

GPE KIX  
SYNTHESIS  
REPORT

The Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange

# EARLY LEARNING A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS



ECE

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The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) is the largest global fund solely dedicated to transforming education in lower-income countries, and a unique, multi-stakeholder partnership. Find out more at [globalpartnership.org](http://globalpartnership.org).

### About GPE KIX

The Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) is a joint endeavour between GPE and IDRC that aims to ensure partner countries have and use the evidence and innovation they need to accelerate access, learning outcomes and gender equality through equitable, inclusive and resilient education systems fit for the 21st century.

### About this report

This synthesis report is one of five commissioned by GPE KIX to consolidate evidence and lessons learned from applied research projects funded during the program's first phase, from 2019 to 2024. These multi-stakeholder projects focused on key challenges facing education systems across the Global South and generated evidence, strengthened capacities and mobilized knowledge into policy and practice. The reports in this series address five priority themes identified by national education stakeholders: data systems and data use; early learning; gender equality, equity and inclusion; out-of-school children and youth; and teacher professional development.

### Acknowledgements

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**For more information:** [www.gpekix.org](http://www.gpekix.org)

# ACRONYMS

<b>BELDS</b>	Better Early Learning and Development at Scale
<b>COVID-19</b>	Coronavirus disease of 2019
<b>ECE</b>	Early childhood education
<b>ECED</b>	Early childhood education and development
<b>GEI</b>	Gender equality, equity and inclusion
<b>GOALS</b>	Gambia Open and Active Learning Spaces
<b>GPE</b>	Global Partnership for Education
<b>GPE KIX</b>	Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange
<b>GREAT</b>	Gender-Responsive Education and Transformation
<b>HIC</b>	High-income countries
<b>IDRC</b>	International Development Research Centre
<b>KIX</b>	Knowledge and Innovation Exchange
<b>LMIC</b>	Low- and middle-income countries
<b>LTP</b>	Learning through play
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organization
<b>PBL</b>	Play-based learning
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goal
<b>SPP</b>	Summer pre-primary
<b>TWG</b>	Technical working group
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund

# SHORTENED PROJECT TITLES

<b>BELDS</b>	Integrating Early Childhood Education in Sectoral Planning
<b>Child-to-Child</b>	Inclusive Child-to-Child Learning Approach: Scaling Up Inclusive Play-Based Learning for Smooth Transition from Pre-primary to Primary School
<b>GREAT-ECE</b>	Gender-Responsive Education and Transformation: Early Childhood Education Through Play for Scale in Mozambique and Rwanda
<b>IHELP</b>	Inclusive Home-Based Early Learning Project
<b>LEARN Plus</b>	Adapting, Testing, and Scaling a Proven Summer Pre-primary Education Model in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Tanzania
<b>Teacher Capacity for PBL</b>	Teacher Capacity Building for Play-Based Early Learning in Ghana and Sierra Leone
<b>Promoting Positive Early Learning</b>	Promoting Positive Early Learning Outcomes Through Strengthened Capacity in Learning Through Play – Evidence from Nigeria, The Gambia and Kenya
<b>SSRI</b>	Scaling the School Readiness Initiative – Strengthening School and Community Capacities for Adoption of Play-Based Learning in Uganda and Zambia

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Early learning has been identified as a critical factor in fostering children's cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development, improving gender equity and supporting long-term educational outcomes. This synthesis report consolidates insights and evidence from eight Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) applied research focused on improving early childhood education (ECE) across low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Five of the eight projects summarized in this synthesis study were cofinanced by the LEGO Foundation. GPE KIX projects aimed to strengthen early learning systems by promoting play-based pedagogy, teacher capacity-building, gender equity and inclusion and community engagement. Drawing on their experience and findings, this report provides an overview of key challenges and innovative approaches related to scaling early learning initiatives and identifies policy recommendations to ensure access to quality education for young children.

## Key themes and findings

**1. Play-based pedagogy and school readiness:** Play-based learning (PBL) is recognized as a critical approach for fostering cognitive and socio-emotional development in early childhood. Despite its inclusion in many national education policies, effective implementation remains a challenge. GPE KIX projects have demonstrated positive results from integrating PBL into pre-primary curricula in a number of countries, including Ghana, Kenya and The Gambia. Success in scaling PBL relies not only on policy frameworks but also on active community and parental involvement. Capacity building for teachers, and the creation of locally relevant, culturally appropriate play-based materials, are key drivers of successful implementation.

**2. Teacher training and professional development:** A significant barrier to the effective implementation of ECE is the lack of teacher capacity and confidence in delivering play-based pedagogies. GPE KIX projects focused on developing and testing innovative teacher-training strategies, including peer-to-peer learning and communities of practice to supplement the Training of Trainers model. In Uganda and Zambia, for example, research on scaling the School Readiness Initiative strengthened teacher capacity through hands-on training and the creation of play-based curriculum guides. Regular teacher mentorship and continuous professional development are necessary to ensure long-term success.

**3. Gender equality, equity and inclusion (GEI):** Gender equality, equity and inclusion are cross-cutting issues that influence access to quality ECE. GPE KIX projects emphasized breaking down gender stereotypes and promoting inclusive practices that benefit marginalized children, particularly those with disabilities. Research in Ethiopia and Uganda, for example, provided training for teachers and caregivers to address the unique needs of children from vulnerable communities. Engaging fathers and addressing stigma around disability are critical to ensuring inclusive ECE environments.

**4. Scaling and sustainability of ECE:** The sustainability and scalability of ECE programs depend on political support, community involvement and the integration of early learning models into national education sector plans. GPE KIX projects have successfully scaled community-based and home-based ECE models by building strong partnerships with local stakeholders and leveraging open-source digital tools. For instance, research on a summer pre-primary education model in Tanzania and Cambodia demonstrated the cost-effectiveness of short-term interventions that prepare children for primary education. Integrating ECE into broader national education strategies is essential for long-term sustainability.

**5. Community and parental participation:** Active community engagement and parental involvement are essential for the success of early learning programs. GPE KIX projects engaged local communities through workshops, participatory research and awareness campaigns. In The Gambia and Nigeria, parents were trained to support learning through play, while in Zambia, community mobilization efforts resulted in the construction of outdoor play parks. Encouraging parental participation, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas, has been identified as a key factor in sustaining early learning initiatives.

## Recommendations

- **Integrate play into the ECE curriculum:** Curricula for early learning should be centred on age-appropriate play-based learning. Including resources to guide both teachers' and parents' in using PBL, and conducting regular monitoring and evaluation, will help to ensure that quality standards for ECE are met.
- **Strengthen teacher training and expand access to training programs:** Continuous professional development, mentorship and hands-on training should be prioritized to build teacher confidence in delivering play-based pedagogy. Pathways to training should be expanded to include digital and other long-distance options that are more accessible to those in rural and remote areas.
- **Promote gender equality, equity and inclusion:** GEI considerations must be mainstreamed into ECE policies and programs, with a focus on addressing the needs of marginalized groups, including children with disabilities and girls.

- **Foster community engagement:** Parental and community involvement should be actively promoted through awareness campaigns and training, ensuring that all stakeholders are invested in the success of early learning programs.
- **Ensure sustainability and scalability:** ECE models should be integrated into national education sector plans, and governments should collaborate with local and international partners to ensure long-term sustainability.

The evidence from GPE KIX projects highlights the critical role of early childhood education in fostering inclusive and equitable education systems. By investing in play-based learning, teacher capacity-building and gender-sensitive approaches, LMICs can improve access to quality early learning for all children. The lessons learned from these projects provide a roadmap for scaling effective ECE interventions and ensuring that early learning remains a priority in national education agendas.



# 1. INTRODUCTION

The Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) is a joint endeavor between GPE and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to ensure partner countries can have and use the evidence and innovation they need to accelerate access, learning outcomes and gender equality through equitable, inclusive and resilient education systems fit for the twenty-first century. During its first phase from 2019 to 2024, GPE KIX funded 41 applied research projects focused on key challenges facing education systems across the Global South. These projects generated evidence, strengthened capacities and mobilized knowledge into policy and practice. They were undertaken by a range of universities, think tanks, networks and NGOs.

This document is one of five synthesis reports commissioned by GPE KIX to consolidate evidence and lessons learned across GPE KIX-funded projects related to priority themes identified by national education stakeholders: data systems and data use; early learning; gender equality, equity and inclusion (GEI); out-of-school children and youth; and teacher professional development.

Early childhood has long been recognized as a very important stage of human development. Secure and nurturing childhoods provide young people with the support that they need to become resilient adults. Positive experiences with education help youth to embrace new challenges and even lifelong learning. Early learning interventions are imperative for increasing access to quality and affordable early-learning opportunities for all children. Early learning develops literacy (language), numeracy, socio-emotional skills and support, and enhances physical development. In this report, we focus on learning opportunities for children aged three to eight years, though we acknowledge the importance of the first 1000 days (birth to three years).

