Build to last: Why Curriculum and Workforce Gaps Undermine Preschool Systems

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Overview

The Global Paradox

The System Lens: Build to Last

Systems Design

1. The Global Paradox

THREE VITAL REASONS FOR MAKING EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION A GLOBAL PRIORITY:

1

QUALITY ECCE SETS A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR LEARNING

2

ECCE MAKES EDUCATION SYSTEMS MORE EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT

3

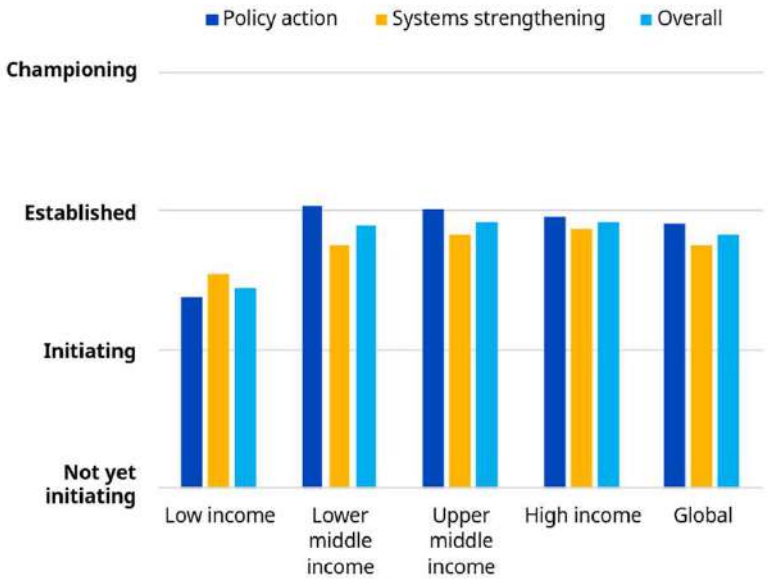
EQUITABLE ECCE IS AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR PROMOTING ECONOMIC GROWTH

