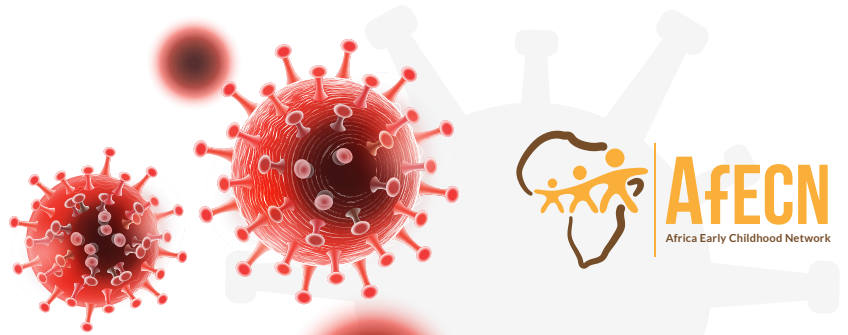


Building Back Better



Building Resilience in Africa:

ECD Workforce Support and Strengthening Amid Covid-19!



If there is one silver lining to the COVID-19 crisis, it's probably the growing appreciation of childcare as an essential service and backbone to the growth and development of our economies. Maniza Ntekim, UNICEF's Regional Advisor for East and Southern Africa, reminds us of the importance of early childhood services, noting particularly that "If we leave early childhood education behind, we leave learning behind. If we are serious about tackling inequality, addressing the learning crisis, and making education systems work better, we have to scale up investment in early childhood education during and after this pandemic." Early childhood services are even more important to parents now because to be productive and engaged in economic activities, they need safe, stimulating, and nurturing environments for their children. A focus on early childhood services is therefore critical in the broader plan to build back better.

Despite the well-established evidence that early childhood services are essential to human capital formation, socio-economic development, women's employment, and increased equality, its workforce is one of the most undervalued in the world. This blog focuses on the early years' workforce in Africa, calling for action to support them to keep services running

Before the ongoing crisis, the ECD workforce was non-recognised as providing an essential service to families. Now we know that we need these services to keep our economics running, our children learning, women employed and society moving forward. As governments focus on re-opening their economies, this must include attention to childcare services: the plight of the many women entrepreneurs who provide much-needed care and support to young children in the communities, especially where families cannot afford the cost of expensive childcare facilities. Indeed, the early childhood workforce needs our support. As we take this realisation on board and build back better, Dr Joan Lombardi, leading global expert on ECD and Director of Early Opportunities reminds us, that "we cannot rely on a volunteer workforce; there is need for

Key actions to ensure the continuity of ECD services during COVID-19, and build back a better, more resilient sector include:

- i. *Placing ECD on the recovery agenda.*
- ii. *Governments to acknowledge that ECD is part of essential social infrastructure especially for working parents and their children.*
- iii. *The public to recognise and support ECD services as a social good - integrating them with other social protection mechanisms and providing free access for poor and disadvantaged families.*
- iv. *Urgent funding commitments and management support to the diverse early years' workforce, to enhance delivery on this priority.*

public resources to pay for these important early childhood services for young children - particularly to assure equity, provide quality and make services more affordable for parents." The ECD workforce needs to be paid and recognised for the value they add to children's lives and our economies.

UNESCO estimates are that since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, over 18.6 million pre-primary school teachers have been affected by lockdowns and stay home orders, in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, this is but a fraction of the whole, as the ECD workforce is multi-sectoral spanning for example health, education, and social protection. The fuller picture of essential workers' real-life experiences, or related data, is limited. This loud silence is deafening.

In many countries across the African region, public ECD systems are not fully established. Private providers play a big role in providing services and the ECD workforce largely operates in a quasi-informal manner, highly dependent on the fees of low-income communities to operate. This makes the viability of their services highly vulnerable to adverse circumstances, such as the ongoing pandemic. No work means no connection with parents or children, and similarly no payments or income for the workforce.

A survey was undertaken in South Africa at the start of their lockdown, *The Plight of the ECD Workforce*, found that 68% of ECD operators (including ECD centres, playgroups, day mothers and other early learning programmes) were worried that they would not be able to reopen after the lockdown because 99% reported that caregivers had stopped paying fees after the nationwide closures. As a result, 83% of operators were unable to pay full staff salaries and 96% reported that their income was inadequate for covering their operating costs.

