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FORUM ECONOMIC OFFICIALS MEETING

8 August 2023

FORUM ECONOMIC MINISTERS MEETING

9 -10 August 2023

Suva, Fiji

INFORMATION PAPER 8: BUILDING A RESILIENT PACIFIC THROUGH INVESTMENTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Purpose and Recommendations

Purpose

This Paper provides key updates on the work facilitated by the Pacific Regional Council for Early Childhood Development (PRC4ECD) in advancing the *Pasifika Call to Action on ECD* and outlines the key decisions from the third (3rd) Early Childhood Development (ECD) Forum held in February 2023, confirming the call for strengthened and coordinated action on ECD to ensure Pacific children are given the best start in life.

The Paper updates Forum Economic Ministers on progress towards a whole-of-government approach to addressing ECD including linking ECD with climate resilience in the region. It expands on ECD Papers previously presented to Forum Economic Ministers which have outlined the need to increase early childhood investments including efforts towards ending childhood obesity and reiterates the call for even stronger prioritization of ECD as the region operationalizes the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*.

Summary

Children born today are critical actors in realizing Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' 2050 vision "...for resilient Pacific region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity that ensures all Pacific peoples can lead free, healthy and productive lives"¹ Achieving the vision for a resilient Pacific requires actions now so Pacific children reach their full potential and build a future for themselves, their families, their communities, countries, and the Blue Pacific Continent.

Young children are profoundly vulnerable to the immediate and long-term impacts of climate change, emergencies and environmental shocks. Multifaceted ECD programmes – across health, nutrition, early learning, safety and security, and responsive caregiving – offer a promising combination of interventions to build protective competencies essential for resilience.

¹ PIF Leaders vision for the Blue Pacific Continent as stated in the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, endorsed at the 51st PIF Leaders Meeting held in Suva, Fiji from 11 – 14 July 2022. <https://www.forumsec.org/2050strategy/>

Despite the evidence, climate change action and financing often overlook human capital investments in the early years. Young children are largely excluded in the climate change discourse. Pacific countries should do more to consider the needs of young children and their families when planning for climate action and environmental protection and to prioritize them as valuable resources in building the region's overall resilience.

In response to the above and guided by the *Pasifika Call to Action on ECD*, Pacific countries have been making significant ECD advances. Overall, the pace of policy development in the region has been impressive. In 2017 most Pacific countries did not have any multi-sectoral framework on ECD. Now at least 10 countries are poised to have policy tools and systems that enable them to drive coordinated programmes and services for young children. Countries have also reported improved services in early childhood education, health, nutrition, child protection, WASH, and child-focused social protection.

Pacific governments at the 2023 ECD Forum endorsed Action Point 10 of the *Pasifika Call to Action on ECD* prioritizing ECD as a pathway to:

- i. increase the resilience and adaptive capacity of communities to the effects of climate change and other emergencies.
- ii. promote close collaboration between the areas of ECD and natural resources, environment and sustainable development; and
- iii. commit to heightened advocacy for ECD in the global climate discourse and to call for global green financing mechanisms that allow for financing of ECD programmes and services.

A. Overview

In response to the call of Pacific Island Forum Leaders in 2018 for a whole-of-government approach to ECD, Pacific countries have progressively improved early years investments. Ministers responsible for Education, Health, Social Services and Economic and senior government representatives from 14 member countries² convened at the 2023 ECD Forum to advance collective action towards prioritizing ECD as a pathway to increase the resilience and adaptive capacity of Pacific communities to the impacts of climate change and other emergencies, promote close collaboration between the areas of ECD and natural resources, environment and sustainable development, and commit to heightened advocacy for ECD in the global climate discourse and to call for global green financing mechanisms that allow for financing of ECD programmes and services.

2. The region has advanced implementation of the *Pasifika Call to Action on ECD*, the region's action agenda for young children, under the political leadership of the Pacific Regional Council for ECD (PRC4ECD), a 15-member Council comprised of Economic Ministers and Social Sector Ministers.³ The PRC4ECD is the main regional mechanism for joint political leadership to drive these

² Member countries in the 2023 Pacific ECD Forum are Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

³ The 15 member countries of PRC4ECD are as above with the inclusion of Tokelau.