CATch-ECE: Country Action Tracker for children

Policy action | **Systems strengthening** | **Overall progress**

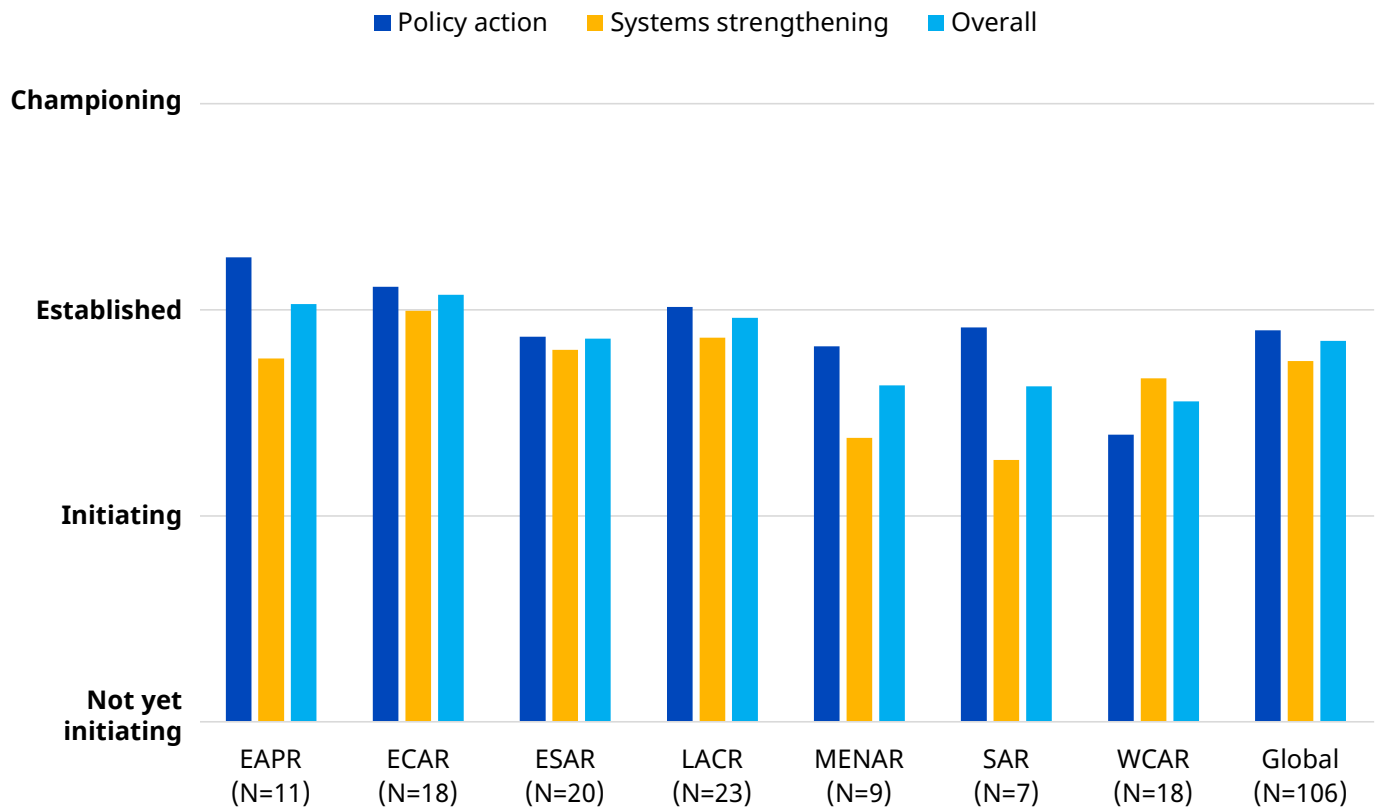






Overall, ECE policy actions have been established, but systems tend to lag behind

Countries are committing to pre-primary education, but system implementation is not keeping pace to **support, coordinate and sustain policy actions** for ECE



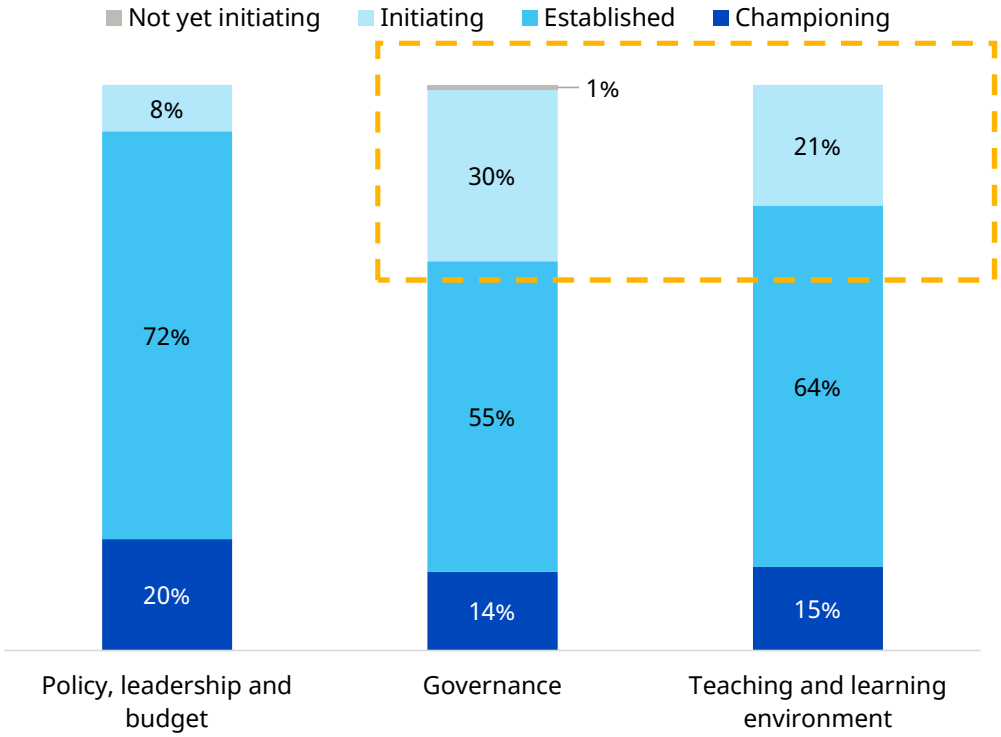
Source: UNICEF CATCh-ECE 2025. Graph only includes countries with both UNICEF RAPID survey and internal monitoring exercise data.

