



Eastern Africa Regional Early Childhood Conference

# CONCEPT NOTE

11<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> MARCH 2024 | DAR ES SALAAM, TANZANIA

Conference Theme

**Investing in Early Childhood: Building Human Capital Along the Life Course**

## 1.0 Background and Context.

Investing in quality and holistic early childhood systems while empowering communities and caregivers is critical to realizing positive human capital outcomes. Empirical evidence continues to point to the benefits that accrue to governments, businesses, communities, families, and the children themselves on account of focused and sustained investment. This investment is also cost-effective as for every \$1 spent on early childhood development interventions, the return on investment can be as high as \$13. This in return builds a strong foundation for survival and well-being, future learning, and productivity of the child with the potential to contribute to government taxes, have enhanced purchasing power and consequently impact positively on a country's economy (Heckman & Lafontaine, 2007). On the flipside, lack of timely investment in quality ECD services often exposes children to extreme poverty, gender inequities, violence, neglect, and abandonment. The negative impacts of such inaction could have long-lasting outcomes for the child, the society, and future generations.

## 1.1 Status of ECD in Africa.

In Africa, progress has been made to improve early childhood systems. This has been achieved through increased regional and national advocacy on promoting investment in the early years. Available evidence shows that in 2001 only Mauritius and Namibia had established ECD policies. However, the situation has improved tremendously over the last two decades with over 60% of African countries having ECD policies that guide service delivery (AfECN, 2021). With regard to early learning, a common policy position across the region has been the inclusion of at least one year of pre-primary education into the formal primary school system: for example, in Ethiopia this inclusion has been achieved through the addition of a zero class; South Africa has a reception class; Ghana added two years of pre-primary while Egypt has an additional two years of kindergarten. Many more countries are including the pre-school years as part and parcel of the basic education structure. These initiatives have resulted in rapid increase to early learning programmes in the region.

Recent estimates on child mortality (IGME 2022) show that 54 countries, 80% of them in Sub Saharan Africa, will not meet the under-five mortality target of 25 per 1,000 live births by 2030<sup>1</sup>. It is estimated that children born in Africa are at 14 times higher risk of dying before their fifth birthday compared to children born elsewhere. Even though stunting levels among children decreased in these countries from 38.3 % in 2000 to 30.3% in 2017, this is relatively still high. In addition, only 37% of children below six months are exclusively breastfed in SSA<sup>2</sup>. In terms of early learning, the proportion of grade 2 students with foundational reading skills is almost zero in many SSA

1. Levels and trends in Child mortality. Report 2022. Estimates developed by the United Nations Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation

2. Otim ME, Omagino EK, Almarzouqi A, Rahman SA, Asante AD. Exclusive breast-feeding in the first six months: findings from a cross-sectional survey in Mulago hospital, Uganda. Afr Health Sci. 2022 Jun;22(2):535-544. doi: 10.4314/ahs.v22i2.62. PMID: 36407345; PMCID: PMC9652645.



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countries. Additionally, only 16% of students in Africa had attained minimum proficiency in reading by end of primary compared to 61% globally and 23% had achieve minimum proficiency in mathematics compared to 60% globally by the time they completed primary school<sup>3</sup>.

The African Union through Agenda 2063, gives attention to enhancing equitable access to quality early childhood education and development (ECED). The agenda calls for universal access to quality early childhood, primary and secondary education, ensuring that no child is left behind and that the potential of every child nurtured. To achieve the Agenda 2063 goals related to ECED, the Africa Union developed the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2026–2025 (CESA 16–25) which observes that early childhood education and development (ECED) is a key pillar on which future learning and training are grounded. In 2018, the Africa Union Commission (AUC) established the Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) Cluster to serve as a mechanism to support the implementation of CESA 16 –25 objectives that relate to the early years of a child. The cluster has six priority areas of engagement at continental, regional and national level.

These priorities include:

- i. policy, advocacy and communication;
- ii. equitable access to quality ECED programmes and
- iii. quality of ECED systems, programmes, and services;
- iv. governance and management
- v. research generation, documentation and dissemination; and finally
- vi. partnership and collaboration across all key stakeholders, including state and non-state actors.

According to the most current Countdown 2030 ECD profiles; under 5 mortality rates in Eastern Africa is at 59 per 1,000 live births which is way above the 2030 target of at least 25 deaths per 1,000 live births. In terms of adequate nutrition data indicates that 32.6% (22.1 million) of children under five in Eastern Africa are considered stunted. What is more, only 14% of children have access to minimum acceptable diet indicating that the remaining 86% do not meet this minimum threshold. Despite the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding, only slightly more than half (56%) are exclusively breastfed. It is estimated that approximately 66% of children under five are at risk of not reaching their full developmental potential due to poverty.

Opportunities for early learning is key to laying the foundation for future wellbeing of a person. Currently, the attendance rate for pre-primary is at 58% in SSA and 63% in Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) while the attendance rate in primary school is at the rate of 74% in SSA and 79% in ESA. Among the pre-scholars, access to ECD services is at a paltry 13% with a whopping 87% lacking access. (<https://data.unicef.org/resources/jme-report-2021>). In reference to safety and security, birth registration stands at 44% in Eastern Africa and only 11% of children experience positive discipline, with approximately 78% being reported to be violently disciplined. Also, only 37% of children have access to basic sanitation in their homes.

