CONCEPT NOTE

Sustainable National Policies for ECD

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Background

The field of early childhood (ECD) has cogently demonstrated that the early years are precious; not only with respect to subjective or poetic interpretations, ratherover the past decade, several fields of study have demonstrated its value. Research across disciplines has synergistically concluded that during early childhood, children make tremendous strides in development; that investing early is leads to high returns; and that high quality programs have a lasting impact (Engle, Black, Behrman et al, 2007; Grantham-McGregor, Cheung, Cueto, & the International Child Development Steering Group, 2007; Heckman & Krueger, 2003; Irwin, Siddqui, & Hertzman, 2007; McCartney & Phillips, 2006; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Walker, Wachs, Meeks, & the International Child Development Steering Group, 2007). Despite this strong evidentiary base, young children in the majority world still bear the greatest burden of poverty, disease, violence and concomitant factors. Outcomes for the youngest in the developing world, and in some instances in the more industrialized countries, are unacceptably abysmal. Daunting statistics paint a bleak future for young children, which is particularly unfortunate given the strong evidence in favor of ameliorating such circumstances and concomitant impact on children. There is an urgent need to apply knowledge and evidence to policies to improve the lives and uphold the rights of children.

The time has come to build on this evidentiary body of knowledge by working towards the next generation of questions that take us from knowing to acting. These 2nd generation questions seek to ensure that ECD programs and policies, and hence children, benefit fully from our enhanced scientific knowledge base. In particular, mechanisms are needed to apply science in order to create *Sustainable National Policies (SNPs)* for ECD.

1. What is the Definition of a National Sustainable Policy?

Currently, there is a growing momentum in countries to enhance ECD. Governments, NGO-providers, civil society, and donors are keen to advance this area (UNESCO, 2007). Several countries are interested in employing systematic processes to develop strong and coherent *sustainable national* policies.

In this section, we briefly define the terms ECD policy framework, national policy, and sustainable policy. Depending on the disciplinary and/or sectoral perspectives this often used policy nomenclature holds multiple connotations.

ECD Policy Framework is defined as a set of social policies with a particular focus on children (prenatal to 8 or 9 years of age), supported by a publicly funded institution (e.g., government) while addressing early childhood. An ECD policy framework is also aligned with other national policies via shared goals. The ECD policy framework fills the gaps by providing directives for areas not covered by existing policies, yet evidentially known to be important for children's development*.*

Figure 1. ECD Policy Framework
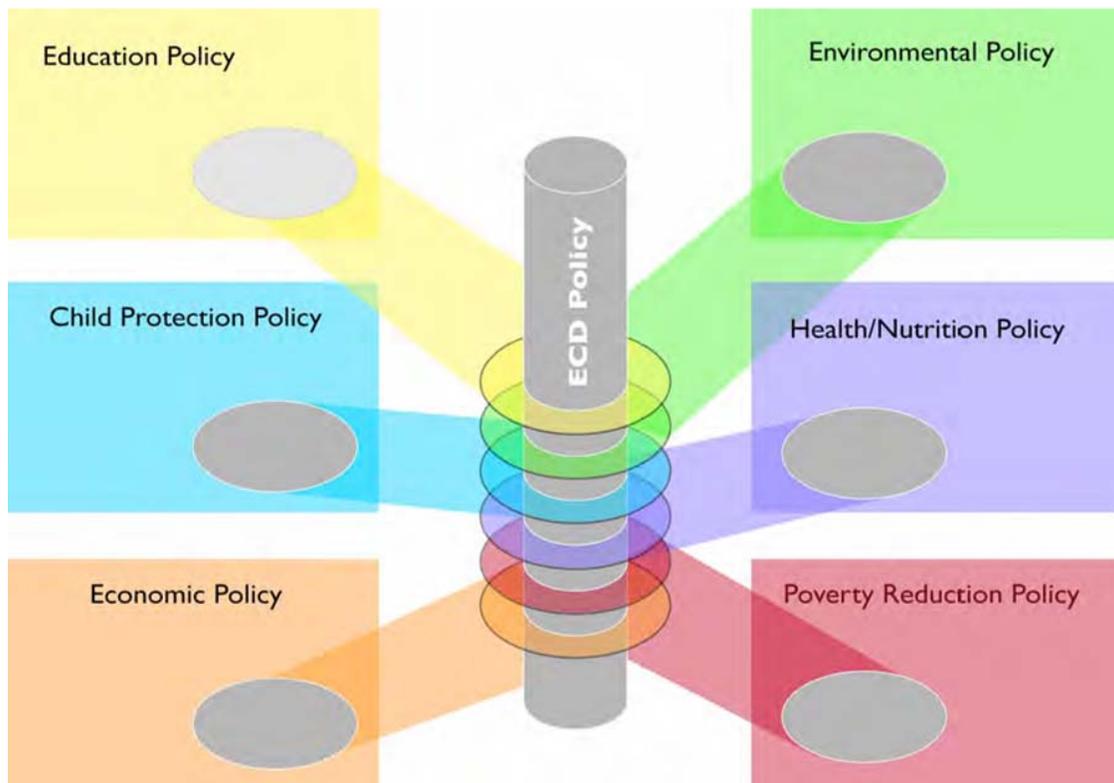
Britto, P.R., Cerezo, A., & Ogbunugafor, B. (2008)

