Investing Early to Grow Faster, Fairer, and More Efficient Education Systems

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Overview

The Problem

Establishing Quality, Inclusive ECE systems

Systemic Shifts

The Problem

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EQUITY DIMENSIONS IN ENSURING ACCESS TO ECE

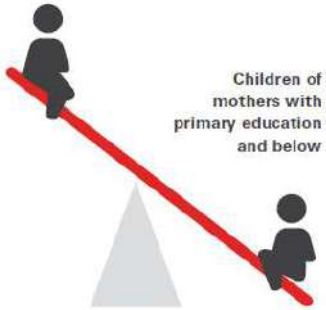
Poverty

Richest children are
7 times more likely
to attend ECE
programmes than



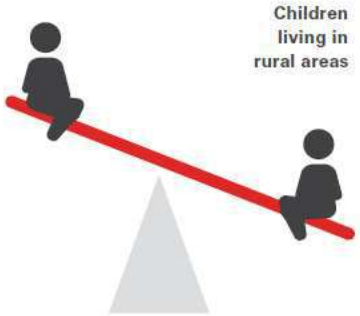
Mother's education

Children of mothers
with secondary
education and above are
5 times more likely
to attend ECE
programmes than



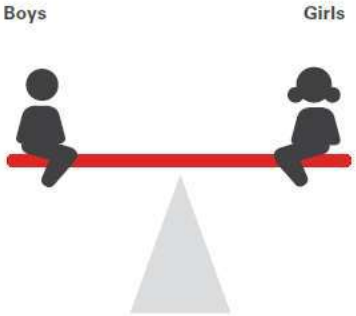
Residence

Children living
in urban areas are
2.5 times more likely
to attend ECE
programmes than



Sex

Equitable
attendance
in ECE
programmes
among



Source: Computations by UNICEF, based on available data from UNICEF MICS global databases, 2010–2016.

THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF EXCLUSION AND INEQUITY

- An intersectional lens is needed to **reach those left furthest behind**.
- This approach strives to reflect and address the experiences of children and young people affected by **multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion**.
- Children with **disabilities** from the **poorest** households, especially **girls**, face the greatest barriers to education
- Disruptions in education caused by **crises disproportionately affects** learners with disabilities.

Notably, of the 240 million children with disabilities globally.

- **49 per cent more likely** to have never attended school.
- **25 per cent less likely** to attend early childhood education.
- **47 per cent more likely** to be out of primary school.
- **42 per cent less likely** to have foundational reading and numeracy skills.

The problem we are trying to solve:

- In low-income countries, the poorest 20% receive **just 11% of public education spending**, while the richest receive **42%**
- Only **3.3% of education budgets** are spent on pre-primary globally, despite being the most pro-equity level of education

Education spending concentrates where **enrolment is already high**.

We are spending the most public money on learners who already succeeded in gaining access —and the **least on those who need it most.**

Education participation is structurally inequitable—and late-stage solutions cannot fix early exclusion

Why early childhood is the equity inflection point?

Early investment lowers the marginal cost of later learning

- Skills are cumulative and self-reinforcing
- Early Intervention services support infants, toddlers and young children at risk and/or with developmental delays and disabilities in the child's natural environment.
- Early childhood is where inequity enters the system—and where it is cheapest to correct. Late remediation has diminishing returns and higher unit costs.

Governments spend most on secondary and tertiary education, but poorest children are least likely to reach those levels

- Children from the poorest quintile represent only 9% of pre-primary enrolment in low-income countries, compared to 17% in primary and 2% in tertiary
- Learning poverty reductions are strongly associated with pro-poor reallocations, even without increasing total spending.

Equity fails early.

If we don't invest early, no amount of later spending can compensate.

