

The Early Childhood Development Action Network: a global network to strengthen support for young children

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Mark this year in history as the one when a new global network committed to comprehensive early childhood development *action* is taking off! The Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN¹) is a global partnership committed to the proposition that all young children, anywhere in the world, in any circumstances, should achieve their developmental potential.

The time is ripe for this endeavour. There have been remarkable advances in global evidence on the kinds of interventions – nurturing care², early stimulation, and protection from toxic stress – that can help children reach their full potential. And the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include early childhood development as part of the 2030 transformative agenda. SDG targets under health, nutrition, education, poverty, violence, and clean water and sanitation goals all contribute to better child development outcomes (The Global Goals for Sustainable Development, online).

However, despite the evidence and global attention generated in recent years, an estimated 250 million children under 5 in low- and middle-income countries are at risk of failing to achieve their potential because of adversity during their early, formative years. This affects their brain development, causing lasting damage and contributing to the inter-generational cycle of poverty and lasting inequity. This gap in human potential is partially due to shortfalls in the application of emerging scientific knowledge to shape young children’s development, as well as a failure to take action at scale, using a multi-sector approach (Black *et al.*, 2016). What’s more, while there are several players advocating for young children, their voices and advocacy are fragmented.

It is urgent to scale-up equitable and high-quality programmes across sectors to provide young children with the opportunity to develop to their full potential and lead happy and productive lives. Political commitment, financial investment, coordinated work across stakeholders, and broader understanding of the importance of the early years of a child’s life are all crucial. ECDAN will work, through countries and partners, to move the needle on these issues.

1 There are ongoing discussions about the name of the network and the name will change soon.

2 Nurturing care is defined as a stable environment that is sensitive to children’s health and nutritional needs, with protection against threats; opportunities for early learning; and interactions that are responsive, emotionally supportive and developmentally stimulating (Britto *et al.*, 2016).

A push for coordinated and accelerated action on early childhood development

To address these challenges and opportunities for young children, ECDAN forms a network of actors to catalyse action to improve the lives of young children. UNICEF and the World Bank Group launched the initiative at the flagship World Bank Spring Meetings event, ‘Smart Beginnings for Economies on the Rise’, in April 2016, marking a milestone moment for young children.³ But ECDAN really came to life when a large number of organisations became active participants, making it a real network. So far United Nations agencies (ILO, UNESCO, UNICEF, and WHO), the World Bank, civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations, foundations, the private sector, regional early childhood networks, academics, think tanks, and related global initiatives, have been engaged. An Interim Executive Group comprising representatives of the different ECDAN stakeholders⁴ was set up to develop a blueprint for ECDAN. Soon the essential remaining constituents and countries will join.

Why a network?

ECDAN is not a single entity, but rather a system of interconnected actors and partners working in coordination for a common cause. The participation of this range of actors is critical to translate the existing strong evidence base into action, and to achieve improved child outcomes. This translation is complex and varies by country. To do this, ECDAN will engage a broad range of stakeholders across constituencies, sectors, and levels of government. It will also prioritise the sharing of tools, resources, and actionable knowledge.

In addition, this initiative seeks to complement and work closely with related global partnerships and strategies such as Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN), Global Partnership for Education (GPE), End Violence against Children Partnership (EVP), and Every Woman Every Child (EWEC), which are already effectively coordinating action to promote different aspects of early childhood development. ECDAN also builds on the experience of the Consultative Group on Early Child Care and Development, which has just ended, but for several decades contributed to the improvement of early childhood policy and practice, through coordinated advocacy and the analysis, synthesis, and dissemination of knowledge. And it builds on some existing regional networks, such as the Africa Early Childhood Network (AfECN), Arab Network for Early Childhood Development, Asia Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC), and International Step by Step Association (ISSA), among others.

What will ECDAN do?

In order to achieve its vision of all young children reaching their potential, ECDAN will:

- coordinate action among diverse actors working to support young children at country, regional and global levels

³ Other efforts had also been laying a foundation for greater support for young children, including the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health with its objectives of Survive, Thrive and Transform.

