

CPHIA SESSION ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND COUNTRY PROFILES LAUNCH

20 25

SUMMARY REPORT



INTRODUCTION



The session on Early Childhood Development (ECD) at the Conference on Public Health in Africa (CPHIA) brought together leading experts, policymakers, and advocates to launch and discuss the use of the Africa Regional and Country Profiles on Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development. The session underscored the critical role of data in guiding national policy, investment, and action toward improving the well-being of Africa's youngest citizens.

The discussion featured presentations by **Professor Linda Richter** of the University of the Witwatersrand, **Dr. Juliana Selesi** from the African Early Childhood Network (AFECN), Professor Mark Tomlinson from Stellenbosch University, **Dr. Leslie Bamford** representing South Africa's Department of Health, and **Ben Hewitt**, Global Lead of the Act for Early Years Campaign.

The session concluded with remarks from from **Ms. Etleva Kadilli**, UNICEF Regional Director for Eastern and Southern Africa, reaffirming the shared commitment to advancing nurturing care for every child across the continent.



KEY HIGHLIGHTS



Professor Linda Richter presented the newly launched ECD Country and Regional Profiles, which consolidate reliable and comparable data from 197 countries, now including Africa-specific profiles. These profiles are structured around the Nurturing Care Framework, which focuses on health, nutrition, early learning, responsive caregiving, and safety and security, supported by enabling environments of policy, services, and community action. The data, sourced from UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), and other validated interagency models, were approved by governments before publication. She emphasized that while the availability of ECD-related data has improved, particularly regarding functional difficulties and family social protection, gaps remain in many countries. The findings show that Africa remains the most at-risk region for poor child development outcomes, largely due to poverty and limited investment in ECD. Professor Richter highlighted that economic progress and child development are mutually reinforcing: the more countries invest in young children, the greater the returns in productivity, education, and social well-being. She called for continued investment in national data systems, cross-country learning, and the use of these profiles to drive evidence-based policymaking.



Dr. Juliana Selesi reflected on Africa's vast child population of over 210 million under-fives and the diversity of experiences across regions. Using the profiles, she noted that while progress is visible in areas like breastfeeding and early stimulation, persistent challenges remain, such as widespread child violence, limited paid maternity leave, and high rates of stunting. She urged for region-specific interventions, recognizing that each sub-region faces unique strengths and challenges:

- North Africa shows high literacy rates but low levels of early stimulation.
- East Africa demonstrates health improvements but uneven ECD access.
- Central Africa faces extreme vulnerability and data gaps.
- Southern Africa shows progress but ongoing inequalities for rural and displaced populations.
- West Africa exhibits improved access to learning but continued deprivation and violence.

Dr. Selesi underscored the need to transform these insights into local action, invest in family-supportive policies, and integrate ECD metrics into national frameworks to ensure no child is left behind.

Professor Mark Tomlinson spoke on the importance of ensuring that data translates into tangible action. He cautioned against viewing data as abstract numbers, reminding participants that each data point represents a child or family living in real circumstances. He emphasized that strong data systems are only meaningful when used to improve children's lives, urging a shift toward **data-driven compassion and accountability**. He called for governments, researchers, and advocates to respect the realities behind the statistics and to act with urgency to ensure that no child's potential is lost to inaction.



Dr. Leslie Bamford provided South Africa’s country perspective, outlining how ECD data has been instrumental in shaping advocacy, investment, and programming. She explained that South Africa is using the profiles to guide the transition from focusing solely on child survival to promoting **child thriving**. The data have strengthened intersectoral collaboration between the Departments of Health, Basic Education, and Statistics South Africa. Furthermore, they have helped identify key data gaps, particularly around nurturing care indicators, which will inform future national surveys and strategies.

Ben Hewitt of the Act for Early Years Campaign highlighted the role of civil society in turning data into advocacy. He noted that the campaign is mobilizing a global movement for increased financing and prioritization of ECD, culminating in the planned **International Financing Summit for Early Childhood Development in 2027**. Hewitt emphasized that data is one of the most powerful tools for advocacy, it helps civil society ask the right questions, craft compelling messages for decision-makers, and engage the public. He urged that data must be humanized by connecting it to the lived experiences of parents, teachers, and caregivers. Through storytelling and media, he said, civil society can make ECD a public priority and inspire broader demand for action.