Financing early childhood is fiscally smart

Transforming Education With Equitable Financing: findings from 2010-2022 data (UNICEF, 2023)

- A **one percentage point increase** in education spending allocated to the poorest 20% is associated with a **2.6–4.7 percentage point reduction in learning poverty**
- This could lift **up to 35 million children** out of learning poverty globally
- Early childhood is the highest-leverage point in the education value chain and delivers **high returns at low per-child cost**
- World Bank estimates suggest that disability exclusion from education and the labor market costs countries between **1% and 7% of their annual GDP.**
- Early childhood investment is not 'social spending'—it is productivity enhancing capital investment with long duration returns.

Late-stage equity is fiscally expensive and politically fragile. Early equity is efficient and durable.

Establishing Quality, Inclusive ECE Systems

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THE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT: POLICIES MAKING ECE INVESTABLE

- **Policies** supporting investment in early learning yield solid returns, especially when integrated within the education system.
- Clear **ministerial ownership** reduces fragmentation and leakage
- Legislation, policy mandates and costed action plans **make investments purposive**.
- Policy certainty lowers risk and attracts both **public and blended finance**.

Country examples:

Chile: Legal entitlement to pre-primary education created **stable multi-year financing** → sustained access, including for children with disabilities, high female labor participation, and strong learning outcomes

Poland: Policy-driven ECE expansion coincided with improved equity in education spending and **strong PISA performance.**

Jordan: ECE embedded in national education reform to address equity gaps linked to **displacement**.

PLANNING AND BUDGETING: FROM MARGINAL SPENDING TO STRATEGIC ALLOCATION STRENGTHENS ECE SYSTEMS

- ECE financing must be **adequate, predictable, and equity-targeted**.
- Reallocating education spending toward the poorest is associated with **2.6–4.7 percentage point reductions in learning poverty per 1% shift**
- Resources reach children ***before*** dropout, repetition and learning poverty occur.
- A modest rebalancing can lift **tens of millions of children** out of learning poverty—without increasing total budgets

Country examples:

Brazil (municipal childcare and pre-primary): Targeted expansion in low-income areas **delivered strong benefit–cost ratios** by reducing later repetition and increasing maternal labor force participation

Ethiopia: Pro-poor allocation reforms narrowed equity gaps **despite fiscal constraints.**

Nepal: Integrated ECE planning improved **rural access** and foundational learning, strengthening returns to primary education spending.

