





EDITORIAL

Rising to the challenges of today by investing in the early years for the present and future

Cecilia Vaca Jones

Executive Director

Bernard van Leer
Foundation, The Hague,
the Netherlands

This world is plagued by injustice and inequities that have never been more evident as a global pandemic underlines the enormous gaps in society, from within local communities and cities to between regions and nation states. To shape a better future, investing in early childhood needs to remain a priority for all governments and societies. The earlier we invest in a human being, the greater the economic and social return on the capital invested. This investment must start from before birth to guarantee equal opportunities for all children to develop their full potential and, collectively, set the foundation for a healthy, creative and peaceful world.

This year's *Early Childhood Matters* is launched in a historical moment when our mission, 'ensuring a good start for all children', is more relevant than ever. We are particularly concerned about children with the greatest vulnerability, such as the 22 million children who have been displaced by various crisis situations and the 250 million children living in urban areas in developing countries who are at risk of not attaining their developmental potential. We have only a limited window of opportunity to take action while a child is a baby or toddler, and in the pandemic context this time pressure motivates us to work harder to find agile and creative solutions that can scale much faster. We hope this journal will provide inspiration for more good practices around the world to improve the well-being of societies.

'The future we want, of a healthier and fairer society, begins today with strategic investment in early childhood.'

This issue opens with testimonies from five extraordinary leaders – four of them women – who make a clear call to action to protect populations living through today's humanitarian crisis. In sharing their visions and experiences of having worked at different levels of government and organisations, these leaders highlight the importance of seeking to be more effective in acting across sectors, between different levels of government, and with varied strategic stakeholders to consolidate an effective system of social protection for children.

The 'Scaling' section explores the implementation of diverse early childhood policies and programmes in different parts of the world and the challenges that must be considered when working at scale. Articles describe the successes and challenges faced by various programmes with modalities such as home visiting and parent coaching in reaching the vast majority of the population while prioritising interventions in the most vulnerable populations and households.

This section also highlights the importance of incorporating mental health as a priority policy in early childhood health and care systems. In these difficult times it is vital to sustain the mental health of caregivers, since this enables positive interactions with children. The behaviour of caregivers has a defining impact on the early development of children. In addition, a unique article emphasises the importance of starting in early childhood to deal with identity as a determining factor to promote equity in our societies. Finally, you will find a comparative analysis of different interventions that the Bernard van Leer Foundation has made in four cities to ensure that urban design and planning incorporate actions that allow improvements in equity, inclusion and the well-being and quality of life of babies, toddlers and their families.

The 'Innovations' section gathers valuable experiences that explore the challenges specific to working with ethnic minorities and highly vulnerable groups in ways that promote fairness and inclusion. Many times the programmes and policies that work at scale do not make it possible to identify and respond to pertinent differences in how diverse populations should be assisted. Several articles discuss how service providers responded to the

Covid-19 pandemic by rapidly finding new solutions, including the use of new technologies, to minimise interruptions to vital services and gaps in access to information and knowledge.

Facing a crisis requires commitment, but also creative problem solving. Current times present a new paradigm of thinking to transform the scope of early childhood policy, and to see beyond immediate services to achieve a bigger impact. That is why the final section, 'Global impressions', shares critical actions to ensure children's well-being in today's context. Nurturing a healthier relationship between childhood and nature, recovering the streets as a public space for people, finding synergies between climate change and early childhood development, and recognising the care economy seem fundamental ways to sustain our societies and focus our collective action.

At this moment, the pandemic is making young children around the world more vulnerable and affecting all areas of their development. The pandemic has also showcased how quickly a range of stakeholders can adapt, with empathy, agility and creativity. We must now ensure continuous action to promote access to all opportunities that help young children thrive. The future we want, of a healthier and fairer society, begins today with strategic investment in early childhood.

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