

# Contributions of Early Childhood Development Services to Preventing Violent Conflict and Sustaining Peace

The purpose of this brief is to: (1) demonstrate the societal risks that result when early childhood development (ECD) services are lacking and (2) show how ECD services contribute to sustaining peace through increasing social cohesion, equality and economic productivity.

In a time of recurring violent conflict and societal shocks, it is vital to invest in long-term solutions that will end cycles of violence, build strong foundations for sustainable development and social cohesion and promote a “culture of peace”<sup>1</sup>. Recent UN Peace and Security reports<sup>2</sup> and the ‘Sustaining Peace’ Resolution<sup>3</sup> urge *all* UN agencies to contribute to sustaining peace. Although the international community recognizes that social services can contribute to restoring peace and stability<sup>10</sup>, there is currently limited understanding of how ECD services can support the prevention of violence and the promotion of peace.

## 1 RISKS RESULTING FROM LACK OF ECD SERVICES

Toxic stress and malnutrition in early childhood are directly linked with harmful psychological processes and interpersonal relations, and decreased economic productivity in adulthood. These effects exacerbate social and economic risks for society.

## 2 BENEFITS OF ECD SERVICES

**2a.** ECD services can foster **social cohesion** between individuals and among conflicting groups and can promote **trust** between government entities and constituents.

**2b.** ECD services can promote **equality** and **economic productivity**.



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## OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

- **SUSTAINING PEACE:** “Preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict, addressing root causes, ending hostilities, ensuring national reconciliation, and moving towards recovery, reconstruction and development.”<sup>3</sup>
- **EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT (ECD):** mental and physical development from prenatal to 8 years of age.
  - Nurturing care ECD is a multisectoral approach that ensures health, nutrition, safety, responsive caregiving and early learning.<sup>4</sup>
  - ECD services will be dependent on the contextual needs and age of the child. Examples of services: health interventions during pregnancy, parent-child home visitation, preschool programmes, interventions that increase father involvement, etc.
- **VULNERABLE CHILDREN:** children who are at risk for not reaching their developmental potential due to preventable environmental influences, including children affected by poverty, conflict, family violence or inequalities; migrants or refugees; orphans or foster children; and children with disabilities whose caregivers lack the resources to properly care for them.
- **TOXIC STRESS:** strong, frequent or prolonged adversity, in the absence of protective relationships.<sup>5</sup>

# Societal Risks Resulting from Toxic Stress and Malnutrition in Early Childhood

Suffering toxic stress or malnutrition in the earliest years of life inhibit a child's optimal brain development, resulting in harmful psychological processes and interpersonal relations, inadequate learning and lower wages in later years. Millions of infants and young children across the world spend their most formative years in suboptimal environments, unable to reach their developmental potential<sup>4</sup>. Without recognition and investment in ECD services, society may face significant social and economic risks.



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## INDIVIDUAL/INTERPERSONAL RISKS

### Harmful psychological processes and interpersonal relations, including violent behaviour

Ongoing neuroscience and epigenetics research indicate that toxic stress strongly increases a child's risk of developing: impaired stress- and emotion-regulation systems, psychiatric symptoms (PTSD, depression, anxiety, etc.), aggression, violent behaviours, substance abuse and harmful relationships in adulthood.<sup>(a)</sup>

(hindering SDGs\* 1.5, 3.4, 3.5, 4.7, 16.1, 16.2)

### Inadequate learning and decreased economic productivity

The advancement of skills throughout the lifetime builds on the developmental foundation created in early childhood. Thus, early disadvantages affecting health or developmental capacities can cumulate over time to critically impact schooling and employment potential, ultimately resulting in decreased economic productivity and well-being.<sup>(b)</sup>

(hindering SDGs 1.2, 4.4, 4.6, 8.5, 8.6, 10.1)

## SOCIETAL RISKS

- Exacerbated **inequalities** among groups and genders<sup>(c)</sup> (hindering SDGs 4.5, 4.7, 5, 10.2, 10.3)
- Increased **crime rates**<sup>(d)</sup> (hindering SDGs 5.2, 16.1, 16.2)
- Intergenerational **cycles of violence**<sup>(e)</sup> (hindering SDGs 5.2, 16.1, 16.2)
- **Reduced gross national income**<sup>(f)</sup> (hindering SDGs 8.1, 10.1)
- Higher **unemployment rates**<sup>(g)</sup> (hindering SDGs 8.5, 8.6)
- Intergenerational cycles of **poverty**<sup>(h)</sup> (hindering SDGs 1.1, 1.2, 10.1)
- **Higher expenditure** in health care, education, the criminal justice system, child protective services and public aid<sup>(i)</sup>
- **Decreased trust**<sup>(j)</sup>

## TOXIC STRESS OR MALNUTRITION

**Early toxic stress (due to inequality, conflict, family violence, etc.) and/or malnutrition severely harm a child's:**

- Hormonal and stress response systems
- Attachment and bonding with caregiver
- Psychosocial and emotional development
- Cognitive development
- Physical health and life expectancy

WHICH CAN LEAD TO

\* To learn more about the UN SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), visit <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org>

(a) Leckman, J. F., Panter-Brick, C., and Salah, R., eds., ch. 5, 7 and 11 in *Pathways to Peace: The transformative power of children and families*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2014.

