

## A foundation for sustainable development: advancing towards a new era for young children and families

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**Nearly 50 years ago, in 1966, the Bernard van Leer Foundation funded its first major project aimed at enhancing the development of young children: the Project for Early Childhood Education (PECE), which was initiated in Jamaica. Funds were made available to the University of the West Indies to improve Basic Schools – nursery schools set up and run by the community (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 1999). It is also five decades this year since the United States first started its Head Start programme, with the aim of providing comprehensive services to support the development of young children living in poverty and engage and empower their families. In the intervening half-century, knowledge and understanding of the importance of the early years to long-term health, education and behaviour have grown dramatically. This issue of *Early Childhood Matters* celebrates the advances made over those past five decades, and calls for a new era, a global movement to bring services for young children and families to scale.**

As the world moves beyond 2015, and towards implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, what has become increasingly clear is the importance of early child development to the long-term success of families, communities, countries and a peaceful and sustainable world. It is estimated that that over 200 million children under 5 are not reaching their developmental potential based on indicators of poverty and early childhood stunting (Grantham-McGregor *et al.*, 2007). Growing up in poverty, in poor health, being exposed to family and environmental stress, exposure to violence and lack of early learning experiences, and other risk factors lead to social and economic consequences that stand in the way of achieving prosperity and economic development (Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development and Development and Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2014).

Yet there is another way. We now have increasing evidence that investing in young children and families can lead to better outcomes for the current and future generations. The series of articles presented in this

publication reflect the innovations that have emerged across the early years and demonstrate the need to continue to build capacity. It is only by building on the evidence and championing change that we can bring early childhood interventions to scale for all children and families, particularly those most vulnerable.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Bernard van Leer's son, Oscar, set out to shape the objectives of the Foundation that had been set up by his father. In 1963, while on his way to America, Oscar van Leer read an article by the New York developmental psychologist Martin Deutsch, Professor of Early Childhood Studies at the University of New York, who had been doing research on young children. His research, along with other studies, found that disadvantages afflicting many children from birth meant the waste of an enormous amount of talent (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 1999). However, early intervention could change this trajectory.

In many ways these early researchers, including those writing about early attachment and other developmental issues, were pioneers in what has become the early childhood movement.

### In Section I of this issue

Given the subsequent advances in scientific understanding of early development, we start this issue with an article by Johanna Bick and Charles A. Nelson (pages 10–13) on what the latest brain research tells us about the effects of early adverse experiences. In this important article, the authors provide us with basic principles of **brain development** and explain why early experiences have such a powerful role in shaping the trajectory of development.

Building on a life course perspective, the next six articles underscore the importance and potential of intervening across the early years, as one developmental period builds on another. Two articles highlight the importance of the **first 1000 days**: on pages 14–18 Gary Darmstadt charts the progress and challenges in assuring healthy births and healthy babies and bridging survival and development, while on pages 19–27 Aisha Yousafzai and

Mandana Arabi focus on the importance of integrated comprehensive services.

Since we know that healthy and successful child development is influenced most directly by the family and the community, we turn next to three important examples of programmes from around the world. Sally Grantham-McGregor and Susan Walker discuss on pages 28–34 the landmark study of **home visiting** from Jamaica which has provided more than two decades of evidence documenting the long-term impact of early childhood services and is now being replicated in several countries. Deepa Grover and Bettina Schwethelm (pages 35–7) explore recent and innovative examples from Eastern Europe and Central Asia, while on pages 38–42 Jorge Luis Fernández and Norma Vidal are interviewed about exciting efforts to scale early childhood programmes in Peru.

Moving along the developmental continuum, the article on **pre-primary education** by Michelle J. Neuman and Kavita Hatipoğlu (pages 43–50) provides a timely update on the current status of this critical service around the world, documenting both progress and gaps.

