Building Bright Futures:

What is needed to expand
early childhood education and care
for Ukraine's refugee children

unicef ✿

for every child

Why invest in and expand early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in humanitarian contexts?

All children have the right to learn and develop, and thus should have access to high quality ECEC services.

Quality ECEC is a powerful means to advancing individuals and society, and to strengthening equity and inclusion for all.

Expanding ECEC services ensures all young children (0–6 years), across refugee and host communities, have a chance to succeed and overcome disadvantage.

Families' self-sufficiency and Ukrainian parents' chances of attaining relevant economic and social support are also tied to young children's opportunities to access ECEC.

How can rapid expansion of ECEC services be achieved?

Reduce legislative, policy and financial barriers that hinder refugee children's access to existing early learning services.

Accelerate national and municipal reforms and plans to expand ECEC services for all young children, especially in geographic areas with higher percentages of refugee or other vulnerable children, with a focus on provision of diverse and flexible modalities of ECEC.

Capitalize on existing resources to meet the additional demand for ECEC. This should include physical resources to provide the spaces and materials for quality early learning experiences, and human resources to meet an increased need for ECEC educators.

Engage refugee caregivers in order to support them in navigating the local ECEC system and to increase their knowledge of ways to provide early learning experiences for their children at home, which is essential in the absence of a sufficient number of ECEC services.

This brief is part of a two-brief series on early childhood education and care in the context of the Ukraine response. While the evidence base informing these briefs is mostly from upper-middle-income and high-income country contexts, the findings also have relevance to other contexts hosting refugee children and their families. Both briefs can be accessed here.

THE STATE OF YOUNG REFUGEE CHILDREN IN THE UKRAINE CRISIS

The war in Ukraine has displaced over 7.8 million individuals who have sought refuge in several countries across Europe, including Poland (1,497,849), Czechia (460,415), Italy (173,231), Slovakia (100,783) and Türkiye (145,000).[1]
As many as 9 in every 10 refugees arriving in host countries from Ukraine are women and children.[2]

Nearly 4 million of the refugees from Ukraine are children in need of humanitarian assistance,[3] one third of whom are estimated to be below the age of 6.[i]

This young refugee demographic is concerning, as the early years are highly sensitive to adverse life experiences and are a period of rapid brain growth and development.[4]

Only 1 in 3
refugee children are enrolled in ECEC in host societies.

[i] *Based on estimates from the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO).*

Refugee children are exposed to several compounded risks as they lose not only their homes but also their education,[5] which tends to be deprioritized in humanitarian response plans compared to survival initiatives.[6] Indeed, recent data show that on average, only one in three refugee children are enrolled in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in host countries.[7]

Challenges exist in rapidly expanding ECEC to meet the demand of host-community and refugee families, as access to ECEC is not universal or legally guaranteed in all host countries, especially for children under the age of 3.[8]

The demand for ECEC in the year before primary school is higher than the supply in many European countries,[9] and the disparity between demand and supply has further deteriorated due to the refugee crisis.

Maintaining a high quality of ECEC services while attempting to achieve rapid expansion is also a challenge, as the increase in the number of facilities must be accompanied by a commensurate increase in resources. This includes hiring and deploying a sufficient number of educators, as well as preparing the workforce to provide ECEC in a context of trauma and cultural and linguistic diversity.

Why invest in early childhood services in humanitarian contexts?