National Policy is defined as, but not limited to, an encompassing policy that pays attention to all critical elements of ECD for the country in a coherent way. It is also understood that the provision of ECD services, at national levels often remain diverse and under the jurisdiction of a variety of sectors. The national character of the policy is reflected in the stipulation of policy directives that respond to the national need, in the inclusion of national values, with attention to minority perspectives and those of vulnerable populations. The imperative of national policies is to ensure access & equity while maintaining quality across the diverse and disparate regions of the country.

Sustainable Policies are conceptualized along 4 dimensions: Socially sustainable means that the policy is owned and easily implementable by parents, communities, and civil society. Politically sustainable means that there is no risk that the provision is jeopardized once a new coalition takes power. Financially sustainable means that funding is secured, even if it has to rely changes in funding sources over time. Capacity sustainability refers to the technical capacity in the country to implement the policy.

National Sustainable policies are characterized by 4 components and 2 underlying processes (See Figure 2). The components of the policy are: Vision and goals; activities and strategies; governance; and finance. These components are all linked and developed in aligned with each other. The processes that are important to create these four components are evidence and participation. Hence you see in Figure 2, National and Sustainable are the characteristics of the policy, with 4 major components. The pencils connote process, and it is the evidence and participation jointly the lead to policy planning and implementation. The components and processes are described in detail below.

