Strengthening Childcare Systems: Concept Note
Eastern Africa Early Childhood Regional Conference
March 2024

Background

Availability and accessibility of high quality childcare plays a critical role in supporting children's developmental outcomes. Evidence highlights that accessible childcare can improve women's participation in the workforce and have positive impacts on inclusive economic growth and development[1]. However, despite its many benefits, there are several challenges in the equitable provision of childcare resulting in millions of children lacking access to high quality care.

Current childcare systems do not meet the varying needs of children[2]. Children develop in the context of the ecosystem around them; however current childcare solutions do not holistically consider the needs of families and communities. Childcare providers are also unsupported, severely underpaid, under-recognized and do not receive sufficient training. Further, different movements that advocate for childcare (e.g., labor movements, women's rights movements) work in silos that further hamper quality of care. There is a critical need to understand the different parts of the system and how they interact to arrive at a shared understanding of how to bridge gaps to elevate and address the needs of children, their caregivers, and their families.

To address these challenges, ECDAN, NurtureFirst and GDI in collaboration with country partners SmartStart and Spark Health Africa propose a learning session focused on strengthening childcare systems using systems thinking tools.

Applications of systems thinking to childcare

Systems thinking offers an innovative approach to addressing these challenges. Broadly speaking, systems thinking helps to look holistically at a complex system, break it down into its component parts, understand their interactions and interconnectedness, and leverage this understanding to achieve large scale change[3]. To meaningfully shift the inequitable access to early opportunities requires a paradigm

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[1] United Nations Children's Fund. Childcare and working families: New opportunities or missing link, 2019

[2] Devercelli, A. and Beaton-Day, F. 2020. Better Jobs and Brighter Futures: Investing in Childcare to Build Human Capital. Washington DC. World Bank.

[3] Kroelinger, CD, Rankin KM, Chambers DA et al. Using the Principles of Complex Systems Thinking and Implementation Science to Enhance Maternal and Child Health Program Planning and Delivery. Maternal Child Health J 2014;18: 1560–1564. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10995-014-1586-9

shift from intervention thinking to systems thinking with greater involvement and ownership of communities[4] to jointly identify and understand systems barriers and enablers alongside an ecosystem of relevant stakeholders.

Applying systems thinking to childcare can help develop a shared understanding of and bring more coherence to the childcare system by recognizing the various forces and dynamics that impact the quality of childcare systems, identifying the interactions among childcare relevant sub-systems, and supporting an shared understanding of the role and interconnectedness of different actors. It can also help identify high-impact leverage and entry points in the system to eventually improve design and implementation of services and support policy advocacy.

Learning session objectives

The main objective of the learning session will be to unearth promising systems approaches to strengthening childcare systems with a focus on the childcare workforce. By the end of the session, participants will,
- Understand the need for systems thinking in childcare.
- Have a better aligned and shared understanding of the childcare system.
- Learn about promising systems approaches to address pressing issues in childcare.
- Develop novel ideas on how to strengthen childcare systems including issues of workforce development, governance, and caregiver support in their contexts.

Learning session structure and format

Recognising the potential of systems thinking to improve child development outcomes, the session will explore opportunities presented by systems approaches to advance various forms of childcare in both formal and informal settings (e.g., center based, home-based) targeting children aged 0-8. The session will explore what a childcare system is and why we require a systems approach to childcare in the African context.

Develop a shared understanding of the childcare system

Childcare systems are complex because of the multisectoral nature of the work. Systems maps are a prominent tool that can visually represent a system and its components to bring greater coherence amongst relevant stakeholders. Participants will engage with a childcare systems map to explore the complexity of a childcare system and reflect on how the map can be used as a tool to identify enablers, inhibitors and leverage points in their respective contexts through a hands-on workshop.

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[4] World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, World Bank Group. Nurturing care for early childhood development: A framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential. World Health Organization; 2018

Lessons on designing systems change strategies in childcare

Participants will have the opportunity to hear compelling country examples from Africa-based childcare organisations including NurtureFirst, SmartStart, and Spark Health Africa on how they employ systems approaches in their work, their promising practices and lessons learned especially as it relates to the design process, as well as strategies for building ownership and sustainability by involving those most affected by inadequacies in the system. The session will also deep-dive into strengths and needs-based workforce capacity strengthening practices that centers the lived experience of providers and focuses on supporting them to provide quality childcare services.

Applying a systems approach in the African context

A multi-stakeholder panel including representatives from African Union States will reflect on how systems strengthening approaches in childcare can be bolstered in the African context and discuss the role of policymakers in creating enabling environments to improve access to quality childcare services.

Targeted participants

This session will benefit various stakeholders involved in the childcare ecosystem including representatives from government, civil society, academia,and the private sector. We also welcome the participation of donors, frontline workers and caregivers to enrich the session with their perspectives and experiences.