

Contributions of Early Childhood Development Services to Preventing Violent Conflict and Sustaining Peace

The purpose of this brief is to: (1) demonstrate the societal risks that result when early childhood development (ECD) services are lacking and (2) show how ECD services contribute to sustaining peace through increasing social cohesion, equality and economic productivity.

In a time of recurring violent conflict and societal shocks, it is vital to invest in long-term solutions that will end cycles of violence, build strong foundations for sustainable development and social cohesion and promote a “culture of peace”¹. Recent UN Peace and Security reports² and the ‘Sustaining Peace’ Resolution³ urge *all* UN agencies to contribute to sustaining peace. Although the international community recognizes that social services can contribute to restoring peace and stability¹⁰, there is currently limited understanding of how ECD services can support the prevention of violence and the promotion of peace.

1 RISKS RESULTING FROM LACK OF ECD SERVICES

Toxic stress and malnutrition in early childhood are directly linked with harmful psychological processes and interpersonal relations, and decreased economic productivity in adulthood. These effects exacerbate social and economic risks for society.

2 BENEFITS OF ECD SERVICES

2a. ECD services can foster **social cohesion** between individuals and among conflicting groups and can promote **trust** between government entities and constituents.

2b. ECD services can promote **equality** and **economic productivity**.



© RADEK PROCYK, DREAMSTIME.COM

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

- **SUSTAINING PEACE:** “Preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict, addressing root causes, ending hostilities, ensuring national reconciliation, and moving towards recovery, reconstruction and development.”³
- **EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT (ECD):** mental and physical development from prenatal to 8 years of age.
 - Nurturing care ECD is a multisectoral approach that ensures health, nutrition, safety, responsive caregiving and early learning.⁴
 - ECD services will be dependent on the contextual needs and age of the child. Examples of services: health interventions during pregnancy, parent-child home visitation, preschool programmes, interventions that increase father involvement, etc.
- **VULNERABLE CHILDREN:** children who are at risk for not reaching their developmental potential due to preventable environmental influences, including children affected by poverty, conflict, family violence or inequalities; migrants or refugees; orphans or foster children; and children with disabilities whose caregivers lack the resources to properly care for them.
- **TOXIC STRESS:** strong, frequent or prolonged adversity, in the absence of protective relationships.⁵

Societal Risks Resulting from Toxic Stress and Malnutrition in Early Childhood

Suffering toxic stress or malnutrition in the earliest years of life inhibit a child's optimal brain development, resulting in harmful psychological processes and interpersonal relations, inadequate learning and lower wages in later years. Millions of infants and young children across the world spend their most formative years in suboptimal environments, unable to reach their developmental potential⁴. Without recognition and investment in ECD services, society may face significant social and economic risks.



© UNICEF/UNI28474/CRANSTON

INDIVIDUAL/INTERPERSONAL RISKS

Harmful psychological processes and interpersonal relations, including violent behaviour

Ongoing neuroscience and epigenetics research indicate that toxic stress strongly increases a child's risk of developing: impaired stress- and emotion-regulation systems, psychiatric symptoms (PTSD, depression, anxiety, etc.), aggression, violent behaviours, substance abuse and harmful relationships in adulthood.^(a)

(hindering SDGs* 1.5, 3.4, 3.5, 4.7, 16.1, 16.2)

Inadequate learning and decreased economic productivity

The advancement of skills throughout the lifetime builds on the developmental foundation created in early childhood. Thus, early disadvantages affecting health or developmental capacities can cumulate over time to critically impact schooling and employment potential, ultimately resulting in decreased economic productivity and well-being.^(b)

(hindering SDGs 1.2, 4.4, 4.6, 8.5, 8.6, 10.1)

SOCIETAL RISKS

- Exacerbated **inequalities** among groups and genders^(c) (hindering SDGs 4.5, 4.7, 5, 10.2, 10.3)
- Increased **crime rates**^(d) (hindering SDGs 5.2, 16.1, 16.2)
- Intergenerational **cycles of violence**^(e) (hindering SDGs 5.2, 16.1, 16.2)
- **Reduced gross national income**^(f) (hindering SDGs 8.1, 10.1)
- Higher **unemployment rates**^(g) (hindering SDGs 8.5, 8.6)
- Intergenerational cycles of **poverty**^(h) (hindering SDGs 1.1, 1.2, 10.1)
- **Higher expenditure** in health care, education, the criminal justice system, child protective services and public aid⁽ⁱ⁾
- **Decreased trust**^(j)

TOXIC STRESS OR MALNUTRITION

Early toxic stress (due to inequality, conflict, family violence, etc.) and/or malnutrition severely harm a child's:

- Hormonal and stress response systems
- Attachment and bonding with caregiver
- Psychosocial and emotional development
- Cognitive development
- Physical health and life expectancy

WHICH CAN LEAD TO

* To learn more about the UN SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), visit <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org>

(a) Leckman, J. F., Panter-Brick, C., and Salah, R., eds., ch. 5, 7 and 11 in *Pathways to Peace: The transformative power of children and families*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2014.

