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# Early Childhood Care and Education: A Key Pillar for Solidarity, Equality, and Sustainability

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Solidarity for the Achievement of the SDGs



# Abstract

G20 2025 emphasises Solidarity, Equality, Sustainability; T20 pivots on Consolidate and Sustain. This policy brief presents Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as key to achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs), reducing inequalities, and building resilient, inclusive, peaceful and sustainable societies.

With only five years remaining to achieve the SDGs, humanity must accelerate progress on foundational early learning and equitable development. ECCE is critical to overcoming intergenerational cycles of poverty, fostering gender equity and mitigating impacts of global crises such as climate change, migration and pandemics. Disruptions caused by COVID-19 underscore a need for competent, resilient, multisectoral ECCE systems to ensure no child is left behind. South Africa's G20 presidency prioritises inclusive growth, sustainability, and ECCE. This brief aligns with TF4: Solidarity for the Achievement of the SDGs. It focuses on accelerating SDG enablers, reducing negative spillovers and reducing inequalities by situating ECCE as the foundation for enabling societies to build more equitable and sustainable futures for all.

Despite progress made, significant challenges remain. Persistent disparities in access, equity, quality, and financing globally, between and within countries and regions, prevent ECCE from achieving its potential impact. Progress requires tackling these obstacles head-on. Strengthened political will and increased investment and commitment to innovative, inclusive approaches can ensure ECCE is universally recognised and implemented as the cornerstone for sustainable development.

This policy brief consolidates eight years of T20 recommendations provided by our global group of authors into a coherent, actionable roadmap for prioritising ECCE as the foundation for sustainable, inclusive development. Aligning with the T20 theme, leveraging the commitments of the Tashkent Declaration, UNESCO reports, and the Global Partnership Strategy, it offers practical, evidence-based pathways towards transformative change for young children.

**Keywords:** Early Childhood Care and Education, Early Childhood Development, Sustainable Development Goals, Inequality, Equity, Global South, South-South-North.

## Diagnosis

It is well understood that establishing and maintaining services and programmes for young children is one of the smartest investments any country can make to improve outcomes on a wide range of measures from individual children to families and communities, and to entire societies. Ensuring wellbeing, holistic, healthy development, and the right to education for all children from birth<sup>1</sup> is beneficial for educational attainment over the life course, social cohesion, and socio-economic prosperity. As the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education notes:<sup>2</sup>

There are substantial developmental, educational, social, cultural and economic benefits to participating in ECCE, which apply to children and the societies in which they live. Children will get greater educational achievements that will improve their future learning, improve social integration and ensure better health and higher lifetime earnings. Parents, especially mothers, are more likely to engage in work outside their homes and to benefit from improved health and literacy. States will often see reduced spending on welfare and lower crime rates, higher tax revenues and improved social cohesion.

Since the adoption of SDG 4.2,<sup>3</sup> significant progress has been made in securing access to pre-primary education.<sup>4</sup> However, stark inequalities persist between – and within – countries and regions, ranging “from 7 to nearly 100 per cent”,<sup>5</sup> with participation rates significantly lower in the least developed countries.<sup>6 7</sup>

SDG 4.2 aims to secure pre-primary education for all children. Yet, since its adoption a wide-ranging policy consensus understands that access to, and participation in, pre-primary education is only one – albeit critical – element of

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this policy brief we adopt the UNESCO definition of early childhood as the period in a child's life from birth to age eight. Services, policies, and programmes for children in this age range are commonly referred to by a variety of terms and acronyms including Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). In line with UNESCO practice we use the term ECCE throughout this brief but emphasise the need for integrated approaches to effective services. We understand ECCE as necessarily embedded in wider early childhood development systems concerned with wellbeing and safety, health and nutrition.

<sup>2</sup> (United Nations, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> The importance of investing in early childhood development, education, and care of high quality is recognised through its inclusion in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals under Goal 4 (inclusive and equitable quality education). The specific target for young children reads “by 2030 ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education”.

<sup>4</sup> (United Nations, 2019).

effective supports for young children. To secure more just and equitable outcomes for all children, ECCE systems must encompass children's life situations and contexts holistically, beginning at birth.<sup>8</sup>

In 2005, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) affirmed "the right to education during early childhood as beginning at birth and closely linked to young children's right to maximum development".<sup>9</sup>

This emphasised the importance of whole-systems approaches and urges "States parties [...] to develop rights-based, coordinated, multisectoral strategies in order to ensure that children's best interests are always the starting point for service planning and provision. These should be based around a systematic and integrated approach to law and policy development in relation to all children up to eight years old".<sup>10</sup>

More recently, in 2022, the UNESCO World Conference on ECCE adopted the Tashkent Declaration re-emphasising that "learning begins at birth".<sup>11</sup>

In 2024, the United Nations Human rights charter (UNHRC) mandated an open-ended intergovernmental working group on an optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the rights to early childhood education, free pre-primary education and free secondary education.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> (United Nations, 2019, p. 30).

