

Unlock
our FUTURE

The Case for the First-Ever International Finance Summit for Early Childhood

**Investing in the Best Start
and a Brighter Future**



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Leaders' Briefing

The world stands at a pivotal crossroads for the youngest children

The world is changing fast. AI, automation and new technology are reshaping how we work and live. At the same time, climate change, conflict, poverty, and economic uncertainty create real challenges for families everywhere.

Countries that invest in giving every child a strong foundation will be the ones thriving in the future. For governments, the choice is clear. Act now or get left behind.

The International Finance Summit for Early Childhood in 2027 offers a unique moment to act. By investing in the earliest years, leaders secure better futures for children while building stronger, more resilient economies that can adapt to change.

Forward-looking governments will come prepared to lead with bold commitments to invest in what works. Proven policies and services deliver lasting change for the youngest children. In support financial institutions, donors, and private investors must unlock billions in early childhood investment before the fast-approaching 2030 goal.

The Summit is a chance to mobilise new financing, redirect domestic spending, create innovative partnerships, and bring private investment to early childhood. It will put the early years where they belong at the heart of how countries plan for the future.

This summit is about action, not promises. It's about creating real change and accountability for the world's youngest children.

Every child deserves the best possible start in life.



Future-Proofing Society Starts in the Early Years

Ten years ago, every government pledged through the Sustainable Development Goals to ensure that by 2030 all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education^[1]. In 2022, this commitment was reinforced by the Tashkent Declaration and Commitments, adopted by over 150 countries and stakeholders.

The science is clear. The first five to six years are a once-in-a-lifetime window, when 90% of brain development occurs^[2] and lifelong patterns of learning and behaviour are set. Yet millions of children are being denied this chance, a crisis of wasted potential that holds back entire societies.

With the SDG deadline fast approaching, progress remains starkly uneven. Globally, 40% of children—around 350 million—need early childhood care, development and learning but cannot access it. While the global gross enrolment rate in pre-primary education rose from 46% in 2010 to 61% in 2020, the average in low-income countries remains just 20%. In low- and middle-income countries, 181 million children—nearly three quarters of all three- and four-year-olds—still lack access to adequate nurturing care^[3].

It is often the most marginalised children, including those with disabilities, those caught in conflict, and those living in extreme poverty, who are most likely to miss out. To deliver we must move from promises to bold, coordinated action.

Delivering the ambition is more important than ever. When the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were agreed we were fully aware that Early Childhood Development was amongst the most urgent and high-impact investments a country can make.

A decade later, the stakes could not be higher. Every generation hands down advances and challenges to their children, but never before has our inheritance been so decisive for the future wellbeing of families worldwide.

Inclusive and quality early childhood care and education are vital for promoting school readiness, foundational learning, and lifelong wellbeing. Yet, more than 300 million children are at risk of not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading by the end of primary school in the next decade^[4], highlighting the urgency for a renewed focus and comprehensive response.

When children thrive in their earliest years, societies break cycles of poverty, empower women to participate in the workforce, and build the skilled, adaptable citizens of tomorrow.

Act For Early Years, the global campaign supported by leaders from across the world, calls for urgent government action to end the early years crisis and ensure every child has access to high-quality and nurturing proven early years interventions through three catalytic goals:

1. Universal **access to quality primary health care** in support of health, nutrition, wellbeing and development across pregnancy, birth, and early childhood.
2. Universal access to **quality, inclusive preschool education**.
3. Universal **support for families** including affordable and quality childcare, child benefits, and parent and caregiver support.

Public investment in the early years transforms outcomes for everyone. It strengthens economies, creates jobs, builds stronger communities, and supports families. Above all, it gives every young child the best possible start in life, wherever they live.





Objective of the International Financing Summit

The Summit aims to transform the promise of the SDGs – all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education – into concrete action, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive in school and in life.

