



RESEARCH TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

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Together for Early Childhood Evidence Final Report

Summary of Together for Early Childhood Evidence Phase II

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

AAU	Addis Ababa University
ADEA	Association for Development of Education in Africa
BEQI	Brief Early Quality Inventory
CIES	Comparative International Education Society
DBE	Department of Basic Education
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECDE	Early Childhood Development and Education
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ELOM	Early Learning Outcomes Measure
ELP	Early Learning Program
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ICQN-ECD	Inter-Country Quality Node on Early Childhood Development
IDELA	International Development and Early Learning Assessment
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
QAS	Quality Assurance Systems
RTAC	Research Technical Assistance Consortium
T4ECE	Together for Early Childhood Evidence
UNMC	University of Nebraska Medical Center
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

1. Background

As part of its commitment to increasing investments in early childhood education (ECE), in 2018 the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) partnered with the ECD Measure group at University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC), College of Public Health to create a consortium to build capacity within USAID Missions and USAID Bureaus to engage in early childhood work within selected countries in Africa. Together for Early Childhood Evidence (T4ECE): Consortium on Pre-primary Data and Measurement in Africa explores how the use and application of data can lead to positive change in early childhood systems and can accelerate country-level action to improve young children’s early learning experiences. The consortium convenes policymakers, researchers, and other early childhood experts to bridge the gap between research and practice. The overarching goal is to increase national capacity for interpreting and applying data on ECE.

T4ECE has been implemented through two phases, both delivered by ECD Measure. Phase I started in October 2018, and Phase II started in May 2020. The contract for implementing Phase II was awarded through USAID’s Research Technical Assistance Consortium (RTAC) by NORC at the University of Chicago. This final report summarizes the work led and completed by ECD Measure under Phase II from May 2020–July 2023.

2. Overview of Activities

T4ECE was structured under the following four pillars of work: 1) Convening; 2) Capacity-building; 3) Virtual Hub; and 4) Research. Please see a summary of the activities below.

Convening

Under Phase II, T4ECE hosted interactive virtual webinars and in-person workshops to facilitate networking, knowledge exchange, and cross-country collaboration.

Virtual Meetings

Throughout 2020–2022, we hosted virtual webinars with country and global partners to discuss specific topics about early childhood data generation and use. In October 2020, we held a kickoff cross-country webinar with the task force country teams to reconnect with country teams, introduce USAID staff from the new countries, share the findings from the needs assessment (see more on this below in the “Research” section), and brainstorm areas and potential project plans that T4ECE could support over the course of Phase II.

In January 2021, we held a monitoring and quality assurance webinar to discuss the importance of developing effective quality monitoring systems. More than 50 participants attended, and the webinar included guest speakers Dr. Laura Johns from Propulsion, who discussed methods and ways for translating principles into practice, and Maya Soonarane, Director of the Association for Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) Inter-Country Quality Node on Early Childhood Development (ADEA ICQN-ECD), who shared priorities for quality assurance and monitoring in Africa. Participants had the

opportunity to engage in discussions about challenges and opportunities in monitoring ECE in their own countries.

In March 2021, we organized a webinar focused on early childhood measurement tools, with more than 100 participants in attendance. The interactive webinar provided background on defining the purpose of measurement in participants' countries, and Dr. Abbie Raikes from UNMC/ECD Measure provided guidance on considerations to make when designing or selecting tools to measure child development. The webinar also featured experts at the University of Cape Town and Innovation Edge who spoke about the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM), South Africa's national preschool child assessment tool, which can be used as a population-level assessment as well as program monitoring tool.

In September 2021, ECD Measure cohosted a virtual roundtable event with ADEA focused on the value of Quality Assurance Systems (QAS) for ECE in Africa. The roundtable convened nearly 100 government, donor, non-governmental organization (NGO), and researcher representatives across Africa to reflect on how countries can build effective QAS that will lead to high-quality ECE for all children. The event stemmed from the results of a survey conducted by ECD Measure of ECE QAS across 15 countries in Africa (see more on this survey under the QAS Report in the "Research" section below) and featured presentations from representatives in Burkina Faso, Morocco, and Seychelles.

In October 2021, ECD Measure organized a mid-project meeting with USAID. The meeting was held virtually and brought together the ECD Measure team, USAID staff from the Africa Bureau, Children Youth and Families division, and other members of USAID's preprimary working group, as well as RTAC and NORC. The goal of the meeting was to share progress and updates and reflect on common themes and lessons during the first half of T4ECE. At the end of meeting, USAID staff and ECD Measure engaged in a discussion around the next steps of T4ECE and linkages to other USAID work.

In November 2021, ECD Measure presented as part of ADEA's 2nd High-Level Policy Dialogue Forum: "Elevating foundational learning as a pathway to skills development and lifelong learning through digitalization." Our team presented as part of the session on "Teaching and learning: Early childhood development (ECD) for strengthening school preparedness and readiness to learn." During this session, we shared the findings from the QAS survey and key takeaways from the September roundtable discussion and discussed ways forward for how countries can collect and use monitoring data as part of establishing effective early childhood care and education (ECCE) systems.

In May 2022, as the country research projects came to a close, we hosted another virtual cross-country webinar for the task force teams to present their projects and discuss common themes and key takeaways across the projects. It was an opportunity for teams to showcase their work, ask each other questions, reflect on the T4ECE consortium experience, and brainstorm together on next steps and the work needed to continue to promote data-driven decision-making in early childhood systems across the region.

Comparative International Education Society Conferences

Over the course of Phase II, we attended and organized various in-person and virtual panels and meetings at the 2021, 2022, and 2023 Comparative International Education Society (CIES) conferences. At CIES 2021, the ECD Measure team virtually attended the conference to identify themes with relevance to T4ECE and how our work can support teams in the post-COVID era. At CIES 2022, we led a virtual T4ECE panel focused on the four country-led research activities that support strengthening and developing effective early childhood monitoring and measurement systems. The panel was an

opportunity for the country teams to share their projects, initial results, and reflections on how data can be used to improve ECE services in their countries. Lastly, at CIES 2023, we organized an in-person breakfast meeting for approximately 50 participants to discuss how countries, USAID, and T4ECE are making progress in building data-informed early childhood systems.