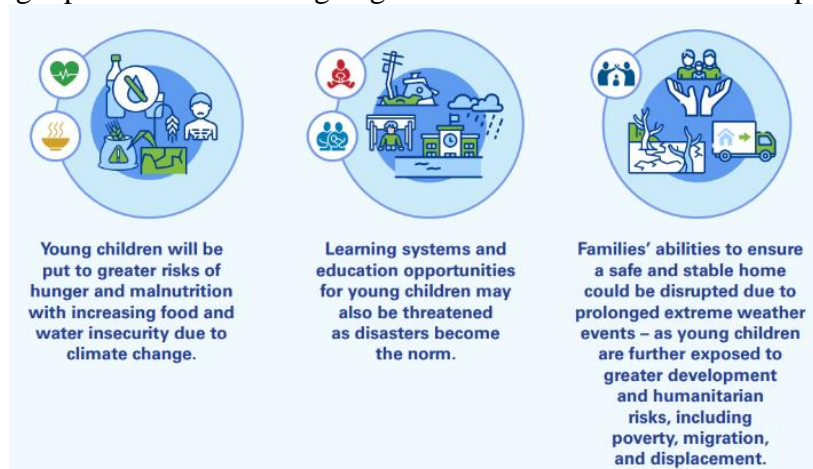
actions and investments on ECD. The Council is an innovative model of a high-level, geo-political network for young children – the only one of its kind globally – that brings together the economic and social sectors. PRC4ECD is the custodian of the *Pasifika Call to Action on ECD*.

3. Economic Ministers play a critical role in facilitating financing mechanisms that coordinate national inter-sectoral cost-sharing to create opportunities for synergies on ECD programmes and services. Economic Ministers are encouraged to elevate ECD in the global climate discourse and to call for global financing mechanisms on climate change to allow for improved financing of ECD programmes and services.

B. DISCUSSION

How are early childhood development and climate resilience linked?

- i. Young children are profoundly vulnerable to the immediate and long-term impacts of climate change, emergencies and environmental shocks. The effects are even more pronounced for those in disadvantaged conditions and with the least resources to cope.
4. Diminished environments and adverse circumstances derail the healthy development of young brains, with lifelong repercussions.⁴ Failing to give children the best start in life perpetuates cycles of



poverty and disadvantage that can span generations, undermining the strength and stability of societies.⁵

5. On the other hand, positive experiences in the early years form a buffer to adversity and build coping skills critical for resiliency. Decades of research show that policies and programs on ECD provide one of the most cost-effective, comprehensive, immediate, and enduring paths to boosting human development, as well as achieving climate change resilience and sustainable development.⁶

6. Any deprivation due to climate change at a young age can result in a lifetime of lost opportunity for young children. Furthermore, if the needs of the youngest are not addressed with the

⁴ Harvard University Center on the Developing Child. In Brief: The Impact of Early Adversity on Children's Development. Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-the-impact-of-early-adversity-on-childrens-development/>

⁵ UNICEF. Early Childhood Development. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/early-childhood-development>

⁶ The connection between ECD and the SDGs is explored in the article: *How Investing in Early Childhood Contributes to the Global Goals*, <https://medium.com/@maribelullmann/https-medium-com-how-investing-in-early-childhood-contributes-to-the-global-goals-228cfb4e216e>

right resources at the right time, this vulnerability extends to the whole community and into the future life of these individuals.

7. Multifaceted ECD programmes – across health, nutrition, early learning, safety and security, and responsive caregiving – offer a promising combination of interventions to build protective competencies essential for resilience. Resilience is defined as the ability to withstand threats or shocks in ways that preserve integrity and that do not deepen vulnerability.⁷

8. Despite the evidence, climate change action and financing often overlook human capital investments in the early years. Young children are largely ignored in the climate change discourse. In major international agreements and frameworks relating to climate changes such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) COP agreements, the Paris Agreement, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), the needs of children are acknowledged but there is little recognition of the disproportionate impact experienced by young children, the distinct support young children require to meet future challenges for adaptation and mitigation, and the opportunities ECD programming presents for building climate change resilience.

What has been done on ECD, climate change and next steps?

9. At the 2023 Pacific Regional ECD Forum, convened by the PRC4ECD, Ministers responsible for Education, Health, Social Services and Finance/Economic sectors, and senior government representatives from 14 member countries gathered to foster whole-of-government approaches to ECD and recognize the inextricable links of ECD to climate change resilience.

