

The Sooner the Better: Rethinking Early Childhood Development in Mongolia

Dulguun Batmunkh

INTRODUCTION

Until the end of the twentieth century, in most countries around the world, including in Mongolia, early childhood education and care (ECEC) was generally considered as the private responsibility of parents or primary caregivers of children – with the state intervening only in cases of unavoidable need. Kindergarten and preschool services were not even part of most formal education systems back then¹.

With the rise of feminist movements in the Global North demanding public-funded childcare for all so that equal employment and income opportunities are ensured for everyone², as well as the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, confirming the right to education for all children, ECEC finally started to gain more political interest from governments around the world.

Moreover, when the 1990s were declared as the decade of the brain³, global scientific efforts to understand the human brain were stimulated and research results from different institutions around the globe broadly suggested that a child's earliest years – aside of their genetics – play a significant role in shaping their brain development and have a lasting impact on their general health, ability to learn, interaction with society and overall success potential in life. According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, for instance, more than one million new neural connections are formed every second in the human brain in the first five years of their life and after this period of rapid proliferation, connections will

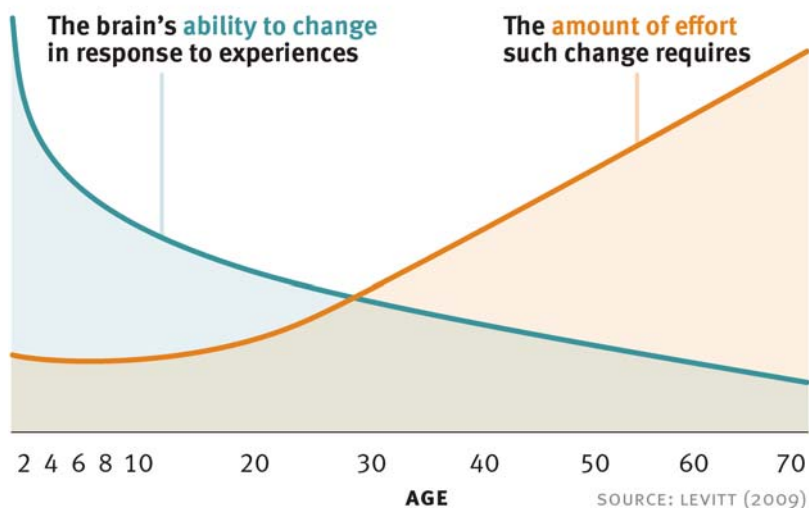
1. Scheiwe, Kirsten and Willekens, Harry. 2009. *Child Care and Preschool Development in Europe: Institutional Perspectives*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

2. Ruggie, Mary. 1984. *The State and Working Women: A Comparative Study of Britain and Sweden*. Princeton University Press.

3. Loc.gov. 1990. Proclamation by the President of the United States of America 6158, 17 July 1990. (<https://www.loc.gov/loc/brain/proclaim.html>).

reduce through a process called pruning⁴. In other words, as the brain matures, it becomes less capable of reorganising itself and adapting to new and unexpected challenges.

Average Human Brain Circuits Formation Over the Years



Center on the Developing Child  HARVARD UNIVERSITY

www.developingchild.harvard.edu

Source: The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. 2017.

Findings like the above led to a general acknowledgement in the international community that ensuring equal access to high-quality ECEC for every child is one of the smartest investments a nation can make for its long-term development, and international organisations promoted it even as the first phase of lifelong learning⁵.

Providing ECEC for all children is not only beneficial for overall social development, but economists also assure that investing in human capital at the earliest life stage have higher returns and is a more cost-effective investment compared to programmes targeting skills development at later life stages⁶. Evidence from both

4. Developingchild.harvard.edu. 2017. Brain Architecture. (<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>).

5. Esping-Andersen, Gosta. 2002. A Child-Centered Social Investment Strategy. Oxford Scholarship Online.

6. Heckmanequation.org. 2008. Invest in Early Childhood Development: Reduce Deficits, Strengthen the Economy. (<https://heckmanequation.org/resource/invest-in-early-childhood-development-reduce-deficits-strengthen-the-economy/>).

developed and developing economies suggests that an additional United States dollar (USD) invested in early childhood development programmes will yield a return of anywhere between six to seventeen USD⁷ in the future.

