

A photograph of two young girls in school uniforms hanging from a horizontal bar. The girl on the left is wearing a white blouse with a lace collar and a yellow skirt with a smiley face pattern. The girl on the right is wearing a white blouse and a green skirt. Both are smiling and looking upwards. The background is a yellow wall with a window.

OPEN SOCIETY
FOUNDATIONS

Early Childhood and Open Society

Creating Equitable and Inclusive Societies

I am happy that the Open Society Foundations have achieved so much over the years in the field of early childhood development. But I think it is also worth remembering how we got involved in the first place—a story that shows how sometimes the best ideas come from keeping an open mind, so that you can find things you didn't know you were looking for.

In 1993, due to the success of my business strategies, I was able to expand significantly my philanthropic work, which was largely directed at the time to supporting the transformation underway in the former Communist countries of East and Central Eastern Europe. My predominant concern was launching what was to become Central European University, with the idea that it would help develop the new generation of leaders that the region so needed after decades spent under the deadening weight of Communism.

I wanted the new university, with its focus on post-graduate studies in the social sciences, to have the best academic minds we could locate, and I devoted myself to talking to everyone I could find who had ideas to contribute—including Dr. Fraser Mustard, the great Canadian teaching doctor who was one of the founders of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research. Dr. Mustard was famous as a cardiologist. But at the time

he was becoming increasingly focused on raising what were then new questions about the socioeconomic determinants of human development and health, starting with early childhood (work that was to help to lead the evolution of the concept of community care that has spread far beyond Canada).

When I told him about my vision of the transformative impact of Central European University, he cited new research on the unprecedented development of the brain in the first few years, and then told me I had to start younger. Instead of focusing on university students, I should look at pregnancy and the critical first six years of childhood.

I was inspired—in addition to the impact on the region's approach to education, I saw here an approach that could also support the region's Roma children, who faced enormous entrenched prejudice and economic challenges that impacted their chance at a strong beginning. I

turned to Liz Lorant on the Open Society staff who was then largely focusing on health care issues—who led us eventually to Professor Phyllis Magrab, a pediatric psychologist, and her team at Georgetown University, and together they created the Step by Step Program.

This work helped shape our other efforts—with an initial \$100 million committed at a time when the strength of the U.S. dollar dramatically increased what we could achieve. Step by Step made immediate visible changes in preschools in Central Eastern Europe and Eurasia, where it was first implemented. This had a big impact on families, who were struggling economically, but hopeful for a better future with fall of Communism, and it led to changes in early education systems.

Over the years, Open Society’s initial focus on early education evolved into a broad, holistic approach to early childhood development—an approach that included looking at health care access and at social support policies (all I imagine in ways that our friend Dr. Mustard would have approved of). As the Open Society Foundations expanded globally, new initiatives were launched in

Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. We have worked along the way with many allies and other funders, with an increasing focus on changing policy-making in ways that recognize the importance of giving a voice to parents and children. I am particularly proud of the way we have been able to work with so many Roma communities to challenge the terrible patterns of discrimination and poverty that Roma people face from the earliest age.

As the Open Society Foundations continue to evolve, our work on early childhood development is now being integrated into our stronger focus on addressing economic inequalities and fighting discrimination—in ways that recognize the inter-connectedness of many of the problems we face.

This publication tells some of the story of how we got to this point—a story that would not have been possible without the innumerable practitioners, experts, policy-makers, and funders who worked with us—and for whose contributions I am enormously grateful.

George Soros

Founder and Chair,
Open Society Foundations

*Right:
Children share their feelings at a
kindergarten in Zabalj, Serbia, on
December 12, 2018.*

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Open Society Foundations*

Foreword

The Open Society Foundations' engagement in the early 1990s in promoting the importance of early child development was prescient. Recognizing the foundational learning of young children and the accompanying learning of their parents as a meaningful element for sustainable political and social change marked the beginnings of the Open Society Early Childhood program I was a part of from its inception. In the former Soviet Union, Central and Eastern Europe, and Eurasia, which were undergoing marked political upheaval, reforming early childhood programming was a bold and imaginative step to furthering a democratic society. The resulting efforts of Open Society's Early Childhood Program filled a vacuum in a region where little consideration was being given to early learning.

Establishing the Step by Step program was the beginning of Open Society's legacy in early childhood systems building; in addressing children who were excluded, especially Roma children and children with disabilities; and in promoting the significant new brain research that recognizes the importance of early learning. Over the last three decades, the influence of Open Society in building the field and reaching the tipping point we see today has been critical. With considerably more modest funds, the Open Society Foundations have often leveraged the support and influence of major international players such as the World Bank, UNICEF, numerous foundations, and corporations, especially for the most underserved. The Open Society Foundations have been instrumental in addressing structures and mechanisms to further growth in the field by building civil society and regional networks like the International Step by Step Association.

Open Society's leadership in coalescing stakeholders, giving voice to those unheard, and recognizing the value of addressing early development in creating equitable and inclusive societies will long be remembered after the Early Childhood Program closes. It remains the challenge for new leaders and stakeholders to sustain the gains in the field and foster new, imaginative solutions to address the pressing issues of the 21st century, such as climate change, authoritarianism, and prejudice.

Phyllis R. Magrab, Ph.D.

Endowed Professor, Pediatrics
UNESCO Chair
Director, Georgetown University
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Introduction

Over the past quarter century, the Early Childhood Program has been bringing a political lens to raising children.

Between 1994 and 2020, the Early Childhood Program launched ambitious initiatives and advocacy, aimed at re-shaping practices and institutions, and scaling up civil society to advance the rights of young children. Inspired by research linking early development to the nurturing of open societies, George Soros steered the Open Society Foundations to make a “big bet” \$100 million, 20-year investment in the flagship Step by Step Program. Step by Step transformed early education systems across 30 countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia and in Argentina, Haiti, and Mongolia. The program used Open Society’s network of foundations to implement its initiatives and engage with governments in participating countries. As a result, the Open Society Foundations became one of the first converts to the field of early childhood and our investments over the past 25 years have helped to shape it.

All of Open Society’s subsequent work in early childhood can trace its origins back to the Step by Step Program. Spread across 30 countries, the program helped families with children ranging from newborns to children in primary and middle schools. Step by Step helped shift the prevailing paradigm of early education to embrace values of democracy, social inclusion, and parent and community engagement. Step by Step introduced child-centered approaches, social justice, critical thinking, and parent engagement, focusing on high quality for all, with a specific focus on Roma children and



children in other minority communities, children with disabilities, refugees, and children living in poverty and in remote areas. It updated quality standards and teacher training, and expanded professional development. Active parents and educators were at the heart of the program from the start. In a bold move, beginning in 1998, Open Society “spun off” the Step by Step Program to create a network of national early childhood nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) stretching across Europe and Eurasia.

Over the following two decades, the Early Childhood Program’s work evolved into two distinct streams: The first focused on improving equity and social inclusion for populations challenging discrimination and prejudice. The second aimed at building the civil society structures and capacity of the emerging early childhood field to do this. Over 26 years Open Society’s Early Childhood Program invested more than \$175 million and reached 80 countries.

A mother holds her two-month-old baby during a home visit by facilitators in Bor, Serbia, on September 15, 2018.

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Open Society Foundations*

Milestones in the Early Childhood Program's 26 Years of Supporting Children and Their Families (1994–2020)

1993

George Soros meets with Canadian physician Dr. Fraser Mustard, and is inspired by a presentation on the latest brain research to invest \$100 million in a new early childhood initiative.

George Soros visits a Step by Step school in Kiev, Ukraine, in 1993.