ECEC benefits all children – from refugee and host communities – necessitating investments in its expansion. Learning and development are successive and cumulative,[10] and a strong foundation developed early in life determines a child's later success and productivity.[11][12][13] Inclusive ECEC also reduces inequality and fosters social cohesion and integration for children from refugee or migrant backgrounds and their families,[14] becoming a safe space for recovery for children affected by trauma.[15] Thus, ECEC is crucial for healthy social, emotional and cognitive development.
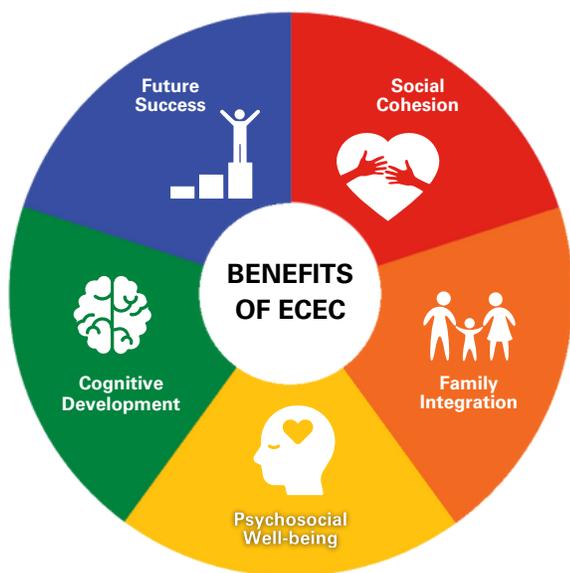
Investing in ECEC also provides economic benefits to individuals and society. Evidence suggests that investment in ECEC has one of the highest rates of return, with a significantly higher return for children from marginalized backgrounds,[16] such as refugee children (see Figure 1). It is estimated that social benefits of public ECEC in the long term will be seven times larger than the cost of its provision[17] and that every US$1 spent on ECEC yields a return of US$9 to society.[18]

Figure 1: Rate of return on investments at different stages of education, for children with different socio-economic profiles

Source: *Vandenbroeck et al., 2018*

Families' self-sufficiency and Ukrainian parents' chances of attaining relevant economic and social support are also tied to young children's opportunities to access ECEC, as this offers parents time to work, access shelter or find other ways to support their families while their children are being cared for.[19] Trauma-informed ECEC can also support children's resilience and recovery, as well as improve their mental health and create a sense of normalcy, which extends to their families.[20]

As such, it is essential to prioritize ECEC in the humanitarian response to the conflict in Ukraine, which should include access to quality early childhood education and care for children age 6 or below, covering a range of services such as day cares, nurseries, kindergartens and preschools, in formal and non-formal settings.[21] This requires innovative solutions in the immediate short term to ensure children can access quality education, while looking towards medium- and longer-term strategies to ensure the strengthening and expansion of systems and the continuation of learning and development.

1. Reduce legislative, policy and financial barriers that hinder refugee children's access to existing early learning services.

Remove barriers hindering young refugee children's access to formal ECEC by including refugee children in national legislation and policy, allocating sustained funding for ECEC, waiving enrollment mandates and supporting early language development.

ECEC systems should explicitly include refugee children in their planning and budgeting, as inclusive policies and legislation provide the enabling environment for overcoming barriers to enrollment. These barriers include legal and administrative challenges, a lack of resources, missing documentation and/or residence permits, language barriers and stereotypes. Some European countries do make explicit stipulations regarding the right of refugees to access education in their legislations, enabling enrollment and easing potential barriers. For example, in Sweden, the School Act states that once a refugee or asylum-seeking child has been assigned to a municipality, they have the right to education starting from preschool.[22]

In the absence of refugee-inclusive policies and legislation, enrollment policies unfavorable to refugee children and families should be waived to support refugee children in accessing ECEC services. This is relevant in the case of European host countries, as families typically need permanent or temporary registration to enroll their children in ECEC. Finland is one of the few countries that changed their policy following the influx of refugees from Ukraine and permitted the enrollment of refugee children without registration. This positively affected children whose parents are engaged in full-time work or studies by providing them with an opportunity to work or study while their children attend preschool.[23]

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's 2018 Global Education Monitoring Report summarized other recommendations around easing barriers to enrollment, including: 1) not allowing identification documents or residence statuses to hinder enrollment; 2) making education and immigration laws consistent; and 3) establishing processes to respond to violations of students' rights.[24]

