CESA Early Childhood Education and Development Cluster Paper on Early Childhood Education in Africa

Introduction

1. The purpose of this paper is to provide Ministers of Education and senior technicians of AU Member States with: i) the latest evidence on the current status of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Africa; ii) recommendations for ways to ensure more children in Africa gain equitable access to quality ECE services and; iii) a briefing on the work of the CESA Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) Cluster and its work to support AU Member States to deliver on the CESA 2016-2025 goals as they relate to ECED.

2. The early childhood phase (conception up to the age of eight) offers an unparalleled opportunity to set children onto the right trajectory for growth and development. Ninety percent of the human brain is developed by the age of five meaning that children who are brought up in loving and caring environments - where they are well nourished, healthy, safe, protected, stimulated and supported by caregivers responsive to their needs - have more chance of developing the key skills and attitudes needed to become productive and responsible citizens who can contribute positively to their communities. The diagram opposite, taken from the Nurturing Care Framework[1] that was agreed at the World Health Assembly in May 2018, illustrates this point. The needs of young children and interrelated, interdependent and interconnected.

3. Early Childhood Education (ECE) is one key element from the Nurturing Care Framework and is defined in this paper as the provision of formal and/or informal education services offered to children before they enter primary education. It includes pre-primary education offered in school settings, community-based programmes, home-based services and kindergarten or day care services often provided in centres. Typically, ECE caters for children aged 3 to 6. This paper specifically focuses on this element of Early Childhood Development (ECD) given the direct accountability of Ministries of Education to deliver on quality ECE. The CESA 2016-2025 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) commit African governments to deliver quality ECE for all.

4. Aside from the continental and global commitments AU Member States have made, there are three other reasons why Governments and Ministries of Education should want to expand access to ECE:
   - **Quality ECE sets a solid foundation for learning** - Children who benefit from quality ECE start primary school with a solid foundation for learning – stronger social skills, larger vocabularies, better number sense and curiosity to learn more. These children are also more likely to stay in

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[1] The *Nurturing care for early childhood development: a framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential* was developed by UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) with the support of the World Bank, the Partnership for Maternal and Newborn Child Health (PMNCH) and the Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN). It was endorsed by Health Ministers at the World Health Assembly in May 2018.

schools and gain competency in reading and maths and build resilience to cope with trauma and stress. Research has shown that children in Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Togo, for example, who had attended pre-primary education were one and a half times more likely to achieve minimum mathematics competencies in Grade 2 than those without pre-primary experience[2].

- **ECE enables education to be more efficient** – children who benefit from quality ECE are less likely to repeat or drop-out and more likely to complete primary school and move onto higher levels. A recent pilot study in Uganda examined the relationship between the repetition rate in the first year of primary school and attendance in pre-primary education and found that children who did not attend pre-primary schooling were more than twice as likely to repeat Grade 1 at the primary-school level[3].

- **Quality ECE can lead to more equitable societies and it can promote economic growth** – Children from lower income families and disadvantaged communities can narrow the achievement gap between them and their richer more advantaged peers if they have had a chance to access quality ECE. In Ethiopia, a high impact, quality pre-primary education programme focused on improving emergent literacy and mathematics skills. Children with the lowest socio-economic status in the programme made almost double the gains in their language and literacy scores as their better-off peers, practically closing the learning gaps between these children by the start of Grade 1.[4] In addition, caregivers can undertake economic activities whilst their young ones are being well cared for and developing the skills that will make them more competitive on the job market later.

Section I: The Status of Early Childhood Education in Africa

5. There are significant gaps in terms of data and analysis on ECE across Africa but the data that is available suggests that though some progress is being made and countries have adopted innovative approaches, much needs to be done to ensure more children can access quality ECE**[5]**.