(b) Leckman, J.F., et al., ch. 5, 7 and 11 in *Pathways to Peace*; The 2016 *Lancet* Early Childhood Development Series, *The Lancet*, October 2016, retrieved from World Health Organization, <www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/documents/eecd-lancet-exec-summary-en.pdf?ua=1>; Heckman, J. J., 'Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children', *Science*, vol. 312, no. 5782, 30 June 2006, pp. 1900–1902.

(c) Irwin, L. G., Siddiqi, A., and Hertzman, C., *Early Child Development: A powerful equalizer – Final report for the World Health Organization's Commission on the Social Determinants of Health*, Human Early Learning Partnership, Vancouver, June 2007; Heckman, J. J., 'The Economics of Inequality: The value of early childhood education', *American Educator*, vol. 35, no. 1, Spring 2011, p. 31.

(d) Economic Opportunity Initiative, *The Link Between Early Childhood Education and Crime and Violence Reduction*, July 2002, retrieved from <www.eoionline.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/early-learning/ELCLinkCrimeReduction-Jul02.pdf>.

(e) See, for example: Widom, C. S., 'The Cycle of Violence', *Science*, vol. 244, no. 4901, April 1989, p. 160.

(f) Hoddinott, J., et al., 'Effect of a Nutrition Intervention During Early Childhood on Economic Productivity in Guatemalan Adults', *The Lancet*, vol. 371, no. 9610, February 2008, pp. 411–416; Schweinhart, L.J., *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40: Summary, conclusions, and frequently asked questions*, High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, Ypsilanti, Mich., 2004; Gertler, P., et al., 'Labor Market Returns to Early Childhood Stimulation: A 20-year followup to an experimental intervention in Jamaica', National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 19185.

(g) Schweinhart, L.J., *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*(h) Engle, P. L., et al., 'Strategies to Avoid the Loss of Developmental Potential in More Than 200 Million Children in the Developing World', *The Lancet*, vol. 369, no. 9557, January 2007, pp. 229–242.

(i) See, for example: Campbell, F., et al., 'Early Childhood Investments Substantially Boost Adult Health', *Science*, vol. 343, no. 6178, 28 March 2014, pp. 1478–1485; Eckenrode, J., et al., 'Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect with a Program of Nurse Home Visitation: The limiting effects of domestic violence', *JAMA*, vol. 284, no. 11, 20 September 2000, pp. 1385–1391; Rolnick, A., and Grunewald, R., 'Early Childhood Development: Economic development with a high public return', *The Region*, vol. 17, no. 4, March 2003, pp. 6–12.

(j) Leckman, J.F., et al., ch. 3 and 7 in *Pathways to Peace*.

2a

ECD Services Increase Horizontal and Vertical Social Cohesion

Early childhood development services can strengthen resilience and foster prosocial behaviours in children and caregivers. ECD services can also be leveraged as social platforms for engaging conflicting sociocultural, ethnic or religious identity groups in joint programming efforts towards shared goals. In addition, government implementation of these ECD services builds bridges between the community and their government.

HORIZONTAL SOCIAL COHESION

Interpersonal relations between individuals

- Through fostering healthy early childhood development, quality ECD services that encompass health, nutrition, protection and early learning can:
 - **Build intrapsychic resilience** to buffer against toxic stress throughout the lifetime, thus improving mental health (including reducing PTSD, depression and anxiety symptoms) and enabling healthy and responsible interpersonal relations.⁶ *(SDG 1.5, 3.4)*
 - **Foster prosocial behaviours, trust and healthy social interactions.**⁶ *(SDG 4.2, 4.7)*
 - **Decrease antisocial and violent behaviours,** including violent crime arrests, in youth and adulthood.⁷ *(SDG 16.1, 16.2)*

Intergroup cohesion (relations among groups)

- In regions of intergroup tension, equitable ECD services and parent discussion groups can build social capital and unite parents from conflicting identity groups around the common goal of child well-being⁹ (for example, see the successfully implemented ECD programmes in parts of Turkey, Ivory Coast and Uganda⁸). *(SDG 4.7, 10.2, 10.3)*

VERTICAL SOCIAL COHESION

Relations between individuals/groups and their governing institutions (vertical cohesion)

- Government implementation of quality and equitable ECD services strengthens trust between community members and their government.¹⁰ *(SDG 10, 16.6)*

2b

ECD Services Promote Equality and Economic Productivity

Through helping vulnerable children and families reach their potential, universal ECD services can reduce inequalities and promote sustainable economic productivity.

