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Advancing the Early Childhood Care and Education Agenda: Inclusive Innovative Dialogue towards a Global Partnership Strategy

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Synthesis report

Introduction

The High-Level Session on ‘Advancing the Early Childhood Agenda: High Level Session towards a Global Partnership Strategy’, organized by UNESCO, took place on 21 January 2021 under the leadership of the UNESCO Assistant Director General for Education and Her Royal Highness Princess Laurentien. It was organized as a follow up to the technical Session held on 16 December 2020, which aimed to stimulate discussion and collect experts’ inputs on key enabling factors to advance the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)/Early Childhood Development (ECD) agenda for the preparation of the draft Global Partnership Strategy (GPS).

This High-Level Session, which included the presence of ministers and high-level personalities from around the globe, aimed at launching the process for preparing and adopting the GPS to define the way forward. The goal of this dialogue was to move ECCE/ECD into action with concrete, practical initiatives to ensure each country meets its national development objectives for early childhood education and development. This report summarizes the main findings of the High-Level event.

Summary of key highlights:

- Some 21 Education Ministers and Vice Ministers, and 19 executives of agencies and International development organizations attended this High-Level meeting across all regions and continents.
- The event attracted over 3,000 participants followed a YouTube channel, and around 80 participants entered directly via Zoom;
- Participants from education authorities, development partners, global, regional and national networks in ECCE, academia, civil society organisations, foundations, and the private sector institutions provided written and oral comments and suggestions to improve the draft GPS.
- The GPS process and content were strongly supported, and various implementation modalities were also discussed.
- The Strategy aims to enhance inter-agency coordination and international cooperation and solidarity.
- Participants emphasized the need to transform goals and objectives into implemented actions.

Main outcomes of the meeting

This High-Level segment of the dialogue provided an opportunity for participants to discuss the overall directions of the global partnership strategy (GPS), offering concrete recommendations for its operationalization as well as guidance for finalization.

The two-hour virtual meeting enabled national policy makers and heads of international agencies to interact in an open dialogue on GPS Strategic Priorities and Initiatives proposed for ECCE/ECD regarding its five Strategies:

- Strategy for results 1: Harness Evidence for Action and Rights
- Strategy for results 2: Leverage Data, Monitoring and Evaluation for Accountability
- Strategy for results 3: Scale up Access, Inclusion, Equity and Quality
- Strategy for results 4: Strengthen Policy, Governance, Financing and Advocacy
- Strategy for results 5: Galvanize Coordination and International Cooperation

The dialogue began with opening remarks by Ms. Stefania Giannini, UNESCO Assistant-Director General for Education who recalled that learning and development begin in the earliest years. With the current global pandemic, the effects are especially hitting the world's youngest children, because at least 35 million pre-primary school children are still affected by school closures. Despite growing evidence regarding the fundamental importance of ECCE/ECD, political will is not reflecting this priority. For this reason,, in July 2020, UNESCO launched a process for developing a GPS for Early Childhood through an innovative dialogue, galvanized by HRH Princess Laurentien. The Strategy aims to enhance inter-agency coordination and international cooperation and solidarity. Referring to the global study recently published by UNESCO on the Right to Pre-Primary Education, she highlighted the importance of ensuring that a rights-based approach is used through the planning process. In the words of Ms. Giannini, "Children cannot wait so let's unite to protect their future." The exchanges throughout this dialogue aimed to do just that.

A Participatory Approach - Key issues discussed:

Mr. Borhene Chakroun, Director of Policy and Lifelong Learning Systems introduced an overview of the objectives of the GPS and the dialogue. He stated that this initiative is mission driven; that it is not

searching for generic objectives, but rather the design of specific missions needed to transform objectives into implemented action. Instead of evaluating the pillars already proposed, this session aims to address the “what’s next” in practical terms. As a reminder to the audience, Ms. Emily Vargas-Baron recalled that while global partners entered the technical session in December with three strategies, the partnership emerged with five; evidence of the complex nature of a GPS that pursues comprehensive early childhood care and education. She described the participatory process that was pursued to prepare the GPS paper and its Executive Summary. HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands reiterated that this dialogue cannot and should not result only in a document; rather, it should result in action with concrete priorities and commitments.

Based on the findings of the technical session held in December 2020, the following five Strategies of the draft GPS for Early Childhood were developed by teams of authors and presented by their respective leads:

Strategy 1: Harnessing evidence for action and rights

Evidence clearly shows that education and care during the early years affects health, learning, and development. Over 200 million children are still at risk. In order to fully protect and support them and fulfill their rights, there is need to build country capacities to use available evidence as well as recruit champions of ECCE/ECD: parents, guardians, teachers - all individuals who can be national champions, as the true voices of ECCE/ECD and children’s rights. Three strategic priorities were presented: (1) build the capacity to use existing research findings, (2) strengthen the evidence for ECCE/ECD by increasing support for research especially in low- and middle-income countries, and (3) recruit new champions for ECCE/ECD.

