



FOURTH BLENDED NATIONAL EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT (ECD) STAKEHOLDERS' CONFERENCE (2021)

Theme - Responsive Caregiving for Children in Diverse Circumstances: Innovations and Inclusivity

CONFERENCE COMMUNIQUE AND CALL TO ACTION

#4thECDconference

#4thECD

Communique themes:

Child thrival, financing, parent/caregiver empowerment, and coordination

Preamble

We the **541 delegates** (275 physically present and 266 via Zoom) from **23 counties in Kenya, 10 countries** and over **70 organizations** comprising Government officials, United Nations agencies, Civil Society, Philanthropists, donors, and academia; YouTube plenary of up to 647 (day two), Twitter reach of 352,000 and Twitter impact of 3 Million (day one), all convening for the Fourth Blended National Early Childhood Development (ECD) Stakeholders' Conference held from 25-27 October, 2021 at Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Siaya County, Kenya, convened for the conference themed "*Responsive Caregiving for Children in Diverse Circumstances: Innovations and Inclusivity.*"

Our future as citizens of our respective countries, lies in our children. The ECD story must start from the beginning. Early experiences affect the developing **brain's architecture**, providing the foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health as well as potential earnings and the capabilities to confront future problems. **Brains are built over time: brain development is** an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood; however, 90% of the brain is developed by age five. The period before birth to age three is the most critical in human development. Thus, nurturing care strategies must be **targeted and intentional** on protective, and preventive strategies in the early years particularly for vulnerable and at-risk children. This reflects ECDNeK vision and mandate: "A society where all children ages 0-8 years realise holistic ECD for lifelong success" Building on the global Nurturing Care Framework, which has been promulgated in law in Kenya in the Children's Act. We need to continue to work to develop integrated public policies, services, and programs to ensure that no child is left behind. The Nurturing Care Framework supported by the regulatory framework in Kenya as well as globally in **the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) and Constitution of Kenya, 2010**. These instruments ensure that children not only survive but also thrive and later transform their societies.

Article 53 of the Constitution of Kenya (2010) guarantees a child's best interest as a key focus for our entire country. It apprehends a shared responsibility between national and county governments, the private sector, academia, civil society organisations and all relevant stakeholders.

KENYA: The COVID-19 pandemic has been a difficult period, particularly for poor households. About 53% reported lower or diminished incomes whose implication has been a significant financial and emotional strain. This has affected families' ability to provide optimal caregiving to children in their care. Families have had to compensate by reducing the number of meals they consume. One in three children have, during the pandemic, eaten fewer quantities of nutritious foods and consumed fewer calories. This has led to increasing levels of malnutrition, particularly stunting and wasting in Kenya. Many young children in Kenya also missed out on quality early education and caregiving. This conference recommends family-friendly supports to families with young children, especially during the most critical time of their development (the early years), including workplace breastfeeding support, integrated care and nutrition services, and violence free spaces. It also calls for innovation and approaches that support families and children where they are including at roadsides where lactating women work, in prisons where children are incarcerated, and for those very young children for whom ECD centre-based provision is not a possibility for a host of reasons. The conference calls for these actions as we now know that the benefits of good quality ECD care and provision transcend the individual and family gains that are well documented, and benefit society at large across different spaces including: the workplace, national economies (Gross Domestic Product) and national cohesion.

Promoting Thrival of at-risk children

- All children need nurturing care to achieve their full potential. Nurturing care is vital for their healthy growth and development. The formative stages of development - from pre-conception, pregnancy to age three - when the brain is most susceptible to environmental influences, are crucial
- Recognising that the structure and delivery of services to young children was interrupted by COVID-19, the Health system have had to innovate to deliver quality services. Community Health Volunteers (CHVs) must be supported as they adapt accordingly to support young children to thrive.
- Reiterate that children of mothers in conflict with the law have the same rights as other children. They are not guilty of any crime but end up as collateral victims of crime. All county governments to ensure female prisons in their counties have model childcare facilities providing nurturing care for children accompanying their parents to prisons including, crèches or daycare facilities, and referral services such as pre- and post-natal services and clinics for children.
- Urging governments to put in place child-friendly policy guidelines in the justice system right from when the mother is taken from the community until the time she is sentenced and imprisoned.
- Urging ECD community to advocate for introduction of onsite childcare facilities in the workplace, where young mothers can leave their babies, and that county governments lead by example.
- Recognising the rapid growth of urban informal settlements, lacking adequate indoor and outdoor play infrastructure for promoting holistic child development. Adapting local play material, linkages to Community Health Strategy (CHS) and devolved Health Units can secure brighter futures.