This report synthesizes emerging evidence from eight GPE KIX applied research that sought to strengthen early childhood education (ECE) with a focus on scaling the impact of ECE innovations. Five of the eight projects summarized in this synthesis study were cofinanced by the LEGO Foundation. By sharing the results of these studies on early childhood topics, this synthesis report aims to inform national and international policy and practice and future early learning and ECE initiatives.

## 1.1 The research

Spanning 19 low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), the following projects are considered in this report:

**Table 1:** Research projects, focus countries, implementing organizations, aims and innovations

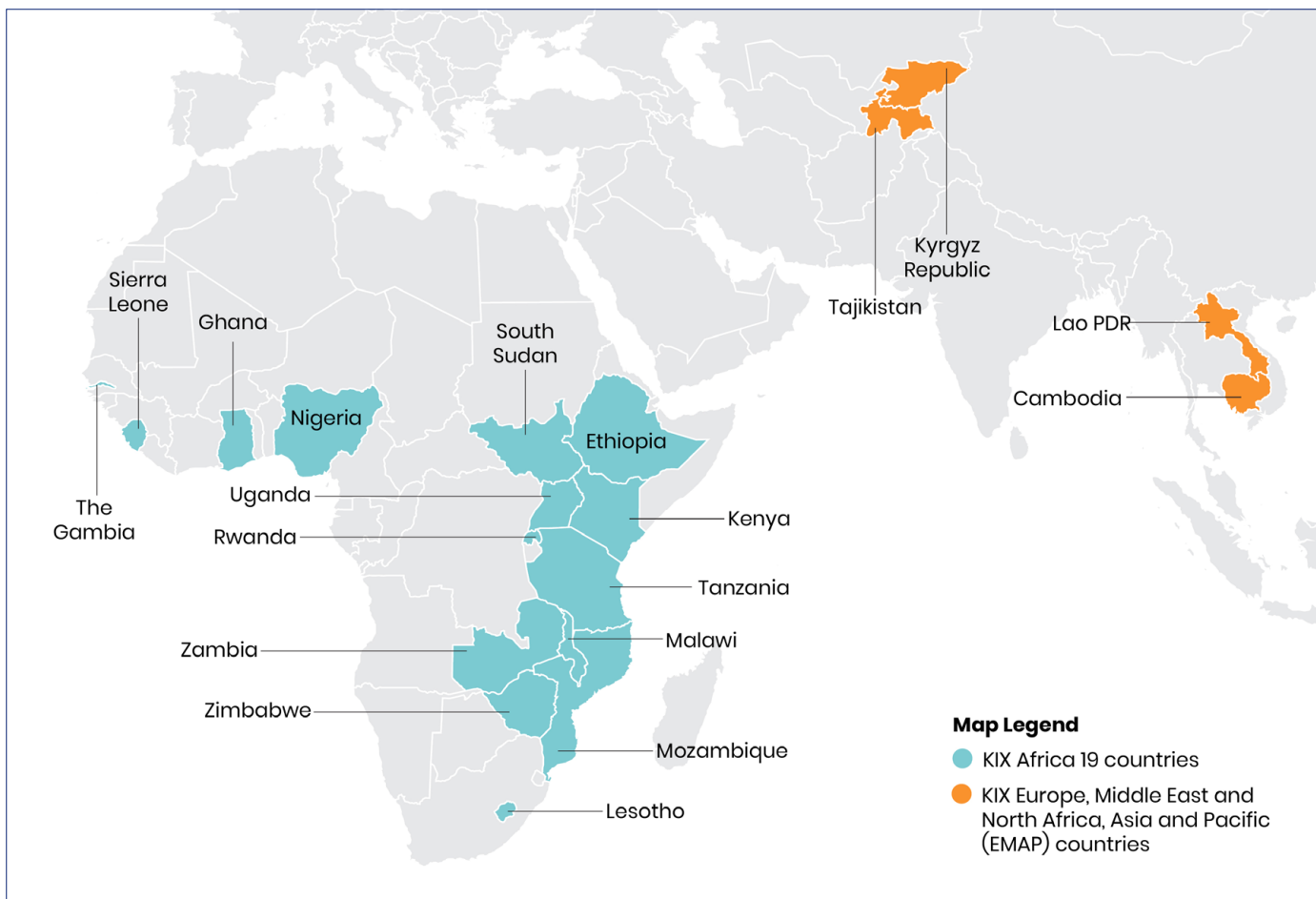
Projects and countries	Implementing organizations	Aims and innovations tested
<p><b>Inclusive Child-to-Child Learning Approach: Scaling Up Inclusive Play-Based Learning for Smooth Transition from Pre-primary to Primary School (Child-to-Child)</b></p> <p>Ethiopia, Malawi and Uganda</p>	<p>Kyambogo University</p> <p>Chancellor College, University of Malawi</p> <p>University of Gondar</p> <p>Literacy and Adult Basic Education</p>	<p>The project’s overall purpose was to adapt and scale up child-to-child learning as a means to help children transition from pre-primary to lower primary. The child-to-child model involves older children helping younger children acquire school readiness skills, literacy and social skills in communities where formal preschools are either unavailable or not well equipped.</p>
<p><b>Promoting Positive Early Learning Outcomes Through Strengthened Capacity in Learning Through Play - Evidence from Nigeria, The Gambia and Kenya (Promoting Positive Early Learning)</b></p>	<p>The African Early Childhood Network</p> <p>African Population and Health Research Center</p> <p>UNICEF</p>	<p>Research sought to test and adapt innovations to support capacity building for teachers, parents and other key stakeholders on how to implement learning through play (LTP) approaches, building on existing positive and playful practices in pre-primary schools. Research was anchored on a proven ECE teacher capacity-building approach known as Tayari, which is cost-effective, scalable and amenable to the incorporation of play-based approaches.</p>

Projects and countries	Implementing organizations	Aims and innovations tested
<b>Gender-Responsive Education and Transformation: Early Childhood Education Through Play for Scale in Mozambique and Rwanda (GREAT-ECE)</b>	Three Stones International Rwanda  Right to Play, Canada  Cambridge Education, UK	<p>Research was designed to generate evidence surrounding LTP in ECE settings within Mozambique and Rwanda and generate stakeholder awareness through an evidence-based adaptation of Right to Play’s Gender-Responsive Education and Transformation (GREAT) program. The project analyzed input from teachers, school leaders, parents and caregivers, together with children’s learning assessments and observation of program activities, to determine how gender-responsive and play-based learning (PBL) approaches can be introduced in pre-primary education and how this contributes to shaping gender norms, life skills and learning outcomes.</p>
<b>Scaling the School Readiness Initiative – Strengthening School and Community Capacities for Adoption of Play-Based Learning in Uganda and Zambia (SSRI)</b>	Zambia Open Community Schools  University of Zambia  Makerere University	<p>The project aimed to strengthen the capacities of schools, communities and early education systems to adopt PBL to promote children’s holistic development and ensure a smooth transition from pre-primary education centres. Building on lessons learned from implementing the School Readiness Initiative in two provinces of Zambia, the project reviewed PBL in early learning curriculum frameworks of Uganda and Zambia and designed an enhanced learning framework – identifying and developing contextually relevant learning materials with input from teachers, parents and children. The research team worked closely with education officials from national to local levels.</p>

Projects and countries	Implementing organizations	Aims and innovations tested
<p><b>Teacher Capacity Building for Play-Based Early Learning in Ghana and Sierra Leone (Teacher Capacity for PBL)</b></p>	<p>Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research, University of Ghana</p> <p>Associates for Change</p> <p>University of Sierra Leone</p>	<p>Research aimed to generate knowledge and evidence to improve the practice of play-based learning in teacher training, and to determine cost-effective ways of training ECE teachers. The project studied the implementation of two PBL-based training programs by Right to Play in both rural and urban settings across Ghana and Sierra Leone to assess their effectiveness and scalability.</p>
<p><b>Adapting, Testing, and Scaling a Proven Summer Pre-primary Education Model in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Tanzania (LEARN Plus)</b></p>	<p>Plan International Canada</p> <p>American Institutes for Research</p> <p>The Mother Child Education Foundation</p>	<p>Research aimed to adapt, test and scale a contextualized 10-week summer pre-primary (SPP) program to support the expansion of quality, gender-responsive pre-primary education in underserved communities. The project built upon previous pilot-testing of Plan International’s LEARN accelerated SPP model in Laos. LEARN Plus entailed adapting the model to include a deeper focus on gender equality and inclusion before scaling out to all three countries.</p>
<p><b>Integrating Early Childhood Education in Sectoral Planning (BELDS)</b></p> <p>Kyrgyz Republic, Lesotho, Sierra Leone, South Sudan and Tajikistan</p>	<p>UNICEF</p> <p>World Bank Group</p> <p>Early Childhood Development Action Network</p>	<p>This project aimed to support integration of the pre-primary sector within education sector planning processes in five GPE partner countries. It aimed to scale up and expand the Better Early Learning and Development at Scale (BELDS) approach to produce a comprehensive, flexible and practical global toolkit (the BELDS Accelerator Toolkit) to help GPE partner countries plan for and implement ECE at scale through education sector planning and implementation processes.</p>