<sup>6</sup> The 2019 UN SDG report states: "Participation in organized learning one year before the official entry age for primary school has risen steadily over the past years. At the global level, the participation rate in early childhood education was 69 per cent in 2017, up from 63 per cent in 2010. However, considerable disparities were found among countries, with rates ranging from 7 per cent to nearly 100 per cent. The early childhood education participation rate was only 43 per cent in least developed countries." (United Nations, 2019, p. 30).

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that these are pre-pandemic figures; like at all levels of education, ECCE suffered wide-ranging disruptions, leading UNICEF to describe children as the "hidden victims" of the pandemic (UNICEF, 2020, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, fully integrated multisectoral support systems for young children, their families, and their communities begin at conception and earlier, with support systems in place for parents (mothers) before and throughout pregnancy.

<sup>9</sup> (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, §28).

<sup>10</sup> (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2005, §22).

<sup>11</sup> (UNESCO World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, 2022, §8).

<sup>12</sup> (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2024).

While these are important achievements, unequal access to ECCE persists, and investment in ECCE is inadequate, leading UNICEF to describe the overall picture as “too little, too late”.<sup>13</sup>

It is well documented that investments in policies that promote children's development are more efficient than others that, later in the life cycle, aim at repairing earlier rights violations.<sup>14</sup>

Poor resource allocation is particularly noticeable in preconception and prenatal services and for children from birth to three years of age. Nutrition, health, childcare, and parenting supports are not equitably available,<sup>15</sup> resulting in “at least 250 million young children, representing 43% of children under five years of age in lower- and middle-income countries, [...] at high risk of not reaching their full potential”.<sup>16</sup>

## **Dysfunctions, Injustices – and Potential for Change**

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) analysis finds stark “dysfunctions and injustices [...] in economic, social and political systems”, exacerbated by “the damage humankind is inflicting on the world's natural systems and thus, inevitably, upon itself”.<sup>17</sup> The polycrisis<sup>18</sup> of climate catastrophe, loss of biodiversity, hunger, malnutrition, displacement and forced migration, war, erosion of democracy, and dysfunctional economic systems has immediate implications for young children and their families. It offers, however, an opportunity “to make these systems more inclusive, more sustainable, more resilient and more responsive”.<sup>19</sup>

The need for more adaptive and responsive social protection must include ECCE, with its “deep inadequacies in the current system of childcare provision,

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<sup>13</sup> (UNICEF Innocenti, 2023)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.cippec.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Documento-3.0-Sistema-de-cuidados-para-la-infancia.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> (Devercelli & Beaton-Day, 2020; UNESCO, 2022)

<sup>16</sup> (Black et al., 2017)

<sup>17</sup> (OECD, 2021)

<sup>18</sup> A term coined by Edgar Morin (Morin, 2018). See also (World Economic Forum, 2023)

<sup>19</sup> (OECD, 2021)

including uneven access, poor quality, the need for public finance, poor terms of employment for the workforce, and the overall vulnerability of the sector”.<sup>20</sup>

## Recommendations

In 2018, G20 launched its Initiative for Early Childhood Development (ECD). Since then, T20 has adopted a body of annual policy briefs, authored by our group, which outlines evidence-based policy solutions for just and equitable ECD policies and programmes at local, national, and global levels.<sup>21, 22</sup>

In 2023, the G20 Leaders' Declaration reiterated the importance of “equal access to affordable, inclusive, equitable, safe and quality education” beginning from early childhood. Achieving the ambitious goals set by the South African Presidency – global solidarity, equality, and sustainability – requires, as stated by the Presidency, a paradigm shift to situate inequalities at the centre of economic policymaking because of the significant risks to global economic growth, development and stability. This can only be achieved by the global multilateral forum that G20 provides.

Consolidating eight years of T20 recommendations leverages the commitments of the Global Partnership Strategy for Early Childhood<sup>23</sup> and the Tashkent Declaration.<sup>24</sup> G20 2025 has a responsibility and unique opportunity to consolidate and strengthen systemic ECCE policies, set out a road map towards realising the 2030 SDGs, and position ECCE as a fundamental enabler for shaping and achieving the post-2030 agenda.

## ECCE As Key Element of the Roadmap to 2030 and Beyond

G20 2025 emphasises Solidarity, Equality, Sustainability – ECCE is key to achieving these ambitious goals!