Access

6. A common policy position across the region has been the inclusion of at least one year of pre-primary education into the formal primary school system, for example through the addition of the zero class in Ethiopia, reception class in South Africa, two years of pre-primary in Ghana and two years of Kindergarten in Egypt. While this strategy has resulted in the rapid increase of enrolment rates across the continent - with notable progress being made in countries such as Cape Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Seychelles and South Africa with access levels over 70% - **less than a third of pre-primary aged children are currently enrolled in Africa**[6] and nearly 57.5 million pre-primary aged children are not enrolled in any ECE services. Given projected population growth, this number could increase to over 65 million if the current rate of progress is maintained. In all countries in Africa, where data is available, **children from the poorest socio-economic group are on average ten times less likely to access ECE compared to their better off peers**.

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[2] United Nations Children's Fund, A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing quality early childhood education, UNICEF, New York, April 2019.

[3] Brunette, Tracy, et al., 'Repetition of Primary 1 and Pre-Primary Education in Uganda', International Development Working Paper No. 2017-02, RTI International, Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, June 2017,

[4] Dowd, Amy J., et al., 'Realizing Capabilities in Ethiopia: Maximizing early childhood investment for impact and equity', Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, vol. 17, no. 4, 2016, pp. 477–493,

[5] Unless otherwise stated the statistics in this section are based on co Computations by UNICEF, based on data from the UIS global database, 2018. The estimation is based on UIS pre-primary-age population and pre-primary education GER in the most recent year (2011–2017). For countries that do not have available administrative data adjusted net attendance rate one year before primary entry age is used. Libya and Somalia do not have available data.

[6] UIS global database, 2018.

Quality

7. Governments have embarked on the design and implementation of institutionalized training programmes of ECE teachers. As a result, over half i.e. 54% and 88% of the pre-primary classroom teachers are trained in Sub-Saharan African and Northern Africa respectively[7]. While much has been done to improve the capacity of teachers, more needs to be done to ensure teachers are well supported and motivated. Few pre-school teachers in the continent are adequately paid, regularized, mentored and supervised. There is also the need to establish appropriate qualifications and a career development plan for ECE teachers that will motivate them to engage in a continuous improvement of their skills. The rapid expansion of the pre-primary programme has not been matched with an equal expansion in the capacity required to manage these programmes. This capacity gap is evident at all levels of implementation from the co-ordination units at national level, to the sub-national and facility level. There is a shortage of qualified staff to support the national roll out of ECE programmes. For example, **an estimated 3.4 million additional pre-primary teachers will be needed in Africa, if it is to meet the SDG 2030 target for pre-primary** and combat its very low qualified teacher: pupil ratio which currently standards at 1:52.

8. In addition, ECE programmes across the region continue to suffer from poor infrastructural facilities, low availability of play and early learning materials and a weak implementation of national curricula and quality standards. This latter point is particularly concerning given that 33% of children who access ECE in Africa are in non-state provision which is often inadequately regulated and monitored which is a significant child protection issue too.

Financing

9. Many countries do not collect reliable data on ECE spending; often this is the case when there is no dedicated budget line for the ECE sub-sector. A generous estimation suggests that on average only 1.8% of education budgets are allocated to ECE which suggests that parents and communities are bearing the main responsibility for financing ECE in Africa. The current allocation to ECE in Africa is significantly below a growing international consensus which recommends that at least 10% of education budgets are allocated to ECE.

10. These low allocations are taking place even despite evidence on the rate of return to investing in ECE. In 2011 the Lancet found that a 50% increase in pre-school enrolment in low and middle-income countries could generate benefits of $15-34 billion, at a rate of return between 6:1 and 17:1 depending on the percentage of children enrolled.

Scaling up access to ECE: The Systems Approach

11. Given the challenges highlighted above this paper proposes that AU Member States adopt a systems approach to delivering on ECE. It is a systems approach that will ultimately deliver quality at scale that is inclusive and sustainable. "A system is a group of interacting, interrelated, and interdependent components that form a complex and unified whole."[8] Typically the ECE 'system' will need to be built as a sub-sector within a broader system e.g. within an education system. This will need collaboration, communication, a shared vision and shared accountability across several key directorates or bureaus responsible for curriculum, planning and financing, personnel, quality standards and monitoring and family and community outreach. It should not be the sole responsibility of one department, directorate or individual to deliver on quality ECE.

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[7] Global Education Monitoring Report 2019: Migration, Displacement and Education – Building Bridges, not Walls. Paris, UNESCO.