Over 1 in 5 countries have yet to establish systems for governance and teaching and learning

- **Gaps** remain in quality standards, financial and human resources, curricula and learning environment
- **Teaching and learning environment** shows greatest regional variation: in some regions, most countries are at Initiating stage, vs. Established in others

SDG 4.2 off track; ~30% of children globally not developmentally on track (MICS)

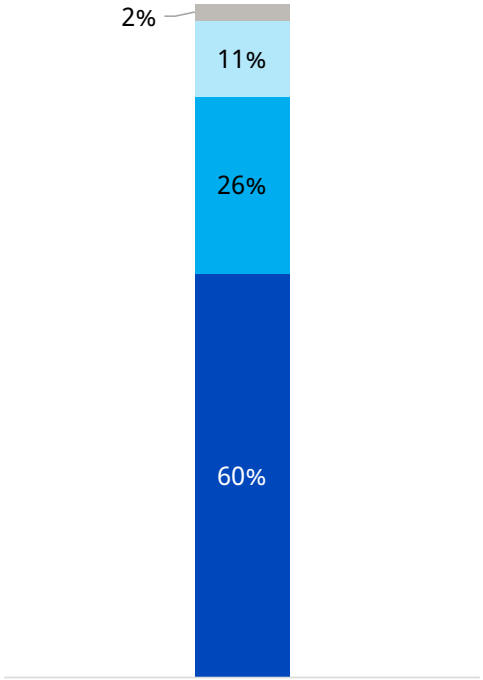
Learning crisis starts before primary school.



Source: UNICEF internal monitoring exercise (N=122).

3 in 5 countries are championing laws and national plans that support the right to inclusive education

Across all regions, at least two thirds of countries are at Established or Championing levels



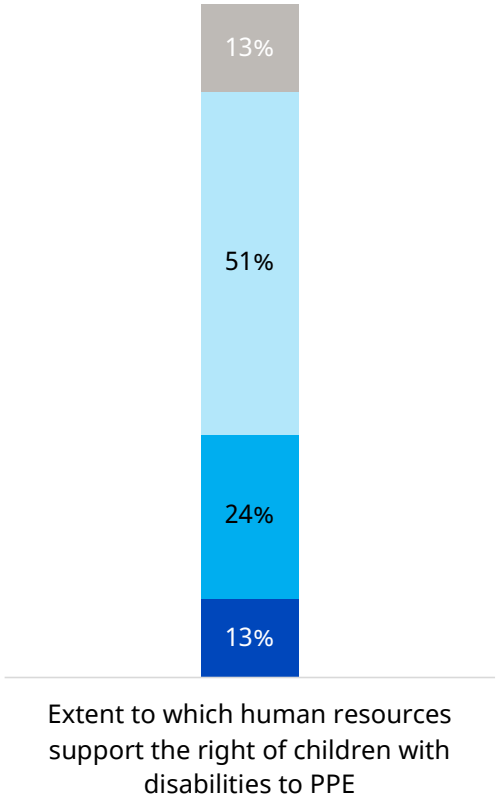
Extent to which laws/policies and plans support the right of children with disabilities to PPE

- Not yet initiating: There is no law/policy establishing the right to inclusive education for children with disabilities.
- Initiating: There is a law/policy establishing the right of all children to receive an inclusive education, which implicitly but not explicitly includes children with disabilities.
- Established: There is a law/policy establishing the right of all children to receive an inclusive education, with an explicit mention of children with disabilities.
- Championing: There is a law/policy establishing the right of all children to receive an inclusive education, with an explicit mention of children with disabilities, and also a national plan on inclusive education.

Source: UNICEF RAPID 2025 survey (N=88).

