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UNICEF Nepal Early Childhood Development Vision & Action Plan

2025-2027





UNICEF Nepal
**Early Childhood
Development**
Vision & Action Plan

2025-2027



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is in the early years of a child's life that survival risks are highest, and that physical and brain development are most rapid. The adverse consequences of lack of healthcare, nutrition, protection, stimulation and nurturing care in the early years are life changing.

Nepal has made significant progress in Early Childhood Development (ECD). However, acute challenges remain. The Government of Nepal's 'National Strategy for Early Childhood Development 2077-2088' sets out the Government's comprehensive approach to ECD. UNICEF Nepal's ECD Vision & Action Plan aligns to the National Strategy and involves collaboration with a range of actors.

An effective response to ECD in Nepal requires working within and across sectors in an integrated manner. It must address 'enabling determinants' of ECD outcomes, including governance, resourcing, and social, cultural, gender and religious norms; as well as 'underlying determinants' of ECD outcomes, such as enhanced people-centered policies, improved services and strengthened parenting and care-giving practices.

The ultimate goal of UNICEF Nepal's ECD Vision & Action Plan is that all young children survive, grow and develop to their full potential. In support of this vision, the Action Plan adopts two impact targets: (i) 75 per cent of children aged 36-59 months are developmentally on track in the Early Childhood Development Index (ECDI) in 2027, and (ii) 50 per cent of children aged 8 demonstrate foundational reading in 2027. To deliver these impact targets, the Action Plan has three integrated strategic objectives, with corresponding priority results areas:

1 **POLICIES, PLANNING, FINANCING & IMPLEMENTATION:** to ensure that policies, plans and financing support effective implementation of the National Strategy for ECD

- People-centered policies, plans and coordination structures in place to implement the National ECD Strategy (national and sub-national)
- Increased public finance for ECD (national and sub-national)
- Risk-informed and climate sensitive ECD planning, budgeting, execution and continuous improvement

2 **SERVICES:** to expand programmes and services that protect, promote and support early childhood development

- Early Identification and Early Intervention (EIEI) of developmental delays and disabilities
- Integrated Home-Based Records (iHBR) implemented
- Early stimulation and responsive care provided in Nutrition Rehabilitation Centres, ECD centres and families
- Improved positive behaviours around responsive care and feeding from parents and caregivers supported by Health Workers (HWs) / Female Community Health Volunteers (FCHVs)
- Universal birth registration
- Improved access to quality Early Childhood Education (ECE)

- Improved access to Quality Early Grade learning (Child Friendly Schools) for all children aged 5–8
- Improved childcare through implementation of the new Childcare guidelines
- Improved access to sufficient and safe drinking water including dissemination of household water treatment and storage practices

3 PARENTING & CAREGIVING: to empower parents and caregivers in caring for their young children and themselves

- Parenting programmes provided at scale
- Improved access to and knowledge about sanitation and improved hygiene including child faeces management and handwashing with soap in community settings

These priority result areas (which do not represent all of UNICEF Nepal’s ECD activities) are supported by four cross-cutting priorities: child-friendly governance; gender-equality programming; social inclusion; and disaster risk reduction, climate resilience and environmental sustainability. To deliver these results, the Action Plan prioritises six change strategies that will drive integrated programming: advocacy and communications; social and behaviour change; data, research and evaluation; innovation and digital transformation; gender transformation; partnerships.

Implementation of the plan will be led by UNICEF Nepal teams in Health, Nutrition, Education, Child Protection, WASH and Social Policy, Governance and Evaluation; as well as specialists in Social & Behavioural Change, Advocacy and Communications, Gender, Disability and Emergencies. We urge you to join us in the execution of this plan, to realise the vast potential of young children in Nepal.





1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The importance of ECD

Opportunities in early childhood fundamentally shape the trajectory of a child's life – her health, well-being and future potential. To deny these opportunities is not only to deny the rights of the child; it is to alter the trajectory of individuals, of communities and of nations. It is in the early years that survival risks are highest, and that physical and brain development are most rapid¹. Indeed, the adverse consequences of lack of healthcare, nutrition, protection, stimulation and nurturing care in the early years are literally life changing. From multiple perspectives – child rights, social justice, economic productivity – there is no more important investment than early childhood

development (ECD)². The core components of ECD are described in the WHO / UNICEF / World Bank 'Nurturing Care Framework'³ (see Figure 1).

1.2 Nepal's commitment to ECD and UNICEF's aligned support

ECD in Nepal covers the period from conception, including pregnant and lactating mothers, to age eight. The Government of Nepal's commitment to ECD is enshrined at the global level – as a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child⁴ and to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁵ – and at the national level through the Constitution of Nepal⁶ that guarantees access to ECD services as a basic right of the

FIGURE 1 Nurturing Care Framework



child. Nepal’s trajectory to graduate from low-income status is charted in the national 16th Periodic Plan⁷. Investments in human capital, particularly in the early years, are central to that trajectory and to Nepal’s broader human and economic development.

The Government of Nepal’s ‘National Strategy for Early Childhood Development 2077-2088’⁸ sets out the Government’s comprehensive approach to ECD. UNICEF Nepal’s ECD Vision & Action Plan aligns to the Government Strategy, and complements UNICEF Nepal’s broader planning documents, notably: (i) ‘Country Programme Document 2023-27’⁹, (ii) ‘Country Programme Action Plan 2023-2027’¹⁰, and (iii) Multi-year Work Plans 2023-2025, agreed with the Government and covering Health, Nutrition, WASH, Education, Child Protection, Disaster Risk Reduction & Emergency.