Mauritius Workshop (2022)

In October 2022, ECD Measure partnered with USAID and ADEA ICQN to convene T4ECE task force teams as a side event to the ADEA 2022 Triennale in Mauritius. This meeting convened 40 T4ECE Task Force members from Liberia, Rwanda, Malawi, South Africa, and Mauritius, as well as partners from USAID and Lego Foundation. The goal of the workshop was to bring together people who gather and use early childhood data in their countries to discuss how we can collectively move toward more data-informed ECCE systems in Africa.

Over the course of the two-day workshop, participants had the opportunity to work within and across country teams to learn about country examples of early childhood data generation and use, identify where their countries are on the path of developing a data-driven ECCE system, and develop common country visions for moving forward. Each T4ECE country team was at a different stage in this process, and the workshop offered an excellent opportunity for teams to learn about best practices and examples of how others have approached early childhood data and measurement issues. For example, participants learned about the recently completed T4ECE early childhood research activities in Liberia, Rwanda, and South Africa (more information can be found on these below under “Case Studies”), which fostered rich discussion on the challenges and opportunities to establish data feedback loops within early childhood systems.

A key benefit of the workshop was the opportunity for diverse stakeholders (government officials, researchers, USAID staff, and other partners) to come together around their shared interest in and commitment to using ECCE data and evidence. The workshop was designed to ensure that stakeholders learned from their peers in other countries, while also having the opportunity to come together with stakeholders from their own countries to generate shared priorities and brainstorm plans for moving forward. Participants left the event committing to a broader regional movement within Africa to share experiences and collaborate to push the agenda forward toward data-informed ECCE systems.

Capacity-building

Throughout the duration of the project, ECD Measure provided virtual technical support and capacity-building to USAID Missions and country teams, through the following:

Technical Consultations to Support USAID’s Preprimary Resources (2020)

In 2020, our team facilitated a technical consultation for the USAID ECE preprimary working group to gather inputs on the USAID preprimary guidance materials and school readiness indicators. We facilitated two consultations—one with leading ECE experts and one with global education stakeholders—to gather inputs on USAID’s preprimary guidance materials. Our team also contributed technical inputs in the development of USAID’s school readiness indicators.

Technical Assistance to USAID Liberia: Mapping of ECCE Stakeholders (2022)

In January and February 2022, ECD Measure conducted a mapping exercise of local ECE organizations in Liberia. The mapping exercise was conducted at the request of the USAID Liberia Education team to

feed into an upcoming early grade reading design. ECD Measure developed and sent out a survey to 59 various local organizations (some ECE-specific organizations; the vast majority were general education organizations/partners). Following the initial survey, ECD Measure collected more in-depth information from 15 local organizations on their ECE-specific programming. Our team prepared a summary of the findings presented to USAID Liberia of organizational information, key work, organizational snapshots, and contact information for the organizations.

Technical Assistance to USAID Malawi: Review of Tools for Measuring ECCE (2023)

In efforts to support the establishment of ECD data systems in Malawi, in early 2023, ECD Measure led a review of available tools and processes for measuring both early childhood outcomes and the environment of early learning programs. This review included a summary of the tools, their purposes, the domains covered, type of information collected by each tool, the methods for collecting data, age groups involved in testing, ease in training and administering the assessment, length of the assessment, and the pros/cons for each tool in the context of Malawi. In addition, ECD Measure provided a general overview of the processes for adapting, pretesting/piloting, training, and implementing measurement tools. This exercise supported the selection of tools to be used in the USAID-supported NextGen mapping of early childhood development and education (ECDE) service providers. The NextGen team also hopes that these tools could eventually be incorporated into the government's national ECDE monitoring system. The findings from the review were presented in a workshop to USAID Malawi and NextGen staff in February 2023.

Communications/Virtual Hub

Through the T4ECE Virtual Hub activities, we kept stakeholders informed and up to date about T4ECE key happenings, research, country work, and the latest resources on data and measurement on early childhood in Africa through the following activities:

Website

The T4ECE website was launched in October 2020 as a microsite on the RTAC website. The T4ECE website was created as a landing place for those interested in learning more about T4ECE and its mission and work; to feature the T4ECE country teams, members, and projects; and to share reports produced under T4ECE, blogs, communication briefs, and any other relevant content, material, activities, and resources.

Quarterly Newsletters

During Phase II, we produced 12 quarterly newsletters with materials relevant to ECE data and measurement, ongoing T4ECE activities, and country and global updates. During Phase II, our subscriber list more than doubled from 450 recipients to more than 1,000 subscribers by May 2023. The newsletters are produced on MailChimp and have a 40 percent open rate (well above MailChimp's average newsletter open rate of 20 percent). The newsletters are distributed to our listserv, cross-posted on the T4ECE and ECD Measure websites, and shared on social media.

Blogs

We produced 14 blog posts throughout Phase II on T4ECE events, new research, and members' publications (21 blogs have been produced in total under Phase I and Phase II). In addition to blogs

written by ECD Measure, we also had featured guest bloggers, including global ECE experts and T4ECE country team members. Blogs were cross-posted on the T4ECE website and ECD Measure websites and links to blogs were highlighted in the newsletters and on social media.

Briefs

To make some of our key work easily digestible by a broad audience, ECD Measure developed four communication briefs under Phase II. Each brief focused on emerging areas of interest from T4ECE country teams and members and included: 1) overview of the T4ECE initiative; 2) summary of main findings and recommendations from the needs assessment (see more under “Research” below); 3) guidance for developing quality assurance systems for ECCE in Africa; and 4) summary of country-led research projects in Ethiopia, Liberia, Rwanda, and South Africa (see more under “Case Studies” below). The briefs were disseminated to T4ECE members through the newsletters, website, and social media.

