

AFRICA CONFERENCE ON CHILDCARE

*BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS
FOR ACCELERATING
ACTION TOWARDS
QUALITY AND INCLUSIVE
CHILDCARE IN AFRICA*

REPORT

AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION HEADQUARTERS
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
18 – 20 June 2025

[PG.15- CONTINENTAL
CHILDCARE CONTEXT](#)

[PG.24- SHOWCASING AFRICAN
CHILDCARE MODELS](#)

[PG.36- THE EXPERIENCE OF
NATIONAL ECD NETWORKS](#)

[PG.42- MEN'S ENGAGEMENT
IN CHILDCARE](#)

[PG.58- ROLE OF REGIONAL
COMMUNITIES IN ADVANCING
CHILDCARE IN AFRICA](#)

Table of Contents

List of Abbreviations:	6
Executive Summary	7
Background	9
Objectives	9
Participants	9
Day One: Setting the Scene: Political Commitment and Regional Landscape	11
Opening Session.....	11
Session 1: Childcare Policies and Practices – Ministerial Panel	13
Session 2: Setting the Scene – Continental Childcare Context	15
Session 3: Childcare Policies and Practices – Ministerial Panel	18
Country Highlights & Ministerial Remarks	18
Session 4a: Systems – Global Perspectives.....	20
Building a Case for Investing in Childcare	21
Investing in Childcare: What Works	21
Applying a Systems Approach to Childcare in Africa	21
Capacitating Grassroots Organizations through Learning Labs	21
Day Two: Implementation, Systems Strengthening and Resilience	23
Session 4b: Showcasing African Childcare Models.....	24
AUC Case Study: The Case for Investing in the First 1,000 Days	24
Rwanda Case Study: Expanding Access through Community-Driven Models	25
Ethiopia Case Study: Six Scalable Childcare Models	25
Zambia Case Study: Integrated Community Hubs (Insaka)	25
Kenya Case Study: Legal Reforms and Integrated Coordination	26
Session 5 Part 1: Advancing Childcare through Policy Reform and Caregiver Support	27
Advancing Childcare through Labour Law Reform	27
Caregiver Wellbeing	28
The Good Start Challenge	28
Caregiver Testimony	29
Session 5 Part 2: Special Interest Groups.....	30
Supporting Adolescent Mothers	30
Children of Incarcerated Parents	31
Children with Special Needs	31
Institutionalised Care of Young Children	32

Session 6: Multi-Sectoral Collaboration for Delivering an Integrated Childcare Service	33
Nurture 2000: A Holistic Start for Every Child in Togo.....	33
Regional Models from ECSA-HC	34
Nutrition and IYCF in Africa	34
Strengthening Health Systems for Childcare	34
Investing in Childcare for Informal Workers	35
Session 7: Advocacy for Childcare – The Experience of National ECD Networks	36
Kenya.....	36
Tanzania	37
Zambia	37
Uganda	37
Malawi	38
Session 8: Financing Childcare – Models and Systems	39
Financing Models of Childcare Systems in Africa.....	39
Financing Childcare: A Strategic Imperative for Inclusive Growth	40
Mobilizing Public Finance for Children	40
Innovative and Sustainable Financing for Childcare	41
Parallel Sessions	42
Parallel Session 1: Men’s Engagement in Childcare	42
Rwanda – Bandebereho Program.....	42
Tanzania – Community-Based Gender Norm Shift	42
East Africa – Madrasa Program	43
Parallel Session 2: Innovative Childcare Models	45
Strengthening Childcare: Baby Minders and Parenting Support for Adolescents Mothers	45
Mother-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs) towards Women Economic Empowerment and Early Childhood Development	45
What Works in Childcare for Low-Income Working Families	46
Designing a scalable and sustainable community-based daycare centre model in Tanzania: Insights from a Qualitative Study	46
Closing Reflections	47
Parallel Session 3: Workforce for Childcare	47
Action for Paid Childcare Sector Transformation: Towards a Dignified and Empowered Childcare Workforce	47
Empowering Informal Childcare Providers Through Community-Based Workforce Development – Nigeria	48

Workforce Development in Childcare: Policy Lessons from Uganda and Tanzania	48
Child Caregiver Curriculum of the National Industrial Training Institute	48
Parallel Session 4: Enabling Policy Environment.....	50
Unlocking Childcare to Benefit Women, Children and the Broader Society	50
Ilifa Labantwana (South Africa)	50
Designing Contextually Relevant Minimum Quality Guidelines for Home-Based Childcare	51
Designing and Scaling Innovative Childcare Models in Vulnerable Contexts: Strategies for sustainable early childcare in low-resource East African settings...	51
Universal Access to Quality Childcare and Child Protection Services for Children 0–5 Years	52
Parallel Session 5: Global Childcare Advocacy.....	53
Strengthening Institutional Child Caregivers' Capacity	53
Responsive Caregiving for Nurturing a Reading Culture	54
Promoting Responsive Caregiving for Holistic Child Development	54
Community-Based ECD Advocacy Through Play	54
Day Three: Evidence, Accountability, Financing, and Partnerships	56
Opening Remarks.....	56
1. Policy Reform and Caregiving Support	56
2. Multisectoral Collaboration	56
3. Advocacy and Visibility of Childcare	56
4. Financing Childcare	56
Session 9: Research & MEL of Childcare in Africa.....	57
Monitoring Child Development: The African Report on Child Wellbeing	57
From Evidence to Policy to Practice	57
From Numbers to Nurture: Tracking Child Development & Caregiver Wellbeing	58
Session 10: Role of Regional Communities in Advancing Childcare in Africa	59
East African Community (EAC)	59
East, Central and Southern Africa Health Community (ECSA-HC)	59
Child Rights Network for Southern Africa (CRNSA).....	60
West African Health Organisation (WAHO)	60
Session 11: Childcare in Crisis – Humanitarian Settings, Climate Change, and Refugee Realities	61
World Refugee Day Commemoration.....	61
Panel Session: Childcare in Crisis	62

Presentations	62
Children in Humanitarian Crises	62
Positioning Childcare in a Two-Generation Approach	62
Climate Change and Childcare	63
 Captured Moments: A Visual Journey	 64
Closing Ceremony	64
Call to Action: Building Strong Partnerships for Inclusive Childcare in Africa ...	64
Hon. Fatou Kinteh Minister of Gender, Children and Social Welfare, The Gambia	64
 Closing Remarks: A Continent United for its Children.....	 65
Field Visit	66
 A Monument to African Resistance and Self-Determination	 66

List of Abbreviations:

ACECD	African Center for Early Childhood Development
ACPF	African Child Policy Forum
APHRC	African Population & Health Research Centre
AfDB	African Development Bank
AfECN	Africa Early Childhood Network
ARBE	Rural Development, Blue Economy and Sustainable Environment
ARNS	Africa Regional Nutrition Strategy
AU	African Union
AUC	African Union Commission
AUDA	African Union Development Agency
ACERWC	African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
ACRWC	Africa Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
CAADP	Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme
CARMA	Campaign on Accelerated Reduction of Maternal Mortality
CBCC	Community-Based Childcare Centres
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CESA	Continental Education Strategy for Africa
CHW	Community Health Worker
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECA	Economic Commission for Africa
ECDAN	Early Childhood Development Action Network
ECDNeK	Early Childhood Development Network for Kenya
ESTI	Department of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation
GRF	Global Refugee Forum
HHS	Department of Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development
ILO	International Labor Organization
IRC	International Rescue Committee
IYCF	Infant and Young Child Feeding
MCDSS	Ministry of Community Development and Social Services
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
MENCARE	Men Engage Kenya Network
MHSD	Medical and Health Services Directorate
MS	Member State
NCDA	National Child Development Agency
NCF	Nurturing Care Framework
NECDA	Network for Early Childhood Development Actors Uganda
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development
PAPS	Political Affairs, Peace and Security
PMRM	Partnership Management Resource Management
REC	Regional Economic Communities
RMNCAH	Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health
STC	Specialised Technical Committee
TECDEN	Tanzania Early Childhood Development Network
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WAHO	West African Health Organization
WGYD	Women, Gender and Youth Directorate
WIEGO	Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

Executive Summary

Strong Policy Commitment

The Africa Continental Conference on Childcare, held in Addis Ababa from 18–20 June 2025, brought together over 300 delegates from across the African Union Member States, including ministers, policymakers, practitioners, civil society, development partners and researchers. Anchored in the shared recognition that accessible, affordable and high-quality childcare is a foundational right and a driver of sustainable development, the conference served as a critical moment for continental alignment and collective action. The conference opened with powerful statements of political will. Ministers from The Gambia, Uganda, Malawi, Mozambique, Senegal and Togo reaffirmed the centrality of childcare in their national development strategies, citing policies and legislative frameworks that reflect a growing shift toward rights-based and inclusive approaches. The African Union Commission reinforced its commitment to placing childcare on the continental agenda, underscoring links to Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2040. This policy momentum was carried forward through two ministerial panels in which leaders discussed how childcare is being embedded in national planning, budget frameworks and social protection schemes. From Kenya's investments in regulation and community parenting initiatives to Rwanda's performance-based district targets and Ethiopia's integrated M&E and budgeting systems, a continent-wide vision for scaling inclusive childcare was clearly emerging.

Systems Approach

Presentations by global and African institutions affirmed the need for childcare to be treated not as an isolated intervention but as an integrated system encompassing policy, finance, service delivery, workforce development and social norms. ECDAN, AfECN, UNICEF and the African Union's Social Welfare Division showcased tools and strategies that support country-led systems transformation, including multi-sectoral frameworks, coordination structures and regional knowledge hubs. Session discussions revealed common gaps: fragmented policies, underdeveloped financing models and undervalued care work. But they also revealed innovation, such as the Learning Hub for childcare in East Africa, workforce professionalisation efforts and the integration of childcare into urban planning and workplace systems.

Local Models and Innovation

Country-level models showcased in the plenary and parallel sessions provided tangible evidence of what works. From Kenya's parenting support for adolescent mothers to Rwanda's district-led community childcare centres and Tanzania's research-based daycare models, diverse approaches were adapted to local needs and realities. Informal care providers were recognised as essential contributors to the childcare ecosystem, with interventions in Nigeria and Uganda focused on training and legitimising their role.

Several programmes emphasised the importance of caregiver wellbeing, including mental health, fair compensation and peer learning networks. Two-generation models, supporting both children and their caregivers, emerged as a powerful strategy, especially in humanitarian and refugee-hosting contexts.

Parallel Sessions: Deep Dives into Practice

Five parallel sessions explored specialised themes: male engagement, innovative care models, workforce development, policy environments and advocacy. These sessions highlighted the interconnectedness of childcare with broader societal goals: gender equality, economic participation, child protection and inclusive education. They also surfaced shared priorities, including the need for locally generated data, context-responsive training models, quality standards and sustainable financing.

The session on male engagement brought attention to deeply entrenched norms and promising strategies to shift them, from Rwanda's Bandebereho programme to school and community-based mobilisation in Tanzania and Uganda. Panellists stressed that domestic care must be repositioned as a shared responsibility, not a gendered burden.

Childcare in Humanitarian and Climate-Affected Contexts

Held on World Refugee Day, the final session brought attention to children in fragile and crisis-affected settings. With over 60% of displaced people in Africa being children, speakers from the African Union, IRC and AfECN drove urgent integration of childcare into humanitarian response, disaster preparedness and climate adaptation frameworks. Climate change, it was argued, is not only an environmental issue but a direct threat to childhood.

