



# INVESTING IN YOUNG CHILDREN: THE SABER SYSTEMS APPROACH

Among the various investments in human capital that countries can make, those related to early childhood development (ECD) may have the largest returns later in life (e.g., Heckman, 2008; Naudeau et al., 2011; Walker et al., 2011; Engle et al., 2011; World Bank, 2012; Denboba et al., 2014). The rate of return on investments in ECD depends on a number of factors, including the focus, length, and quality of an ECD program. But these rates of return have been shown to be as high as 17:1 (Heckman, 2008). By one estimate, increasing preschool enrollment to 50 percent in low- and middle-income countries could result in additional lifetime earnings ranging from \$15 billion to \$34 billion (Engle et al., 2011).

During a child's early years, there are four critical domains of development: physical, cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional. Neurological studies have shown that synapses develop rapidly during a child's first few years, forming the basis of cognitive and emotional functioning. Adequate nutrition and stimulation, especially during a child's first 1,000 days, play a critical role in brain development. Malnutrition in the early years not only leads to poor physical growth, but can also impede brain development—it is linked with delayed cognitive development and low academic achievement throughout a child's life. By contrast, early investments that reduce the risk of malnutrition can have long-term impacts on the individual, the community, and

society as a whole. Similarly, early childhood education provides building blocks to ensure that children learn the skills necessary to succeed throughout life, from primary school through tertiary education and into the labor market.

## Challenges to Investing in Young Children

While developing countries have expanded access to ECD services in the past decade, many still face major challenges, and investments in ECD remain low in most low- and middle-income countries. This is in part because policies and programs related to ECD are complex and managed by multiple ministries, including those in charge of education, nutrition, health care, and child and social protection. This complexity often leads to a lack of

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coordination of ECD interventions across sectors, among implementing agencies, and at the level of service delivery.

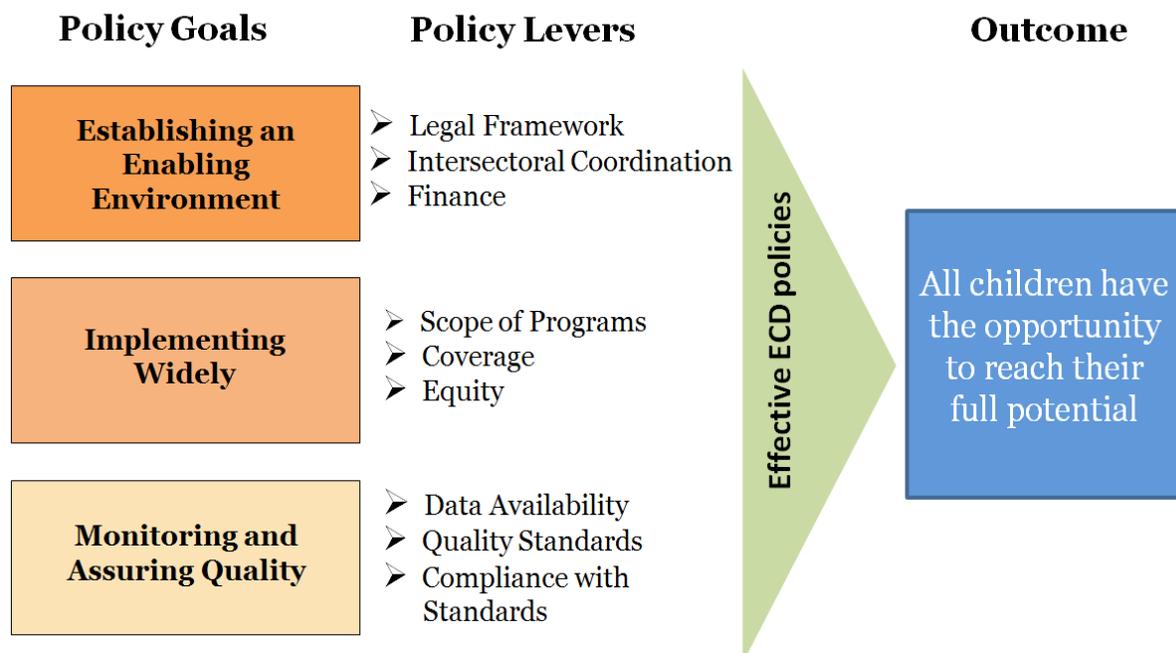
Particularly for poor and marginalized populations, access to ECD services remains a challenge. And when access is available, the quality of ECD services is typically limited, especially for the poor. In many countries, a large proportion of ECD services are provided by the private sector, which increases the importance of well-defined and enforced monitoring and quality assurance systems. While there are many small, successful pilot programs, taking such interventions to scale at a national level is difficult, in part because many countries lack the legal and regulatory framework needed to support comprehensive ECD provision. A lack of sufficient fiscal resources in national or state budgets is also a common challenge, along with the absence of other financing systems. Finally, interventions are also not usually fully aligned with strategic priorities, due to either the limits of policy planning or divergent management mechanisms.