Research

A key goal for the T4ECE was to compile and gather new evidence for data-informed ECE systems. Our team conducted background research and supported local data and measurement projects in the T4ECE task force countries to help contribute to the evidence base and inform both the regional-level and local ECE landscapes.

Needs Assessment (2020)

To better understand regional and country-level opportunities and challenges in early childhood education, care, and learning, ECD Measure conducted a needs assessment at the beginning of Phase II. The needs assessment was designed to gather inputs from USAID staff in Washington D.C. and select missions to further inform planning of Phase II T4ECE activities, with a specific focus on defining the needs for technical assistance for building early childhood systems.

The needs assessment included an online survey completed by 12 USAID D.C.-based and Mission-based staff, as well as follow-up in-depth interviews with USAID staff. The needs assessment highlighted the priority of ECD for USAID missions across focus countries as well as the need for more data, ECE technical expertise, entry points for USAID, and funding to execute their work. T4ECE was viewed as an opportunity to build on and provide technical guidance for the emerging ECE activities in the USAID focus countries. The findings from the needs assessment fed directly into the design of the technical assistance and capacity-building pillars within Phase II.

Research on ECCE Quality Assurance Systems (2021–2022)

While countries throughout Africa have made progress in building their ECCE systems, there remains much room for improvement to ensure quality of all ECCE facilities. The role of QAS in promoting ECCE quality has been well documented and QASs have featured prominently in high-income countries’ efforts to improve ECCE quality. However, less is known about QAS in other parts of the world, particularly in Africa. Our research report, *Early Childhood Care & Education Quality Assurance Systems in Africa*, reviewed ECCE QAS in 14 countries in sub-Saharan Africa based on a survey we disseminated to ministries of education in the region and discussions with key stakeholders across the continent. Data and information gleaned from survey responses gave insight into: 1) the existence of quality standards in Africa; 2) what kinds of monitoring systems are in place across the continent to monitor these standards; and 3) repercussions in place if standards are not met and, conversely, rewards for exceeding

standards. In our report, we outlined several recommendations for governments and partners to consider continuing the momentum of building strong and sustainable QAS for ECCE.

Country Projects (2021–2022)

In 2021 and 2022, T4ECE provided four country grants to support local research activities to help inform programmatic and policy decisions facing early childhood education. The inclusion of small grants as part of the T4ECE initiative was intended to develop stronger in-country collaborations and offer a good place for USAID to enter the complex ECE landscapes. Each multidisciplinary T4ECE country team designed the focus of the country-level research activities, with input from USAID country office stakeholders. Research proposals were then evaluated on the following criteria: 1) contribution to evidence base; 2) potential for scale/sustainability; 3) establishment or contribution to data feedback loops; 4) ownership and alignment with national early childhood priorities; 5) involvement of the T4ECE country team; and 6) research team experience and expertise. In each country, local USAID Missions and T4ECE country task force teams were actively involved in the proposal development and approval process to ensure each project aligned with the national early childhood policy and program landscape, as well as fit within USAID's broader country investment strategy. Section 4 summarizes each of these country research projects in more detail.

South Africa Case Study (2023)

T4ECE partnered with DataDrive 2030 and University of Cape Town to document the story of South Africa's experience developing and using early childhood measurement tools to drive change in its national early childhood system. The case study outlines the process and goals for developing South Africa's ELOM suite, South Africa's national tools that measure developmental outcomes in young children and quality of early learning environments. It also describes how data from the ELOM suite of tools is being used in South Africa to motivate better investment in ECE programming in the country. Our goal with this case study was to document South Africa's story as the country develops a more data-informed early childhood system, which has valuable lessons for other low- and middle-income countries.

3. Country Research Projects

The T4ECE country task force teams from in Ethiopia, Liberia, Rwanda, and South Africa have been working together since 2019. Under Phase I, from 2019–2020, the teams worked together to identify their priorities and gaps in building data-driven ECE systems. Under Phase II, T4ECE launched country research activities to help address some of the gaps identified. These projects aimed at promoting evidence-based decision-making for ECE, which in turn could lead to greater impact for ECE investments and higher-quality services for children and families. Each country team identified their own specific research activities to support strengthening and developing an effective monitoring and measurement system within their country. Below, we summarize the four country-led research activities to test and apply new approaches to early childhood data and measurement.

Ethiopia

Project Background

In 2010, the government of Ethiopia developed its first Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Framework. ECCE is noted as one of the government's top priority areas in its Education Sector Development Plan. However, there are still significant gaps and challenges in implementing ECCE and providing coverage throughout the country. As a result, numerous international, local, faith-based, and non-governmental organizations have stepped in to fill these gaps.

Given the multiple agencies and organizations working in ECCE, a significant number of resources, materials, and research has been developed within this field. However, there is a general lack of coordination between stakeholders. Often the resources developed remain localized and inaccessible to other partners, resulting in overlap and repetition of work. Multiple investments are made by donors and partners to re-create already-existing resources, leading to an inefficient use of time and resources.

Project Objectives

Under this project, researchers from Addis Ababa University, the Ministry of Education, and Ethiopian School Readiness Initiative created a multidisciplinary team to create an online Knowledge Hub for the exchange of information, experiences, and resources from organizations throughout Ethiopia involved in ECCE. This online platform creates a foundation for collaboration and sharing between organizations and encourages academic partners, government officials, and practitioners to access and disseminate existing evidence and resources on early childhood access and quality in Ethiopia. The Hub is intended to unify all ECDE stakeholders into one platform of collaboration and learning.

Project Methodology and Summary

The resource collection for the Knowledge Hub focused on all materials related to early childhood education, early childhood care, early childhood development, and early childhood parenting. The collection of resources was focused within Addis Ababa city administration level. The types of resources collected include policies, strategies and operational frameworks, curricular materials, standards, supplementary materials, measurement and assessment tools, datasets, research outputs, training programs, parent engagement programs, community enhancement methodologies, quality documents, locally produced materials, etc.