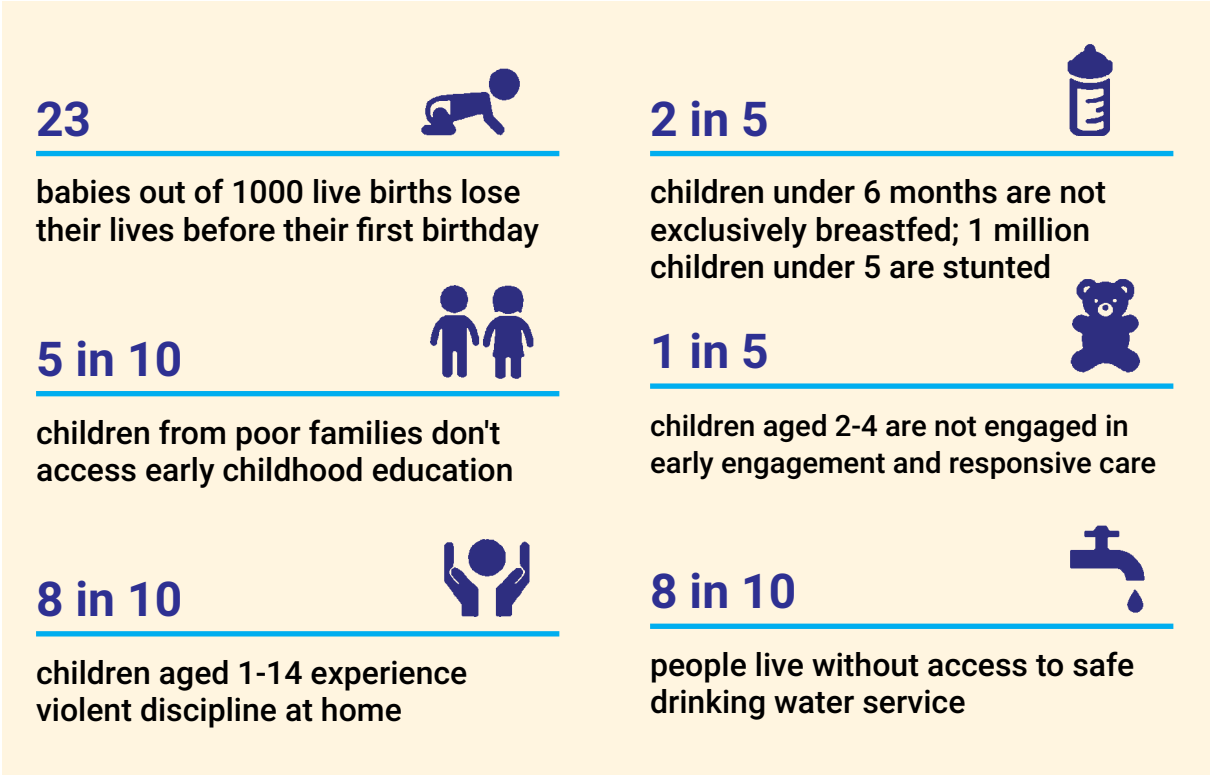
The purpose of this ECD Vision & Action Plan is to set out what UNICEF Nepal seeks

to achieve in ECD over the period 2025-2027, and how it will achieve it; working in partnership with the Government of Nepal – at national and sub-national levels – and also with other actors. It sets out a vision and corresponding impact target, strategic objectives, priority results areas, cross-cutting priorities, change strategies and means of implementation, and a results framework for the period 2025-2027.

1.3 Progress on ECD in Nepal

Nepal has made significant progress across key markers of ECD: reducing child mortality by more than 70 per cent since 1990¹¹; reducing stunting by over 20 per cent since 2001¹²; and increasing access to early childhood education (ECE) to over 80 per cent¹³. However, acute challenges remain. Figure 2 lists some of the key deprivations in Nepal.

FIGURE 2 Key deprivations impacting young children’s lives in Nepal¹⁴



Nepal has made considerable advances in child health. Between 2016 and 2022, neonatal mortality has remained at 21 deaths per 1,000 live births; infant mortality decreased from 32 to 28 deaths per 1,000 live births; and the under-5 mortality rate decreased from 39 to 33 deaths per 1,000 live births¹⁵. However, there are significant gaps in child health services. In rural areas, skilled-birth attendance, institutional delivery and quality postnatal care are all below 65 per cent coverage¹⁶; with around 15 per cent of children with zero-dose immunization¹⁷.

Nutrition and early stimulation provide the foundations for early childhood development. However, Nepal's progress in nutrition – reducing stunting from 57 per cent in 2001 to 25 per cent in 2022 – masks major shortcomings in nutrition outcomes. 520,000 children under 5 are still stunted; child wasting decreased from 10 per cent to 8 per cent between 2016 and 2022; and iron-deficiency anaemia in girls and boys is high (43 per cent). Exclusive breastfeeding rates are low, at around 56 per cent; and dietary intake often sub-standard, with less than half of children aged 6–23 months meeting the minimum dietary diversity and only 43 per cent meeting the minimum acceptable diet¹⁸.

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is critical for the physical, cognitive, social and emotional development of young children. Yet only 29 per cent of children aged 36–59 months – and only 12 per cent of children from the bottom income quintile households – are developmentally on track in literacy and numeracy assessments¹⁹, severely affecting their school readiness. While one year of compulsory ECE forms part of the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP), 19 per cent of children do not access ECE in Nepal, rising to 50 per cent for the most disadvantaged children²⁰.

The consequences of Child Protection violations are particularly severe for young children; often with lifelong negative impacts²¹. 82 per cent of children in Nepal experience violent discipline across a range of settings, including schools, community settings and homes²². There are shortfalls in basic systems and services – such as birth registration, case management and referrals – which combine with negative social norms and a lack of understanding of the negative consequences of child protection violations.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) interventions are critical to child development outcomes, including in the early years. Only 19 per cent of the population of Nepal has access to safely managed drinking water, and around 5 per cent of the population practise open defecation²³. While 78 per cent of schools had improved water sources and 83 per cent improved sanitation facilities, very few have met the quality standards for gender and disability²⁴. Climate change poses increased risks of depletion and contamination of water sources, especially for pipe-water supply, impacting people in hills and urban areas.