Despite all these proofs and acknowledgements, ensuring access to high-quality ECEC services for all remains more a vision than a reality for most countries. Currently, a systematic comprehensive ECEC approach is primarily found in Nordic countries⁸ while most other countries, such as Mongolia, still lag in providing adequate and accessible early childhood education services to their citizens, mostly due to policy and management inefficiency and budget constraints.

This paper analyses some of the major challenges in the ECEC system of Mongolia – a developing country in Northeast Asia with a population of over three million people⁹. Aside from examining the topic from the education curriculum and funding policy perspectives, it also points out the exclusion of vulnerable populations of the Mongolian society from ECEC services. Finally, it discusses the high load on parents and primary caregivers to raise young children whilst maintaining their financial stability and career growth and emphasises the importance of social security and labour policies that complement each other.

EDUCATION CURRICULUM

The foundation of the ECEC system in Mongolia was laid down in the early twentieth century with the rise of communism. Until then, caregiving at home was the primary way of bringing up young children in this traditionally nomadic country. The need for an official childcare service increased visibly in the early 1930s, as more and more women became part of the economically active population to contribute on the implementation of the five-year plans¹⁰.

The first early childhood education curriculum for Mongolian kindergartens was primarily based on the Guidelines for Kindergarten Educators of the Soviet

7. Heckman, J. J., Moon, S. H., Pinto, R., Savelyev, P. A., and Yavitz, A. 2010. The Rate of Return to the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program. *Journal of Public Economics*. (<https://www.impact.upenn.edu/early-childhood-toolkit/why-invest/what-is-the-return-on-investment/>).

8. Karila, Kirsti. 2012. A Nordic Perspective on Early Childhood Education and Care Policy. *European Journal of Education*.

9. National Statistical Office. 2021. Population of Mongolia in 2021. (https://www.1212.mn/tables.aspx?tbl_id=DT_NSO_0300_003V1&SEX_select_all=0&SEXSingleSelect=_1&AGE_GROUP5_select_all=0&AGE_GROUP5SingleSelect=_1&YearY_select_all=0&YearYSingleSelect=_2021&viewtype=table).

10. Nonna, D. 2009. Development of Preschool Education in Mongolia. Undraga Print LLC.

Union. To take the special characteristics of the country itself into account, the Ministry of Enlightenment of the Mongolian People's Republic developed its own Kindergarten Curriculum later in 1964¹¹. However, as this curriculum was heavily based on school-like subjects and lacked content for children's personal development, the ministry had to update it numerous times¹².

In 1989, Mongolia started its transition from being the second country in the world to adopt communism (after the Soviet Union) to a democracy. Therefore, the entire education policy had to be reformed accordingly and the Preschool Children's Upbringing and Education Curriculum¹³ was introduced in 1990. This programme included age-specific activities for all age groups in kindergarten and proposed the idea of working closely with parents to support their children's development for the first time¹⁴. Through an update in the Kindergarten Education Curriculum later in 1991¹⁵, the Ministry of Education of Mongolia also added content to teach children about the folk customs and traditions of the country. However, the teacher-centred learning approach from the communist era was still deeply manifested in the curricula.

Only later in 1998, with the introduction of the Preschool Education Content Standards¹⁶, was more flexibility provided to kindergartens to design their activities based on their local needs, and to run those in a more child-centred way.

In the framework of a larger reform in the education sector, the Preschool Education Standards were renewed again based on the Four Pillars of Learning proposed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) for the Twenty-First Century in 2005¹⁷. Even if it was a good attempt to align the national preschool curriculum standards to international recommendations, this document was too heavily packed with guidelines that had minimum

11. Ministry of Enlightenment. 1964. Kindergarten Curriculum. Ministry of Enlightenment, Mongolian People's Republic.

12. Ministry of Enlightenment. 1968. Kindergarten Education Program. Ministry of Enlightenment, Mongolian People's Republic.

13. Ministry of Education. 1990. Education and Training Program for Preschool Children. First Edition.

14. Nonna, D. 2009. Development of Preschool Education in Mongolia. Undraga Print LLC.

15. Ministry of Education. 1991. Kindergarten Education and Curriculum, Revised Second Edition, Textbook and Children's Book Publishing House of the Ministry of Education.

16. National Center of Standards and Metrology. 1998. Mongolian Standard for Primary and Secondary Education. Part 1: Preschool Education Content. Resolution No. 13 of the Council of the National Center for Standards and Metrology.