Work under this project was divided between two teams. The research team was responsible for identifying organizations, visiting organizations, collecting resources, compiling resources, and providing key information related to each resource. The ICT team was responsible for creating an interactive platform (the "Knowledge Hub") with the integrated e-repository system to allow for the storing and searching of the relevant resources.

Researchers received training on the tools to be used, procedures to be followed, and how to report on the collected resources; they then had the opportunity to pilot the tools and procedures and adjust based on feedback. Resource collection took place from November 2021 to March 2022.

Project Results

The researchers visited 50 organizations and gathered a total of 488 resources. ECCE resources were collected from government ministries across multiple sectors, universities, research institutes, assessment centers, and local, national, and international (bilateral and multilateral) NGOs.

The ECDE Knowledge Hub is hosted on the Addis Ababa University (AAU) website, where the materials and resources can easily be retrieved and are publicly available. The Knowledge Hub accommodates different types of data formats and allows organizations to upload their own resources directly to the Hub. The ICT team trained staff from the ECCE center at AAU on overall maintenance and operating procedures for the Knowledge Hub to ensure sustainability of this project. The ECCE at AAU will be responsible for maintaining and updating the Hub.

The Knowledge Hub was formally launched in April 2022 at an event attended by government officials from the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health as well as representatives from key partners including USAID, UNICEF, Save the Children, AAU, the World Bank, and others.

Data Feedback Loops

Given the numerous ECCE partners and initiatives throughout Ethiopia, there is great value in bringing together and sharing best practices, research outputs, tools/measures, and datasets. The Knowledge Hub aims to improve coordination by bringing together stakeholders into one platform and creating a community of practice for collaboration and integration of ECCE efforts to help shape the future ECCE policy and practices in Ethiopia.

The Hub will encourage academics, policymakers, and practitioners to access and disseminate resources, enhance expertise, and discover more efficient practices. Research from best practices can be shared to allow the scaling up of successful initiatives in other parts of the country. Different assessment tools can be further adapted and used to comprehensively monitor early childhood outcomes in Ethiopia. Datasets can be accessed and further analyzed to understand ECDE in different perspectives. The sharing of materials, teacher trainings, parental engagement programs, and quality assurance systems can serve as cornerstones for scaling up enhanced quality of ECDE in Ethiopia.

Creating a repository of shared resources will create a continuous data feedback loop system to advance knowledge and practices in ECDE in Ethiopia. The mutual sharing of data among academics, policy makers and practitioners will hopefully encourage integrated services and research, thereby reducing unnecessary duplication of efforts. This will create opportunities for improved coordination among institutions, organizations, and individual professionals to collaborate to advance ECDE in Ethiopia.

Liberia

Project Background

Attention to early childhood and early learning in Liberia has improved significantly over the past decade. According to the 2019 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, 88 percent of Liberian children are enrolled in an ECE program at least one year before primary school entry. Liberia's National Inter-Sectoral Policy on ECD and National Inter-sectoral Committee on Early Childhood Development have been in place since 2012, but implementation remains a challenge and service provision remains unevenly distributed. The Ministry of Education of Liberia has had little information and data on the location, status, and quality conditions of ECE programs throughout the country.

There are noticeable disparities in ECE center locations among regions (rural or urban), program types and quality, and services available. Often, schools are opened based on political or economic considerations rather than local needs. In addition, this subsector is grossly underfunded and is largely

donor driven. Some regions might be more donor concentrated while others are underserved; similarly, programs/interventions may be directed more by donor interest rather than by the actual needs that exist in that particular region. This results in uneven location of educational institutions and varying levels of quality and program interventions, leading to disparity in access, and overutilization or underutilization of educational facilities.

Project Objectives

Under this project, researchers from the University of Liberia and the Liberian Ministry of Education created the first catalog of public, private, community, and faith-based ECE centers and schools in selected regions of Liberia. The catalog includes the location of centers as well as components of structural and process quality. The goal of this exercise was to survey existing ECE schools/centers in selected regions of Liberia, with the intent or hope that these data will be used by the Ministry of Education and its partners for policy-making that may lead to improved ECE programming.

Project Methodology and Summary

Sixty ECE schools/centers from three counties were randomly selected from the Ministry of Education, Education Management Information System (EMIS) data based to represent the three educational regions: Bong, Montserrado, and Grand Gedeh.

The study used a classroom observation tool and teacher interview to gather data from the participating schools/centers. The demography items were developed by the Liberian T4ECE team, the University of Liberia, and the Ministry of Education and collected data on location and type of center, distance to closest villages, number of teachers/caregivers, children enrolled, and children attending (including overage children). Items on structural and process quality (related to pedagogy, learning activities, and health and safety) were adapted from the Brief Early Quality Inventory (BEQI) tool that was previously used in Liberia in a research study conducted by the University of Liberia and ECD Measure. The teacher interview collected information on teachers' level of education, their professional development, the availability and use of curriculum, and teacher perceptions and motivation. Both the observation tool and teacher survey were adapted to align with existing ECE policies and the Liberian context.

Six enumerators were trained to reliably administer the instruments. The observation data were collected during a 90-minute period and ran for 10 instructional days in each district during the months of December 2021–January 2022. The scores were recorded using paper forms and were then entered into an electronic database. Each data collection site was assigned a supervisor for a week to ensure that accurate data were collected.

Project Results

The University of Liberia and T4ECE task force team produced two products from this study:

1. School catalog of all ECE schools and centers (public, private, community, and faith-based) in the pilot counties with their respective locations and key data on demographics of school and basic infrastructure
2. Descriptive report on ECE quality of the 59 centers, focused around the following four research questions:
 - a. What are the health and safety features of the learning space and facilities?
 - b. Does the teacher engage with children in play-based learning activities and materials?
 - c. What teaching approach do Liberian ECE teachers use in the classroom?

