

PART 1: THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT

Early child development has become an intense focus of attention across the globe and a priority for most developed countries. The United Nations has made substantial efforts to monitor the health and wellbeing of children in developing countries and to assist the developing world with aid targeting the basic health, social and infrastructure determinants of longevity, health and wellbeing.

A long catalogue of national and state policies and strategies reflects the policy effort and attention devoted to the early years.

Notable features of the national and international effort include:

- The need to focus on the early years is based on growing evidence from a range of disciplines about the importance of the early years for individual and societal, medium and long-term outcomes. This evidence is well disseminated internationally. Countries cite a fairly consistent body of findings to support the allocation of resources to this age group and to those who have the capacity to influence their outcomes.
- Commitments to fund only programs that are based on evidence that they work, or else are innovative programs where there is sound program logic and a strong evaluation component.
- The effort needed to improve outcomes for this age group includes the traditional human services of health, welfare and education, but extends well beyond them. Policies are needed that affect income distribution in a society, reduce the number of children and families living on or below the poverty line, give access to basic infrastructure such as transport and sanitation, support the role and place of women in a modern society ('gender empowerment') and support women of child-bearing years to express their choices during pregnancy and after their children are born.
- Most national and state effort recognises that children from at risk and disadvantaged groups have priority needs – for example, Indigenous populations in some countries, children of people with a mental health problem and children living in poverty. Both universal and targeted efforts are needed.
 - International efforts affirm the need for:
 - action at all levels of government;
 - integrated planning and development of initiatives across government, and between the government and non-government

sectors, to reduce duplication and to increase synergies and return on investment;

- coordinated efforts across the traditional boundaries of government departments;
- community partnerships; and
- business partnerships.

The emphasis within policy frameworks, and the action plans that arise from them, differ from place to place. These key characteristics of policy effort are, however, well supported by evidence, across time and across cultures.