On 25 September 2015, countries around the world adopted a set of goals to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all as part of the new sustainable development agenda (United Nations, 2015). For young children and families this was a landmark moment, as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognise the critical importance of assuring that all young children get off to a good start. For the Bernard van Leer Foundation, after more than 50 years of experience investing in early childhood development (ECD), this represents the dawn of a new era.

We are therefore relaunching this journal in a new format, on a new publication schedule and to serve a new purpose. Early Childhood Matters: Advances in Early Childhood Development will be published annually with the aim of elevating key issues, spreading awareness of promising solutions to support holistic child development and strong families, and exploring the elements needed to take those solutions to scale. It is our hope that by documenting the advances in these areas each year, we will be sharing the latest ideas, inspiring innovations and contributing to momentum on behalf of young children and families.

That momentum is growing around the world. More than ever before, the earliest years of life are being recognised as the foundation of human development and economic success. Propelled by a combination of science, economics, parental demand, new champions and common sense, we are witnessing a revolution in thinking about the importance of the period from pre-conception to the early primary grades.

One of the most exciting examples of this growing early childhood movement was the announcement by the World Bank and UNICEF, on 14 April this year, of a joint effort to urge greater investment in early childhood development:

The two organizations announced the establishment of a new alliance that aims to make ECD a global policy, programming and public spending priority, to give all young children access to quality services that improve their health, nutrition, learning ability and emotional well-being.

(World Bank and UNICEF, 2016)

From the emergence of early childhood in the Sustainable Development Goals, to increasing research, to the growing number of local, national and regional early childhood networks, there is a sense that early childhood has finally ‘come of age’ and is on the move.
Elevating the issues

We are honoured to launch this new annual series with leading authorities in the field. Anthony Lake (pages 12–15), Executive Director of UNICEF, starts us off with a strong call to apply the science to shape policies, practical action and public advocacy. He reminds us that the new Sustainable Development Goals reflect the growing recognition of early childhood and the need to come together across sectors – coordinating and integrating efforts in new ways.

We then move to three important voices representing health, education and child protection, all harmonising around a common science. Flavia Bustreo (pages 16–21), representing the World Health Organization, explains the importance of early childhood development to the Global Strategy for Women’s, Children’s and Adolescents’ Health. Alice Albright, Karen Mundy and Sarah Beardmore (pages 22–25), from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), provide insight into their new strategic plan, underscoring the role that early childhood plays as a prerequisite for accelerated progress to achieve the SDGs. Rounding out this trilogy, Susan Bissell (pages 26–32), representing the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, reinforces the importance of preventing all forms of violence and the ways that we can all become part of this global movement.

By sharing these important perspectives from leading authorities across sectors, we hope that readers will use them together as a catalyst for cross-sector collaboration and stepped-up action for young children and families.

Scaling up

One exciting aspect of the new era is the call to move from small-scale interventions to reach increasing numbers of children with better services at the community and country level. Yet scaling up creates a new set of challenges. How do we assure quality as we reach more children and families? In what creative ways can we effectively harness existing services? How do we build the system’s capacity at all levels from public officials to those working with children and families at the grass roots level? And how do we continue to monitor progress in a way that leads to continuous improvement?

In this section we begin to address some of these challenges. Given the importance of monitoring and reporting the status of child development from the earliest years of life, we start the discussion of scaling with two articles on measurement. Dana Charles McCoy, Maureen Black, Bernadette Daelmans and Tarun Dua (pages 34–39) shine a light on the various efforts emerging to develop ways to measure the development of children from birth to age 3 at the population level. Magdalena Janus and Caroline Reid-Westoby (pages 40–45) then share the background and characteristics of the Early Development Instrument, an important tool for monitoring child development at school entry.
We turn next to a topic of growing interest and critical importance, the role of the early childhood workforce in assuring quality. Mihaela Ionescu, Kimberly Josephson and Michelle Neuman (pages 46–51) present what we know about the early childhood workforce and share the groundbreaking effort to launch the Early Childhood Workforce Initiative, bringing renewed attention, energy and understanding of the importance of those dedicated people around the world who work with young children and families every day.

No topic is more essential to the ability to scale early childhood services than financing. Vidya Putcha, Arjun Upadhyay and Nicholas Burnett (pages 52–57) review what we know about the issue and call for increased public financing. Emily Gustafsson-Wright and Sophie Gardiner (pages 58-63) then review the latest information on the emergence of impact bonds and their potential for use in early childhood interventions.

The next three articles illustrate both the challenges and potential of scaling two important services – parenting support and childcare. Jane Lucas (pages 64–68) chronicles the advances being made to promote responsive parenting by scaling Care for Child Development. Another essential service, often overlooked, is childcare for working families: Emma Samman, Elizabeth Presler-Marshall, Nicola Jones, Tanvi Bhatkal, Claire Melamed, Maria Stravropoulou and John Wallace (pages 69–73) present the findings of a landmark study on the global childcare crisis. Responding to this issue in India, Mridula Bajaj and Sonia Sharma (pages 74–79) discuss how early childhood centres for migrant construction workers are being taken to scale.

We round out this section on pages 80–84 by highlighting three recent reports on early childhood for readers interested in exploring further: Samuel Berlinski and Norbert Schady introduce their book for the Inter-American Development Bank, The Early Years: Childhood Wellbeing and the Role of Public Policy; Ankie Vandekerckhove and Jan Peeters share the work of the Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years; and Miho Taguma, Arno Engel and Maria Huerta discuss the role of monitoring programme quality, referencing the OECD Starting Strong IV report.

Finding new solutions

As communities and countries scale early childhood, they are confronted with new challenges which call for new solutions. We are inspired by the efforts going on around the world to find new and creative ways to solve problems and expand services for young children and families.

Addressing the needs of young refugees and their families must be at the top of the list. Maysoun Chehab (pages 86–89) highlights the important efforts taking place to provide education opportunities for Syria’s youngest refugees. Susan Hibbard and Gerry Cobb (pages 90–93) provide an overview of an important initiative from the USA to improve the quality of early childhood programmes.
Sonja Giese (pages 93–99) presents stimulating ideas to transform early learning through social innovation in South Africa.

Continuing with promising country examples, Emily Vargas-Baron, Rusudan Bochorishvili and Hollie Hix-Small (pages 100–103) address the important topic of creating a national early intervention system in the Republic of Georgia. Yukhiko Amnon and Maniza Ntekim (pages 104–107) discuss efforts to build an early childhood development system from scratch in Liberia. And Mariela Solari Morales, Florencia Cerruti and Giorgina Garibotto (pages 108–110) present Uruguay’s programa de acompañamiento familiar, a comprehensive protection system for young children focused on their integral development from a perspective of rights, equity and social justice.

We conclude this section, and this issue of the journal, with more suggestions for further reading. On page 111, we summarise The Lancet’s recent report highlighting the importance of breastfeeding; on page 112, Anna Lucia D’Emilio and Clara Laire summarise a recent UNICEF report on Cuba’s early childhood system; and Evelyn Santiago explains the documentation of ‘noteworthy practices’ by the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (pages 113–114).

Throughout this issue of Early Childhood Matters, readers will be encouraged to see how the voices of important champions are singing in harmony, the challenges of scaling are starting to be addressed and creative solutions are emerging. The examples presented here are only a glimpse of the many inspiring initiatives taking place around the world. We hope they multiply, we hope they gain momentum and we hope you celebrate with us as the movement grows!

References
