HOW REGIONAL NETWORKS CATALYSE IMPACT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across over 100 countries in four regions, the past decade has seen a dramatic increase in the collective capacity for comprehensive cross-sector work advancing Early Childhood Development (ECD). Critical to this accomplishment have been four regional ECD networks:

Africa Early Childhood Network (AfECN)
Arab Network for Early Childhood Development (ANECD)
Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC)
International Step by Step Association (ISSA)

These networks are rights-based, with core operating principles dedicated to quality, equity, diversity, inclusiveness, partnerships and accountability. All four are high-performing, with initiatives that have set the stage for advancing ECD work. This report takes a systematic look at how these networks have evolved and what uniquely and collectively positions them to make an impact.

This report builds on interviews with political leaders, senior civil servants, INGO's, academics and heads of national networks. It identifies the unique advantages of regional networks in the ECD sector, examining how these can be leveraged for greater impact, especially in times of crisis and recovery.

The timing for this work could not be more critical. Migration, climate change, political instability, war and other disasters affect more and more young children. The United Nations has stated that, in order to accelerate progress toward SDG Goal 4, there is an urgent need to bolster *local action* and significantly improve engagement, coordination and alignment across levels of policy implementation, from local to national to regional and international[1]. Furthermore, projections for the ongoing impact of COVID-19 by Save the Children and UNICEF estimate that an additional 150 million children are living in multidimensional poverty as a consequence of the pandemic.[2]

SEVEN PRIMARY OUTCOMES ACHIEVED BY REGIONAL ECD NETWORKS

ECD is critical to the development of human capital but, like most multi-sectoral issues, it is both "*everyone's problem and no one's problem*". Networks are powerful vehicles for achieving ambitious goals and addressing complex multi-sectoral issues. Through their connections, networks can assemble and activate diverse people, gather and communicate vital information, develop and scale

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[1] Special Edition: Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, Report of the Secretary General. May 8, 2019: https://undocs.org/E/2019/68

[2] UNICEF COVID-19 Data Hub, October, 2020: https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/?utm_source=UNICEF%20Data&utm_medium=homepage&utm_campaign=COVID19-hub-unicef-data-banner

innovative solutions, influence policy and practice across sectors and confer legitimacy by engaging actors at all levels. This ability to organize for increased impact is called the network advantage.

Within their regions, each of the networks is well-established, highly visible and influential across a variety of targets, including regional intergovernmental bodies. The cross-sector linkages they facilitate serve as the connective tissue, infrastructure and collective voice for the sector. This network capacity has contributed to outcomes that are not one-time results, but rather a bedrock for greater impact in the sector.

I.   MAINSTREAMING ECD AS A PUBLIC SECTOR IMPERATIVE

ECD advocates in each region shifted historical perspectives from an emphasis on childcare and the private sector to the science of human development and the need for public support and investment.

II.   BUILDING THE CROSS-SECTOR CONNECTIONS NEEDED FOR ECD TO ADVANCE

Each network has members from different issue sectors, such as health, education, and protection who perform different functions, like policymakers, civil society organizations, academia and practitioners. Through their engagement with regional ECD networks, these members across sectors and functions have built muscle memory for the effective collaboration needed to plan, implement and improve comprehensive national policies and programs. Knowledge is constantly being created or translated by multi-disciplinary teams.

III.   CARVING OUT A SPACE FOR GOVERNMENT CONNECTION, CAPACITY BUILDING AND ENGAGEMENT

Decision makers at different levels play a role in policy formation, implementation and improvement. By connecting ministers from multiple sectors across countries, all four networks have created the space needed to share best practices for effective national-level ECD frameworks, plans and policies.

IV.   EXPANDING REACH AND CAPACITY THROUGH NATIONAL NETWORK BUILDING

Developing and sustaining national ECD programs and advancing ECD at the national level relies on having a national infrastructure and capacity. In order to expand the supportive infrastructure in member countries, each regional network has focused on supporting national partners and networks.

V.   LINKING THE GROUND TO THE GLOBAL

Interpreting programs, policies and interventions through regional, national and local contexts improves their implementation and effectiveness. Each network works with members to interpret and refine global research into practical methods that work on the ground. Likewise, knowledge and best practices from members in countries and across regions lift up new ideas and models to inform global agenda and action.