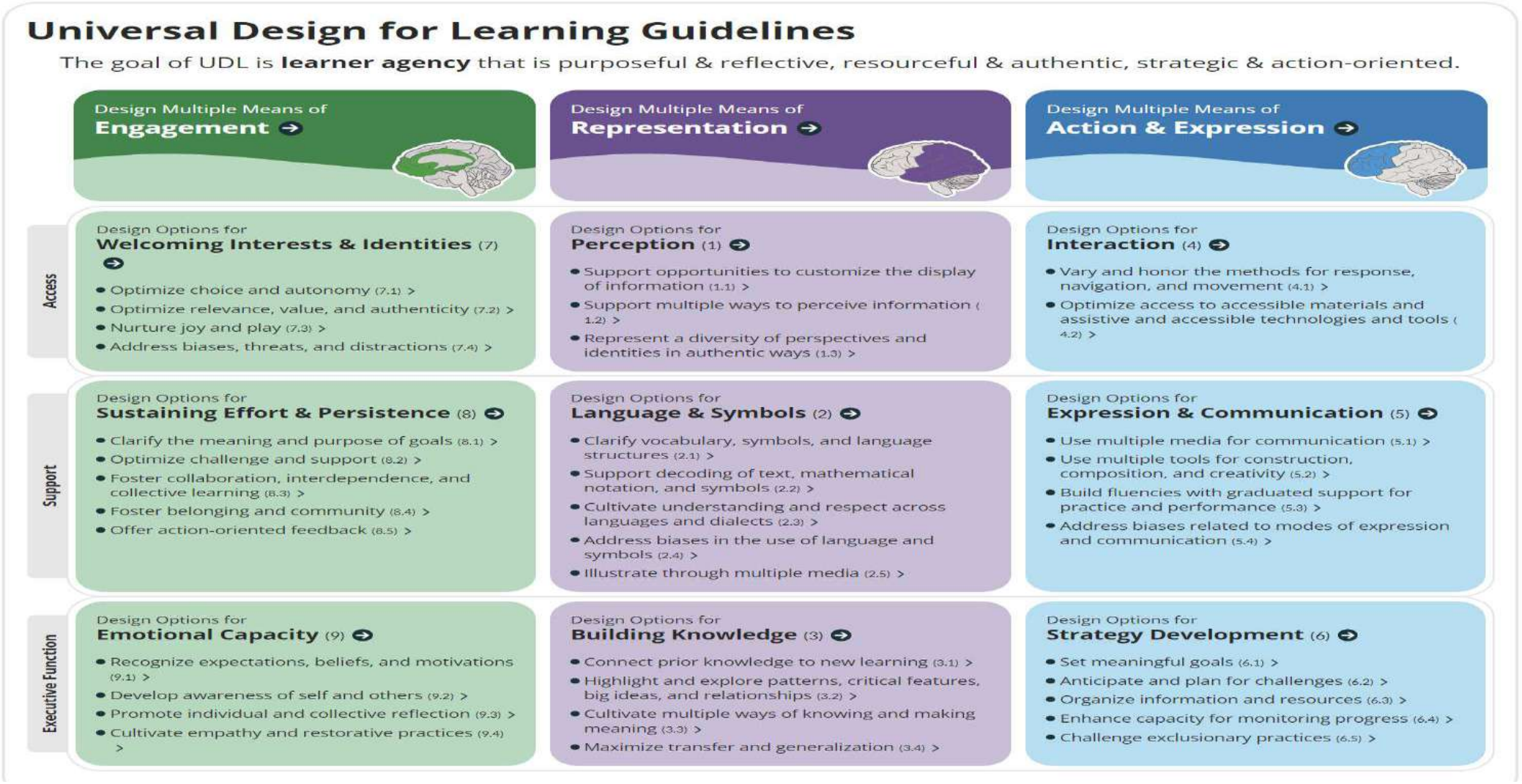
EQUITABLE ACCESS TO QUALITY ECE: PROTECTING THE RATE OF RETURN

- Investment risk: Expansion without quality **destroys returns;** Determines if early investment reduces repetition, improves completion and raises efficiencies.
- Investment in quality prioritizes development of a developmentally appropriate **curriculum** across pre-primary and early primary grades professionalized **workforce** and alignment with **quality assurance** systems.
- **Government stewardship** through standards, supportive supervision and public financing leverages private delivery without inequity

