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COVID-19 POLICY RESPONSES TO EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT (ECD)

UNITED NATIONS
SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
GOAL 4: QUALITY
EDUCATION

- In 2015 the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—an action plan for people, planet and prosperity. This provided a common blueprint for the next 15 years.
- Advances in the understanding of early brain development now tell us much more about the life-long health, learning and behaviour impacts of early experiences
- Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, at least 15 countries had made strides in getting three specific policies adopted, critical to support young children's healthy brain development: two years of free pre-primary education; paid breastfeeding breaks for new mothers for the first six months; and adequate paid parental leave.
- However, post the pandemic in the thick of a recession, early childhood development policies are unlikely to be a top priority for governments frantically trying to address the macro and micro economic implications of COVID-19 lockdown and the hammer and dance scenario in response to changing infection rates until a vaccine become available.

“CHILDREN ARE NOT THE FACE OF THIS PANDEMIC. BUT THEY RISK BEING AMONG ITS BIGGEST VICTIMS...IN SOME CASES, BY MITIGATION MEASURES THAT MAY INADVERTENTLY DO MORE HARM THAN GOOD. THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF THIS PANDEMIC WILL NOT BE DISTRIBUTED EQUALLY, THEY ARE EXPECTED TO BE MOST DAMAGING FOR CHILDREN IN THE POOREST COUNTRIES, IN THE POOREST NEIGHBOURHOODS, AND FOR THOSE IN ALREADY DISADVANTAGED OR VULNERABLE SITUATIONS”

-UNITED NATIONS POLICY BRIEF, 15 APRIL 2020-



THE SCALE OF
COVID-19 IN
SOUTH AFRICA
(SA)?

- South Africa is reported as having the worlds fifth-highest number of reported COVID-19 cases
- Underreporting and co-morbidity masks the true scale of the crisis
- Africa has the worlds youngest population with the lowest share of people over 65. South Africa has an older population, more than any other African State. Older people are the most vulnerable to morbidity and mortality in the COVID-19 battle
- Moody's downgrade of South Africa's creditworthiness came as the pandemic hit, exacerbating and amplifying the socio-economic vulnerabilities South Africa already faced. As it navigates a new and unknown public health and economic crisis, the stakes are much higher in the policy space.



COVID-19 SHOCKS
THAT DIRECTLY
IMPACT ECD

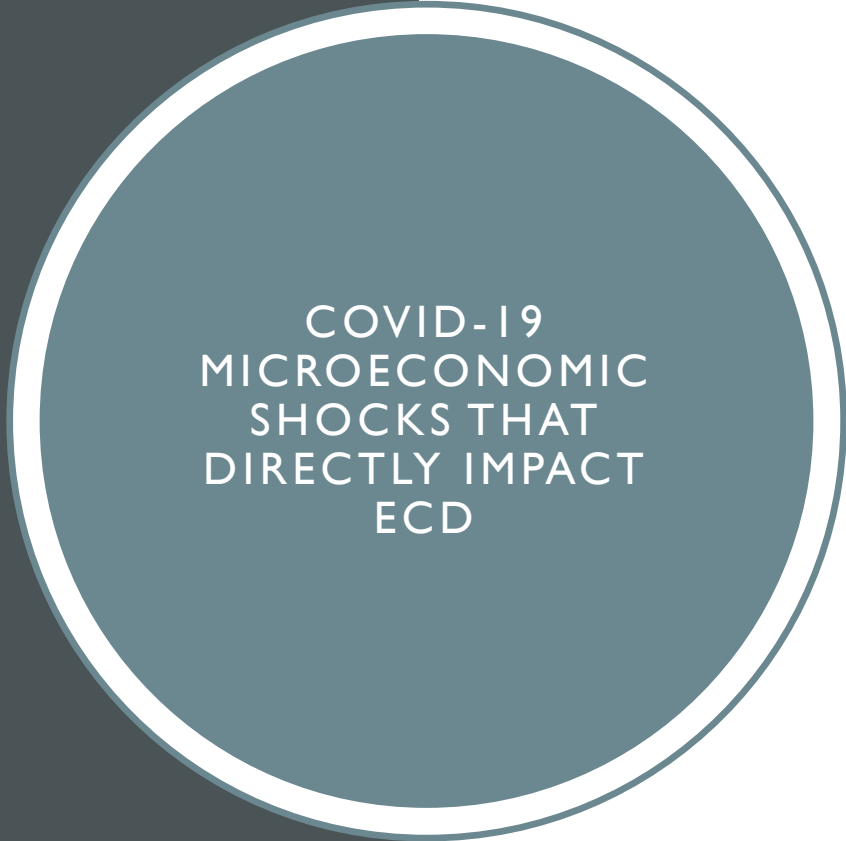
A PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY

(NUTRITION, CARE AND PREVENTION SERVICES AT RISK)

- Estimates predict increase in maternal and child mortality in low- and middle-income countries as health services for non-COVID-related issues become scarce; delayed/interrupted visits for healthcare related to HIV creating risk of increased mother to child transmission; increased resourcing to the pandemic, decreases resources to other mother child health related issues such as immunizations
- Many childcare and early education facilities closed worldwide, and interactions with extended families disrupted, children are deprived of both social and cognitive stimulation beyond their homes, in addition to the meals and other resources provided by many ECD programs
- There are risks faced during early childhood, when brain architecture is still rapidly developing and highly sensitive to environmental adversity
- Women's livelihoods-lockdowns have left many parents struggling to balance childcare and paid employment, with a disproportionate burden placed on women who, on average, spend more than three times longer on care and housework than men. [*Childcare in a global crisis: The impact of COVID-19 on work and family life*](#)

PREDICTED COVID-19 MACROECONOMIC SHOCKS THAT CREATE A VICIOUS CYCLE FOR ECD

- With a creditworthiness downgrade, the expected deteriorating economic circumstances anticipated by most countries due to COVID-19 will only amplify immediate health, nutrition, care, and education risks in SA.
- South Africa's most recent Progress in International Reading Literacy study (PIRLS, 2016), showed that 78% of children in Grade 4 could not read for meaning in any language. The problem goes deeper.
- It is estimated that the pandemic can lead this year to an additional 42 to 66 million children who live in extreme poverty, and the economic shocks experienced by families because of the global economic downturn could reverse 2 to 3 years of progress in decreasing infant mortality.
- Families may lose wages and housing, and have to bear the costs of increased health care and associated food insecurity.
- Low-income households are likely to quickly deplete savings and sell assets to provide better food and treatment for ill household members.
- Widespread poverty has and will continue to drive further migration, displacement, and family separations, which severely affects early childhood nutrition, care, and development.



COVID-19
MICROECONOMIC
SHOCKS THAT
DIRECTLY IMPACT
ECD

AN ECONOMIC PAUSE

- Unemployment en masse as tourism is paused, wine and liquor production is halted. These are major income generators in SA
- Halt in the economy as the informal market shuts down and trade is disallowed in public spaces to curb the spread of the virus

DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE FAIL

- Lack of social net accessible to all due to outdated data systems for example the UIF scheme that had the funds but couldn't process applications timeously for everyone to provide the urgent income relief needed

WOMANS LIVELIHOODS

- Lack of childcare options as school and childcare centres remain closed and therefore job insecurity
- Inability of woman to further their education or access job opportunities as they are homebound
- Early evidence shows increases in parents reporting mental health difficulties as well as increases in child behaviour problems since the onset of the pandemic.

EXISTING INEQUALITIES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES PERVADE

- Crowded housing and lack of access to water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities in concentrated urban poverty areas, refugee camps, and informal settlements makes preventive behaviors like physical distancing, handwashing, or within-household isolation of members difficult. In addition, early reports show that confinement and/or crowded conditions are associated with large increases in domestic violence related to COVID-19-related movement restrictions.
- Family Planning: In Sierra Leone, there was an 11% increase in the chance of pregnancy for girls 12-17 years of age as a result of the Ebola crisis. Early reports of teenage pregnancy and lack of government services providing family planning sessions has already been coming in from some township areas in Cape Town.

34%

A third of early years providers in deprived areas who may have to close within a year.