[8] *A Framework for Evaluating Systems Initiatives* (2007), by Julia Coffman for the BUILD Initiative.

12. A highly functional ECE system requires four fundamental elements that are interconnected, interdependent and equally necessary:
    - Political will
    - Contextual Planning
    - Technical capacity
    - Financial resource

    Without political will, financial resources will be limited or even non-existent. Contextual planning and technical capacity are essential to ensure that resources are well allocated and spent.

13. When putting in place an ECE system, there are three recommended process pathways:
    - a political process - In most cases ECE systems are weak due to limited interest or involvement of political actors. The process of ECE systems strengthening should first be envisioned as a political process requiring political actors responsible for education - in both the executive and legislative branches of government.
    - a technical process - Technical expertise is needed to support the design or structure of the system based on context knowledge, interaction and experience.
    - a participatory process - Stakeholders participation in system development is relevant for engagement, collaboration and ownership.

14. Systems in themselves have no impact but for their functionality at national and sub-regional levels. To ensure the functionality of ECE systems, several elements are worth considering[9]:
    - Relevant laws and policies
    - Organized structures
    - Leadership and capacity
    - Public investment
    - Partnership and coordination
    - Awareness and public demand

15. Aside from the key enabling environment elements needed for ECE as highlighted above there are five areas where governments will need to prioritise action[10]:
    - Effective planning and budgeting
    - Curriculum, teaching and assessment
    - Workforce development training
    - Family and Community engagement and
    - Monitoring and Quality Assurance.

16. The diagram overleaf shows how all these elements must fit together to create viable ECE systems that can deliver quality and scale across Africa. But one important aspect must be highlighted. Given current public investment and limited capacity of many African public systems to deliver quality ECE services, it is important to recognise the role of non-state provision which can be delivered by private providers, Civil Society Organisations, Faith Based Organisations, community groups, self-organisers and others. Critical is to invest in building a system that ensures that no matter where a young child accesses her or his ECE they are guaranteed quality based on an approved curriculum delivered by a trained provider within a safe environment that provides them with all they need to develop holistically, start school on time and do well in later life. Governments may not be in a position to

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[9] Adapted from United Nations Children's Fund, 'Building effective early childhood education systems: Framework for the Pre-Primary Subsector', UNICEF, New York, 2019

[10] United Nations Children's Fund, 'Building effective early childhood education systems: Framework for the Pre-Primary Subsector', UNICEF, New York, 2019

provide all ECE services but it is their responsibility to develop and implement a robust regulatory framework and put in place provisions that mean no child is left out due to poverty, geographical location, disability status, gender or any other determinant of access.