10. The Forum affirmed that Pacific Island governments have been making significant progress on ECD, demonstrating the political will and whole-of-society action to support the optimal development of its youngest citizens.

11. Overall, the pace of policy development in the region has been impressive. In 2017 most Pacific countries did not have any multi-sectoral framework on ECD. Now at least 10 countries are poised to have policy tools and systems that enable them to drive coordinated programmes and services for young children.

12. Guided by the *Pasifika Call to Action on ECD*, countries have been making coordinated ECD investments, with at least 7 countries (FSM, Kiribati, RMI, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga, PNG) have completed national multi-sectoral ECD policies and several more (Fiji, Samoa, Tuvalu, Tokelau) in the process of developing these policies. Countries have also reported improved services in early childhood education, health, nutrition, child protection, WASH, and child-focused social protection. Similarly, 10 countries have established multi-ministry mechanisms for better coordination with each other, with many countries having dedicated National ECD Coordinators in government to do the day-to-day implementation of priority activities. Some other countries that do not have dedicated ECD policies identify other mechanisms by which they support children in a coordinated manner.

⁷ UNICEF East and Central Asia (n.d.). Resilience, humanitarian assistance, and social protection for children in Europe and Central Asia. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/2671/file/Social_Protection2.pdf

13. Majority of the countries include some ECD interventions in their NDP, although this can be made more explicit and comprehensive in nature. About half of the countries have increased their public expenditures in one or more ECD sectors (in most cases, the education sector).

14. Collectively, Pacific governments at the ECD Forum also endorsed Action Point 10 of the Pasifika Call to Action on ECD - to prioritize ECD as a pathway to increase the resilience and adaptive capacity of communities to the effects of climate change and other emergencies; promote close collaboration between the areas of ECD and natural resources, environment and sustainable development; and commit to heightened advocacy for ECD in the global climate discourse and to call for global green financing mechanisms that allow for financing of ECD programmes and services (see **Annex 1** for the case paper on Action Point 10).

15. The Pacific Regional Council for ECD is expected to commission technical guidance, resources, and technical support to countries as they implement the Pasifika Call to Action on Early Childhood Development including the additional action point.

16. Despite the great progress, there are still areas to strengthen including strengthening parenting and community programme on ECD at scale; workforce support for teachers, health workers, social workers across sectors that foster a common approach to ECD across these professions. Disaggregated data on young children and the consolidation of ECD outcomes across different management information systems need to be improved, and greater coordination and coherence of development partners engagement in this space.

Pacific Regional Council on ECD

17. The 2023 ECD Forum included the meeting of the Pacific Regional Council for ECD which elected its new Co-Chairs, the Hon. Mulipola Anarosa Molioo, Minister of Finance of Samoa, and Hon. Lynda Tabuya, Minister of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation of Fiji. They are supported by an officials level Steering Committee co-chaired by Deputy Chief Secretary Abacca Anjain-Maddison of the Republic of Marshall Islands and CEO Dr. Mema Motusaga of Samoa.

18. The Pacific Regional Council for ECD also convened an ECD Partners Roundtable to foster a more harmonized approach to ECD support across the region, and coherence of the support provided to Pacific countries.

19. At the close of the ECD Forum, the member countries formally committed to advancing ECD multi-sectoral policy frameworks and systems for quality services in health, nutrition, early learning, protection, WASH, and social welfare. **Annex 2** identifies the key commitments by the Pacific member countries on ECD.

20. While it is necessary for Economic Ministers to support all of the commitments above, additional support is requested for facilitating financing mechanisms given the central role in public financial management and the influence in fostering inter-sectoral cost-sharing to create opportunities for synergies on ECD programmes and services.

21. National ECD policies provide the framework for coordinated action for young children in most Pacific Islands countries. Results-based and improved public finance management of ECD resources will ensure these policy frameworks translate to improved services for young children.

22. Economic Ministers are encouraged to elevate ECD in the global climate discourse and to call for global financing mechanisms on climate change to allow for improved financing of ECD interventions.

C. Conclusion

23. Children born today will be critical actors in realizing Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' 2050 vision "...for resilient Pacific region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity that ensures all Pacific peoples can lead free, healthy and productive lives".