© Open Society Foundations





1994 Together with national Open Society foundations in 15 countries and Georgetown University, Open Society launches its early education reform initiative in the first preschool classrooms. The Step by Step Program, as it comes to be known, aims to build open, democratic societies by promoting critical thinking, creativity, diversity, responsibility, and active parent and community participation in preschools in former Communist countries.

Children make art outdoors at a Step by Step kindergarten in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 2000.

© Courtesy Step by Step - Bosnia and Herzegovina

1998 Open Society begins a process of “spinning-off” the Step by Step teams from national Open Society foundations, leading to the establishment of 28 independent national professional nongovernmental organizations and the International Step by Step Association, a regional network giving voice to professionals from across Europe and Eurasia. Over the next two decades, Open Society is a leader in establishing, funding, and mentoring similar regional associations such as the Asia-Pacific Regional Early Childhood Network in 2008, the Arab Network for Early Childhood Development in the Middle East in 2014, and the Africa Early Childhood Network in 2015.



Students at a Step by Step school in Fretta-Mas, Haiti, in 2004.

© Raphaele Castera for the Open Society Foundations

2004

On its 10th anniversary, Step by Step's reform initiatives extend across 30 countries in Central Europe, Eurasia, and Argentina, Haiti, and Mongolia.¹

Step by Step's expanded comprehensive initiatives aim at transforming early childhood and primary education and care, teacher education, and professional development. The program emphasizes quality teaching and learning for all, and implements focused initiatives combating racism and addressing access and inclusion of Roma children and children with disabilities.

¹ Albania, Argentina, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Haiti, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan

2006 The Open Society Foundations are invited by the BRAC Institute of Educational Development to co-develop post-graduate early childhood courses and a joint master's degree program with Manchester University, building on university courses developed through the Step by Step Program. Over the next 15 years, Open Society goes on to work with the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences and Yangon University of Education to develop similar certificate and degree-granting courses. Open Society also supports course development across colleges and universities in Liberia.



2007 The Liberian Ministry of Education invites the Open Society Foundations to help revive a defunct early childhood sector destroyed by over 40 years of war, nurturing a new cadre of leadership through training, mentoring, and scholarships. Over the next decade and beyond, Open Society works side by side with Liberia's government, nongovernmental organizations, and international agencies to enact new government policy, to create and launch new kindergarten curriculum and training, and to introduce programs for pregnant women and adult literacy initiatives. The project in Liberia inspires shorter-duration capacity-building initiatives in Bhutan, East Timor, Pakistan, and Peru.

Above:

Parents and teachers take part in an early childhood development training program in Monrovia, Liberia, on September 1, 2010.

© Faith Lamb-Parker

Below:

An early childhood master trainer reads a book with young children in Monrovia, Liberia, on March 28, 2014.

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Animated children's program Keremet Koch (Magic Journey) produced by Kyrgyz Television and Radio Corporation in Kyrgyzstan since 2006.



2009 An animated TV series supported by Open Society, UNICEF, the Aga Khan Foundation, and Kyrgyz National Television wins the Japan Prize for animation in 2009. The program, Keremet Koch (Magic Journey), launched in 2006, is watched by over 95 percent of young children in Kyrgyzstan, a country where at the time only 12 percent of children have access to early childhood education. With its well-loved characters, including a lively donkey, the show prepares children for school through storytelling and problem solving, developing their creativity and teaching them about hygiene, nutrition, ethnic tolerance, and gender equity. In later years, the show is broadcast in Turkey through Turkish Radio and Television, reaching 250 million people from the Balkans to China.

2009 Open Society and the International Step by Step Association bring the Getting Ready for School Initiative developed for Central Asia and Eastern Europe to the U.S. government's Head Start program, which had provided resources and trainers to Open Society's Step by Step Program in 1994. Head Start uses materials from the Getting Ready for School Initiative to support parents from disadvantaged communities in the United States so they can prepare their children to start primary school. In 2012, the materials were further adapted for use in classrooms and evaluated by Columbia University.

2010

Responding to the lack of community-based services for the youngest Roma children, Open Society first provides seed funding to more than 20 innovative models between 2010 and 2015, and then scales up Starting Strong, a parenting program in Serbia.

The evaluation demonstrates that the program had a strong impact on the social and emotional skills of children and the skills and confidence of parents.

Several generations of a Roma family pose for a photo in Ostrava, Czech Republic, on March 2, 2012.

© Stephanie Sinclair/ VII for the Open Society Foundations





Children sing and dance at an early childhood development center in Cape Town, South Africa, on August 17, 2012.

© Andrew Aitchison/Getty

- 2011** The Early Childhood Program partners with the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa to launch Getting it Right, a regional, multi-year early childhood initiative for Southern Africa aimed at building the capacity of civil society and government, raising public awareness, and disseminating evidence about the importance of early childhood. Coordination and networking at the national and sub-regional level contribute to the movement to establish a pan-African professional early childhood network in 2015.
- 2013** At the invitation of the Ministry of Education, Open Society begins activities in Georgia that lead to policy reform and the introduction of new services and funding mechanisms with the support of parent and physician groups. These reforms ensure that the youngest children with developmental delays and disabilities and their families have access to early childhood intervention services and that education systems are prepared to welcome these children in educational mainstream settings.

2014 Open Society joins forces with the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Development and Care and international partners. The collaboration helps step up advocacy to include a measurable early childhood goal in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals that will guide international development over the next 15 years. Though a unique goal for early childhood is not achieved, the field celebrates the development goals' commitment to ensure that young children are developmentally on track.

2014 In collaboration with the Open Society Burma Program, the Early Childhood Program initiates a small grants program to support key civil society groups working with minorities and marginalized groups to increase access to high quality, community managed services. Initial work also begins to develop the first post-graduate course in early childhood development in the country. The Burma Program partners with the Yangon University of Education to launch the course in 2018, with the aim of building a cadre of early childhood development professionals for the country.

2015 Open Society and a small group of international foundations working in early childhood form an informal network for information sharing, learning, and collaboration. Today, 30 foundations in the Global Early Childhood Funders Group meet on a monthly basis to align efforts, messaging, and advocacy in areas of common interest.



First-grade students practice reading news articles in Shan State, Myanmar, on February 17, 2020.

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A Sesame Workshop character draws with refugee children in Mafraq, Jordan, on May 12, 2017.

© Sesame Workshop/Parisa Azadi



2016 Sesame Workshop is the first recipient of a small grant from the newly established Open Society refugee initiative to develop content for refugee children in Jordan. This leads to a successful bid by Sesame Workshop and the International Rescue Committee to the MacArthur Foundation's 100&change award securing \$100 million for expansion of the initial pilot across the Middle East. Building on the power of collaboration, the Early Childhood Program in 2018 works with the Bernard van Leer Foundation to establish the Moving Minds Alliance, a multi-stakeholder partnership to increase financing, policies, and insights in support of young children and caregivers affected by crisis and displacement.

2016 Open Society becomes one of the first funders of the global Early Childhood Development Action Network, which supports information sharing and advocacy and increasing the role of the growing early childhood field in awareness raising and policy debates. In 2020, Open Society funding helps the network launch the cost of inaction, an online tool to help governments calculate the cost of not investing in early childhood.

2020

With Open Society support, Eurochild, the International Step by Step Association, the Roma Education Fund, and the European Public Health Association launch First Years, First Priority, a multi-year advocacy campaign targeting the European Commission and over 10 countries.

The campaign aims to unlock the potential and improve the quality of life of children under the age of six by increasing public awareness, government commitment, and resources during the upcoming budget cycle. Campaign coalitions will conduct advocacy with a particular focus on children with disabilities, children living in poverty, and children from Roma communities. Actions for Roma children will leverage the Early Childhood Program's 10 years of movement-building activities, including the establishment of the European Roma Early Years Network and eight national Roma Early Years Inclusion monitoring reports.