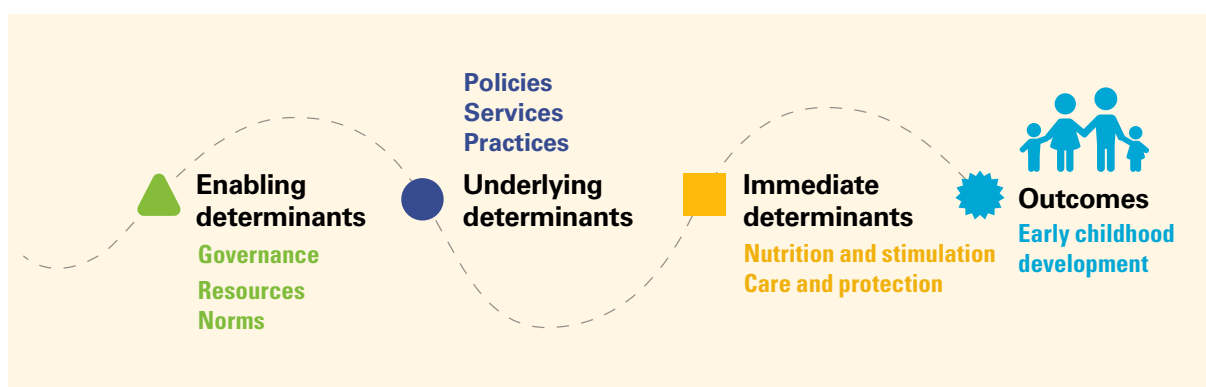
Responsive Parenting and Caregiving is one of the critical areas of the Nurturing Care Framework (see Figure 1 above). Yet Nepal lags behind on some of the key markers of responsive caregiving. According to a recent Nepal household survey²⁵: 21 per cent of children under 5 had been left alone or in the care of another child younger than 10 years of age for more than one hour at least once in the last week; only 67 per cent of children aged 36–59 months had been engaged by an adult household member in four or more activities to promote learning and school readiness in the past three days; only 5 per cent of children under five had three or more children's books at home.



2 CAUSAL ANALYSIS & CHALLENGES

This section describes the challenges and opportunities of ECD in Nepal. It draws on a causal analysis framework (see Figure 3 below; further expanded in Annex 1), modified from UNICEF’s global ECD Vision Document²⁶.

FIGURE 3 Causal Analysis of optimal Early Childhood Development



(modified from UNICEF global ECD Vision Document ²⁷)

2.1 Enabling determinants: Governance, Norms, Resources

GOVERNANCE: Nepal is characterised by weak central, provincial and municipality level planning, implementation, and monitoring. At the national level, there is a lack of coordination between line Ministries leading on implementation of the national ECD Strategy, and an absence of leadership from the central ECD Council which remains inactive. At the sub-national level, provinces and municipalities have struggled to integrate the national ECD Strategy into their own planning, budgeting and implementation arrangements. Notably, roughly one-third of the 753 local governments lack sufficient capacities and human resources to effectively develop and implement plans and strategies and utilize available resources to support the delivery of social services for children. This challenge is particularly noteworthy

considering the constitutional provisions of federalism and efforts to decentralize services to local governments across the country. There is a lack of accountability inside and outside of government, to ensure that duty bearers deliver on their responsibilities; and Nepal lacks political will and broad national coalitions that put young children at the centre of the political and policy agenda. There is also a need to ensure that ECD planning and implementation is both risk-informed and climate-sensitive.

RESOURCES: Despite increased investments in ECD in recent years, there are shortfalls in ECD financing, both in national-level budgeting, and, critically, at provincial and municipal levels. Nominal 10% allocations for 'children' in Village Development Committee budgets in previous governance mechanism are no longer in practice and budgets are now prioritized towards physical infrastructure. At all levels of Government (though it varies across sectors), budget execution can be

low²⁸, resulting in inefficiency and under-utilisation of resources allocated to ECD. The international community should supplement public financing with more resources and technical assistance for ECD. It is also important that out-of-pocket expenditure – notably fees for privately provided early childhood care and education services – do not constitute a barrier to children from low-income households accessing services, nor add to unsustainable debt burdens for low-income parents and caregivers.

NORMS: Positive social, cultural, gender and religious norms, community engagement, knowledge sharing, positive and service seeking behaviours are vital to enable optimal development in young children. However, a negative norm's framework in Nepal might increase the risk contributing to a range of challenges that impact – either directly or indirectly – young children: poor dietary intake and nutrition; violence against women and children; early pregnancy; poor sanitation and hygiene practices; limited education and opportunities for young children with disabilities; poor parenting practices; different forms of discrimination and exclusion.

2.2 Underlying determinants: Policies, Services, Practices

POLICIES: The Government of Nepal's 'National Strategy for Early Childhood Development 2077-2088'²⁹ is both comprehensive and ambitious in its approach. While the policy and legislative underpinning of that Strategy is generally well-developed, there are gaps in policies, tools and guidance relating to ECD; for example, in areas such as early identification, intervention, and referral services, Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) systems, and disaster preparedness and risk reduction. There is also a need to enhance people-centred policies at the national and sub-national levels.

SERVICES: There are two principal bottlenecks with respect to ECD services in Nepal: (i) gaps in the availability and quality of some services provided by health, nutrition, education and other service delivery points, and (ii) weak linkages across sectors and service delivery platforms. Effective ECD services require sectoral line Ministries, service delivery platforms and professional cadres to execute their functions under their own leadership (e.g. immunization, therapeutic feeding, early learning). But they also require integration of many services (e.g. all sectors share services and outcomes related to responsive caregiving) and optimization of these platforms for the integrated development of the child. Integration is difficult and requires changes in systems, practices, professional competencies and working culture. There is also a need to ensure that services are people-centred to ensure access to the most marginalized communities, as well as resilient and able to withstand growing climate risks and to deliver in humanitarian crises.

PRACTICES: In this document, practices refer to parenting and caregiving practices that protect, promote and support adequate nutrition, stimulation, care, early learning, health and protection. There is limited awareness among parents, caregivers and communities in Nepal of the importance of ECD (see Section 1 above). This creates two problems: (i) parenting and caregiving practices and behaviours that are not conducive to ECD outcomes, and (ii) lack of demand for ECD services, resulting in lack of pressure for Government to provide those services (this has resulted in some municipalities not using their block grants for ECD services, for example).

2.3 Immediate determinants: Nutrition & Stimulation, Care & Protection

NUTRITION & STIMULATION: Good policies, services, parenting and caregiving practices must work in combination – and in an integrated manner – to create two immediate determinants of ECD outcomes: adequate nutrition and stimulation, and adequate care and protection. The first requires nutritious diets and responsive feeding, and conditions that enable early stimulation and learning. Yet, 1 million children in Nepal are stunted; 5 in 10 children from low-income households do not access early childhood education, and 1 in 5 children aged 2-4 do not receive early engagement and responsive care.

