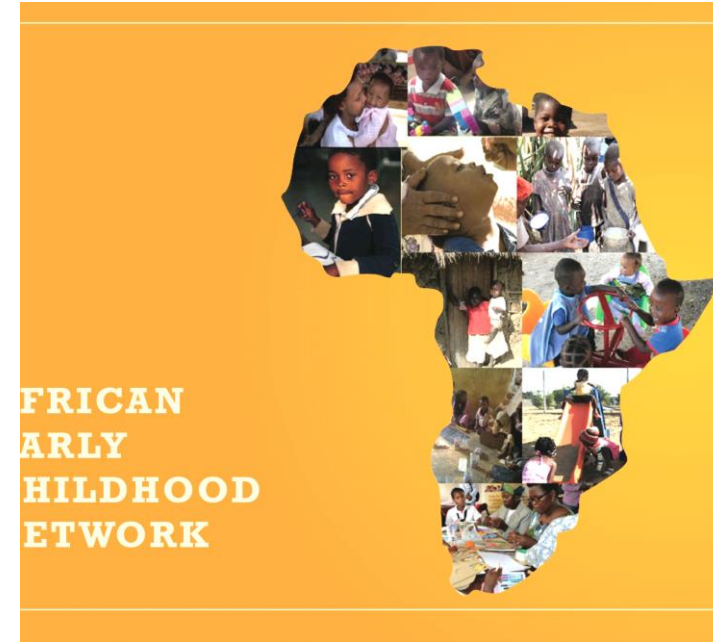




**AfECN**  
Africa Early Childhood Network

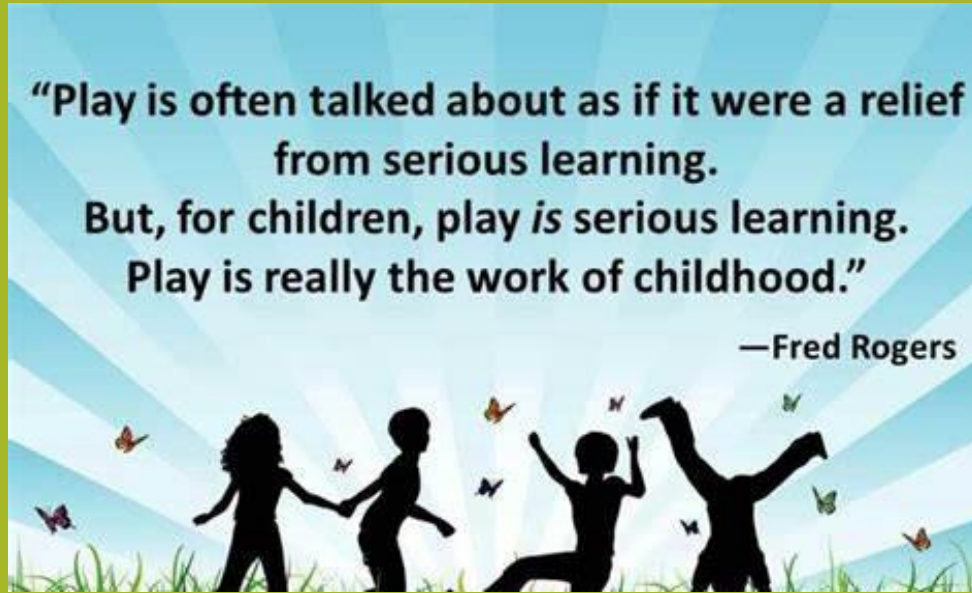


# THE RIGHT TO PLAY: A RIGHTS-BASED SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IMPERATIVE

Presentation: Patricia Martin on behalf of the AfECN 25 November 2020

**“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief  
from serious learning.  
But, for children, play *is* serious learning.  
Play is really the work of childhood.”**