Projects and countries	Implementing organizations	Aims and innovations tested
<p><b>Inclusive Home-Based Early Learning Project (IHELP)</b></p> <p>Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe</p>	<p>Kyambogo University</p> <p>Sense International</p> <p>Masinde Muliro University of Science</p> <p>University of Zimbabwe</p>	<p>Research aimed to increase community- to national-level action to provide access to quality early learning and care and improve school readiness outcomes for boys and girls, including those with disabilities. Drawing on proven features of home-based, centre-based and play-based ECE models, the project adapted and scaled an effective and inclusive home-based ECE model (IHELP). It drew lessons on how parents and teachers can support learning in home and classroom settings, with sensory enhancements, to improve both access and learning outcomes.</p>

**Figure 1:** Countries in which GPE KIX research projects were implemented.



## 1.2 About this report

This synthesis entailed the identification, assessment and synthesis of GPE KIX evidence on early learning in order to produce a summary that can inform good practice and identify gaps in evidence, and help define future research agendas (see Grant and Booth 2009; Tricco et al. 2018, 2016). The approach to this synthesis entailed four activities:

- Refinement of themes and appraisal of the extensive evidence produced by the GPE KIX projects
- Virtual focus-group discussions to identify gaps in project reports and refine additional questions to guide the scoping review process
- Scoping review of the published literature on the landscape of ECE in GPE partner countries, as related to themes relevant to GPE KIX projects, and research products and outputs from GPE KIX grantees and key stakeholders.
- Integration of the evidence and report writing.

The following section provides an overview of the ECE landscape, highlighting its benefits, challenges and role in progress toward Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for children's well-being and education. Section 3 presents key findings from this review of GPE KIX research and background literature on five main topics: play-based pedagogy; teacher training and support; gender equality, equity and inclusion; scaling and sustaining ECE within education sector planning; and the importance of community involvement and parental participation. Section 4 highlights research gaps that emerged from this review, and potential future research directions. The report concludes in Section 5 with a series of recommendations for key stakeholders that can make important contributions to advancing access to quality ECE, including practitioners, researchers, policymakers and donors.

Readers interested in more detail on individual projects can find additional data and evidence in the project reports and other research outputs included in the reference section of this report.

## 2. THE ECE LANDSCAPE

Good quality ECE provides a wide range of benefits for children, families and communities. Through ECE programs, children gain safe spaces in which to grow, supporting their cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development. As primary caregivers in most contexts, women also benefit from access to ECE. Their time is freed up, allowing them to engage in income-generating activities that increase their agency and overall family prosperity. For communities, long-lasting benefits of quality ECE include reduced child labour and increased intergenerational social mobility and gender equality (Mwaipopo et al. 2021).

Given all these benefits, early childhood education and development (ECED) – an umbrella term that captures ECE plus related benefits such as child nutrition and family care services – has become a priority globally. The United Nations has been advocating for high-quality ECED with the expansion of the global policy agenda to include indicators for universal access to pre-primary education and children’s health, learning and psychosocial well-being (UN 2015). One sign of progress towards expanding ECED access is the fact that many nations now provide access to at least one year of fee-free pre-primary education (Britto et al. 2015; Raikes et al. 2023). Quality ECED requires many sectors to be involved, overlapping with nutrition, health and child protection. Its governance encompasses private and public settings, entailing oversight of financing and staffing and requiring coordination from national to local levels (Britto et al. 2015; UNESCO 2021).

Yet challenges abound in providing quality ECE programming, as Mwaipopo et al. (2021) have highlighted. Inequalities in early-learning opportunities are often attributed to poverty, nutrition deficiencies, a limited supply of ECE services and a shortage of trained and qualified teachers. Low teacher compensation, lack of public awareness on the importance of ECE, poor infrastructure and linguistic challenges are other factors. Children from GPE partner countries often face socioeconomic deprivations due to parental poverty and persistent environmental and health challenges (Allel et al. 2021). Allel et al. also point to limited early stimulation, even in rural communities where children have multiple opportunities and resources for play.

Lower investments in ECE account for low school retention, limited awareness of ECE among community members and lower enrolment, among other issues. While donors are funding the ECE sector to strengthen access to quality services at scale, this remains a challenge (Neuman & Powers 2022). When scaling up ECE, most countries tend to focus on infrastructure such as aspects of the physical environment, group characteristics (e.g., adult-child ratios) and caregiver or teacher variables (e.g., initial



education and training). However, investing in infrastructure alone is insufficient to guarantee other aspects of quality that children experience in ECE settings, such as interactions with teachers, peers and materials.

Globally, access to ECE has doubled over recent decades, from an average of 30% of children in 1986 to slightly over 60% in 2019 (Akkari 2022; UNESCO 2021). However, this access is uneven. ECE enrolment ranges from 21% in LMICs to 79% in high-income countries (HICs) based on data from 196 countries prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (McCoy et al. 2021; Raikes et al. 2023). UNESCO (2021) reports that children from HICs have greater access to ECE than children from LMICs. The increase in ECE appears to have taken place mostly in countries of South Asia, East Asia, the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean. Children in Middle Eastern and African countries are less likely to benefit from ECE, with an average gross enrolment rate of 30% for pre-primary education (Akkari 2022).

In 2015, the development of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 signalled a global commitment to improving ECE. In essence, SGD4 seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education that promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all, including children under five (Olusanya et al. 2023; UNESCO 2016). SDG target 4.2 stipulates that by 2030, the global community should ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality ECE and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education (UNESCO 2021).

SDG Goal 4.2 aims for access to quality ECE for all, highlighting the demand for effective interventions in LMICs (Olusanya et al. 2023; UN 2015). Yet the establishment of SDG goals is not the first call for change. In 2000, a few countries adopted national ECE policies to meet the Education for All targets under the UN Millennium Development Goals (UNESCO 2021). In 2012, 23 countries in Africa adopted national ECE policies (Mezu 2023; UNESCO 2021). Despite adopting national policies regarding ECE, less than 10% of public education expenditures were allocated to ECE services in these countries.

Progress towards quality ECE declined even further during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and negatively impacted populations that were already disadvantaged. In 2020, UNICEF estimated that over 90% of learners worldwide were affected by the pandemic and related response measures (UNICEF 2020). ECE services received limited support in response to COVID-19 as compared to other education levels. Two-thirds of LMICs reduced their public education budget for ECE (UNESCO 2021). An inadequate response to the pandemic's impact on ECE services meant that approximately one-third of children globally fell behind developmentally (UNICEF 2020). UNICEF (2020) highlighted that 70% of learners attending pre-primary programs prior to school closures lacked access to remote-learning opportunities.



## 3. KEY FINDINGS ON SCALING INNOVATIONS TO ADVANCE QUALITY ECE

This summary of findings draws from our review of published literature and project documents and analysis of focus-group discussions. We explore these results under the following five topics:

- Play-based pedagogy and school readiness
- Teacher training, support and professional development
- Gender equality, equity and inclusion as cross-cutting issues in ECE
- Scaling and ensuring sustainability of ECE planning
- ECE partnerships and community and parental participation

### 3.1 Play-based pedagogy and school readiness

Play is crucial in enriching children's learning experiences and fostering peer interactions. Despite widespread acknowledgment of the importance of play in national education policies, implementation of play-based approaches remains a persistent hurdle. While governments and policymakers have introduced play-based pedagogy into curricula, this alone is insufficient. Coury and Ortiz (2021) advocate for a curriculum implementation approach that prioritizes the dynamics of interaction between teachers and children, and the pedagogical methodologies used in pre-primary education, adapted to the local learning context. Emphasizing classroom settings, this approach encompasses the teacher, child, learning methodology and environmental resources.

“

*“Although the curriculum mentions creating a good environment for children to play, the curriculum doesn't give details as to how these can be done. There are no example of games or instruction suitable for early learners.”*

Male, focus group discussion, Mozambique

Significant staff capacity gaps are a challenge in many countries, with most teachers lacking the skills and understanding to effectively implement play-based learning in the classroom. Nevertheless, progress is evident in some countries targeted by GPE KIX projects, including Ghana, The Gambia and Kenya, where teachers have taken steps to integrate play-based learning into pre-primary curricula.

GPE KIX projects have revealed lessons on innovations and strategies that reinforce play-based approaches, as well as evidence aimed at addressing gaps in content and teaching methodologies to foster learning through play. Context-based innovations and strategies, such as training teachers in play-based pedagogy and using older children as facilitators, are effective in reinforcing play-based learning approaches and addressing gaps in teaching methodologies. They lead to improved outcomes and greater support from school managers for capacity-building initiatives. Active engagement from parents and the broader community is also a key factor for the success of learning through play.