- d. What is the teacher's level of education and professional training in catering to early learners?

The study showed that schools often do not have sufficient indoor learning space or furniture (chairs and writing surfaces) to support learning. Outdoor conditions at many schools are also inadequate, with limited to no space or equipment for outdoor play and gross motor activities. In addition, the majority of schools lack sanitary toilet facilities and handwashing stations. These types of facilities and building conditions are key to ensuring children have a safe and stimulating environment to support learning.

The data showed that virtually no play-based activities or practices are being implemented in ECE classrooms that were involved in this project. Children were observed having almost no choice in how to engage in activities; instead, they were mainly involved in whole-group activities and had few opportunities to interact with their peers. Teachers in the sample of classrooms largely used rote instruction, and few were observed getting on the children's level or taking part in activities with the children. These findings suggest there is considerable room for improvement for play-based learning in Liberian preprimary classrooms. Global evidence demonstrates that children having opportunities to choose what and how to engage in activities, work and play with each other (as opposed to whole-group instruction only), and learn by doing and engaging directly in activities with teachers (rather than rote instruction) are key components of quality early childhood programming. The study also identified the need to improve positive behavior management practices and, in particular, the need to reduce the use of physical punishment.

The lack of play-based learning practices and positive behavior management strategies speaks to the urgent need for ongoing support in these areas. Data from the teacher interviews provided insights into why these practices may not be employed and additional areas where teachers need support. Many existing preprimary teachers are not certified, and only 40 percent of public school teachers received in-service training last year. This may suggest that teachers do not have specialized training or knowledge on best practices for early childhood teaching. The survey revealed that teachers feel overwhelmed with the amount of work they have. In addition, they feel they do not have the training they need to be effective kindergarten teachers and are not adequately supported with resources to carry out their teaching duties.

Data Feedback Loops

This project marks an important step toward mapping ECE centers and identifying gaps in the implementation of ECE programs. The T4ECE Liberian task force team presented the findings to the Ministry of Education Senior Management Team as well as key partners and donors. The catalog was formally presented and handed over to the Ministry of Education to be included in the EMIS database. The project report and evidence brief are available on the website of the Ministry of Education.

An important next step will be to further explore ways to use the data to manage resources to address specific needs as identified by the project. This study can be used by the Ministry of Education, its partners, and school administrators to identify the types of facilities and infrastructure that should be included in each ECE school/center and to develop strategies for the training of ECE teachers to ensure all children have access to quality and equitable education to develop lifelong learning skills. In fact, findings from this study are already being used under the USAID-TESTS (Transforming Education System for Teachers and Students) grant in Liberia as they develop in-service training curriculum for ECE teachers. We also hope the findings can be used to advocate for more funding in the national budget for ECE programs across the country.

Finally, this was a pilot mapping exercise of only a small sample of ECE programs in three counties in Liberia. It is hoped that the Ministry of Education can use this experience to scale up a nationwide study for a comprehensive picture of ECE programs in Liberia. In Mauritius, the team shared that the tool is being consolidated to be used by the Ministry of Education and the World Bank to produce a national mapping tool for Liberia. As Liberia continues to learn more about the status and current conditions of their ECE programs, opportunities will arise to leverage those data toward ongoing program improvement, capacity-building, supporting the workforce, and improving child outcomes through data-driven policies and approaches.

Rwanda

Project Background

Expanding access to quality preprimary education in Rwanda is a priority in the Education Sector Strategic Plan, as well as the Government of Rwanda's strategy to strengthen human capital. In 2016, the Government of Rwanda began offering a one-year preprimary education program. In 2018, preprimary enrollment was 21 percent. Significant investments have resulted in development of an official preprimary curriculum (2016), a preprimary teachers' guide (2016), a preprimary scheme of work (2018), the Early Childhood Development Policy (2016), and the Minimum Standards and Norms for Early Childhood Development Services in Rwanda (2016).

However, there is limited collection of and access to data on the quality of the classroom environment to guide decision-making at different levels. While the Ministry of Education has established quality standards and has designated staff to inspect and monitor schools, the current monitoring data do not include sufficient information about the quality of teaching and learning in preprimary and ECE classrooms. In addition, inspection staff are normally trained on issues related to infrastructure and facilities of ECE programs and are less so on issues related to the quality of teaching and learning environment.

Project Objectives

In 2020, Save the Children Rwanda was awarded funding from its Global Central Fund to implement the International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA) study to generate data on children's learning and development skills. Under the T4ECE project, the team expanded the scope of the IDELA study to: 1) enhance quantitative data about the quality of preprimary classroom environments using the IDELA Classroom Environment (IDELA-CE) tool, and 2) build the capacity of government officials and partners to recognize and monitor quality preprimary learning environments. The IDELA-CE tool measures quality in four core domains: general resources, literacy instruction, numeracy instruction, and interactions in the classroom. This project aimed at training government officials in how to assess the quality of preprimary learning environments using the IDELA-CE and on how to use the findings and data to improve students' experiences and learning.

Project Methodology and Summary

In mid-2021, Save the Children Rwanda conducted capacity-building sessions with 57 education officials (district education officers and district ECD focal persons) from all 30 districts throughout Rwanda. The training covered core aspects of quality in early childhood, such as the use of play-based learning, the importance of choice, and how to effectively set up and use learning stations in a classroom in order for officials to have a common understanding of key quality elements in preprimary classrooms. The later

part of the training focused on the technical aspects related to observing and monitoring classroom quality using Save the Children's IDELA-CE tool. The participants had the opportunity to pilot the tool at schools in Kigali City and contributed to reviewing and further adapting the IDELA-CE tool to make it more relevant for the local context. On the last day of the training, the participants had a facilitated session on how to utilize IDELA-CE findings at school level, sector, and district. They were introduced to different post-observation teacher coaching techniques and discussed methods to use data for internal and external advocacy.