**—Fred Rogers**



# THE RIGHT TO PLAY

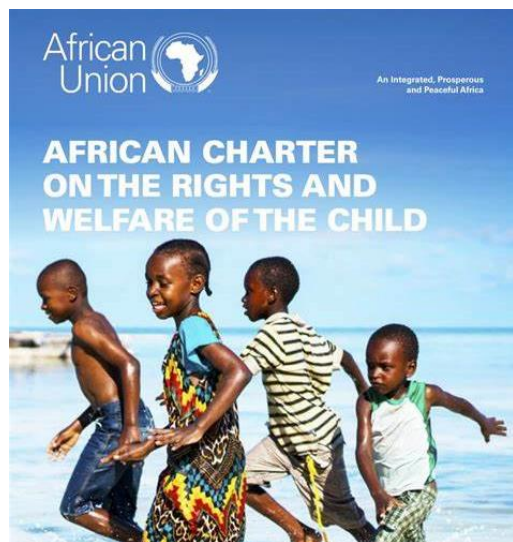
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Not a matter of child's play

# A rights-based sustainable development essential

- Play is a right in and of itself
- But also a critical gateway right
  - Essential to the realisation of a number other rights key to the right to develop
- For this reason it is a building block of sustainable development of countries and the Continent
- Realised through responsibilities by
  - Parents and caregivers as the primary duty-bearers
  - Government must create enabling environments for play





# An African rights-based sustainable development imperative

Recognised as a fundamental right by the ACRWC and the CRC

**All children have “the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.”**

Recognised as key to child and national development in Africa’s Agenda 2063 and Africa’s Agenda for Children 2040

Continent’s road map for achieving inclusive, sustainable development

Grounded in development of human capital

Notably its biggest asset – its 50 billion children (by 2050)

Through realisation of the rights in the ACRWC – including the right to play



# THE CASE FOR SIGNIFICANT PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN PLAY

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Play is one of the most important building blocks of human capital development – and hence sustainable development

# BENEFITS OF PLAY

## Bigger Brain Size Better Early Development

In studies using rats, playing leads to bigger brains. In human studies, playing enhances children's adjustment, language, and social and emotional stability by 33% to 67%.



## Smarter, Faster Learning And Better Memory

In one study, children offered toys in infancy have higher IQ at age 3 and again at age 4.5.

## More Creative

Free play enhances divergent thinking. Pretend play requires imagining and encourages creativity.



## Better Communication, Vocabulary And Language

Playing, especially pretend play, improves preschoolers' speaking and understanding.

## Greater Impulse Control And Emotion Regulation

Self-regulation is essential for a child's academic as well as social success. Kids who pretend play have better self-regulation skills.



## Greater Social Competence, More Empathy And Happier

Play provides opportunities for children to learn social interaction. Whilst playing together, children learn to cooperate, follow rules, develop self-control, and generally get along with other people.

Playful children are happier, better adjusted, more co-operative and more popular with their peers than those who play less.

## The UN's General Comment 17: The right to play - stresses that

- *Play is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood, as well as an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development.*

## The WHO and UNICEF's Nurturing Care Framework For Early Childhood Development

- Translates accumulated evidence into a policy framework for realising optimal early development as the foundation of human capital
- Play – from birth – is key to the optimal cognitive, social and emotional development of children
- Development requires nurturing care and play is key to nurturing care
- *Scientific findings from neuroscience and developmental psychology show that from the first months, quality time with the baby – including smiling, touching, talking, storytelling, listening to music, sharing and reading books, and engaging in play – builds neural connections that strengthen the child's brain*
- It is an essential element of two of the 5 nurturing care domains
  - Responsive caregiving
  - Opportunities for early learning