The session concluded with remarks from UNICEF’s Regional Director for Eastern and Southern Africa, who reaffirmed that the ultimate purpose of data is to serve the child. She reminded participants that behind every statistic is a young life that must be nurtured, supported, and given a fair chance to thrive. She called on all partners to take ownership of this agenda, accelerate progress toward the 2030 goals, and strengthen collective accountability for Africa’s youngest citizens.

WAY FORWARD

KEY NEXT STEPS:

- Strengthen national data systems and integrate nurturing care indicators into existing surveys (DHS, MICS).
- Institutionalize ECD indicators within health, education, and social protection frameworks.
- Support advocacy campaigns, including preparations for the **2027 International Financing Summit for ECD**.
- Develop region-specific ECD implementation roadmaps tailored to each sub-region's context.
- Expand community-based programs addressing caregiving, nutrition, and early learning.
- Facilitate knowledge exchange and capacity building across countries through the African Early Childhood Network.
- Establish mechanisms for regular monitoring, reporting, and accountability using the updated country profiles



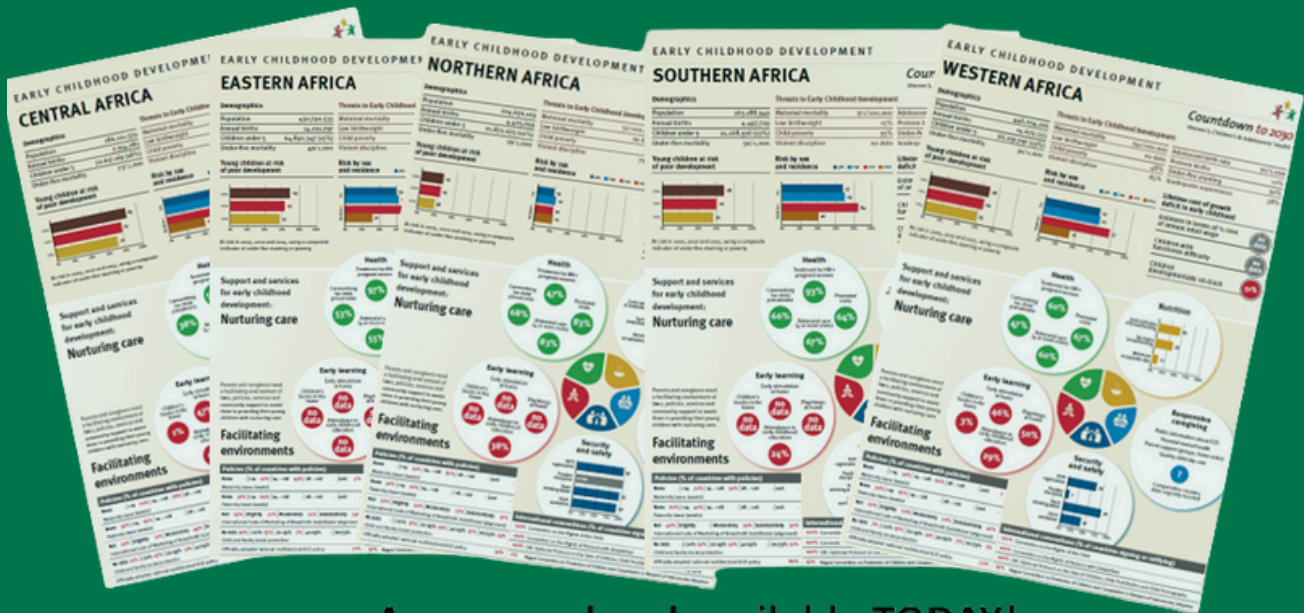
Next Steps:

In the coming months, partners will disseminate the Africa ECD Country and Regional Profiles through the African Union Commission and other platforms. Technical workshops will be organized to support countries in interpreting and applying the data for policy and planning. Advocacy efforts will intensify through African Union Commission, AfECN, ECDAN, UNICEF, WHO and civil society partners to ensure sustained visibility of ECD priorities beyond CPHIA. Regional task forces will align sectoral policies to the nurturing care framework, and progress will be reviewed annually in the lead-up to the 2027 Financing Summit.



PHOTO GALLERY





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COMPILED & DESIGNED BY:
 Mr. Derrick Oduck Ochuot, Strategic Communication Officer, African Union Commission