CARE & PROTECTION: Adequate care and protection are driven by policies, services and practices that promote and support nurturing care and good health, and that protect young children from adverse experiences and toxic stress. Yet, half of children aged 1-14 in Nepal

suffer from physical punishment as part of child-rearing and care practices³⁰.

2.4 Outcomes

OUTCOMES: These enabling, underlying and immediate determinants combine to support ECD outcomes: improved survival, physical growth, cognitive development, health, school readiness and school performance. In turn these outcomes provide the foundations for individual and community flourishing, social cohesion and economic growth. The best measure of ECD outcomes is the Early Childhood Development Index (ECDI). In Nepal, only two thirds of children aged 36-59 are developmentally on track according to the ECDI³¹.

The next Section of the ECD Vision & Action Plan describes the Strategic Framework for UNICEF Nepal's work in ECD; working within and across sectors in an integrated manner to address these determinants of early childhood development.

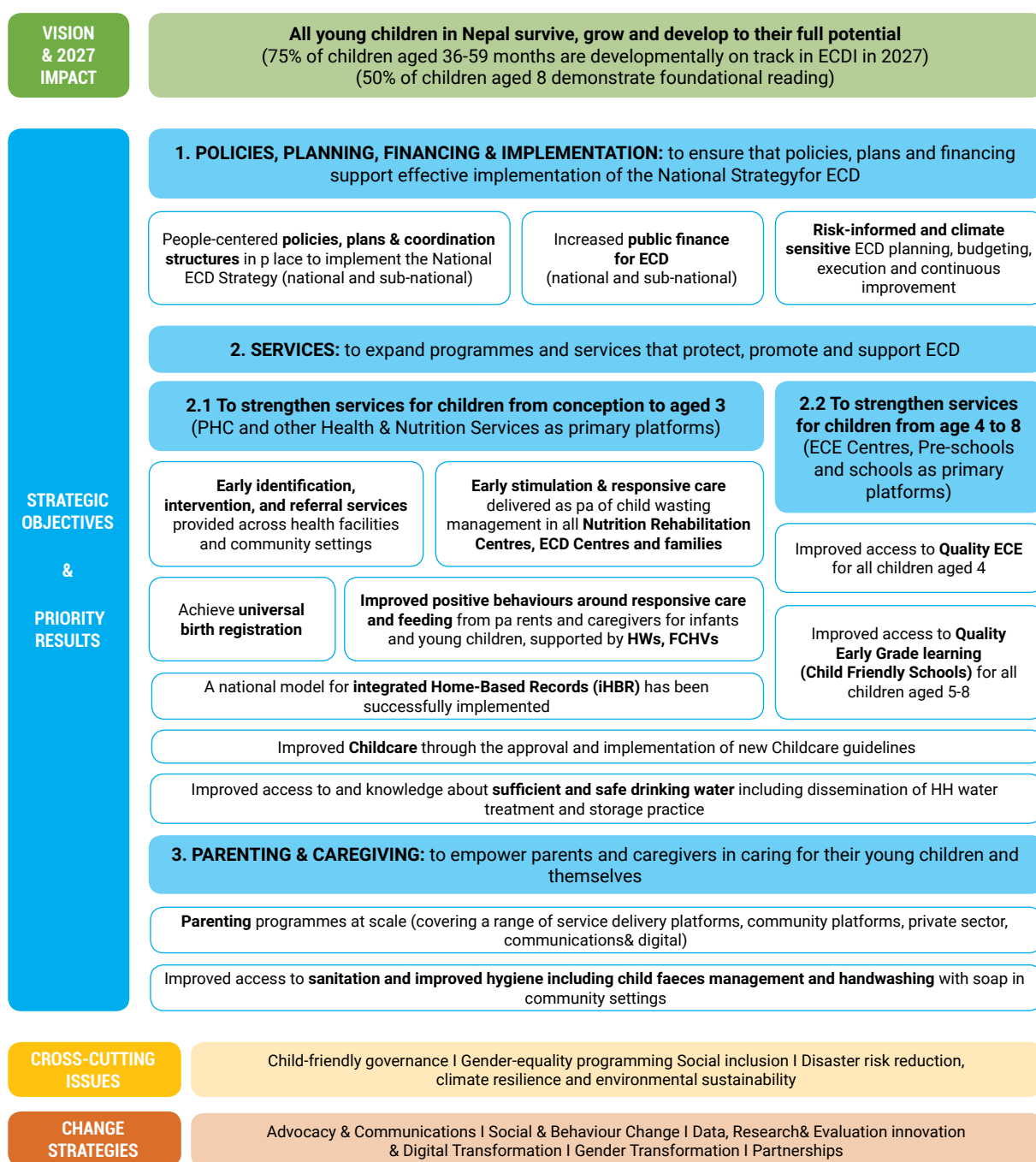




3 UNICEF NEPAL ECD STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK (2025-2027) & PRIORITY RESULTS

Figure 4 below describes the Strategic Framework for UNICEF Nepal’s ECD Vision & Action Plan.

FIGURE 4 UNICEF Nepal ECD Strategic Framework (2025-2027)



The vision of UNICEF Nepal's ECD Vision & Action Plan is that all young children survive, grow and develop to their full potential. In support of this vision, the Action Plan adopts two impact targets: (i) 75 per cent of children aged 36-59 months are developmentally on track in the Early Childhood Development Index (ECDI) in 2027 (against a baseline of 65.2 per cent for 2019³²), and (ii) 50 per cent of children aged 8 demonstrate foundational reading (against a baseline of 40 per cent of girls and 38 per cent of boys in 2019³³).

In support of this vision and impact target, the Action Plan has three Strategic Objectives, as follows:

- 1. POLICIES, PLANNING, FINANCING & IMPLEMENTATION:** to ensure that policies, plans and financing support effective implementation of the National Strategy for ECD;
- 2. SERVICES:** to expand programmes and services that protect, promote and support early childhood development;
- 3. PARENTING & CAREGIVING:** to support parents and caregivers in caring for their young children and themselves.