Call to Action

The conference concluded with a bold and unified Call to Action, endorsed by the ministers and stakeholders present. It urged Member States to allocate dedicated funding for childcare, integrate it into national policy frameworks and build strong regulatory and accountability systems. It called on the African Union Commission to endorse childcare and early childhood development as the AU Theme of the Year for 2027 and proposed the institutionalisation of a biennial AU Childcare Conference. The Call further urged development partners to align funding and technical assistance with continental priorities and to invest in knowledge-sharing platforms and regional capacity building. At its heart, the Call affirmed that childcare is not a peripheral social service but a core pillar of Africa's development strategy to unlock the rights and potential of every child, every family and every nation.

A Continent Moving Forward

The conference closed with a reaffirmation of collective responsibility in which the African Union Commission pledged continued leadership and support. The conference made clear that ***Africa does not need to import solutions. It already holds the ideas, the commitment and the capacity to build care systems that are African-led, inclusive and transformative. The time to act is now.***

Background

Childcare plays a pivotal role in shaping early childhood outcomes and enabling women's economic participation. Across Africa, challenges such as limited access, poor quality and unaffordability of childcare services disproportionately affect low-income families. The increasing attention to childcare from global frameworks such as the Generation Equality Forum, the ILO Convention 189, and the Nurturing Care Framework highlights its centrality in achieving gender equality, child development and inclusive economic growth. Despite growing recognition, childcare remains underprioritized in African policies and investments. There is an urgent need to raise awareness, share evidence-based solutions, and foster collaboration among stakeholders to integrate quality, affordable childcare into social protection, employment, health and education systems. This is especially critical in the wake of COVID-19, which magnified existing childcare gaps and the burden on women. The Africa Conference on Childcare brought together governments, development partners, civil society and the private sector to catalyse regional action and learning on childcare systems that work for African families.

Objectives

The objectives and expected outcomes for the conference were as follows:

- *Raise the visibility of childcare as a critical issue for Africa's development, gender equality, and early childhood outcomes.*
- *Facilitate knowledge sharing on scalable, context-appropriate childcare models and policies, particularly those that support low-income and informal sector workers.*
- *Encourage national and regional commitments toward improved investment and integration of childcare into broader systems (e.g., health, education, labor).*
- *Promote cross-country and cross-sectoral collaboration, peer learning, and innovative partnerships.*
- *Align stakeholders around a shared agenda for childcare that addresses both child well-being and caregivers' economic empowerment.*
- *Strengthen advocacy efforts and build momentum for policy change through the dissemination of evidence, tools, and promising practices.*
- *Lay the groundwork for ongoing regional coordination and follow-up mechanisms to monitor progress and sustain momentum beyond the conference.*

Participants

The 2025 Africa Conference on Childcare brought together a wide cross-section of delegates from across the continent, reflecting the scale and urgency of advancing quality and inclusive childcare systems in Africa. In total, 23 African Union Member States were represented, alongside participants from the United States and other development partners. The presence of Member States from all five AU regions, and the inclusion of countries such as Zambia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Malawi, Ghana, Tanzania, Rwanda, South Sudan, Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Nigeria, Morocco, Liberia, Lesotho, Chad and Libya underscored the pan-African nature of the event. Ministers and senior officials from six African nations, affirmed the high-level political engagement that framed the discussions.

These included **The Gambia**, represented by two senior officials: Hon. Fatou S. Kinteh, Minister of Gender, Children and Social Welfare and Hon. Habbibatou Drammeh, Minister of Basic and Secondary Education; **Uganda** represented by Hon. Barugahara Balaam Ateenyi, Minister of Gender, Labour and Social Development; **Mozambique**, represented by Hon. Esmail Abdul Razak Amuza, Deputy Minister of Labour, Gender and Social Action; **Senegal**, represented by Hon. Abdoulaye Sarr, Cabinet Representative; **Malawi**, represented by Hon. Halima Alima Daud, Deputy Minister of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare; and **Togo**, represented by Sophie Tiadema, Director in Charge of Prevention of Vulnerable Situations, Ministry of Social Action, Solidarity and Promotion of Women.

Beyond the ministerial delegations, the conference welcomed a wide range of stakeholders including policymakers, technical experts, civil society leaders, private sector actors, early childhood practitioners and development partners. Participants engaged in discussions that spanned policy, research, service delivery, financing and advocacy – bringing diverse experience and expertise to the fore. The breadth of representation at the conference created a vibrant and inclusive space for dialogue, learning and collective action and fostered a shared vision of childcare not as a privilege, but as a public good and a foundation for Africa's development.



Day One: Setting the Scene: Political Commitment and Regional Landscape

Master of Ceremonies: **Mr. Austin Makani** Rapporteur: **Lantern** Training Analyst: **Ms. Janet Muthoni - Ouko**



The Opening Session of the Africa Conference on Childcare set a strong political and moral tone for the days that followed. Held at the African Union Commission Headquarters in Addis Ababa, the session brought together key leaders and dignitaries to reaffirm childcare as a foundational pillar of Africa's development, and to call for collaborative, multisectoral action

Prof. Julio Rakotonirina, Director for Health and Humanitarian Affairs at the AUC, gave the welcoming remarks in which he reminded delegates of the critical importance of intersectoral collaboration, regional solidarity and accountability. He praised the breadth of participation and political will, stating that, *"We must build a future where every African child thrives in a safe, stimulating and conducive environment."* He reaffirmed the AU Commission's commitment to supporting Member States in strengthening childcare systems and policies.

Hon. Aboubekrine El Jera, Special Rapporteur on Health, Welfare and Development and Member of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC), followed and framed the conversation within the legacy and future of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. He acknowledged that 51 of 55 AU Member States have ratified the Charter and urged governments to ensure access to basic services

for all children from their earliest years. Reflecting on the African Day of the Child recently held in Malawi, he shared the resounding call from children across the continent for governments to increase investment in child wellbeing, stating that, *“Investment in early childhood guarantees the future of Africa. Children are our future.”*

Prof. Mary Getui, Chairperson of the Africa Early Childhood Network (AfECN), followed with remarks that highlighted the structural childcare deficits across Africa. She expressed AfECN’s commitment to strengthening partnerships in advancing the childcare agenda in Africa and pledged support to ongoing efforts to promote childcare. She described the conference as an opportunity to interrogate existing systems and reflected on how economic realities force many mothers to leave children in unsafe, unregulated environments. *“This conference throws a spotlight on the many young children receiving care in informal settings – from marketplaces to home-based centres,”* she said. She noted that 350 million children globally lack access to childcare, with Africa carrying the largest share.

Dr. Laila Omar Gad, UNICEF Representative to the African Union and ECA, delivered a compelling call to action. *“Investing in our children’s early years is not optional – it is essential,”* she said, emphasising that every \$1 invested in early years yields \$15 in return. Dr. Gad focused on three core priorities: the need for integrated investment, sustainable financing, and listening to caregivers. “When we invest in childcare,” she added, “We are also investing in gender equality, productivity and national development.”

A poignant video clip titled **Voices of Children**,¹ produced by UNICEF ESARO, followed. The film gave delegates an emotive glimpse into the realities of childcare in informal settings, reinforcing the urgency and moral imperative of reform. It underscored the importance of dignity, health, stimulation and early learning in the lives of all children, regardless of circumstance. Voices of Children highlighted the need for childcare in communities and showed how employees (and families) are being supported in their childcare responsibilities, through a workplace-based childcare initiative in Rwanda. It highlighted the role that the private sector can play and the benefit on women’s participation in the labour market as well as the impact on companies’ productivity.

H.E. Ambassador Amma A. Twum-Amoah, AUC Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development, then delivered the Opening Address. She described childcare as a social, economic, and moral necessity. *“Let us seize this moment to build a future where childcare is not a privilege, but a fundamental right,”* she declared. Her remarks stressed the importance of investing in childcare as a strategy for inclusive growth, workforce participation, and national resilience. She applauded ongoing efforts aligned with Agenda 2040 and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

Finally, as the guest of honour, **Her Excellency Adanech Abiebie, Mayor of Addis Ababa**, delivered an inspiring keynote address that anchored the Africa Conference on Childcare in African values and urban leadership. Invoking the timeless African proverb, *“It takes a village to raise a child,”* she challenged delegates to reimagine what that village looks like in the 21st century. Her speech framed childcare not as a peripheral concern but as a moral, cultural and civic responsibility – shared across communities, governments and families alike.

The mayor highlighted Addis Ababa’s proactive investment in early childhood care and development as a model of urban leadership. She spoke of the city’s multi-sectoral early childhood development program launched in January 2023, which targets the most vulnerable populations with interventions that are both inclusive and sustainable. These include citywide feeding programs in public schools, where children receive two meals per day – not as charity, but as a “guarantee of dignity.” She underscored how inclusive playgrounds, expanded

¹ Voices of Children

daycare services and a cadre of trained parental coaches are enabling children to develop mentally, physically and emotionally from the earliest stages of life. Importantly, Her Excellency also connected these local efforts to global commitments, aligning Addis Ababa's initiatives with Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 4, on health and early learning respectively. Her remarks served as both a call to action and a celebration of what is already possible when local government is empowered and committed to child-centred development. She affirmed that investing in early childhood is a long-term investment in the wellbeing of families, the vibrancy of neighbourhoods and the resilience of cities. The Mayor of Addis Ababa concluded with a powerful reminder: the responsibility to nurture children is not the burden of one, but the collective duty of all. "The village is us," she said, capturing the essence of the conference's spirit. Her leadership, grounded in both cultural authenticity and progressive policy, set the tone for the sessions that followed.



"The wisdom that it takes a village to raise a child holds even more relevancy today... the village is us."

Session 1: Childcare Policies and Practices – Ministerial Panel



This first Ministerial Panel set the tone for the conference by presenting rich policy perspectives from The Gambia, Malawi and Uganda. The session examined how African governments are approaching childcare through legal frameworks, sector coordination, financing and partnerships. While each country faces its own unique challenges, several cross-cutting trends emerged, including a growing political commitment to integrated ECD systems, the need for better coordination between sectors, and a common emphasis on

access, equity, and professionalisation. The dialogue reflected a broader continental vision to move childcare from the margins to the heart of national development strategies.

Country Highlights & Ministerial Remarks

THE GAMBIA

“The government of The Gambia recognises the importance of all-round early years care, integrating child protection, nutrition, health and education to ensure a fair start for all children.”

Hon. Habbibatou Drammeh Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, underscored the country’s commitment to holistic early childhood development, delivered through a combination of education, health, nutrition, and child protection services. ECD is recognised in The Gambia’s National Education Sector Policy 2016–2030 as a foundational pillar of basic education, with services split between public (36%) and private (64%) centres. She described how the government works in partnership with UNICEF, the World Bank and civil society to expand ECD coverage, particularly in rural and immigrant communities. Hon. Drammeh also pointed to the importance of teacher training and learning materials, and noted that while funding remains a challenge, the national education budget allocates 40% to the sector. She affirmed the need for a coordinated national framework to enhance collaboration between stakeholders and improve delivery across ministries.

REPUBLIC OF MALAWI

“Childcare is not a cost... it defines the future of our country and contributes to global development goals.”

Hon. Halima Daud, Deputy Minister of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare of Malawi, framed childcare as “one of the most powerful investments a nation can make.” She highlighted Malawi’s Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECD) Policy, which supports children from birth to age eight through a multisectoral approach. Central to implementation are the Community-Based Childcare Centres (CBCCs), which currently number 13,990 and reach approximately 1.1 million children. These centres not only provide early learning and meals but also allow mothers to participate in income-generating activities. Hon. Daud raised concern over the low rates of legal identity among children and stressed that strengthening birth registration systems remains a national priority. She emphasised political leadership as a driving force in Malawi’s progress and described how collaboration with UNICEF and other partners has led to major improvements in birth registration and CBCC expansion.

REPUBLIC OF UGANDA

“A child has the right to good health... Uganda is committed to creating an environment where all our children must thrive.”

