

Systems thinking as an approach to guide action and advocacy for ECD

Proposed learning session for the AfECN East Africa Regional Early Childhood Conference

Presenting organizations: Mathematica, the ECD Network for Kenya, KixiQuila Consultoria (Mozambique), Ifakara Health Institute (Tanzania)

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Timeframe: Two-hour workshop/learning session

Theme: Monitoring progress focusing on data/evidence generation, dissemination, and utilization

Brief excerpt:

All of us, from caregivers to frontline workers to ministers, and those from across the health, education, social welfare, and other sectors are part of an “ECD ecosystem,” and we all bring our own lived experiences, motivations, goals, measures of success, incentives, and constraints to our roles.

Understanding and leveraging the challenges and opportunities that result from the relationships between diverse actors plays a vital role in shaping whether and how policies, programs, and advocacy support or hinder progress towards nurturing care for all.

Join us for this exciting session where you will learn to use a systems diagnostic tool and create an ECD systems map! This workshop will provide participants with an opportunity to learn how to use systems thinking approaches to understand different aspects of the ECD systems in their respective countries. They will have an opportunity to create a systems map, complete selected portions of the first-of-its-kind “ECD Systems Diagnostic,” and explore how systems thinking can guide their efforts to strengthen the ecosystem and bring it closer to realizing the promise of nurturing care.

Longer abstract:

As part of the Hilton Foundation’s ECD in East Africa project, Mathematica developed an ECD Systems Diagnostic tool that is based on the Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) systems diagnostic. The RISE tool was designed to “facilitate and support government actors in selecting reforms that can improve learning outcomes” for children within education systems by analyzing the system as a set of interrelationships between government and nongovernmental actors across different sectors, each with their own roles and responsibilities, goals, resources available to achieve those goals, and performance metrics.

Mathematica adapted the RISE diagnostic tool to focus on ECD and extent to which the various systems that serve children aged 0-3 are oriented towards nurturing care for ECD. The resulting tool is designed to elicit the perspectives of stakeholders with lived experience in ECD-related systems, including the health, education, social protection, and other sectors. It comprises a series of “big-picture” reflection questions or prompts relevant to one or more relationships within the ECD system, each with a set of sub-questions

that probe in more concrete terms how relationships between actors are designed, and how they work in practice. The result of the systems diagnostic helps policymakers and other stakeholders understand the current state of the ECD system and plan strategies and policies accordingly.

We will conduct a workshop to teach the broader AfECN community how to use the systems diagnostic tool. The session will be facilitated by members of the ECD Systems evaluation team, including researchers from Kenya, Tanzania and Mozambique and the United States. The two-hour workshop will be broken into three main sessions:

- I. **Introduction of the systems diagnostic tool** (30 minutes)
- II. **Application of the tool** where facilitators will lead participants through a selection of questions from the systems diagnostics and encourage them to develop answers based on their professional and lived experience in their home countries. Participants will also have the opportunity to create visual maps of the systems in their countries to help visualize the relationships among actors (45 minutes)
- III. **Discussion session:** Session leaders will facilitate a discussion of their responses and encourage them to reflect on what they learn both about their own country and about similarities and differences in responses between individuals from the same country who may have different lived experiences and between different countries. (45 minutes)

Participants in the learning session will gain in-depth experience using the systems diagnostic tool and gain a deeper understanding of the key features of the ECD systems in their own countries. They will also have an opportunity to discuss the implications of systems thinking for their ongoing programmatic or advocacy work. The session will also inform planned revisions to the tool to improve its utilization by a more diverse audience.