. Humanitarian crises increase young children’s exposure to chronic stress and disrupt supportive systems for nurturing care. It is critical to adopt whole-of-society responses to ensure that young children and caregivers in crisis contexts have access to uninterrupted early learning and nurturing care to mitigate the psychosocial impact of crises and to ensure that young children have the skills and resources needed to thrive. ECD interventions must also ensure that young children receive responsive caregiving from male and female caregivers in environments free of gender discrimination. We will therefore work collaboratively to promote men’s caregiving roles, support change in the distribution of resources and
allocation of duties between men and women and address gendered power relations.

c. We commit to delivering high-quality ECD that utilizes effective service, learning and development standards. It is critical to secure quality stimulation and foundational learning for all young children as this will set the course for children’s educational, psychosocial, and economic prosperity. Doing so requires working collaboratively to develop, implement, and uphold learning and development standards, and to utilize good practices that nurture holistic early stimulation and learning processes, including a focus on integrating climate literacy and green skills into teaching and learning approaches in early childhood. We must support the ECD workforce through recognition, incentives, renumeration, formal training, and capacity-building to transform the role of caregiving and teaching into a dynamic, multi-dimensional interaction with young children.

d. We commit to prioritizing and facilitating nurturing care environments and learning facilities for young children and their caregivers. Building a nurturing environment requires supportive policy, legislative and physical learning environments, utilization of relevant and appropriate learning delivery tools, and fostering healthy learning relationships with children. We must ensure that ECD programs are inclusive of and responsive to the needs and challenges faced by young children and their caregivers, teachers, and communities. We must also ensure that family-friendly connected technologies are appropriated to supplement and enhance young children’s overall wellbeing and learning experience, as well as that of their caregivers.

e. We commit to positioning parenting support as an integrated and multilevel effort beyond approaching parents as recipients of information, to a more collaborative partnership and support for both children and parents themselves.

2. Principle 2 (policy): Advancing ECD requires establishing and upholding family-friendly ECD policies, partnerships, and regulatory and monitoring frameworks nationally and globally: Policies and frameworks that enable parents and caregivers to provide the best start in life for their children pay off in healthier, better educated children, a properly equipped workforce and sustainable growth. The mobilization of political will, increased funding, and agile policies must be rooted in a global system committed to enabling every country, district, city, and village to foster a whole of society approach for advancing ECD.
a. **We commit to making parenting support and family-friendly ECD policies a national and global priority and a private sector imperative.**  
At the national level, we will focus on national context. This will be done by working closely with local governments to understand their agendas and priorities, advocate for increased prioritization of ECD, and leverage local resources and partnerships in formulating policies. It will also include partnering with private sector actors when relevant to address identified challenges. At the global level, focus will be placed on fostering strategic multi-sectoral public-private partnerships to develop and operationalize innovative solutions for advancing ECD from the ground up. This will require understanding and investing in capacity building at all levels, to create environments conducive to cross-sectoral public-private collaboration.

b. **We commit to providing dedicated leadership for ECD programmes and coordinating efforts more effectively across sectors.** Strong and effective governance mechanisms at national, sub-national and global levels can bring ministries, partners and sectors together to promote holistic ECD. We will therefore focus on partnership and coordination frameworks that boost synergies and coherence between multi-sectoral development and humanitarian agendas at the local, national, and global levels.

c. **We commit to closing the knowing-doing gap in ECD through facilitating knowledge systems that allow for assessing progress, and enable effective evidence-based policy making, financing decisions, and continuous improvement.** Advancing ECD requires access to internationally comparable data on essential indicators of ECD in order to track progress towards advancement, hence the need to invest in policies and practices that increase availability of usable data, knowledge, information, and best practices globally. In countries, progress towards achieving specific disaggregated targets addressing young children needs in the SDGs on health, nutrition, education and protection will be tracked. That will require investments in research partnerships to expand evidence base for ECD and address knowledge gaps, especially for delivering ECD in crisis contexts. It will also require capacity building and improving regular monitoring and reporting on progress towards the achievement of SDG Target 4.2 including other child development related SDG indicators.

d. **We commit to driving demand for high-quality ECD services on a global scale through evidence-led communication and advocacy.** Communication and other public information initiatives about ECD can build
greater understanding of the critical importance of nutrition, health, protection and stimulation in helping children reach their full potential. We must invest in efforts to identify, design, and implement advocacy mechanisms that can boost the positioning of ECD in policy discourse at different levels.

3. **Principle 3 (financing): Advancing ECD requires innovative approaches to financing that maximize overall investment in ECD and enable efficient resource mobilization, allocation and management:** Financing ECD remains one of the most critical barriers to designing and implementing services that give young children, especially the most marginalized and those affected by emergencies, the best start in life. Committing to increasing the overall share of budgetary allocations for ECD programming is a critical step governments, funders, private sector and development partners must take. Furthermore, innovative financing mechanisms present a critical opportunity to maximize investments in ECD and must be embraced.

   a. **We commit to building capacity in public financing for ECD and promoting joint planning and budgeting across sectors** to maximize investments and management of ECD policies and practices that simultaneously accelerate progress towards multiple SDGs.

   b. **We commit to leveraging Multilateral Development Banks** to multiply donor resources, mobilize additional financing, and secure long-term financing of ECD.

   c. **We commit to attracting new and alternative financing resources to fill financing gaps in ECD.** Alternative resources include results-based financing, philanthropic giving, and public-private partnerships. Development and social impact bonds are especially helpful mechanisms for financing ECD programs due to their high up-front costs and potential for both short- and long-term returns.