Hon. Balaam Barugahara Ateenyi, Minister of State for Youth and Children Affairs, Uganda, described a country with a youthful population and rapidly growing demand for formal childcare. Uganda has over six million children under the age of three, and in response, the government recently approved a national ECCE policy (2023), as well as a National Child Policy and updates to the Children Act. He noted that child-related services are currently delivered through multiple ministries (Gender, Health, and Education) without a single coordinating body and proposed the creation of a National Childcare Board to address this gap. Uganda currently allocates about 4% of its national budget to health and is working to increase funding for childcare through targeted incentives and subsidies. Hon. Barugahara reiterated that children’s rights must be protected through both legal reform and direct services, including immunisation, caregiver support and safe, accessible childcare environments.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- Political leadership and commitment are seen as catalytic for mobilising partnerships and resources.
- Each country is working towards a national policy or law that places childcare within an integrated ECD framework.
- Coordination across ministries remains a challenge; all three ministers supported the idea of establishing national childcare boards or coordinating bodies.
- Disparities persist in access and quality, especially for rural and low-income children.
- There is a shared call for increased financing and the professionalisation of the childcare workforce.

Proposed Actions

- The Gambia committed to expanding ECD centres in rural areas and supported the idea of establishing a national coordination framework.
- Malawi prioritised strengthening its birth registration systems, scaling up CBCCs, and enhancing multisectoral coordination.
- Uganda proposed forming a national childcare board, increasing budget allocations and offering subsidies and incentives for vulnerable families.

Closing Reflections

The panel brought to light the essential role of childcare in shaping Africa's human capital future. The ministers' statements reflected not only policy progress but also a deep sense of urgency. Their reflections reaffirmed that childcare must be recognised not as a welfare issue but as a national investment in equity, productivity and inclusive development.

Session 2: Setting the Scene – Continental Childcare Context



This second session of the Africa Childcare Conference, moderated by Ms. Sophia Ashipala of the African Union Commission, provided a sweeping overview of the continental childcare landscape. The session served to frame the discourse of the conference by exploring the policy, institutional and implementation frameworks shaping early childhood care and development in Africa. Speakers from multiple AU departments and allied institutions emphasized the urgency of addressing Africa's **'silent emergency'** in childcare, while providing key policy and programmatic insights.

Presentations

Regional Landscape of Childcare in Africa

Dr. Lynette Okengo Executive Director, Africa Early Childhood Network (AfECN)

“Care is not charity, it is infrastructure. It is justice.”

Dr. Okengo offered a powerful continental overview, describing childcare as both a right and a critical engine for human capital. Her presentation drew from the Nurturing Care Framework, underscoring the need for interlinked interventions in health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, early learning, and safety. She painted a sobering picture: 350 million children globally lack access to childcare; the majority of Africa’s childcare providers are untrained and underpaid; and public funding remains negligible.

Africa’s Agenda for Children 2040

Ms. Catherine Maina Senior Social Worker Africa Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of Children (ACERWC)

“Planning and budgeting for children is not a choice – it is a legal responsibility.”

Ms. Maina outlined Agenda 2040’s ten aspirations. These include effective child-friendly legal systems, universal birth registration, access to health and nutrition, quality education and child protection. She highlighted that only two countries have reported multiple times on the Children’s Charter and urged member states to translate these aspirations into coordinated policy implementation.

AUC’s Role in Holistic Child Development

Ms. Inas Mubarak Yahia Head of Health Systems, Diseases and Nutrition Division, AUC

“We must look at childcare through a whole-of-society and whole-of-government lens.”

Ms. Mubarak highlighted strategic AU initiatives aligned with the Nurturing Care Framework’s five pillars. She emphasized high-level campaigns such as CARMMA Plus for maternal and newborn health, and regional strategies for nutrition, early learning and immunization. She presented the AU Inter-Departmental Taskforce on Holistic Child Development, which coordinates across sectors to integrate childcare in continental strategies.

Online Child Safety and Digital Literacy

Ms. Nena Thundu Policy Officer, Social Welfare Division Department of Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development

“Children are gaining access to devices younger and younger... this brings opportunity, but also grave risk.”

Ms. Thundu discussed the AU’s draft Model Law on Online Child Safety, designed to harmonize member state legislation and protect children from digital risks such as cyberbullying, exploitation, and harmful content. She stressed the urgent need for child participation, capacity building and multi-stakeholder partnerships with educators, families, law enforcement and tech companies. Notably, she warned that poverty has led to families sharing exploitative content online, underscoring the need for digital protection policies to be embedded in broader childcare strategies.

Gender, Positive Masculinity and Childcare

Ms. Arlette Akingeneye (AUC Women, Gender and Youth Division)

“Childcare is a shared responsibility. This cannot be achieved unless we achieve gender equality.”

Ms. Akingeneye linked childcare to broader gender equality and the AU's commitment to transforming harmful masculinities. Through the Maputo Protocol, GEWE Strategy and the AU's Presidential Initiative on Positive Masculinity, the AU is pushing for equal caregiving responsibilities and legal reforms, advocating for men as allies and caregivers in both policy and practice.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- Childcare is central to economic development, gender equality and social justice.
- Current policies are fragmented and insufficient – only a handful of countries have childcare-specific policies.
- There is an urgent need for funding childcare systems, not relying on informal and private care.
- Digital safety must become integral to childcare planning, with legislative and educational support.
- Gender norms and unpaid care burdens must be challenged through positive masculinity and legal reform.

Proposed Actions

- Scale up national childcare dialogues and integrate care into national development plans.
- Adopt and implement the AU's draft Model Law on Online Child Safety.
- Establish and fund professional training pathways for childcare providers.
- Accelerate the ratification and enforcement of the AU's legal instruments on children's rights and gender equality.
- Support AU-level coordination mechanisms such as the Inter-Departmental Taskforce for holistic implementation.

Closing Reflections

This session made clear that early childhood care in Africa cannot be an afterthought – it is foundational to the continent's prosperity. Childcare must be mainstreamed in all policies and systems and investing in caregivers is investing in national development. As the AU and its partners lead with frameworks, evidence and advocacy, member states must seize the momentum to make childcare a pillar of their national strategies that lead to public action and financing. The road to Agenda 2040 and beyond begins with bold, unified action today.

Session 3: Childcare Policies and Practices – Ministerial Panel

Moderator: **Dr. Erinna Dia** UNICEF Country Representative, Togo



This session continued the high-level ministerial dialogue by highlighting diverse childcare policy approaches from The Gambia, Mozambique, Senegal and Kenya. While each country operates within its unique legal, social and institutional context, several unifying themes emerged: a growing emphasis on inter-ministerial coordination, the professionalisation and regulation of childcare, and the integration of early childhood policies within broader national development frameworks. Ministers underscored that holistic childcare is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic investment in national development.

Country Highlights & Ministerial Remarks

THE GAMBIA

“We must build a comprehensive system that protects and empowers every child, while promoting inclusive and quality care in accordance with global best practices.”

Hon. Fatou S. Kinteh Minister of Gender, Children and Social Welfare



Hon. Fatou Kinteh delivered a wide-ranging keynote that underscored The Gambia's commitment to institutionalising child protection and inclusive childcare. She outlined the evolution of national policy and legal instruments, including the Children's Act (2005, amended 2016), Sexual Offences Act (2013) and the development of the National Children's Policy 2025–2030. These frameworks are complemented by operational tools such as a Child Protection Manual and revised standards for

residential childcare facilities. The Ministry has established a 24-hour helpline, regional child welfare offices, and a shelter for children and survivors of GBV. Hon. Kinteh emphasised that coordination is key, referencing the National Child Protection Steering Committee and the Children's National Assembly as mechanisms that ensure stakeholder engagement and accountability. She called for increased investment, stronger enforcement, and a unified continental response to protect children from violence, abuse, and neglect.

REPUBLIC OF KENYA

CPA Caren Ageng'o Principal Secretary, Ministry of Labour and Social Protection

"Childcare is central to our development agenda. Our new ministry for children signals strong political will."

Ms. Ageng'o presented Kenya's expansive childcare ecosystem. She noted that children account for 46% of the national population and that the government has developed a suite of policies, including the Children's Act, National Care Policy (2024), and Care Reform Strategy (2022–2032). Kenya is actively reintegrating children from institutional care to families and has introduced a National Positive Parenting Programme aiming to reach 2 million households. Ms. Ageng'o highlighted coordination with county governments and stressed that regulatory oversight remains a key implementation challenge.

MOZAMBIQUE

Hon. Esmail Abdul Razak Amuza Deputy Minister of Labor, Gender and Social Action

"Early childhood is the foundation of human development – our policies must begin there."

Deputy Minister Amuza framed Mozambique's policy around constitutional guarantees and multisectoral investment in child survival and development. The country is currently finalising a National Preschool Education Strategy and a National Action Plan for the Child. Existing programmes support health, nutrition, sanitation and pre-school education, delivered in partnership with families and communities. He noted that early education is offered in both crèches and orphanages, with a strong emphasis on inclusion for children with disabilities. He highlighted the importance of partnerships and expressed a need for further technical support to implement national policy at scale.

SENEGAL

Hon. Sarr Abdoulaye Minister of National Education

"Offering a safe, stimulating, and benevolent environment to our children from an early age is to guarantee the prosperity of our societies."

Minister Sarr emphasised Senegal's holistic approach to early childhood care. The country has integrated childcare into its National Transformation Agenda, with significant efforts to scale up preschool access – from just 2% in 2009 to 24% in 2020. Coordination is facilitated through the National Committee for Integrated Development of the Small Child, comprising ministries of education, health, justice and family. Minister Sarr stressed local cultural relevance – advocating for the adaptation of programs to Senegal's community realities and traditions – and the importance of supporting women's employment through services and training and encouraged South–South cooperation among African nations.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- Childcare policy is increasingly multisectoral, involving justice, education, health and social protection ministries.

- Many countries are transitioning from institutional care to family- and community-based childcare solutions.
- Legal frameworks are in place or emerging, but enforcement and regulation remain a challenge.
- Data and digital systems, such as helplines and case management software, are improving monitoring and response.
- Cross-country coordination and shared learning were recognised as key enablers of progress.

Proposed Actions

The Gambia pledged to create a dedicated national budget for children and strengthen coordination through the National Child Protection Steering Committee.

- Mozambique will finalise its National Preschool Strategy and reinforce child inclusion across all social sectors.
- Senegal aims to expand equitable access to early learning and deepen community-based initiatives.
- Kenya committed to regulating childcare provision, scaling positive parenting and prioritising care in its development budgets.

Closing Reflections

The second Ministerial Panel re-emphasised the political will driving childcare reforms across Africa. Through strengthened legal frameworks, community-based care and strategic investment, these governments are taking tangible steps toward inclusive, quality childcare. As articulated by Hon. Kinteh, “Our collective action is critical to ensuring every child is protected, empowered and given the opportunity to thrive.”

Session 4a: Childcare Systems – Global Perspectives

Moderator: **Ms. Alleluia Delphine Dusabimana** Senior Programme Officer, CARMMA Plus, African Union Commission



This session explored global insights and models for strengthening childcare systems. Distinguished speakers from UNICEF, the World Bank, ECDAN and the Conrad N. Hilton

Foundation shared their evidence-based approaches and frameworks for scaling up affordable, equitable and quality childcare. The discussion underscored the imperative to move childcare from the margins of policy to the centre of human capital development strategies in Africa.

Presentations

Building a Case for Investing in Childcare

Dr. Oliver Petrovic Regional ECD Advisor, UNICEF, ESARO

"If we change the beginning of the story, we change the whole story."

Dr. Petrovic emphasized that quality childcare is a "win-win-win" investment – for children's development, family welfare and economic growth. Drawing on regional evidence, he highlighted the affordability gap and the fact that over 350 million children globally lack access to childcare, with 80% of them in low-income countries. He cited examples from Rwanda, Kenya, Zambia and Uganda where governments are expanding childcare services through public-private partnerships and local government investment, and he recommended diversified, quality models tailored to local needs and financing reforms.