Strategy 2: Leveraging data, monitoring, and evaluation for accountability

Collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data is key to advancing ECCE/ECD. Data inform policymaking, can address gaps in information and implementation, and improve ECCE/ECD systems at all levels. New tools have been developed, including measurement via questionnaires and household surveys. Yet overall, ECCE/ECD is still under-studied and under-monitored at national, regional and global levels. As such, two strategic priorities were presented: (1) improve data quality and availability at global and regional levels for achieving SDG 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 and other SDGs that are related to ECCE/ECD; and (2) provide technical support and workshops to assist countries to develop and strengthen the implementation of national multisectoral ECCE/ECD monitoring and evaluation systems.

Strategy 3: Scaling up access, inclusion, equity, and quality

Equal access to ECCE/ECD services from birth to 36 months as well as pre-primary education remains a major challenge to fully implementing SDG 4.2. Too many poor and disadvantaged children from birth to 36 months and their parents and caregivers still lack access to ECCE/ECD services. Furthermore, the COVID-19 global crisis has exacerbated already-underlying inequalities regarding children with at-risk situations, developmental delays and disabilities as well as those affected by climate crises, violence, migration and minority ethnic and linguistic status. In order to fight against inequality and ensure equal access, three strategic priorities were advanced: (1) Expand access and tackle inequity and exclusion by developing and strengthening existing early childhood intervention (ECI) and inclusive ECCE/ECD services, including harnessing the potential of tools such as ICT; (2) improve the quantity and quality of the ECCE/ECD workforce, via certification, training, supervision, and setting up an international body for pedagogical review and the identification of effective practices; and (3) support the development, improvement and monitoring of child development, early learning and recommended international quality services standards.

Strategy 4: Strengthening policy, governance, financing, and advocacy

In many countries where ECCE/ECD has been considered privilege rather than a right. Inequalities persist globally, especially for children with disabilities. To remedy this situation, an additional international normative document focusing on ECCE/ECD is needed, uniting key articles of the CRC and CRPD. Additional policy planning is needed to build effective multisectoral organizational frameworks and coordination systems to ensure sectoral, multisectoral and integrated ECCE/ECD services are developed, implemented, improved and expanded. In order to do so, states and the global community need to establish better governance systems for ECCE/ECD. Yet even if positive multisectoral ECCE/ECD policies are in place, they can be hampered by inadequate financing. Although reliable data regarding ECCE/ECD financing is often unavailable, we do know that, on average, only two percent of education budgets is provided to support ECCE/ECD in low-income countries, which is woefully inadequate. ECCE/ECD financing is at even greater risk now due to COVID-19. In order to tackle policy, governance, and financing challenges, the global community should pursue strategic priorities to: (1) strengthen normative and policy frameworks for ECCE/ECD at national and international levels, (2) prioritize at least one year of free and compulsory pre-primary education in sector planning, budgeting and implementation, (c) increase greatly international and domestic funding for ECCE/ECD.

Strategy 5: Galvanizing coordination and international cooperation

To truly achieve progress in ECCE/ECD, we need coordination at all levels - from the international community to regional, national and municipal levels. Intersectorality is the basis of the ECCE/ECD action plan and the construction of a systemic programme. This begins by strengthening regulatory policies through coordinated government approaches. A harmonious movement requires a holistic perspective, recognizing that children's human rights are universal, indivisible, and interdependent. To this end, three strategic priorities are to be utilized: (1) strengthen policies and frameworks through coordinated whole of government and coordinated approaches to protect child rights and protection; (2) increase multisectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration, including promoting the UNGA's approval of a UN decade for ECCE/ECD and developing a knowledge exchange platform; and (3) transform systems to strengthen capacities at all levels to plan, develop, and implement policies and programmes through the provision of technical assistance and inter-regional and inter-country exchanges.

Following the introduction of the GSP's five strategies, HRH Princess Laurentien opened the floor for statements from government and inter-governmental representatives from around the globe, including H.E. Mr. Zheng Fuzhi (China), who highlighted that in China, pre-primary education is centrally coordinated, implemented by local authorities, and financed by all levels of government, resulting in an enrollment growth rate of 62%. Ms. Leela Davi (Mauritius) emphasized that for real and swift movement, we need 1) commitment at the highest level of government with sub-regional support, and 2) an intersectoral, non-fragmented approach. Mr. RJ Simpson (Canada) reiterated that we cannot address the pandemic alone: only through collaboration and sharing across all sectors-ministries, provincial governments, and civil society, can we combat the effects of this pandemic. Ms. Zsuzsanna Jakab (WHO) stated that reliable and comparable data on ECCE/ECD is critical, and that the health sector has an important role to play in ECCE/ECD as childhood health and development begins at conception and continues within the family domain during the important first three years of life. Mr. Sanjay Wijesekera (UNICEF) reaffirmed that at least one-year of pre-primary education should be compulsory in all national education policies, and that governments need to double-down on evidence-based advocacy efforts. HRH Princess Laurentien then mentioned that, although the honorable Minister of Cambodia was unable to join the dialogue, Cambodia's efforts and leadership in ECCE/ECD are also of great importance.