## Assessing ECD Policies and Programs: The SABER-ECD Tool

To help countries assess their education policies in a systematic way and achieve the ultimate goal of learning for all, the World Bank launched the Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) initiative. SABER allows countries to conduct a thorough inventory of their education policies and institutions based on global best practices. It produces data on these policies and institutions, analyzes and evaluates their quality, and provides decision makers and stakeholders at all levels with a tool for structured and effective policy dialogue.

Within this initiative, education policy domains have been identified to cover the span of the education systems from early childhood to entry into the workforce. SABER-ECD helps policymakers identify gaps and areas in need of policy attention to promote healthy and robust development for all children. Specifically, the SABER-ECD tool assesses a country's ECD policies and programs along three core policy goals that

Figure 1. SABER-ECD Policy Goals and Levers



Source: Neuman and Devercelli (2013).

have a direct impact on children's early development: (1) *Establishing an Enabling Environment*; (2) *Implementing Widely*; and (3) *Monitoring and Assuring Quality* (see Figure 1). In turn, each of these goals has three specific policy levers through which countries can build effective ECD policies to give all children the opportunity to reach their full potential.

- ***Establishing an Enabling Environment.*** This is the foundation for effective ECD policies. A country's enabling environment can encourage diverse participation and service uptake, promote efficient service delivery, and ensure adequate financing and institutional capacity. In the context of ECD, establishing an enabling environment entails developing an adequate legal and regulatory framework to support ECD provision. Coordination within sectors and across institutions is necessary to ensure effective service delivery. Finally, the availability of adequate fiscal resources and systems to allocate financing will determine the extent to which the enabling environment supports the ECD system.
- ***Implementing Widely.*** This goal refers to the scope of existing programs offered and their coverage level, as well as the extent to which access to these programs is equitable and children's holistic development is addressed. A robust ECD system should include policies that support programs in all essential sectors and target all beneficiary groups (e.g., pregnant women, infants and toddlers, preschoolers, and caregivers). Finally, particular attention must be paid to children from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds as well as those with special needs, so that all children have equitable access to the programs being offered.
- ***Monitoring and Assuring Quality.*** This goal refers to the availability of data and systems to monitor ECD outcomes, the development of quality standards for ECD service delivery, and the establishment of systems to monitor compliance with these standards. Under political and budget pressures, policymakers may expand access to ECD services at the expense of quality. This could jeopardize the very benefits that

policymakers hope children will gain through preschool and other ECD interventions. Sound evidence is required to inform policy decisions. Impact evaluations suggest that the benefits from ECD interventions are large, but if programs are of poor quality, the benefits may be negligible and the programs may even be detrimental. Furthermore, in many countries, a large proportion of ECD services are provided by the private sector; for these systems, well-defined and enforced monitoring and quality assurance systems are critical to ensure that standards for service delivery are met.

## Implementing the Tool: Stocktaking, Analysis, and Policy Options

A methodology has been developed to analyze and compare ECD policy development across countries based on the review of the evidence provided in Neuman and Devercelli (2013). The application process of SABER-ECD includes three key steps: taking stock of existing ECD policies and programs in a country, analyzing the data collected, and preparing a summary country report with suggested policy options based on the country's context.

- ***Stocktaking.*** Two instruments are used for data collection: (1) The SABER Questionnaire on ECD Policies gathers information on existing policies, institutional arrangements, finance levels, coordination mechanisms, and quality assurance frameworks within each of the relevant sectors. The instrument also collects additional supporting documents to verify the information obtained via interviews; (2) The SABER Questionnaire on ECD Programs is used to develop a list of ECD interventions within the relevant sectors (health, nutrition, education, and social and child protection) and gather in-depth information on the coverage of key interventions in each sector. Within each sector, standardized information is gathered on interventions, including the primary service provided, target beneficiary, number



of beneficiaries, geographic scope of coverage, operating budget, per capita cost, evidence of impact or evaluation, quality assurance mechanisms, pre-service and in-service training requirements for personnel, source of finance, and institution managing the intervention. In addition, data from a range of surveys are used to inform ECD coverage. The survey data sources include the World Bank’s Women, Business and the Law database, UNICEF’s Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, UNESCO’s Institute for Statistics database, WHO’s Global Database on Anemia, and WHO’s Global Health Expenditure Database. Table 1 lists some of the indicators on which data are collected through the tool for the purpose of assessing the level of policy development of countries (additional indicators are also collected).