VI.   CREATING READINESS FOR EFFECTIVE POLICY CHANGE

By mobilizing stakeholders, building advocacy capacity, connecting short-term coalitions and alliances, and supporting successful implementation followed by monitoring for quality and improvement, the regional networks have supported the public and political will needed for sustainable change.

VII. LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR EFFECTIVE CRISIS RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

Network members are able to mobilize as needed, with different configurations of members taking on different tasks to be responsive to new issues and to new challenges or barriers to existing issues. In a global environment rife with conflict, displacement, natural and man-made disasters, and now the COVID-19 pandemic, this adaptive capacity is crucial to ensure that ECD can continue to advance while protecting hard-earned gains across the sector. Because of their adaptive capacity and strong linkages to each other and to members at the national and local levels, the four ECD regional networks are able to respond to crisis by:

- Scaling solutions quickly and efficiently
- Shining a light on vulnerable populations
- Keeping core ECD issues on the agenda
- Detecting emerging risks early and conducting joint research to identify the extent of impact
- Providing a two-way pathway for resources and information from the international level to the local level
- Quickly activating "muscle memory" for collaboration and practice exchange

Looking ahead, the four networks are applying those same capacities to address issues that were critical in ECD before the current pandemic and have now become even more acute:
- Who is and will become vulnerable?
- What interventions and solutions worked?
- What happened to the already fragile ECD workforce?
- What is needed to build back a better, more integrated system?

OPPORTUNITIES

By increasing their connections to each other and supporting cross-network collaboration, the kinds of network advantages that have made the four ECD networks successful in their regions have the potential to create powerful global capacity. The following areas of opportunity for regional ECD networks and their investors and partners were identified through this research:

STRENGTHEN CROSS NETWORK INFRASTRUCTURE TO ADDRESS EMERGING ISSUES:

Intentionally creating capacity for cross-network collaboration on topical and emerging issues would yield a stronger infrastructure organized to respond to both global trends and issues that surface from members working in and across communities. Progress is already being made through collaboration on the **Early Childhood Workforce Initiative (ECWI)**, as well as on emerging issues like the impact of climate change on vulnerable children.

STRENGTHEN PEER EXCHANGE TO SHARE BEST PRACTICES FOR OPERATIONS AND STRATEGY

Key areas for cross-network learning include sustainability, engagement and structure as networks evolve over time. In addition, sharing successful strategies for advocacy and strategic communications to build political and public will remains critical for supporting ECD.

EXTEND SCALE AND REACH

Increasing support in each network for intentional national network building and strengthening capacity at the grass-roots level creates deeper infrastructure for the sector and reinforces regional networks' ability to connect to practitioners, families and communities on the ground. Strengthening linkages between the regions will also help target support to areas in greater need. Lastly, supporting an additional regional ECD network in Latin America would address a key gap in global capacity.

INVEST IN REGIONAL NETWORKS AS INFRASTRUCTURE FOR THE ECD SECTOR

Taken together, the four regional ECD networks form a connective infrastructure for the ECD sector. The networks are at a mature stage where they have developed successful strategies and are working toward greater alignment across regions to further bolster the sector. Their work advancing ECD has resulted in both outcomes for the sector - better practices and improved policies and frameworks -- as well as deep knowledge about how to connect the sector for greater impact. Investing in the networks collectively as infrastructure to better connect the ECD sector for impact would build on past successes and scale the network's ability to drive change.

ENGAGE REGIONAL ECD NETWORKS AS THOUGHT PARTNERS FOR STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Networks are able to define and elevate stakeholders who are credible, and connect with voices on the ground which brings authenticity and legitimacy to the work. They can help broaden program design as they connect research with practice, then refine research, improve practices and share back lessons learned. They are also a guide to local and national contexts and players. Regional ECD networks can support the thought partnership at the local, national and regional levels that funders need in order for within and across contexts to be better connected in order to serve as a multiplier effect for impact.

About Network Impact

Network Impact (NI) is accelerating and spreading the use of networks to advance positive change. NI provides consulting, tool-building, and research services to support social-impact networks, foundations, and the emerging field of network builders. NI are leaders in the field of network strategy and evaluation, having developed and implemented numerous evaluations for a variety of different types of networks - including complex, multi-stakeholder networks. In 2014, they authored in partnership with the Center for Evaluation Innovation *The State of Network Evaluation* framing paper and network evaluation casebook. This research was also summarized in the article "Network Evaluation in Practice: Approaches and Applications" for *The Foundation Review* in 2015.