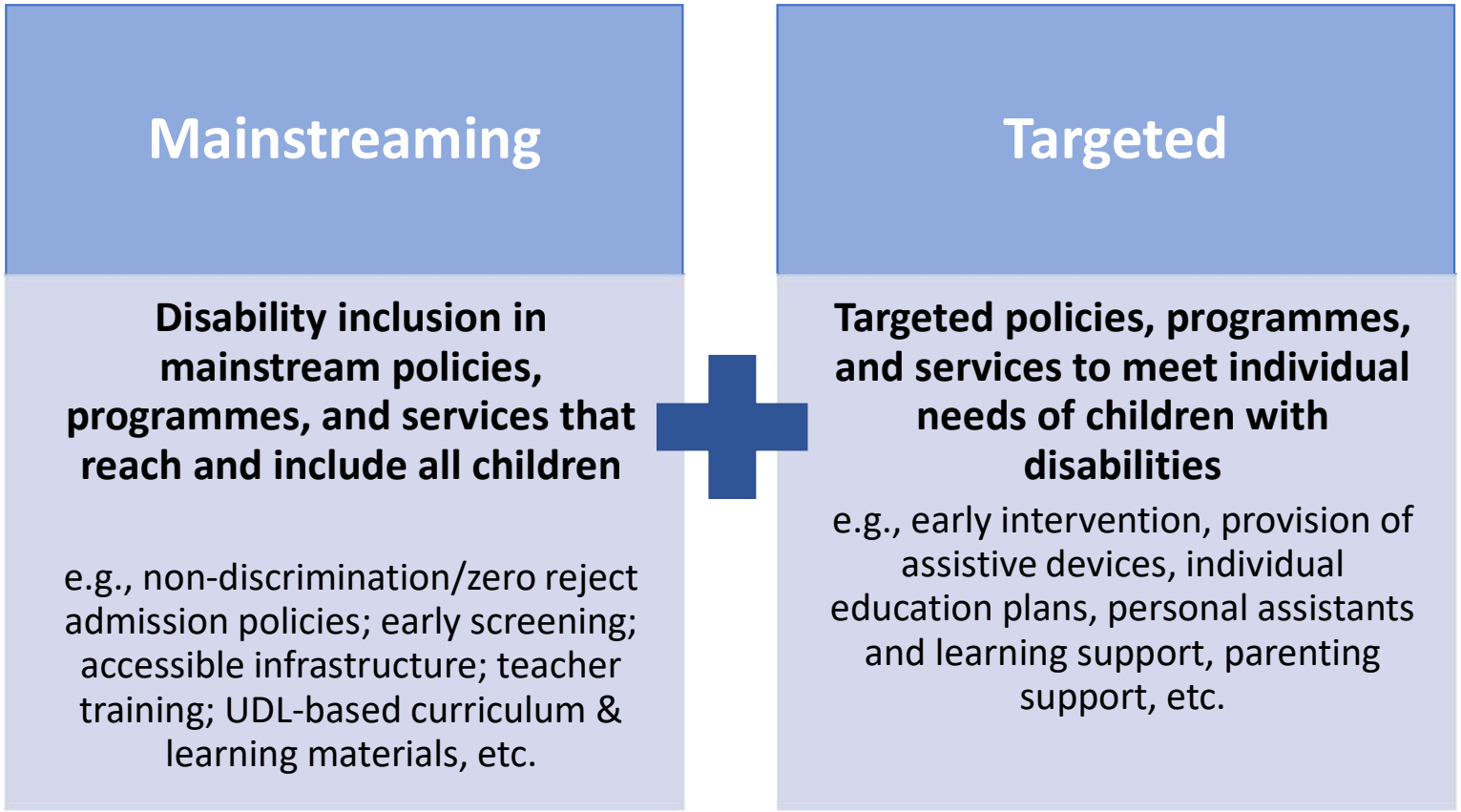
Country examples

- **Vietnam**: Sustained workforce investment in ECE contributed to strong foundational skills and long-term learning outcomes
- **Rwanda**: Gradual system-building approach to ECE quality in low-resource settings
- **Portugal** integrated universal design principles and curriculum flexibility from preschool onwards with multi-level supports to meet individual learner needs, → sustained gains in enrolment, retention and completion rates including children with disabilities.
- **Estonia**: High-quality ECE workforce supports one of Europe's most equitable and efficient learning systems
- **Sweden**: Strong regulation + public financing = universal access with equity