From Commitment to Implementation:

Following the plenary session, participants joined one of two separate roundtables to consider which strategic priorities would be most relevant for the overall strategy and for possible national contributions. Breakout Session 1 was led by HRH Princess Laurentien, and Breakout Session 2 was led by Mr. Borhene Chakroun.

The breakout sessions addressed the following items, gathered diverse comments on the draft GPS strategy, and offered recommendations for its endorsement and prioritisation. Specifically:

- Which strategic priorities and initiatives would be the most relevant to achieve the objectives of the strategy? What needs to be highlighted?
- What are your country's priorities and which contributions can your country make to achieve the objectives reflected in the strategy?

The Princess, in breakout session 1, posed the following questions.

- How can we best move the strategies this forward?
- An Agile Action Team requires resources to work across institutions and organisations in an agile manner. How should it be organised?

Mr. Sheldon Shaeffer started by proposing to use the crisis context and collect data and instil a sense of urgency at the government level. While ECCE/ECD data is much needed, there are successful examples in the reopening of ECCE/ECD services during the pandemic that could be analysed and shared rapidly.

To fight against poverty, France took a holistic approach, engaging different departments, linking poverty, social isolation and child health and development, resulting in developing a shared language regarding ECCE/ECD to mobilize communities, parents, and teachers in 2017, well prior to the pandemic. Hence, they were already mobilized around a shared language at the onset of COVID-19 in early 2020 because they were already taking an integrated approach with a broader perspective linking diverse aspects and issues such as poverty and social cohesion with child and family development. ECCE/ECD is also part of the national agenda as reflected in the inter-ministerial strategy for early childhood.

The representative from WHO underlined that early learning and development begins at home; therefore, it is vital to involve parents and communities through parenting education and support. A child learns from day one, hence looking at the child's developmental trajectory is most important, wherein the health sector contributes. Multi-sectoral collaboration and promoting equity in learning and learning environments needs to be highlighted in the Strategy.

A second part of the discussion focused on the following questions:

- What does this Strategy need to do now? What does an action group need to do?
- What does the new Strategy add to existing ones?
- What does political commitment to ECCE/ECD mean more concretely? What are the concrete steps to make commitment more tangible?
- Given the importance of financing, should we engage with Ministries of Finance as a key priority?

A UNESCO representative stated that it stands ready to support data collection and helping to measure the impact of the pandemic on children and children's services. For instance, to inform better ECCE/ECD policies, an Agile Action Team could focus on data collection in partnership with OECD, drawing on various good practices and make sure to bring them into inter-ministerial platforms to help them act on the basis data and other policy experiences and evidence.

UNICEF emphasised the importance of adequately financing ECCE/ECD. To increase domestic financing and international aid for ECCE/ECD, a UNICEF representative stated that the agency has committed to allocate 10 percent of its education budget to pre-primary education to train ECCE/ECD frontline workers and support the roles of child caregivers and parents.

Canada emphasised the importance of taking a holistic approach, by accompanying both children and families.

In Cuba, ECCE/ECD is a universal human right, hence nationwide-access and coverage are ensured, with 99.2% coverage of young children enrolled in ECCE/ECD services, with institutional presence in critical domains. Cuba also considers training teachers to be a strategic issue. Cuba offered to share their experience in ECCE provision based on an inter-sectoral and community-based approach.

ILO articulated the importance of ECCE/ECD employers and workers in the strategy.

To roll out the strategy, Morocco emphasized three areas:

1. Institutional reach of the strategy, which requires a legal framework.
2. Taking a multisectoral approach to addressing cross cutting issues.
3. Governance and ensuring sustainable financing.

The Princess emphasized that language development is a catalytic factor in ECCE, which needs to be reflected in the strategy.

