
MEETING REPORT

Nurturing human capital along the life course: Investing in early child development

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Acknowledgements

This document is the report of the meeting organized by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 'Nurturing human capital along the life course: Investing in early child development'. The meeting was organized by the WHO Departments of Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health, Mental Health and Substance Abuse, and Reproductive Health and Research. Collaborating departments included the Departments of Chronic Diseases and Health Promotion, Nutrition for Health and Development, Ethics and Social Determinants of Health, Violence and Injury Prevention, Management of Non-communicable Diseases, and Prevention of Non-communicable Diseases.

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Abbreviations

CCT	Conditional Cash Transfers
ECD	Early Child Development
ECDI	Early Child Development Index
EDI	Early Development Instrument
ICF-CY	International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health for Children and Youth
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

1. Introduction

Rationale for the meeting

There has been substantial progress in reducing global child mortality, with a 41% decline in the under-five mortality rate since 1990. However, for children that survive, exposure to the multiple risks that threaten their survival prevents them from meeting their development potential. It is estimated that annually over 200 million children have significantly impaired growth and development. Those who experience low birth-weight, poor nourishment, illness, disabilities or inadequate psychosocial care are at particular risk. These risks are compounded by social determinants like poverty, the absence of water and sanitation, environmental influences such as noise, stress and pollution, poor parental education, maternal depression, violence, and conflict. The long-term effects of these risks on adult health and human capital are profound. Interventions that optimize children's developmental trajectories not only enable young children to survive and thrive, but also benefit human capital formation by: (1) improvement of cognitive, social, emotional and behavioural development favouring creativity and productivity; (2) improvement of long term health outcomes and; (3) reduction of health and socio-economic inequalities.

The early childhood years provide an important window of opportunity to build a strong foundation for future development. Young children have maximum plasticity of neuronal systems; they are not only vulnerable to environmental influences, but also capable of benefitting from interventions that mitigate risk and promote capacity and resilience. Interventions to address health, nutrition and provision of safe physical, chemical and biological environments can be delivered alongside interventions that support caregivers to provide a stable, warm and engaged family environment for learning. Adopting a life course approach is essential to provide young children with the best start in life. Helping adolescents to adopt healthy lifestyles and prepare for parenthood, as well as ensuring that adolescents, women and men receive preconception and prenatal

care will also benefit healthy early development for the next generation.

Health services have an important contribution to make in promoting and supporting early child development (ECD). Contacts with health services offer opportunities to promote healthy development and identify children with developmental difficulties in order to provide them with appropriate services. However, implementation and the evaluation of ECD programmes at scale have been limited, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

The post-MDG agenda demands a place for ECD at the centre of the human development approach. Much more has yet to be learned in order to move forward the ECD agenda, and the World Health Organization (WHO) can help to identify a global agenda and contribute through its normative strengths. The purpose of this meeting was therefore to bring together experts in the field to identify research needs for evidence-based interventions, to standardize and develop consensus on methods of assessment of ECD, and to establish a collaborative commitment to promoting universal access to ECD interventions.

Objectives

Four key objectives were identified for the meeting:

1. to describe the state-of-the-art evidence and promising ongoing research on pathways and factors that influence children's development;
2. to share evidence of effective interventions to promote development in early childhood using a life course approach;
3. to review indicators and tools for developmental assessment, and methods for improving the epidemiological information around ECD;
4. to learn from the experiences of implementing effective ECD programmes at scale, and to discuss translational issues for low- and middle-income countries to deliver integrated services at high levels of coverage.

The meeting set out to achieve three expected outcomes: (1) to identify priority actions for implementation and research in each of the four identified objectives; (2) to consider a way forward for harmonization of definitions around ECD; and (3) to follow up on the meeting recommendations and increase investment in ECD in partnership with stakeholders. The discussions were informed by four background papers, namely on influences on ECD and the life course, interventions to promote ECD, measurement of ECD, and a review of large scale implementation programmes in high-income countries that can inform scale up in low- and middle-income countries.

The meeting participants included representatives from WHO, international agencies, foundations and academia (see Annex 2 for the list of participants).

Declaration of interest

All meeting participants were required to declare their potential conflicts of interests. Dr Mark Hanson declared he had a conflicting interest by having accepted research funding from private companies including the food industry. This was carefully considered by the Secretariat and it was decided that there was no conflict with regards to the scope and objectives of the meeting. All other meeting participants declared no conflict of interest.

Report content

This report contains a synthesis of the issues raised in the presentations, discussions and working groups. It concludes with the key messages and future steps for the ECD strategy agenda for action by WHO in partnership with global stakeholders.

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