



## CONCEPT NOTE

### The First AfECN International Conference on Early Childhood Development

16<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> October, 2018 Safari Park Hotel NAIROBI, KENYA

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16<sup>th</sup> October: Side meetings for skills development

17<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> October: Main Conference

# Background

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Globally, 250 million (43%) children from low and middle-income countries are at risk of not achieving their developmental potential. Stunting and poverty in early childhood have been found to be major risk factors for poor development, resulting in cognitive and social-emotional deficits. An analysis of the stunting and poverty data from 141 low and middle-income countries in 2010 found that for majority of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa the prevalence of children at risk of poor development was 60%, the highest prevalence of poor development compared to any other region. For Africa, this represents a significant gap in human potential impacting the health, wealth and economic prosperity of African communities. Reducing poverty and stunting is a priority for enhancing the environments of young children in Africa to ensure they survive and thrive through adulthood to become productive members of society able to contribute to the growth and well being of their communities.

In the last decade there has been a proliferation of scientific evidence on child development and a global prioritisation of social and economic development issues such as poverty, hunger, health, education and gender equality. There is now growing evidence of the centrality of child development in addressing these challenges. Advancements in neurology have enhanced our understanding of early brain development. We now know that the period from conception to 3 years offers an unparalleled opportunity to shape the devel-

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oping brain. During this period brain connections form at a rate higher than any other period in the lifespan laying the structural foundation for the sequential progression of sensory-motor, cognitive, language, and social-emotional abilities. Research has also found that investments in early childhood programmes have a high rate of return (13.7%) with benefits in better education and health outcomes, lower crime and up to 25% higher individual earnings. We also know that early deficits are carried into subsequent generations resulting in an intergenerational cycle of diminished potential and persistent poverty.

At the global level, there has been an enhancement of commitments to social and economic development. Evidence of this is seen in the establishment global declarations and goals including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Millennium Development Goals (2000), and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. The SDGs have particularly made a significant contribution to raising awareness and calling for commitment to the early years by including Target 4.2 which proposes that “by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education”. Beyond Goal 4, we know that early childhood development (ECD) interventions encompass more than education and fostering the health, nutrition, nurturing care and protection also impacts other goals focused on poverty eradication, improving nutrition, healthy lives, gender equality and the promotion of peaceful lives.

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At the Continental level, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) promotes and protects the human rights and basic freedoms of African children recognising that children require specific safe guards and care. Central to this charter are children's rights to life, expression, protection, education and physical, cognitive and social emotional development. Article 11 states that: every child has the right to an education, to develop his or her personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to the fullest potential. Building off these rights, the African Union developed Agenda 2063 "The Africa We Want" which is a 50-year strategy for an integrated, prosperous and peaceful continent with high quality growth and dynamic people. The aspirations outlined in agenda 2063 include a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development and an Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth and caring for children.

Achievement of the SDGs 2030 and Agenda 2063 cannot be completed without translating early childhood development research, policies and plans into actions at scale. Africa has seen tremendous improvements in the last decade. Technological advancements have been drivers of economic growth, job creation and social inclusion; more women are seeking employment and are being represented in governments; neonatal, child and maternal mortality rates have declined and agricultural productivity has increased. Despite these

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overall improvements, progress towards available employment opportunities, poverty reduction, food security and gender equality has been slow and there is significant variability at the sub-regional and country levels. An integration of the unique opportunities and challenges in Africa and the lessons learned from best practices in early childhood development globally is necessary for sustainable transformation of our environments into communities where children survive and thrive.

Earlier this year the WHO launched the Nurturing Care Framework to guide policy makers, public and private practitioners and families to utilise the latest evidence for a whole-society approach to protecting children from adversity and promoting physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. The components of the Nurturing Care Framework are good health; adequate nutrition; responsive care-giving; security and safety and opportunities for early learning. Enhancement of these key areas ensures optimal development of young children, and the well-being of communities. The Nurturing Care Framework further promotes cost effective strategies and approaches and proposes five strategic actions that seek to strengthen leadership: national service delivery systems and community services, empowerment of communities and families, continuous learning, monitoring implementation and accountability, as well as innovation.