42%

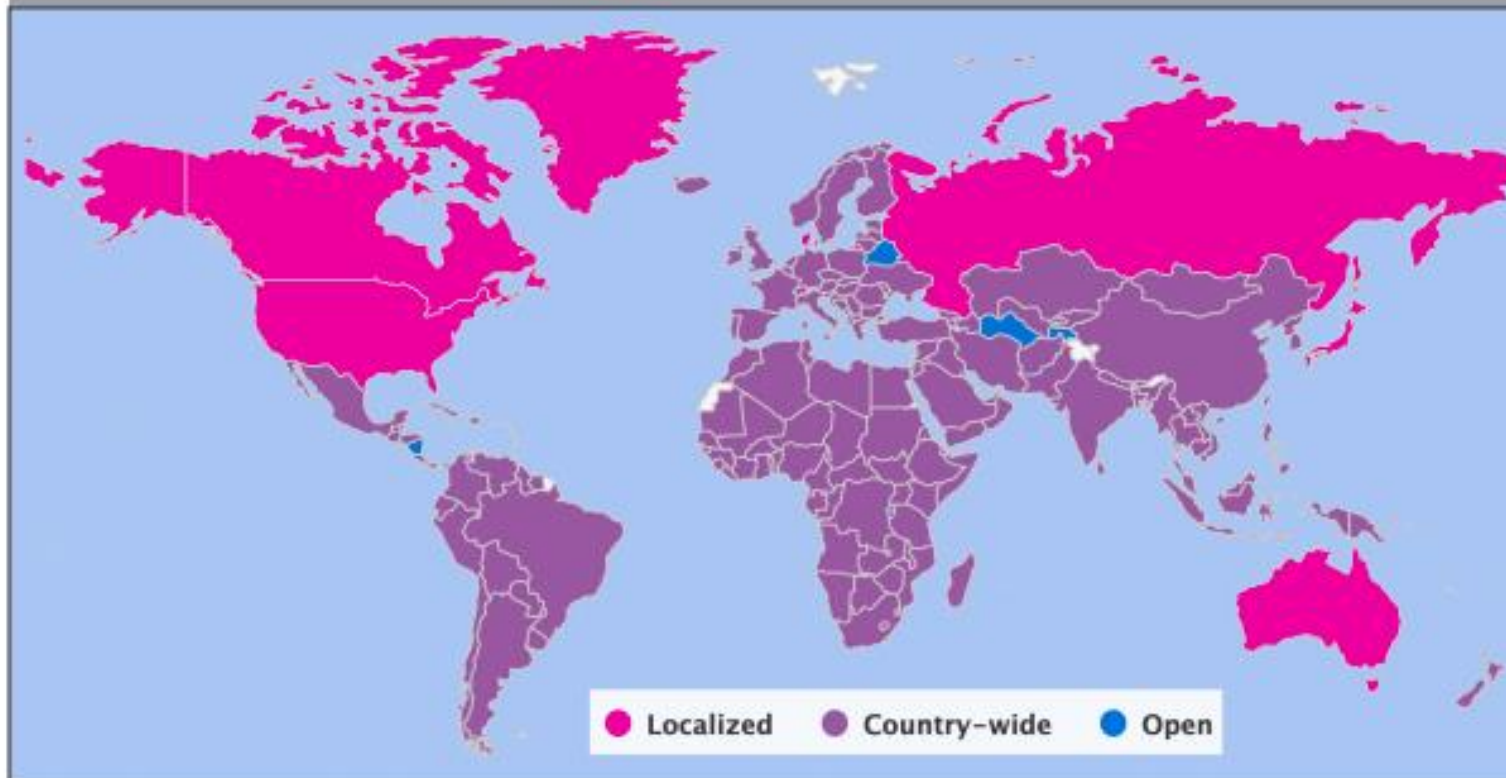
The proportion of early years providers in deprived areas who are likely to make redundancies.

65%

Two thirds of parents without childcare are feeling stressed, worried or overwhelmed.

THE SUTTON TRUST, ENGLAND, JULY
2020

FIGURE 2: SCHOOL CLOSURES (SOURCE: UNESCO)



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

THE EDUCATION GAP

Before the pandemic, 43% of all children less than 5 years of age in the world were estimated to be at risk of not achieving their developmental potential. International support to scale up essential interventions was gaining momentum towards reducing the percentage of children at risk of devastating physical, socioemotional, and cognitive consequences over the entire course of their lives.

Widespread digitalisation mitigates the education loss caused by school-closures, but the poorest children are least likely to live in good home-learning environments with internet connection or in SA even caregivers who are literate and able to provide education. Increased unsupervised on-line internet use has magnified issues around sexual exploitation and cyber-bullying. Increased digitalisation is likely to widen inequalities between children, as the poorest children are least likely to have a quiet place in their home to concentrate on their studies and/ or have the tools or support to access on-line education. The effect of this “education gap” may be long-lasting.



ECD PROVIDES A
RESILIENT AND
SUSTAINABLE
POLICY FOCUS
FOR COVID-19
RECOVERY

- Strengthening early childhood development is key to achieving at least seven of the Sustainable Development Goals goals, on poverty, hunger, health (including child mortality), education, gender, water, sanitation, and inequality.
- ECD forms the foundation of at least 7-11 of the 17 SDG's, with the Secretary General Ban Ki Moon citing these goals as being fully achievable with ECD as the focus

THE SDG'S AND ECD



Goal 1: ECD is one of the most cost-effective strategies for poverty alleviation. Early brain development sets children up for the future and enables them to learn skills to flourish in a 21st-century economy.