Priority Results are further described in rest of this section. These result areas do not represent the full breadth of UNICEF Nepal's activities relating to ECD (see Annex 2 for a fuller description). Rather, they are areas that UNICEF Nepal has chosen to prioritise over the coming three years based on high need, high potential impact and comparative advantage of UNICEF Nepal relative to other national and international actors. Outcome and Activity targets for the Priority Results are described in Annex 3. Though many of the Result Areas are described under thematic or sectoral headings – to reflect both Government line Ministry leadership and UNICEF Nepal organisational structure – in reality, many of the activities described are integrated across sectors and services and require coordinated multi-sectoral implementation.

1 POLICIES, PLANNING, FINANCING & IMPLEMENTATION: to ensure that policies, plans and financing support effective implementation of the National Strategy for ECD

People-centered policies, plans and coordination structures are in place to implement the National ECD Strategy (national and sub-national). Nepal has struggled to put in place the policies, plans, financing, and coordination structures needed to deliver the National Strategy for ECD at both the national and sub-national level. The target of this Action Plan is that the ECD Steering Committee is established and functioning effectively at both national and at the sub-national (provincial) levels. UNICEF will support the following activities:

- advocate for and support the national ECD Steering Committee to be established and functioning;
- support Provincial governments and relevant stakeholders to develop ECD Steering Committees, focal points and budgeted integrated ECD plans; and support reviews of their implementation.

Increased public finance for ECD (national and sub-national). Financing – both budget allocation and budget execution – represents a binding constraint to better ECD outcomes in Nepal. The target of this Action Plan is a 10% increase in government budget allocated to ECD. UNICEF will support the following activities at federal, provincial and local government levels:

- conduct ECD Annual budget allocation and expenditure analysis;
- conduct pre-budget consultations at federal level (including across relevant line Ministries), and at provincial and local government levels, and advocate for increased budget to ECD;

- monitor child grant utilisation and advocate for linkages with ECE and other sectors;
- encourage household child grant recipients to invest time and resources for ECD.

Risk-informed and climate sensitive ECD planning, budgeting, execution and continuous improvement. Implementation of the National Strategy for ECD requires planning and execution that is fully informed by vulnerabilities and risks, and by the potential impacts of climate change, at all levels of Government. The target of this Action Plan is at least 80 local governments have: (i) functioning ECD Steering Committees³⁴, (ii) locally integrated ECD plans, with priority ECD activities visible in sectoral plans covering Health, Nutrition, Education, Child Protection and WASH, (c) dedicated ECD focal points / coordinators, with those positions funded in local government budgets. UNICEF will support the following activities:

- conduct vulnerability and capacity assessments;
- support local integrated ECD plan development workshops;
- support capacity building of local governments.; including to review implementation of plans and course-correct accordingly.

2 SERVICES: to expand programmes and services that protect, promote and support early childhood development

Early Identification and Early Intervention (EIEI) of developmental delays and disabilities. As much as 50 per cent of the onset of disabilities happen before the age of 10 in Nepal³⁵. EIEI is therefore a critical intervention to advance ECD outcomes in Nepal. In line with the ECD Health guiding framework and global guidance on EIEI, UNICEF will support the Government to

develop a national model and tools for EIEI, to ensure consistent and systematic screening and management of developmental delays and disabilities across different platforms. The target of this Action Plan is that localised EIEI tools are implemented in over 50 per cent of health platforms in one priority Province, including health facilities and communities. UNICEF support will include the following activities:

- adapt EIEI tools from other settings;
- train health workers and community health volunteers;
- implement localised EIEI tools in model health facilities and communities;
- demonstrate results from the modelling;
- develop a national EIEI guideline.

Integrated Home-Based Records (iHBR).

The iHBR for mother and child health consolidates maternal and child records and information in a single handbook, enhancing care continuity – eight antenatal visits, hospital delivery, and postnatal/neonatal care – and promoting home-based care and husband involvement. The iHBR has also been demonstrated as a cost-effective strategy, with the potential to save several million dollars each year³⁶. The target for this Action Plan is that a national iHBR model is implemented in at least two priority provinces. UNICEF support will include the following activities:

- develop a national iHBR model and guidelines, based on findings from a situation analysis;
- train health workers and community health volunteers;
- implement iHBR (check-up, data recording, counselling) in two selected Provinces;
- develop a national roadmap for expanding iHBR;
- implement iHBR based on the roadmap.

Early stimulation and responsive care delivered as part of child wasting management in all Nutrition Rehabilitation Centres, ECD Centres and families.

Nutrition Rehabilitation Centres (NRCs) provide a service delivery point to access children suffering from wasting, but also, a critical contact point with parents and caregivers of vulnerable children. The target for this Action Plan is that all NRCs provide early stimulation and responsive care and infant and child feeding counselling. UNICEF will work to promote early stimulation and responsive care in NRCs through the following activities:

- revise the Comprehensive Nutrition Sensitive Intervention (CNSI) guidelines and training manual to include early stimulation, responsive care and child feeding aligned with the new UNICEF infant and young child feeding (IYCF) guidelines;
- support the establishment of child-friendly play areas in NRCs, designed with and for the users;
- support training of NRC staff to deliver parenting education.

Improved positive behaviours around responsive care and feeding from parents and caregivers supported by HWs and FCHVs.

Nepal has a well-developed community health infrastructure supported by HWs and FCHVs; this platform provides an excellent opportunity to access parents and caregivers. The targets for this Action Plan are: (a) 35 per cent of HWs in NRCs and FCHVs in the NRC catchment areas are trained on early stimulation and responsive care and child feeding per year, and (b) over 50 per cent of parents / caregivers provide responsive care and feeding. UNICEF will work to support these cadres of health support workers through the following activities:

- increase supportive supervision and coaching for HWs and FCHVs on quality early stimulation and responsive caregiving and feeding practice;

- support social behavioural change and community engagement to increase demand ECD and nutrition services.

Universal birth registration. Birth registration is critical to fulfilling the rights of the child, including their access to basic services such as healthcare, education and legal protection. Additionally, children without a birth certificate are more vulnerable to violence, abuse and exploitation. In Nepal, 23 per cent of children under the age of five do not have birth certificates. The target for this Action Plan is that 100 per cent of civil registration centres are covered by the online Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) system. UNICEF will support the following activities:

- support the identification of children left behind through vulnerability assessments;
- provide administrative and legal aid to children left behind in focus municipalities;
- roll out guidelines to facilitate online CRVS systems;
- roll out interoperable systems between health and civil registration in focus municipalities.