Governments must also ensure that budgeting for vulnerable and marginalized groups is included in ECEC sector planning and in national and local budgets. Most parents in Europe have to pay for ECEC services,[25] hindering enrollment for more than a third of preschool-aged children.[26] Financial constraints and an inability to pay for education create additional burdens for refugee parents who already face a multitude of challenges. To increase enrollment of marginalized groups, free or subsidized ECEC has been introduced in several European countries. For example, free ECEC is available for vulnerable groups – including asylum seekers and refugees – in Ireland, while in Norway, children from socially vulnerable families have a right to 20 hours of free ECEC per week, including children in asylum centres.[27]

It is imperative to provide refugee children who are in later stages of ECEC with additional support and resources to learn the host country's language in order to overcome language barriers and eventually transition to primary school.
For example, Bulgaria's Ministry of Education, in partnership with UNICEF and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, provided additional funding for Bulgarian language classes for refugee children and rolled out training for educators to strengthen their capacity to teach Bulgarian.[28] Additionally, some countries like Slovakia provide free language classes for educators from Ukraine who want to integrate into the existing education system.[29] As such, ministries of education and municipalities must ensure that they set aside budgets that can support the diverse needs of language development or work with service delivery partners who can deliver language lessons at subsidized rates.

Develop a transitional education plan (TEP) with a focus on the early years to facilitate medium- and longer-term planning to support the education of young refugee children.

Developing a clearly articulated TEP focusing on the early years is essential when the development of a long-term education sector plan is less feasible and in cases where refugees are not already included in ECEC plans and budgets. The TEP should be a government-led participatory process, at either a national or local level.[30] When its development is delayed or not possible, it is recommended that an ECEC-specific coordination mechanism with clearly defined roles and responsibilities of involved parties is established to ensure that early learning and development opportunities for young children are part of the response. The development and implementation of TEPs and other longer-term plans should be done in parallel to short-term programmes and responses, to guarantee a more sustainable and comprehensive overall response.

2. Accelerate national and municipal plans and reforms to expand ECEC services for young children, especially in geographic areas with higher percentages of refugee and other vulnerable children, with a focus on provision of diverse and flexible modalities of ECEC.

Expand provision through different and flexible modalities of ECEC to cater to the needs of refugee families and their varying conditions and characteristics.

Establishing and encouraging the set-up of high-quality home-based ECEC services can help meet the increased demand for ECEC, especially for children age 3 or below. Home-based ECEC services are used in some European countries, such as Denmark, Finland and Germany, for children under the age of 3.[31] While variations exist in their regulation, positive associations between enrollment in high-quality home-based services and child learning and socio-emotional outcomes have been identified.[32] Encouraging caregivers to receive training and set up home-based ECEC services to meet the additional need for childcare could be one cost-effective way to expand access to ECEC. Ensuring these settings are rapidly licensed and regulated would be optimal to achieve fast expansion of services aligned with the host country's minimum ECEC standards and the formal ECEC system. In cases where formally establishing such services is not possible, non-formal home-based ECEC can be provided, with special attention being paid to the safeguarding and quality assurance of these services. Such an approach was implemented in the Little Ripples programme in Chad,[33] Cameroon, the Central African Republic and Greece. The programme provided ECEC services in home-based settings where refugee women were hired to coordinate the home-based preschools. This can ensure refugee and host-community children can access the home-based services, providing a space for them to interact, play and learn alongside one another, hence fostering social cohesion.