Findings from the project [Promoting Positive Early Learning Outcomes Through Strengthened Capacity in Learning Through Play – Evidence from Nigeria, The Gambia and Kenya](#) (Promoting Positive Early Learning) underscore the importance of assessing teachers' knowledge to gauge changes in their practices. Upon completion of training in play-based pedagogy, pre- and post-tests were administered to evaluate shifts in teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes regarding the implementation of learning through play (LTP) in pre-primary classrooms. Positive improvements were observed among teachers and schools, sparking interest from school managers in supporting capacity-building initiatives for educators. The [Inclusive Child-to-Child Learning Approach: Scaling Up Inclusive Play-Based Learning for Smooth Transition from Pre-primary to Primary School](#) (Child-to-Child) project – which engaged older children as facilitators for scaling play-based learning – affirmed that children in rural Africa benefit from multi-age play groups, where older peers play a role in facilitating learning experiences.

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*“Play-based learning is appreciated by all in The Gambia. Our challenge right now is inadequate resources, especially in capacity, because we have teachers who have limited knowledge on play-based learning, including heads of school.”*

Female, focus group discussion, The Gambia

Collaborative efforts between governments and various stakeholders are crucial for promoting the integration and sustainability of PBL initiatives across curriculum and policy. For instance, in Nigeria, the Promoting Positive Early Learning project underscored the significance of stakeholder engagement, resulting in the adaptation of the child-centred and experiential Reggio Emilia curriculum to bolster its LTP component. Similarly, in The Gambia, collaborative stakeholder engagement led to the refinement and testing of an enhanced Gambia Open and Active Learning Spaces (GOALS) curriculum, complemented by supplementary resources such as teacher capacity-building manuals and parental-engagement guides. Meanwhile, in Kenya, stakeholders collaborated in the co-development of the initial draft of the LTP model.

The project [Scaling the School Readiness Initiative - Strengthening School and Community Capacities for Adoption of Play-Based Learning in Uganda and Zambia](#) (SSRI) took a similar approach in Uganda, convening collaborative meetings with stakeholders and key figures in the education sector to establish objectives for developing a play-based national curriculum. This endeavor also involved the creation of a comprehensive training manual and guides for parents, school administrators and caregivers. The outcomes of these national stakeholder engagements led to the development of a web-based and mobile application designed to enhance the capacity of parents, caregivers and educators for school readiness and transition. This application, centered around educational content, thus enabled an online learning system. Tablets equipped with the mobile app were distributed to selected ECE centres across Uganda.

Preparing children for their next level of schooling is also pivotal to their success. In recent years, experts have started to realize the importance of supporting the transition between early childhood to formal schooling. As highlighted by Margetts (2014), the transition to formal schooling involves the adjustment to new rules, physical environments and intricate social dynamics. The extent to which children feel comfortable and self-assured during this transitional period significantly shapes their emerging identities, interpersonal relationships and cognitive advancement (Margetts 2014). For disadvantaged children, the transition to school can pose additional hurdles. Research concerning these transitions for marginalized populations has primarily centered on discerning specific impediments to successful transitions, fostering collaborative efforts and offering recommendations for enhancing the transition process (Kaplan, Mart and Dicken 2022). Such findings underscore the importance of tailoring support to accommodate individual variations and acknowledging cultural diversity as disadvantaged children transition into formal schooling.

Results of an impact study within the [Adapting, Testing, and Scaling a Proven Summer Pre-primary Education Model in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Tanzania](#) (LEARN Plus) project indicated that the LEARN Plus 10-week summer pre-primary program can

help prepare children in small villages in rural areas for pre-primary school at an affordable cost and without requiring additional infrastructure or additional teaching staff. Ninety-four percent of children who participated in the program enrolled in Grade 1 on time, compared with only 57 percent of children who did not have any form of ECE. The children who enrolled in the 10-week program did better on school readiness in numeracy and language learning compared to both children who did not enroll and children who attended a formal nine-month pre-primary school.

Collaboration between ECE and primary school teachers will also increase support for both educators and children. Rather than solely relying on summative assessments, promoting ongoing discussions between ECE and early primary school teachers about children's progress and readiness, can strengthen play-based pedagogy, school readiness and successful transition. So too can giving children early exposure to the primary school environment: activities that allow pre-primary children to visit Grade 1 classrooms and interact with the surroundings before their official transition are highly recommended. The SSRI project made it mandatory for ECE and Grade 1 teachers to interact and meet throughout the school year.

Earlier studies have highlighted that parents' beliefs about school readiness and their level of involvement at home can significantly impact children's successful transition to school, and differences in these beliefs and levels of involvement might contribute to variations in children's outcomes during this transition (Puccioni, Baker and Froiland 2019). Parental involvement at home has also been identified as an important factor in improving children's cognitive development (Xia, Hackett and Webster 2019). To promote equitable school readiness, it is imperative to implement targeted strategies that address challenges faced by parents. The SSRI project confirmed that involving parents and creating conducive home environments were indispensable to school readiness and transitioning. It found that raising awareness about the importance of ECE and guiding parents on strategies for supporting their children's education could empower parents. Schools and communities could, for example, collaborate to establish libraries, interactive learning spaces and workshops that offer resources and knowledge to parents. These initiatives foster a collaborative learning environment, thereby ensuring that every child enters formal education with a strong foundation.

The SSRI project also shows how various strategies can be implemented to build capacity and garner community support for play-based learning. In some participating communities, parents and community members have played significant roles in supporting PBL activities by sourcing local materials and equipment. The use of human capital and community support in Zambia showcases the potential of harnessing local resources to promote PBL and enhance ECE outcomes. Orienting parents and community members on their role in PBL is crucial to help schools implement PBL collaboratively within local contexts, which contributes to its effectiveness and sustainability. Strengthening the capacity of

parents and community members to support PBL requires targeted investments in caregiver training and the establishment of community-based structures to facilitate implementation. Contextualizing training manuals for parents, school administrators and caregivers is crucial to create and sustain play-based learning environments. Promoting the use of available resources, such as local playgrounds, can further enhance community involvement.

Early learning models should embrace culturally relevant practices and address diverse community needs to promote play-based learning. All GPE KIX projects encouraged the use of outdoor play spaces, local materials and languages, and activities such as singing, games and storytelling. This departure from Western-centric play-based pedagogy addresses issues of resource access, cultural beliefs and practices. Additionally, recognizing the importance of adult mediation in children's play, the [Gender-Responsive Education and Transformation: Early Childhood Education Through Play for Scale in Mozambique and Rwanda](#) (GREAT-ECE) project sensitized parents on the need to use these approaches at home, fostering a teacher-driven parental engagement approach. Similarly, through the Child-to-Child project, Ethiopia has developed play materials to facilitate LTP, which have been embraced and popularized among parents, community members and teachers alike.



*“We need to monitor teachers in ECE both in private and public schools. Teachers are not trained for ECE. Teachers are not aware of the curriculum, hence we need to make sure they are knowledgeable on it.”*

Female, focus group discussion, Sierra Leone

### 3.2 Teacher training, support and professional development

Effective curriculum delivery for young children relies heavily on teacher capacity. Yet many teachers lack the necessary skills and confidence for PBL, as evidenced by findings from literature reviews and baseline assessments across the GPE KIX research projects. Recognizing this gap, the projects designed strategies to develop and test innovative approaches to teacher capacity development. For instance, Lesotho has implemented online training for ECE teachers using findings from the [Integrating Early Childhood Education in Sectoral Planning](#) (BELDS) project. The Child-to-Child project focused on building teachers' capacity to facilitate learning, while GREAT-ECE provided training on play-based pedagogy and developed teaching materials. Similarly, the adaptation and scaling of the LEARN Plus pre-primary model in Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) and Tanzania included training sessions for teachers and school leaders, aiming to support the seamless transition of early learners into formal primary education.

One of the barriers to producing qualified ECE teachers is the shortage of ECE training institutions. GPE KIX projects highly recommended continuous mentorship and coaching, and specifically reflective supervisory visits, as approaches to strengthening the capacity of teachers. Strategies implemented in the projects – such as the Training of Trainers approach, continuous support, peer-to-peer learning and communities of practice – were effective in building teacher capacity and confidence in facilitating learning through play.

In Rwanda, the GREAT-ECE project monitored classroom activities and identified areas where teachers still had skill gaps. These gaps were then addressed through coaching and mentoring sessions. Every round of classroom observation captured marked improvements in the delivery of play-based learning among the teachers in the study. Peer-to-peer learning also emerged as an avenue for capacity building, through activities such as communities of practice that gave teachers an opportunity to exchange experiences and strategies to overcome any difficulties they faced. Challenges identified in these sessions were then addressed through refresher training and practice sessions during simulated lessons. The teacher training conducted by the GREAT-ECE project in Rwanda and Mozambique led to greater use of play-based pedagogy.

Training content across the projects covered subjects such as the ECE curriculum, play-based approaches to learning, development and use of teaching and learning materials using locally available resources, parental engagement and pedagogies related to gender and disability. For the Training of Trainers approach, additional modules included supportive supervision and mentoring and coaching. Across multiple projects, materials such as manuals and guidelines were developed to support the capacity development of teachers. These included the *Nigeria Pre-*

*Primary Teacher's Capacity Building Manual* as a guide for implementing the Reggio-inspired curriculum in the Promoting Positive Early Learning project. In The Gambia, a teacher capacity-building manual and parental-engagement strategy were developed and aligned to the reviewed GOALS curriculum. An activity pack and caregiver manual produced by the Child-to-Child project are also useful resources for building practical understanding of play-based pedagogy in Uganda and Ethiopia.