# Who is responsible?

Primary duty bearer – parents and caregivers - as in the first duty bearers

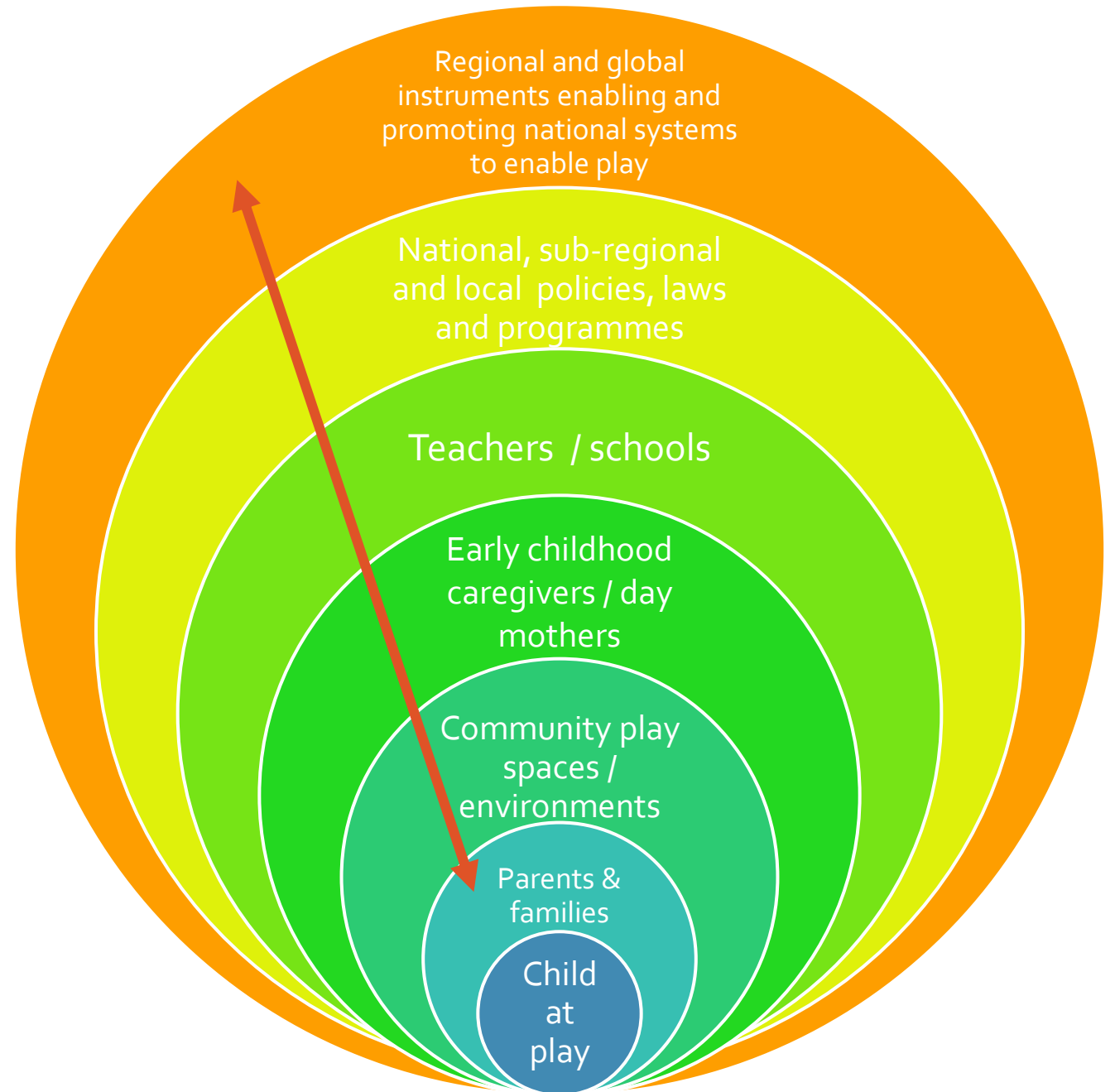
Caregivers across caregiving continuum must provide a safe and nurturing, developmentally supportive play environment and interactions

BUT

Government has a prior duty to enable nurturing environments across the caregiving continuum to enable play

AND

Treaty and development bodies should enable and hold governments to account for enabling play-based nurturing environments