Investing in Childcare: What Works

Ms. Frances Mary Beaton-Day Global Co-Team Lead for Invest in Childcare, World Bank

"To unlock childcare at scale, we must embed it where families already go—health systems, schools and employment programs."

Ms. Beaton-Day framed the case for investment to match different stakeholders' interests and outlined four scalable entry points for investment in childcare: integrating into existing community platforms (e.g., health), expanding access through education systems, embedding childcare in employment support programs and promoting it as an income-generating activity. Using country examples such as Côte d'Ivoire and Cabo Verde, she illustrated how strategic diagnostics, policy reforms and coordinated action across ministries – especially involving Ministries of Finance – can accelerate sustainable childcare solutions. She also highlighted the importance of subsidization, quality assurance and contextualised program design.

Applying a Systems Approach to Childcare in Africa

Ms. Elizabeth Lule Executive Director ECDAN

"Childcare is not a standalone service – it's a system. And systems transformation requires political will, evidence and cross-sector action."

Ms. Lule delivered a powerful presentation on the need for a systems approach to childcare in Africa. She argued that because childcare involves multiple moving parts – policies, service models, workforce, norms and data – it cannot be treated as an isolated intervention. She introduced systems thinking as a tool for mapping complex interconnections and for identifying leverage points that can enable large-scale transformation. ECDAN's global systems initiative has brought together experts across Africa and Asia to co-create tools like the Childcare Systems Map and a global masterclass series, with thousands of participants joining to deepen their understanding.

Ms. Lilies Njanga Program Officer, Global Early Childhood Development – East and Southern Africa, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

“Partners may change, but governments remain. Our job is to help them deliver care that is affordable, trusted, and scalable.”

Ms. Njanga stated that 70% of children in East and Southern Africa lack access to quality care. She presented the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation’s model of Learning Labs as a way to incubate and scale grassroots childcare organisations who are the essential first responders and innovators. These labs identify, support and fund early-stage community-based solutions tailored to local contexts – urban, rural or displaced populations. She stressed the need for evidence-informed models that build trust with families, foster public-private partnerships, and can be mainstreamed into national systems.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- Childcare is a high-return, triple-benefit investment – benefiting children, families and economies.
- Systems thinking is essential to address the complexity of childcare: policy, equity, workforce, data, and culture must align.
- Strategic financing, especially with support from Ministries of Finance, is key to scale and sustainability.
- Quality cannot be compromised in scale-ups – subsidization and regulatory frameworks are vital.
- Grassroots organisations are essential actors in contextualizing and delivering childcare at the community level.

Proposed Actions

- Expand national investment in childcare through cross-sector policy reforms and targeted subsidies.
- Adopt a systems approach that integrates childcare into broader early childhood and economic strategies.
- Support grassroots innovation through technical, financial and policy incubation mechanisms.
- Utilize global tools like systems maps and diagnostics to inform country-level strategies and measurement.
- Create learning communities for peer exchange and continuous improvement across African member states.

Closing Reflections

This session revealed the vital role of global partnerships in shaping sustainable and inclusive childcare systems in Africa. It emphasized that global evidence and innovation must be contextualized for African realities and delivered through government leadership. The panellists’ presentations stressed the importance of investing not only in services, but in building systems that can sustain quality care at scale, particularly for the most vulnerable.

Closing Remarks and Wrap-up Day One

Hon. Balaam Barugahara Ateenyi Minister of State for Youth and Children Affairs, Uganda.

“Childcare is not just a necessity – it is an investment in our collective future.”

In closing the day’s proceedings, Hon. Balaam Barugahara Ateenyi expressed strong support for the conference outcomes and urged delegates to advocate for a future AU

Theme of the Year focused on childcare and early childhood development, arguing that **“childcare is not just a necessity, it is an investment in our collective future.”** He reinforced childcare as central to Africa’s development and children’s rights and reaffirmed Uganda’s commitment to policy reforms and systems-building. The minister called upon all nations to ensure that “Africa’s growth starts with our children” through action-oriented collaboration and national commitments. His call to action closed with the energizing refrain: **“Our children, our future!”**

Day Two: Implementation, Systems Strengthening and Resilience

Mr Austin Makani, Master of Ceremonies

Mr Makani delivered a high-energy recap of Day One, highlighting the timeliness and alignment of the conference with the African Union’s Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2040. Delegates were reminded that the convening offered a platform for the exchange of best practices, reaffirmations of commitment and new insights into quality and inclusive childcare. Both ministerial panels, he noted, demonstrated clear political will and increasing budgetary alignment across countries in pursuit of childcare goals.

Partner organisations including the African Union Commission, UNICEF, World Bank, AFECN and others were recognised for their roles in advancing holistic early childhood development, particularly in the foundational years from birth to age five. Mr Makani also invited participants to engage with the graphic facilitation art wall by artist Robert Dersley,² as he continued to capture key insights from the conference visually.



Ms. Janet Muthoni Ouko *“Africa cannot afford to leave the care of its youngest citizens to chance.”*

² [Robert Dersley Illustration](#)

Ms Ouko delivered a powerful, analytical summary of the previous day's proceedings, highlighting the structural policy gaps evident in Africa's approach to childcare. While policy frameworks such as Agenda 2063, Agenda 2040 and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child all refer to children's rights, they lack specific targets or state obligations related to childcare. Policy is not yet practice. No African country clearly tracks childcare spending or has laws mandating state provision; the responsibility is often delegated to families or communities – which weakens state accountability – and childcare is largely missing in national development, gender equity and economic strategies. The absence of explicit budgeting, legislation or measurable indicators for childcare systems – particularly for children aged 0 to 3 – was repeatedly underscored.

Ms Ouko called for the recognition of childcare as a national responsibility rather than a parental favour, advocating for state-led investment, and strong regulation and monitoring. She challenged member states to update legacy frameworks to reflect modern realities, establish legal mandates for government provision of care, and create an African Childcare Scorecard to hold leaders accountable. Her closing remark, echoing Oliver Petrovic's insight, captured the spirit of the day: "When you change the beginning of the story, you change the whole story."

Session 4b: Showcasing African Childcare Models

Moderator: **Dr. Rongedzayi Fambasayi** (Technical Advisor–Climate Action, AfECN)



This session bridged global systems thinking with African-grown childcare models. It opened with a presentation from the African Union Commission's Dr Meshach Olawuyi, who underscored the foundational importance of the first 1,000 days in a child's life. Following his address, four country models – Rwanda, Ethiopia, Zambia and Kenya – were explored through a rich panel discussion. Panellists shared practical approaches to childcare grounded in context, innovation and government prioritisation.

Presentations

Dr Meshach Olawuyi, Specialist Paediatrician, Medical and Health Services Department, AUC *"If you change the beginning of the story, you change the whole story – and that begins with investing in the first 1,000 days."*

Dr Olawuyi gave a brief talk on the critical importance of the Nurturing Care Framework within the first 1,000 days of life, which he described as “the bedrock upon which the foundation is laid,” and highlighted the biological and developmental urgency of that window of time. He announced plans for an African Union Commission Childcare Centre at the AU’s headquarters in Addis Ababa, to support the AUC staff with childcare services. Dr Olawuyi noted that while funding delays had slowed implementation, the goal was to support mothers working at the AUC and showcase institutional responsibility before opening it out as a service to others in the area.

Rwanda Case Study: Expanding Access Models through Community-Driven

Mr. Gilbert Munyemana Deputy Director General, National Child Development Agency, Rwanda

“Every mayor wants to be reappointed – so they deliver on childcare.”

Mr Gilbert Munyemana presented Rwanda’s decentralised, multisectoral and community-anchored approach to childcare. Innovative use of public and faith-based spaces, like underutilised church buildings, has enabled the rapid scaling of home- and community-based ECD centres. He noted that workplace-based childcare now extends to the Office of the President and deep plantation industries. Rwanda’s use of performance contracts for local mayors was cited as a key driver of accountability. “Every mayor wants to reach 100% access,” Munyemana shared. The government’s commitment to deinstitutionalisation, with over 91% of children reintegrated into families, underscores its rights-based approach.

- Integrated, multisectoral, culturally grounded ECD model.
- Home- and community-based centres use churches, homes, and workplaces.
- High-level political commitment with district mayoral performance targets.
- Case management system and foster-parent model ('Malayika Murinzi').

Ethiopia Case Study: Six Scalable Childcare Models

Dr. Abebe Negesso Abela Addis Ababa City Administration, Mayor's Office

“We scaled from 10 to over 800 centres in three years—it’s all about priorities.”

Dr Negesso described six childcare models implemented in Ethiopia: publicly financed, community-run, workplace-based, day mothers, NGO-led and private-for-profit centres. The scale-up from 10 to over 800 daycare centres in three years reflected strong political will, backed by city investment now comprising 5.7% of municipal revenue. “It’s all about priorities,” Dr Abebe stated. Supportive policies included repurposing kebele housing, integrating childcare with feeding initiatives and mandating government institutions to provide care services for employees.

- Six childcare models including public, workplace, community, day-mothers, NGOs and private.
- Strong public investment: daycare budget rose to 1.8 billion birr (5.7% of city revenue).
- Emphasis on prioritization and government buy-in.

Zambia Case Study: Integrated Community Hubs (Insaka)

Ms. Patrine Chilala Deputy Director, ECE Directorate, Ministry of Education

“We follow the Nurturing Care Framework—and reach children in their homes, churches and farms.”

Ms Patrine Chilala shared Zambia's Insaka model of multifunctional community hubs for children aged 0–8. Developed with UNICEF and anchored in local traditions, Insakas integrate growth monitoring, nutrition demonstrations, play-based learning and maternal support. Community ownership and trained volunteers form the backbone of delivery. National Quality Standards ensure safety and inclusiveness.

- 'Insaka' ECD Hubs: integrated community centres with health, nutrition and learning.
- Community-based volunteers deliver services; backed by multi-ministerial support.
- National quality standards ensure inclusivity and safety.
- Challenge: volunteer attrition and need for continued training.
- Insaka model rolling out to other districts with potential for strengthening in childcare provision.

Kenya Case Study: Legal Reforms and Integrated Coordination

CPA Caren Ageng'o Principal Secretary, Ministry of Labour and Social Protection

"Children under three should not be in institutional care – they belong in families."

CPA Caren Ageng'o outlined Kenya's legal and policy landscape for childcare, including the Children Act, National Care Policy and Care Reform Strategy. Models range from community-run centres to church-based and private facilities. Devolved implementation allows counties to tailor services, while the State Department for Children Services leads national coordination. Volunteer children's officers, positive parenting programs, and foster care licensing were also highlighted.

- Mixed model: formal, community, church, NGO-run and private childcare centres.
- New State Department now oversees childcare under Ministry of Gender and Children.
- Integrated ECD Policy (2024) supports coordination across sectors.
- Emphasis on family and community-based care; law prohibits institutional placement under the age of 3.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- The first 1,000 days of life are foundational – care, nutrition and stimulation must be prioritised.
- Community-based and decentralised models improve access, cultural relevance and sustainability.
- Multisectoral coordination across health, education and social services is essential.
- Public–private partnerships and workplace childcare schemes can drive innovation.
- National quality standards and legal mandates ensure safe, inclusive care delivery.

Proposed Actions

- Establish and enforce national childcare standards across public, private and informal settings.
- Incentivise public sector and employer-supported childcare provision through tax and policy levers.
- Strengthen local government performance contracts and monitoring systems.
- Scale integrated community hubs in underserved rural and peri-urban areas.
- Ensure care is funded, regulated and recognised as economic infrastructure.