Financing

- Investing early in pre-primary Education and Health because early interventions have life-long effects on human and national development

- Calling on 47 county governments to prioritise investments in early years, beyond infrastructure/classrooms.
- Increased investments towards promotive and preventive health support for young children.
- Calling on the National government to develop a financing framework indicating how funding for devolved functions related to early childhood should be utilized (e.g percentage allocations for infrastructure, teaching/learning materials, teacher remuneration and feeding programs).
- Ensure free and compulsory pre-primary education, particularly capitation for every child.
- Call for increased use of evidence (data) and multi-sectoral collaboration to respond to emerging issues.
- Adopt the Nurturing Care Framework as a government program, with expenditure lines as well as ensuring longevity beyond political office terms.

Parent/Caregiver Empowerment

- Acknowledging that many parents of young children know what to do, but face many barriers as they strive to nurture, particularly in the context of COVID-19.
- Focusing on challenges facing the Prison System provides opportunities for collaboration to improve service provision in the female penal institutions. This is to uphold the right of every child to survival, protection, and development in accordance with the Constitution of Kenya 2010, and other legal instruments governing the rights and welfare of the child.
- Reflecting on the quality of nurture provided by traditional extended family and community safety nets. Early stimulation is critical and must be done intentionally and skillfully.
- Prevention of stunting is imperative to ensure that young children's development trajectories are founded early.
- Calling on County governments to provide adequate spaces for children to play in all caregiving environments and advocating for scaling up of inclusive ECD services.

Coordination

- Recognising that ECD is a devolved function. Bringing together the 48 (national and county) governments and coordinating all sectors that are linked to early child development, and consequently national development.
- Calling upon the 48 governments in Kenya, employers, service providers and policymakers to collaborate in providing targeted and workplace support for parents of children under age eight, that is, father and mothers to get adequate time to nurture, quality childcare services: appropriate childcare benefits, and education of parents on responsive caregiving. With such policies, workplace productivity increases, and promotes economic growth.
- Multi-sectoral committees in county and national government.
- Continued political leadership and championing of ECD at the highest political levels.
- Recognizing the County First Ladies Association (CFLA) commitment to become ECD champions or patrons for reaching every child aged under 8 years - with age-appropriate services.

We recognize that the Early Childhood period, the first 1,000 days (ages zero to three) and the subsequent 3,000 days (ages 4-8), are the most rapid for brain development and the foundation of skills and capabilities that affect an individual's life. **Therefore, building on this conference and the proceedings of previous national conference communiqués ECDNeK has issued [at KICD (2016), Kenyatta University (in Nairobi of 2018), Mombasa (2019;) and now Siaya (2021)], we are making a call to action as follows:**

Siaya Call to Action

This communique calls on all ECD stakeholders to lobby all state and non-state actors and decision-makers in Kenya to prioritize Early Childhood Development (ECD) as a critical sector that is of national importance. We call for profiling and recognition of counties that are constantly improving investment in ECD services to showcase best practices for national adaptation. We call for the following substantive policy and action-oriented recommendations:

1. Recognize that the first 1,000 days of a child's life are critical in ensuring optimal brain and holistic development.
2. Ensure that children from diverse circumstances, with disabilities and special needs, including those accompanying their mothers to prisons, in refugee camps, informal settlements, emergencies, rural poor communities, among other marginalised settings, receive equitable childcare services to grow and develop to their full potential.
3. Embrace the needs of all children aged 0-8 years with cooperative and synergistic-multisectoral programming. Needs of 0-3s, should be prioritized in workplace including capacity development/family support to parents/caregivers (the home) and onsite childcare.
4. Acknowledge that securing the future of Kenya's children is the responsibility of government in partnership with all stakeholders and, therefore, enact ECD policy enhancing coordination and collaboration by all actors.
5. Call all 47 county governments to work in partnership with all partners, including the private sector, in early childhood efforts to aim at scalable and cost-effective models of ECD programming to reach all children.
6. Recognize that attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to which Kenya is a signatory prioritizes early childhood as the anchor to reach sustainable development across all sectors and aligns to Kenya's National Development Plan and the Big Four Agenda. ECD is the pathway to ensuring a more capable and productive workforce and to provide the future leadership we need.
7. Recognise existing government systems as key platforms for the creation of ECD champions and for reaching every child aged 0-8 years with age-appropriate services, adaptation, and application of contextually relevant parenting support interventions.
8. Prioritize ECD provision in a sustainable manner with the funding requirement needed to target and impact holistic and optimal development beginning with secure funding for all children aged 0-8 years.
9. **Biennial ECD conferences:** Resolving that National ECD Stakeholder's Conference be held on a rotational basis, in each regional economic blocks in Kenya.
10. Urge all ECD practitioners offering relevant programs and services and researchers - from the grassroots to national levels - to register as members of ECD Network for Kenya, to enhance collaboration and partnership.
11. Fifth biennial National ECD Stakeholders' Conference will be held in Turkana County.

Endorsed on 27th October, at the Fourth National ECD Stakeholders' Conference, held at Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, Siaya County, Kenya