A mother looking after her seven-month-old baby at home in Kragujevac, Serbia, on September 18, 2018.

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A student celebrates the end of a lesson at a Head Start program in Shreveport, Louisiana, on July 22, 2003.

© Mario Villafuerte/Getty

Think Big, But Act at Grassroots Level

Thinking big, while acting at grassroots level are hallmarks of the Open Society Foundations' work in early childhood.

Young children have benefited from enormous gains when policymakers and stakeholders have been brave enough to take risks and think big. Head Start, the U.S. early childhood program upon which Open Society's initial early childhood work was modeled, was launched during the War on Poverty in the 1960s, and remains a bold national policy initiative providing early learning and comprehensive support to the poorest young children and their parents. Like Head Start, the Open Society Step by Step Program was designed to respond to a dynamic, historic moment of change in Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, economically challenged regions that were emerging from decades of Communist rule.

There had been little attention to the preschool sector in the region when the Open Society Foundations proposed the Step by Step Program to government ministries and went on to establish partnerships with them. The big idea was to reform teaching and learning in early childhood systems to reflect the region's emerging democratic societies. This meant introducing educational models that responded to children's interests and ideas, as well as

critical thinking skills, choice, responsibility, and appreciation of diversity that are the bedrock of open societies. It also meant supporting parents as active agents in preschools and recognizing their critical role as educators.

Step by Step fostered changes at the ground level, engaging communities and embracing the diverse cultures and values that shape how children are raised. The program set about meeting families in their homes, and welcoming families into preschools, as visitors, as educators, and as members of governing bodies. Participating preschools planned curriculum to reflect the cultures of community members. In response to demand from parents, the program expanded upward to primary schools and downward to serve infants and toddlers. New streams of work advancing social inclusion and equity for Roma children and children with disabilities inspired anti-bias and social justice trainings for educators and community members.

The program created linkages with universities and teacher training institutes and converted the strongest preschools into model training sites to support expansion. Progressive pedagogic principles and mentoring were used to support teacher professional development and ensure quality. Cooperation and teamwork were fostered internationally across the implementation teams. The Open Society Foundations achieved an economy of scale—sharing training and resources across countries and networking experts—by implementing the program across Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Such rapid large-scale activity was only possible because Open Society could leverage the unique strategic and operational capacity of affiliated partner foundations in each country. Step by Step teams were nurtured inside Open Society affiliated foundations for up to five years before each was supported to establish an independent NGO.

A mother holds her baby in their newly constructed home in Keiskammahoek, South Africa, in 2000.

*© Siphwe Sibeko for the
Open Society Foundations*



By the time Step by Step reached its 10th anniversary, the program had trained more than 200,000 teachers in 30 countries, reaching millions of children and families. Ultimately, the program fostered the creation of a new civil society sector across Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, including the International Step by Step Association, the pre-eminent early childhood network linking Step by Step supported NGOs and professionals from Central and Eastern Europe with their counterparts in Western Europe.

Spotlight: International Step by Step Association

The International Step by Step Association (ISSA) is the oldest and largest of the regional professional networks that the Open Society Foundations helped establish. Registered in the Netherlands in 1999, and housed in a historic former orphanage building in Leiden, ISSA was created to sustain the NGOs that “spun off” from the Open Society Foundations’ Step by Step program and to strengthen the voice of early childhood professionals from Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia in international fora. Over the following two decades, ISSA has welcomed new members from across the continent and has evolved into the pre-eminent early childhood network linking organizations and the wider early childhood community of stakeholders across Eastern and West Europe and Eurasia. ISSA serves as a platform for its members to learn and cooperate and create learning communities to build their knowledge. It is a recognized leader and innovator in the field.

With Washington-based Results for Development (R4D), a research and international development organization, ISSA co-leads Early Childhood

Workforce Initiative, which promotes knowledge creation and sharing to improve professional status and practice. In Europe, ISSA hosts the Romani Early Years Network (REYN), an advocacy and training initiative to improve services for young Roma children. REYN also seeks to encourage more Roma people to enter professions working with young children. ISSA facilitates implementation of innovative projects created with organizations like UNICEF, the European Union, and global foundations in areas such as home visiting, father participation, urban environments, municipal policy development, and social inclusion of the most marginalized children. A strong advocate for young children and early childhood professionals, ISSA has earned its place at the European and international table. After 2020, when the Open Society Foundations winds down early childhood initiatives, ISSA will remain a strong presence, carrying forward the principles and values of equity, quality, and diversity that inspired its creation in 1999.

A father and son draw together during a workshop for fathers and grandfathers in Bor, Serbia, on September 15, 2018.

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Open Society Foundations*



The Open Society Foundations' large-scale initiatives in early childhood have not been limited to Europe and Eurasia. In 2010, the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa and the Early Childhood Program conducted a set of national studies and a regional conference, which brought together a wide range of stakeholders, including governments, NGOs and INGOs (international nongovernmental organizations), multilateral agencies, academic institutions, and independent experts. The results informed the design of Getting It Right, a multi-country initiative aimed at building the capacity of civil society and government, raising public awareness, and disseminating evidence about the importance of early childhood. The Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa and the Early Childhood Program cast a wide net initially and supported a range of NGOs active in advocacy and service delivery across seven countries along with a limited number of government initiatives. The breadth of the program ensured that Open Society gained experience and cultivated a reputation as a donor responsive in the first instance to grassroots civil society. The program elevated the interesting and innovative work of smaller NGOs and brought these groups together to learn from each other.

Women participate in a training with the Wona Sanana Association in Mundavene, Mozambique, on October 1, 2019.

© Wona Sanana Association



Spotlight: Wona Sanana Association

When the Early Childhood Program and the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa wanted to combine forces to support early childhood development initiatives in Southern Africa, Wona Sanana was identified as a leading civil society organization with a clear commitment to children's rights. The Mozambican nonprofit was formally established in 2003, following an initiative on children and violence led by Graca Machel, former first lady of Mozambique. The name Wona Sanana is a combination of words from local Mozambican languages and means "to see, to take care of, and to protect the children." As one of the Early Childhood Program's earliest grantees, Wona Sanana organized the first international early childhood conference in Mozambique. The meeting provided opportunities for government and implementing partners to make contact with regional and international professionals and researchers to share evidence about the benefits of investing in early childhood. As well as stimulating a debate about the need for a national early childhood policy, the conference also launched Getting It Right, a joint early childhood

strategy developed by the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa and the Early Childhood Program. Getting It Right was a multi-country initiative that included Mozambique and ran for several years. Since then, the Early Childhood Program and the Southern Africa Initiative have supported several Wona Sanana initiatives in Mozambique that have drawn on Wona Sanana as a source of local expertise to deliver services for local communities and influence national policies for young children. For example, Wona Sanana worked to create an early childhood development partners group that became a national early childhood development network. The network is now recognized by the government and receives funding from UNICEF. Wona Sanana also piloted the first official early childhood development curriculum for newborns to five-year-old children. The government approved and adopted the curriculum and now uses it across the country. This process prompted the government and other implementing partners to develop a community preschool curriculum in 2019 that went to the government for formal approval in 2020.

This inspired creative approaches to learning, monitoring, evaluation, and documenting good practice. Through ongoing monitoring of grantees and commissioned evaluations, Open Society became aware of the fragility of these NGOs and implemented organizational development support through individualized consultancies and regional events. In 2016, in response to changes in the Southern Africa Initiative's strategy, Getting It Right shifted from supporting the broader early childhood field to prioritizing funding to NGOs that work on disability and inclusion in fewer countries. Over 10 years, the program supported more than 30 grantees in Angola, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe to introduce innovative program models and strengthen advocacy, civil society, and government capacity. The grantee network supported by the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa participated in the establishment of the African Early Childhood Network.