Closing Reflections

The session underscored that childcare must be prioritised at every level – national, municipal and household – as both a right and a lever for human development. The discussion highlighted two critical enablers for progress: political will and prioritisation. Country examples demonstrated what this looks like in action: Rwanda’s district-level performance targets drive accountability, Zambia’s national quality standards ensure inclusive provision, Ethiopia’s childcare scale-up is supported by budget allocations and central monitoring, and Kenya’s coordinated, policy-led approach is grounded in community-level implementation. Collectively, these models affirmed that scalable, African-owned solutions are already making a tangible impact.

Session 5 Part 1: Advancing Childcare through Policy Reform and Caregiver Support

Moderator: **Mr. Morris Tayebwa** Gender Youth and Children Expert, East Africa Community



This session explored how childcare can be strengthened through national policy reform, workplace transformation and the critical support of caregivers. It included a powerful mix of global frameworks, data, innovation and lived experience. The session featured presentations from the International Labour Organization (ILO), Dr Teshome Desta on caregiver wellbeing, and a team from the Good Start Challenge representing Van Leer Foundation and Challenge Works. It concluded with a moving personal testimony from a beneficiary of workplace-based childcare.

Presentations

Advancing Childcare through Labour Law Reform

Ms. Laura Addati Maternity Protection and Work-Family Specialist ILO

“Care is infrastructure—it must be planned, financed, and protected in law.”

Ms. Addati gave a virtual presentation grounded in the ILO’s 2024 Resolution on Decent Work and the Care Economy. She highlighted that over 2 billion potential parents globally lack access to adequate care systems and protection, particularly in low-income countries. A striking statistic showed that only 21 of 178 countries provide a legal entitlement to childcare for children under two. Addati outlined the ILO’s 5R framework – Recognise, Reduce, Reward, Represent and Redistribute – which calls for recognising care work, reducing unpaid care

burdens, rewarding care workers fairly, representing caregivers in policy processes and redistributing care responsibilities more equitably. She urged member states to integrate care into labour laws, social protection and economic planning.

- 2 billion people live in countries without adequate childcare or leave; 740 million (mostly women) are excluded from the labour force due to care responsibilities.
- Only 1 in 10 children under 2 have a legal right to care services globally.
- In Africa, there's an average 5.7-year gap between end of paid leave and access to ECED services.
- Return on investment: \$1 in care = \$2.22 in GDP growth by 2035.
- Examples from Ethiopia, Moldova, Colombia show workplace childcare and community cooperatives can drive impact.
- Concluded with a call for ratification of ILO Conventions 183 and 156 and multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Caregiver Wellbeing

Dr. Teshome Desta Woldehanna Former Child Health Advisor WHO

"If the caregiver is not well enough, we cannot expect them to provide nurturing care."

Dr Teshome delivered a compelling presentation on the urgent need to prioritise caregiver wellbeing. He stressed that caregivers cannot provide effective nurturing care if they themselves are unwell or unsupported. Presenting stark statistics on global mental health – including that one in seven adolescents has a mental disorder and that suicide is the fourth leading cause of death in 15–29-year-olds – Dr Teshome emphasised the intergenerational consequences of poor maternal health. He called for action across sectors: integrating mental health into maternal and child health systems, improving social support for caregivers and ensuring that caregivers' mental health is seen as a central pillar of the nurturing care agenda.

- Caregiver well-being includes mental, emotional, physical, social and financial health. Nearly 1 billion globally suffer from mental disorders; mental health disorders rose by 50% over 25 years.
- Only 2% of health budgets go to mental health; most affected get no support.
- Maternal mental health affects both mother and child: linked to prematurity, low birth weight, malnutrition and depression.
- Presented a support pyramid: universal, targeted and intensive interventions using health systems, community and hybrid tools.
- Urged use of WHO/UNICEF resources and building caregiver support into broader health and ECD systems.

The Good Start Challenge

Ms. Karima Grant Regional Representative, Africa, Van Leer Foundation & **Douglas Logedi Luhangala** East African Regional Lead, Good Start Challenge

"If we support caregivers, then children and communities will flourish."

Ms Karima Grant (Van Leer Foundation) and Mr Logedi Luhangala (Challenge Works) introduced the Good Start Challenge, a global innovation prize supporting locally rooted solutions to caregiver and parental wellbeing. Targeting communities affected by forced displacement and adversity, the challenge invites scalable innovations from SMEs, CBOs and startups. Innovations may include digital tools, access to services, mental health support and

economic empowerment strategies tailored to high-stress environments. The initiative reflects a shift toward inclusive, human-centred innovation that responds to the lived realities of families across Africa and beyond.

- Innovation challenge by Van Leer Foundation, Challenge Works and partners (Lego Foundation, Maria Far Femsie Foundation).
- Focused on parental and caregiver wellbeing through scalable, community-based innovations.
- Target regions: Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Senegal; focused on displacement, single/adolescent parents.
- Grants of €50,000–€200,000 available for winners to scale solutions.
- Solutions include tech-access, peer networks, and mobility innovations.
- Encouraged stakeholders to join as champions or scaling partners.

Caregiver Testimony

Ms.Yenenesh Abdissa

“I cannot put into words the support I’ve received from the daycare – it has changed my life.”

Ms Yenenesh Abdissa, a mother of two and employee of Addis Ababa City Administration, shared how access to workplace-based childcare has transformed her life. She described how the daycare centre at her place of work enabled her to continue employment while ensuring her children received quality care. “It has solved many problems – not just for me, but for my colleagues too.” Her testimony grounded the policy discussions in lived experience and served as a powerful reminder of why childcare access matters.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- Policy gaps remain significant across Africa, particularly in legal entitlements to childcare services.
- The ILO’s 5R framework and investment case offer powerful tools for national childcare reform.
- Caregiver wellbeing – including mental health – is essential to delivering nurturing care.
- Innovative approaches such as the Good Start Challenge can unlock scalable, locally led solutions.
- Workplace childcare has direct and measurable benefits for working mothers and employers alike.

Proposed Actions

- Ratify and implement ILO conventions on maternity protection and workers with family responsibilities.
- Strengthen national policy frameworks that integrate mental health, labour and social care systems.
- Invest in community- and employer-based childcare solutions that support working parents.
- Champion parental wellbeing as a pillar of childcare strategy and sustainable development.
- Support innovation ecosystems that elevate local voices and contextualised solutions.

Closing Reflections

The session reinforced that effective childcare reform must be driven by both sound policy and practical implementation. Discussions highlighted the importance of creating an enabling environment for caregivers through legal protections, workplace support, mental health services and community-based care. Recognising care as essential infrastructure emerged as a unifying theme, requiring integration into national planning, budgeting and legal frameworks to ensure caregivers can thrive and children can flourish.

Session 5 Part 2: Special Interest Groups

Moderator: **Ms. Catherine Maina**, Senior Social Worker, ACERWC



This panel addressed the policy and practical needs of children from vulnerable and often overlooked groups. These included adolescent mothers, children of incarcerated parents, children with disabilities and those in institutional care. The discussion provided country-specific reflections and strategic directions from Rwanda, Uganda, Malawi and civil society actors.

Presentations

Supporting Adolescent Mothers

Ms. Emily Gumba-Onyango Senior Program Officer, Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)

"It takes a whole community to keep a girl in school."

Ms Gumba-Onyango outlined FAWE's multi-country programs focused on the inclusion and reintegration of adolescent mothers into education. She highlighted a three-pronged model that supports the teen mother, her baby and her caregiver (usually the teen's mother), delivered through Mothers' Clubs and Tuseme safe spaces. "A 13-year-old girl is still a child – but she's also a mother," she observed, calling attention to the layered vulnerabilities faced. FAWE has supported over 5,000 girls to re-enrol in school, with many successfully completing secondary education and reimagining their futures.

- FAWE supports girls and young mothers through a three-pronged model targeting the teen mother, her baby, and her caregiver (often her mother).
- Implemented 'Mothers' Clubs' to support re-entry to school, parenting skills, and community advocacy in Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Senegal, and Ghana.

- Girls face stigma, economic barriers, and policy implementation gaps despite having re-entry policies.
- Programs provide stipends, childcare ‘corners’, nutrition education, vocational training and collaboration with Ministries of Health and Education.

Children of Incarcerated Parents

Mr. Fred Ngabirano, Commissioner for Youth and Children Affairs, Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Uganda.

“Prisons were never designed for children.”

Mr Ngabirano described the Ugandan government’s efforts to support mothers and children within prison systems. While prisons were not designed with childcare in mind, the government has created mother-child units, daycare facilities and bonding weekends. Children may remain with mothers up to 18 months, after which alternative care is arranged. “Prisons are not places for children,” he noted, citing challenges in staff training and infrastructure. Uganda’s child justice reforms and early release options for mothers are helping to humanise the system and safeguard child rights.

- Uganda has 301 children living in prisons with their mothers; children may stay until 18 months, after which alternative care is arranged.
- Prisons have daycare centres, special funds for child nutrition, and trained probation officers for reintegration.
- Mothers receive special food supplements and can access community-based alternatives to incarceration.
- Major challenge: prison architecture and staff are not suited to meet children’s development needs.

Children with Special Needs

Mr. Gilbert Munyemana Deputy Director General, National Child Development Agency, Rwanda

“Disability is not inability – early prevention and detection are key.”

Mr Munyemana presented Rwanda’s integrated approach to disability prevention, early detection and inclusion. Through antenatal care improvements, fortified nutrition and disability screening, the government aims to reduce preventable disabilities. Rwanda is transitioning from home-based to community ECD centres with inclusive infrastructure and trained caregivers. A national disability data system is being developed to support targeted programming and referrals.

- Rwanda’s NCDA coordinates across 7 ministries to ensure disability inclusion in policy, infrastructure, and representation.
- Focus on early detection and prevention of disability starting with antenatal care and micronutrient supplementation.
- Community health workers and volunteers support referrals to services including physiotherapy and nutrition.
- National survey and disability management information system under development.
- Infrastructure challenges persist, especially for mental disabilities such as autism and access to ECD services.

Institutionalised Care of Young Children

Mr. Justin Hamela Deputy Director, Child Affairs Directorate, Ministry of Gender Community Development and Social Welfare, Malawi

“Institutional care lacks the love of a family. It must be the last resort.”

Mr Hamela discussed the policy shift underway in Malawi to reduce institutional care, especially for children under three. While institutional care is still needed in emergencies, it is considered a last resort. **“We recommend family-based care because institutions cannot provide the love children need,”** he stated. Malawi’s new early childhood development law will support reintegration, foster care and parenting support. Resource constraints, inadequate standards and psychosocial risks for children were acknowledged as major hurdles.

- 165 children under age 3 are in institutional care; used as rescue and last resort in Malawi.
- Challenges include lack of love in institutional settings, inadequate standards, funding constraints, and low caregiver capacity.
- Malawi promotes foster care, parenting programs, and aims to reduce reliance on institutional care through new ECD legislation.
- New draft law under development to expand community and family-based alternatives.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- Children from special interest groups require targeted, rights-based support.
- Family- and community-based care is preferable to institutional care for young children.
- Inclusive education and childcare policies must consider children of teen mothers, incarcerated parents and those with disabilities.
- Local innovations such as Mothers’ Clubs and safe spaces create bridges between communities and care systems.
- Disability prevention and data systems are vital for inclusive planning and early intervention.

Proposed Actions

- Strengthen reintegration policies and re-entry strategies for adolescent mothers and their children.
- Invest in inclusive infrastructure and disability-focused services across ECD and education systems.
- Develop specialised training for prison staff and caregivers supporting children of incarcerated parents.
- Scale up alternative care models such as foster care and kinship placements for children under three.
- Mainstream disaggregated data systems to support inclusive planning and service delivery.