Only about 1 in 10 countries report that most educators receive training on inclusive education

Across all regions, >50% of countries are at Initiating or Not Yet Initiating levels



- Not yet initiating: Teachers and school administrators receive no training on inclusive education. Teachers have no specialists to consult with on issues pertaining to educating children with disabilities. No access to speech and physical therapists exist
- Initiating: Less than half of teachers and school administrators receive training on inclusive education. Less than half of schools have access to specialists on inclusive education for consultation. No access to speech and physical therapists exists.
- Established: More than half of teachers and school administrators receive training on inclusive education. More than half of schools have access to specialists on inclusive education for consultation. Some access to speech and physical therapists exists.
- Championing: Most teachers and school administrators receive training and ongoing support on inclusive education. Most children have access to speech, physical and occupational therapists, as needed.

Source: UNICEF RAPID 2025 survey (N=88).

2. The System Lens: Build to last

Build to Last: Pre-Primary Subsector Conceptual Framework

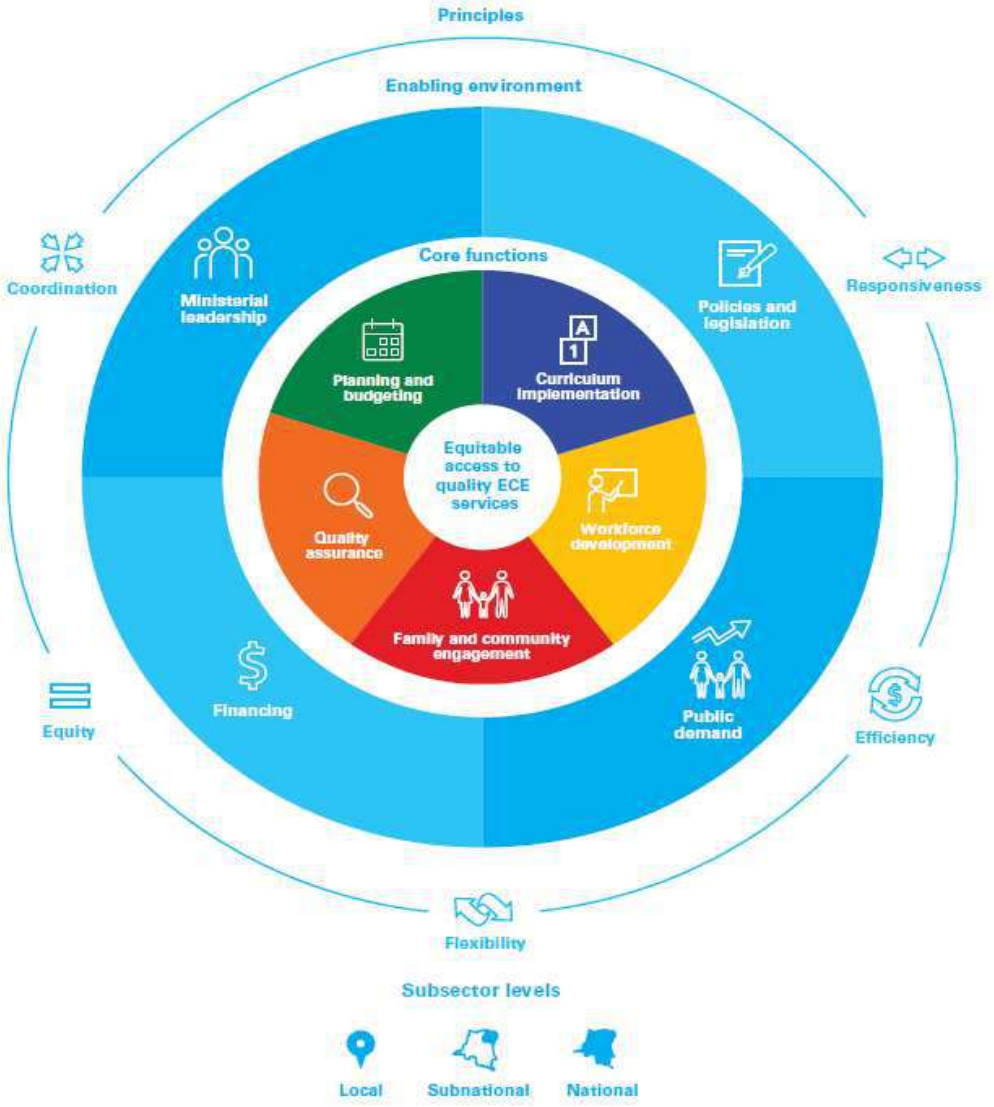
What Strong Systems require:

① A supportive or **enabling environment** that can help leverage political, public, and financial resources for the pre-primary sub-sector

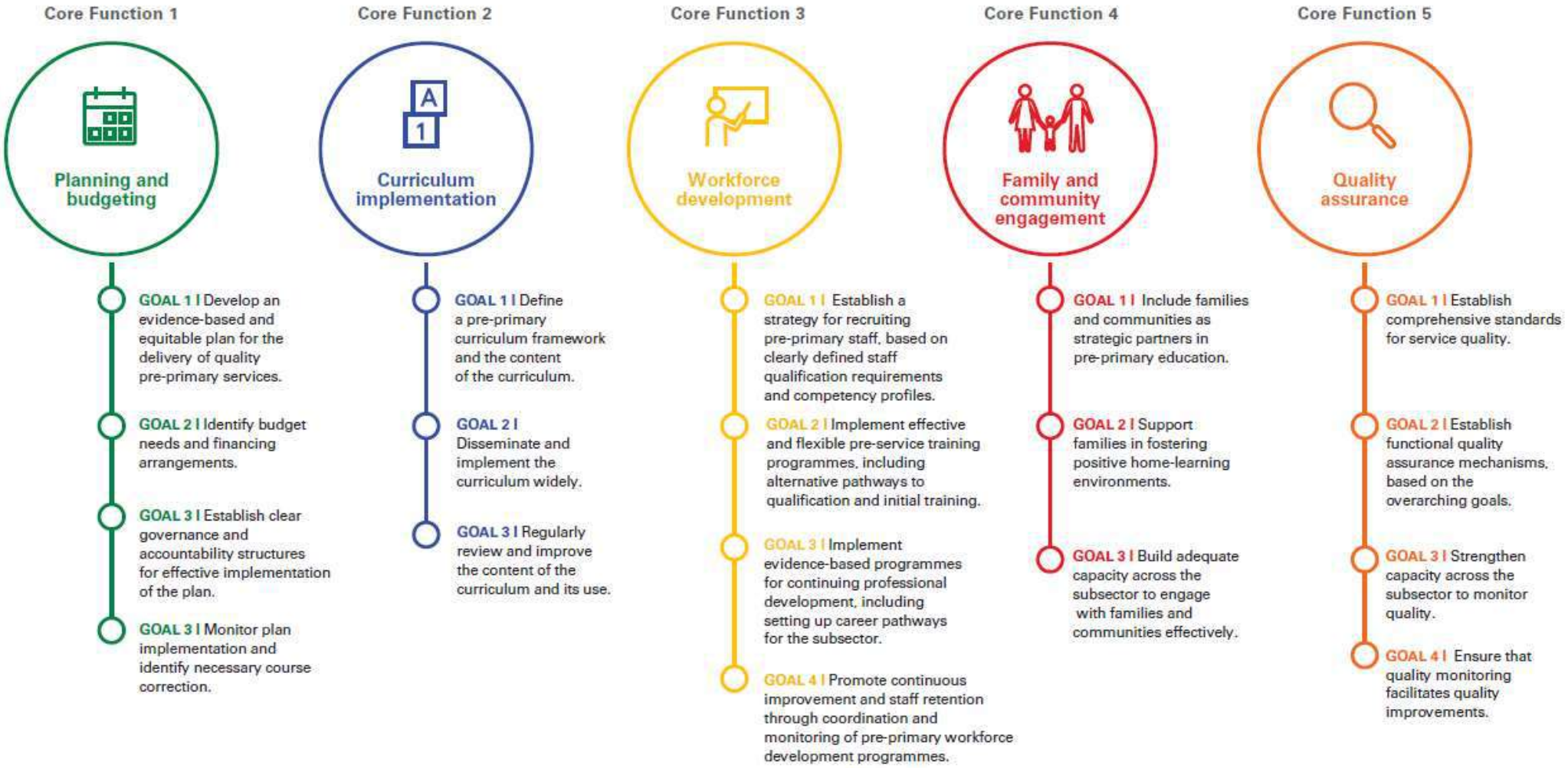
② Five **core functions** that are essential to the development and sustainability of high-quality pre-primary education