Increased human capital of children and families

- Investments in ECD help vulnerable children stay developmentally on track, which can result in significantly improved mental and physical health, higher educational and employment attainment, and up to 46 per cent higher income in adulthood.¹¹ In addition, two-generation ECD programmes can build human capital of both the child and the caregiver by helping the caregiver enhance their education, employment, income or empowerment.¹⁶ *(SDG 1.2, 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 8.5, 8.6, 10.1)*

Reduced economic and educational inequalities

- Providing universal ECD services for all groups and genders can significantly narrow economic and educational inequality gaps¹², thus reducing risks of violent conflict.¹³ *(SDG 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 10)*

Cost-effective programmes

- Cost-benefit analyses have consistently shown that investing in ECD is “the most powerful investment a country can make,” with societal returns up to \$18 per dollar invested.¹⁴ This commitment to ECD includes reducing violence against children, which cost the economy an estimated \$206 billion in 2014 across East Asia and the Pacific alone.¹⁵ *(SDG 1.2, 8.1, 10.1, 16.2)*

Sustainable economic productivity

- Breaking cycles of poverty and disadvantage allows future generations the continuing opportunity for economic productivity and social mobility. *(SDG 1.2, 10.1)*

Policy Recommendations

Peace-relevant ECD policies must endorse:

- **Universal access to ECD services** that reach the most vulnerable and excluded children, and include all genders. (SDG 3.2, 3.4, 4.2, 4.7, 5.1, 10.2, 10.3, 16.b)
- **Quality, multisectoral ECD packages** rooted in 'nurturing care' that can be delivered through preexisting sectorial programmes. (SDG 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 4.2, 4.7, 5.2, 6.2, 16.1, 16.2)
 - *The strongest programme effects result from quality ECD programmes that target the most vulnerable children and are integrated with existing sectorial programmes.*
- **Context-specific and conflict-sensitive ECD services** that address the needs of the region and the families involved, and provide universal, comprehensive family/caregiver support. (SDG 2.2, 3.4, 4.2, 16.2)
- **Intergroup ECD services** that unite parents from different sociocultural, ethnic or religious groups. (SDG 10.2, 10.3, 16.b)
- **Science-informed and evidence-based ECD action plans** that leverage ECD for peacebuilding. (SDG 4.2, 4.7)
 - *This is especially relevant for conflict-affected and post-conflict countries, where these policies are largely missing.¹⁷*
- **National, implementable frameworks** that guide scaling up and assess ECD programmes' effectiveness. (SDG 10.5, 16.6)
- **Accountability systems** that track financial investments of ECD services. (SDG 10.5, 16.6)



© UNICEF/UNI115653/NESEBITT

Acknowledgements: This document was drafted by Chelsea Donaldson on behalf of the Early Childhood Peace Consortium (ECPC), with contributions from Angelica Ponguta, Friedrich Affolter, Pia Rebello Britto and fellow ECPC members. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support from ALEX AND ANI and the Jacobs Foundation. For more information about the ECPC, please visit: www.ECDpeace.org