Closing Reflections

Childcare must be inclusive not only in policy but also in design and delivery, especially for children from vulnerable backgrounds. Across the session, speakers highlighted strategic national and regional efforts: FAWE’s scholarships and school reintegration for adolescent mothers in 10 countries; Uganda’s integrated justice and entrepreneurship initiatives within its national ECD plans; Rwanda’s inclusive ECD systems supported by assistive technology and disability detection; and Malawi’s policy shift toward family-based care underpinned by a forthcoming ECD law. Each intervention underscored the importance of coordinated, rights-based approaches that meet the needs of every child, regardless of circumstance.

Session 6: Multi-Sectoral Collaboration for Delivering an Integrated Childcare Service

Moderator: **Dr. Meseret Zelalem** Deputy CEO, Chief of Programs and Research Officer, African Center for Early Childhood Development



This session explored how coordinated collaboration across health, nutrition, education and social protection systems can drive the delivery of integrated and equitable childcare services. Presenters from Togo, the East Central and Southern Africa Health Community (ECSA-HC), the African Union Commission, AfECN and WIEGO showcased examples of multi-sectoral systems thinking, community-anchored care models and gender-responsive delivery mechanisms.

Nurture 2000: A Holistic Start for Every Child in Togo

Ms. Sophie Tiadema Director in charge of prevention of vulnerable situations; Director, Ministry of Social Action, Solidarity and Promotion of Women

“Every community has the power to transform futures.”

Ms Tiadema presented the Nurture 2000 program, a cross-sectoral national effort aimed at promoting holistic early childhood development. The programme engages more than 300 local committees in leading community dialogues, designing action plans and coordinating service delivery. By linking birth registration to immunisation and embedding care into education and health policy, Togo has improved access and equity across sectors. Services range from free school health insurance and parenting support to child protection and violence prevention.

- Community-based holistic childcare integrating health, education, nutrition and protection.
- Achievements include raising birth registration from 79% to 86% and integrating ECD into municipal plans.
- Implemented universal health access program including SchoolAssur and parental support policies.

Regional Models from ECSA-HC

Dr. Andrew Silumesii Manager, Family Health and Infectious Diseases, East Central and Southern Africa – Health Community (ECSA-HC)

“Coordination is a work in progress, but essential for comprehensive care.”

Dr Silumesii shared a regional lens on responsive caregiving and the collaborative Insaka model implemented in Zambia. These are community-run hubs offering integrated services including growth monitoring, early learning, maternal health, nutrition support and adult literacy. Ministries of Health, Education and Social Welfare each contribute to the model. Dr Silumesii acknowledged that while coordination is complex, it is vital for scaling responsive, people-centred systems.

- Introduced ECSA-HC Experts Committee on Responsive Caregiving for peer learning and accountability.
- Spotlighted Zambia’s ‘Insaka’ Community Hub: Features include growth monitoring, a stimulation room, ECD, playground and women’s village bank.
- Male involvement and strong community ownership promote sustainability.

Nutrition and IYCF in Africa

Ms. Lucy Murage Policy and Partnerships Expert, HHS, African Union Commission

“Nutrition in the first 1,000 days sets the lifelong trajectory for a child’s health.”

Ms Murage outlined persistent challenges in child nutrition across Africa – particularly on stunting, anaemia, low birth weight and exclusive breastfeeding. She emphasised that nutrition is a critical gateway to survival, development and equity, and must be integrated within broader childcare systems. Highlighting the importance of maternal nutrition and infant feeding during the first 1,000 days, she called for strengthened national nutrition strategies, regional scorecards and multisectoral investment frameworks.

- Malnutrition is the single biggest contributor to under-5 mortality in Africa.
- 44% exclusive breastfeeding rate in sub-Saharan Africa, below the 70% target.
- Stunting affects 32% of African children under five; anaemia prevalence in women is over 40%.
- Urged pre-pregnancy maternal nutrition, breastfeeding promotion, and micronutrient supplementation.

Strengthening Health Systems for Childcare

Ms. Rosemary Mwaisaka Technical Advisor – Health and Nutrition, Africa Early Childhood Network

“Without investment in workforce, governance and integration, we cannot deliver quality care.”

Ms Mwaisaka focused on the importance of robust health systems in delivering childcare. She argued that effective childcare cannot exist without well-functioning primary healthcare systems, trained service providers, and coordinated planning across sectors. She called for investment in integrated health information systems, inclusive health financing and a workforce trained to deliver services for both children and caregivers. Her remarks positioned healthcare as the operational core of holistic childcare systems.

- Strong health systems enable integrated childcare across health, education, nutrition, and family support.
- Emphasis on six building blocks: service delivery, health workforce, info systems, medicine access, financing, governance.
- Advocated for equity-driven policies, resilient infrastructure, and two-generation approaches.

Investing in Childcare for Informal Workers

Tracy Koske Childcare Coordinator WIEGO

“Childcare is not just a service – it’s a foundation for women’s empowerment.”

Ms Koske addressed the critical yet often invisible childcare needs of women working in the informal economy who make up 90% of the female workforce in sub-Saharan Africa. Without access to maternity protection, safe workplaces or formal childcare, these women and their children remain underserved. Koske advocated for public investment in community-based care systems that recognise both the economic and caregiving roles of informal workers. Worker-led childcare models were highlighted as promising innovations for inclusive development.

- 90% of women in sub-Saharan Africa are in informal work; 41% drop out of employment due to childcare duties.
- Informal care workers lack contracts, social protection and maternity rights.
- Called for worker-centric childcare models, not just employer-led solutions.
- Urged inclusive investment: financial, infrastructure, policy and social capital.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- Multisectoral coordination is essential for delivering integrated childcare services.
- Community ownership strengthens accountability, relevance and sustainability.
- Nutrition and health systems underpin early childhood wellbeing and development.
- Informal workers must be prioritised in childcare policies and investment strategies.
- Integrated data systems are key to tracking equity and guiding implementation.

Proposed Actions

- Develop childcare systems anchored in primary health care and maternal–child services.
- Invest in nutrition-sensitive policies during the first 1,000 days of life.
- Promote worker-led childcare models and informal sector inclusion in policy frameworks.
- Strengthen community-led structures and regional peer learning to support cross-sector implementation.
- Establish national coordination platforms to align childcare across health, education and social protection.

Closing Reflection

The session made clear that childcare cannot be siloed. From health and nutrition to social protection and labour, effective delivery depends on deliberate collaboration. Speakers demonstrated that where coordination is strong and communities are engaged, childcare systems become more resilient, equitable and scalable. Whether serving urban or rural populations, formal workers or informal vendors, the call was consistent: childcare must be treated as essential infrastructure across all sectors.

Session 7: Advocacy for Childcare – The Experience of National ECD Networks

Moderator: **Ms. Given Daka** Regional Coordinator – Southern Africa, AfCEN



This session explored how national ECD networks are advocating for childcare across the continent. Representatives from Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Uganda and Malawi shared insights on their structures, campaigns, partnerships and strategies for advancing childcare through policy reform, media engagement and grassroots mobilisation. The moderator, Ms. Daka, began by reminding the audience of the conference's focus on partnerships and accelerating action for childcare. She emphasized that while initiatives exist across Africa, progress is not moving at the scale or speed needed. Strong local engagement and advocacy through in-country actors, are key to improving coordination and alignment in the advocacy effort.

Kenya

Prof. Teresa Mwoma ECD Network for Kenya

“Using the media is a strong tool that gave us a lot of visibility.”

Professor Mwoma described the ECD Network for Kenya's three-pronged approach focused on advocacy, research and partnership. She highlighted a six-month childcare campaign launched and concluded with the participation of Kenya's Cabinet Secretary for Labour and Social Protection. The campaign engaged over 130 state and non-state actors and leveraged national and local media to promote universal access to quality childcare for children aged 0–5. Key outcomes included strengthened government engagement and the creation of a new State Department for Children's Services.

- The network focuses on advocacy, research, coordination and partnerships.
- Six-month childcare campaign culminated in a National Childcare Dialogue and led to greater visibility and government ownership.
- Media played a vital role in raising awareness and mobilizing support.

Tanzania

Ms. Mwajuma Rwebangila, Tanzania ECD Network

“We are shifting from awareness to action – childcare must be standardised, financed and delivered everywhere children live.”

Marking 25 years of advocacy, the Tanzania ECD Network coordinates over 150 members across all 26 regions. Ms Rwebangila outlined achievements including the development of training packages for caregivers and minimum standards for daycare centres. The network has also strengthened ECD data systems and trained 2,000 journalists on childcare, resulting in over 1,700 reports – 40% of which led to action. A national childcare campaign was launched in May, with expansion into Zanzibar planned.

- One of Africa's oldest ECD networks, operating for 25 years with 150+ members.
- Launched a childcare campaign informed by a landscape analysis and DHS findings.
- Supported training packages for caregivers and minimum standards for daycare registration.
- Trained 2,000 journalist champions; 1,700 media stories produced; 40% led to action.
- Hosted national forums and supported Zanzibar's upcoming childcare campaign.

Zambia

Ms. Edith N'goma ECD Action Network Zambia (ECDAN)

“A cared-for child is an asset for national development.”

Zambia's network emerged in response to fragmented efforts exposed during a 2017 symposium. Registration of ECDAN Zambia two years ago enabled formal operations and government recognition. A key success was a national dialogue attended by the First Deputy Speaker of Parliament, 50 MPs, traditional leaders and the Minister of Finance. The event catalysed stronger multi-stakeholder collaboration and elevated childcare as a development priority.

- The ECD Network was established following the 2017 ECD Lancet Series launch in Zambia, which exposed fragmented efforts in the sector.
- It became a formally registered network in 2022 to enhance visibility, advocate for increased resources, and strengthen coordination and supportive policies.
- It convened a high-level national childcare dialogue attended by 50 MPs, traditional leaders, policymakers (including the Ministry of Finance) and other stakeholders.
- ECDAN Zambia is now government-recognised and integrated into national Early Childhood Care and Education policy dialogue structures.

Uganda

Mr. Jimmy Obbo Interim Chair, National Early Childhood Network Uganda

“We believe in the power of play – it's how children learn, connect and thrive.”

Uganda's ECD network brings together faith-based groups, CSOs, academia and private providers under a shared coordination structure. Obbo highlighted their successful play-based learning campaign, implemented in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. The initiative culminated in national celebrations and government commitments to fast-track ECCE policy reforms. The network operates through five thematic clusters and champions evidence-based advocacy to influence national reforms.

- Formed from existing coalitions to unify advocacy and align mandates with sector needs.
- Built a 5-cluster structure: health/nutrition, education, child protection, parenting, research.

- Advocated for 'play as learning'; led a national campaign that influenced ECCE policy finalization.
- Network members conducted regional activations nationwide.
- Evidence-based advocacy has informed Uganda's childcare and ECCE policy reforms.

Malawi

Ms. Joylet Genda ECD Coalition of Malawi

"The power of the network lies in its membership."

Genda shared how Malawi's ECD Coalition leverages its diverse membership to advocate for improved services and equitable financing. Using national budget analysis, the coalition tracks allocations across sectors including health, nutrition and early learning. Implementation of childcare activities at the community level is driven by network members, including NGOs, students and professional volunteers. Advocacy efforts are anchored in Malawi's ECD policy and delivered through multisectoral collaboration.

- Multisectoral advocacy built on policy structure; engages ministries of health, education and local government.
- Conducts national budget analyses for child-focused sectors and advocates for increased allocation.
- Relies on network membership to deliver programmes at the grassroots level.
- Engages academic members in research to generate evidence for advocacy.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- National ECD networks are pivotal in coordinating childcare advocacy and influencing policy change.
- Strategic use of media and social behaviour change communication boosts visibility and public support.
- Multisectoral partnerships and engagement with ministries of finance, education and health are essential.
- Formal registration and recognition by government enhances legitimacy and operational reach.
- Evidence-based advocacy, including budget tracking and research, strengthens impact and accountability.