Integrating LTP into the ECE and teacher training curriculum, coupled with increased access to resources for ongoing support and learning, strengthens teacher capacity. The SSRI project established resource centres dedicated to PBL at the University of Zambia and public ECE training colleges. This served as a hub for knowledge dissemination and training. Training teachers and monitoring the use of the training curriculum ensures that teachers have the needed skills, while also giving policymakers evidence of the curriculum's actual classroom implementation. In the SSRI project, developers collaborated with Zambia's Ministry of Education and Curriculum Development to integrate PBL into the teacher training curriculum. This involved revising the curriculum to include dedicated modules on PBL methodologies, providing comprehensive guidance on incorporating play-based learning activities across various subjects and learning areas. The project also designed competency-based continuous professional development sessions exclusively focused on PBL for both pre-service and in-service teachers. User-friendly tools and technologies such as Know-How Modules and an Early Learning Kiosk tablet were used to enhance experiential training for teachers. Furthermore, the project developed documentaries showcasing successful PBL practices, disseminating them through online platforms, teacher training colleges and workshops to inspire educators and promote collaboration.

Findings from the project [Teacher Capacity Building for Play-Based Early Learning in Ghana and Sierra Leone](#) (Teacher Capacity for PBL) show that teachers are generally positive about PBL. They see the value of outcomes ranging from increased learner participation in lessons to improvements in language skills and cognitive, social and physical development. Findings from across the projects show continuous improvement in teachers' abilities to progressively deliver the curriculum through play-based learning approaches after close mentorship and support. Among those who took part in continuous professional development programs, 66.7 percent of teachers rated their ability to focus on child brain development and learning as very good, compared to 33.3 percent from the non-intervention group. Gender differences in ratings are also evident, with female teachers generally rating their knowledge and ability higher than male teachers across various aspects of play-based learning.



Yet while many teachers are committed to creating environments conducive to play-based learning and appreciate children's unique abilities and learning styles, some struggle to grasp the concept of LTP. This reflects a lack of alignment between policy and implementation and a lack of consensus on the intended outcomes of ECE. Despite nearly all teachers integrating PBL activities to some extent, enthusiastic proponents face practical challenges such as managing additional time investment, potential fatigue, lack of trained support staff, limited resources and infrastructure, and feeling inadequately equipped to implement.



*“We have already developed the standard-based curriculum for kindergarten in September 2019. We have trained teachers. ECE district coordinators have been trained on the curriculum. We have developed the National Early Childhood Policy. The issue now is to do training for the newly posted teachers who did not go through the standard-based curriculum. We work with Right to Play, which [focuses] on play-based pedagogy. UNICEF has also helped with digitized pedagogy of the standard-based curriculum which we are training teachers on so that teachers implement the curriculum very well. We have adopted the Family Engagement Guideline that provides guidance on how to educate parents within the community on the standard-based curriculum.”*

Female, focus group discussion, Ghana



### 3.3 Gender equality, equity and inclusion as cross-cutting issues in ECE

Literature on mainstreaming in ECE, health and education in general tends to focus on gender mainstreaming (e.g., Chi 2018a and 2018b; Psaki et al. 2022; Ravindran et al. 2021) and mainstreaming inclusion (e.g., Mathwasa and Sibanda 2021; McLinden et al. 2018; Olusanya et al. 2023). GPE KIX projects sought to be gender-transformative and inclusive, and focus on addressing root causes of gender inequality and social exclusion within the communities and countries by targeting stigma and stereotypes. Findings across various research projects demonstrate that educators can tackle stigma and stereotypes and promote GEI if they ensure gender and geographical representation in all initiatives. They must also intentionally create community awareness and dialogue to address the issues and build the capacity of key actors including teachers, parents, caregivers, community leaders and policymakers. Incorporating GEI considerations into ECE initiatives can shift gender roles and communities' general perceptions about child-rearing and gender-related issues, benefitting children, parents and the community at large. Such beneficial outcomes were seen in several projects, which used varied approaches to strengthening GEI in early childhood education.

Projects used a variety of approaches to mainstream GEI issues within their project design and implementation. For example, they looked for attempts to ensure gender balance within program enrolments and selected project sites based on communities' needs, leading to the inclusion of low-income and rural areas. Similarly, including participants of varying income levels provided a more representative socioeconomic profile of the community in which the projects are being implemented. Projects sought equal gender representation in meetings and leadership positions and ensured that curriculum review or reform took GEI into account. Data collection was seen a major means to highlight GEI issues in ECE; projects therefore ensured that their data collection instruments captured data on GEI for analysis. The resulting findings also provided a basis for advocacy on inclusion.

The LEARN Plus project integrated a GEI lens throughout the research process. It considered gender and other relevant demographic factors when formulating gender-sensitive and inclusive questions, used data disaggregation during data collection, and analyzed data separately for male and female subjects to identify any gender-specific patterns or disparities. Furthermore, the GEI assessments conducted in Tanzania and Cambodia explored the role that gendered power dynamics play in shaping parenting responsibilities: who has access to education, who progresses in the delivery of pre-primary education, and the overall educational trajectory of diverse girls and boys. These assessments provided a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gender dynamics within the study areas. This helped the project identify gender gaps and provide recommendations on how to strengthen the interventions to ensure they are adequately being addressed.

Some projects contributed to breaking down stereotypes while simultaneously addressing underlying social issues such as poverty. In Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe, the [Inclusive Home-Based Early Learning Project](#) (IHELP) addressed the stigma often ascribed to children with special needs through continued sensitization exercises targeting fathers, mothers, communities, teachers and policymakers. This changed communities' perspectives on these children and resulted in learning centres becoming more accommodating by using learning models that attend to the needs of every child. The GREAT-ECE project also changed teachers' perceptions about learners with disabilities through teacher training, refresher training, supervision and ongoing support for teachers. It shifted perceptions from seeing disabled learners as problem learners to seeing them as children with unique backgrounds and potential. Meanwhile, the Child-to-Child project acknowledged the unique needs of children, mothers and fathers, and took action to address those needs while dealing with other realities such as rurality and poverty. The project challenged the perception that only an adult can be a facilitator or a teacher, by providing training to teachers, older children and parents in the community. It also equipped parents with skills on livelihood activities such as soap making for income generation. These livelihood activities had the added advantage of attracting fathers to ECE centres, encouraging their participation in children's education.

Engaging and strengthening relationships with government stakeholders and diverse partners was instrumental to projects' efforts to promote GEI in education. Resources produced through GPE KIX research also built the capacity of government stakeholders to address gender and social inequities. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the Ministry of Education revised its national curriculum to remove bias, promoting more equitable interactions and learning materials thanks to strategies and case studies produced by the BELDS project on tackling gender equality from the early years. LEARN Plus strengthened relationships with government stakeholders through technical working groups (TWG) in each country. To begin, the findings from the project's implementation research, GEI assessment and impact evaluations were shared with TWG stakeholders. Discussions were then held to ensure various GEI issues – such as fathers' involvement in parenting, and the enrolment, retention and overall development of boys, girls and children with disabilities – were addressed by the program. In Lao PDR, the engagement of policymakers in support of GEI led to discussions of intersecting identities and how the project can promote school readiness for girls and boys from different ethnic groups. This engagement has been critical for increasing the stakeholders' understanding of how the LEARN Plus project can influence change around GEI issues.

GPE KIX projects underscore the importance of promoting equal participation and addressing stigma to create more inclusive learning environments for children with special needs, as well as girls. The Teacher Capacity for PBL project tackled

the gender-skewed participation of parents in meetings related to their children's education. Specific messaging during community sensitization meetings emphasized the need for men to participate more actively. It also underscored the need to ensure all schools had facilities for children with disabilities. Messaging further encouraged parents to ensure that girls are supported in their education journey by reducing their household chores. The importance of the participation of children with special needs is underscored by the contact hypothesis, which posits that people develop more positive perceptions and attitudes towards others when there is an opportunity for inter-group interactions (Pettigrew 1998). This implies that including children with special needs in mainstream learning environments can contribute to a more inclusive society. The Promoting Positive Early Learning project organized training and community dialogue meetings around the principle of Least Restrictive Environments, which aims to maximize the extent to which students with disabilities are educated alongside their peers by creating inclusive and supportive learning environments that include disability-friendly facilities. Gender and disability lenses were also applied to analyze project results, ensuring disaggregation by gender and other factors of inequity, including disabilities.