Goal 2: Children who receive early stimulation with nutrition supplements have better outcomes than children who only receive nutrition supplements. ECD interventions buffer the negative effect of stress thereby improving absorption of nutritional intake.



Goal 3: ECD interventions early in life set a trajectory for good lifelong health. It can lead to lower incidence of cardiovascular and non-communicable diseases and can increase well-being.



Goal 4: Learning begins at birth. ECD interventions have proved to be the foundation for later learning, academic success and productivity.



Goal 5: The link between early childhood development and women's economic empowerment is clear. Greater investment in high-quality and affordable childcare is linked to greater opportunities for women's economic advancement and empowerment.



Goal 8: Adequate childcare is a critical element of the decent work agenda. Investments in professionalisation of the early childhood workforce contribute to full and productive employment, especially for women.



Goal 10: Inequality often begins before birth. ECD is a powerful equaliser. The first few years of a child's life offers a window of opportunity to provide interventions that can close the inequality gap between children born into disadvantage and those born with many advantages.



Goal 11: ECD requires safe spaces that have sustainable, natural, and biophilic features.



Goal 12: ECD programmes set in place patterns of consumption, attitudes towards conservation and behavioural practices that will preserve the environment.



Goal 16: Early childhood interventions have the potential to instil values and behaviours that can reduce violence and promote peace. ECD interventions have been shown to lead to lower rates of violence in the home and greater social cohesion in communities.







Goal 17: Measurement of early childhood development at global, regional and national levels can serve as a powerful tool to revitalise global partnerships.

WHAT ARE OTHER COUNTRIES DOING TO ENSURE NO CHILD IS LEFT BEHIND?

- On July 15, 2020, a ministerial round-table took place via a UNESCO webinar for Ministers of Education and their representatives from the different regions of the world to present experiences and priority actions in the overlooked area of early childhood care and education (ECCE).
- In the Seychelles, the Minister presented an effective communication plan implemented and strong commitment of ECCE leaders to mobilize and engage all stakeholders.
- The Minister of Cambodia explained how public-private partnership was built to ensure learning continuity, in the use of online platforms, social media and TV and Radio channels for children with no access to the internet, and even paper-based material for those who did not have access to any distance learning solution with particular attention to children from vulnerable groups.
- From the Arab region, the representative of the Minister of Qatar explained that the State has invested in ECCE, by turning to distance education, focusing on support to parents and children and support to children with special needs, through special channels of communication.
- The Representative from Uruguay explained the new way of learning implemented in the country without compromising health and safety.
- Saudi Arabia, as chair of G20 which has ECCE as theme in its agenda, shared the initiative of virtual kindergarten for children 3-6 years of age, initiated before and amplified during the COVID-19 crisis.
- In China, parents are receiving real-time advice and tips through social media on supporting ECE at home including social and emotional learning (SEL).
- In Zimbabwe, printed materials are being made available to pre-primary aged children.
- In Mongolia, TV is being used to keep pre-primary aged children learning, including in languages children understand, complemented with printed material.




DEVELOPING FUTURE FACING ECD POLICIES

The twelve futures tools/techniques:

Intelligence Gathering	
	Horizon scanning: process of looking for early warning signs of change
	7 Questions: interviews to gather insights of a range of stakeholders
	The Issues Paper: presents quotes from 7 Questions interviews to illustrate strategic issues and choices
	Delphi: consultation process to gather opinion from experts about the future and prioritise issues

Dynamics of Change	
	Driver mapping: identifies the PESTLE drivers shaping the future policy environment
	Axes of uncertainty: used to define the critical uncertainties for the policy area in the future and frame scenarios

Describing the Future	
	Scenarios: stories describing how external factors might develop in future
	Visioning: used to create common aims and objectives and describe what the future will be like if they are delivered
	SWOT: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; factors that need to be considered when developing policy

Developing and Testing Policy	
	Policy stress-testing: way of testing strategic objectives against a set of scenarios to see how well they stand up against external conditions
	Backcasting: method for determining the steps that need to be taken to deliver a preferred future
	Roadmapping: shows how a range of inputs will combine over time to shape future development of policy