Double-shift schools have also been implemented in humanitarian settings to meet the increased demand for education and early learning but have several operational challenges. In double-shift schools, one group of children attends school in the morning, while the second group attends an afternoon shift at the same school.[34] This approach may also be replicated in ECEC; however, there are many challenges to operating a two-shift system. These include creating an additional burden for school staff who may end up teaching at both shifts, the exhaustion of existing infrastructure, potential segregation of host-community and refugee students, and the challenges for students and working parents associated with cutting the school day in half. Findings from Jordan indicate poor infrastructure, overcrowding, shortened lesson time and higher teacher turnover in double-shift schools affected the quality of education.[35] Lower learning achievement in double-shift schools is correlated with children spending less time at school.[36] Given these drawbacks, it is advisable to invest in the provision of overlapping shifts instead, where students in the two shifts can overlap and interact during the day,[37] and in other forms of flexible or rapid solutions. This can include setting up modular kindergartens, which are kindergartens that can be quickly constructed and then delivered to different locations to be assembled and connected to necessary utilities. Modular kindergartens have been installed in different regions of Australia to meet the growing demand for ECEC.[38]

Digital solutions have been used in several conflict settings to support children's learning and development and can act as complementary, interim solutions to support education.[39] These include learning applications for children, video content,[40] and chatbots for caregivers.[41] One such example is the online kindergarten set up by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education in Ukraine, which aims to encourage parents to conduct learning and development activities with their children ages 3–6 through videos and other online content.[42] Similarly, the partnership between UNICEF and the Akelius Foundation supported community-based ECEC classes for Syrian refugees through a digital learning application in Lebanon. This programme significantly improved children's language skills, and ECEC facilitators were key in providing technical and psychosocial support to caregivers.[43]

Digital resources should include cautionary messaging for caregivers regarding their use in moderation. For example, screen time should be limited to a maximum of 60 minutes per day for children ages 2–4.[44] Digital resources should also encourage caregivers – at home or in ECEC settings – to be actively engaged in the activities and bring them to life. This is essential as children need two-way communication modalities for more effective learning, which is possible when they are engaged with peers and adults, learn through play, apply the new knowledge, and obtain feedback.[45]

Ensure a clear link between non-formal and formal ECEC programmes to facilitate mainstreaming and enrollment of children into formal learning systems and engage with subnational entities for coordination.

Non-formal approaches to expanding ECEC are important for meeting access gaps that cannot solely be covered by the government.[46]

A key consideration for establishing non-formal ECEC services is ensuring the content of the programmes offered matches or is aligned with host country ECEC standards and curricula.

This can support refugee children's integration into formal systems, either as spaces become available in formal ECEC services, or via integration into formal primary schooling. A case study from Germany suggests refugee students faced difficulty entering formal school following non-formal education, as learning materials in the non-formal setting were not closely aligned with the school curriculum.[47] While this example relates to secondary school students, it illustrates the importance of ensuring alignment between formal and non-formal services, to maintain learning continuity and minimize disruptions emerging from the need to catch up.

Engaging subnational entities, such as municipalities, is integral to achieving programme sustainability, and to either the potential absorption of non-formal programmes by the formal system or establishing clear links between both. For instance, in Poland and Slovakia, UNICEF and partners established non-formal play and learning hubs targeting children and their families as forms of alternative ECEC. Municipalities are engaged from the outset in providing the public spaces and planning professional development activities for ECEC staff. A formalization plan should be established early on in non-formal programmes to support transitioning non-formal programmes into formal ones, consequently facilitating the scaling up of formal services and catalyzing expansion efforts, which are beneficial for both refugee and host communities.

3. Capitalize on existing resources to meet the additional demand for ECEC. This should include physical resources to provide the spaces and materials for early learning experiences, and human resources to meet an increased need for ECEC educators.

Adapt and use existing community spaces to establish non-formal ECEC programmes where children can play, learn, socialize and develop.

Establishing non-formal ECEC programmes with clear links to the formal system can ensure children are not missing out on early learning and development opportunities while formal medium- to longer-term expansion solutions are achieved.
Using community spaces to provide educational experiences for young children can limit disruptions to learning and development caused by conflict and displacement, while also limiting the costs of building new ECEC infrastructure. This can include leveraging existing infrastructure, such as public libraries, playgrounds, or religious spaces that can be used for non-religious activities, to reach children in their communities who are unable to enroll in formal ECEC institutions.[48] Activities can be facilitated by community members or volunteers who are trained in implementing developmentally appropriate strategies and activities for children of different age groups, and in working with children who have faced trauma. Similar initiatives have been implemented in Jordan and Ethiopia with the We Love Reading programme, which has shown evidence of promise.[49] Private ECEC settings can also be leveraged. Governments can partner with private ECEC providers to rent out classrooms, auditoriums or playrooms for use by trained community members or volunteers who can provide refugee children with learning and play experiences. Additionally, when space is unavailable in public ECEC systems, governments can also subsidize spaces for young refugee children as a means of offsetting costs for enrollment in private ECEC settings.

