

Global Campaign for Education

Briefing paper on key priority areas informed by the Strategic Plan 2023-2027

Early Childhood Education

1. Background

Education is a universal human right, as stated by the international human rights law, and this means that no condition should restrict its enjoyment. All people are entitled to this human right from birth to death.

Despite the clarity of this principle, a restrictive interpretation of the right to education has been historically promoted, for ideological, economic, and political reasons, limiting state obligations to the demands of only certain populations and age groups. The result of this improper and illegal interpretation is, among others, that there are nearly 175 million children aged 3 to 6 years old are not enrolled in school nor education programmes¹.

Life-long and life-wide learning² are the pedagogical principles that reflect the full meaning of the right to education, embracing the entire continuum of learning and reinforcing the idea that all people are entitled to the right to education and learning throughout the life cycle and in all aspects that contribute to their holistic development.

The Convention of the Rights of the Child lays out the aims of education and the state obligation to guarantee the right to education and care in early childhood. In Africa, the right to early childhood care and education is guaranteed in the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (also known as the Banjul Charter), the African Charter on the Rights and Wellbeing of Children and the Cultural Charter for Africa. In the Americas, this right is guaranteed in the American Convention on Human Rights, in the Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Finally, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the Additional Protocol of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms also recognises this right, as does Protocol No. 12 of the same Convention, which introduces the general prohibition against discrimination.

But, although early childhood education has been recognized as part of the right to education, there is no obligation in international human rights treaties to provide it free of charge. This omission is incompatible with the rights of the child and must be corrected through a new legal framework to realise the right to free education for all children. Besides, as the GEM report 2022³

¹ <https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/pre-primary-education/>

² <https://uil.unesco.org/lifelong-learning/self-construction-and-social-transformation-lifelong-lifewide-and-life-deep>

³ UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report 2021/2.

sets out, the lack of a rights-based framework, determines that ECCE financing, organisation and provision is predominately taken up by the private sector. Non-State actors dominate education for children under 3 years of age. This process reinforces inequalities of access correlated with the economic and social situation of each family and makes it impossible to carry out an inclusive education for all.

The Global Campaign for Education reaffirms that education is a universal and indivisible human right, on whose realisation the success of the Sustainable Development Agenda depends, and therefore it must be ensured to young children, whereby some groups appear even more excluded from the enjoyment of this fundamental right, especially girls, those who live in poverty and are also part of marginalised populations.

2. The GCE Strategic Plan (2023-2027)

The GCE Strategic Plan fully subscribes to the lifelong learning approach. We believe that every person, free from all discrimination, has the right to lifelong learning, which means the right to benefit from formal, non-formal and informal learning opportunities from early childhood to late life, including diverse types of learning in fields such as health, work, culture, citizenship, and environment.⁴

Conjointly we claim this right at all levels, using international and regional human rights provisions as a lever. We demand that governments respect, protect, and fulfil the right to education and lifelong learning, making education available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable for young children.

We ask that lifelong learning meets the needs of learners in all their diversity and contributes to building more just, equitable and sustainable communities and societies. We acknowledge that international human rights law currently does not stipulate free education beyond the primary and fundamental stages, therefore we advocate for greater public engagement and investment in education for children in pre-primary age.

3. Critical challenges of Early Childhood Education

On target 4.2 States have committed that “By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education”. However, several challenges must be faced, in relation with:

3.1 Access: Only the 39% of the children between 36–59 months old world is attending an early childhood education programme. Participation in early childhood education varies considerably due to social, economic and cultural factors, particularly those related to gender norms, increases with age, reaching its highest level the year before primary school. In this group, participation was 73% in 2019, with disparities ranging from 12% in Djibouti to more than 99% in countries

⁴<https://www.uil.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2022/06/Declaration%20of%20the%20Civil%20Society%20Forum%202022.pdf>

such as Fiji and the United Arab Emirates. (GEM Report, UNESCO, 2021)⁵. Regarding early childhood, global statistics confirm the limited supply of care and education services for children from 0 to 3 years of age. Millions of children miss out on enormous opportunities to socialize, learn, interact and play with their peers. At the same time, women around the planet see their opportunities to access the world of work, education, free time and social and community participation relegated because they do not have access to institutionalized programs or within the family framework.