ECD POLICY FOR
SOCIAL MOBILITY
GATHERS LOCAL
LEVEL
INTELLIGENCE
ABOUT CONTEXT
SPECIFIC REALITIES

FALLING INTO POVERTY

- The long-term effects of this pandemic for children are likely to be compounded by an enduring economic downturn well beyond quarantine. International Monetary Fund projections predict a global economic recession to extend beyond 2021, even if the pandemic is contained.
- Employment may take years to be recuperated in some sectors, and loss of productive assets and business loss may be unrecoverable.
- The urgent securing of food supply chains and local food markets has led to a food security crisis
- The duration of childhood poverty may span all the early childhood years or beyond.
- Many young children who remain at home do not get the play and early learning support they need for healthy development. In 54 low- and middle-income countries with recent data, around 40 per cent of children aged between 3 and 5 years old were not receiving social-emotional and cognitive stimulation from any adult in their household.
- Studies of economic crises as well as birth cohort studies in high as well as low- and middle-income countries demonstrate the potential for life-long negative effects of exposure to poverty early in life, and more severe effects associated with longer exposure to poverty.
- In some countries such as the US, there is a racial component to the family's ability to deal with the stress of severe economic losses. In addition to a higher rate of poverty (child poverty rates in African American families are 32% vs 11% in white families), African American families have one-tenth the family net worth of white families, even at similar educational levels. Thus, there is much less financial flexibility or cushion to protect these families and their children during economic crises such as the current one.
- Socioeconomic inequalities at a global level are thus exacerbating the situation for millions of families.
- Lack of childcare and early education options also leaves many parents, particularly mothers working in the informal sector, with no choice but to bring their young children to work. More than 9 in 10 women in Africa and nearly 7 in 10 in Asia and the Pacific work in the informal sector and have limited to no access to any form of social protection. Many parents become trapped in this unreliable, poorly paid employment, contributing to intergenerational cycles of poverty.

DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

Immediate government measures could ensure that children have access to good food, receive protection against child abuse and neglect, have continued access to child physical and mental health services, and can navigate safely on the internet. Policies would also need to support parental employment since it is key to fighting child poverty...

However, staining its ability to progress in this policy space, is South Africa's history of misappropriation of public funds to bail out states owned entities over service delivery, continued corruption within the tendering process and poor data collection preventing truth, transparency and accountability .



DESCRIBING THE FUTURE

POLICY REFORM

- Globally, an average of [6.6%](#) of domestic education budgets are allocated to ECD; [fewer than 1%](#) of development aid budgets to education are allocated to the early year sector. A global [consensus](#) is emerging for at least 10% of education budgets to be spent on ECD.
- Game-changing investments in broadband access and digital public goods that support learning, alongside complementary investments in digital literacy and regulations that ensure children's privacy, data protection and safety online while also taking more energetic steps to protect children from online child sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as other online harms. Psycho-social support can also be accessed or even used as an early warning screening tool via media platforms such as the MXIT portal.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE

- Build resilient, adaptable and integrated service delivery systems that are better able to withstand the next crisis (ECD is shared between 13 different departments that don't actively collaborate or share databases)
- Flexible work arrangements that address the needs of working parents;
- Investment in the non-family childcare workforce including training;
- Social protection systems including cash transfers that reach families working in non-formal employment.
- Invest in mental well being of mothers and carers: Caregiver Health is Child health. Create systems that pick up on early warning signs of mental illness and postnatal depression, how to care for your children and who to call if home is not a safe place

DEVELOPING AND TESTING POLICY

POLICY COSTING

- Adaptation by local level governments of standard physical distancing and lockdown strategies i.e. avoiding blanket policies that have serious secondary causation that outweighs benefit to cost
- Deregulation of the informal economy to allow woman to continue working close to home in local markets which also helps keep local supply chains moving

SAFETY

- Provide local level support with PPE and advise on how to trade safely in the COVID-19 environment
- Create pressure within government via IMF loans/Moody's to ensure a percentage of GDP is invested in human capital, at this critical age and stage of development, showing a path out debt in the future.

LEARNING

- Revisit pilots or digital initiatives that deliver educational resources and prompts to parents to provide ECD support at home
- Look at incentives that can support home learning support during shutdowns so that children don't fall behind, for example food coupons awarded to parents who provide evidence of children completing ECD learning through play tasks.
- Create pressure within government via IMF loans/Moody's to ensure a percentage of GDP is invested in human capital, at this critical age and stage of development, showing a path out debt in the future.

EMPLOYMENT

- Provide free transport for woman needing access to FET college courses or job interviews.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFORM

- The tender rules in government have for years in South Africa, created an atmosphere ripe for corruption and self dealing. This can be evidenced through the bids for PPE being awarded to family members of the ruling party. This is an injustice that can be addressed through policy change, redefining conditions under which tenders are awarded and who has the delegatory authority to do so.
- Use the opportunity to improve data gathering (training local Govt offices to register deaths and report them timeously even if death certificates cannot be produced). Reliable reporting and digital transformation of national co-ordination efforts. Opportunities to train young people.

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THANK YOU