Immediately following the training, in late-2021 government officials used the IDELA-CE tool to collect data on preprimary classroom quality in a nationally representative sample of 143 schools in all 30 districts of Rwanda. Save the Children Rwanda supervised the data collection and classroom observation. Data were collected digitally, and real-time results were available on the IDELA-CE dashboard.

Project Results

The findings from IDELA-CE study supported by T4ECE were consolidated into the national IDELA Assessment Report, which allowed for deeper comparison between the IDELA scores (measuring child learning and development outcomes) and the IDELA-CE scores (measuring quality of preprimary environments).

Results from the IDELA-CE observations show that, on average, classrooms have acceptable levels of classroom and health resources. Ratings of literacy and numeracy teaching practices and overall interactions in the classroom were also rated as “sufficient.” The highest ratings were of interactions in the classroom—between teachers and children as well as between children. On average, preprimary classrooms in Kigali City were found to be higher quality than classrooms in the North, South, and Western provinces (no difference with the Eastern Province). Higher-quality classrooms were associated with the presence of more experienced teachers, longer length of support from an NGO (Save the Children, in this case), and presence of a nutrition program at the school. This suggests that classrooms and schools that have been receiving ongoing support from outside groups like NGOs, civil society organizations, or governmental partners in other sectors will tend to have higher-quality learning environments.

In addition, higher-quality classrooms were associated with stronger learning and development skills for children. Resources and teaching related to literacy and numeracy, as well as interactions between teachers and children, were most highly correlated with children's skills. Classrooms rated as having poor quality were associated with particularly low student learning scores. Focus on supporting schools with the lowest-quality classrooms to raise their service provision to a sufficient level could have substantial effects on advancing student learning and well-being.

Finally, for many of the government officials trained and involved in the IDELA-CE data collection, this was their first time in an ECE classroom. Anecdotal evidence demonstrated that this experience helped them to better understand how young children learn (through play), the workload the teachers have and the challenges they face including a high teacher-to-student ratio, insufficient classroom size, insufficient learning materials, and lack of required skills to support children's learning and development, particularly for the most recently recruited teachers. The participants noted that the IDELA-CE exercise challenged government officials to rethink how they support young children's learning and the importance of early childhood development.

Data Feedback Loops

The Early Learning National Assessment in Rwanda Report was presented to ECE Technical Working Groups and the Rwanda Basic Education Board. In addition, the 57 government officials who were involved in the IDELA-CE were engaged in a virtual reflection meeting on the results and committed to promoting the collection and use of credible data to inform education decisions. Once the final report approval from the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda is secured, Save the Children will disseminate the report to a wider audience, including district officials, national-level government institutions, development partners, civil society, and private sector at a dissemination event. In addition, during the workshop in Mauritius, the team shared that under the USAID Tunozu Gusoma project, the team is building on the available data for decision-making and has plans to institutionalize IDELA.

Prior to implementing the IDELA-CE, data on quality of preprimary classrooms were scarce. Now, building on this experience and leveraging the strengthened coordination and data use by government officials, results and findings from the report can help to shape recommendations and interventions to address areas of need. For example, as noted above, results showed that quality of preprimary environments range significantly in different areas and regions, so there is a need to invest in activities that raise the overall quality of classroom environments throughout the country, with specific focus on those regions and areas with lower levels of quality. There is especially a need to invest in the literacy and numeracy environments, as well as in overall classroom resourcing. This requires investments in both “soft” inputs, such as teacher training, and “hard” inputs, such as classroom furniture, books, and toys.

As noted above, an important aspect of this project was the involvement and capacity-building of local officials to collect and utilize classroom-level data to improve the quality of ECE programming in Rwanda. The data have helped local education officers to better direct resources and budgets and organize teacher training based on identified areas of need. Recognizing the importance of quality early childhood programming and the use of data, many district officials have committed to continue including ECE classroom observation in their ongoing monitoring plans and to train other staff in their districts, including Sector Education Inspectors, in the use of this tool. This exercise has helped to shape a more positive data-use culture in Rwanda as stakeholders are better understanding the need for data to improve quality, rather than seeing data collection as a policing tool.

South Africa

Project Background

In South Africa, there are 1.3 million children aged 4–5 years. Approximately two-thirds of these children live in households that have per capita income below the poverty line. Massive inequalities persist in South Africa when it comes to young children’s early experiences. Poor children are more likely to live in households with poor access to early health care and nutrition and are less likely to access an early learning program (ELP). When poor children do access an ELP, it is likely to be of inferior quality to that available to children from wealthier backgrounds.

Seventy-two percent of children ages 4–5 years in South Africa attend some type of ELP. Even though such a high percentage of children attend ELPs, up until recently, limited systematic information was available about the diverse ELPs in the country and children’s development. There were no national data and no system to monitor and report child outcomes trends over time, and to help understand correlations between children’s sex, socio-economic status, growth, social and emotional development,

exposure to an ELP, and learning outcomes. For most poor children in South Africa, the experiences in their earliest years present significant barriers to their success in school and to their long-term economic inclusion, reinforcing intergenerational cycles of poverty and exclusion. As such, this type of data and monitoring system is crucial for determining and adjusting programs offered to young children in South Africa that can set them up for lifelong success.

Project Objectives/Goals

The Thrive by Five Index 2021 is the largest survey of preschool child outcomes ever attempted in South Africa. It is the first in a series of surveys that will monitor trends over time in the proportion of children enrolled in ELPs who are “On Track” for their age in key areas of development. The index was initiated by First National Bank and Innovation Edge, in collaboration with the Department of Basic Education (DBE), with support from USAID and T4ECE. This project is part of a public/private partnership to provide regular and reliable data on a nationally representative, random sample of young children and includes an audit of ELPs.