# What are government's responsibilities?

- Because play is a right, because it is important to the development of young children, and therefore key to national and regional development
- Governments are duty-bound to take several implementation measures to respect, protect, promote and ultimately ensure fulfilment of the right
- They must report on it, and treaty bodies should provide direction for strengthening implementation
- **It is however one of the most misunderstood and neglected rights**
- Governments are failing to fulfil their obligations in relation to the right to play
- Treaty bodies like the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child are not holding governments to account
- Review of state party reports and concluding observations reveal
  - Reports that are very thin on the measures to support play and focus very much on safe play and sports facilities for children of school-going age
  - In communities, play and cultural activities at school and sport in terms of infrastructure
- Not addressed in either as a rights across the life course with responsibilities to support families – as the most crucial play facilitator - in the earliest years by strengthening the enabling care environment in the home and community programmes and spaces





UNITED NATIONS

GENERAL COMMENT NO.17



**NURTURING CARE**  
FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

### Three key documents clarify government's responsibilities

- UN Committees General Comment 7 and 17 - the right to ECD and the Right to play
- The Nurturing Care Framework

### UN GC's require that Governments:

- Ensure universal and equal enjoyment of the right
- Respect the right: "refrain from interfering directly or indirectly, in the enjoyment of the right"
- Protect the right: "take steps to prevent third parties from interfering with the right"
- Fulfill the right: take all "necessary legislative, administrative, judicial, budgetary, promotional and other measures" to make available all "necessary services, provision and opportunities" necessary for full enjoyment of the right by all children.

The Nurturing Care Framework explains further: Governments have a duty to enable nurturing care through play by integrating it into a public ECD system that

- Provides all parents and caregivers with the support they need to provide play-based nurturing care from birth across the life course of the young child
- Provide targeted measures to overcome the risks and challenges to providing play-based nurturing care
- To reach the most vulnerable

# Government's responsibilities

To create the enabling conditions for all families - parents and caregivers - to provide play-based nurturing care that promotes well-being and development



Through a public ECD system that secures sustained support and services for enabling play-based nurturing care for all caregivers and children from birth across the life course to maximise opportunities and address risks for most vulnerable

Policies /laws

Adequate programmes that cover all five domains

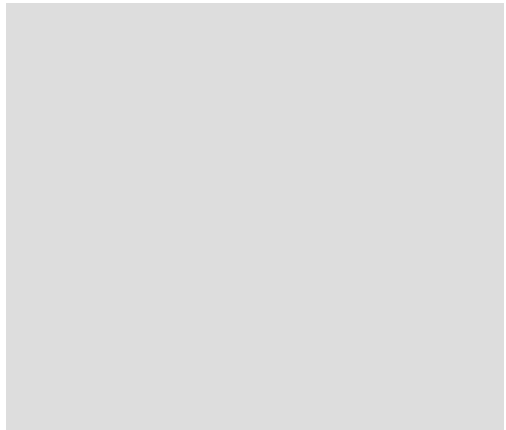
Human resources

Infrastructure

Financial resources

Monitoring, quality improvement and reporting

Leadership, management and governance



# Key risks

## Poor understanding and recognition of the importance and value of the right to play

- Many adults, including parents, educators and policy makers see play as a “frivolous or unproductive activity”
- Certain forms of play, such as competitive game sports are valued more highly than other forms of play that are equally important for the child’s development.
- Especially in the earliest years - misunderstanding the play is about relationships and interactions between child and caregiver
- Doesn’t need equipment and infrastructure

## Environmental hazards

- Polluted water; open sewer systems, overcrowded cities, uncontrolled traffic; poor street lighting and congested streets; inadequate public transport; lack of safe local play areas, green spaces and cultural facilities
- High levels of crime and violence, community unrest, child trafficking and the high levels of violence against children, especially girls
- Increasing levels of urbanisation mean that children are no longer able to access and play freely in natural environments.



## Pressure for educational achievement

- Growing pressure on educators and children to improve the quality of teaching and learning that takes place in early learning centres and schools.
- This has seen a shift in emphasis on formal learning – not play-based learning - in the classroom and not the playground.