Right:

An early childhood master trainer plays with her son in Monrovia, Liberia, on March 28, 2014.

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The Open Society Foundations have followed a similar approach of “thinking big and acting at the grassroots level” in initiatives to support refugees, Roma children, and children with disabilities. In Bulgaria, the Open Society Foundations have been strategically supporting initiatives aimed at reforming outcomes for young Roma children through a multi-layered advocacy strategy. In 2018, Open Society, working with UNICEF and the Roma Education Fund, commissioned a Roma early childhood inclusion report for Bulgaria to examine how current policies and services were affecting young Roma children and families and to identify barriers and opportunities. The report, finalized in 2020, consolidated data and information from national statistics and existing secondary data and infused these findings with views from Roma communities and families. It documented extraordinarily high levels of infant and child mortality in Roma communities and significant obstacles for Roma mothers, infants, and children in accessing even the most basic health care. These findings and recommendations were shared and discussed with national stakeholders at the end of 2020.

Policy development and advocacy at all levels need an authentic base, informed by communities themselves and those working in the field. To complement the high-level monitoring report and policy advocacy, Open Society has been making significant investments in grassroots, community, and parent-led organizations. With funding from Open Society, the Trust for Social Achievement initiated We Care, an initiative to bring together and support the capacity development of 15 Roma led community-based organizations, working with the most excluded families across the country to advocate for systemic changes for access to health and health-related services with a direct impact on infant and maternal health. These Roma NGOs are joined by the Bulgarian Roma Early Years Network, which brings together professionals and para-professionals working with Roma children and their families. Together they are carrying out four national advocacy campaigns on nutrition, early learning, safety and security, and health.

These three examples—Step by Step, Getting it Right, We Care—demonstrate the vital importance of grounding reform of policies and practices in community-level actions and actors. Without the dynamic interaction of local and national stakeholders and families and the recognition of community diversity, national reform efforts to improve the well-being of young children cannot succeed.





Children read a picture book together in a preschool in Zabalj, Serbia, on December 20, 2018.

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Invest in Strong Early Childhood Ecosystems

The Early Childhood Program has championed the importance of strengthening early childhood ecosystems. Ecosystem describes the relationships between civil society, government, academic and training institutions, and businesses.

The Open Society Foundations' early childhood work emphasizes the idea that building democratic, open societies requires supportive national and global ecosystems that operate effectively at the grassroots level to ensure every young child is included from the start and can fulfill their right to develop to their fullest potential. Governments, donors, professionals, civil society organizations, parents, and communities each have respective roles to play to create a more equitable society that supports young children. By definition, systemic change in this model requires going beyond introducing new or better government services and extends to strengthening civil society, as well as academia and business engagement in early childhood initiatives.

Open Society’s approach, which prioritizes strengthening of this broader ecosystem, differs from prevailing implementation models in the field that concentrate on piloting, evaluating, and scaling-up discrete, measurable, evidence-based programs and initiatives. Many donor organizations view scale-up of single-strand initiatives (universalizing a preschool or home visiting program) as a “holy grail.” Yet, a more fundamental role for donors in a country could be to support building a healthy early childhood ecosystem in the country. In a healthy ecosystem, civil society, government, academic and training institutions, and businesses are fluent in early childhood development. Together they flexibly design, implement, and monitor services and address challenges on their own without donor intervention. How different would donor aid be if the aim were to build capacity broadly in countries, rather than to implement single strand (often branded) initiatives?

The Open Society Foundations’ strategic advantage in this arena has clearly been in building an early childhood civil society sector that contributes to innovation, service delivery, accountability, and demand. It is frequently NGOs that empower parents to act on behalf of their children and these same NGOs serve as engines of innovation and expertise, both complementing and challenging the approaches of politically driven government institutions. NGOs are also vehicles for social change for groups facing marginalization and discrimination, taking action to protect rights. When all parts of the system are engaged and capable, it can self-correct. If a system starts excluding refugees or children with certain disabilities, the accountability mechanisms should kick in and pressure the government and civil society organizations providing services to include them.



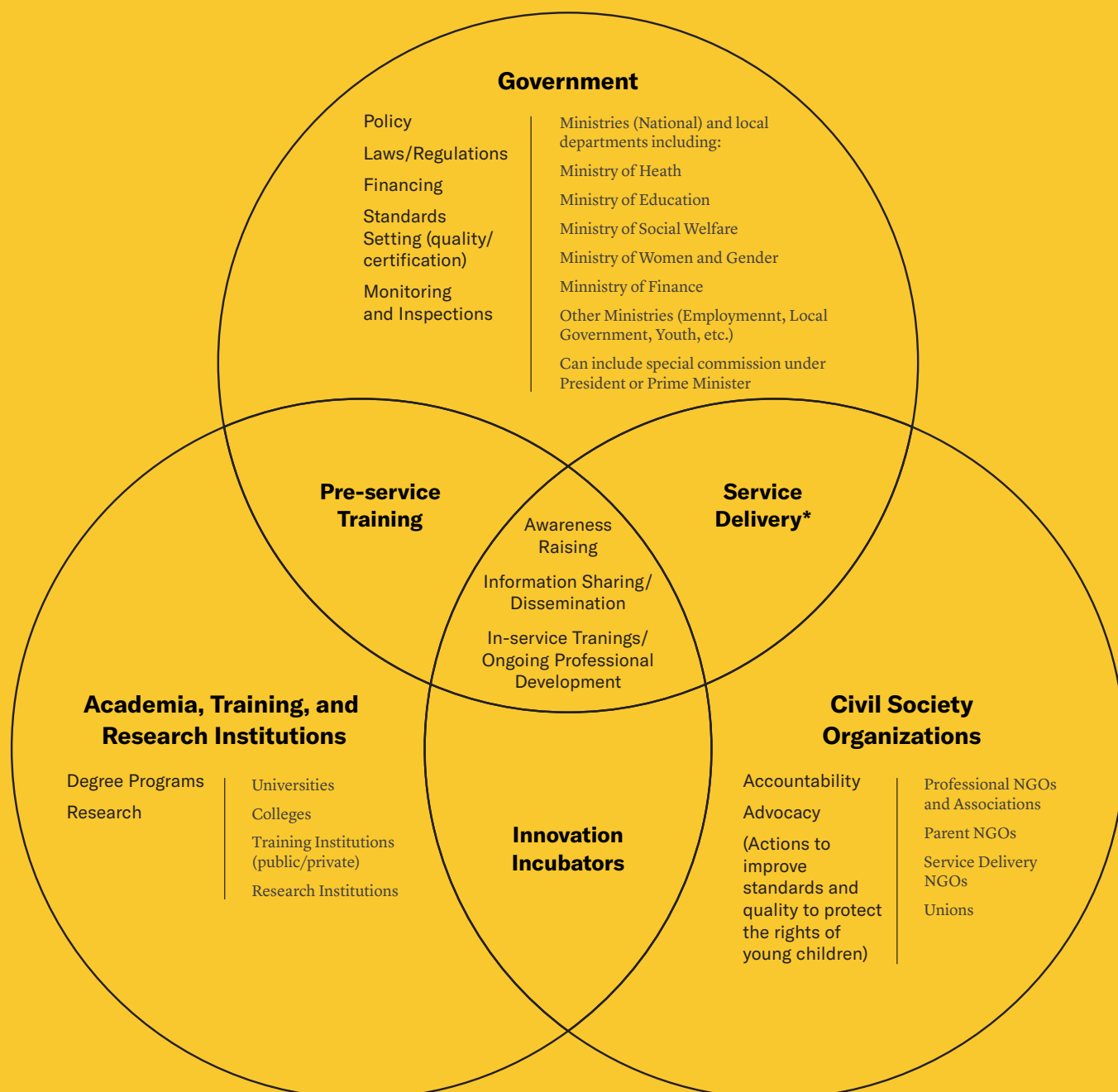
Students during an English class in Lashio, Myanmar, on February 17, 2020.