- **Analysis.** In many countries, ECD interventions are not coordinated across sectors, either among implementing agencies or at the level of service delivery. Interventions also are not often aligned with policies, due to either the limits of policy planning or divergent management mechanisms. When analyzing the data collected, countries are assessed according to a typology with four levels of policy development. Table 2 describes how country policies can evolve from the latent level to the advanced level for each policy goals.
- **Policy Options.** Based on the SABER-ECD typology, detailed information collected on ECD policies and programs, and regional and international comparisons, country-specific policy options are identified to inform ECD policy dialogue within each of the three ECD

**Table 1. SABER-ECD Policy Levers and Classification Rubric**

Policy Goals	Policy Levers	Scope of Indicators
Establishing an Enabling Environment	Legal Framework	The extent to which laws and regulations are in place to protect young children and promote healthy development.
	Coordination	Coordination across sectors, at the level of service delivery, mechanisms for coordination with non-state stakeholders and the existence of a strategy and institutional anchor.
	Finance	How financing is provided, transparency of the budget process, sustainability of revenue, mechanisms to transfer funding, and the relative burden of finance on the population.
Implementing Widely	Scope of Programs	The extent to which interventions target all relevant beneficiaries and are established in all essential areas of focus.
	Coverage	The coverage of essential interventions.
	Equity	Equity in providing services across regions and in urban-rural locations, regardless of a child’s socioeconomic status, gender, or special needs.
Monitoring and Assuring Quality	Data Availability	A country’s monitoring and evaluation system and ability to track key data accurately.
	Quality Standards	Quality standards for personnel, learning standards and curricula, infrastructure, service-delivery, and accreditation/registration.
	Compliance with Standards	The ability of the system to monitor and enforce compliance with established standards.

Source: Neuman and Devercelli (2013).

policy goals and associated levers. These policy options along with findings from the SABER-ECD analysis are presented in summary country reports that are available together with other materials on the SABER website, <http://saber.worldbank.org>.

strong and are able to learn and become productive citizens. When young children do not have healthy early childhood experiences, the impact on life outcomes can be severely detrimental. As countries around the world strive to ensure that all children reach their full potential, they can learn from each other how to design and implement effective ECD policies. SABER-ECD aims to contribute to this learning. As a diagnostic tool organized around three essential ECD policy goals that all countries should strive to meet – Establishing an Enabling Environment, Implementing Widely, and Monitoring and Assuring Quality – SABER-ECD can help countries measure their progress in designing and adopting policies to meet these goals.

## Helping Countries Design Policies to Invest in Young Children

The foundations for human development are laid in the early years. When young children are protected and receive adequate nutrition, stimulation, and health care, they grow

**Table 2. Typology of Levels of ECD Policy Development**

ECD Policy Goal	Level of Development			
	Latent ● ○ ○ ○	Emerging ● ● ○ ○	Established ● ● ● ○	Advanced ● ● ● ●
<b>Establishing an Enabling Environment</b>	Legal framework non-existent, ad-hoc financing, few institutions, low sectoral and inter-institutional coordination.	Minimal legal framework, few programs with sustained financing, low inter-institutional coordination, higher sectoral coordination.	ECD regulations in some sectors, many programs with sustained financing, functioning intra- and inter-institutional coordination.	Developed legal framework for ECD, sustained financing for attaining ECD goals, robust inter-institutional coordination.
<b>Implementing Widely</b>	Low coverage levels, pilot programs established in some sectors, high inequality in access and outcomes.	Coverage expanding but gaps remain, programs established in a few sectors, inequality in access and outcomes.	Near-universal coverage in some sectors, established programs in most sectors (health and nutrition, education, social protection), low inequality in access.	Universal coverage, with comprehensive strategies across sectors; integrated services for all children, some universally provided, some tailored to young children's unique needs.
<b>Monitoring and Assuring Quality</b>	Limited standards exist for provision of ECD services; only minimal measures of infant & child mortality reported.	Standards for ECD services exist in some sectors, no system to monitor compliance, increased information on ECD outcomes at the national level.	Standards for ECD services exist for most sectors; system in place to regularly monitor compliance; information on ECD outcomes at national, regional and local levels.	Standards exist for ECD services in all sectors; system in place to regularly monitor and enforce compliance; information on outcomes at national, regional, local and individual levels.



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