Proposed Actions

- Support formal registration and operational strengthening of national ECD networks.
- Invest in media engagement and social behaviour change communication for childcare.
- Facilitate network-led national dialogues and cross-sector policy forums.
- Use budget analysis and research to inform advocacy and guide resource allocation.
- Embed networks in national coordination structures to sustain influence and integration.

Closing Reflection

This session affirmed the unique and powerful role that national ECD networks play in advancing childcare agendas. Through collaboration, coordination and strategic advocacy, these networks are bridging policy and practice, amplifying community voices, and holding

governments accountable. Their work reveals that a cared-for child is indeed an asset to national development.

Session 8: Financing Childcare – Models and Systems

Moderator: **Mr. Austin Makani**



This high-level panel addressed the urgent need for sustainable and innovative financing for childcare systems across Africa. The session brought together experts from the World Bank, Kidogo, UNICEF, and the African Centre for Early Childhood Development to share strategies, data, and policy recommendations that could transform financing for childcare from a fragmented afterthought into a pillar of inclusive national development.

Financing Models of Childcare Systems in Africa

Ms. Frances Mary Beaton-Day Co-Team Lead for Invest in Childcare, World Bank

“The problem isn’t that childcare isn’t important, it’s that it’s everyone’s responsibility and no one’s budget line.”

Ms Beaton-Day outlined the persistent underfunding of childcare globally, with public investment in low- and middle-income countries often below 0.1% of GDP. She highlighted multi-source financing models – combining public funding, private sector contributions and demand-side subsidies – and shared examples from Colombia, Cabo Verde and Ghana. Key entry points for integrating childcare included urban development, nutrition programs, and entrepreneurship schemes. Ms Beaton-Day emphasised that while the private sector has a role, strong government engagement is critical to ensure quality and equity.

- Advocated for public financing to be the foundation of childcare system development, especially to support low-income families.
- Only 0.1% of GDP spent on childcare in some LMICs; compared to 0.8% in OECD countries.
- Public finance options: national/sub-national budgets, sector-specific taxes (e.g. Colombia’s fairness tax, Cabo Verde’s tourism tax).

- Emphasized leveraging existing sectoral programs (e.g. nutrition, urban planning) for childcare expansion ('win-win investments').
- Cautioned against market-led models that risk inequity and low quality; called for strong government policy and co-financing to regulate standards.

Financing Childcare: A Strategic Imperative for Inclusive Growth

Ms. Elaine Wacuka Hurt Director, Policy and Partnerships, Kidogo

"You can't lift women out of poverty if you leave their children behind."

Ms Wacuka delivered a passionate call to reframe childcare as core infrastructure, not a "side hustle" of development. She underscored its triple dividend: enabling women's workforce participation, boosting child development and driving economic growth. Ms Wacuka urged national and sub-national governments to embed childcare in budgets, adopt targeted financing mechanisms and partner with non-state actors. She called on stakeholders to harness the innovation and scale of social enterprise models and to shift from fragmented efforts to systemic inclusion.

- 1 in 3 children under 5 in Kenya lacks access to quality care; informal providers serve 80%+ of families in low-income areas.
- Advocated for public-private partnerships to support scalable, community-based solutions.
- Financing must be shared: government to embed childcare in core budgets; private sector to provide employer-supported models; philanthropists to support informal provider capacity.
- Emphasized integrating childcare in urban plans, social protection and economic development.

Mobilizing Public Finance for Children

Dr. Margaret Irving Public Finance Specialist, UNICEF ESARO

"We need to make investments less risky to unlock financing – and recognize that childcare has the highest return of any investment in childhood."

Dr Irving gave a virtual presentation that delivered sobering data on public finance for ECD in Africa. She reported that only 6.5% of child-related spending in Africa is allocated to children aged 0–5, compared to 28% in the G20. Visibility is a major challenge: ECD funding is scattered across sectors, rarely tracked, and often unspent. She proposed options including blended finance, improved tagging in budget systems, and better execution of existing allocations. Irving urged governments to make early childhood a visible budget priority with real allocations and measurable outcomes.

- Africa spends 16x more on older children than infants
- Average ECD spending in Africa is just 0.07% of GDP, far below the 2% needed for holistic services.
- COVID-19 stalled progress and reduced childcare investments.
- Blended financing (public, private, philanthropic) and social impact bonds can de-risk investments and expand access.
- Urged improved budget visibility and tracking mechanisms to enable targeted advocacy and investment.

Innovative and Sustainable Financing for Childcare

Dr. Meseret Zelalem Deputy CEO, African Centre for Early Childhood Development

“Without institutionalization and sustainable governance, innovation cannot endure.”

Dr Zelalem shared insights from the Addis ECD Program, highlighting how strong governance, legal institutionalisation and treasury-financed initiatives have enabled substantial and sustainable investment in childcare. She stressed that innovation must align with cost-effectiveness, child rights and measurable results. The program is led by the Addis Mayor's Office and has expanded across five regional states. Key success factors include high-level political buy-in, coordinated donor engagement and family-based service design targeting vulnerable groups.

- Lessons from Addis ECD program: government covers 70% of financing via treasury allocations.
- Multi-sectoral approach led by the city administration integrates education, health, protection and livelihoods.
- Emphasis on governance, M&E and documentation for learning and scaling.
- Investments are family-focused, prioritizing vulnerable groups and maternal-child wellbeing.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- Public funding for childcare in Africa remains significantly below global averages and is poorly tracked.
- There is an urgent need to reposition childcare as essential infrastructure deserving of integrated financing.
- Blended financing and PPPs offer opportunities to crowd in private investment while ensuring equity and quality.
- Community-based and informal providers must be formally recognised, supported and integrated into systems.
- Cross-sector integration across health, education, urban planning and social protection can enhance sustainability and reach.

Proposed Actions

- Encourage governments to request financing for childcare through World Bank and donor channels.
- Establish dedicated budget lines for ECD and improve transparency in public finance systems.
- Adopt innovative mechanisms including subsidies, PPPs and social impact bonds to diversify funding.
- Institutionalise ECD governance with clear mandates, policies and M&E frameworks.
- Promote localised, scalable models like Addis Ababa's ECD program as blueprints for other cities.

Closing Reflections

This session reframed childcare financing as a strategic imperative for Africa's inclusive growth. Speakers emphasised that underfunded and uncoordinated systems can no longer suffice. The call was clear: childcare must be embedded in national strategies, funded through blended channels, and delivered through accountable, equity-driven partnerships that recognise caregivers and children as foundational to development.

Parallel Sessions

Parallel Session 1: Men's Engagement in Childcare



This parallel session focused on how men across Africa are being meaningfully engaged in caregiving and childcare. The session was structured in two parts: (i) a series of presentations showcasing male engagement interventions by partner organisations, and (ii) a panel discussion with MenEngage-affiliated partners from Kenya, Tanzania and Rwanda. Together, these elements offered practical and policy-level insights into how gender norms are being challenged, and how male inclusion in parenting is being repositioned as vital to child development and gender equality.

Presentation Summaries

Rwanda – Bandebereho Program

Emmanuel Karamage, Rwanda Men's Resource Centre (RWAMREC)

"Fatherhood is our entry point – from there, we reshape gender norms and build equitable family relationships."

Mr Karamage presented lessons from scaling up Bandebereho, a gender-transformative program that engages fathers through Rwanda's health system. The program includes 17 structured weekly sessions that support both fathers and couples in maternal and child health, violence prevention, and responsive caregiving.

Impact and Learnings:

- Increased antenatal and postnatal participation by fathers.
- Improved household decision-making and gender-equitable practices.
- Reduction in intimate partner violence.
- High scalability due to integration with public health infrastructure.

Tanzania – Community-Based Gender Norm Shift

Ms. Mary-Ann Schreiner Gender Program Specialist ECD, UNICEF Tanzania

"When we empower men to parent, we don't just help children, we heal the community."

Ms Schreiner shared findings from a gender analysis of male involvement in Tanzania. Social norms, workplace stigma and limited policy support were cited as key barriers. She

emphasised the need for safe spaces, role models, and early engagement at the household and health system level to increase men's caregiving confidence.

Impact and Learnings:

- Identified practical barriers and enablers to male involvement.
- Recommendations informed UNICEF's program design and behaviour change strategies.
- Highlighted policy entry points for inclusive parenting interventions.

East Africa – Madrasa Program

Ms. Amina Mwit, Aga Khan Foundation

"We start from a place of strength – affirming what fathers already do, then building from there."

Ms Mwit presented insights from the Madrasa Early Childhood Program, where male engagement is embedded across parenting workshops, reading clubs and community dialogues. The initiative promotes peer-to-peer support, flexibility for working fathers and champions within faith and community structures.

Impact and Learnings:

- Shift in community perceptions around fatherhood roles.
- Strengthened bonds between fathers and children through play and reading activities.
- Faith leaders emerged as effective advocates for shared parenting.

Panel Discussion Highlights

The panel brought together regional representatives from Tanzania, Uganda and Rwanda, who explored the cultural, political and social drivers influencing male engagement in childcare.

Dr Lazarus Katanta Simwanza, Lead Manager for Violence Protection, SRH and

Safeguarding at Management and Development for Health (MDH) in Tanzania, described how entrenched gender norms, the absence of caregiving role models, and peer stigma continue to discourage men's participation in caregiving roles. He outlined how MDH is responding through policy advocacy, school-based interventions and nationwide campaigns such as Mimi Ni Mwanaume ("I am a man"), which challenge rigid views of masculinity and promote a more nurturing model of fatherhood.

Mr Joseph Nyende, Executive Director of the Foundation for Male Engagement Uganda (FOME), acknowledged the ongoing resistance to shifting gender roles in many communities. However, he shared how community-based interventions — including video screenings, storytelling and peer mentorship — are beginning to create space for reflection and change. He delivered a powerful reminder: *"Domestic work is not a threat to manhood – it's a responsibility."*

Mr Fidele Rutayisire, Executive Director of the Rwanda Men's Resource Centre

(RWAMREC), highlighted the importance of embedding male engagement within government policy frameworks. He noted that Rwanda has institutionalised this approach through its gender and early childhood development (ECD) policies. The government's commitment to fund and scale programs such as Bandedereho was cited as an example of political will in action. *"A nurturing father is one of the most underused assets in child development."*

Across the discussion, panellists agreed on the need for a multi-level approach — one that combines national policy integration with grassroots mobilisation, supportive messaging and intentional investment. Their reflections underscored that caregiving must be redefined as a shared responsibility, not a gendered expectation.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- Fatherhood as a catalyst: Engaging men during the transition to fatherhood creates lasting change in family dynamics.
- Community-led models: Local champions, especially those embedded in cultural and religious spaces, are critical to scale and sustainability.
- Policy integration: National strategies that include male engagement — particularly within gender and health frameworks — strengthen institutional support.
- Positive messaging matters: Successful programmes emphasise strengths and shared responsibility rather than blame.
- Barriers remain: Deep-seated cultural norms, peer pressure, and workplace discrimination continue to inhibit male participation in caregiving.

Proposed Actions

- Integrate male engagement into national childcare, gender and family policy frameworks.
- Support peer-led and community-based models tailored to both rural and urban fathers.
- Expand paternity leave to enable men's active involvement.
- Invest in public messaging that normalises and celebrates male caregiving.
- Build monitoring and evaluation systems that include father involvement indicators.

Closing Reflections

The session highlighted that male engagement is not an optional extra — it is essential to equitable childcare systems. Panellists called for increased investment, stronger policy integration and community-based approaches that challenge stereotypes while offering practical pathways for men to participate fully.

“When we empower men to parent, we don’t just help children — we heal families and communities.”

Parallel Session 2: Innovative Childcare Models



This session explored innovative, scalable and context-responsive childcare models in different African settings. It comprised four presentations showcasing program models and research evidence from Kenya, Ethiopia and Tanzania. The session aimed to distil both operational learnings and policy insights for scaling equitable, inclusive childcare models.