③ Key **Principles**: Equity, Efficiency, Flexibility, Responsiveness, Coordination

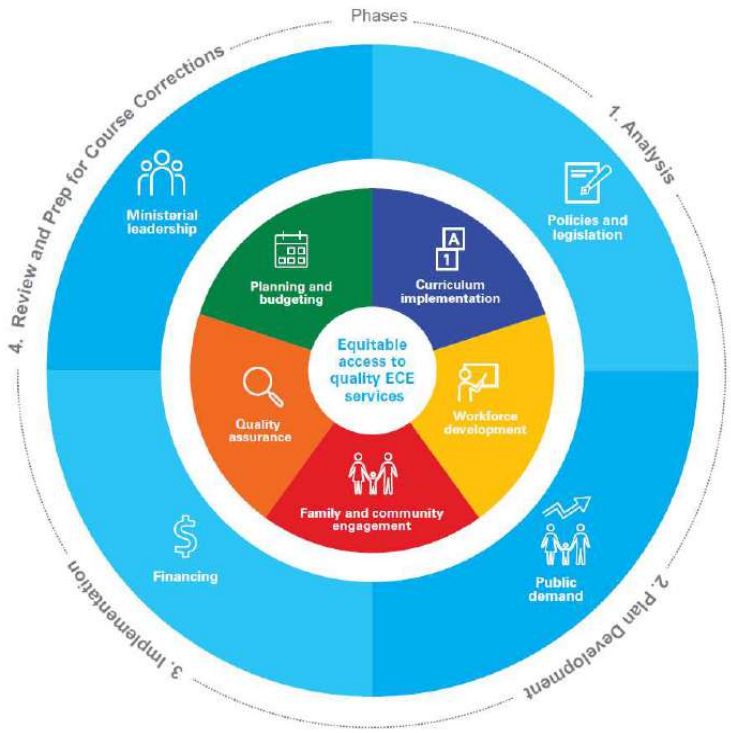
④ Natonal, sub-national and local **subsector level**



Pre-Primary Subsector Core Functions



Where Systems Break down:



- Among core functions, **curriculum implementation** and **workforce development** are the most fragile and most catalytic.
  - Curriculum exists on paper, not in classrooms.
  - Teachers exist in classrooms, but without preparation or support.
- **Result:** Fragmented provision, uneven quality, inequitable learning outcomes.

Quality is not a program feature—it's a system outcome.

Curriculum implementation

The problem

- Weak dissemination
- Limited alignment with child development science
- Minimal coaching or feedback loops

Why it matters

- Curriculum is the **instructional backbone** linking policy to practice.



Curriculum in practice



Ghana: Play-based curriculum reform

- National KG curriculum redesigned around play, language, and SEL.
- Implementation paired with teacher guides and training.

Impact

- Improved classroom interactions and foundational skills.

In Morocco rapid expansion through non-state provision required stronger public stewardship over curriculum standards to prevent widening inequalities

In **China**, national curriculum guidelines are combined with local adaptation and teacher deployment strategies, such as the “One Village, One Preschool” initiative, showing how curriculum coherence can be maintained even at scale.

In **Italy**, particularly in municipal preschool systems, pedagogical coordinators support teachers continuously, ensuring curriculum intent is realized through daily interactions—not just written plans.

Workforce Development

The global constraint

- 6+ million additional ECCE educators needed by 2030.
- Only **57% of pre-primary teachers in low-income countries** meet minimum training standards.

System risk

- Expansion without workforce investment **locks in low quality**.



Workforce as a system lever



Rwanda: Professionalizing the ECE workforce

- Workforce standards embedded in national education planning.
- Alignment between curriculum reform, teacher training, and supervision.

Lesson

- Workforce reform works when embedded in **system planning and financing**, not pilots.

Vietnam shows how sustained investment in trained pre-primary teachers strengthens classroom quality and curriculum delivery, even in a resource-constrained setting.

In **Jordan**, national kindergarten expansion was explicitly paired with curriculum reform and in-service teacher training, helping maintain quality while scaling access.

Finland shows how high workforce standards protect curriculum intent, while systems without similar workforce investments struggle to translate curriculum into practice.