3.2. Equity: According to UNESCO (2021)⁶ of the 183 countries with available data, around a third have established free preschool education in national legal frameworks, and they mainly belong to groups of upper-middle and high-income countries. Also, the total number of years of free preschool education varies between countries, and very few have adopted legal provisions for two, three and four years of free preschool education. Also, in many countries, the lack of public provision led to the growth of non-state provision of ECCE. In 2020, 38 percent of preschool children were enrolled in private institutions globally, and this figure is much higher than that of primary education, at 19 percent. According to UNESCO and UNICEF data, in low-income countries, children from the wealthiest families are eight times more likely to participate in ECEC programmes than children from families in the poorest quintile, because families are compelled to pay for participation.

3.3. Comprehensiveness and quality: GCE fully subscribes that every child – especially the most marginalised – should have the opportunity to access early childhood care and education and governments should ensure comprehensive and integrated services for young children – including care, health, and education – that are regularly monitored to ensure high quality. The “educare” approach has been developed by the Committee on the Rights of the Child as a shift towards integrated services that reinforces the recognition of the need for a coordinated, holistic, multisectoral approach to early childhood. (GC N°7, 2007). We also believe that curriculum and approaches should meet the educational, developmental, nutritional, health and individual needs of children and that parents should be educated and supported, while teachers and other staff⁷ should be trained, qualified, supported, and valued professionals⁸.

3.4 Financing: The GCE calls for the provision of progressive financing for free, quality, public early childhood (at least 1% of GDP), adults and youth learning and education and reminds states that they bear the primary responsibility for ensuring it, mainly through tax justice and expansion

⁵ Global Education Monitoring Report, UNESCO, (2021) Right from the start: build inclusive societies through inclusive early childhood education. Policy Paper 46.

⁶ UNESCO (2021) Right to pre-primary education. A global study

⁷The Tashkent declaration calls States to "strengthen ECCE systems including the recruitment, qualifications and working conditions of all ECCE personnel and improve regulatory and quality assurance frameworks, striving towards policies and interventions on equal qualifications, certifications, wages and status between ECCE and, at least, primary school teachers. Increase access to evidence based parenting support programmes for all parents and caregivers".

⁸ GCE. Rights from the Start. Early childhood care and education, 2012.

of public resources. The engagement of the private sector, even though it is important, in no case should subrogate this obligation. According to the recent "Tashkent Declaration⁹", States committed to increase ECCE funding to a level sufficient to achieve SDG target 4.2, by striving to allocate at least 10 per cent of education spending to preschool education.

3.5. Legal frameworks. As stated above, it is necessary to develop legal frameworks that ensure access to ECCE without discrimination. It will be necessary to regulate on the free and compulsory education as well as establish clear guidelines on the nature of programs and services of formal and non-formal education, as well as lay down rules the participation of non-state actors.

4. Way forward

GCE is committed to support the definition and implementation of comprehensive and effective public policies aimed at the full realisation of the right to education by actively engage in the follow-up and monitoring process of compliance with the SDGs related to early childhood, articulating resources, coordinating global and local initiatives, and promoting synergies.

States are the main responsible to implement, strengthen, and scale up public policies, plans, and strategies that ensure the comprehensive development, well-being, and dignity of all people from birth by supporting the adoption and implementation of a UN Decade for Early Childhood and Education¹⁰.

GCE will integrate working groups on Early Childhood Education as ways to strengthen our strategic work on those crucial matters.

⁹ UNESCO. Tashkent Declaration and Commitments to Action for Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education, WCECCE 2022.

¹⁰ OMEP. Towards the Decade for Early Childhood Care and Education