As we explore ways to keep the focus on young children and their development at this especially difficult time, building back a stronger, more resilient ECD sector will not happen without a strong workforce. For those passionate about ECD, the plight of caregivers, child-minders, preschool teachers, Community Health Workers (CHVs), and others who work in the early years' space, should be prioritised. After all, they are the sector, and without them, services for children would be non-existent.

Learning from Seychelles: The government of Seychelles, which has a strong ECD sector, has given high priority to the services the given workforce has provided since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak in their country. A demonstration of this has been a commitment to keep the sector alive despite lockdowns

and the impacts of COVID-19. The responses included:

1. Financial assistance to daycare centres or child-minding businesses, for two months, to pay staff.
2. An increase of SCR250 (USD 15) in subsidies for parents whose children are registered in daycare or child-minding homes. The subsidy was SCR500 (USD 30).
3. A monthly salary for assistant child-minders, which is equivalent to the minimum wage threshold, during the lock-down period when these assistants were not working.

We need the ECD workforce now more than ever. Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, they are on the frontlines to ensure appropriate services for families and young children. This is an effort geared towards enabling the sector to sustain itself and form part of national build back better plans. *"All over the world," says Joan Lombardi, "there are examples of early childhood providers, teachers and caregivers rising to the challenge in their community to keep services alive, providing for nutritional needs of children, delivering supplies and providing early learning materials: doing all they can for families with young children. Home visitors and CHVs are often providing the only social lifeline to families. They need supports and new ways of reaching families."*

1. Early childhood services are essential, so is the workforce that provides the service.
2. Across our continent and around the world, ECD workers are undervalued and poorly supported.
3. The ECD workforce is vulnerable to economic shocks, threatening the stability of the sector.
4. There is an opportunity to build back better, by recognising and remunerating the ECD workforce.

Another important spin-off of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a growing recognition that ECD services are essential. With this must come another realisation: that without the early childhood workforce, ECD services would not be possible. The ECD workforce is diverse. Thus, depending on a country's context, they may include caregivers, community workers, healthcare workers, teachers, and principals. What is common to all is that the sector is largely driven by women who are poorly remunerated, experiencing limited opportunities for career advancement, and few, if any have access to tangible employment benefits. This low status of the early years' workforce across health, education, and social services does not match the essential nature of their services. We also know that there is limited evidence on the relationship between the quality of service delivery, the training, and also the wellbeing of the workforce. The ECD workforce also needs to be paid and recognised for the value they add to children's lives and our economies.

Key actions to ensure the continuity of ECD services during COVID-19, and build back a better, more resilient sector include the following by governments:

1. Acknowledging that ECD is part of essential social infrastructure especially for working parents and their children.
2. Recognizing and supporting ECD services as a social good - integrating them with other social protection mechanisms and providing free access to services.
3. Urgently funding commitments and management support to the diverse early years' workforce, to enhance delivery on this priority.

Additional resources

- i. Time to Care: Childcare as an opportunity for Children, Families and a Strong Economy by Joan Lombardi. Retrieved from: https://mcusercontent.com/8103bc6125ed66e0964ae244d/files/8e467582-8020-497b-84b0-28a178d97db7/JoanLombardi_BlogDesign.pdf
- ii. Supporting the Early Childhood Workforce: Spotlight on 6 Countries. Retrieved from: <https://r4d.org/resources/ecwi-spotlight-6-countries/>
- iii. Early Childhood Workforce Initiative (ECWI) – The Early Childhood Workforce in times of COVID-19 - are they adequately supported? Retrieved from: <https://www.earlychildhoodworkforce.org/content/early-childhood-workforce-times-covid-19-are-they-adequately-supported>
- iv. The Plight of the ECD Workforce in South Africa – an urgent call for support in the wake of COVID-19. Full report available at: <https://www.bridge.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Final-report-The-plight-of-the-ECD-workforce-1.pdf>
- v. The effects of the Global Coronavirus Disease-2019 Pandemic on Early Childhood Development: Short-and Long-Term Risks and Mitigating Program and Policy Actions. Retrieved from: <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-and-partners-launch-early-childhood-education-ece-personnel-survey-related-covid-19-sub>
- vi. UNESCO and partners launch an early childhood education (ECE) personnel survey related to COVID-19 and Sub-Saharan Africa, yet to be released. Retrieved from: <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-and-partners-launch-early-childhood-education-ece-personnel-survey-related-covid-19-sub>