Figure 2. Components and Processes of National Sustainable Policies.
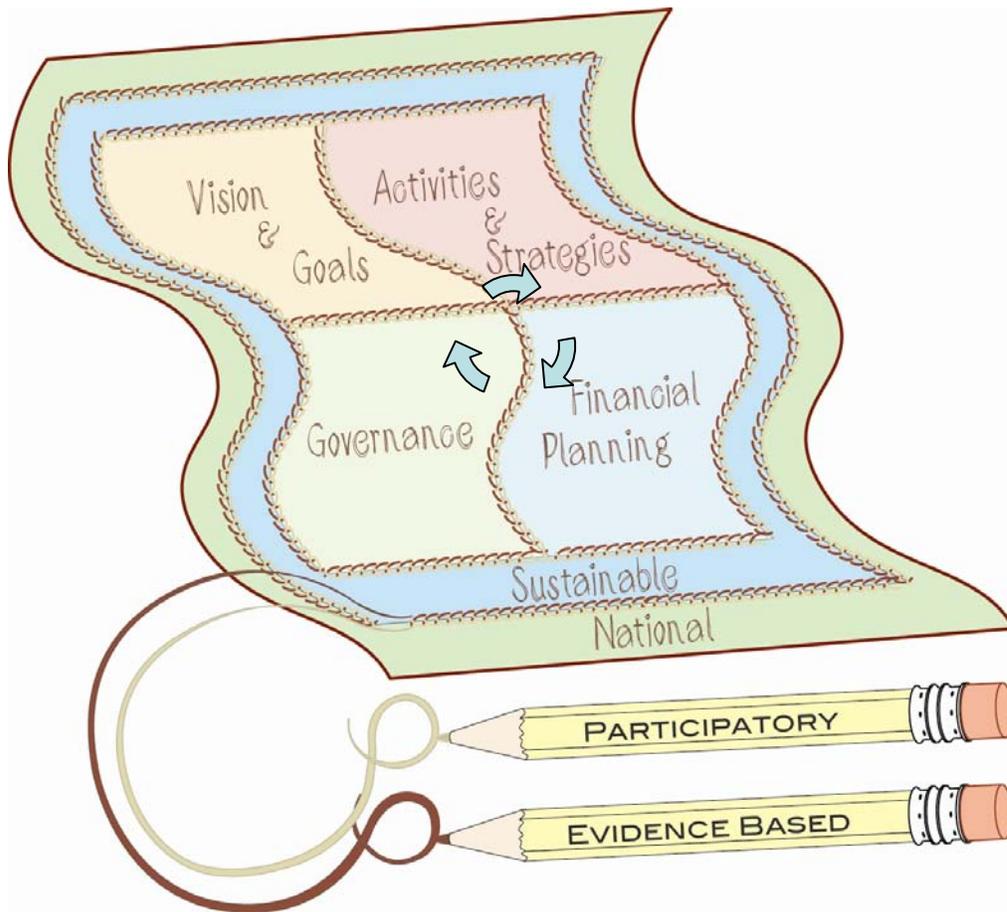
2. What are the Components of National Sustainable Policies?

In order to build a framework for the development of SNPs, it is imperative to understand the components of the framework and the type of evidence required to inform each of the components. While the literature provides several frameworks for conceptualizing policies and policy components, we propose four major components for an ECD policy framework: vision and goals; programs and strategies; governance and management; and financial planning and implementation (Britto, Cerezo, & Ogbunugafor, 2008; Britto & Ulkuer, 2007; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Jolly, 2007; Kamerman, et. al., 2003; OECD, 2001; UNESCO, 2007; Vagas-Baron, 2005).

The components of the framework are created in accordance with specific criteria and in response to a basic set of guiding questions.

The criteria for the framework are: i) demonstrate the rationale for the development of the framework, ii) capture the values and ideology, and iii) comprehensively cover the scope of ECD issues.