17. Department of Standards and Metrology. 2005. Standards of Preschool Education.

consideration of the Mongolian context and hence became too unrealistic to be implemented¹⁸. Moreover, the strict requirement for teachers to develop a unit-based content for every subject with concrete numbers of lessons and activities per day caused a shift back to a more school-like, teacher-centred learning setting at kindergartens¹⁹.

With amendments to the Law on Preschool Education Article 3.1 in 2016, the purpose of early childhood education in Mongolia was reframed as “to support, protect, develop, and train young children to build their individual characteristics, skills, and creative abilities, and to help them acquire the basic skill set to pursue lifelong education²⁰”. The Preschool Education Core Curriculum was updated accordingly in 2019 and allowed more flexibility for kindergartens to design and implement their education content and activities based on individual needs of the children with increased attention to social skills and behaviour development²¹. According to the current curriculum framework, kindergarten children in Mongolia receive an education on the thematic areas of social interaction, athletic development, language, nature and environment, mathematics, as well as music and painting.

18. Norjkhörloo, N. 2020. Our Preschool Education Can't Go Always Back and Forth. (<http://buuvei.mn/?q=%D2%AF%D0%B7%D1%8D%D0%BB-%D0%B1%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BC%D1%82%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%BB-%D0%B1%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE/%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B9-%D1%81%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B3%D1%83%D1%83%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%B9%D0%BD-%D3%A9%D0%BC%D0%BD%D3%A9%D1%85-%D0%B1%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BB-%D1%8D%D1%80%D0%B3%D1%8D%D0%B6-%D0%B1%D1%83%D1%86%D0%B0%D0%B6-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BE-%D0%B4%D1%8D%D0%B2%D1%85%D1%86%D1%8D%D1%8D%D0%B4-%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B3%D2%AF%D0%B9-%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BD%D0%B0>).

19. Norjkhörloo, N. 2020. Our Preschool Education Can't Go Always Back and Forth. (<http://buuvei.mn/?q=%D2%AF%D0%B7%D1%8D%D0%BB-%D0%B1%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BC%D1%82%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%BB-%D0%B1%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE/%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B9-%D1%81%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B3%D1%83%D1%83%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%B9%D0%BD-%D3%A9%D0%BC%D0%BD%D3%A9%D1%85-%D0%B1%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BB-%D1%8D%D1%80%D0%B3%D1%8D%D0%B6-%D0%B1%D1%83%D1%86%D0%B0%D0%B6-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BE-%D0%B4%D1%8D%D0%B2%D1%85%D1%86%D1%8D%D1%8D%D0%B4-%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B3%D2%AF%D0%B9-%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BD%D0%B0>).

20. Parliament of Mongolia. 2016. Law of Mongolia on Preschool Education, 2008, Revised Part from April 14 2016.

21. Ministry of Education and Culture. 2019. Curriculum of Preschool Education, First Appendix of the Minister's Order No. A/494. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

Later in 2020, in the name of ensuring that every child is ready for school, the Ministry of Education introduced a Child Development Assessment Sheet²² that must be filled up by kindergarten teachers to conduct a regular skills assessment for all individual children in their classes. This increased the workload of teachers enormously and shifted their focus back on primarily preparing children to become ready for school rather than paying attention on their holistic skills development and overall well-being.

Early childhood education institutions must serve as a safe space for young children to learn how to get along with others in a social setting, to explore their individual talents and interests, as well as to acquire fundamental skills on learning how to learn. Based on the current education policy and curriculum guidelines, early childhood education institutions operating in Mongolia are not fully able to offer these potentials to children and have to limit their function to serving primarily as a place where young children get prepared for school.

FINANCE AND INCLUSION

According to the World Bank, only 60 per cent of children aged three to six worldwide have access to ECEC services²³, and this number goes even lower in low-income countries. Compared to the global average, nearly 74 per cent of children aged three to five years (in Mongolia, children start with primary school education at the age of six) have access to early childhood education services in Mongolia²⁴. The World Bank points out that the state budget expenditure for preschool education in Mongolia has grown steadily in the last two decades²⁵ by sustaining its spending

22. Regulation on the Assessment of Development and School-Readiness of Children Enrolled in Preschool Education Programmes. (<https://legalinfo.mn/mn/detail?lawId=211164&showType=1>).

23. World Bank Group. 2016. Education Global Practice, Smarter Education Systems for Brighter Futures. (<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/827581468189575720/pdf/98448-REVISED-PUBLIC-03-WB-Improving-Learning-ECD-041116-print.pdf>).