24. Achieving the vision for a resilient Pacific requires actions now to ensure Pacific children reach their full potential and build a future for themselves, their families, their communities, countries, and the Blue Pacific Continent.

25. Pacific countries should do more to consider the needs of young children and their families when planning for climate action and environmental protection and to prioritize ECD investments and programming in building the resilient capacity of Pacific communities.

UNICEF and Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat
19 July 2023



2023 PACIFIC ECD FORUM OUTCOME

Early Moments Matter

We, Ministers of Education, Health, Social Services and Finance Sectors, and our senior government representatives from Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu gathered in Nadi, Fiji from 22 to 24 February 2023 for the 2023 Pacific Early Childhood Development (ECD) Forum,

Re-affirming the call of our Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' that securing the future of the Pacific cannot be left to chance; and supporting the regional collective expanded vision in the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, for a resilient Pacific Region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion, prosperity, spiritual and cultural wealth that ensures all Pacific peoples especially children and young people lead free, healthy, productive and happy lives,

Reinforcing the 2017 Pasifika Call to Action on Early Childhood Development which sets the strategic direction for ECD action in the region, and recognizing the Pacific Regional Council for ECD (PRC4ECD) as the regional governance mechanism whose mandate aligns and contributes to the realization of the *2050 Strategy for Blue Pacific Continent* and national development priorities,

Recognizing the 2018 Pacific Islands Forum Leaders commitment and expanding on the regional vision to lead a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, at the national level to address Early Childhood Development,

Acknowledging capacity gaps and resource constraints and hearing the need for increased investment, call on UNICEF and partners to strengthen and harmonize support for ECD through capacity-building and technical support, south-south cooperation, funding including climate financing, regional initiatives and for programmes in countries, and

Hereby, endorse Action Point 10 of the Pasifika Call to Action on ECD, to prioritize ECD as a pathway to increase the resilience and adaptive capacity of communities to the effects of climate change and other emergencies; promote close collaboration between the areas of ECD and natural resources, environment and sustainable development; and commit to heightened advocacy for ECD in the global climate discourse and to call for global green financing mechanisms that allow for financing of ECD programmes and services.

Recognizing the need for a unified regional approach, commit to:

- Provide opportunities, strengthen mechanisms, frameworks and financial support for the inclusion and meaningful engagement and participation of children and young people irrespective of gender, abilities and other status within all policy making, planning and reporting processes at international, regional, national and sub-national level.
- Undertake coherent and coordinated multi-sectoral approach to planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation which is accessible and informed by relevant, reliable and comparable data disaggregated by age, sex, disability, residence, ethnicity and wealth.
- Support and enhance multi-sectoral platform to coordinate financing and investment through national public financial management systems that are evidence based and make best possible use of budgets, ensuring efficacy, build synergies for ECD programmes and services at international, regional, national and sub-national levels.
- Develop and strengthen robust ECD legislations and policies with costed action plan and monitoring and evaluation framework which are supported by well-resourced and functioning multi-sectoral coordinating mechanisms.
- Coordinate mechanisms that translate normative framework and commitments to affordable quality services and support for all children, young people and their families, with particular attention to the most marginalized and vulnerable, such as children with disabilities by integrating ECD and taking a holistic approach when delivering policies and programs.
- Provide critical comprehensive and quality support to parents, caregivers and communities; to nurture a loving, safe and caring environment that is grounded in our culture, values, knowledge, and faith, all of which are critical to child-rearing in the Pacific; and support systems for the most vulnerable and marginalized including early interventions for children and young people with disabilities.

Conclusion

We, Ministers of Education, Health, Social Services and Finance Sectors, and our senior government representatives from Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu, reiterate our commitment to providing a regional and collaborative approach in ECD to ensure *that No Child is Left Behind*.

We reiterate the call to all governments to accelerate implementation of the *Pasifika Call to Action on ECD* by undertaking measures that ensure the full and effective implementation of ECD frameworks.

Building a Resilient Blue Pacific Through Early Childhood Development (ECD)

Brief on the Proposed Action Point #10 for Pasifika Call to Action on ECD

Why is ECD critical to resilience-building?