Project Methodology and Summary

Data collection for the index took place in September and November 2021. The sample included 5,139 children (ages 50–59 months) enrolled in 1,247 ELPs across the country. The index sample is nationally representative of children enrolled in ELPs, and data may be disaggregated to show the performance of children in different provinces, different household income groups (using school quintiles as a proxy for income), and for boys and girls.

The index provides population-level data on how well preschool children in South Africa are doing in three key developmental domains: early learning, physical growth, and social-emotional functioning. The measures were selected because a child’s performance in these domains at the point of entry into school is predictive of performance in the Foundation Phase of schooling, and beyond. The data collected also allowed the team to undertake relational analyses for child outcomes: for example, the relationship between height for age (a measure of stunting) and children’s learning outcomes, and between socio-emotional well-being and learning outcomes.

Children were assessed using the ELOM Direct Assessment and the ELOM Social and Emotional Functioning Rating Scales. The ELOM is a locally developed and standardized instrument that is aligned with the South African Early Learning Curriculum. Height for age measurement was used as a proxy for health. Selected ELPs (522) were also audited to assess program quality using the ELOM Programme Quality Assessment Tool, and results on the audit are forthcoming.

Project Results

The index reports that 65 percent of children attending an ELP in South Africa are not “On Track” for cognitive and/or physical development and face barriers to thriving, which limit their chances of realizing their full potential. Fifty-five percent of children attending ELPs are not able to do the learning tasks expected of children their age, with 28 percent of children “Falling Far Behind” the expected standard. These children will need intensive intervention and are at risk of not catching up with their peers.

Approximately 25 percent of children in South Africa showed signs of stunting. Overall, 5 percent were found to be severely stunted. These children are excessively short for their age as a result of chronic malnutrition and are at high risk of not achieving their potential.

Data showed a clear socio-economic gradient, with considerable variation in the performance of children across different income groups; as household income increases, so do the child's chances of being On Track. Children in the poorest 60 percent of households are “Falling Far Behind” the expected standard in key areas of development. The combination of risk factors faced by young children in South Africa places these children at a massive disadvantage. By age 4 years, a child from the lowest income group who is severely stunted is already one full year behind a child of normal growth in the wealthiest income group when it comes to early learning.

Data Feedback Loops

The Thrive by Five Index was formally launched in April 2022 as part of a broader initiative to use data tools and insights to help change the educational trajectories of disadvantaged children in South Africa. A high-level formal launch event was held, coinciding with the publication of the Thrive by Five Index Report. All data and reporting are made publicly available on the Thrive by Five website (thrivebyfive.co.za). Action Briefs are also available on the Thrive by Five website, providing more detailed information on the steps that need to be taken to address the challenges highlighted by the study.

Data collection for the index took place just prior to the transfer of responsibility for early childhood development from the Department of Social Development to the DBE in April 2022. The Thrive by Five Index therefore provides the DBE with a measure of service quality and child outcomes at the time that this function shift took place. It offers a baseline measure against which to monitor progress in improving the quality of ELPs and other services for young children over time.

The intention is to repeat data collection every three years, to be able to track trends in the proportion of 4- to 5-year-old children who are developmentally “On Track” and to respond accordingly to priority needs within specific domains, population groups, or geographies. Data from the index will be used to report on the Sustainable Development Goal 4.2.1 and to ultimately raise public awareness of the importance of early childhood development, motivate for greater resources and more effective targeting, support data-informed systems enhancements, and improve routine data collection systems and performance monitoring to give children the foundations for lifelong success.

4. Lessons and Common Themes from T4ECE

Several themes that may inform future work have come up in our efforts over the course of Phase II with the T4ECE task force countries:

Country-driven research grants can be effective mechanisms to build local capacity in early childhood evidence collection and use.

We've observed that the highest point of leverage within the T4ECE initiative has been the provision of the country grants for local researchers. We recommend continuing to build capacity in countries through local research activities. Within the four country projects and our work with the local teams, we have observed several common themes:

- 1. *Data feedback loops:*** Data can be used at each level of an ECE system to influence change in behavior or decision-making. In order to effect change, data must be actionable and accessible to stakeholders at all levels (parents, teachers, schools, communities, national decision-makers, global players for accountability). Creating a tight feedback loop between policy and practice requires routine sharing of information and ongoing data on how well programs are being implemented in a trusting and transparent manner (Metz & Bartley, 2015). In designing their research, country teams have identified where data are intended to impact early childhood policy or practice. Insights from the data collected in each project will be used to make decisions about each country's respective early childhood systems. For example, the 2021 Thrive by Five Index in South Africa is just the start of an ongoing data feedback loop in which data will be collected every three years to track trends and adjust programming and policies accordingly. In Liberia, data are already being used to inform the design of ECE teacher training curriculum under the USAID-TESTS grant. Projects have intentional links to use data on quality and access to ECE so that it is accessible and actionable for decision-makers.
- 2. *Creating a culture of data:*** Task force teams have reflected on the importance of clearly communicating the purpose of collecting and using data in advance. Stakeholders (particularly teachers and those at the local level) need to understand that data is not being collected to police or penalize. Similarly, is the need to use common language in sharing data and results. When researchers present, they often use academic language, creating a disconnect between those people who are on-the-ground and supposed to use the data for quality improvements. For example, in Rwanda, the team worked closely with local government officials and trained them in understanding and utilizing data to help with decision-making and working directly with teachers at the local level. In South Africa, the team worked closely with a communication partner to ensure that the data and findings were communicated in clear manner accessible to all levels of stakeholders. They developed "Action Briefs" to highlight concrete steps to be taken to address the challenges. As part of the efforts to create a culture of data, we as researchers need to flip the way we introduce, communicate and present data so that people understand it's focused on improving learning and quality and not on penalizing.
- 3. *Bridging gap between research and practice:*** The four research activities demonstrate effective collaboration between local researchers and those who use the data to make decisions. Local researchers have intentionally collaborated with government officials in the design and implementation of their research. For example, in Rwanda, government officials are involved in data collection efforts on classroom quality. In Liberia, the Assistant Minister for Early Childhood Education and team provided technical inputs throughout the process and were involved in the development of the data collection instruments and items to be used in the catalog, helping to ensure that the tools were aligned with government policy and to build government ownership of the findings. In South Africa, the DBE is directly involved in the audit of early learning programs. In Ethiopia, the National Educational Assessment and Examinations Agency, an agency within the Ministry of Education, supported data collection efforts and co-hosts the Knowledge Hub with Addis Ababa University.
- 4. *Contribution to local evidence base and alignment with national priorities:*** Local data and evidence can help governments track progress over time and prioritize investments to areas most in need. Each research activity is designed to generate demand-driven data that responds to needs within the government's overall vision and plans for ECE. In Ethiopia, for example, the lack of coordination between stakeholders and fragmentation of resources and interventions is noted as a key challenge in their Education Sector Plan. The Knowledge Hub responds directly to this priority by creating a foundation for collaboration and sharing between stakeholders. In Liberia,