Diagram: The Systems Approach to Scaling up ECE
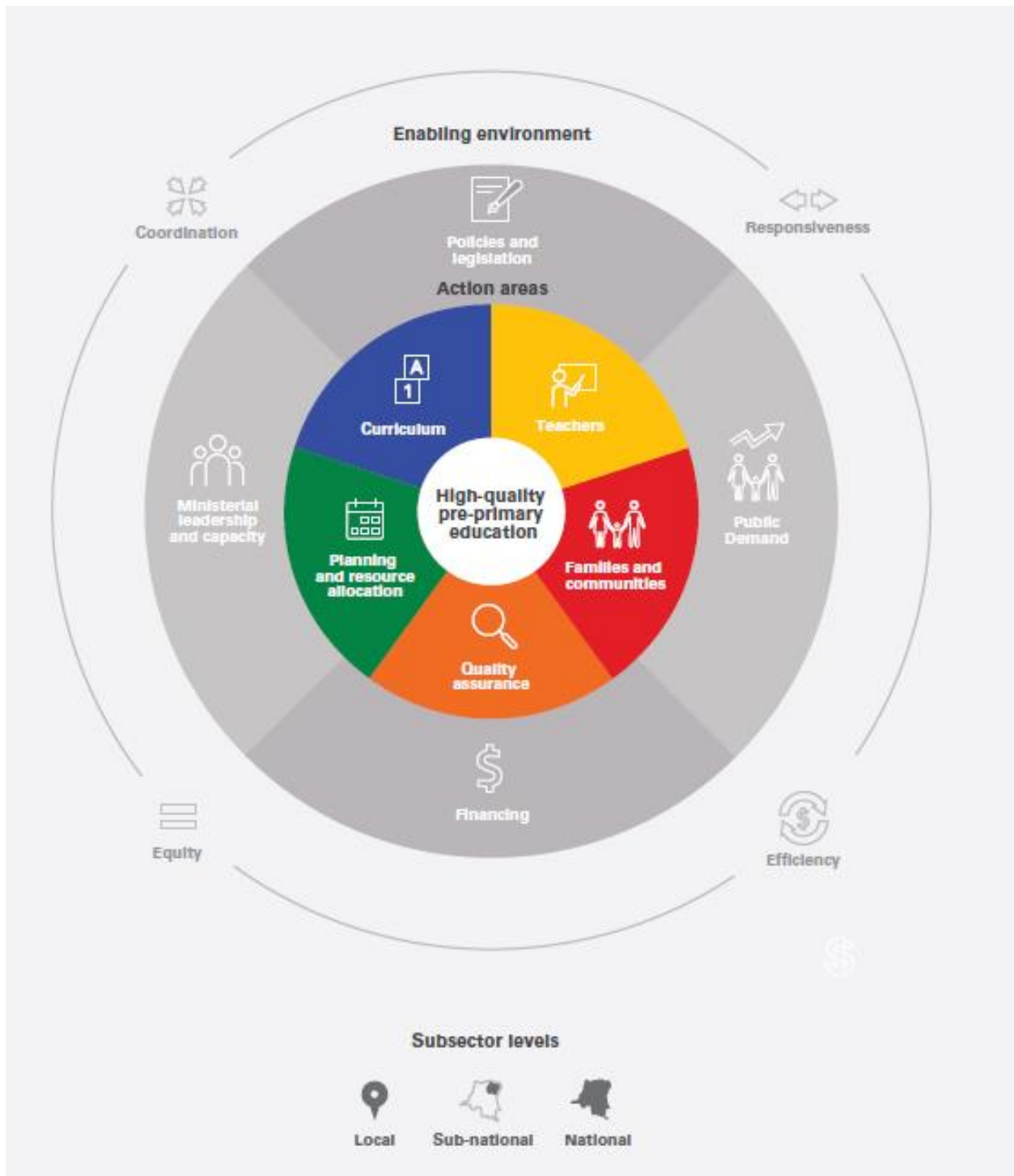
THE CESA ECED CLUSTER AND ITS ROLE IN BUILDING VIABLE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SYSTEMS

17. It will take political will, resources and vision to build viable Early Childhood Education systems as outlined above. There is no organization better placed than the AU to support its Member States to drive this agenda forward at continental level. Agenda 2063 sets an ambitious agenda to deliver a safe and prosperous Africa for all and the CESA 2016-2025 is a key strategic document to enable Africa to achieve its economic and social development goals. In September 2018, to support the achievement of CESA 16-25 and in line with the AU's commitment to laying solid foundations for lifelong learning, the AU launched the Early Childhood Education and Development Cluster (CESA ECED Cluster). The Cluster is chaired by the AU Commission, co-chaired by the Government of Mauritius and co-ordinated by the Africa Early Childhood Network (AfECN). The Cluster is open to all AU Member States and also counts Development Partners, NGOs and academia amongst its members all seeking to support AU Member States in developing, implementing and monitoring policies and programmes to support ECED across the continent.

Guiding Principles of the ECED Cluster

1. The earliest years form the foundation upon which later interventions and services are able to build. Essential later investments such as quality day care and pre-school education will have greater gains if they build upon early investments.

2. Development spans the life-course and brain development continues throughout life. Investments in the early years must be consolidated and expanded by complementary investments in ECE and up to and throughout schooling and adolescence.

3. Family members are the primary care providers for young children. It is essential to place families at the centre of all Early Child Development programmes.