The early childhood period is a critical and singular window of opportunity to shape the development of the human brain. In fact, in the first few years of life, as much as [1 million new neural connections are formed every second](#).^[i] This brain architecture is the foundation for all future learning, behaviour and health.^[iii]

Diminished environments and adverse circumstances derail the healthy development of young brains, with lifelong repercussions.^[iii] This makes young children profoundly vulnerable to the immediate and long-term impacts of climate change, emergencies and environmental shocks (see examples below).^[iv] The effects are even more pronounced for those in disadvantaged conditions and with the least resources to cope.

Failing to give children the best start in life perpetuates cycles of poverty and disadvantage that can span generations, undermining the strength and stability of societies.^[v] On the other hand, decades of research show that policies and programs focused on ECD provide one of the most cost-effective, comprehensive, immediate, and enduring path to boosting human development, as well as achieving climate resilience and sustainable development.^[vi]

Positive experiences in the early years form a buffer to adversity and offer opportunities to develop coping skills critical for building resiliency. Resilience is the ability to withstand threats or shocks in ways that preserve integrity and that do not deepen vulnerability.^[vii] Multifaceted ECD programmes – across health, nutrition, early learning, safety and security, and responsive caregiving – offer a promising combination of interventions to build protective competencies essential for resilience.

ECD policies, programs, and practices - when appropriately financed, of high quality, distributed equitably and at the right time, and aligned with the principles of sustainable development - increase the resilience and adaptive capacity of individuals, their families, communities and the nation to the effects of climate change and emergencies.

Action point #10 of the Pasifika Call to Action on ECD

Pacific Island leaders have been making significant progress on ECD, demonstrating the political will and whole-of-society action to support the optimal development of its youngest citizens. Guided by the Pasifika Call to Action on ECD (see figure on the right), countries have been making coordinated ECD investments, national multi-sectoral ECD policies and improved services in early childhood education, health, nutrition, child protection, WASH, child-focused social protection and parenting support.

An additional Action Point 10 is proposed to expand the 9-point Pasifika Call to Action to address the urgency of protecting the youngest children of the region and to maximize the value of ECD

interventions. It is as follows:

10. Prioritize ECD as a pathway to increase the resilience and adaptive capacity of communities to the effects of climate change and other emergencies and promote close collaboration between the areas of ECD and natural resources, environment and sustainable development.

Action Point 10 highlights the opportunities ECD policies and programs provide for boosting resilience, adding adaptive capacity, and serving as a catalyst to achieving the vision of a “Pacific Region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity, that ensures all Pacific peoples can lead free, healthy and productive lives.” as described in the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. ECD policies and programs for the Pacific region also provide new pathways to attract financing and resourcing for human development, climate resilience and sustainable development for the region.

The power of ECD to support the resilience aspirations of the Pacific are best realized when there is interdisciplinary dialogue and close collaboration between professionals in the fields of ECD and those of environmental, natural resources, climate, and sustainable development. Action Point 10 underscores the need for ECD policies and programs to be developed in alignment with the principles of environmental protection, climate resilience and sustainable development.

Adding an additional point expands the aspiration of the 9-point Pasifika Call to Action on ECD towards a truly sustainable development in support of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. Altogether, it underscores the urgency of rallying stakeholders, resources, knowledge, and financing to attend to the needs of the youngest children and their families – when interventions and support make the most impact. As with the rest of Pasifika Call to Action on ECD, the Pacific Regional Council For ECD, in collaboration with UNICEF, is expected to commission technical guidance, resources, and support to countries as they implement the additional action point.

^[i] UNICEF. Early Childhood Development. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/early-childhood-development>

^[ii] Ibid.

^[iii] Harvard University Center on the Developing Child. InBrief: The Impact of Early Adversity on Children’s Development. Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-the-impact-of-early-adversity-on-childrens-development/>

^[iv] Adapted from [UNICEF EAPRO ECD and Climate Change Advocacy Brief](#)

^[v] UNICEF. Early Childhood Development. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/early-childhood-development>

^[vi] The connection between ECD and the SDGs is explored in the article: *How Investing in Early Childhood Contributes to the Global Goals*, <https://medium.com/@maribelullmann/https-medium-com-how-investing-in-early-childhood-contributes-to-the-global-goals-228cfb4e216e>

^[vii] UNICEF East and Central Asia (n.d.). Resilience, humanitarian assistance, and social protection for children in Europe and Central Asia. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/2671/file/Social_Protection2.pdf