3. UNESCO. 2022. Spotlight Report on Basic Education Completion and Foundational Learning in Africa, Paris, UNESCO



## Eastern Africa Regional Early Childhood Conference

# CONCEPT NOTE

11<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> MARCH 2024 | DAR ES SALAAM, TANZANIA

The East Africa Community recognizing the enormous responsibility confronting all actors to come through for children, is committed to promotion of the life and wellbeing of all children and young people. The 4th meeting of the Sectoral Council on Gender, Youth, Children, Social Protection and Community Development held in May 2018, developed and adopted the Minimum Standards for Comprehensive Services for Children and Young People in the East Africa Community (MSCS). The MSCS initiative was spurred by the EAC Child Policy, that highlighted the need to generate a common understanding and approach and develop guidance for partner states to ensure the wellbeing of all children and young people. It targets those between the age of zero to 24 out of the recognition that 18-24-year-olds may fall through the cracks if they are not adequately supported throughout the various stages of childhood.

Countries in the EAC have made efforts to put in place policies, programs and ECD frameworks that support the whole child development. Some examples include, inter alia, the National Multi-Sectoral ECD Programme (NM-ECDP) for Tanzania, The policy for children in prison with incarcerated mothers in Kenya and the Integrated ECD Policy in Uganda and Rwanda and others. The policy and regulatory framework in the EAC and its member states and those of neighbouring Eastern African countries provide a useful springboard to craft programmes and interventions aimed at addressing the deficits in ECD highlighted above.

## 2.0 About the ECD Conference

As has already been discussed above, enhancing investments in early childhood is critical as these years form the foundation for building human capital along the life course. In this regard, the African Early Childhood Network (AfECN), in partnership with the Government of Tanzania, the Tanzania Early Childhood Development Network (TECDEN) and other partners will be convening the Eastern Africa Regional Early Childhood Conference to provide a platform for taking stock of the status of early childhood in the region and sharing knowledge and learning on how to take innovative models of quality early childhood interventions to scale. The conference is expected to bring together a diverse group of early childhood actors, including policy makers, researchers, CSOs, academia, funders, early childhood practitioners, and government ministries, departments, agencies to discuss and make concrete deliberations on early investment trajectory in Eastern Africa.

## 2.1 Objectives of the Conference

The conference provides an opportunity to:

1. Take stock of the status of early childhood in the EAC region.
2. Foster dialogue that promotes knowledge and experiences sharing and enriches the early childhood advocacy agenda and learning for improved quality early childhood services.
3. Build consensus around key advocacy issues
4. Showcase innovative programmes in the EAC region including those on ECD measurement.
5. Strengthen policy and programme implementation, build partnerships, and establish pathways for collaborations and networking.



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### 2.2 Conference Sub-Themes

The conference sub-themes include but are not limited to:

- Empowering parents, caregivers, and communities.
- Systems strengthening with a spotlight on workforce development
- Monitoring progress focusing on data/evidence generation, dissemination and utilization
- Financing at both micro and macro-levels
- Leadership and Governance
- Scaling up and Innovating

### 2.3 Conference Participants.

Conference participants will comprise government officials, national ECD networks, development partners, civil society organisations, academia, global ECD experts, ECD practitioners and programme planners from eight countries in Eastern and horn of Africa region and AU Regional Economic Communities.

### 2.4 Conference Format:

This will be an in-person conference to maximise on conference attendance and participation by stakeholders from across the region and beyond. It will also provide an opportunity for networking and learning among participants and offer grassroots organizations a chance to showcase their work in the exhibition booths available at the conference venue. The conference will be organised in different sessions to provide participants with diverse sub-themes in areas that may interest them.

**The conference sessions will be organised as follows:**

- Plenary sessions where keynote presentations will be made along with panel sessions that spotlight country experiences.
- Oral paper presentations in thematic break-out parallel sessions
- Round table discussions for smaller groups that allow for in-depth engagement.
- Learning sessions and side events to support capacity building and joint planning for various interest groups. This will enable groups to engage, network and build pathways for collaboration and partnerships that would take Early Childhood forward in the region.
- Exhibition of partner initiatives and sharing of materials and resources.

### 2.5 Conference Host

The United Republic of Tanzania, in collaboration with Tanzania Early Childhood Development Network (TECDEN) and the Africa Early Childhood Network (AfECN), will host the conference.

### 2.6 Conference Dates and Venue

The conference will be held between 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> March 2024, at Julius Nyerere International Convention Centre, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.



**AU CESA  
ECED CLUSTER**



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**2.7 Conference Speakers**

The Conference will bring together experts and field practitioners as keynote speakers who will be drawn from the continental level, EAC government representatives, civil society organization, academic partners and regional and international ECD funders and other organizations implementing ECD interventions.

**Proposed Agenda**

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
09:00 – 10:30	Learning Events/ Side Sessions	Learning Events/ Side Sessions	Children & Families	Monitoring Progress	Financing	Learning Events/ Side Sessions
10:30 – 11:00			<b>Health Break</b>			
11:00 – 12:30	Learning Events/ Side Sessions	Learning Events/ Side Sessions	Strengthening Services	Scaling up & innovations	Leadership & Governance	Learning Events/ Side Sessions
13:00 – 14:00						
14:00 – 16:00	Learning Events/ Side Sessions	<b>Setting the Scene</b>  <b>Official Opening</b>	Parallel Session Deep Dive Session • Children & Families • Strengthening Services	Parallel Sessions: Deep Dive Session • Monitoring Progress • Scaling up & innovations	Parallel Sessions: Deep Dive • Financing • Leadership & Governance	Learning Events/ Side Sessions
16:30 – 18:30	Briefing for • Chairs • Presenters • Moderators • Rapporteurs		Learning Events/ Side Sessions	Learning Events/ Side Sessions	<b>Advocacy Session: Closing Session Call to Action</b>	Learning Events/ Side Sessions