Ensure young children have access to rich and stimulating early learning materials in ECEC settings and in the community.

Make use of locally available materials to create play and learning experiences for refugee children by partnering with local providers, the private sector, charity organizations or volunteers. Such materials can be made accessible in communal spaces to bring members of the community together. When feasible, this can also be supplemented with play or learning boxes, such as UNICEF's Early Childhood Development (ECD) kit for emergencies,[50] Save the Children's 'Boxes of Wonder' toolkit, [51] or locally procured play materials. These toolkits typically contain materials and templates that can create or support early learning and development activities for children in safe environments and should be facilitated by trained facilitators or volunteers.[52][53]

ECD KIT - UNICEF
Introduced in 2009, the ECD kit has been used to strengthen UNICEF's humanitarian response for children age 6 or below in emergency settings.[54] One box can serve 50 children at a time, providing materials and guides to stimulate play and foster a sense of stability and safety. The box mostly includes hygiene products for children, as well as toys, books and other learning materials. Evaluations have found positive impacts on the caregivers who facilitate sessions with children using the toolkit, on child-level outcomes including socio-emotional development and learning outcomes, as well as on community social cohesion as it allowed host-community and refugee families to connect while creating toys.

Access to these toolkits in the humanitarian contexts in which they have been implemented has yielded positive benefits to children's behaviour, well-being, and learning.[55] Another approach that can be implemented using local resources is the mobile kindergarten model, requiring learning materials, a bus to create a kindergarten classroom on wheels, and a trained ECEC facilitator or educator for set-up. This approach has been implemented to support out-of-school children or those residing in hard-to-reach areas,[56] and can be adopted to support refugee children in host communities who are unable to access formal education.

Expand the qualified teaching workforce to meet the additional demand for ECEC by:

1) rapidly employing more educators from the host and refugee communities,

2) providing professional development opportunities for new and existing educators, and

3) ensuring positive working conditions for the ECEC workforce.

Ministries can ease accreditation and documentation restrictions and begin recognizing foreign degrees to rapidly hire qualified educators from the refugee community. This is essential as an increase in the demand for ECEC creates an increased demand for qualified educators. Accreditation and the lack of required documentation typically hinder refugee educators' ability to be hired in host countries and address the shortfall in the availability of qualified staff. Several European countries began providing ECEC-related jobs to educators from Ukraine following the war.[ii] In Luxembourg, 77 professionals from Ukraine have been hired to work in ECEC settings.[57] As an additional benefit, having educators with the same cultural background as refugee children can facilitate children's inclusion in the new community. In the medium to longer term, education systems must establish systematic teacher recruitment processes for emergency contexts to avoid deterring interested and qualified candidates.[58]

[ii] *This includes Austria, Germany, Spain, France, Ireland, Luxembourg and Slovakia.*

It is essential to establish various mechanisms for coaching and professional development among existing and new ECEC educators. Professional development programmes that are responsive to existing and new educators' needs are essential to facilitate their efforts in teaching and supporting refugee children in host-community preschools.[59] For example, the Brussels-based Baobab initiative trains and hires representatives of minority ethnic groups as ECEC educators.[60] The programme lasts four years; candidates work in the preschool three days per week, where they co-teach, receive mentorship and guidance on teaching and take part in trainings. Candidates are paid for their work, and training fees are refunded.[61] Additionally, in humanitarian contexts where ECEC professionals need to be rapidly trained, digital approaches such as UNICEF's LearnECD or Learning Passport – which have digestible, bite-sized professional development courses aligned with national teacher training standards – can be leveraged. The flexibility offered through digital professional development can also ensure rapid outreach to more educators.