4. An enabling environment of policies, information, and services is critical in assisting parents and caregivers to support the development of their children

5. Caring for children is a human rights issue, which is enshrined in the African Charter for the Rights and Welfare of Children (ACRWC). Core in this regard is ensuring that poor, vulnerable and marginalized children as well as children with disabilities, minorities and young children in humanitarian settings are not left behind.

6. Integrated programming is critical in ensuring holistic and comprehensive support to child development. This calls for collaboration across the various sectors including health, education, social welfare, finance, water and sanitation, and child protections.

18. The CESA ECED Cluster takes a holistic approach to ECED and defines early childhood as the developmental period between conception until 8 years of age. It understands the importance of delivering on holistic child development and is committed to working with other CESA Clusters, AU

institution and AU Member States to provide for children's health, nutrition, safety, security, early learning and development. A key focus for the Cluster, given its education entry point, is to scale-up access to quality ECE services across the continent, to support children's physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. The Cluster could play a critical role in providing support and guidance to AU Member States in building and strengthening ECE systems so that more children are developmentally on track and enabled to start primary school on time ready to learn, stay on and progress through to higher levels of education. The Guiding Principles of the Cluster are spelt out above.

19. The Cluster has identified its six key objectives as follows:
    i. Enhance policy, advocacy and communication. The ECED cluster will collaborate with key stakeholders to:
        a) Increase advocacy to strengthen political will for policy development, resource allocation and sustainable implementation of strategies and;
        b) Promote and support the development of policies that will ensure all children have access to quality ECED services.

    ii. Intensify action to improve equitable access to quality ECED programmes and services. The ECED cluster will collaborate with key stakeholders to:
        a) Enhance advocacy for equitable access to quality services;
        b) Support the improvement of early learning infrastructure and;
        c) Promote the design and implementation of contextually relevant strategies for expanding access.

    iii. Improve Quality of ECED systems, programmes and services. The ECED cluster will collaborate with key stakeholders to:
        a) Strengthen the capacity of the ECED workforce;
        b) Support the development of relevant and comprehensive regional and national curricula and;
        c) Enhance quality assurance and assessment mechanisms.

    iv. Governance and Accountability. The ECED cluster will collaborate with key stakeholders to:
        a) Develop guidelines and toolkits to strengthen management and accountability and;
        b) Support the implementation of programmes for the improvement of governance and management.

    v. Enhance Research Generation, Documentation and Dissemination. The ECED cluster will collaborate with key stakeholders to:
        a) Strengthen the capacity of young African scholars to undertake research that supports ECED programming;
        b) Undertake generation of knowledge to guide improved practices and;
        c) Improve dissemination of ECED knowledge and experiences.

    vi. Strengthen partnership and collaboration across all key stakeholders including state and non-state actors.

20. Through the operationalisation of the ECED Cluster AU Member States can be supported to strengthen ECE systems. Specifically, the Cluster could enable AU Member States to:
    - Build capacity on how practically to develop and maintain durable Early Childhood Education systems;
    - Share good practice from across the continent on how to create the right enabling environment for ECE as well as how to develop the core functions of the ECE subsector that will enable the delivery of quality ECE for all, ensuring that:

- ➢ the right legal framework and policies are put in place
- ➢ there are strengthened governance mechanisms at national and sub-national level
- ➢ adequate investments are made – both financial and human resources the capacity to plan, implement and monitor ECE programmes is strengthened, including stronger workforce, appropriate curricula and effective quality assurance mechanisms
- ➢ there is broad public awareness on the importance of investing in the early years and demand for ECE services
- ➢ within Ministries of education there is inter-departmental collaboration to improve teaching, engage better with communities and families and ensure better quality with improved curricula and clear standards and guidelines.
- Strengthen intersectoral collaboration.
- Generate contextually relevant evidence and lessons learned to better inform the scale-up of quality ECE.

21. The CESA ECED Cluster stands ready to support AU Member States as they strive to deliver on their commitments to young children. There is much good will and good progress within the continent to build upon and now is the right time to accelerate action in this area and to ensure more equitable access to ECE. This is not only necessary to ensure achievement of the CESA 2016-2025 goals, it is also necessary to meet Africa's international commitments and to deliver on its own vision of a peaceful and prosperous Africa as per the AU Agenda 2063.