2017 Pacific Early Childhood Development Conference
Moving Forward with Sustainable Development Goals for Early Childhood
Denarau Island Nadi, Fiji
September 19-21, 2017

Pasifika Call to Action for Early Childhood Development

PREAMBLE

We, Ministers of the Education, Health, Social Services and Finance sectors, and our senior government representatives from 15 Pacific Island countries, gathered in Nadi, Fiji, from 19 to 21 September 2017 for the first Conference on “Moving Forward with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for Early Childhood”, organized by UNICEF, in collaboration with the World Bank and the Pacific Regional Council for Early Childhood Care and Education;

1. Recognise the vast diversity and complexity in the Pacific region and note that this call to action represents a unified vision for the holistic development of our young children.

2. Recognise that parents, families and communities are critical to Early Childhood Development (ECD) in the Pacific and therefore our actions must be supportive and reflective of their contexts including appropriate traditional and cultural practices, and their aspirations for our youngest children.

3. Recognise that investments in ECD are vital for individuals and societies to reach their full potential. Accordingly, we endorse the development targets for young children embodied in the SDGs and particularly SDG Goal 4, “Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning” and SDG Target 4.2., which calls for all member countries to ensure that “by 2030, all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.” Furthermore, we recognize that ECD is reflected across the other SDGs, with multiplier effects that help fulfil global, regional and national goals related to poverty, hunger, nutrition, environment, social and emotional development, health and well-being, gender equality, work and economic growth, inequality, sustainable living, and peace.¹

And therefore after considerable discussion at this conference, we adopt this call to action.

¹The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines early childhood as extending from the prenatal stage through to the transition to primary school or age 8.
ECD AS THE FOUNDATION OF INCLUSIVE PROSPERITY FOR ALL

Evidence on benefits of ECD investments (for detailed advocacy note please refer Annex I)

I. Neuroscience and Child Development
   a. Neuroscience evidence indicates immense benefits of positive early life experiences, and evidence is also clear that quality ECD services contribute to cognitive capital.
   b. High-quality ECD systems and programmes contribute to lifelong achievements and improved socio economic outcomes.

II. Economic Benefits
   a. Investments in holistic ECD yield attractive benefits. In best-case scenarios, one USD invested in ECD can yield a return as high as USD 17.
   b. High returns have been consistently delivered across a range of contexts, with average annual rates of return of 13.7 percent.
   c. Long-term studies show that early interventions can increase individual’s future earnings by of up to 25 per cent.

III. Socio Cultural Benefits
   a. Investments in holistic ECD yields social returns.
   b. Experts underscore the importance during the early years of ‘nurturing care’ that encompasses health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, security and safety, and early learning and is a vital ingredient in high-quality ECD.
   c. Especially in the Pacific this involves learnings and focus on family and community based care and traditional social settings.

Challenges in the Pacific region

Significant challenges exist in the provision of quality services for young children.

- Across the region, an alarming 70 per cent of 3-5 year olds do not have access to pre-primary or preschool education. An average of 25 children for every 1,000 live births die before reaching the age of five. Around 38.3 per cent of children in the Pacific are stunted. Some countries struggle to develop and/or implement protection frameworks and systems. Also, there is a gap in many countries for 0-3 age group interventions.
- Existing legislations and policies on ECD are usually limited in scope or mandate. Most governments do not prioritize ECD in their social and economic sector development plans. Public investment is very low and fails to meet international benchmarks.
- There is limited awareness and understanding amongst communities and stakeholders on the importance of ECD to the future of countries, communities and individuals.
ACTION AGENDA FOR PACIFIC ISLAND GOVERNMENTS TO ACHIEVE SDG TARGETS FOR ECD

Pacific leaders in endorsing the Pacific Roadmap for Sustainable Development commit to focusing their national as well as regional collective efforts to ensure that “no one is left behind” and requisite resources are secured. All actions for ECD will build on existing positive cultural, family and national strengths.

We hereby submit the following action items that will, in conjunction with Pacific regional frameworks\(^2\) for education, finance, social welfare and health, contribute towards the realization of SDG Target 4.2 in order to prepare our youngest citizens to be happy, healthy and successful learners, and pave the way for more equitable, inclusive, gender responsive and sustainable social and economic prosperity across Pacific Island countries:

1. **Develop and strengthen** national systems on holistic ECD through a coordinating multisectoral mechanism for the development and review of legislation and policies, coordination of budget allocation and provision of quality services for young children while ensuring the inclusion of the 0-3 age group and children with special needs.
2. **Incorporate** ECD into national development plans with clear implementation mechanisms including cost effective, innovative and scalable interventions.
3. **Articulate** the roles and responsibilities of each Ministry, the lead agency for ECD, and mechanisms for interagency collaboration.
4. **Increase** government investment in ECD through recurrent budgets, with the goal of gradually increasing to accept international benchmarks.\(^3\)
5. **Improve** coordination between government and non-government stakeholders who contribute to ECD.
6. **Provide** the requisite resources (including adequate compensation, improved working conditions, the sharing of best practice and knowledge and competency frameworks) to professionalise the ECD workforce.
7. **Promote** parents, community, and other stakeholders’ awareness of the importance of ECD.
8. **Develop, strengthen and use** comprehensive data management, monitoring and assessment systems for informed decisions on early childhood.
9. **Encourage** development partners to increase and harmonise assistance to support regional and national implementation of ECD related priorities.

