

INVESTING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT: A luxury or sensible economic strategy?

The early years of a child's life set the trajectories for health, behaviour, learning and employment opportunities throughout their lives. Early childhood development (ECD) programmes are therefore a critical intervention that puts children on the right track towards lifelong wellbeing and enhanced life chances.

Children exposed to such programmes have better opportunities for access to health services, do better in school, have lower dropout rates and are more likely to earn higher income as adults.

Many studies have also shown that ECD programmes are cost effective in the long run and that their benefits surpass their costs. Programmes implemented at this stage of life have the highest long-term returns in terms of human capital development and reduction of poverty, inequality and vulnerability.

In economic terms ECD is the first step in the process of human capital development and, as a result, should be viewed not merely as a vehicle for delivering badly needed social services, but also as an important element of economic development and strategy. Yet despite this, ECD is almost entirely neglected by African governments.

What are Early Childhood Development Programmes

ECD encompasses critical aspects of a young child's development including;

- Pre-primary education
- Healthcare
- Nutrition
- Hygiene
- Play/recreation-related services

Such programmes usually follow an **integrated** approach and budgets are often attached to the education and health sectors of a national government's budget.

The benefits of Early Childhood Development programmes

Studies have consistently demonstrated the positive outcomes of early childhood programmes – not only the significant social gains, but also in economic terms;

- Children do better in school and go on to earn higher incomes than children without early education
- Children have improved nutrition and health as ECD programmes require children to complete their immunisations, monitor their growth and facilitate access to health facilities if required
- Children have increased levels of enrolment and retention in primary and secondary schools, alongside improved behaviour and better academic performance
- ECD programmes encourage and facilitate social interaction that helps promote cognitive development leading to higher scores on intellectual aptitude tests than those who do not participate in ECD
- A cost benefit analysis in a US study indicated savings of \$US7 for every dollar spent for a child at the initial period of investment¹.

Provision of Early Childhood Development in Africa

Despite the significant economic and social benefits, ECD is almost entirely neglected by African governments and is given insufficient attention and resources. With a few exceptions, preschool is far from accessible to most children in Africa. And where services are available, they are predominately provided by private institutions that operate largely in urban areas;

- Only 20 of 52 countries in Africa had official early childhood programmes according to a 2010 UNESCO survey
- A mere 2% of the education budget in Africa is allocated to pre-primary education
- Only 15% of pre-primary school age children have the opportunity to attend pre-primary schools
- The Seychelles and Mauritius have high pre-school attendance – nine in every 10 pre-school aged children have the opportunity to access this level of education
- Cape Verde, Ghana, Liberia and Morocco also have a positive record with a net enrolment ratio in pre-schooling of around 50%
- Sao Tome and Principe, Tanzania, Kenya and Algeria are also making commendable efforts to provide pre-primary education
- However, even in countries where ECD programmes are available, they tend to cater mostly to children living in urban settings, and exclude those in rural areas and children from poorer families who cannot afford the services
- In Morocco, almost all those enrolled in pre-primary schools are in private institutions. In Mauritius only 18% attend public institutions
- But countries such as Ghana, Liberia and Tanzania are increasing efforts to provide preschool children with access to ECD programmes in public facilitiesⁱⁱ.

What African Governments need to do

- Africa cannot afford to ignore investment in ECD, nor consider it a luxury in the face of competing priorities for scarce resources. Whilst there are many other compelling programmes demanding finances from both the health and education sectors, ECD is vital in child wellbeing, human capital development, social cohesion and nation building and therefore must be given increased recognition and resources
- Studies suggest that an **initial investment of at least 6% of the budgets allocated for health and education** are required for ECD, progressively increasing in order to achieve the Dakar Education for All commitment * and expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education
- But financing is not the only factor in determining effective ECD programmes. Governments need to ensure effective service provision, especially expanding services to reach the most disadvantaged, ensure equity of access, train middle-level professionals in this field and monitor the quality of these programmes.

*The *Dakar Education for All Declaration* is a global framework adopted by 164 governments in 2000 in order to reaffirm their resolve to expand learning opportunities. It included a commitment to expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

ⁱ Parks, G (2000) the High Scope Perry Preschool Project Synopsis. Juvenile Justice Bulletin. Washington DC. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

ⁱⁱ Based on data from UNESCO 2010