

Why Should Host Governments and Donors support and invest in the early years of children's lives and their caregivers?

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Background

Early Childhood Development (ECD) lays the foundation for a prosperous and equitable society. Research consistently demonstrates that investments in high-quality early childhood programs yield substantial long-term benefits, not only for children themselves, but for communities and economies at large. Investing and supporting ECD is an impactful investment providing short-term and long-term sustainable solutions for displaced children, their families, and their communities. **As forward-thinking stakeholders**, there is a unique opportunity at GRF 2023 to create positive change for displaced children and crisis affected populations, and a lasting impact for them and their host communities by leveraging equitable financing, ethical policies and inclusive interventions based on the [Nurturing Care Framework](#) and the need to advance progress on [SDG4.2](#).

ECD is a cross-sectoral thematic area for advancing children's holistic care and development through the provision of nutritious food, health care, early learning opportunities, protection and psychosocial support in a safe and nurturing family and community environment during their foundational years of development. Children affected by crises, conflicts and other humanitarian situations are especially at risk and must be prioritized for ECD initiatives. In many countries, this includes 'children on the move' – those who may be internally displaced in their own countries or children and their parents/caregivers who are seeking refuge across international borders, as well as their host communities.

In all these situations, a commitment to prioritize 'Early Childhood Development in Emergencies' (ECDiE) is essential to providing life-saving and life-sustaining support for children, and their families. Covering life course interventions from conception to eight years, ECDiE services and supports seek to ensure the provision of responsive care and continued opportunities for play and learning for all children as part of the preparedness, response and resilience building efforts in emergencies, including protracted crisis and conflict.

Early Childhood programs in crisis contexts are overlooked and underfunded, including through the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR). Globally, ECD accounts for just over 3 percent of all development assistance going to crisis-affected countries and only 2 percent of humanitarian assistance (Moving Minds Alliance 2020). This is despite the fact that; one in six children lives in an active conflict zone (PRIO 2022), children represent over 40% of total displaced people (UNICEF, 2022a); there were more than 12.5 million refugee children worldwide in 2021 (UNHCR, 2022); and between 2018-2021, an average of between 350,000 and 400,000 children were born into a refugee life per year (UNICEF, 2022a).

Our Vision:

We envision a future where forcibly displaced children in all their diversity, regardless of their background, have access to high-quality early childhood programs that set them on a path for success in school and in life. By investing in this critical phase of development from ages 0 to 8, we can create a

ripple effect that not only transforms individual lives of children and their caregivers, but also strengthens the fabric of society worldwide (Harvard University Center on the Developing Child,2007).

Why Invest in ECD as part of Refugee Response?

Brain Development: The early years of life are the most crucial for brain development (Unicef,2018). Quality early childhood programs provide stimulating environments that support cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Exposure to conflict during early childhood can negatively impact a child's brain structure and cause delays in their development (Goto, Frodl, and Skokauskas,2021). Exposure to conflict and prolonged stress can affect children's mental health, resulting in symptoms of PTSD, and behavioral and emotional problems (Moving Minds Alliance, MHPSS #6, 2023). By investing in these formative years, we can ensure that children have a strong foundation for future success.

Long-Term Gains: Research has consistently shown that early childhood interventions lead to better educational outcomes, increased earning potential, and reduced reliance on social services later in life. For every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood programs, society can expect returns of up to \$7 or more in cost savings and increased productivity (RAND corporations,2005).

Reducing Inequities and Advancing Gender Equality: Early childhood programs play a vital role in reducing socioeconomic disparities. By targeting vulnerable populations, such as low-income families and marginalized communities, we can break the cycle of poverty and create a more equitable society where every child has an equal opportunity to succeed (OECD,2020).(Harvard Center on the Developing Child,2022)

Additionally, quality, gender transformative ECD services can have a significant impact on closing the gender divide and reducing impacts of gender inequality later in life (Plan International, 2017). This includes through addressing gendered norms and attitudes that perpetuate inequality and that teach girls and boys how they are supposed to behave, what their future role will be, and how they are valued differently; ensuring that girls and boys in all their diversity are provided with equal care and opportunities; promoting men's engagement in childcare and domestic work, improved couple communication and non-violent conflict resolution; supporting access to maternal and child health and nutrition services, including maternal mental health; and addressing increased burden of unpaid care work and the impact of negative coping strategies such as child early and forced marriage and unions.

Peace and Social Cohesion: ECD has been identified as a potential pathway for peacebuilding, conflict-sensitivity, and social cohesion in fragile and humanitarian settings (Leckman et al, 2014). The early years of children's lives represent an opportunity to lay the foundations for transformative change and to support the youngest children to learn values, skills and behaviors for peace. ECD programs offer multiple entry points for promoting peace, resilience, social cohesion and conflict sensitivity amongst children who are refugees and from host communities

Lifelong Health and Well-being: The impact of early childhood programs extends beyond academic achievement. Children who participate in these programs are more likely to lead healthier lives, make better life choices, and contribute positively to their communities (Unicef,2022). Early childhood development programs that support caregivers in caring for their children can improve caregivers' own mental health as well (Husain et al,2021).

Benefits of investing in ECDiE services for host governments and funders (inc. donors)

For host governments:

1. Delivering transformative social and economic benefits: Investing in the early years, inclusive of young refugee children, is an investment proven to deliver some of the greatest public policy returns to the nation in terms of future savings to areas such as social services, health and education. Well-nurtured and educated individuals are more likely to develop skills and capacities that enable them to support themselves, their families and their host communities (Nores and Barnett,2010) (Walker, et al.,2021) and contribute to the workforce in ways that drive national development outcomes and bolster a country's competitiveness. Additionally, Early childhood parenting support programs empowers refugee caregivers with tools and skills to support their children, and provides the space and time for them to seek livelihood opportunities which enhances their ability to become self-reliant and boost the national economy (NAEYC 2019).