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An effective early childhood system has the following characteristics:

- A well-functioning government with early childhood policies that are developed through participatory processes and which engage health, social protection, and education sectors. Effective governments ensure resources and personnel to plan, deliver, monitor, and make accessible, high-quality early childhood services for the entire population, giving priority to unreached, disadvantaged communities.
- A strong, well-networked knowledge base, including academic and training institutions, civil society organizations, and a professional workforce. A networked knowledge base can promote quality, innovation and equity, and hold government accountable.
- Society at large, but especially parents, legal professionals, and experts are aware of the urgency of getting it right in the early years and are empowered to demand quality services.
- Regulatory and civil society bodies that monitor and evaluate the implementation of early childhood policies as well as adherence to key international instruments including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Critical Components of an Effective National Early Childhood System



A woman and child explore nature in a school garden in Pakistan, on May 18, 2005.

© Majority World/Getty



The Open Society Foundations have supported development of the early childhood ecosystem in specific countries and regions as well as globally, based on assessments of where we could leverage the most positive changes. Our work strengthening systems has ranged from policy development; to improving capacity of governments, civil servants, and the workforce; securing public funding; strengthening professional organizations, parent and rights-focused NGOs, and academic and training institutions; and engaging the private sector. The Early Childhood Program's entry point was investing in the civil society sector in Southern Africa, Myanmar, and Senegal, while in other regions and countries like Liberia, Pakistan, Peru, Bhutan, East Timor, and Sierra Leone, the entry point was investing in strengthening government policy and services.

Spotlight: Myanmar

The Early Childhood Program began work in Myanmar in 2012 with the aim of promoting equity through support for a range of early childhood development interventions. Many young children in Myanmar who have the greatest need for quality early childhood services, such as children and families living in remote rural and ethnic minority areas, are unable to access these services and are in danger of being left behind. An Open Society call for proposals resulted in a series of small grants to community organizations for development of community-based early childhood services. The organizations were based around the country with the majority targeting hard to reach groups. Shared approaches included participatory training of staff and management committee

members. The trainings aimed at addressing ethnic and religious conflict by undertaking work on conflict resolution and peace building. Other organizations targeted women, building their capacity as teachers or as home-based child care providers, while also setting up small loan schemes to pay community teachers to ensure the sustainability of services. Activities were also undertaken in monastic settings and refugee camps to strengthen services for young children and internally displaced people. Many of these community groups are now active in the national early childhood working group that engages with the government on implementation of its early childhood policy.

Spotlight: Bhutan

The Ministry of Education of the government of Bhutan is one of 10 ministries that promote the concept of Gross National Happiness. The ministry's aim is to produce an educated and enlightened society in a country of approximately 750,000 people. The Early Childhood Program began its engagement in Bhutan in 2012 when the government invited the program to train over 200 preschool teachers in an adaptation of the Step by Step methodology. The training was founded on the capacity building work of Open Society's

original preschool reform program. Experienced Step by Step trainers worked closely with the Ministry of Education and a teacher training college in Bhutan to introduce the child-centered methodology that was then rolled out across the country. In 2018, as many of the previously trained trainers had moved on, the ministry requested "top up" training to ensure that any future training needs could be met by creation of an ongoing group of trainers of trainers.

Since 1999, Open Society has strategically invested substantial funding (\$20 million over 20 years) to catalyze and build networks to create a robust civil society backbone for the international early childhood field. These networks include:¹

- International Step by Step Association–Europe/Eurasia (est. 1999)
- Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood–Asia (est. 2008)
- Arab Network for Early Childhood Development–Middle East and North Africa (est. 2014)
- Africa Early Childhood Network–Africa (est. 2015)
- Early Childhood Development Action Network–Global (est. 2016)



Roma children in a Soros Foundation school in Rokycany, Czech Republic, on November 10, 1995.

© Sean Gallup/Getty

¹ At the time of the writing of this publication, there is no single regional network representing Latin America, rather several organizations organize multi-country activities.

The networks² were established in very different contexts across two decades, thus, each is unique, and in a different stage of organizational development. The International Step by Step Association, which is the oldest of the five, is the inheritor of Open Society's flagship Step by Step Program. All have evolved into significant accelerators of early childhood development by linking key organizations, stakeholders, experts, and policymakers from across each region into vibrant networks that collaborate on advocacy and policy initiatives, knowledge generation and sharing, and technical developments to strengthen holistic, quality early childhood education. The four regional networks, in particular, cultivate relationships and communications systems that cover numerous countries and languages and work with efficiency in culturally competent ways. They give local civil society, professionals, and experts a voice in regional and global early childhood discussions and ensure connectivity and knowledge sharing.

Spotlight: WE-CARE (Liberia)

WE-CARE, an indigenous Liberian NGO, was founded in 1992 in the middle of the Liberian civil war. The organization initiated a community based book-lending scheme, based in Monrovia, to provide a focus for young people who may have otherwise been drawn into the conflict. WE-CARE's innovative approach was based on making books available for borrowers to then simply pass on to others in the community. Over the course of a decade, Open Society has worked closely with WE-CARE. For instance, WE-CARE brought together a group of Liberian authors and illustrators to develop a series of children's books, based on local everyday experiences. WE-CARE has also been the implementer of a family literacy initiative and has rolled out critical thinking initiatives in educational institutions across the country. The organization

also piloted an internationally recognized home visiting model to Liberia. WE-CARE's solid record of program delivery prompted the Global Partnership for Education to select WE-CARE as the lead implementing partner for scaling up early childhood education programming in some of Liberia's most disadvantaged southeastern counties. WE-CARE broadcasts its own radio program, shares teaching, learning, and family literacy with the public, and has its activities frequently reported in the national Liberian press. Through its own initiative, capacity, and ingenuity, WE-CARE has emerged as a leader among other civil society organizations in this field and regularly participates in regional and international early childhood events.

2 Open Society also supported the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development, which preceded the Early Childhood Development Action Network, between 2006 and 2016.



Effective early childhood ecosystems rely on a highly skilled workforce. Recognizing this, the Early Childhood Program has invested in growing the expertise in the field, through establishing post-graduate courses in universities in Bangladesh, Russia, and Myanmar. It has supported scholarships for African, Asian, and Roma students to early childhood programs organized by the University of Haifa and the University of Victoria, and through funding leadership programs, like the World Forum Foundation's Global Leaders. Open Society was an early supporter of the Early Childhood Workforce Initiative, a global learning community established by the International Step by Step Association and R4D to advance knowledge, tools, and advocacy. Additionally, Open Society funded development or dissemination of critical early childhood resources to benefit the wider field. This has included support to Save the Children to disseminate the International Development and Early Learning Assessment tool, which is used globally by many evaluators to ascertain the impact of programs on children and their parents. The Early Childhood Program also supported the University of the West Indies to pilot, adapt and evaluate the home visiting program, Reach Up! in Africa; and make training available globally through regional networks. Reach Up! is an evidence-based home visiting program, which originated in Jamaica and has since been adapted to support caregivers of infants and children up to the age of three in 18 countries. A new economic forecasting tool, supported by Open Society, designed to calculate the financial loss resulting from not investing in early childhood programs was launched in 2020 by the Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN).