Improved access to quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) for all children aged 4. ECE is critical to young children's development and future life chances. UNICEF will support capacity development of the federal, provincial and local government on promoting access to quality and holistic early learning opportunities. At the local levels, UNICEF will focus on improving access to school based ECE that meets government minimum standards with strong inter-sectoral linkages and will also support efforts to improve the supply of quality ECE through teacher development and the development of teaching and learning materials. The targets for this Action Plan are: (a) 83 per cent of children aged 4 are accessing ECE, (b) 75 per cent of ECE Centres meet at least 3 Minimum Enabling Standards, (c) 1.5% of children with disabilities benefiting from the access to ECED services. UNICEF support will include the following activities:

- support Government scale up of the Early Learning Development Standards (ELDS) report card;
- establish and demonstrate alternative ECE mechanisms;
- promote model ECED classroom design and climate change resilient playgrounds.

Improved access to Quality Early Grade learning (Child Friendly Schools) for all children aged 5–8. Early Grade Learning is an essential building block for lifelong learning. UNICEF is promoting child friendly school systems which prioritizes the needs, interests, and well-being of children. It aims to create learning environments that are safe, inclusive, and supportive, fostering a love of learning and promoting holistic development. The targets for this Action Plan are (a) 60 % of children 'ready to learn' in Grade 1, and (b) % of children meeting expected learning proficiency levels by Grade 3 (42.5 literacy and 40.5% numeracy). UNICEF support will include the following activities:

- scale up remedial learning measures for marginalized children upon entry to Grade 1;
- scale up strategies to improve foundational literacy and numeracy;
- promote inclusive education (language, gender and disability).

Improved childcare. Childcare is not formalized in Nepal, but informally integrated with preschools, particularly in the private sector. This has led to higher academic pressures and lack of age-appropriate practices for children. Furthermore, there are disparities in terms of service availability and quality by income group, due to lack of government support and regulation. The target for this Action Plan is that National child care guidelines and minimum standards developed. UNICEF will work with the Government to:

- develop childcare guidelines and standards;
- build capacity of stakeholders to implement these guidelines and standards;

- promote social behaviour change with respect to family friendly policies, including childcare.

Improved access to sufficient and safe drinking water including dissemination of household water treatment and storage practice. Improved drinking water can help reduce disease and undernutrition and support better health outcomes for young children. The target for this Action Plan is to achieve universal coverage in Basic + service levels in 60 per cent of targeted community water points and 60 per cent of targeted households. UNICEF support to improved access to sufficient and safe drinking water for young children will include the following activities:

- provide improved and child friendly WASH services in ECD/ ECE Centres/ public spaces;
- provide improved WASH services in education and health facilities providing ECD services;
- support implementation of gender sensitive and climate resilient water supply schemes to vulnerable communities (new, repair and rehabilitation);
- support communities to achieve water safe status and promoting household water treatment and storage practices (boil water for baby food and drinks, safe storage).

3 PARENTING & CAREGIVING: to empower parents and caregivers in caring for their young children and themselves

Parenting programmes at scale. Parenting programmes were historically regarded as education sector programmes. However, the education sector only has access to parents/caregivers of children from age three, leaving a gap for the zero to three age range. Furthermore, parenting needs are diverse and require a multi-sectoral approach. Given the huge demand as well, there needs to be

programming at scale. The target for this Action Plan is a government owned parenting education strategy developed, and 100,000 parents/caregivers improve their knowledge and skills through the parenting education national package through various sectoral platform by 2027. UNICEF will support the following activities:

- work to build ownership from line ministries to work together on positive parenting;
- support the government to refine and disseminate the parenting education national package;
- facilitate development of the parenting education strategy under the leadership of the NPC;
- assist line ministries to expand parenting education through sectoral interventions.

Improved access to and knowledge about sanitation and improved hygiene including child faeces management and handwashing. Sanitation and hygiene are critical to child health and broader ECD outcomes. The target for this Action Plan is to achieve basic sanitation and hygiene service levels in 90 per cent of households in targeted areas. UNICEF support to improved access to sanitation and improved hygiene for young children will include the following activities:

- provide access to improved hygiene services and facilities to facilitate management of child faeces and hand washing of mothers and babies in community settings;
- provide support to attain and sustain Open Defecation Free status and access to safely managed sanitation services;
- provide orientation to FCHVs/ Water User Groups on good WASH behaviours (drinking safe water, use of toilet including disposing child faeces, hand washing) in intervention municipalities;
- provide orientation to ECD classes including ECD teachers in schools on use of safe water, using toilet, washing hands with soap and water.

The Strategic Framework additionally prioritises four cross-cutting issues, consistent with the UNICEF Nepal 'Country Programme Action Plan 2023-2027'³⁷: (i) child-friendly governance, (ii) gender-equality programming, (iii) social inclusion, and (iv) disaster risk reduction, climate resilience and environmental sustainability. These are further described in Annex 2.

4 CHANGE STRATEGIES

This Action Plan prioritises six main change strategies to achieve the priority results. These change strategies will be executed in a way that emphasises integrated and convergent programming.

ADVOCACY & COMMUNICATIONS: this ECD Vision & Action plan is supported by an 'ECD Advocacy Plan', which sets out UNICEF Nepal's vision, goals and approaches for ECD Advocacy. The primary focus of UNICEF Nepal's ECD advocacy is to support this Action Plan's first two Results relating to policies, plans, financing and implementation: 1. Policies, plans & coordination structures in place to implement the National ECD Strategy (national and sub-national), and 2. Increased public finance for ECD. Advocacy activities will focus on decision-makers in the three tiers of Government, and will engage a range of allies and influencers, including parliamentarians, professional associations and parent groups.

SOCIAL & BEHAVIOUR CHANGE: UNICEF Nepal's work on Social & Behaviour Change aims to improve both individual behaviours and broader social norms, through a range of demand-side approaches (social listening, community engagement, strategic communication and influencers, etc.) and supply-side communities-centred interventions (service improvements, supportive policies, systems strengthening

and social accountability among others). It targets a range of ECD outcomes critical for this ECD Vision & Action, notably: uptake of routine immunization; exclusive breastfeeding and improved dietary diversity; improved handwashing and reduced open defecation; increased pre-school and school enrolment; improved parenting behaviours and practices; increased female autonomy and increased male involvement in care; empowered marginalized groups; and improved trust in institutions.