## Overly-structured and programmed schedules

- Parents, caregivers, early childhood development, educational and care institutions increasingly regulate children's activities and programmes. This results in overly-structured programmes.

Especially  
vulnerable groups

**CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY**

**CHILDREN LIVING IN RURAL AREAS**

**CHILDREN IN OVERCROWDED URBAN AREAS**

**CHILDREN IN CRIME-RIDDEN COMMUNITIES**

**CHILDREN IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES**

**CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES**

**CHILDREN LIVING IN INSTITUTIONS**

# What should the system look like?



Policies and laws – national and sectoral – that mandate and obligate state-wide realisation and protection of the right to play as an early and national development imperative



Comprehensive integrated programmes that provide age-appropriate combinations of supportive services to enable all - and address risks to play-based nurturing care – especially for vulnerable groups



Adequate financial, human and infrastructure resourcing policies, strategies and provisioning to support play-based planning, implementation at scale, quality, sustainability, coordination and management



Data collection, monitoring, analysis, reporting – that leads to improvement in play-based planning and measurement of impact



National leadership and coordination that secures state-wide prioritisation of play-based development

# Who is responsible and what should be done?

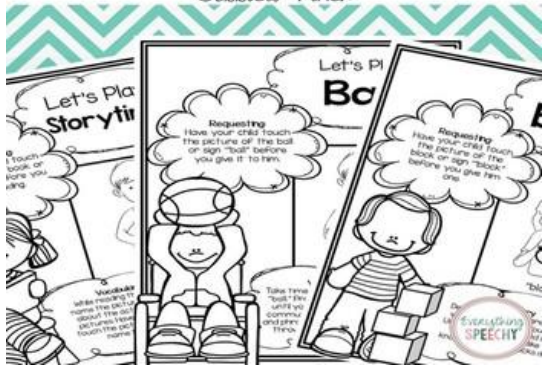


- **Regional guidance and direction**
  - ACERWC – should develop a General Comment on Play
  - Appoint a Special rapporteur on ECD and play-based development
  - Develop reporting guidelines on play
- **National policies and law**
  - ECD policies that integrate play as a central driver
  - Child-care and protection policies that place play at the centre
  - Play-based early education policies, curriculum statements
  - Standards for play-based developmentally supportive care environments
  - Laws obligating and regulating play in alternative care settings
  - Family support policies
  - Human settlement policies and strategies – recognise and advance playful environments
  - Environmental health policies
  - Local government plans and policies that enable play in communities and caregiving settings



# LET'S PLAY!

Caregiver Handouts for  
Beginning Communicators  
Jessica Finch



## Programmes that enable all and overcome risks and challenges

Across the life course, age-appropriate support, starting from birth

Parenting support programmes that include education and material support for promoting play from birth

Formal / structured ECD programmes of support on importance of play and how to support it

Day mothers

ECD playgroups

Target vulnerable groups with appropriate targeting, delivery and defined support and service modalities

## Develop human resources for planning, provision, monitoring and quality improvement

In health

In human settlements and environment

In local government

In early learning

## Infrastructure and equipment

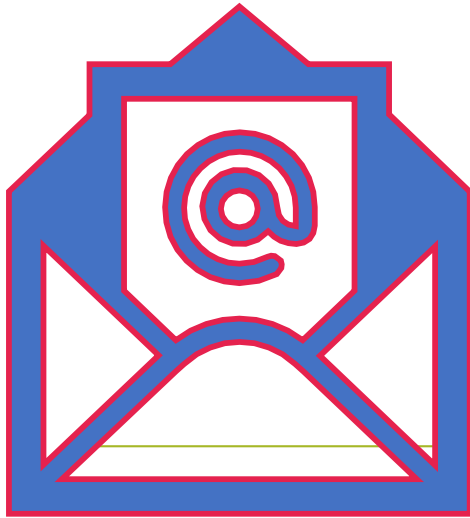
Safety and minimum provisioning standards

Safe play spaces

## Increased financial investments to support the whole system

Monitor and improve quality through quality improvement frameworks





# THANK YOU

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