(b) Leckman, J.F., et al., ch. 5, 7 and 11 in *Pathways to Peace*; The 2016 *Lancet* Early Childhood Development Series, *The Lancet*, October 2016, retrieved from World Health Organization, <[www.who.int/maternal\\_child\\_adolescent/documents/ecd-lancet-exec-summary-en.pdf?ua=1](http://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/documents/ecd-lancet-exec-summary-en.pdf?ua=1)>; Heckman, J. J., 'Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children', *Science*, vol. 312, no. 5782, 30 June 2006, pp. 1900–1902.

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(j) Leckman, J.F., et al., ch. 3 and 7 in *Pathways to Peace*.

**2a**

## ECD Services Increase Horizontal and Vertical Social Cohesion

Early childhood development services can strengthen resilience and foster prosocial behaviours in children and caregivers. ECD services can also be leveraged as social platforms for engaging conflicting sociocultural, ethnic or religious identity groups in joint programming efforts towards shared goals. In addition, government implementation of these ECD services builds bridges between the community and their government.

### HORIZONTAL SOCIAL COHESION

#### Interpersonal relations between individuals

- Through fostering healthy early childhood development, quality ECD services that encompass health, nutrition, protection and early learning can:
  - **Build intrapsychic resilience** to buffer against toxic stress throughout the lifetime, thus improving mental health (including reducing PTSD, depression and anxiety symptoms) and enabling healthy and responsible interpersonal relations.<sup>6</sup> *(SDG 1.5, 3.4)*
  - **Foster prosocial behaviours, trust and healthy social interactions.**<sup>6</sup> *(SDG 4.2, 4.7)*
  - **Decrease antisocial and violent behaviours,** including violent crime arrests, in youth and adulthood.<sup>7</sup> *(SDG 16.1, 16.2)*

#### Intergroup cohesion (relations among groups)

- In regions of intergroup tension, equitable ECD services and parent discussion groups can build social capital and unite parents from conflicting identity groups around the common goal of child well-being<sup>9</sup> (for example, see the successfully implemented ECD programmes in parts of Turkey, Ivory Coast and Uganda<sup>8</sup>). *(SDG 4.7, 10.2, 10.3)*

### VERTICAL SOCIAL COHESION

#### Relations between individuals/groups and their governing institutions (vertical cohesion)

- Government implementation of quality and equitable ECD services strengthens trust between community members and their government.<sup>10</sup> *(SDG 10, 16.6)*

**2b**

## ECD Services Promote Equality and Economic Productivity

Through helping vulnerable children and families reach their potential, universal ECD services can reduce inequalities and promote sustainable economic productivity.

### Increased human capital of children and families

- Investments in ECD help vulnerable children stay developmentally on track, which can result in significantly improved mental and physical health, higher educational and employment attainment, and up to 46 per cent higher income in adulthood.<sup>11</sup> In addition, two-generation ECD programmes can build human capital of both the child and the caregiver by helping the caregiver enhance their education, employment, income or empowerment.<sup>16</sup> *(SDG 1.2, 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 8.5, 8.6, 10.1)*

### Reduced economic and educational inequalities

- Providing universal ECD services for all groups and genders can significantly narrow economic and educational inequality gaps<sup>12</sup>, thus reducing risks of violent conflict.<sup>13</sup> *(SDG 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 10)*

### Cost-effective programmes

- Cost-benefit analyses have consistently shown that investing in ECD is “the most powerful investment a country can make,” with societal returns up to \$18 per dollar invested.<sup>14</sup> This commitment to ECD includes reducing violence against children, which cost the economy an estimated \$206 billion in 2014 across East Asia and the Pacific alone.<sup>15</sup> *(SDG 1.2, 8.1, 10.1, 16.2)*

### Sustainable economic productivity

- Breaking cycles of poverty and disadvantage allows future generations the continuing opportunity for economic productivity and social mobility. *(SDG 1.2, 10.1)*



# Policy Recommendations

## Peace-relevant ECD policies must endorse:

- **Universal access to ECD services** that reach the most vulnerable and excluded children, and include all genders. (SDG 3.2, 3.4, 4.2, 4.7, 5.1, 10.2, 10.3, 16.b)
- **Quality, multisectoral ECD packages** rooted in 'nurturing care' that can be delivered through preexisting sectorial programmes. (SDG 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 4.2, 4.7, 5.2, 6.2, 16.1, 16.2)
  - *The strongest programme effects result from quality ECD programmes that target the most vulnerable children and are integrated with existing sectorial programmes.*
- **Context-specific and conflict-sensitive ECD services** that address the needs of the region and the families involved, and provide universal, comprehensive family/caregiver support. (SDG 2.2, 3.4, 4.2, 16.2)
- **Intergroup ECD services** that unite parents from different sociocultural, ethnic or religious groups. (SDG 10.2, 10.3, 16.b)
- **Science-informed and evidence-based ECD action plans** that leverage ECD for peacebuilding. (SDG 4.2, 4.7)
  - *This is especially relevant for conflict-affected and post-conflict countries, where these policies are largely missing.<sup>17</sup>*
- **National, implementable frameworks** that guide scaling up and assess ECD programmes' effectiveness. (SDG 10.5, 16.6)
- **Accountability systems** that track financial investments of ECD services. (SDG 10.5, 16.6)



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