DATA, RESEARCH & EVALUATION: data and evidence are critical to understand needs, focus policies, target services and create accountability for outcomes. There are shortcomings in Nepal in sectoral information management systems (e.g. HMIS, EMIS), in household survey data and in quality research related to ECD. UNICEF will work with Government, academia, civil society and major development partners to strengthen data collection and utilisation and the use of evidence; with a particular focus on capturing data relating to equity and inclusion in ECD services, behaviours and outcomes.

INNOVATION & DIGITAL

TRANSFORMATION: UNICEF will support: (i) innovations in service provision, such as alternative models to deliver early childhood education, (ii) innovations in professional practices and protocols, such as revised Comprehensive Nutrition Sensitive Intervention (CNSI) guidelines, (iii) innovations in the design and execution of demand-side interventions, such as behavioural research and nudging, and (iv) innovations in products, such as the Parenting App. Innovations may be 'low-tech' (e.g. Integrated Home-Based Records) or digital (e.g. online CRVS systems) in nature.

GENDER TRANSFORMATION: UNICEF Nepal's 'Gender Strategy 2024-2027' prioritises five areas, all of which directly intersect with ECD: (i) quality maternal health and nutrition services, counselling and care,

(ii) gender-responsive education systems and equitable access to education for all, (iii) addressing violence against girls, boys and women, as well as harmful behaviours, norms and practices, (iv) equitable WASH systems, and (v) gender-responsive social protection systems and care work. It also prioritises adolescent girls' rights, well-being, and leadership. The Gender Strategy adopts as one of its priority actions to "Integrate gender systematically into the vision and plans of the [Government's] holistic ECD strategy", with a priority focus on the National Parenting Education Package supported by UNICEF.

PARTNERSHIPS: UNICEF will partner primarily, but not exclusively, with the Government to support implementation of the National Strategy for ECD. This will include all levels of Government: from central line Ministries and the National Planning Commission, through Provincial Governments to local Municipalities and Palikas, in areas of highest need. UNICEF will also partner with civil society organisations, academia and the private sector (for example, on childcare policies). UNICEF Nepal's 'Communication, Advocacy and Partnerships' Section will lead UNICEF's Partnerships work, including resource mobilisation with national and international funders.

5 UNICEF NEPAL: CAPABILITIES, LEADERSHIP & COORDINATION STRUCTURES, RESOURCING

UNICEF has unique capabilities in ECD. Globally, UNICEF has over 15,000 staff working to support children in over 190 countries. UNICEF Nepal has teams working across Health, Nutrition, Education, Child Protection, WASH and Social Policy, Governance and Evaluation; as well as specialists in Social & Behavioural Change, Communication, Advocacy and Partnership, Gender, Disability and Emergencies. UNICEF has unique access to Line Ministries,

strong convening capability linked to the UNICEF brand, and sub-national presence through Field Offices located in Janakpur, Siddharthanagar, Surkhet and Dhangadhi.

ECD forms one of three over-arching priorities for UNICEF Nepal³⁸. All UNICEF staff will be engaged in the execution of this Action Plan. The leadership structure for the Action Plan will be as follows:

- The UNICEF Nepal Deputy Representative will provide overall leadership and oversight of the ECD Vision & Action Plan.
- Day-to-day coordination will be the responsibility of the Education (ECD) Specialist (50 per cent FTE) based in the Education Section.
- There will be ECD leads for each of the two main age groups and delivery platforms:
 - Conception to Age 3: ECD Lead from the Nutrition or Health Sections (optimising Health and Nutrition platforms);
 - Age 4-8: ECD Lead in the Education Section (optimising Education and Parenting platforms).
- Each of the Sections and each of the Field Offices will have designated ECD Focal Points.
- These staff collectively form the 'ECD Task Team'.

The implementation and accountability structure will be as follows:

- The detail implementation plan (internal document) specifies 'Lead' and 'Support' functions for each of the Priority Results that constitute the Action Plan. Primary responsibility and accountability for Priority Results sit with the nominated Lead.
- The ECD Task Team will meet quarterly in an 'ECD Vision & Action Plan Quarterly Review Meeting' chaired by the Deputy Representative, to review progress against the ECD Vision & Action Plan – based on

the Implementation Plan components and identify bottlenecks and corrective actions to move the Action Plan forward. The Education (ECD) Specialist will support the preparation of the Quarterly Meeting.

- Progress on resourcing and implementation of the ECD Vision & Action Plan will be periodically reviewed at the UNICEF Nepal Programme Team and Programme Coordination Group meetings. This is also an opportunity to resolve specific implementation bottlenecks.
- The Country Management Team will also review progress on implementation of the ECD Vision & Action Plan on an annual or bi-annual basis, according to need.