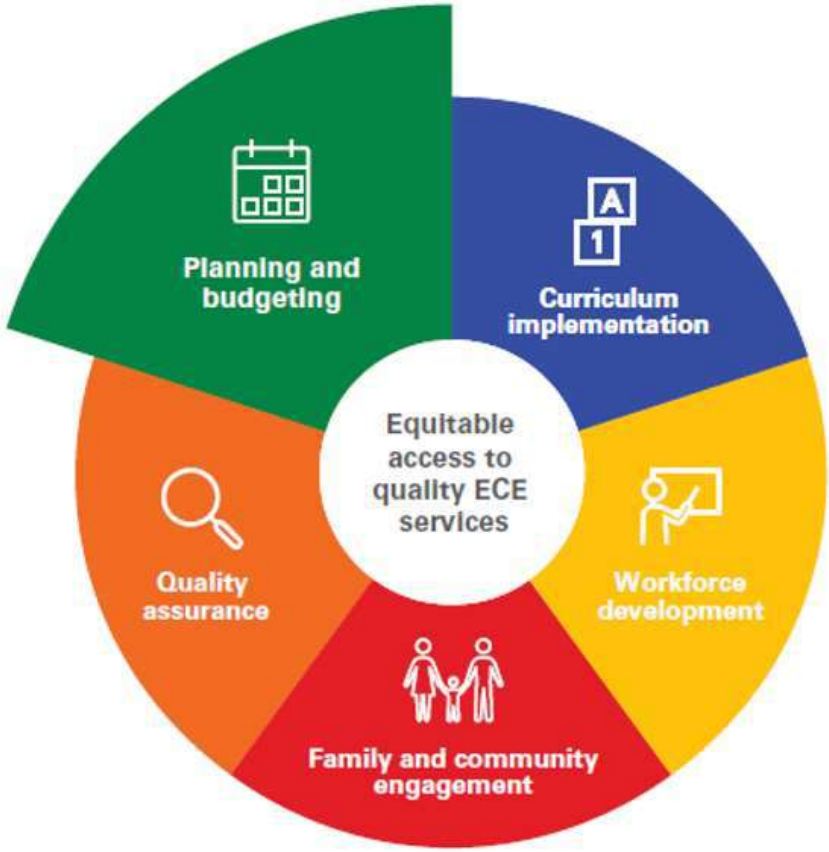
Financing Reality Check

The constraint

- Median public spending on pre-primary: **0.4% of GDP**.
- Annual financing gap for one year of pre-primary: **USD 21 billion**.

Implication

- Curriculum and workforce reforms must be **costed and protected**.