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<sup>20</sup> (Devercelli & Beaton-Day, 2020)

<sup>21</sup> See appendix 1 for an overview of T20 ECCE policy briefs 2018-2025

<sup>22</sup> (Urban et al., 2024; Urban et al., 2020a, 2020b; Urban, Cardini, & Floréz-Romero, 2018; Urban, Cardini, Guevara, Okengo, & Floréz-Romero, 2019; Urban et al., 2021; Urban et al., 2022)

<sup>23</sup> (UNESCO, 2022)

<sup>24</sup> (UNESCO, 2024; UNESCO World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, 2022)

Building on a well-established body of evidence summarised in our previous policy briefs (2018–2024), and welcoming South Africa's firm commitment to strengthening ECCE,<sup>25, 26</sup> we urge G20 to adopt the following policy priorities:

- 1) Declare and establish the Decade of Action for ECCE (2026–2036), emphasising that ECCE is a human right, the foundation of sustainable development and a catalyst for achieving the entire SDG framework. Engage with Member Countries and the global community of nations to prioritise SDG target 4.2 and ensure its successor includes additional targets for ECCE, from pregnancy and preparation for parenting to birth onwards.
- 2) Address continuing disparities in access to high-quality ECCE services between and within countries and sub-regions, including urban–rural challenges, while prioritising the provision of culturally appropriate early childhood intervention services for infants and children at risk of developmental delays and disabilities due to poverty, marginalisation and emergencies, for example, conflicts, displacements (and forced migration), and the impacts of climate change.
- 3) Call for the participatory development of national ECCE policies in the remaining 90+ countries still lacking a competent, multisectoral policy document and work to ensure all countries develop ECCE systems that are well implemented, with programmes that are multisectoral or integrated, and have effective coordination at national, provincial and community levels, while encouraging more proactive and supportive sub-regional and regional networking.
- 4) Promote, support, and showcase whole-of-government and whole-of-society multisectoral approaches that understand ECCE as a common good and responsibility that prioritises investment in capacity development

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<sup>25</sup> See appendix 4: South Africa's 2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programmes (Department of Basic Education of the Republic of South Africa, 2023)

<sup>26</sup> <https://insideeducation.co.za/childhood-education-and-development-a-collective-responsibility-g20-seminar/>

for ECCE leaders, planners, managers, supervisors, educators/trainers, paraprofessional caregivers, monitors, evaluators and advocates.

- 5) Establish a global initiative to secure, maintain and increase public and private financing for the long-term impact of ECCE by engaging all leading parties (bilateral and multilateral assistance, nation states, and civil society organisations) and enabling them to meet and expand existing financial commitments for ECCE, for example, in the Tashkent Declaration and others, while also collaborating with funds for health, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), social protections and social welfare to help ensure the maximisation of the use of multisectoral funds and other resources for the improved holistic development of young children and families. Foster a consensus that resourcing ECCE must vigorously promote the development of implementable public policies that enable countries and communities to take responsibility together for child development and education that realises children's rights and enhances their wellbeing.
- 6) Prioritise ECCE in the Global South to achieve global solidarity for shared prosperity. Despite general progress towards achieving “at least one year of pre-primary education”, stark disparities remain, with children from marginalised communities in the Global South deprived of their right to ECCE. G20 must promote ECCE policy development, knowledge sharing, co-production and exchange of initiatives among all countries and regions with specific emphasis on south-south-north initiatives, establishing frameworks for ECCE practice and policy learning, innovation, scaling, and multisectoral monitoring, evaluation and reporting systems, advocating for solidarity-driven (not charity-driven) global and regional partnerships for ECCE, using the framework of the Global Partnership Strategy for ECCE, and encouraging Global North countries and actors to learn from and partner with ECCE initiatives and community capabilities in the Global South and share and adapt essential lessons learnt in both regions.



## Appendix 1: Early Childhood in G20/T20 Policy Briefs. A Coherent Body of Evidence and Policy Guidance

- 2025: **Consolidating Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policies**  
*Consolidation as a pillar of Solidarity, Equality, and Sustainability*
- 2024: **A Global Common Good**  
*Prioritising investment in early childhood development, education and care to combat inequalities, poverty, and hunger from the beginning*
- 2022: **A Global Common Good**  
*Strengthening multisectoral and integrated policy approaches to early childhood as a global common good*
- 2021: **Data**  
*Integrated and multisectoral early childhood data, monitoring and evaluation systems as key to developing effective and resilient social welfare systems*
- 2020: **Upscaling**  
*Grassroots competent systems*  
**Post-pandemic**  
*Resilient Early Childhood systems*
- 2019: **Governance**  
*Early childhood as common good and public/government responsibility*
- 2018: **Competent Systems**  
*Integrated early childhood policies and practices*



## Appendix 2

### T20 ECD / ECCE Policy briefs

- Urban, M., Cardini, A., & Floréz-Romero, R. (2018). It takes more than a village. Effective early childhood development, education and care services require competent systems / los servicios efectivos de desarrollo, educación y cuidado de la primera infancia requieren sistemas competentes. In A. Cardini (Ed.), *Bridges to the future of education: Policy recommendations for the digital age / puentes al futuro de la educación: Recomendaciones de política para la era digital* (pp. 25-42). Buenos Aires: Fundación Santillana.
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### Appendix 3: South Africa's 2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programmes



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