24. National Statistical Office. 2018. Mongolia Social Indicator Sample Survey 2018. Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey. (https://mics-surveys-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/MICS6/East%20Asia%20and%20the%20Pacific/Mongolia/2018/Survey%20findings/SISS2018-MICS6%20SFR_English.pdf).

25. World Bank. 2017. Pre-Primary Education in Mongolia Access, Quality of Service Delivery, & Child Development Outcomes. (<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/481101490364915103/pdf/113752-WP-PUBLIC-P152905-QualityJanWithExecMarchclean.pdf>).

for preschool services at around 24 per cent²⁶ of its annual education budget on average.

However, an examination of the detailed spending patterns and budget allocation will reveal the gaps in the ECEC funds of the country. After covering priority expenditures such as staff salaries, meals for the children, general utilities and maintenance costs, the state budget cannot cover the cost of most learning tools, including learning and teaching materials, extracurricular activities, and other expenditures that are essential to create more room for creative and experimental environments²⁷. Thus, kindergartens rely heavily on contributions from parents and transfers from their local authorities. Unequal capacity to mobilise such funds are leading eventually to major differences in quality of learning and teaching environments at kindergartens across the country.

On top of that, the state must budget larger funds to expand public kindergarten facilities every year, as there's a much higher demand for kindergarten spots than the existing supply, especially in the capital city Ulaanbaatar. Currently, public kindergartens in this city do not have enough space to enrol all children who are in the kindergarten age, and with the limited public funding, the process of building more kindergartens runs too slowly. Therefore, a lottery system was introduced in 2015 to ensure a fair enrolment procedure for all children. However, a 2017 Asia Foundation Report found that 77 per cent of sampled parents always, often, or sometimes used bribes, personal connections, or positions to get their child admitted to kindergarten²⁸. Parents from financially comfortable families no longer even bother with the lottery system and enrol their children at private kindergartens instead, as they also offer better learning environments. Unfortunately, poorer families do not have this luxury and some of those whose children did not get picked for kindergarten have to become a stay-at-home parent until their children

26. World Bank. 2017. Pre-Primary Education in Mongolia Access, Quality of Service Delivery, & Child Development Outcomes. (<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/481101490364915103/pdf/113752-WP-PUBLIC-P152905-QualityJanWithExecMarchclean.pdf>).

27. World Bank. 2017. Pre-Primary Education in Mongolia Access, Quality of Service Delivery, & Child Development Outcomes. (<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/481101490364915103/pdf/113752-WP-PUBLIC-P152905-QualityJanWithExecMarchclean.pdf>).

28. The Asia Foundation. 2017. Transparency, Ethics, and Corruption Issues in Mongolia's Education Sector. (<https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Education-Sector-Corruption-Survey-Eng.pdf>).

reach school age. The Government of Mongolia announced²⁹ in September 2022 that such lotteries will no longer run from this year onwards, as they are starting to subsidise the private kindergarten expenses for the children who could not get enrolled in public kindergartens. However, visible outcomes of this statement and its sustainability can only be measured in the course of the upcoming years.

Aside from the insufficient number of kindergarten spots, geographic location and the socioeconomic background of the families are also key determinants to leaving numerous children out of early childhood education. Currently, early childhood education institutions primarily cater to families in the larger cities and towns of the country only. Yet, over 20 per cent of the Mongolian population continue to live as nomadic herders. In 2021, over 188,000³⁰ out of the 922,000³¹ families in Mongolia were registered as nomadic herders and most of the children in those families are left out from early childhood development programmes, as there are no kindergarten facilities in their neighbourhood³². The Law on Preschool Education provides the legal framework for alternative forms of preschool services. For instance, mobile kindergartens that use the traditional *gers* (yurts) are operating during summertime in several parts of the country. These have multiple benefits, as they not only allow nomadic children to learn how to socialise with their peers from a young age, but also help herder parents to boost their productivity by allowing them to focus on their work while their children can learn in a safe environment. The challenge remains, however, to find cost-effective and accessible solutions to run mobile kindergartens beyond the summer season.

Health issues that children are born with or that were caused to them due to their living environment also prevent a critical number of children from attaining early childhood education. There are nationwide a few kindergartens that are operating with adequate facilities to accommodate children with special support needs

29. Statement by the Prime Minister of Mongolia, L. Oyun-Erdene. 2022. Attending kindergarten by lottery and running in-person registrations no longer exist: <https://montsame.mn/mn/read/303064>

30. National Statistical Office. 2021. Number of Herder Households Nationwide. (https://www.1212.mn/tables.aspx?tbl_id=DT_NSO_1001_027V1&BAG_select_all=0&BAGSingleSelect=_0&YearY_select_all=0&YearYSingleSelect=_2021&viewtype=table).

