A network for early childhood development

Shekufeh Zonji
Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN), New York, New York

Address for correspondence: Shekufeh Zonji, ECDAN Global Coordinator, Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN), 333 E 108th St, New York City, NY 10029. zonji@ecdan.org

Political action and investment are critical to meet the development needs of vulnerable young children today. Early childhood development (ECD) has become a global priority: an ECD target and other ECD-related targets are included in the sustainable development goals, over 75 countries have officially adopted multisectoral ECD policy instruments, and ECD is a programmatic focus in major global institutions (including UNICEF, UNESCO, the WHO, and the World Bank). However, lack of clear and strong ownership of and champions for ECD, operational and communication silos of constituent sectors that constitute ECD, political pressures for investment in other arenas, and low international investment in ECD inhibit making a compelling and cohesive investment case for ECD. This commentary explores how a global ECD network can facilitate systematic alignment and action across sectors to support country systems, strengthen political will, and increase investment to deliver results for young children’s development. The ECD Action Network is in formation and offers an opportunity for the field to share knowledge among countries and sectors, identify pathways for sectoral coordination and collaboration, and undertake advocacy to generate the scale of political and financial support necessary to ensure that every child receives the nurturing care he/she needs.

Keywords: network; partnerships; global; early childhood development

Introduction

In a healthy society, children are well nourished and feel safe to play and learn. But 250 million (43%) children under five in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are at a risk of being reared without this nurturing care and of developing delays and disabilities. The consequences are devastating and lifelong; they also create massive social and economic burdens for these nations. Evidence-based early childhood development (ECD) interventions could transform this situation: for each dollar invested in ECD programs for vulnerable children, a return of at least US$3 and up to US$17 is possible!

So, why are investments in ECD programs underprioritized and poorly funded, despite substantial evidence and pathways to scaleable action? A pair of global health governance experts suggest that siloed sectors within ECD (i.e., nutrition—sustainable development goal (SDG) 2.2; health—SDG 3.2; education SDG 4.2; child protection—SDG 5.2; and related sectors like environmental health and social welfare) may be at the crux of the matter. Sectoral and organizational advocacy has created a cacophony of demands under the banner of ECD, resulting in confusion for decision-makers, instead of bold and well-coordinated action for the early years. Powerful national and global champions of ECD are too few, so political incentives for investment are weak. Constituent sectors have not prioritized ECD to major funders, domestic governments, private sector, and political movers and shakers; they need a strong shared narrative about coordinated, high-quality, high-impact ECD services. Apart from some notable national multisectoral ECD programs in Colombia, Chile, Brazil, India, and others, few programs have gone to national scale in LMICs.

Collective action has overcome siloed thinking in other fields from informal, knowledge-sharing dialogue platforms to formal partnerships to create
systemic change. There is extensive literature on lessons learned and good practices showing that networks can “produce benefits beyond what individual partners could achieve.” By bringing together unique combinations of individuals and organizations to pool and align resources, networks have been able to shape public perceptions and policies, innovate delivery solutions, build political will, and unlock funding.

While not a panacea, a global ECD network can facilitate systematic alignment and action in a fragmented and competitive field, and “summon sufficient throw-weight to propel a field up and over the tipping points to sweeping change.” For the field of ECD, reaching this tipping point will require that sectors champion and collaborate to meet the development needs of young children; country leaders drive action at scale in partnership with public and private actors; and global, regional, national, and local advocacy strengthens. The ECD debate must expand from one that is insular and technical to one that is public and political—because the future of every society depends on the healthy development of its youngest citizens. And no single actor can achieve this alone.

This is the goal of the ECD Action Network (ECDAN). Announced in 2016 by the World Bank, UNICEF, and more than a hundred civil society organizations, foundations, multilaterals, bilaterals, businesses, researchers, and regional ECD networks, ECDAN affirms these organizations’ collective commitment to seize the opportunity afforded by the SDGs to achieve impact at scale for the world’s most vulnerable children.

ECDAN members have been incubating a blueprint for a network focused on supporting and strengthening country action, leadership, and investment. To figure out how to do this, nine “First Wave Countries” have begun exploring multisectoral ECD initiatives. ECDAN documents lessons, facilitates learning exchanges, and explores how to support coordinated action at scale in different country contexts. Some countries form their own cross-sectoral national ECD networks with shared advocacy and policy goals; others organize nationwide consultations bringing together previously isolated organizations and sectors; while others experiment with innovations to unlock political will, private sector financing, or scaling up on sectoral platforms. The process promotes national ECD agendas and validates the value and need for a global movement for young children.

To bridge sectors and jumpstart this process, ECDAN convened the leadership of major global sectoral partnerships including the SUN Movement, GPE, EWEC, PMNCH, SWA, ECPC, and End Violence at the 72nd UN General Assembly. The partnerships affirmed the value of a global ECD network, identifying five key opportunities for ECDAN: (1) provide clear guidance for how each sector can integrate ECD; (2) shape ECD narratives for decision-makers; (3) coordinate joint advocacy campaigns; (4) coordinate data across sectors to develop snapshots of young children’s status; (5) and strengthen ECD in other partnerships’ multisectoral efforts. These actions will create a collective, visible, and impactful global footprint.

ECDAN partners want to take a systems approach to ECD and identified five priorities: (1) multisectoral interventions; (2) workforces; (3) data; (4) finance; and (5) advocacy. For these five themes, ECDAN members formed task forces to map out the field’s needs and opportunities and an ECDAN results framework. The process embodied the spirit of a network: working together energized members across organizational and sectoral siloes; some organizations cited new programmatic strategies as an outcome of participating in the task forces. Task Force recommendations unpacked myriad ways to undertake multisectoral coordination and collaboration, for example, how to coordinate and integrate data systems across sectors.

Notable examples of similar mechanisms to ECDAN include those in climate (Climate Action Network), agriculture (the New Vision for Agriculture), and water (the 2030 Water Resources Group). Other successful examples in the health sector include Roll Back Malaria, Stop TB Partnership, GAVI, and PEPFAR.

Networks, alliances, coalitions, partnerships, and other similar terms have specific definitions in the literature, but for the purposes of this article, they will be used interchangeably.

\[^{a}\text{SUN Movement, Scaling Up Nutrition Movement; GPE, Global Partnership for Education; EWEC, Every Woman Every Child; PMNCH, Partnership for Maternal and Newborn Child Health; SWA, Sanitation and Water for All; ECPC, Early Childhood Peace Consortium; and End Violence, Partnership to End Violence.}\]

\[^{b}\text{Notable examples of similar mechanisms to ECDAN include those in climate (Climate Action Network), agriculture (the New Vision for Agriculture), and water (the 2030 Water Resources Group). Other successful examples in the health sector include Roll Back Malaria, Stop TB Partnership, GAVI, and PEPFAR.}\]
To build on this work, ECDAN will need to develop three core functions with its partners. First, a dynamic knowledge platform to capture, disseminate, and amplify lessons learned from cutting-edge implementation and impact research on cross-sectoral ECD scale-up efforts across varied geographic, economic, socio-linguistic, and political contexts. This will require collaborative efforts of all members, especially the research constituency and ECD national and regional networks. Second, mechanisms (both digital and operational) and incentives for sectoral coordination, cooperation, and collaboration guided by country and partner efforts. And finally, build capacity and a platform for coordinated advocacy, which will engage a critical mass of champions committed to systematic and opportunistic coordination, spotlight effective national and global action, and amplify voices to increase political will and financing for the early years.

ECDAN aims to create an enabling environment for effective action to flourish so that children everywhere get the nurturing care they need to thrive. To join the network, visit ecdan.org.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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