An illustrator draws during a workshop for writers and illustrators interested in creating children's books at the WE-CARE library in downtown Monrovia, Liberia, on March 29, 2014.

© Andrea Bruce/NOOR for the Open Society Foundations

Spotlight: Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood

As one of the four Open Society-supported early childhood regional networks that build the infrastructure of the international early childhood field, the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC) was conceived as a cross-disciplinary and multi-sectoral network of early childhood professionals, policymakers, and academics. ARNEC aims to consolidate and disseminate knowledge to improve early childhood policy and programming in the region. It was formed in 2008, in response to a policy review exercise that demonstrated the need for stronger coordination of early childhood policy and practice across the region.

Now with approximately 2000 members, ARNEC continues to be one of the most respected regional early childhood development networks,

representing 47 countries in the Asia-Pacific region. ARNEC is notable for its use of technology to connect its membership, hosting webinars, e-discussions, and developing online publications that stimulate debate and dialogue. ARNEC also hosts a highly successful annual conference bringing together academics, practitioners, and policymakers. ARNEC's use of technology was particularly evident during the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic when it conducted a range of well-attended webinars on the pandemic's impact on children and communities and on distance learning support for young children and families. ARNEC's ability to document noteworthy practices and convene policymakers and practitioners has extended its influence well beyond the region.

Globally, the Open Society Foundations have catalyzed and participated in stakeholder partnerships that have helped shape the emerging global field. The Foundations are a co-founder of the Global Early Child Development Funders group, an informal network of 30 philanthropies that facilitates information sharing to inspire collaboration for better impact. Open Society was also a partner in the Inter-American Development Bank's Early Childhood Development Innovation Fund for Latin America and the Caribbean, which supported 18 initiatives across the region in its first two years. Open Society also funded Theirworld to advocate for increased funding for early childhood education and development.

“Early childhood education is the key to a brighter future for every child. Through Theirworld’s work with the Open Society Foundations, we have set the benchmark for investment in the early years and built a coalition of donors and countries moving towards these new targets. Ongoing campaigning will help us to unlock big change and unleash the potential of every single child through equitable and inclusive quality pre-primary education.”

Sarah Brown, Chair, Theirworld



A girl plays during recess on the rooftop of the Kibera School For Girls in Nairobi, Kenya, on February 29, 2016.

© TheirWorld/Adriane Ohanesian

One of the most interesting partnerships has been Open Society's role coordinating foundation support to the Global Partnership for Education's (GPE) early childhood education activities. Open Society acted quickly in 2015 to help the GPE convene a consultation on early childhood education to inform its five-year strategy. The consultation brought together experts from multilateral and bilateral organizations, regional networks, civil society organizations, foundations, universities, and one national government. The consultation included representatives from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. It resulted in the creation of a new stream of work at GPE. Better Early Learning and Development at Scale, focused on early childhood, which Open Society subsequently supported with a two-year \$1.5 million grant that consolidated funds from the Open Society Early Childhood Program, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, and Comic Relief. A fourth organization, Dubai Cares, contributed \$500,000 separately to support Better Early Learning and Development at Scale. This new work stream supported cross-country learning projects and national planning efforts. The stream also funded a new staff member at the GPE to strengthen early childhood education efforts. Through rapid joint actions, foundations working together were able to support a lasting shift in the GPE. In the intervening years, the GPE has strengthened knowledge sharing and planning for early childhood globally, contributing millions to efforts by developing countries to create robust early education systems.

Preschool students play with toys in Lima, Peru, on March 10, 2014.

© Mariana Bazo/Reuters/Newscom





An EENET videographer films a wheelchair accessible swing set for a teacher training video in Eswatini, on September 11, 2019.

© Enabling Education Network

Leaving No Child Behind: Rights for Children and Families

Every child has the right to a strong start in life.

Yet many children, because of race, ethnicity, a disability, poverty or other factors beyond their control, are denied a fair start. Promoting equity and fairness means helping families out of poverty, addressing discrimination, and providing children with additional opportunities to support them to overcome barriers. It requires putting into practice the strategies that the Open Society Foundations have honed over decades in the field: thinking big, while acting at grassroots level, transforming systems, and combating bias. Real change is possible when parents, families, and communities are empowered to demand better services, and when new systems, programs, and a skilled workforce are in place to meet the unique needs of each child.

In order to be effective at promoting equity and social inclusion for all, it is important to understand the barriers and enabling factors experienced by different groups, as well as the great variations that exist within each community. Different aspects of identity—gender, religion, language, race, ethnicity, disability, poverty—combine and mediate individual experience and meaning. The Early Childhood Program learned lessons about how to work with specific groups during the 20 years of the Step by Step Program that can be translated to new contexts. For instance, adapting learning environments for children with disabilities can then inform

Spotlight: Enabling Education Network

Open Society has supported global civil society networks such as the Enabling Education Network (EENET) with a vision to facilitate the exchange of information, ideas, and experiences around inclusive education. EENET, established in 1997 in the United Kingdom, has been working hard to reverse the traditional North-to-South flow of information by empowering education stakeholders in southern Europe to document and share their experiences developing inclusive education. The network has a global reputation for effectively influencing decision makers in education and finance and is a leader in promoting collaboration between inclusive education actors. Open Society's support to the network since 2014 has created a distinct body of work and unique expertise in the field that will boost EENET's efforts and support its stakeholders for many years to come. The Foundations' support has been used by EENET to guide two filmmaking projects that provided easily accessible training resources on inclusive education. EENET assisted Open Society grantees in four countries to collect and provide inputs for a General Comment on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This generated a children's voices poster on issues related to educational

transitions (for instance, between preschool and primary school) that has been shared globally in 14 languages. It also initiated a thread of work within EENET, which has led to training materials, including a training film, on transitions. EENET gradually expanded the focus of its work to young children and developed a project dedicated to listening to young voices. It also supported stakeholders conducting action research with very young children and older child researchers. EENET will continue to give priority space to the voices of those who are often least heard in education matters, with a focus on the learners themselves, from young children through adult learners.

EENET's most recent grant provides resources that pull together strands from all the previous projects to create training and learning materials that will be widely and freely available to a global audience. Open Society's continuous support has helped EENET to engage in the sort of ongoing thinking, learning, reflection, and improvement that has expanded its work and developed its long-term capacity.

inclusive practices for all children. Underpinning this approach is a commitment to address prejudices in programs and communities by embedding anti-bias and diversity trainings for parents, educators, and community members throughout our work.

Over time, the Early Childhood Program put into practice the concept of "progressive" or "proportionate universalism," persuading governments in participating countries to commit to providing high-quality services for all, and to pursuing additionally resourced interventions or services for the most marginalized. The concept helps governments recognize that different types of support are needed for different children and families. The ultimate goal of



Early childhood development facilitators visit a Roma family in Kragujevac, Serbia, on September 15, 2018.

© Sanja Knezevic for the
Open Society Foundations

such an approach is to create policies, systems, and institutions that promote the principles and practice of inclusion whereby each child, whatever their identity, has the opportunity to realize their full potential. The Early Childhood Program's work moves beyond the false binary choice between creating generically inclusive systems and investing in initiatives that support specific populations, such as Roma children, refugees or children with disabilities. Our response is that both inclusive public systems and policies as well as tailored responsive services are essential to meeting the needs of diverse children and families. In practice, this has meant that Open Society has used the Step by Step Program to invest considerable resources in improving the quality, access, and equity of early education systems in 30 countries. At the same time, Open Society has also supported complementary initiatives that demonstrate benefits for specific populations.