The <u>questions guiding</u> the framework components are: a) what does the policy aspire to achieve?, b) how will these aspirations be achieved? c) who will be responsible to carrying out the tasks towards the achievement?, and d) what is the financial and human resource capacity to achieve these aspiration?[1]
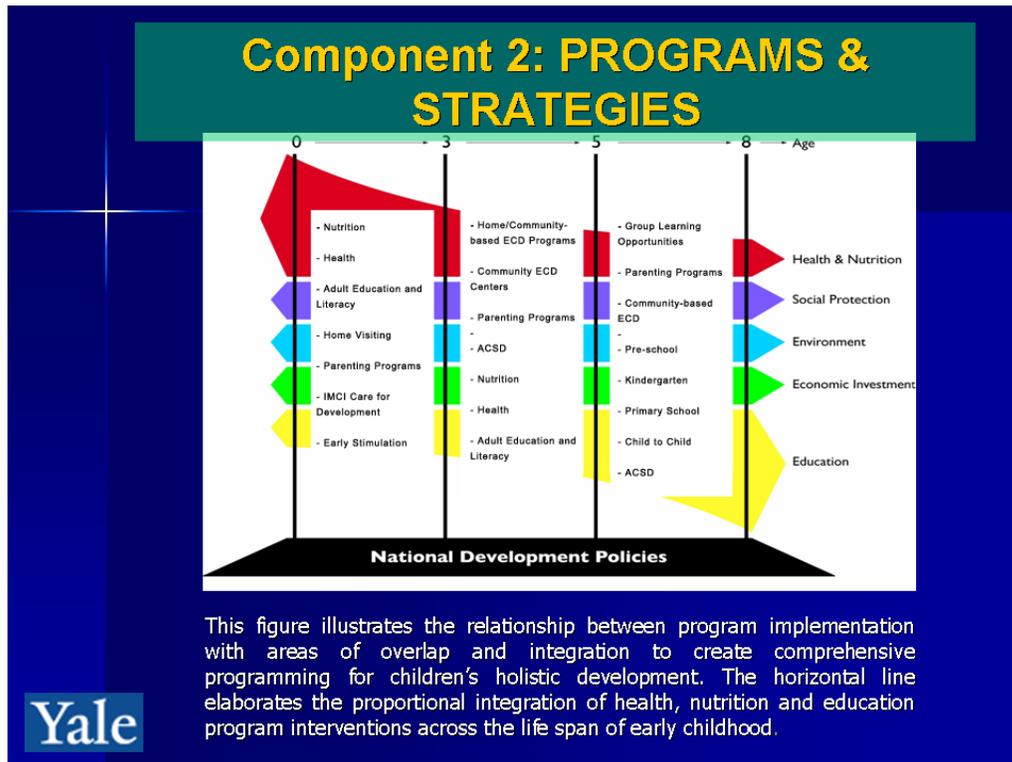
Component 1 - Vision and Goals. The vision is an articulation of what the policy framework hopes to achieve. The vision is the broadest level of aspiration stated in the policy. The goals are aspects of the vision which can be reflected at multiple levels: population (children and families), programs and services, and alignment with other national polices and international goals. The goals provide the direction for the programs and strategies while also setting the targets to be achieved by the policy. The targets, measured by a series of indicators are the monitoring aspect of the policy framework.

Component 2 – Activities. This 2nd component is designed to respond to the question of how will the policy vision and goals be achieved. Typically, policy directives, tools, programs and strategies are listed under policy activities. *Programs and Strategies* refer to the multiple ways in which ECD is implemented, which is often complex given that programs for children are distributed across multiple sectors. Also, the stages of early childhood differ in need, risks and opportunities for promoting development. Therefore, the activities of the framework, while adhering to the vision incorporate the variety of approaches involved in programming across the ECD age spectrum.

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[1] A common aspect that should be included in all 4 components is that of monitoring. Monitoring systems provide important information on the implementation and oversight of the policy. Albeit this component is not described in detail in the framework, and typically addressed in the strategic plan, nonetheless it is important to both include mention of it in the framework and acknowledge its important for policy effectiveness measurement. To the end, the vision and goals component, should present the monitoring indicators that align with the policy goals. The activities component should contain a series of indicators that could be used to measure the implementation of the activities. Indicators that comprise the governance component should measure the degree to which the relevant stakeholders and partners fulfill their responsibilities with respect to accountabilities and the financial component monitoring system should measure if the estimated the costs and expenditures of the policy are validated and if funding is obtained and distributed with fidelity to the policy.

Figure 2

This figure illustrates the relationship between program implementation with areas of overlap and integration to create comprehensive programming for children's holistic development. The horizontal line elaborates the proportional integration of health, nutrition and education program interventions across the life span of early childhood.

Component 3 – Governance. This component captures who will be responsible in the differing capacities to achieve the vision of the policy. Governance lays out the roles and responsibilities of the different parties, at the levels of government, partners, communities and civil society. The roles include, but are not limited to, planning, coordination, implementation, finance, and evaluation.   The governance component of the policy is often measured with respect to the accountabilities of roles and responsibilities.

Component 4 - Financial Planning. Critical to policy implementation is the consideration to how much will it cost to achieve the goals and how will the activities get funded. Without careful costing and allocation of resources, the sustainability and effectiveness of a policy is limited and at best, circumspect. Often policies fail to meet their vision because of inadequate financial allocations and unrealistic planning for revenue generation.

3. Processes for Developing National Sustainable ECD Policies

The process for policy development is defined by 2 critical features, as determined by the literature on social policy development: evidence-based; and participatory.