Summit Goals:

1. New commitments to sustainable financing and family friendly policies, with a strong emphasis on domestic leadership and investment.
2. Expansion of equitable, universal access to quality primary healthcare, quality preschool education, and family support and play, especially for the most disadvantaged.
3. Sharing best practice and forging innovative partnerships that drive smart, scalable, and sustainable solutions across sectors and regions.

This is an opportunity for urgent and strategic investment in early childhood. It's not just the right thing to do for children and families. It's also one of the smartest, most cost-effective ways to build stronger economies, improve learning outcomes, and create more resilient societies.

This Summit is for those with the power to set subnational, national and international priorities:

- Presidents and Prime Ministers
- Ministers of Finance, Education, Health, and Social Services
- Mayors and Local Leaders
- Business Leaders, Philanthropists, and Foundations
- Heads of Global Funds, UN Agencies, Development Banks, SDG4-Education 2030 High-Level Steering Committee and Bilateral Donor Governments
- Early Childhood Professionals, Parent Networks, Researchers, Advocates, and Experts

To deliver on the promise of SDG 4.2, we must rethink how early childhood is financed – to unlock new, sustainable, and scalable resources.

The first-ever International Finance Summit for Early Childhood will be a platform to mobilise political will, reframe financing strategies, and promote country-led solutions.

We know what works. Early childhood programmes deliver high returns by boosting school readiness, improving health and nutrition, supporting working families, and building a stronger future workforce.

Real progress for young children depends on three things: enough funding, spending it wisely, and delivering quality services. It's not just about how much countries invest, but how effectively they use those resources. Governments need both adequate budgets and smart strategies to create real change for children. Strong early childhood systems require more than money alone. They need skilled people, effective programmes, and delivery models that actually reach families.

This is a chance to move beyond talk and take coordinated, high-impact action to make early childhood a defining priority of this decade.

Driven by action at national and subnational levels, this Summit will bring together leaders across government, business, philanthropy, civil society and multilateral institutions on a global platform to forge bold action and financing commitments for the early years.

- Part 1 of the Summit will provide a platform for new commitments behind new and improved financing and family friendly policies^[5].
- Part 2 of the Summit will explore cross-sector partnerships and new financing solutions, including innovative and alternative finance models, city-wide strategies, private capital partnerships, and improved global financial mechanism support
- Part 3 of the Summit will include a public forum on quality delivery, sharing latest insights and learning on proven, cost-effective 'Smart Buys for Early Childhood Development' that maximize impact, delivering quality and nurturing services and ensuring 100% enrolment.



What Makes Us Hopeful

Change is not only possible, it is happening. In the last 18 months, we have seen remarkable progress on early childhood around the world. Countries across continents are stepping forward with bold policies, putting the early years at the heart of government priorities like never before.

From Singapore and Canada to Rwanda, India, South Africa, the Philippines, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Japan, Australia, Brazil, and Jordan — leaders across regions and income levels are recognising that investing in the earliest years is foundational to building more equitable, resilient, and prosperous societies.

In countries facing conflict and crisis, such as Ukraine and Jordan, early childhood support is also being prioritised as a vital part of emergency response and national recovery, helping to protect children, stabilise families, and rebuild thriving communities.

This growing recognition is now reaching the global stage. Early childhood has gained unprecedented prominence in the G20 processes of both 2024 and 2025, a sign that momentum is building and the world is aligning behind the early years as a strategic investment for the future. These actions are not isolated. Countries are watching one another, learning, and being inspired to act. A new sense of shared responsibility and collective ambition is emerging.

President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa echoed this powerful truth: “Investing in the early years is one of our most powerful tools for breaking cycles of poverty and creating more equitable societies.”

And in Brazil, the launch of a new national early childhood policy in 2025 demonstrates the government’s determination to reach every child with the care, protection, and opportunities they deserve.

A global movement is taking shape rooted in political will, rising ambition, and the courage to act for the next generation. This is what gives us hope.



The Road to the 2027 Summit and Beyond: A Step-by-Step Process

Step 1: Government Commitment to the Summit

Governments are formally invited to participate in the Summit. By confirming their intention to attend, they commit to preparing a national commitment.