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Encouraging nurturing environments will require a comprehensive and coordinated plan of action that can only be achieved through collaboration and partnerships across the spheres of influence in a child's life. We know that the environments where children grow, live and learn from conception are the most important for their development; however we also know that parents and caregivers are unable to provide nurturing environments without support from local, regional, national and international systems. Social, political and economic factors in an environment such as the allocation of resources, national policies and service delivery systems all influence the environment of a child. The work of non-state actors such as civil society, faith based organizations and development partners continue to play a major role in determining the environments in which young children grow and develop. This is especially so for the poor, vulnerable and marginalized children.

For Africa, partnerships and collaborations within nations, across regions and sectors are necessary for the enhancement of environments that support the health and well being of young children.

This conference aims to enhance existing linkages and build new partnerships and collaborations for the scale up of best practices in ECD that will hone the human potential of Africa's people and drive her into the 21st century.

For this inaugural conference AfECN aims to bring together over 500 participants from

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Africa and beyond including high level policy makers, civil society organizations, development partners, ECD professionals, academia, practitioners, private sector actors and human rights activists, all working to support early childhood development for enhanced social and economic development in Africa.



# Objectives

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The conference will serve as a platform for knowledge exchange and skills development with a strong focus on strengthening partnerships and building new collaborations to scale best practices in ECD that are culturally and contextually relevant for Africa now and the Africa we want by 2063.

Specifically the conference aims to:

- Launch the Nurturing Care Framework to strengthen global and regional advocacy for holistic approaches to ECD
- Champion and provide evidence for enhanced policy and programme development
- Promote effective practices in improving child outcomes
- Enhance skills development for tackling the challenges facing the well being of African children and communities
- Strengthen networks and partnerships for effective collaboration of stakeholders across sectors and regions



# Conference Sub-Themes and Format

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The conference sub themes are framed from the WHO Nurturing Care Framework on the understanding that the key to achievement of SDGs and Agenda 2063 require a holistic approach to supporting children, families and communities. Equally important are the modalities that support improved services and systems addressed under the systems strengthening sub theme. Presentations will be expected to explore nurturing care thematic areas and or the underlying modalities and systems that improve service delivery.

## A. Nurturing Care Themes

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1. *Good health* – health related systems and services that support the needs of young children from conception to age 8 and the physical and mental health of their caregivers. Particular interests include integration of ECD interventions within existing health service delivery systems and maternal mental health.
2. *Adequate nutrition* – development, delivery and access to adequate nutritional services for young children from conception to age 8 in Africa.
3. *Early learning* – challenges, new ideas and innovation in the development and delivery of quality formal and informal early learning environments.

Particular interests include children below 3 years of age and the integration of traditional systems, tools and resources.

4. *Safety and protection* – protection of young children from neglect, violence and maltreatment. Particular interests include children of refugees, and children facing conflict, effects of natural disasters or disease outbreak.
5. *Responsive caregiving* – the dynamic relationship between caregivers and young children from conception to age 8 and it's impact on child outcomes and caregiver's health and well being.

## **B. Systems Strengthening Themes**

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1. *Policy, advocacy and communication* – efforts to align the ECD agenda at the forefront of policy development and implementation in Africa
2. *Capacity building and effective implementation* – skills building and knowledge sharing to strengthen human resources and improving practice through leveraging other interventions and addressing challenges in quality provision of services.

3. *Research, innovation and monitoring and evaluation* – knowledge exchange, skills building, dissemination of novel ideas, including effective use of resources and standardisation of indicators for regional congruence of ECD.
4. *Resource mobilisation and sustainability* – efforts aimed to support economic, environmental, and social sustainability of ECD systems and services
5. *Partnership and networking* – collaborative efforts to enhance ECD

The conference will be formatted to include **a)** Pre-conference workshops for key side meetings and skills building activities **b)** Plenary sessions featuring key note speakers addressing the conference themes and sub themes **c)** Panel discussions with experts, regional and country representatives to collectively address issues and recommend solutions **d)** Round table discussions for focused discussion by specific interest groups, countries or issue areas and **e)** Paper, video and other interactive presentations accepted through AfECN's call for proposals.

## Expected Outcomes

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- A stronger ECD network for Africa committed to the social and economic development of Africa through early childhood development
- Enhanced understanding of evidenced based strategies in African contexts and the requirements for scale up.
- Increased commitment by policy makers, funding agencies, academia and practitioners to scale up of best practices in early childhood development in Africa

## Conference Host and Organisers

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The Government of Kenya is the host government for the International Conference on Early Childhood Development.



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