Closure

Summary notes for Day 1: Situation analysis and population level measurement in the afternoon, and Day 2, a morning session on Countdown and ECD Policies

The situation of young children in Eastern and Southern Africa:

The region made tremendous progress in maternal and child survival over the past three decades. Several low-income countries reduced under-five mortality by more than 75 percent since 1990, a remarkable achievement by any standard, paving the way for others. Despite some consistent yet slow progress, one in three children (or 26 million) have stunted growth. Only four in ten children receive early stimulation and responsive care at home, and one out of three children have access to ECE services – this is marked by significant disparities, with poor children from rural areas falling behind. The global and regional learning crisis among children living, when 9 out of 10 children at age 10 cannot read or write a simple sentence, is rooted in limited access to early learning opportunities, at home, or in the community and school settings.

 Using the ECDI measure of child development we found that two-thirds of the children in the region are developmentally on track. Far too few children are thriving because of poor health, inadequate nutrition, exposure to stress, a lack of early stimulation, and limited opportunities for early learning. They are not thriving in the crucial first 1,000 days when the foundations for healthy, lifelong physical growth and mental development are laid.

Population-level measurements

Early Child Development (ECD) measurement serves different purposes (global monitoring, programme evaluation, individual screening, etc.) so need to ask some key questions from the outset (why, who, what, and how) to guide decisions in selecting the right ECD measurement approach and the tool. UNICEF, WHO, and WB have all developed and validated separate tools to measure ECD outcomes, but a key difference is in the age ranges covered. Together they provide the approach to measure ECD from 0-6 years.

Global monitoring and reporting within the context of the SDGs is attached to some specific conditions. For this specific purpose, the ECDI2030 is the approved measure and is being used for monitoring and reporting on SDG 4.2.1. If a country is considering ECD measurement at the population level now or in the next few years, the only tool that is currently available for integration in MICS and DHS is the ECDI2030.

Our joint vision is to explore linkages across measurement tools to enhance ECD monitoring from 0-6 years, increase the quality of existing measurement efforts, provide guidance to countries on joint implementation of the tools, and facilitate scale-up of ECD measurement globally. The 3 agencies have articulated a roadmap for collaboration in order to achieve this vision.

ECD Policies

For children to develop to their full potential, caregivers need to have time and resources to provide nurturing care. This is facilitated by enabling environments of policies, services, community, and family.

ECD policies are in place in 13 countries, though, some policies are outdated (over 10 years old). In five countries - Malawi, Uganda, Zambia, Madagascar, and Zimbabwe – new ECD policies are being developed. In the new set of policies, national ownership is enhanced, governance, coordination, accountability, and monitoring are improved, and evidence and costing are determining priority actions. Some of the critical gaps in ECD policies are related to early learning and responsive caregiving. The golden standard is to ensure at least one year of pre-primary services, free of charge. In our region, preschool education is still not compulsory in most of the countries, and moreover, it is not free of charge. Family-friendly policies, policies such as minimum wage, paid parental leave, breastfeeding breaks at work, and affordable childcare - that allow parents more time and resources to provide responsive caregiving, are still not in place in most of countries.

ECD financing is the major bottleneck in creating an enabling environment for young children to thrive. Frontloaded expenditure in children is the smart thing to do! The highest return to investment is coming from investing as early as possible, in disadvantaged families. Currently, the investment can be summarized into – *too little, too late* – or so-called, backloaded expenditure.

Gains in reducing child mortality provide a vivid example of what can be achieved when action is driven by high-level political commitment and stakeholders are mobilized for effective implementation at scale. Scaling up ECD is far more complex - the complexity of the early childhood agenda means that substantial progress from surviving to thriving will require an equally uncompromising commitment, strong science to guide the implementation, and sustained community engagement.

The SDGs, a road map for creating a better future, recognize the link between early childhood development and equity, productivity, wealth creation, sustainable growth, and a more peaceful future. With this global agenda comes the responsibility to act. We have the science, knowledge, and experience. Now, it is up to us to invest in children's brains and their futures.
We need to increase investment in early childhood development, starting with the youngest and the most deprived.

Commitment for action

- Complete the meeting report within two months (jointly with co-organizers)
- Support countries to incorporate ECDI2030 into DHS and national surveys, and ensure technical support in the training, analysis, and report writing
- Provide technical assistance to a group of countries – Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Burundi, and others – to develop ECD dashboard
- Provide technical assistance to countries – Angola, Madagascar, and others – to develop ECD policy
- Finalize and launch the Situation Analysis of Young Children in Eastern and Southern Africa
- Facilitate meetings with country teams to check up on the progress of country actions/commitments related to ECD measurement.