**Monitoring the Call to Action**

- Monitor the progress of the Call to Action every two years following this conference, primarily through the development of a monitoring framework that would monitor the status of ECD in the Pacific and reporting it at relevant fora.
- PRC4ECCE will develop a detailed implementation plan, a meeting schedule, identify accountability and monitoring mechanisms. Results and learnings from these actions will be shared in relevant regional and global public fora and platforms.

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\(^2\)“Regional Education Framework”, “Public Financial Management Roadmap for Forum Island Countries” and “The Healthy Islands Monitoring Framework”

\(^3\)International benchmarks of ECD spending are 1 per cent of GDP and 10 per cent of public education funding.
ANNEX I: Evidence on benefits of ECD investments- Detailed Advocacy Note

The elevated status of ECD in the global development charter is underpinned by robust evidence on the impact of early life experiences on lifetime outcomes and socio-economic goals. The following elicit evidence and benefits accrued in recent years on benefits of ECD investments:

I. Neuroscience and Child Development

Advances in neuroscience strongly inform investments in early childhood. Key concepts and evidence which illustrates the relevance of the early years and the enduring benefits of investing here are:

i. The brain is built by genes, experience and environment – a combination of nature with nurture.

ii. The process begins well before birth and is influenced by a pregnant woman's health, nutrition and environment. It is vital to invest earlier, rather than later, because the development of brain architecture in the early years is the foundation of future learning behaviour, and health. The time span between conception and the second birthday of a child, tagged the 'first 1,000 days of life', is an especially critical window. In these earliest days, connections between neurons grow at a speed and complexity that is never again repeated. Research indicates that these connections occur at a pace of at least 1,000 per second. However, recent indications are that the speed could be up to 1 million per second.

iii. Inadequate nutrition, stress, and diminished learning environments undermine the optimal development of the growing brain, with lifelong repercussions.

iv. Exposure to violence, abuse and neglect can produce toxic stress, which when prolonged and extreme, can interfere with the development of neural connections.

v. Neuroscience evidence indicates immense benefits of positive early life experiences. In the early moments of a child’s life, the stimulation that comes with love, play, talk, singing and reading books with a caring adult is not as simple as it seems. It serves an important neurological function. These interactions can boost cognitive, physical, social and emotional development. Brain scientists call this interaction 'serve and return'. And in these interactions between baby and adult, some of the simplest of moments can matter the most: eye contact, a hug, words, a song.

vi. Evidence is also clear that quality ECD services contribute to cognitive capital the capacity of people to think and learn and work together.

vii. High-quality ECD systems and programmes contribute to lifelong achievements and improved socio economic outcomes.

viii. Development in early childhood is a multidimensional and sequential process, with progress in one domain acting as catalyst for development in other domains. It is also rightly pointed out that young children’s lives, and those of their parents, are lived holistically, not in a sectoral way.
II. Economic Benefits

Investments in young children are one of the most cost-effective strategies for healthier and more productive populations, with potential returns that far exceed costs. Economic analyses demonstrate:

i. Rates of return that are among the highest among public investment options.

ii. High returns have been consistently delivered across a range of contexts, with average annual rates of return of 13.7 percent.

iii. In best-case scenarios, it can even yield as high as a 17:1 return on the dollar.

iv. Long-term studies also show that early interventions can increase individual’s future earnings of up to 25 per cent.

v. Investments in young children yield dividends through a stronger workforce, better health, and lower crime rates.

vi. Cross-country evidence shows that by the time children enter primary school, significant gaps already exist between children, and these widen with time. In analyses by Nobel Laureate James Heckman, early interventions were shown to have considerably higher returns – 7 to 10 percent more – compared to equivalent investments in the later years – primary school, secondary school and after.

vii. Allocating 10 per cent of all national education budgets to pre-primary education will greatly expand the number of children with access to early learning opportunities, which can improve their educational attainment and increase future earnings.

viii. ECD is reflected across the other SDGs and investing in it has multiplier effects that help fulfil global, regional and national goals related to addressing poverty, hunger, nutrition, environment, social and emotional development, health and well-being, gender equality, work and economic growth, inequality, disaster and climate change, sustainable living, and peace.

III. Socio Cultural Benefits

Investments in holistic ECD yields tremendous social returns such as:

i. ECD interventions are most effective when done in an integrated and inter-sectoral way.

ii. Addressing children’s development in all domains – health, nutrition, hygiene, learning, protection – better prepares children to enter primary school and primes them to gain the most benefit from formal learning.

iii. Getting children ready for school is a trajectory that starts way earlier and involves children's nested environments from home outwards. Experts underscore the importance of 'nurturing care' in the early years – encompassing health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, security and safety, and early learning – as a vital ingredient for high-quality ECD services.

iv. Interventions ought to start early as significant development gaps already exist by the time children enter primary school, but left unaddressed, these gaps continue to widen with time.

v. Especially in the Pacific ECD interventions involves early learning and focus on family and community based care and traditional social settings.
UNICEF’s recent publication “Early Moments Matter for Every Child”, released on the 21st of September 2017, may please also be further referred to for detailed advocacy inputs

ANNEX II – Endnotes


x The data is based on UNICEF’s sub-regional monitoring reports and cited in UNICEF Pacific’s unpublished Strategy Notes 2018-2022.

xi http://www.who.int/nutgrowthdb/jme_brochure2017.pdf?ua=1


xiii Ibid.


xv The data is based on UNICEF’s sub-regional monitoring reports and cited in UNICEF Pacific’s unpublished Strategy Notes 2018-2022.


xx Ibid.