Teacher training on gender-responsive and inclusive pedagogies in the classroom has built teachers' understanding of gender roles and how they affect the experiences that girls and boys have in their education. IHELP demonstrated that capacity-building can support teachers to gain greater understandings of gender-related issues and develop contextually and linguistically age-appropriate resources (such as stories) that can interest students and promote gender equality while still meeting curricular objectives. The project was also intentional about inclusion by targeting rural sites to ensure that marginalized children benefited from project interventions that supported access to education (Ejuu and Locoro 2022). The Teacher Capacity for PBL project reported that teachers in targeted schools found their PBL training particularly valuable as it incorporated a component on GEI. This GEI training focused on promoting sensitivity to gender and learners with special needs in teaching methods. Specifically, it addressed strategies for ensuring equal participation from both boys and girls while catering to their distinct learning styles. The training helped to address longstanding gender prejudices, as evidenced by teachers' reduced use of discriminatory practices. Teachers from the intervention group also reported a higher ability to deliver PBL. LEARN Plus project activities had a clear focus on promoting a gender-responsive and inclusive model by working directly with teachers, parents, community members and government stakeholders

to address social norms and other structural causes of inequality. The training content covered practical strategies for incorporating gender-responsive and inclusive education in their classrooms, including ways to empower both girls and boys through child-centered and needs-based approaches. The teaching and learning materials used in classrooms were also gender-responsive and inclusive, with gender-equal language, avoidance of stereotypes, and equal representation of girls, boys and children with disabilities in illustrations.

High-quality early learning programs that target underprivileged children have long-term positive effects on important social and economic outcomes (Oppong 2020). The project Promoting Positive Early Learning showed that positive effects are strong for girls, who are often marginalized. Similarly, all projects sought to provide ECE that was more inclusive to children of various backgrounds, including those with special needs. They provided real learning opportunities to groups of children, including those traditionally excluded from learning, using various approaches to address inclusion issues. IHELP, for example, developed a disability awareness week to promote awareness of children with special needs, and strengthen caregivers' knowledge of health and nutrition, growth monitoring and immunization (Ejuu and Locoro 2022).

Engagement with parents on gender-responsive and inclusive parenting skills is also important to support their children's learning opportunities equally. The parenting-education component in LEARN Plus used a gender-transformative approach that engaged mothers to increase their knowledge and build their agency to become leaders in pre-primary education promotion. Fathers were also involved in the parenting sessions to foster equal and shared parenting responsibilities and deconstruct negative masculinities to promote more equitable power relationships. Working together with parents and caregivers, LEARN Plus supported equal access to education for girls and boys by raising parents' awareness. According to end-line results in both Tanzania and Cambodia, there was gender parity in the summer pre-primary enrolment, although there continued to be challenges with parents' attitudes towards gender equality in education. The manual for Cambodia's parenting sessions was expanded to add additional units, with GEI content embedded throughout, stressing the importance of men's participation in parenting, equal parenting and how to change gender norms. In Tanzania, the TWG developed and enhanced school-readiness materials (curriculum, training materials, learning and teaching materials and methodologies) with a focus on operationalizing strategies for including children living with disabilities. They also worked with community and district partners to increase enrolment of young children, including those with disabilities.

### 3.4 Scaling and sustainability of ECE in education-sector planning

ECE can serve as a foundation and a tool for sustainable development (Fermín-González and Echenique-Arginzones 2022; Grindheim et al. 2019; Sonter and Kemp 2021; Yıldız et al. 2021). Scaling up early learning models with specific components that promise quality ECE programming helps increase access to ECE for marginalized communities. Examples that have been included in policy documents include home-based, centre-based and community-based models, as well as models that deliberately promote community participation. Omoding (2021) and Nakajima et al. (2021) provide empirical evidence of an initiative that used a community participatory approach. Inclusive training programs that encompass both pre-primary and primary school levels can enhance scalability. This section highlights how different GPE partner countries where GPE KIX research was conducted have attempted to mainstream and sustain ECE initiatives at the national and local levels. In this report, we note that one of the most common strategies being used by governments to scale ECE initiatives is by mainstreaming them into education sector plans.

Sustainability and scaling can be strengthened if projects gain political support from the outset. This effort should foster collaboration between national and international experts, invest in workforce development (and workforce needs) such as capacity building for ECE teachers, support multi-level and multi-sectoral approaches, and ensure strong community partnerships and civil society engagement. Being open to including teachers who were not initially targeted in the project demonstrates adaptability and responsiveness to evolving demands. GPE KIX projects have helped to strengthen educational ecosystems for early learning and to increase access to and quality of early learning opportunities by building the capacity of educational stakeholders at both the policy and practice (classroom) levels. The system strengthening also included building parents' capacity for income-generating to sustain community-based ECE centres in some communities.

Understanding the costs associated with implementing a given program sheds light on how efficiently the model can strengthen or improve educational outcomes. For LEARN Plus, cost analysis was an important complement to its feasibility analysis. In Lao PDR, it aimed to provide information to the ECE department, the Provincial Education and Sports Service and the District Education and Sports Bureau regarding the costs associated with scaling up the 10-week summer pre-primary (SPP) program in remote areas, with active community engagement. The cost analysis focused on two supporting research questions: 1) What were the program costs?; and 2) What were the types and quantities of resources invested in the program?

To better understand these costs, the study considered the full context of implementing the adapted SPP program. This included capturing the different people involved in various stages of the program (e.g., planning, implementing and monitoring) as well as the resources invested. The overall cost of the adapted SPP program was USD383 per child. This included the costs of developing adapted SPP teaching and learning manuals and educational materials for the children; delivering teacher training and community awareness campaigns; and program roll-out and monitoring costs. These estimates also included the cost of the TWG, project team, district office of education, provincial office of education, teachers, and other personnel that were involved, as well as volunteered time and in-kind resources that the community donated. As is the norm for the facilitation of educational initiatives, personnel costs constituted the largest share, at 44 percent of the overall cost. However, if the adapted SPP continued to be rolled out in the same communities, the yearly cost would fall to around USD238 per child, given that materials and initial trainings have already been designed, and teachers would only need refresher training.

The LEARN Plus findings on scaling illustrate the value of leveraging research partnerships and collaborative networks and replicating innovations in new regions. The endorsement of the LEARN Plus accelerated school readiness model by the Plan International Federation marked a significant milestone in scaling educational innovations globally. This endorsement underscores the model's adaptability and effectiveness across diverse educational contexts.

In Lao PDR, the engagement of parents through LEARN Plus parenting sessions has been pivotal in enhancing educational outcomes. The initiative's emphasis on parental involvement illustrates the importance of community engagement in scaling educational programs. Scaling and sustaining the whole SPP program in the broader education system demands strong engagement from the community, increased parental involvement and a wider partnership reach. It also requires supporting more involvement and interaction among teachers, and sharing more information with the community to raise awareness about the program. Gaining strong support from school management teams, cooperating with village and commune chiefs, and asking for more active teachers and ECE officers are other best practices.

GPE KIX projects findings also affirm the value of building the capacity of national educational stakeholders, both at the policy and practice levels, and increasing funding for early learning to scale ECE programs. Peer-to-peer support and strategic alignment of knowledge and evidence are also key to this process. For instance, following the successful implementation of the ECE Accelerator Toolkit in Sierra Leone through the BELDS project, a community of practice was established for five GPE partner countries. This provided a platform for Sierra Leone to use their experience



to guide other countries in their efforts to integrate ECE budgeting into their new education sector plans. In Lao PDR, the LEARN Plus project ensured that knowledge and evidence generated by the project strategically aligned with the priorities in the education sector plan. For instance, a feasibility study was initiated to provide evidence on the need for scaling the SPP and guidance on where and how to scale the program. The project built the capacity of government partners and education stakeholders to adapt and use the innovation that addresses a key gap in pre-primary education provision.

Scaling ECE must extend beyond the national policy level to include teachers, communities and parents. Allowing teachers from different levels to participate in training sessions promotes a more comprehensive understanding of new approaches and their adoption into existing ones. Teacher capacity-building sessions contributed to the success of the LEARN Plus program, resulting in increased interest from other school leaders. This highlights the importance of showcasing tangible results to generate interest and buy-in from stakeholders. Teacher professional development also contributes to increased quality of ECE and scaling potential. The Child-to-Child project in Uganda, Ethiopia and Malawi and IHELP in Uganda, Kenya and Zimbabwe not only built the capacity of teachers and young facilitators, but established new early learning centres in rural communities that previously had none. Child-to-Child's inclusion of income-generating livelihood activities contributed to the involvement of male caregivers, brought parents together, and generated income for the centres to ensure their sustainability – showing how including livelihood training can strengthen the financial viability of community-based ECE.

Well-elaborated social mobilization strategies and public-private partnerships provide a foundation and opportunities for scaling ECE models and approaches. Engaging key stakeholders as co-creators and implementers fosters ownership and sustainability of interventions. This means actively involving school managers, community leaders and other relevant stakeholders in the planning and implementation process. In various contexts cited in the literature, parents, teachers, community members, government entities and NGOs have been involved in diverse functions such as funding, project implementation, and knowledge and skills exchange (Das et al. 2018; Nakajima et al. 2021; Omoding 2021). In Uganda, the introduction of IHELP involved community engagement and the project was widely accepted such that community members willingly volunteered and participated to sustain it (Ejuu and Locoro 2022). Parents took management positions as chairs and committee members, aided in the financial management and offered to supervise activities at the centre. Other forms of community participation included supporting project planning and budgeting, offering advice (such as the use of Indigenous teaching and learning materials), paying fees and other means of financial support,

donating and cooking food, supplying firewood, and providing cleaning and security services (Ejuu and Locoro 2022). LEARN Plus also showed that allowances for teachers and village volunteers can contribute to sustainability efforts.