The Early Childhood Program's work combines the bottom up approach of empowering grassroots NGO partners, including parents' associations, to advocate for young children and to overcome barriers preventing inclusion with a top down approach of building effective systems to prompt governments to guarantee the right of each young child to quality inclusive services. Supporting capacity development and empowerment of service providers and institutions leads to changes that translate immediately to improved quality of services offered to children, even when policies are not in place. Dissemination of models of successful inclusive practice that can be scaled up nationally, together with the generation of evidence on continued discrimination, can provide powerful support to policy and practice development and give voice to those rarely heard.

Prioritizing Inclusion for Roma Children

A majority of Roma people experience unacceptable poverty, systemic racism and discrimination, and live in communities where there is high unemployment, low-quality housing, and limited access to basic utilities, health care, and social protection services. Infant mortality and childhood illnesses are higher in Roma communities, vaccination rates are lower, and only half as many Roma children attend early education compared with majority populations. As a result, Open Society prioritized inclusion of Roma children in the Step by Step program, hiring Roma adults into teacher assistant roles and developing new cultural and language resources to enrich the curricula in preschools and primary schools.

Roma Initiatives Snapshot: Creating Strong Early Childhood Programs in Serbia

In 1997, the Open Society Foundation Serbia set up bilingual community-based programs in 10 remote Roma settlements with astounding results. Three years later, all of the children who attended the community-based centers entered primary school knowing Serbian and successfully completed their first year of primary school, in stark comparison with only 40 percent of Roma children who had not attended preschool. Subsequent projects, implemented with the newly established Center for Interactive Pedagogy, improved the quality of early education in state preschools and primary schools, and piloted the role of Roma pedagogical assistants. The position of Pedagogical Assistant was then adopted officially, and scaled up across the country by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development. Beginning in 2012, Open Society seed-funded innovative community-based programs to complement work in formal educational settings, and then, from 2016 to 2018, expanded and evaluated the Starting Strong parenting program in 15 communities across Serbia. The evaluations demonstrated strong gains in school readiness and social emotional development for children and improved parental knowledge and skills. With funding from the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological

Development, the World Bank, and the European Union, these community-based programs are being expanded to public preschools and primary schools across the country.

“My child at the age of six has no idea what is Roma, what is Serbian. I asked my child in the first days of preschool when she came back home—[child’s name] ‘Are there any Roma there?’ She said, ‘No, mom, only friends are there.’”

—Mother of a non-Roma child

“What they [teachers] need is to be sensitive to children’s needs and diversity and then to plan work according to them. It addresses the array of a teacher’s competencies, but it starts with an awareness of differences and an attitude that they need to be addressed.”

—Staff of the NGO Center for Interactive Pedagogy

“Skin color does not matter. No schoolchild should feel sad. They should feel respected and equal to other children.”

—Roma parent



Students and teachers in their classroom in Croatia on April 15, 2003.

Courtesy of the International Step by Step Association

The Early Childhood Program shifted strategies in the past decade from elaborate national initiatives, like the one in Serbia and countries across the region, to build a European movement for young Roma children. Through an ongoing collaboration with UNICEF and the Roma Education Fund that started in 2009, Open Society has launched eight national Roma Early Childhood Inclusion monitoring reports, including in Serbia, to gather evidence needed for stronger advocacy. The Open Society Foundations have also worked with the International Step by Step Association to establish the Romani Early Years Network, which brings together professionals through affiliated national networks in 11 countries. Members of the Romani Early Years Network work together to provide high-quality resources and trainings to professionals working with young children, to advocate for improved services and to empower and encourage Roma to join the early childhood workforce. In December 2020, Eurochild and the International Step by Step Association, in partnership with the European Public Health Association and the Roma Education Fund, will launch a four-year regional advocacy campaign with Open Society funding to increase inclusion and create an equitable start for young children currently left out of planning and budgets in Europe.

Enabling Childhoods: New Opportunities for Children with Developmental Delays and Disabilities

When Open Society launched the Step by Step Program in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, young children with disabilities were segregated into special schools and institutions, coordinated by experts known as defectologists. Stigma was high and opportunities for social inclusion were minimal. Beginning in 1999, the Open Society Foundations used the child-centered classrooms established through the Step by Step Program to welcome children with disabilities and special educational needs into mainstream classrooms. This required negotiations with education system officials and intensive training for educators and parents.

Redeploying highly skilled staff from special schools and institutions to support inclusive education in mainstream settings became a priority, as did early identification of children with development delays and disabilities so that they could be supported in their most

Georgia Snapshot: Parents and Civil Society Advocate for Children with Disabilities

Over the past decade, in collaboration with the Open Society Foundation Georgia, Open Society awarded grants strategically to civil society organizations to stimulate systemic reforms aimed at introducing policies and services for young children with disabilities. The work included strengthening the capacities of civil society service providers, engagement with ministries on new legislation, strategy and system development, and support to parent-led organizations to network, demand and monitor services. The Georgian Association of Neurologists and Neurosurgeons adapted an international parent questionnaire used to identify infants and toddlers who needed additional support. They then trained pediatricians around the country on how to use it. To support these children, Portage of Georgia and First Step Georgia introduced home-based early intervention services and advocated to integrate preschools. Parent advocacy groups were established and the Georgian Coalition of Early Childhood Intervention Organizations formed a group that has grown to 25 civil society organizations focusing on professional standards and advocacy. A university course is under development. At the request of the Georgian government, Open Society and UNICEF have been providing expertise to roll out a series of new strategies and policies, with the result that the government has been steadily

increasing financing. There are now 25 providers of early intervention services, serving seven of the ten regions of the country. Reforms like those in Georgia are badly needed to prevent institutionalization of young children in a region that still has the largest number of children living in institutions.

“The creation of the coalition I think was a turning point because the government understood that they had a very credible partner with whom they could work, who provided expertise, and who provided policy advice. The government had someone to rely on in terms of capacity building as well as in terms of monitoring, ongoing support. It was really something very important.”

-UNICEF representative

“Children with special educational needs are not guilty that they have learning difficulties. They don’t have to be excluded.”

-Parent in favor of inclusion

“None of the project activities were ineffective and I am sure that none of our children will cry on the 1st of September.”

-Kindergarten teacher

formative earliest years. These efforts intensified collaboration with health and social protection experts. Open Society established competitive grant programs to support innovative initiatives, and initiated funding for financing studies and policy guidelines to promote a full reorganization of services.³

3 The Early Childhood Program’s work with children with disabilities has spanned Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, as well as Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Uganda, and Zimbabwe in Southern Africa.

Children coloring at a kindergarten in the Kara Tepe refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos on October 11, 2019.

© Valery Sharifulin/ZUMA/Newscom



Children on the Move: Supporting Young Refugee Families in Greece and Beyond

When the body of two-year old Alan Kurdi washed up on a beach in the Mediterranean in 2015, a spotlight was cast on the unfolding crisis in the Middle East leading hundreds of thousands of people to flee in search of safety. Of the more than 150,000 people who applied for asylum in Greece from June 2013 to June 2018, up to half were children and young people. Despite the best efforts of the Greek authorities to provide access to play, learning, health, and education services for refugee and migrant children, the result was that access to services was fragmented and inconsistent.