31. National Statistical Office. 2021. Number of Households Nationwide. (https://www.1212.mn/tables.aspx?tbl_id=DT_NSO_0300_033V1&SOUM_select_all=0&SOUMSingleSelect=_0&YearY_select_all=0&YearYSingleSelect=_2021&viewtype=table).

32. National Statistical Office. 2018. Mongolia Social Indicator Sample Survey 2018. Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey. (https://mics-surveys-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/MICS6/East%20Asia%20and%20the%20Pacific/Mongolia/2018/Survey%20findings/SISS2018-MICS6%20SFR_English.pdf).

and only less than 40 per cent of disabled children can go to kindergarten according to numbers from 2018³³. Public and private kindergartens that provide services to children with disabilities named aspects that make their work extra challenging as the lack of training curricula, teaching and learning tools, rehabilitation-treatment-related equipment, transport, and extra benefits for teachers³⁴. Moreover, many young children frequently miss out on kindergarten and school during wintertime due to the poor air quality in major cities and provincial centres, as it causes them respiratory illnesses. The cost of treating such illnesses is a further burden on poor families that are already struggling with covering the basic funding for their children's education³⁵.

Another key factor and probably the most influential determinant holding children back from getting enrolled in early childhood education programmes is the income of their families. According to an assessment by UNICEF from 2013, seven out of ten children from low-income families in Mongolia do not attend kindergarten³⁶. As mentioned previously, learning supplies and materials in kindergartens are largely financed by out-of-pocket expenditures of the children's families and for those who are living under the poverty line such fees nearly seem impossible to cover.

All in all, even if it appears at first glance that Mongolia spends an adequate amount of its annual budget on early childhood development, when looking closely at the financial expenditures through an inclusion lens, one can easily point out that the ECEC sector needs more investments and an inclusive budgeting approach so that every child has access to an early childhood education programme.

33. Bolor-Erdene, B. 2018. The Construction Work of Complex No. 10 for Disabled Stands Still for Five Years. Ikon.mn. (<https://ikon.mn/n/17xm>).

34. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sports and the Asian Development Bank. 2020. Preschool Education Sector Study Report. (<https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/document/file/2020-24-12-preschool-education-sector-study-report.pdf>).

35. Banzragch, Undrakh and Enkhbat, Tsolmon. 2018. Child Rights Situation in Mongolia 2018. Save the Children Mongolia. (https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/crsa_eng-20181225_final_for_websitel_0.pdf/).

36. Enkhtuvshin S., Bolormaa Z. and Dulamjav G. 2013. Child Friendly Kindergarten Self-Assessment. UNICEF. ([https://www.unicef.org/mongolia/media/716/file/Child%20friendly%20kindergarten%20self%20assessment%20\(Mongolian\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/mongolia/media/716/file/Child%20friendly%20kindergarten%20self%20assessment%20(Mongolian).pdf)).

INVOLVEMENT OF PRIMARY CAREGIVERS

For most parents, especially for mothers, it would have been impossible to continue to work without the availability of an adequate public ECEC service. The Women, Business and Law team of the World Bank analysed data from 173 countries and confirmed that where the government provides free primary ECEC, women are more likely to receive a formal wage³⁷. And this is not just about their economic participation, but it is about their mental health too. In the Bright Horizon's 2022 Modern Family Index, most survey respondents from the United States of America (USA) indicated that childcare is one of their daily stressors at work³⁸. Nine out of ten of them were feeling that they were lacking time for their children's development and were overwhelmed in attempting to balance professional and family duties. It is fair to assume that primary caregivers in most other countries, including in Mongolia, also face the same issue although there is no country-specific data on this matter.

In Mongolia, parenting roles for fathers and mothers are unequally shaped from the beginning of the birth of their child. Even if paid parental leave is offered to both parents, paternity leaves are way shorter³⁹. While female employees receive 120 days of paid maternity leave which starts 60 days prior to the birth of the child and ends 60 days after giving birth, male employees only receive up to ten days of paid leave after their child is born according to the current law⁴⁰. Overall, parenting remains strongly gendered and mothers tend to take a more active day-to-day role in the lives of their children – particularly for those under the age of five. Fathers are mostly considered as the main financial provider and head of household due to the traditional aspects of the patriarchal society in Mongolia⁴¹.

