The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) has developed a new Strategic Plan 2016–2020 which provides a road map showing how the partnership will help to deliver on Sustainable Development Goal 4 to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. This article explores how GPE will enhance countries’ progress on early childhood care and education (ECCE) by locking together better sector planning, stronger partnership at the global and country levels, exchange of knowledge, best practices and innovation, and strategic financing.

The Global Partnership for Education is the world’s only multilateral organisation focused solely on ensuring that children and young people in low-income and lower middle-income countries achieve their right to education. Its mission is: to mobilize global and national efforts to contribute to the achievement of equitable, quality education and learning for all, through inclusive partnership, a focus on effective and efficient education systems and increased financing.

(GPE, 2016a)

GPE’s support prioritises education for the poorest and most disadvantaged, including in circumstances of conflict and fragility, and it drives change by enabling countries to develop and lead their own robust national education sector plans through local education groups that cohere all development partners and stakeholders in support. It is a genuine partnership of developing countries, donor nations, international organisations, civil society, philanthropy, teachers and the private sector.

As the international community now pivots towards the vision set out in the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda, GPE has aligned its new Strategic Plan with SDG4: To ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.

While GPE has made considerable progress since its establishment in 2002 as a small multi-donor trust fund for the education Millennium Development Goals, its alignment with SDG4 poises it to significantly deepen and stretch its focus.
on a comprehensive and holistic vision of education which aims at achieving three fundamental goals:
1. improved and more equitable learning outcomes
2. increased equity, gender equality and inclusion, and
3. effective and efficient systems.
(GPE, 2016a)

GPE's model relies on the tripartite interlocking of evidence-based sector planning, mutual accountability through policy dialogue, and effectively invested domestic and external financing. By bringing together all of its partners at the national level, GPE will help to align donors, citizens, philanthropies, the private sector and ministries of education behind a common agenda of education change to achieve SDG4.

GPE's grant financing will continue to focus on basic education – which is defined as including not only primary, lower-secondary education and second-chance learning opportunities – but also pre-primary education. The Sustainable Development Goals also include a specific global goal on early childhood care and quality education which goes even beyond pre-primary. SDG Target 4.2 in particular calls for scaled-up focus on early childhood to ensure all children are ready to learn:

*By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.*
(United Nations, 2015)

ECCE is foundational to GPE’s goals, and a prerequisite for the kind of accelerated progress that will be required to achieve the SDGs – and ensure that no one is left behind. GPE will therefore also seek additional financing for equity-focused investments in the progressive realisation of the SDG vision of a world in which early childhood care and quality education are available to all. GPE will not only aspire to this vision, but will indeed measure its own progress with two of the results indicators in its Strategic Plan focusing on ECCE: Indicator no. 2 is SDG4.2, *Percentage of children under five (5) years of age who are developmentally on track in terms of health, learning, and psychosocial well-being*, and Indicator no. 6 looks at *Pre-primary gross enrolment ratios* (GPE, 2016b).

GPE has already made inroads into ECCE through its sector planning, policy dialogue and finance. Its support for comprehensive national education sector planning requires a whole-sector approach which looks at the entire cycle of education. For example, GPE’s initial grants to partner developing countries fund a planning process based on robust needs analysis and strong technical support and in almost all education sector plans of GPE countries there is reference to Early Childhood Care and Education. Twenty-seven of 73 GPE programme implementation grants (ESPIGs) have an ECCE component (12 of these are in Africa). Good-quality planning is the essential foundation for improvement and here GPE’s support can help to drive nationally owned
ECCE priorities by investing in sector analyses, supporting education planning methodologies, linking knowledge exchange to good practice and financing national-scale reforms.

In several GPE partner developing countries we have seen what is possible when we resource government leadership to expand pre-primary education. In Cambodia, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports aims to reach 32,600 children aged 3–5 through the programmes reaching 56% enrolment by 2017, and GPE is financing intensive pre-service training for early education trainers, teacher training and ‘core-mother’ training for parental education. This new grant will also establish an additional 500 home-based preschools. In Mongolia, GPE has invested USD 10 million to expand access to preschool through the construction of mobile kindergartens in rural and remote areas – so children can access early care and education in the protection of yurts, which move with their nomadic communities.

Just as GPE has increased its focus on early learning, it is heartening that many others have also ramped up focus on ensuring that infants, toddlers and young children have what they need to survive and thrive. Since 2010, there have been more ECCE pilot interventions, more research and more evidence-based work by multilaterals like GPE and the World Bank than in the past 30 years combined.

△ Photo: GPE / Chantal Rigaud
The efforts of the Early Learning Partnership have helped to pick up the pace of progress by international development partners and governments alike. The Early Childhood Development Partnership being launched by UNICEF and the World Bank in 2016 also holds the tangible promise of a much-needed boost in advocacy, investments and monitoring of ECCE progress. So it is clear that ECCE is on an upward trajectory.

Unfortunately, there is a lot more to be done. Significant challenges remain. A particular focus of GPE’s work is on reaching the children that are in regions with a high propensity for conflicts or in fragile countries, where progress may not be linear and setbacks are likely. Even in developed countries that are convinced of the value of early learning investments and where resources exist, reaching the most vulnerable is a challenge. No country in the developing world can boast of comprehensive programmes that reach all children, and unfortunately many fall far short. It will be vital to convince policymakers and high-level senior government officials to invest in ECCE: despite the vast amount of evidence for the benefits of quality ECCE, countries as well as donor agencies do not make the necessary investments to effect change in early learning. And most of all, it will be important to break down the silos that impede working together across sectors.

Alice Albright, CEO of GPE, was in a village in the Democratic Republic of Congo bordering the Central African Republic in 2015. A man came up to her with a letter inside an envelope. It said ‘Thank you so much for the school you have built for us. When you come back next time can you build us a health clinic?’.

By working in partnership across sectors, we can better harvest the benefits of a holistic approach to child development. Each child needs both health and education – and strong national systems are critical to universalising and sustaining essential services in health and education and improving their quality by strengthening their delivery and underlying institutions. GPE’s new Strategic Plan 2016–2020 calls on all of its partners to focus on the common SDG goal of a world in which early childhood care and education are available to all – so that all children are supported to realise their potential.

References