Ensure the workforce has stable and equitable working conditions, as the quality of education is affected by educators' satisfaction with the work environment.[62] Positive work environments in challenging contexts can support teacher retention and attract qualified educators into the profession. In many contexts, the shortage of educators creates[63] situations where educators are hired rapidly, on short-term contracts, and often without the same benefits and stability as full-time educators. In Germany, educator shortages resulted in the creation of voluntary, short-term contracts for educators, with no job security and lower salaries. In addition, retired educators and those without required qualifications were hired to address teacher shortages.[64] Decision makers should also ensure other aspects of the work environment are conducive to teaching quality, including acceptable adult-to-child ratios, competitive and adequate salaries, and the provision of ECEC educators with child-free time to engage in professional development activities.[65] While these challenges are applicable to educators in any low-resource setting, they are especially pronounced in refugee contexts.[66]

4. Engage refugee caregivers in order to support them in navigating the local ECEC system and to increase their knowledge of ways to provide early learning experiences for their children at home, which is especially essential in the absence of a sufficient number of ECEC services.

Targeting refugee caregivers in response efforts and complementing child-targeted programmes with caregiving support are essential to ensure children have positive home learning and development environments, which is important in the absence of sufficient ECEC services.[67] Caregivers impact their child's development, socio-emotional well-being, learning and home environment.[68] [69] Caregivers may be reached through services they frequent, such as health providers, where parenting resources providing guidance on how to create nurturing home environments can be distributed for use at home. Home visiting programmes can also be effective in providing refugee caregivers with the necessary knowledge and support to provide positive learning experiences for their children.[70] Caregivers can also be engaged directly through ECEC centres. For example, PrimoHUB – a play, learning and parenting centre implemented in Romania with the support of UNICEF, Romania's Ministry of Education and the Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development – has engaged caregivers of children age 6 or below to increase their parenting skills.[71] Knowledge gained through such centres can be used with other young children in the family, who may be unable to enroll in ECEC.

Parenting programmes can also be delivered through digital solutions to support refugee parents during their displacement. For example, the International Rescue Committee's Vroom initiative aims to empower caregivers to use everyday interactions with their children as brain building moments by sending content through various media modalities, including social media (specifically, Facebook and WhatsApp) and television.[72] Adapting existing materials and resources to suit the needs of refugee caregivers can also prove to be a quick, cost-effective option, as with UNICEF's Bebbo application. Bebbo was initially designed to provide comprehensive and concrete tips and strategies for parents to support early childhood development and parental care of children age 6 and below in a parent-friendly format, and was adapted to the Ukrainian language once the conflict began.[73]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

ECEC is often underprioritized in humanitarian responses. However, ECEC has long-term benefits for a child's cognitive and socio-emotional development, and missing out on early experiences has negative consequences for years to come.

As such, the expansion of ECEC services in host countries is integral to ensuring refugee children can succeed both in the short and long term and better integrate into their new communities. Expansion of ECEC must be linked with opportunities for existing/ongoing reforms in ECEC at the national and municipal levels, with a focus on equity, thereby ensuring ECEC services are readily available in areas with higher densities of refugee populations. Expansion can be achieved through both formal and non-formal channels, including through rapidly expanding the ECEC workforce and providing them with necessary professional development, removing barriers that hinder access to ECEC, and capitalizing on partnerships and existing resources to provide ECEC services (such as mobile kindergartens or using community spaces to provide children with learning and development activities). It is essential to also target caregivers in response efforts to help them create positive home learning and development environments for their children in cases where formal and non-formal access is not possible. Finally, ensuring linkages between formal and non-formal services can support learning continuity, transition and long-term sustainability of ECEC services with the goal of eventually strengthening ECEC systems for all young children.

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