the government had little information or data on the location and status of ECE programs. This project is the first attempt at developing an organized system for the government to survey and capture key components of quality in programs throughout the country. The research activities in all four countries are sparking momentum on-the-ground, as they bring together diverse partners to work on tangible projects and engage in dialogue around improving the use of early childhood data.

- 5. *Building local capacity for data collection and use:*** A key feature of the T4ECE consortium is that it builds capacity of local researchers and implementers in sub-Saharan Africa to gather and use their own data to improve national ECE systems. Data collection is often outsourced to firms or international organizations. However, early childhood data systems are most likely to have high impact when local stakeholders are in the driver's seat. For example, in Rwanda, Save the Children intentionally trained local officials in the use of the data collection tools to build ownership around the process. In Liberia the team was led by a consortium of both local university researchers and government officials who were involved in the design of the instruments, the data collection process, and data analysis. Our four research activities were designed by and implemented by local researchers, with direct inputs from country-level policymakers.

While many countries have made notable progress, there is a need to improve the availability, scope, and use of data within country ECE systems.

In the 2020 T4ECE needs assessment, 75 percent of respondents indicated that improving the available data, its scope, and its use (i.e., measurement of child development and quality of learning environments) was a very challenging issue in their countries.

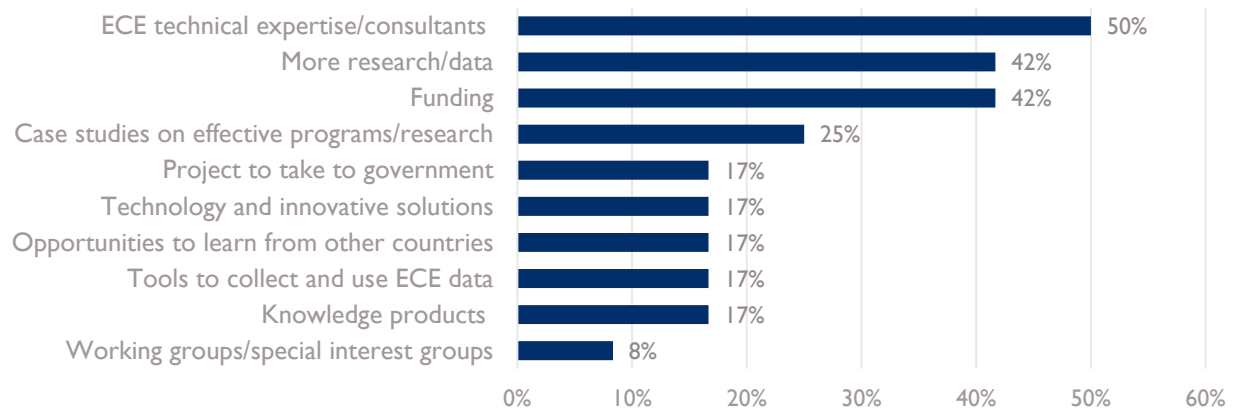
In working with countries, we've found that countries need support and resources to gather and use early childhood data. USAID has recently established a school readiness indicator for its missions, but many countries do not have recurring data collection mechanisms for ECE indicators. There has been recent progress in some countries that other countries may value. The South Africa T4ECE country project supporting the Thrive by Five Index, and the subsequent case study provides a detailed example of increased focus on availability and use of early childhood data at the country level.

Moving forward, there will be a need to clarify how existing national indicators or adapted country measurement tools can contribute to better insight into USAID's global indicators of improved early learning skills. Further, it will be important that the measures USAID uses for the new indicator are tested and aligned with specific interventions to ensure that they are sensitive to detecting improvements in early learning skills.

Countries need more technical ECE expertise and research.

As noted in the figure below, when we asked USAID staff what was needed to address the early childhood priorities, the top needs were more ECE technical expertise and more research/data. The T4ECE model that brings together local researchers and decision-makers has proven to be an effective way to build local expertise and uptake of local early childhood evidence.

Figure: Perceptions on what is needed to address ECE challenges



n=12, Respondents selected more than one option

There is a strong desire to improve inter-sectoral coordination within early childhood sectors.

Inter-sectoral coordination (primarily between education, health/nutrition, and social protection) is a continuous challenge in implementing holistic ECD programs around the world. In the needs assessment process, many country teams who were interviewed noted this, and indeed it is a challenge both within and outside of USAID—for governments and other partners alike. From the missions interviewed, it seems that the health sector (within governments and USAID) receives significant financing, and in some cases, ECD activities have already been included in health/nutrition. Opportunities to integrate ECE activities with health programming could be further explored.

As T4ECE transitions from Phase II to Phase III, we look forward to building on these lessons and continuing to support country-level efforts to test and apply approaches to early childhood data and measurement. Further, as country teams continue to learn from their locally design efforts, we hope to continue to facilitate opportunities for regional and global learning and knowledge dissemination.