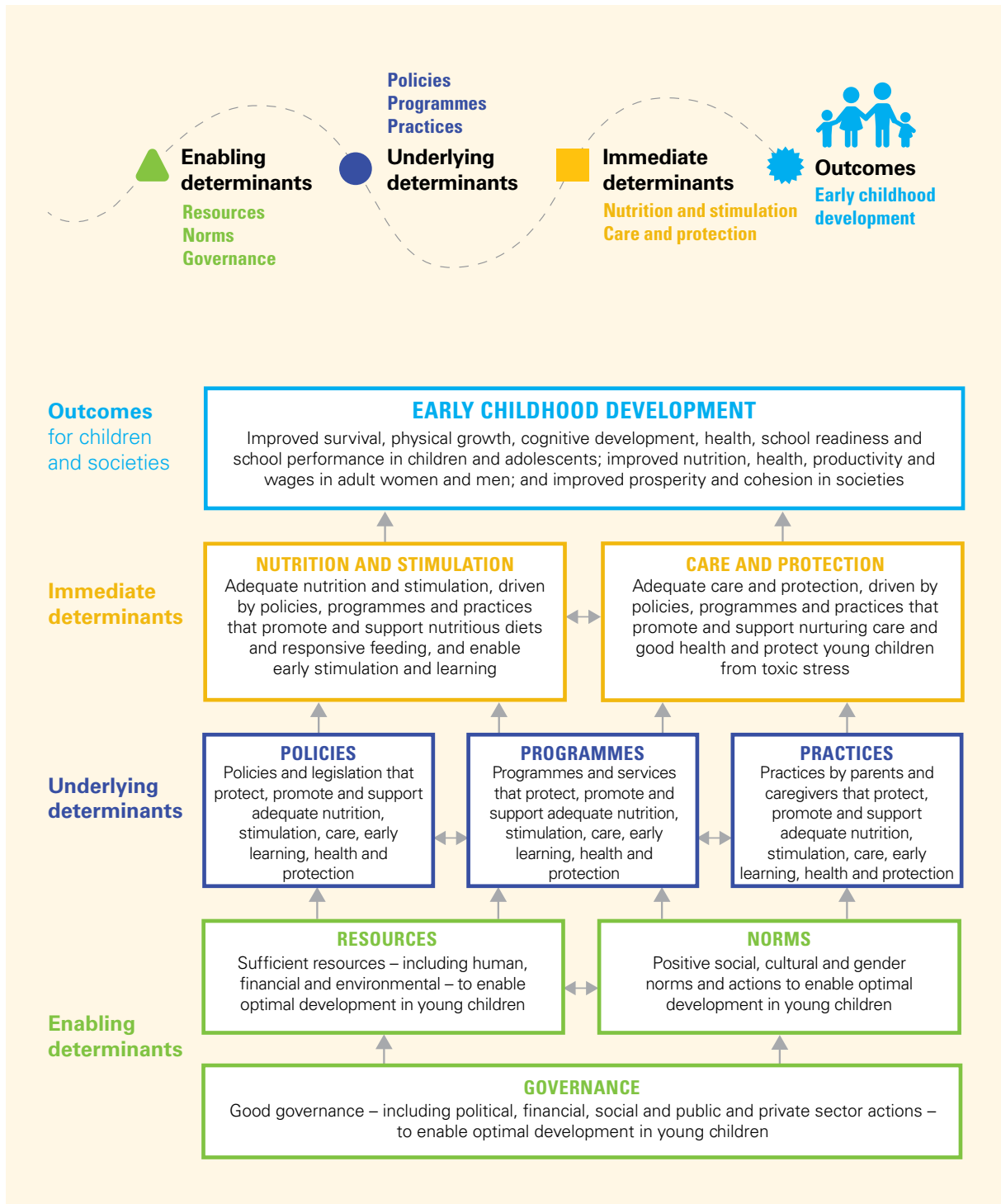
The activities and priority Results foregrounded in this ECD Vision & Action Plan are not fully funded. Some activities are funded, and many are ongoing; for others, UNICEF is seeking to mobilize additional resources. Resourcing will function as follows:

- Resource Mobilisation in UNICEF Nepal is led from the Communications, Advocacy and Partnerships Section; actively supported by the UNICEF Nepal Representative and Deputy Representative based on the resource mobilization strategy.
- The Communications, Advocacy & Partnerships Section will lead on resource mobilisation for the ECD Vision & Action Plan, supported by the Education (ECD) Specialist. Resources will be mobilised: for the Plan as a whole; for specific integrated activities (e.g. Parenting, Social and Behaviour Change); and for activities with more of a thematic or sectoral focus (e.g. WASH).
- Individual Sections will integrate resource mobilisation efforts into their own thematic and sector-specific fundraising efforts and proposals (e.g. Health, Education).

We urge you to join us in the execution of this plan, to realise the vast potential of young children in Nepal.

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1 Causal Analysis of optimal Early Childhood Development³⁹



ANNEX 2 UNICEF Nepal ECD-related activities (with Strategy priority areas highlighted)

HEALTH 	NUTRITION 	WASH 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maternal and newborn health • Maternal and caregiver mental health • Immunization and management of common childhood illnesses • Early detection and intervention for developmental delays and disabilities • Early stimulation in Child Health and Immunization programmes • Integrated Home-based Records to track health care history 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maternal nutrition before, during and after pregnancy • Breastfeeding, complementary foods and responsive feeding and care • Fortified foods and micronutrient supplements for children and women • Early detection and treatment of child malnutrition • Early stimulation in Child Nutrition and Development programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe and affordable drinking water • Safe handling and storage of drinking water • Sanitation, including the safe disposal of child faeces • Handwashing with soap at critical times by caregivers and young children
EDUCATION 	CHILD PROTECTION 	SOCIAL POLICY 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early childhood care and education services • Parenting support for early learning and caregiving • Enhanced home-learning environments • Social-emotional development of children • Inclusive early childhood education for children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal identity, including birth registration • Mental health and psychosocial support of children and caregivers • Prevention of violence against children and women in family settings • Prevention and response to child abuse and neglect • Prevention of family separation and promotion of family-based alternative care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measurement of child poverty in early childhood • Inclusive social protection, including child benefits and health insurance • Family-friendly policies and care • Local governance for early childhood services • Public investment in early childhood development

CROSS-CUTTING

- **Child-friendly governance:** building capacities for child-friendly strategic planning and implementation at national, provincial and local government levels, involving children, families and communities. This is particularly important in the context of UNICEF support to municipalities in financing and operationalising a context-specific approach to ECD.
- **Gender-equality programming:** supporting the well-being and agency of girls and women; promoting positive gender norms; addressing gender-based and other violence, and mental health support. This implies not only a focus on women as primary caregivers for young children, but also attention to the dynamics of gender socialisation from an early age.
- **Social inclusion:** addressing disparities by and in age, caste, disability, education, ethnicity, geography, gender, migration and wealth status – through advocacy, support to planning, and modelling inclusive and equitable service delivery approaches. This implies focused support to particular populations and geographies, but also a mainstreaming of social inclusion across all ECD-related services and in Social and Behaviour Change activities.
- **Disaster risk reduction, climate resilience and environmental sustainability:** building community resilience, child-sensitive climate adaptation and mitigation models, and enhancing child-centred disaster risk reduction and emergency response preparedness capacities of young people and Government. DRR and climate resilience must be incorporated in ECD planning and implementation at all levels of Government, and across all ECD-related service delivery points (e.g. climate-smart ECE facilities and playgrounds).



ENDNOTES

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