Step 2: Research and working groups support evidence building (Ongoing)

Including a new UNESCO and UNICEF Global Report on Early Childhood Care and Education, an ECD Technical Finance Working Group led by ECDAN, UNESCO Community of Practice, Brookings Institution Global Costing Taskforce, the new panel of global experts looking at Smart Buys for Early Childhood Development and others.

Step 3: Launch of National Consultations (Month 3-12)

Civil society coalitions, with support from regional and global partners, coordinate inclusive national consultations. These engage:

- Ministries of finance, education, health, and social services
- Local leaders and municipal governments
- Parents, caregivers, youth, researchers and early childhood professionals
- Business leaders and private sector partners
- Stakeholders from disability and humanitarian contexts

Step 4: Drafting and Strengthening Commitments (Month 12-18)

Insights from consultations inform the development of government commitments. Governments are encouraged to ensure pledges are:

- New/additional (not pre-announced)
- Quantifiable (with targets and timelines)
- Needs-driven (aligned with national context)
- Measurable (trackable through 2030)

Stakeholder engagement continues, including dialogue with financing partners and development banks.

Step 5: Formal Commitments at the Summit (2027)

At the International Finance Summit, governments and partners announce formal commitments. These are presented alongside initial delivery and financing plans.

Step 6: Post-Summit Delivery Planning (2027–2028)

Governments and partners finalise implementation roadmaps, budgets, and collaboration frameworks to begin delivery of pledged actions.

Step 7: Establishing the Accountability Mechanism (2027–2028)

An independent monitoring and accountability mechanism is launched to track progress, encourage course correction, and promote transparency.

Step 8: Sustained Action and Progress to 2030

Commitments are implemented and monitored through to 2030, contributing to measurable improvements in early childhood development, equity, and sustainable growth.

How to register for the Summit

To register your interest in the Summit and find out more visit www.actforearlyyears.org/summit



This briefing was prepared by Theirworld on behalf of the Act For Early Years campaign, in consultation with members of the High-Level Advisory Group, Genesis Analytics, and the Learning for Well-Being Institute. It reflects inputs from these partners but should not be taken as representing the formal policy positions of any individual organisation or network.

Act For Early Years High-Level Advisory Group is made up of leading early childhood organizations and networks from around the world, including the Africa Early Childhood Network (AfECN), Arab Network for Early Childhood, Dubai Cares, Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood, Brookings Institution Center for Universal Education, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN), Early Opportunities, International Step by Step Association (ISSA - Europe and Central Asia Regional Early Childhood Network), Education International, Fundação Mario Cecília Souto Vidigal, Global Business Coalition for Education, Lego Foundation, Minderoo Foundation, Moving Minds Alliance, Perkins, Roger Federer Foundation, Scaling Up Nutrition, Sesame Workshop, Somos Crianza (Latin American Regional Early Childhood Network) Theirworld, Thrive Coalition, UNICEF, and UNESCO

[1] SDG 4.2 (UN 2015, Sustainable Development Goals framework)

[2] UNICEF / WHO: <http://www.unicef.org/turkiye/en/stories/10-facts-about-early-childhood-development-you-need-know>

[3] 1) UNICEF: A world Ready to Learn(2019) 2) <https://data.unicef.org/topic/early-childhood-development/early-childhood-education/> UNICEF 2025 3) Lancet (2024) / McCoy et al 2022: Early Childhood Development and the next 1000 Days

[4] UNESCO / UNICEF's Global Report on Early Childhood Care and Education (2024)

[5] Social protection policies cover the gaps between services and families. These foundation policies create cascading benefits. For example: <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/UNICEF-policy-brief-family-friendly-policies-2019.pdf>



The Act For Early Years campaign is led by a High-Level Advisory Group of early childhood experts, networks and organisations around the world. The campaign's secretariat is managed by Theirworld, a UK-registered charity.

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