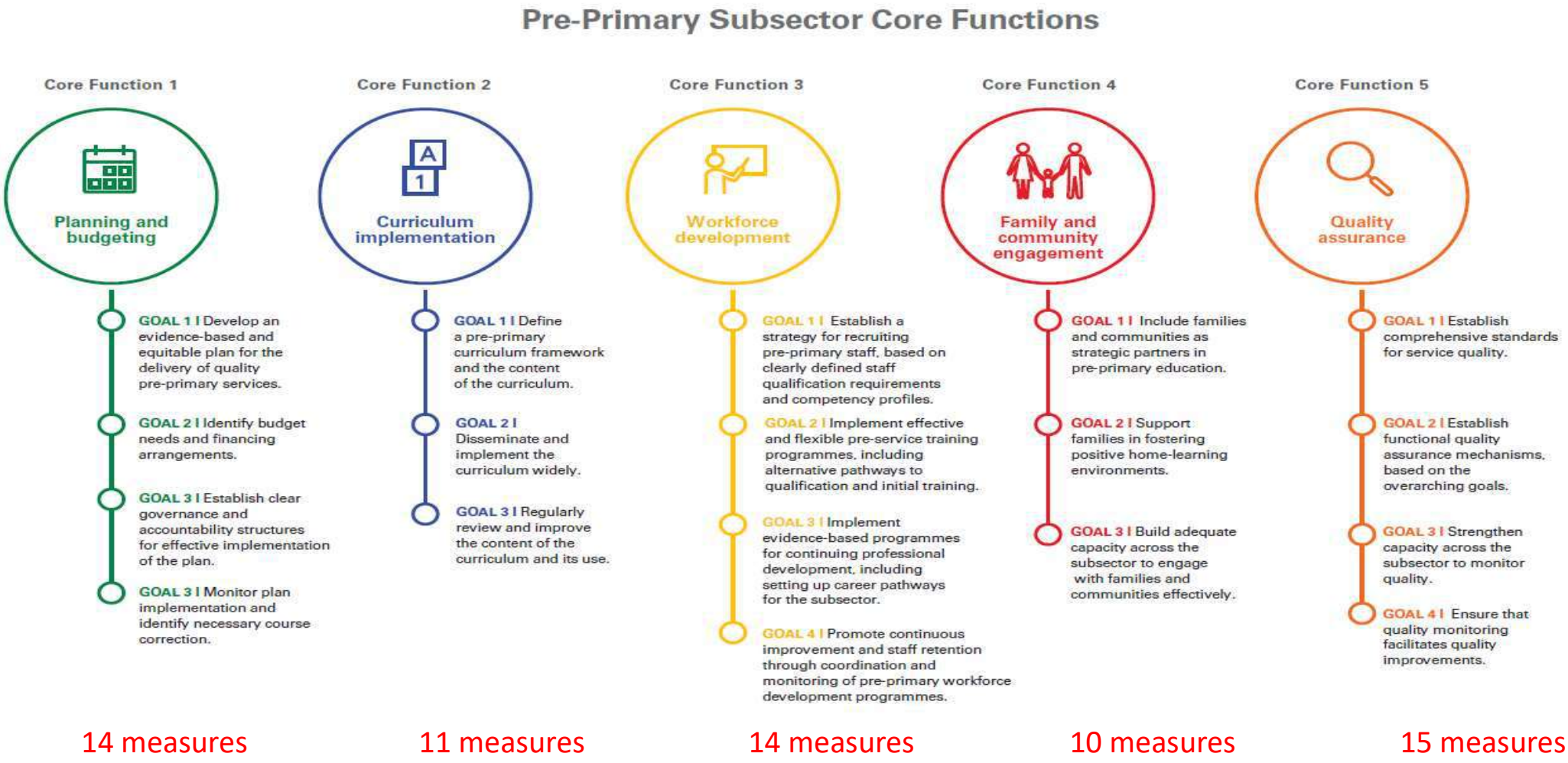
Follow Universal Design Principles for inclusive Learning environments



Adopt a Twin track approach to strengthen Disability Inclusion



Inclusive Pre-primary Subsector Diagnostics with Intersectionality Analysis



Systemic Shifts

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Three actionable shifts

Rebalance education portfolios

- Protect and expand pre-primary within education budgets
- Treat early learning as **foundational infrastructure**
- Establish systems for early identification, assessment and interventions to leave no one behind

Adopt pro-poor allocation rules

- Minimum share of education resources to poorest quintiles
- Align with UNICEF's **15% benchmark** for poorest learners

Finance systems, not pilots

- Costed national pre-primary plans
- Stable multi-year financing envelopes

Equitable education financing is not achieved by spending more later—but by investing smarter earlier.

Merci!

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