Parallel breakout session two, chaired by Borhene Chakroun, aimed at looking at the same items and the following aspects were highlighted:

Strategic priorities and initiatives:

- High-level of political will (backed up by public buy-in), leading to the provision of sufficient resources to the sector, is critically important. In order to increase political support for ECCE/ECD, it is essential to share knowledge about ECCE/ECD with the public.
- An integrated, well-coordinated multi-sectoral approach to ECCE/ECD policy and planning, accompanied by integrated curriculum, etc., is needed.
- Professionalization of the workforce is a necessary step to assure quality services. Mauritius identified the lack of trained professionals as the main challenge for quality. Moreover, quality education can be ensured with better coordination between the public and private sector.
- Focus on children's well-being, resilience and equity in access to ECCE/ECD. Canada, for example, is placing attention on the impact of COVID-19 on early learning and enrolment and encouraging play-based learning. Canada's priority is also to narrow the gaps between the indigenous education and the other populations. To compensate for the lack of ECCE/ECD in rural areas, Zambia annexed ECCE/ECD centers to primary schools.
- Increased digitization and use of IT in ECCE/ECD. Canada stressed the importance of monitoring the impact IT usage on development, as for example on children's creativity. Different means for service delivery should be used to increase access and equity. Zambia used radio to reach rural areas.
- ECDAN identified the importance of enhancing knowledge sharing and multisectoral collaboration. The Institute of Early Childhood, a UNESCO category 2 center in Seychelles expressed the need to develop better data management.

WHO is committed to work jointly with other agencies and with countries to enhance an inter-sectoral coordination framework with roles and responsibilities in the GPS to improve attention to children's health in the first years of life before the beginning of early education. Besides, governments can convince their governments to lobby for establishing the UN decade of ECCE/ECD to increase political support and investment.

Conclusion and Next Steps:

After the two breakout sessions, the chairs summarized the interventions, with an emphasis on what is needed for GPS implementation. The key question was how to define and structure implementation arrangements and the monitoring framework? How to build a strong and united commitment for establishing an Action Team?

The following were identified and reported back as top content priorities during the first breakout session on identifying the strategic directions and priorities to achieve the GPS:

- Using lessons learned from the crisis, by analyzing data regarding what happened and using the urgency of the pandemic to greatly increase support for ECCE/ECD;
- Ensuring political commitment;
- Putting equity at the heart of this strategy;
- Guaranteeing financial allocation, not only at the governmental level, but also at international agency levels;
- Establishing a holistic multisectoral approach;
- Developing legal frameworks;
- Emphasizing the importance of language development as a catalytic force.

In addition, six important areas regarding content and action emerged from the discussion of the second breakout session and were introduced to the plenary:

- Importance of the well-being of children, especially in the resilience contexte
- Role of technology and digitalization to guarantee equal access.
- Professionalization at the global level of the ECCE/ECD workforce for quality education;
- Engagement of the wider public to ensure political commitment;
- Involvement of different stakeholders;
- Generation of knowledge by creating an international clearing house for knowledge sharing and building.

Moving forward, UNESCO and Princess Laurentien opened the floor for ideas on how to build an Action Team to implement the GPS, the following was discussed:

- Proclaim an ECCE/ECD Decade that will help boost public policy and increase participation of all actors.
- Develop frameworks to allow the construction of regional, local and national strategies to enable the development of a comprehensive global strategy.
- Advance a movement for a wider engaged public
- Coordinate knowledge into a strong well-designed clearinghouse
- Create an important international legal framework on ECCE/ECD that is currently lacking

Beyond this and as immediate next steps to take, the following was proposed and agreed upon:

- Finalize the Strategy and share it with all Member States and stakeholders;

- The implementation modalities will require further discussion. One already accepted idea is to continue the collaboration by forming an Agile Action Team to drive the strategy;
- And finally,, find the resources needed to drive this strategy forward. (e.g., a national awareness campaign).

In her concluding remarks, Ms. Stefania Giannini, reiterated that UNESCO is fully engaged and committed to continuing this dialogue and mobilizing all stakeholders and partners to ensure the full participation of Member States in the finalization and implementation phase. She also emphasized the importance of keeping a mission-oriented approach under global coalition leadership, as well as the importance of data collection on the ECCE/ECD crisis to mobilize awareness and advocacy to greatly increase political will. This momentum should be maintained to further promote GPS work within holistic, rights-based and lifelong learning perspectives to support the attainment of universal access to ECCE/ECD. She concluded the session by presenting the key next steps:

- Ensure a well-coordinated and multisectoral and holistic approach for ECCE/ECD policy planning and implementation.
- Increase high-level political will leading to securing sufficient resources for the sector.
- Focus on equity by including the most marginalized children and developing concrete proposals for achieving full equity.
- Conduct concrete action for language development as a critical dimension of cognitive development.
- Establish the Agile Team as a “mobile team” not only hosted by UNESCO but also by other committed agencies and institutions (UNICEF, OECD, ILO, WHO)

She added that for the GPE replenishment in July, we must be able to quantify ECCE/ECD development with data and evidence. She added “I see this not only as a process within the COVID-19 response but also looking forward and beyond and becoming an SDG 4 acceleration action plan and important pillar.”



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