⁴ UN agencies, World Bank, CSOs, early childhood development regional networks, academia and foundations.



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- share knowledge across countries and communities, including technical tools and resources, advocacy materials, etc.
- raise demand for services for young children and their families through expanded and coordinated advocacy initiatives.

These efforts, which will be undertaken through ECDAN partners, will contribute to building a movement to improve outcomes for young children worldwide. Within this movement, ECDAN's priority is to assist countries in their efforts to provide high-quality, equitable services that support parents and other caregivers of young children, especially from birth to age 5. To do this, ECDAN created six 'task forces' to define priorities and start creating, identifying, and/or enhancing key resources and tools in critical areas that ECDAN will support. More than 100 experts and practitioners from a diverse group of partner organisations volunteered their time, creativity, and insight for this endeavour. Here are some examples of what they achieved:

- The **interventions** old group proposed the development of a knowledge hub that can help decision makers narrow the universe of evidence-based intervention possibilities to those most likely to have an impact on young children in their context. The group also created a guide designed to assist

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countries in their efforts to develop multisectoral early childhood initiatives, including an overview of the proven sectoral entry points for establishing and strengthening these initiatives.

- The **workforce** group developed definitions and a typology of early childhood workforce requirements, including volunteers, para-professionals, and professionals; prepared recommendations on financial and technical assistance needed to strengthen workforce capacity; and further enriched a Knowledge Hub with early childhood workforce resources, building on the online portal developed by the Early Childhood Workforce Initiative⁵, co-led by ISSA and the Results for Development (R4D) Institute.
- The **data and evidence** group prepared a global mapping of measurement tools and capacity-building entities. It emphasised the need to create an enabling environment for building/strengthening national early childhood data systems.
- The **financing** group developed recommendations for a common early childhood costing framework, focusing on national capacity building to identify and leverage innovative financing, building on existing global costing tools developed by ECDAN partners. The group also recommended the development of an early childhood financing toolkit for policymakers, and an advocacy tool to leverage financing at country level.
- The **advocacy** group developed a strategy for improving the effectiveness of policy advocacy efforts at national and global levels, including how to connect, inform, and mobilise advocates around young children, and engage leaders outside of the early childhood field. This group is hosting a webinar series among ECDAN partners to exchange advocacy plans and resources, to maximise synergies, and increase the reach of each partner's efforts.
- The **results framework** group developed a Theory of Change and global results framework for ECDAN, including SDG indicators from multiple sectors as well as intermediate indicators, to track progress over time.

How will ECDAN engage with countries?

The primary goal of ECDAN is to accelerate results at the country level. To guide this process, ECDAN has designed a country engagement strategy anchored in two key principles:

- **Universality** All countries will be able to engage with the network, through different modalities.
- **Phased approach** The network will start small, and gradually engage with a larger number of countries to allow sufficient time for learning to guide the expansion of the initiative.

ECDAN will use different modalities of engagement with countries to address different needs and contexts:

- **Learning Countries** In 2017, a small group of countries will start to shape and define ECDAN. While they advance their own country efforts to strengthen planning, prioritisation, coordination and, eventually, implementation, to improve outcomes of young children, they will co-create ECDAN's future.

⁵ Information about the Early Childhood Workforce Initiative is available at <http://www.earlychildhoodworkforce.org>.

- **Action Countries** In 2018, ECDAN will expand efforts to coordinate and scale-up support in a larger group of countries.
- **Learning Exchange Countries** Countries interested in exchanging lessons learned or sharing resources and improving programmes and policies for young children will be embraced as ECDAN matures and develops knowledge-sharing platforms.

What's ahead?

To date, ECDAN has generated tremendous momentum and energy among partners. The network is still in its early days and this learning stage depends on the continued engagement and support of champions from different constituencies working for young children. Incorporating perspectives from participating countries and partners will be critical in shaping ECDAN for the future and ensuring that it can, through coordinated and synergistic action, achieve the goal of all young children, without exception, achieving their developmental potential.

For more information on ECDAN or to join the mailing list, contact:
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