Scaling in communities where pre-primary education coverage is low and inequitable presents additional challenges that must be reflected in budgetary allocations. In LEARN Plus, for example, this meant allocating adequate funds to cover incentives for teachers, providing teaching and learning materials, and ensuring the availability of water and sanitation and safe learning spaces. For implementation, recommendations included providing additional coaching and mentoring to teachers, and supporting simple and creative educational initiatives to equip parents with tools to better engage with their children. Furthermore, developing platforms for continuous knowledge-sharing among partners will be key to building and sustaining innovative educational practices, challenges and solutions relevant to different contexts. Encouraging joint research initiatives that explore new methodologies, tools, and strategies for enhancing pre-primary education – with a particular focus on scalability and adaptability to diverse environments – will further solidify the foundation for these educational endeavors. Investing in capacity-building activities to strengthen the abilities of partner institutions to implement, evaluate and scale successful educational models is another critical step. Additionally, collaborating on advocacy efforts to influence education policy in new regions will ensure that conducive policy frameworks support the replication of proven project models.

Contextualizing knowledge for building the capacity of policy-level stakeholders is a proven strategy in sustaining ECE in GPE countries. Offering refresher training programs can further support scalability by ensuring continuous learning and skills reinforcement. This allows for the integration of new knowledge and practices into existing systems over time. For example, the Department of Early Childhood Education in South Sudan mobilized resources for ECE system strengthening, building on support from the BELDS project to strengthen the capacity of its ECE technical working group, Ministry of Education staff and education partners. This capacity helped the ECE TWG to develop a national ECE policy, strategy and implementation plan. One major result of this capacity building was the government's allocation of 13.6 percent of the total 2022 education budget to ECE (UNICEF 2023). LEARN Plus produced brief, easy-to-read, local-language versions of research reports to make them accessible and digestible to decision-makers and education stakeholders with limited time to read technical reports. Project workshops were followed by reflection meetings with government partners and education stakeholders, particularly those involved in program adaptation and piloting, to assess implications for the SPP program and work on areas for improvement. This resulted in more refinements to the program, in terms of content, methodology, training and engagement strategies for parents and the community. The project also sought opportunities to disseminate knowledge



and evidence and advocate for uptake of the program through existing sector coordination platforms. This happened at national and sub-national levels including through local education groups, education networks and coalitions, and sector review and planning processes.

The use of contextually relevant and culturally appropriate content is crucial for sustaining ECE at community and subnational levels. In Uganda, Indigenous games were used to implement the Child-to-Child project, while in Ethiopia, they were used (in Amharic) to sustain ECE in communities (Ejuu et al. 2022). The GREAT-ECE project produced an evidence-based adaptation of Right to Play's Gender-Responsive Education and Transformation program in Rwanda and Mozambique. In Rwanda, a stakeholder workshop on ECE landscape analysis was used to design sustainability strategies for the project. Its scalability was also supported by a teacher-driven parental engagement approach (Musemakweli et al. 2023).

Through IHELP – to support adoption and scaling of an effective and inclusive home-based model to increase access to ECE and improve school readiness outcomes in vulnerable communities – the University of Zimbabwe worked on a draft curriculum guide that will be used in developing Training of Trainer modules to guide teaching and learning in the home-based ECE centres. In Uganda, the project partnered with the National Curriculum Development Centre to review the country's ECE curriculum (Ejuu and Locoro 2022). In Zambia, drawing on findings from the SSRI project, the ECE curriculum embraced the concept of LTP and advocates for 60 percent play and 40 percent academic learning (Kalinde et al. 2022).

Analysis of focus group discussions revealed several other approaches used by GPE KIX projects and national stakeholders to promote the scalability and sustainability of ECE initiatives. For instance, participants reported that countries mainstreamed and promoted sustainable ECE initiatives through infrastructural development (e.g., establishing and renovating new ECE centres, supplying utilities and resources to the centres, etc.), while projects secured political will at their onset. Other examples included using tools such as the BELDS ECE Accelerator Toolkit, building effective monitoring and evaluation systems, and maintaining a multi-level, multi-sectoral approach to ECE planning and policy formulation. These approaches serve to ensure that national educational systems in GPE partner countries can integrate, scale up and ensure sustainability of ECE planning in the context of education sector planning.

### 3.5 ECE partnerships, community and parental participation

Quality ECE requires the involvement of multiple partners and stakeholders that are integral to overall development in early learning. Stakeholder collaboration and strong partnerships expedite meaningful relations that help provide the resources to tackle challenges in early learning. Regional platforms support the exchange of knowledge and ideas in tackling these common challenges. Additionally, civil society organizations and government agencies help implement ECE policies and regulations for better sustainability of implementation. Project partnerships that involve the community in designing and implementing project activities acknowledge the role of community members as advocates and not just users of the intervention (Kabue et al. 2022). Through community participation and partnerships, ECE initiatives have become more relevant, effective and sustainable. This is demonstrated in GPE KIX projects that have used various participation techniques to include the voice of local community members (Kabue et al. 2022). These projects have deliberately included parents, teachers, communities and organizations in rural, semi-urban, and urban areas, in multiple countries.

Active and diverse community engagement is crucial for the successful integration and sustainability of educational initiatives. GPE KIX projects engaged with their communities in a variety of ways, such as through social media platforms, collaborative mapping, workshops, research symposia, community-based participatory research, webinars and orientation events. This engagement also helped build capacity, understanding, skills and motivation. These approaches have encouraged dialogue among stakeholders, promoting collaboration and the exchange of knowledge and ideas, and fostering mutual understanding. Through ongoing dialogue and feedback, community participation has allowed for continuous learning, adaptation and improvement. The BELDS project engaged partners to increase global awareness and uptake of the ECE Accelerator Toolkit. Using the project's findings and capacity-strengthening activities, Sierra Leone, Lesotho, Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan have integrated ECE into national education systems (UNICEF 2022a). Knowledge exchange with Ghana encouraged a TWG in Sierra Leone to use the ECE Accelerator Toolkit (UNICEF, 2022a). The capacity-building phase on the use of the toolkit for GPE partner countries was a significant accomplishment that has resulted in wider use of the toolkit, in communities beyond those in GPE KIX projects (UNICEF 2022b). Capacity building equipped country officers with the necessary skills to mainstream ECE in the education sector planning process. Civil society organizations and government agencies engaged in these projects to help implement ECE policies and regulations, which increases sustainability.

LEARN Plus demonstrated the importance of regional knowledge exchange, stakeholder support and community engagement for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of ECE innovations. Sharing best practices and research findings,

training educators and involving stakeholders were crucial steps for expanding and integrating initiatives into the learning process. The project facilitated an exposure visit to Lao PDR for the Cambodian team, to enhance program effectiveness through regional knowledge exchange. In Tanzania, a meeting with ECE advocates focused on sharing research findings and developing action plans for the model's expansion. The parental engagement component of the project had a positive impact on the extent to which families supported children's early learning at home (through activities like storytelling and counting). Findings from Lao PDR show that to ensure a conducive learning environment for children, parental engagement should focus on: 1) building parental awareness on the importance of enrolment and attendance in primary school; 2) maintaining the significant positive impact of family support for the child's learning at home; 3) strengthening GEI; and 4) ensuring relevant adaptation and contextualization of the model if expanded to other communities. Empowering parents and communities through adult-literacy programs and providing government support and guidance on involvement are also essential, particularly in hard-to-reach communities.

Community engagement also proved invaluable in sustaining play-based learning. Through the SSRI project, community mobilization efforts led to infrastructure improvements in several centres and the provision of outdoor play parks in home learning centres. To further promote positive exposure to PBL, orientation programs like those used by the SSRI project should be extended to additional schools, while enhancing parental engagement through regular meetings and workshops. In urban areas, alternative methods for financing play park construction, such as applying for constituency development funds, should be explored. Community engagement is also crucial for safeguarding play infrastructure against vandalism.



*“We are creating awareness among parents and communities through workshops and seminars on the importance of learning through play. We are developing an activity bank, where local attributes in the form of songs and drawings can be locally collected and submitted to the Ministry of Education and then shared so everyone can have access.”*

Male, focus group discussion, Nigeria

The Child-to-Child project illustrated the value of incorporating livelihood training for parents to deepen the involvement of parents and other community members, and enhance ECE centres' financial sustainability. Through BELDS, Kyrgyz Republic opened an ECE centre in a library space as a strategy to enable community mobilization and accommodate parents and their children, with UNICEF providing training packages to librarians. In The Gambia and Kenya, Promoting Positive Early Learning has been building awareness about parental engagement regarding play-based learning. In Tanzania, through LEARN Plus, the community used specific criteria to select people who can teach pre-primary as community teaching assistants.