2. Integrated and multi-sectoral approach that increases efficiencies: ECDiE solutions can be integrated with existing refugee response services like health and nutrition outreach, as well as in resettlement programs. In doing so, they serve as an investment multiplier that increases efficiency. Additionally, instead of expensive siloed programs, early childhood development services involve taking a 'whole family' approach (Moving Minds Alliance, 2019). There is a focus on both children and caregivers, recognising that for young children to thrive, those who care for them must be supported too.

3. Boosting social cohesion: From parent support programs to early education, these programs often involve bringing together displaced populations and host communities. Usually, host communities also benefit from enhanced services for their own children as they are included in these programs. The experience of getting to know another culture through interacting in this way improves tolerance, understanding and bolsters relationships. This, in turn, reduces conflicts between communities and contributes to social cohesion and better security and stability (UNESCO,2008).

For funders:

1. A smart investment for a sustainable long-term impact: Providing young refugee children with holistic, low cost services that provide a strong foundation for education, health, and emotional well-being can mitigate the impacts of adversity and enhance potential for self-reliance in the future (Moving Minds Alliance, 2022). In fact, investment in ECDiE has incredible short and long-term impacts. Children in the future become capable of contributing to their societies and economies. Investing in the

youngest refugee children can also address some of the root causes of displacement like lack of access to education, healthcare, and basic services which can contribute to the conditions that lead to forced migration and break the Generational Cycle of Displacement (ECW,2019).

2. Delivering a higher return on investment: Donors could make use of and support the existing local and international infrastructure used to deliver services, thereby increasing return on investment. An integrated approach to providing services will help to reduce duplication and waste of resources. Integrating interventions that focus on child development can make pre-existing investments in similar services such as health, nutrition, education and protection more effective. Research shows that support in the early years for children and their caregivers can provide returns of up to 13 percent a year through improved education, health, legal, and economic outcomes—even after adjusting for the cost of the program (Garcia et al, 2016). Priorities such as maternal mental health, prevention of GBV and promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, would also benefit significantly from investment in early childhood development.

How does supporting early childhood link to GCR objectives?

In addition to the above, supporting the youngest refugee children in their early years aligns with GCR objectives:

- 1- **promoting self-reliance:** ECDiE provides the youngest children with tools to become productive citizens in their host countries when they are older. ECDiE also incorporates parental support, which enables parents/caregivers to integrate into the labor market, to generate income and to contribute to the well-being of their families, fostering their self-sufficiency and reducing their dependency on external aid.
- 2- **easing the pressures on host countries:** By investing in the early childhood development of refugee children and providing opportunities for children to reach their full potential, host countries can alleviate pressures on their resources, services and societies. We know early investments deliver greater impact and return on investment, not only for children and families but for societies at-large and for our shared goals of sustainable development, reducing poverty and inequality, promoting gender equality and supporting lifelong learning that fosters more peaceful and inclusive societies.
- 3- **expanding access to third country solutions:** well-educated and nurtured children are more likely to succeed in new environments, enhancing their prospects for adaptation to change and self-sufficiency in a new country.
- 4- **fostering conditions that support safe and dignified return to countries of origin:** when children receive quality education, nutrition, health and protection, and when their caregivers are supported with skills and MHPSS services, both children and caregivers develop the skills and knowledge needed to make informed choices about their future and to contribute positively to rebuilding their home countries if this is their chosen option.

Our call to action:

To Host governments: Governments at all levels, particularly those serving crisis-affected and displaced populations, should develop, implement and fund national ECD policies and programs that are inclusive of both refugee children and their families and host communities, with a focus on quality, gender

transformative services that meet the needs of children in all their diversity. Local ECD solutions and service providers should also be prioritized for support, recognising the benefits of locally-led action and that the experiences and solutions identified by people affected by crisis, including in contexts of displacement, should inform ECD policies, programs and funding allocations.

To funders : funders including bilateral and multilateral donors need to invest at least 10% in humanitarian funding to support local, national and community organizations and host governments as well as international organizations, where appropriate, to scale up local ECD solutions and/or accelerate the integration of ECD into existing programming through improved cross-sectoral coordination. Donors need to ensure their investment is done early, equitably and with high quality. Donors need to ensure that local ECD actors and CBOs who are serving refugee populations are directly funded, and included in decision making about program design, implementation and evaluation as they are the experts who speak the language, know the culture and the community.

To Humanitarian actors:

Leaders of local and international organizations need to prioritize support for children ages 0-8 and their caregivers in crisis affected and displaced populations. They should make it an essential component of their own programming, including the package of these critical, inexpensive and cost-effective solutions that can be integrated with existing services that already reach young children and their caregivers such as health, protection, education and nutrition (Moving Minds Alliance Resource Kit,2023). Humanitarian actors need to collect and report age, sex and disability disaggregated data and evidence on this specific age group, including to identify gaps in service provision, and to ensure greater accountability for results . Additionally, they need to ensure their programing is not displacing successful local solutions, but supporting them, including through ensuring effective coordination and communication mechanisms are in place.

Join Us:

By pledging to invest, support or include inclusive early childhood programs, you are not just supporting programs– you are investing in the future of whole societies. Together, we can break down barriers, bridge gaps, promote peace and gender equality, and create a world where every child has the chance to thrive. Join us in making a lasting impact that will shape generations to come.

Contact Us:

To learn more about how to build your pledge, please contact the co-leads of the ECD global framework below.

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