Therefore, providing all parents and primary caregivers with the potential to remain financially stable while being on parental leave and continue their career through ensuring access to high-quality daycare and kindergarten facilities for their

37. The World Bank and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. 2015. Women, Business and the Law 2016. (<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/555061519930693642-0050022015/original/WBL2016KeyFindingsEN.pdf>).

38. Bright Horizons Family Solutions LLC. 2022. Eight Annual Modern Family Index. (<https://www.brighthorizons.com/-/media/BH-New/MFI/MFI-2022/Bright-Horizons-MFI-2022.ashx>).

39. Law on Family. 1999. The Parliament of Mongolia. (<https://legalinfo.mn/mn/detail/226>).

40. Amendment on the Law on Family. 2021. (<https://legalinfo.mn/mn/detail?lawId=16230709635751>).

41. Sukhbaatar K. 2020. Communication in Family. Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences.

children must receive a higher priority on the ECEC and social security policy agenda of Mongolia. Moreover, policies that encourage primary caregivers to combine childcare with work, such as introducing shared parental leave (taking an example from the Scandinavian model) or more flexible working hours at work, may be particularly useful. Some international organisations and private entities that are operating in Mongolia have started introducing pilot versions of these policies, such as by creating decent workspaces for pregnant and postpartum mothers and opening small daycare centres at their offices. However, waiting for every organisation to come up with such solutions by themselves will require a long time. A policy solution to implement such family-friendly employment models is therefore needed nationwide.

Moreover, social safety nets for families must be strengthened to support out-of-work parents and primary caregivers and reduce their household income volatility – especially during economically unstable periods caused by unforeseen forces like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Aside from ensuring equal access to affordable, accessible, high-quality ECEC services for all children, another important indicator to measure the efficiency of the ECEC system in a country can be how meaningfully the primary caregivers are involved in the upbringing of their children without being held back in their careers and financial wellbeing. The coherence between ECEC services, the social security and the labour policies must be ensured so that primary caregivers are meaningfully involved in their children's upbringing whilst being able to continue their career path and staying financially stable.

CONCLUSION

Education is fundamental to the growth and development of every nation, and within education, early childhood education has a substantial and everlasting impact on the comprehensive development of every child. A strong foundation will increase the chances of raising productive and empowered citizens and add value to the human capital. Despite a growing evidence base and global consensus on the importance of ECEC, this sector remains under-resourced and comparatively neglected as a policy issue in many countries around the world, especially in developing nations like Mongolia.

In sum, there are three central messages that have come from this paper. First, early childhood education institutions in Mongolia must revise their current curriculum and build their capacities to upgrade their function so as to be a place where young children can learn how to communicate with others in a social setting

efficiently, explore their individual talents and interests as well as acquire fundamental skills on learning how to learn rather than focusing too narrowly on getting children ready for school. Second, the ECEC sector in Mongolia is in essential need of massive long-term investments and must adopt an inclusive budgeting approach at the same time to ensure that every child, regardless of their socioeconomic background, has access to early childhood education services. Finally, Mongolian policymakers and employees must ensure that ECEC services and social security and labour policies complement each other so that parents and primary caregivers can maintain a balance between their family and professional lives.

Children's early childhood years present a window of opportunity for every country to address the inequalities in their society. While the long-term returns on Mongolia's ECEC investments have not been studied yet, initial results are promising and indicate that providing access to high-quality ECEC services is associated with improved cognitive and non-cognitive skills of children.

Dulguun Batmunkh, from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, is pursuing a MA in international policy at Stanford School of Humanities and Sciences. She earned a BA in international relations from the National University of Mongolia, and a MBA in public policy from the University of Finance and Economics in Mongolia. Dulguun worked as a Programme Manager at the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation from 2014 to 2018, where she established civic education programmes and networking platforms for promising young politicians and mid-career women to promote their proactive participation in politics. In her previous function as the Development Cooperation Officer of the German Embassy in Ulaanbaatar from 2019 to 2021, Dulguun helped at concluding negotiations and official project agreements between the German-Mongolian governments on development cooperation. She served as the Secretary-General of the UN Youth Advisory Panel Mongolia from 2013 to 2016 and is a co-founder of the UN Association of Mongolia. Dulguun is passionate about designing policies, programmes and learning environments that can maximise the learning experience for children and youth.