*“We ensure sustainability through engaging parents and communities to support children’s education. We are partnering with creative minds. The activity includes encouraging volunteering mothers in the communities to go through training of play-based pedagogies in which they’re given one hour to teach learners through play pedagogy. Trained parents are usually given a certificate and awarded among the community. We have also developed family and community guidelines used to educate everyone within the community.”*

Female, focus group discussion, Ghana

## 4. RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Research provides evidence to support policymakers in making informed decisions. It is therefore important that researchers continue to collect, analyze and publish reliable and valid evidence to meet the needs of policymakers. This report identifies several specific gaps that require further research to better understand how to introduce ECE innovations and scale their impact, including how LMICs can best prioritize within their national budgets and identify suitable financial models to support ECE implementation.

The following gaps and recommendations for future research emerged from focus group discussions and the review of project documentation and published literature discussed in this report.

### **Implementing learning through play**

There is a gap in the literature on LTP in Africa. National documents on ECE address a considerable number of key aspects of LTP content and child development and play-based learning. However, parents and community members lack of understanding and knowledge of LTP has hampered its application in teaching and learning among children (Kalinde et al. 2022). More action research on how to implement LTP could help to fill this gap. Teacher syllabi and guides are also lacking both content and methodology on play-based pedagogy. Locally available resources to support LTP are often neglected, and teachers are not being trained on how to use locally available tools to promote school readiness and transitioning from pre-primary to primary education. Thus, research needs to examine how to incorporate locally available resources such as teaching and learning materials to support LTP.

### **Accommodating special needs in ECE**

Though a lot has been said about improving inclusion for children with special needs in ECE service delivery, not much has been done in LMICs to understand which pedagogical approaches work for mainstream ECE centres. Education stakeholders are interested in understanding how to incorporate LTP in managing children with special needs as well as how to combat the stigma against these children in mainstream educational systems.

### **Addressing the impacts of climate change**

Climate change is a key issue in ECE planning now. Yıldız et al. (2021) report that ECE for sustainable development has focused largely on environmental sustainability. This makes issues of climate change quite important for ECE, not only to leverage ECE for sustainable development, but to mitigate the impact of climate change

on children's development. Education stakeholders expressed an interest in understanding the impact of climate change on ECE and mitigation strategies that can promote quality ECE.

### **Strengthening the role of fathers and mothers in ECE**

Parental involvement is a key factor in sustaining ECE centres in rural LMICs (Nakajima et al. 2021). However, most ECE initiatives have targeted the mother as the primary caregiver (Oppong and Strader 2022) and concerns have been expressed about the low level of fathers' involvement. Education stakeholders wish to understand what measures can effectively promote fathers' involvement in LMIC settings. They also want to understand how to work with mothers in the informal sector to promote quality care for their children.

### **Strengthening ECE data management**

There is a need to improve the collection and management of ECE data in LMICs. Weak data management systems result in poor data or a complete lack of data (Raikes et al. 2023). There is a need for ECE projects that focus on building robust data management systems in LMICs for effective monitoring and evaluation.

### **A continued focus on scaling the use of evidence to support ECE**

While the scaling of ECE innovations and policy uptake of evidence on ECE is growing, it is still minimal in LMIC settings. There is a need for more applied research and basic science research targeting improved policy uptake and the scaling of existing evidence. The evidence synthesized in this report is a good example of using existing evidence in ways that can support policy uptake. More research should be commissioned to provide evidence that can inform ECE policy in LMICs.

### **Balancing public- and private-sector ECE service delivery**

Most ECE projects have focused on public-school systems or community-based childcare services. Publicly provided programs tend to be held accountable for observing national ECE regulations and standards. Yet much of the provision of ECE services in LMICs is through the private sector. This implies that future ECE initiatives should also focus on private childcare providers to improve quality and access, particularly in low-income urban areas. Studies that investigate how to balance the competing interests of profit-making and the public good could provide models for other LMICs to learn from and scale.

Beyond these themes, there is also limited data on how several ECE indicators in LMICs, such as the number of ECE teachers and enrolment and retention rates, compare with HICs. GPE partner countries should continue to partner with donors, funders and researchers to identify and address crucial knowledge gaps and generate the evidence needed to help stakeholders understand ECE challenges, potential innovations and how to scale the impact of successful programs and approaches.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report synthesized the evidence generated by GPE KIX-funded projects and published literature on early learning in GPE partner countries, integrating the body of knowledge that these projects produced. The evidence highlights the importance of policies that address ECE challenges and support the structural integration of effective early-learning innovations to ensure effective and efficient implementation of ECE services. It illustrates how stakeholder engagement – from global, national and local communities – is key to successful implementation of ECE projects. The insights drawn from this evidence synthesis can be used to support national dialogue and policymaking on early-learning.

The following recommendations derived from the GPE KIX projects are tailored for ECE practitioners, researchers, policymakers and donors, acknowledging that each group can effectively contribute to and benefit from the proposed actions.

### **1. Integrate play into the ECE curriculum.**

Curricula for early learning should be centred on age-appropriate play-based learning. Including resources to guide both teachers' and parents' in using PBL, and conducting regular monitoring and evaluation, will help to ensure that quality standards for ECE are met.

### **2. Strengthen ECE teacher training and expand access to training programs.**

There is a shortage of qualified ECE teachers in LMICs, particularly in rural and remote areas. While LMIC governments have initiated efforts to train ECE teachers at certificate, diploma and degree levels, training opportunities are limited because few academic institutions offer ECE training, and most are in urban areas. There are also few scholarships available to support ECE training in LMICs. To increase the number of qualified ECE teachers, governments should expand training into more public colleges of education and provide alternative training opportunities for the ECE sector, such as through distance-education or virtual training, to increase accessibility and enrolment even in remote areas. More ECE scholarships are also needed to strengthen human resources. For in-service teachers, continuous professional development, mentorship and hands-on training should be prioritized to build teacher confidence in delivering play-based pedagogy.

### **3. Promote gender equality, equity and inclusion through ECE.**

GEI considerations should be mainstreamed into ECE policies and programs, with a focus on addressing the needs of marginalized groups, including children with disabilities and girls. To address current inequities, there is a need to identify and implement policy and financing approaches to scale ECE services to rural areas and



to disadvantaged populations. Various service delivery models can be used to widen access, including home-based ECE centres, the child-to-child approach, community-based childcare centres, or mainstreaming pre-primary education and delivery through private providers. Financing models should include a focus on equity to ensure that all children have access to quality ECE.

LMIC governments can also address equity through policies such as introducing paid paternity to strengthen men's role in caregiving by adopting culturally sensitive approaches. Strategies to transform social norms and shift beliefs that ECE is a woman's issue will require social and behavioural change within communities, to empower more men to participate in early learning and child care.

#### **4. Foster community engagement.**

Parental and community involvement should be actively promoted through awareness campaigns and training, ensuring that all stakeholders are invested in the success of early learning programs. GPE KIX projects showed how engaging local communities helped with both the acceptance of and ongoing support for innovations in early learning. Parents gained skills and understanding in play-based learning and greater agency in supporting their children's education. Parents and communities can be engaged in many ways, such as social media, community-based participatory research, and webinars, workshops and other events. Such approaches can encourage dialogue and collaboration with other education stakeholders, giving parents and communities a role in fostering continuous learning, adaptation and improvement of ECE.

#### **5. Ensure sustainability and scalability.**

ECE models should be integrated into national education sector plans, and governments should collaborate with local and international partners to ensure long-term sustainability. Factors that contribute to sustainability and scaling of educational innovations include gaining political support from the outset, fostering collaboration among stakeholders at multiple levels and with local and international experts, investing in workforce development and ensuring strong partnerships with communities and with civil society partners. Helping decision-makers understand the costs and benefits associated with ECE innovations can also contribute to the case for scaling and sustaining them.

Funding early-learning innovations is critical for their integration into education policy and practice and for scaling their impact. While GPE KIX projects investigated low-cost and locally-grounded ECE models, and integrated small-scale income generating activities to help finance them, this will not be a sufficient approach to finance the full scope of quality ECE needed in LMICs. Governments should recalibrate



their fiscal policy and budgeting practices to increase ECE investments without undercutting investments later in life. ECE budget allocations should be specific to pre-primary education and not included in the primary education budget. Investment should focus on capacity-building for teachers, curriculum development and infrastructure. To identify additional resources for ECE, both supply-side and demand-side innovations in funding can be considered.

Supply-side approaches include:

- direct government provision of public ECE services
- one-off grants to providers to set up ECE programs
- government provision of operational subsidies and specific input costs
- tax breaks to private employers that offer childcare services for employees
- job-creation initiatives to expand opportunities for the ECE workforce

Demand-side options include:

- tax breaks for formally employed parents whose children attend ECE facilities
- ECE vouchers for poor households
- conditional cash transfers to families, linked to ECE enrolment

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