Evidence Based Policy. Notwithstanding the multiple influences on policy such as ideology, institutions, infrastructure, interest and lobby groups (Weiss, 1995), the era of evidence-based policy has arrived (Huston, 2008). No longer are policies based on opinions accepted *carte blanche*. Over the past decade we have noted a phenomenal growth in the body of evidence on early childhood and social policy, not just as single disciplines, but also interdisciinary. Given the hybridization of knowledge, increase in monitoring evidence and data access, we are not able to move to the 2nd generation of questions that focus on how knowledge can be applied to policy. The four components of the policy framework draw upon that knowledge base and work through the questions of applying information and evidence to their development and implementation. require an amalgamation and understanding of different bodies of evidence in order to fully inform their development.

- The *Vision and Goals* of the framework require a strong knowledge of the national policy landscape of the country and of the science of holistic child development. These two bodies of information are then culled together to discern if currently existing policies are meeting the rights and needs of **_all_** young children in order to enable them to develop to their full developmental potential.

- The *Programs and Strategies* require an understanding of currently existing programs, strategies and tools. Also imperative to this component is knowledge of evidence on effective program strategies that directly or indirectly have improved the lives of young children. Within the country, it is important to know which programs have had strong results and in general what types of programs, strategies, and tools work best under what circumstances so as to generate recommendations for action towards improving child outcomes.

- *Governance* of policies calls upon another body of evidence and knowledge. Typically the responsibility for young child survival and development is split among national agencies and across sectors. Therefore, governance and management of the policy requires knowledge of key actors in ECD and their roles and responsibilities.

- The critical element of sustainability is the *Financial Planning and Implementation* component of the policy. For this component, evidence on cost calculations and the formula for estimating the long term investment in strategies and programs is required. The basis of the

costing component is culled from the knowledge on costing and financing policies, which requires information on how public (and private, in partnership) funding can be allocated to ECD policies.

Participatory. The policy development process is often lengthy and complex (Babajanova, 2006; Evans, Myers, & Ilfeld, 2000; Myers, 1995 Pence, 2004. Most models emphasize a participatory process for policy planning to include both governmental institutions and civil society, calling for broad stakeholder involvement to promote public support (Addison, 2006; Vargas-Baron, 2005). Further elaborated in this process is the type and nature of participation, which varies depending on the components being developed.

- The *Vision and Goals* of the framework require the participation of several key groups of stakeholders. First, families and communities who truly have a vision for early childhood and what they would like their children to be know and able to do. Communities have a keen sense of what they should provide for children and families. Leaders at sub-national and national level are able to provide the vision and guidance for a national policy. Involvement of representation from these different groups will not only ensure a national vision for the policy but also ownership and sustainability.

- As stated earlier *Programs and Strategies* require an understanding of currently existing programs, strategies and tools. Therefore it is important to involve those who oversee and implement programs for children and families across the sectors. These should also include major NGO partners, private sector, foundations and other groups who are involved in programming and services for children.

- *Governance* for early childhood policies requires intersectoral collaboration given that ECD issues are typically split among national agencies and across sectors. The participation for detailing the governance functions of the policy should involve all relevant decision makers from key sectors at national and sub-national levels.

- The *Financial Planning* component of the policy calls upon very detailed and technical information. Therefore it is important to involve and include the participation of individuals from sectors who are knowledgeable about the costing of the programs and sources of funding. In addition to understanding revenue generation, this component also describe revenue allocation, to that end, individuals who are provide information on how funding should be allocated to programs should participate.

In summary, the ECD policy framework is a social policy with a particular focus on ECD while being aligned with other national policies via shared goals. The framework most be supported by the government. The purpose of the framework to fill the gaps in current service provision for young children and their families by

providing directives for areas not covered by existing policies, yet evidentially known to be important for children's development. The framework is characterized by national relevance and social, financial, political and human capacity sustainability. The core components of the framework are the vision, the activities, the governance and the financial planning and implementation. The processes that are important to acknowledge for framework development are the reliance on evidence and participation of multiple sectors, level of government and key stakeholders.

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