ENDNOTES

- 1 United Nations General Assembly, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 23 December 2016, follow-up to the Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace, A/RES/71/252, 26 January 2017.
- 2 United Nations General Assembly Security Council Reports: Report of the Independent High-Level Panel on Peace Operations, A/70/95-S/2015/446, 17 June 2015; and Report of the Peacebuilding Commission on its ninth session, A/70/714-S/2016/115, 4 February 2016.
- 3 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2282 adopted by the Security Council at its 7680th meeting, S/RES/2282, 27 April 2016.
- 4 Britto, P. R., et al., 'Nurturing Care: Promoting early childhood development', *The Lancet*, vol. 389, no. 10064, 7 January 2017, pp. 91–102.
- 5 Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 'Toxic Stress', retrieved from: Harvard University, <<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>>.
- 6 See, for example: Leckman, J. F., Panter-Brick, C., and Salah, R., eds., *Pathways to Peace: The transformative power of children and families*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2014; *Peace Building Through Early Childhood Development: A guidance note*, retrieved from: UNICEF <www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/files/ECD_Peacebuilding_GNote_.pdf>.
- 7 Reynolds, A. J., et al., 'Effects of a School-Based, Early Childhood Intervention on Adult Health and Well-Being: A 19-year follow-up of low-income families', *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, vol. 161, no. 8, August 2007, pp. 730–739; Schweinhart, L. J., *The HighScope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40: Summary, conclusions, and frequently asked questions*, HighScope Educational Research Foundation, Ypsilanti, Mich., 2004; Yoshikawa, H., 'Long-Term Effects of Early Childhood Programs on Social Outcomes and Delinquency', *The Future of Children*, vol. 5, no. 3, Winter 1995, pp. 51–75; Walker, S. P., et al., 'Early Childhood Stimulation Benefits Adult Competence and Reduces Violent Behavior', *Pediatrics*, vol. 127, no. 5, May 2011, pp. 849–857.
- 8 AÇEV – Mother Child Education Foundation, *Building a Generation of Reconciliation: The role of early childhood development in peace building*, 2009; *Early Childhood Education and Peacebuilding in Postconflict Northern and Eastern Uganda*, UNICEF, May 2015; *UNICEF Côte d'Ivoire 2014 Annual Report: Peacebuilding, education and advocacy in conflict-affected contexts programme*, UNICEF, 2014.
- 9 Pettigrew, T. F., and Tropp, L. R., 'Does Intergroup Contact Reduce Prejudice? Recent meta-analytic findings', *Reducing Prejudice and Discrimination*, edited by Stuart Oskamp, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, New Jersey, 2000, pp. 93–114.
- 10 Erin McCandless, *Peace Dividends and Beyond: Contributions of administrative and social services to peacebuilding*, United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office, New York, 2012.
- 11 Tanner, J. C., Candland, T., and Odden, W. S., *Later Impacts of Early Childhood Interventions: A systematic review*, Independent Evaluation Group Working Paper 2015/3, World Bank Group, Washington, D.C., 2015; Gertler, P., et al., 'Labor Market Returns to Early Childhood Stimulation: A 20-year followup to an experimental intervention in Jamaica', National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 19185, June 2013; Hodinott, J., et al., 'Effect of a Nutrition Intervention During Early Childhood on Economic Productivity in Guatemalan Adults', *The Lancet*, vol. 371, no. 9610, February 2008, pp. 411–416; Reynolds, A. J., et al., 'Effects of a School-Based, Early Childhood Intervention on Adult Health and Well-Being'; Schweinhart, L. J., et al., *Lifetime Effects: The HighScope Perry Preschool study through age 40*, edited by Lynn Taylor, High Scope Press, Ypsilanti, Mich., 2005.
- 12 See, for example: Engle, P. L., et al., 'Strategies for Reducing Inequalities and Improving Developmental Outcomes for Young Children in Low-Income and Middle-Income Countries', *The Lancet*, vol. 378, no. 9799, 8 October 2011, pp. 1339–1353; Irwin, L. G., Siddiqi, A., and Hertzman, C., *Early Child Development: A powerful equalizer – Final report for the World Health Organization's Commission on the Social Determinants of Health*, Human Early Learning Partnership, Vancouver, June 2007.
- 13 *Reducing educational and economic inequalities can significantly reduce risks of violent conflict*. See, for example: FHI 360 Education Policy and Data Center, *Education Inequalities and Violent Conflict: Evidence and policy considerations*, UNICEF, New York, June 2016; Brinkman, H. J., Attree, L., and Hezir, S., *Addressing Horizontal Inequalities as Drivers of Conflict in the Post-2015 Development Agenda*, Saferworld, United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office, New York, February 2013.
- 14 See, for example: Hodinott, J., et al., 'The Economic Rationale for Investing in Stunting Reduction', *Maternal & Child Nutrition*, vol. 9, no. 2, September 2013, pp. 69–82; Nores, M., and Barnett, W. S., 'Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions Across the World: (Under) Investing in the very young', *Economics of Education Review*, vol. 29, no. 2, April 2010, pp. 271–282; Sayre, R. K., Devercelli, A. E., Neuman, M. J., and Wodon, Q., *Investing in Early Childhood Development: Review of the World Bank's Recent Experience*, World Bank, Washington D.C., 2015.
- 15 *Estimating the Economic Burden of Violence Against Children in East Asia and the Pacific*, UNICEF, September 2014, retrieved from: <www.unicef.org/eapro/Economic_Burden_in_East_Asia_Pacific.pdf>.
- 16 See, for example: Kagitcibasi, C., Sunar, D., and Bekman, S., 'Long-Term Effects of Early Intervention: Turkish low-income mothers and children', *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, vol. 22, no. 4, July–August 2001, pp. 333–361; Olds, D. L., et al., 'Prenatal and Infancy Home Visitation by Nurses: Recent findings', *The Future of Children*, Spring–Summer 1999, pp. 44–65; *UNICEF Côte d'Ivoire 2014 Annual Report: Peacebuilding, education and advocacy in conflict-affected contexts programme*, UNICEF, 2014.
- 17 Ang, L., and Oliver, S., *A Systematic Policy Analysis of Early Childhood Development and Peacebuilding in Fourteen Conflict-Affected and Post-Conflict Countries* (research brief), UNICEF and University College London Institute of Education, New York, 2016.