While much of the developmental literature focuses on the role of the mother in the early years, Gary Barker’s article on **fatherhood** (pages 51–3) makes the strong case for the importance of men’s caregiving for young children and provides examples from the global MenCare Campaign. At the same time, no set of articles on child development would be complete without a focus on the current issues facing those children growing up in countries affected by armed conflict, as well as those facing children with developmental disabilities. On pages 54–8, the International Rescue Committee’s Katie Murphy, Sandra Maignant, Laura Boone and Sarah Smith explore the grim realities of the impact of war on children and the promise of **humanitarian intervention**. This is followed by an important article by Donald Wertlieb and Vibha Krishnamurthy (pages 59–64) which draws our attention to the critical need to focus on the **rights and needs of young children with disabilities** and the essential part that inclusive early childhood services can play in their lives.

## In Section II of this issue

While underscoring the importance of continuity across the developmental period, the remaining articles speak to the issues that need to be addressed as we move forward to scale services and build capacity, including areas such as research and measurement, quality assurance, financing, and leadership development.

Two articles address the **research and measurement** issues. As described by Dominique McMahon and Karlee Silver on pages 70–73, on the research emerging from Saving Brains, Grand Challenges Canada will be instrumental in assuring evidence-based strategies to address the most pressing problems facing young children and families. On pages 74–7, Abbie Raikes, Tarun Dua and Pia Britto describe how measuring progress towards meeting goals and establishing indicators will benefit from measurement work launched across the UN agencies.

While access to services continues to be a major concern for children of all ages, and particularly for children growing up in poverty, the quality of services is critical. To underscore this point, the article by Dawn Tankersley, Tatjana Vonta and Mihaela Ionescu on quality early childhood settings (pages 78–81) reports on the growing consensus on how best to define quality and the importance of both universal values and cultural sensitivity.

Historically, early childhood has not received the resources necessary to meet demand or assure quality. The **financing** of early childhood services is only now beginning to receive the attention it deserves. An important innovation has been the establishment of the Early Learning Partnership, a new funding mechanism that is catalysing change. The contribution by Aashti Zaidi Hai from the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (pages 82–5) documents the promise of this new resource.

In order to build public awareness and advocate for increased financing at the global, national or community level, we need to increase our numbers

in the early childhood community and include more people who can help us communicate the needs of young children. These **new voices** can include civic and religious leaders, law enforcement and the business community, among others. The example from Sara Watson at ReadyNation and Gideon Badagawa and Ruth Musoke at the Private Sector Foundation (pages 86–7) provides a glimpse into what is possible in reaching out to new champions.

With increased demand comes the need to **build capacity and leadership** within the field. Too often efforts to move from evidence to scale are challenged by capacity issues at all levels and the lack of recognition of the importance of the early childhood workforce. On pages 88–90, the article by Eduardo Queiroz and James Cairns provides an example of leadership development in Brazil. On pages 91–3 we hear from Kofi Marfo on the new Institute for Human Development which has emerged in Africa and the critical importance of respecting culture as we build the knowledge base. And on pages 94–6, Mark Elliott and Lynette Okengo of the World Forum Foundation’s Global Leaders for Young Children programme further explore the need to build capacity that cuts across research, policy and practice.

In the final article (pages 97–100), Mary Young brings us back to the future, reflecting once again on the **history of the early childhood field and challenging us to move forward** by starting early, assuring comprehensive services and expanding cross-sector planning and policies.

At the end of each section, you will also find example boxes briefly showcasing a selection of the other noteworthy work being done by a wide range of organisations with an interest in young children. Although in this issue of *Early Childhood Matters* our hope is to present as comprehensive as possible a picture of the current state of the field of child development, we are well aware that many more important advances are going on around the world than we able to do justice to in these pages.

We are in a very different place now than 50 years ago, when the Bernard van Leer Foundation first began to focus on young children – the evidence that we can make a difference continues to grow, new champions are emerging, and demand for services is increasing. Now is the time to build on our history, to continue to increase public awareness and to expand and improve services for children from before birth to age 5 and beyond, in communities around the world. It is our hope that this issue of *Early Childhood Matters* is a call to action on behalf of young children and their families, action that can lay a strong foundation for sustainable development. We look forward to celebrating a different world 50 years from now – a world where all children have an equal opportunity to grow up healthy, happy and successful.

#### References

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