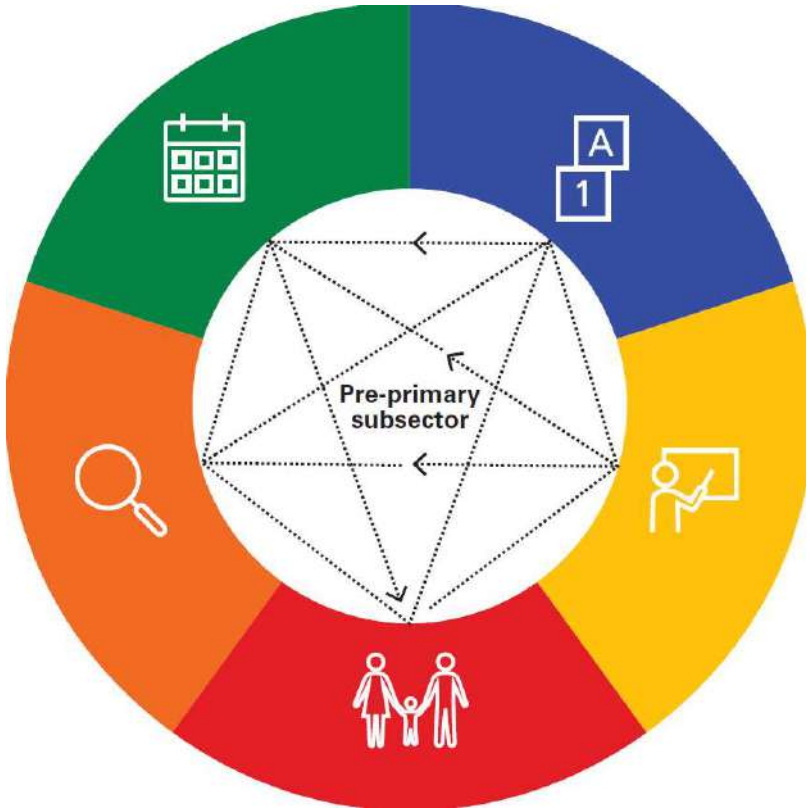


3. Systems Design

System-level design principles

Shift from pilots to **system enablers**:

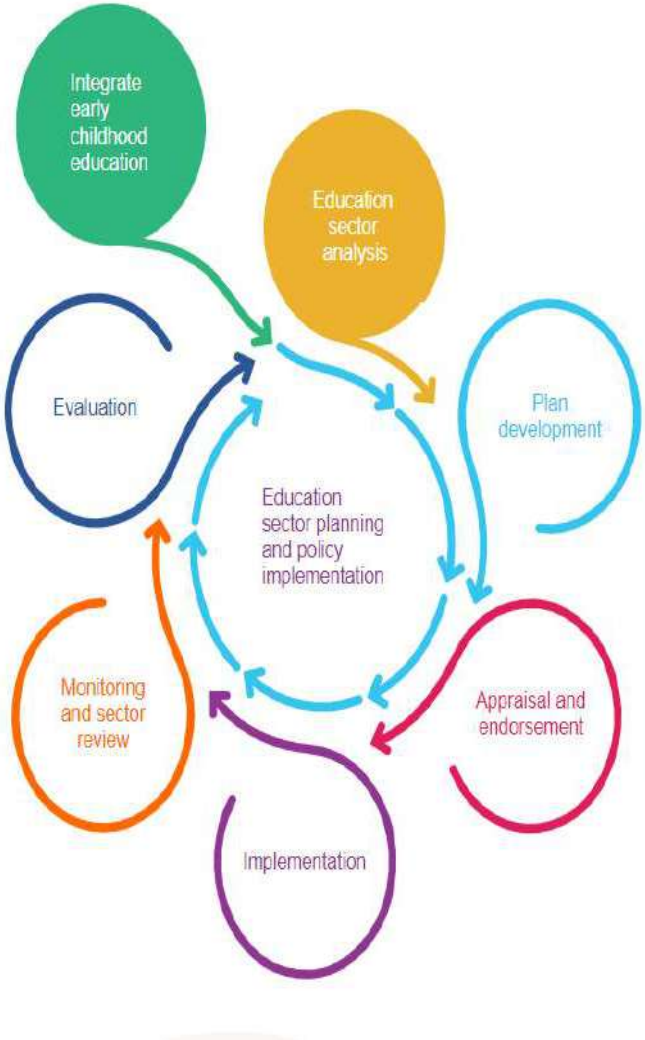
- Curriculum reform anchored in child development science
- Workforce pathways with pre-service + in-service + coaching
- Financing aligned to quality inputs, not just access
- Strong national stewardship, even in mixed-provider systems



ECE Accelerator Toolkit

https://www.ece-accelerator.org/





See Section 2: Conduct ECE Data and Policy Mapping and Analysis

See Section 2 for guidance, tools, resources and examples to support you:

- identify, consolidate and assess available ECE data and information;
- identify ECE data gaps and consider ECE evidence generation plans;
- conduct a comprehensive analysis of the ECE subsector;
- formulate the ECE sections or chapter of the ESA report.

Go to section

Conclusion



Curriculum and workforce reforms are strongest when embedded in broader early childhood systems.



Across contexts—from Finland to Rwanda, from Vietnam to Colombia—the same principles emerge:

curriculum grounded in child development science;
coherent workforce pathways;
financing aligned to quality inputs and
strong public stewardship, even in mixed-provider systems.



If we want children ready to learn, **systems** must be ready to teach and invest where implementation breaks to **Build the workforce and Make the curriculum real.**


unicef
for every child
Access gets children through the door.
Curriculum and workforce determine what makes access worthwhile – and what lasts.
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