The Open Society Initiative for Europe and Open Society's health, education, and early childhood programs responded by partnering with the Municipality of Thessaloniki to implement an Integrated Action Plan for the Integration of Refugees and Migrants. The aim was to support a systemic response to the arrival of refugees, moving away from short-term projects. Through a range of interventions including a preschool program targeting host and refugee communities to enhance integration and intercultural activities, the Early Childhood Program supported the municipality to develop a model of integration. With the cooperation of the Greek Ministry of Education, additional partnerships in Greece with organizations such as the University of Patras and local and international NGOs led to the provision of early childhood activities on the Greek islands for refugee children and families. Building on this experience, these organizations went on to work with progressive local authorities in Greece to provide training for early childhood educators. The training resulted in the production of play and learning materials that are now available across the country for those working with young refugee children and their families.

Spotlight: Refugee Trauma Initiative (Greece)

Open Society has prioritized support for grassroots organizations such as the Refugee Trauma Initiative which started in 2016 in response to the plight of 13,000 refugees stranded in Idomeni on the borders of Greece and North Macedonia. It has grown from a volunteer initiative providing therapeutic support for refugee adults and children to an established NGO now delivering a range of initiatives for young people and children in Greece. These initiatives include Baytna (“home” in Arabic), an early childhood care and development intervention that emphasizes psychosocial care. Baytna takes a holistic approach to strengthening the attachment between parent and child while focusing attention on maintaining identity. In 2018, Baytna created a hubs initiative that builds capacity by working through partners to create new or strengthen existing early childhood services that are responsive to the needs of refugees. The Baytna hubs initiative is simple and scalable

because it provides training on child-centered practice and technical support and supervision to strengthen culturally responsive early childhood approaches for refugee children and families and host communities. Under the leadership of Obama Fellow Zarlasht Halaimzai, a refugee from Afghanistan, Baytna plans to expand to other parts of the world.

“Thank you [RTI] so much for helping us. Our lives have changed so much since we started receiving support. My husband has even started playing with Rami again”

–Refugee parent

“[The Early Childhood Program team] really wants to hear what’s happening from our perspective all the time. They are really trying to understand and learn together with us, so it’s a very open partnership.”

– Grantee

As well as supporting improvements in local systems to respond to the needs of refugee children, the Early Childhood Program has worked to influence the global early childhood response for children affected by crises. For example, Open Society supported the Refugee Trauma Initiative to develop an early childhood approach that addressed trauma and identity issues. The initiative’s work was featured in the 2019 Global Education Monitoring report as an example of promising practice. The Open Society Foundations are also one of the founders of the Moving Minds Alliance, a donor collaborative that has now extended into a multi-sectoral partnership. The alliance is about to launch a dedicated advocacy strategy that will draw on examples of best practice from around the world such as BRAC’s early childhood initiative with the Rohingya population in Bangladesh, Sesame Workshop, and various parenting support projects in the Middle East. The wider aim of these efforts is to highlight what works for young children and families in order to increase funding of effective services for those affected by humanitarian crises.



Rohingya refugee students attend class in the Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, on November 25, 2017.

© Andrew Parsons/eyevine/Redux



*Refugee children play during programing
by the Refugee Trauma Initiative in
Polykastro, Greece, on June 27, 2019.*

© JZA Photography

Looking to the Future

When the Open Society Foundations launched the Step by Step Program, few people were making the connection between how young children are raised and the quality of our societies.

For many years, starting after World War II, international agencies and governments had prioritized child survival, simply keeping the next generation alive. However, beginning in the 1990s, with rates of child survival increasing dramatically and new brain research demonstrating the rapid development of brain architecture in the first years of life, attention shifted toward improving child development as a means of shifting lifelong trajectories. Open Society's interest went further, seeking to understand how changes in early education could support the open, democratic societies that many people hoped for in the Central and Eastern European and Eurasian transitions from Communism. Open Society's investments in early childhood took shape in this new dynamic, scientific, and political context. The Foundations entered a field that needed new expertise and faster, more efficient ways to generate and share new thinking and put it into action.

Over the past three decades the Open Society has catalyzed shifts in how early education and development in Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia is understood and how programs and policies are shaped. The Early Childhood Program has strengthened early childhood ecosystems in many countries and created robust civil society infrastructure and networks in four regions. Our programs have activated movements of parents and professionals, fostered new expertise, and strengthened capacity of governments. At the global level, the Open Society Foundations have been a first mover in many multi-stakeholder coalitions and have supported development of tools and resources to promote the growth of the field. Significantly, all of our work has aimed at strengthening open societies and improving the lives of those facing discrimination with a particular focus on Roma children, refugees, and children with disabilities.

In the intervening years, the World Bank, UNICEF, the World Health Organization and many governments, donors and agencies have elevated early childhood development as a priority. The unexpected arrival of COVID-19 threatens this new attention granted to young children, yet it also offers unprecedented opportunities to address problems that have been simmering for years: gaps in early education systems; the overdependence on women for child care; the rights of those working with young children; and the rights of children left behind. The pandemic is prompting early childhood development advocates to examine these challenges and to ask new questions about how they can be overcome. How might the field use this moment of opportunity?

It is almost inevitable in the next decade that early education will become a statutory part of every education system, requiring a doubling of the workforce globally and even greater increases in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East where fewer than 30 percent of children currently participate in early education. As a society, we must find the means to guarantee access for all children—regardless of their gender, religion, language, race, ethnicity, wealth, ability—to early education. We need to ensure that these programs are socially, culturally, and academically inclusive and foster the skills children need to be active participants in open societies. We must guard against “schoolification” in the early years, and expand programs that promote creativity, critical thinking, responsibility, choice, and parent and community involvement.



A teacher wearing a protective suit teaches a young girl at home in Cali, Colombia, on August 4, 2020.

© Luis Robayo/AFP/Getty

COVID-19 has put a spotlight on the global crisis in child care, and the women, caregivers, and the formal and informal workers who carry most of this responsibility. Men can and should take up a more equal role in child care including at home, and more effective, higher quality child care services must be structured and subsidized, like health care, with the aim of universality. It is only through such efforts that it will be possible to achieve equal rights for women. However, it is also the rights of care workers, primarily women who are often minorities and/or migrants, to fair work that must be addressed. COVID-19 gives the world a chance to turn things upside down, to spread responsibility for child care more equally across men and women, to rethink economies and shift salary resources from large corporations to fairly compensate those nurturing the next generation.

Beyond COVID-19, nature and science will reshape young children's futures. Climate change is amplifying inequity for already marginalized groups, and it will impact the youngest generation to the greatest extent across their lifespan. Air quality from pollution is worse at lower "altitudes," closer to the ground where children breathe, during critical moments in their development. Extreme weather—floods, droughts, storms, fires—put young children's development at great risk by destroying homes, health centers, schools and sources of food and safe water. What shape will the world be in when they grow up? Scientific developments in genetics and technology will shape new worlds for children of the future, with both positive and negative outcomes. These are only some of the challenges for the future.

There is one commitment all of us must continue to make, even in these difficult times: the promise to leave no child behind. Robust activity from governments, donors, and civil society is necessary to support all children born into precarious conditions. Too many young Roma children, refugees, and children with disabilities are denied a fair start in life because of poverty, displacement and discrimination. Too few organizations are fighting for children's rights or funding the struggle to achieve equity and social inclusion.

As the Early Childhood Program's work winds down, we call on those who will continue to take up these issues—early education, child care, the climate crisis, equity—to learn from our experiences. We urge future leaders to be more ambitious, to also fund robust early childhood systems rather than scaling up specific initiatives, to invest in grassroots organizations and civil society, and to prioritize children who are left behind because of discrimination. It is only by investing in the next generation that we will succeed in creating more just, democratic societies.

Right:

Kindergarten students take a morning walk with their teachers in Lashio, Myanmar, on February 17, 2020.

© Minzayar Oo/Panos for the Open Society Foundations



Cover:

*Students play outside an education
center in Lashio, Myanmar, on
February 18, 2020.*

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OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

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