Presentation Summaries

Strengthening Childcare: Baby Minders and Parenting Support for Adolescent Mothers

Ms. Josephine Odhiambo ICS-SP, Kenya Ms Odhiambo shared insights from the Skillful Parenting program in Kakamega County, which supports adolescent mothers through baby minders and structured parenting education. Trained community health volunteers provide care using the Baby-Friendly Community Initiative framework. Government ownership has been embedded through MOUs and the involvement of social welfare officers. The parenting curriculum has now been adopted for national scale-up by Kenya's Department of Social Development.

Key Impact and Learnings

- Enabled adolescent mothers to continue school or vocational training.
- Strong government collaboration ensures sustainability and supervision.
- Community-based baby minders enhanced access and trust.

Mother-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs) towards Women Economic Empowerment and Early Childhood Development

Mr. Natan Tilahun, ChildFund International, Ethiopia. Mr. Tilahun presented findings from a model that links mother-led self-help groups (SHGs) to community childcare centres. The approach aims to improve women's income, social empowerment, and caregiving options. SHGs manage savings and credit activities that fund

the childcare centres, while also serving as platforms for peer support and ECD training. The model was implemented in partnership with local governments and adhered to national ECD quality standards.

Key Impact and Learnings:

- Improved women's employment and household food security.
- SHGs mobilised financial resources and local ownership.
- Gaps in child nutrition outcomes underline the need for integrated services.

What Works in Childcare for Low-Income Working Families

Mr. Tesfayesus Alemayehu, Mercy Corps LIWAY Program, Ethiopia. Mr. Alemayehu outlined the LIWAY programme's evaluation of three childcare delivery models for low-income working mothers in Addis Ababa: school-linked, TVET-based, and industry zone facilities. The study demonstrated how flexible, work-aligned childcare solutions can boost labour participation and economic security. The programme works with public and private partners to improve affordability, infrastructure, and caregiver capacity.

Key Impact and Learnings:

- Childcare improved workforce entry and job retention.
- Industry-linked models were especially effective for working parents.
- Emphasised the need for cost transparency and PPPs.

Designing a scalable and sustainable community-based daycare centre model in Tanzania: Insights from a Qualitative Study

Dr. Deman Yusuf, Researcher, Institute of Social Work, Tanzania. Dr Yusuf presented research from a study piloting community-based daycare centres in Tanzania. The model prioritises local caregiver training, participatory design, and integration with local government structures. The research reinforced that successful expansion requires consistent monitoring, flexible delivery options, and strong linkages across sectors.

Key Impact and Learnings:

- Community preference for home-based or village-led care models.
- Participatory approaches enhance sustainability.
- Need for better caregiver incentives and data systems.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- Scalable childcare must align with the realities of women's work and community structures.
- Government engagement, especially at decentralised levels, is critical for sustained impact.
- Mother-led groups and peer networks offer practical financing and delivery platforms.
- Flexibility of care models (e.g., workplace-aligned) improves uptake and effectiveness.
- Caregiver training and quality assurance remain a universal challenge across models.

Proposed Actions

- Integrate informal and home-based care providers into policy frameworks and quality systems.

- Strengthen cost-modelling tools for government and partners to assess scale-up feasibility.
- Promote peer-led childcare financing mechanisms such as savings groups.
- Foster PPPs and co-investment models for infrastructure and staffing.
- Include caregiver welfare and development in national childcare planning.

Closing Reflections

This session revealed that innovation in childcare is not defined by novelty, but by contextual fit, affordability and community ownership. Presenters demonstrated that mother-led, government-supported and work-aligned models can yield both social and economic benefits. Mr Rogers Golooba closed the session by encouraging a stronger focus on monitoring systems, cost-effectiveness and disability inclusion as necessary conditions for scale.

Parallel Session 3: Workforce for Childcare



This session focused on sharing implementation experiences and innovative approaches to childcare workforce development, featuring four presentations from Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda and Tanzania. A Q&A session followed, allowing comparative reflection on what it takes to build a dignified, skilled and scalable childcare workforce across African contexts.

Presentation Summaries

Action for Paid Childcare Sector Transformation: Towards a Dignified and Empowered Childcare Workforce

Ms. Ruth Muendo Project Director, Action for Paid Childcare Sector Transformation, World University Service of Canada

Ms Muendo presented the Action for Paid Childcare Sector Transformation (ACT) project, which aims to improve the working conditions, remuneration, and professional recognition of childcare providers. The project highlighted the vulnerabilities of a largely informal and feminised sector, marked by low pay, long hours, and limited safeguards. ACT worked with government and local actors to standardise training and embed safeguarding protocols, while advocating for policies that support gender-equitable, decent work in childcare.

Key Impact and Learnings:

- Strengthened collaboration across government, NGOs, and private sector.
- Highlighted the importance of standardised certification and safeguarding training.
- Advanced discourse on male engagement and decent work within childcare policy.

Empowering Informal Childcare Providers Through Community-Based Workforce Development – Nigeria

Ms. Pamela Akinboboye, Managing Director, Icarella Childcare Services and Chairperson, Nurturing Early Childhood Community Support Initiative, Nigeria

Ms Akinboboye shared the Nigerian experience of supporting informal childcare providers through community-based training and mentoring. Her initiative targets underserved urban areas with limited formal care, using a curriculum that blends child development with small enterprise skills. She stressed the value of continuous mentorship, awareness campaigns, and peer support networks in professionalising informal care delivery.

Key Impact and Learnings:

- Upskilled informal providers and increased access to quality childcare.
- Raised community awareness around early childhood needs.
- Offered a cost-effective model for grassroots caregiver development.

Workforce Development in Childcare: Policy Lessons from Uganda and Tanzania

Mr. Dweh Nyenmoh and **Ms. Scholastica Olomi** (BRAC Uganda and Tanzania) The BRAC team discussed their childcare microenterprise initiatives in Uganda and Tanzania, which equip young women to launch and sustain low-cost childcare centres. These models include business training, certification support, savings platforms, and ongoing coaching. The presenters highlighted the need for tailored regulation and financial inclusion to scale such home-grown efforts effectively.

Key Impact and Learnings:

- Enabled microentrepreneurship in early childhood care for young women.
- Identified regulatory barriers for small providers.
- Called for tiered standards to accommodate low-income contexts.

Child Caregiver Curriculum of the National Industrial Training Institute

Dr. Hellen Kimathi (ECD Specialist, Kenya) Dr Kimathi presented Kenya's national Caregiver Curriculum developed through the National Industrial Training Authority (NITA). This formalised curriculum fills a critical gap in professional training and standard setting for caregivers in both formal and informal settings. Dr Kimathi outlined the validation process, development of trainer guides, and the next steps toward nationwide rollout and piloting.

Key Impact and Learnings:

- Standardised training to enhance professionalism and quality assurance.
- Aligned training with national TVET frameworks.
- Created a replicable model for institutionalising caregiver development.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- Effective childcare workforce development must be embedded in national service delivery systems, not isolated pilot projects.
- Many young women are eager to enter the childcare workforce but face barriers including lack of certification and start-up capital.
- Community-based training and mentorship can professionalise informal childcare sectors cost-effectively.
- Standardisation efforts (e.g. Kenya's NITA curriculum) offer a model for other countries to follow.
- Policies must account for diversity in provision – with tiered regulations for low-income and informal settings.

Proposed Actions

- Support national efforts to develop and roll out standardised caregiver training curricula.
- Expand financing pathways, including microcredit and savings schemes, for childcare entrepreneurs.
- Create certification routes that are accessible, affordable and flexible.
- Include children with disabilities and vulnerable groups in caregiver training content.
- Invest in monitoring, documentation and evidence-building to support scale and sustainability.

Closing Reflections

The session reinforced that workforce development is central to building equitable, quality childcare systems. Panellists stressed the importance of local ownership, context-appropriate regulation, and public-private partnerships. Ms Given Daka closed by encouraging countries to accelerate action toward dignified, trained and recognised childcare professionals, framing this not only as a workforce issue but a foundational element of social protection and early childhood development.

“

***It is time to shift our perspective of childcare.
It is not a private burden it is a public good***”

-DR. LYNETTE OKENGO
Executive Director, African Early Childhood Network
(AfECN)



Parallel Session 4: Enabling Policy Environment



Moderator: Mr. David Baysah, UNICEF ESARO. This session explored how enabling policy environments can drive equitable access to childcare. Structured into four presentations, the session offered a mix of national case studies and network-led advocacy approaches. Presenters discussed legal frameworks, decentralised models, home-based care standards, and the power of ECD networks to influence national policy. Taken together, the session demonstrated that good policy design, when inclusive and context-specific, is a crucial foundation for scaling quality childcare.

Presentation Summaries

Unlocking Childcare to Benefit Women, Children, and the Broader Society

Ilifa Labantwana (South Africa)

Dr. Elizabeth Biney

Dr Biney presented an in-depth systems review of childcare in South Africa. She argued that despite strong public investment and legislative frameworks, the childcare system remains fragmented and inequitable – largely due to siloed implementation and a lack of integration between services and departments. She emphasised the gendered nature of both unpaid and paid care work and the need to design systems that recognise care as both a right and a lever for women's economic participation. South Africa's early childhood services are heavily market-driven, with most provision handled by underpaid women in informal settings. A recent ECD census helped map this system, highlighting urgent funding gaps and operational disparities.

Key Impact and Learnings:

- South Africa spends R24 per child per day in subsidies, but actual costs average R49, leaving many low-income families unable to access care.
- 1.15 million children (aged 3–5) are not attending any program.
- Women perform 6x more unpaid caregiving work than men.
- The system is structurally unequal, reflecting broader socio-economic and gendered inequalities.

- Policy is strong, but coordination and implementation remain weak.
- A holistic systems approach is required – integrating childcare, nutrition, health, social protection and parental leave policies.

Designing Contextually Relevant Minimum Quality Guidelines for Home- Based Childcare

Mr. Martin Kiyeng (Kidogo) & Ms. Cindy Lithimbi (NurtureFirst), Kenya

This presentation outlined a co-creation process in Mombasa County to develop minimum quality guidelines for home-based childcare (HBCC) settings. The presenter stressed the importance of adapting tools to local realities rather than imposing standards designed for centre-based care. The process included mapping 234 providers serving over 900 children, most operating informally without training or government oversight. A multi-stakeholder approach led to the development of a practical, context-specific draft guideline – later incorporated into county-level legislation.

Key Impact and Learnings:

- Developed 53 context-specific quality indicators, down from 180, through stakeholder consultation.
- Introduced a sixth domain into the Nurturing Care Framework: caregiver livelihood.
- Clarified registration vs licensing – creating pathways for informal providers to enter formal systems.
- Embedded HBCC guidelines into the Mombasa Child Care Facilities Bill and regulatory frameworks.
- Created space norms and child-to-caregiver ratios suitable for informal urban settings.
- Emphasised importance of ongoing supportive supervision.

Designing and Scaling Innovative Childcare Models in Vulnerable Contexts: Strategies for sustainable early childcare in low-resource East African settings

Ms. Minha Khan – Global Schools Forum (East Africa) Ms. Khan shared findings from the Global Schools Forum's research on childcare provision in fragile and low-resource contexts, including Kenya, Uganda and Sierra Leone. She highlighted the tension between the need for greater childcare access and the limited capacity of informal providers. Her presentation focused on how to balance quality, scalability and affordability. The research identified barriers such as insufficient regulation, under-investment, and lack of coordination. Ms Khan called for hybrid models that blend informal care settings with structured support, including training, parent engagement and government collaboration. She emphasised that flexible, locally embedded solutions are critical for systems resilience.

Key Impact and Learnings:

- Highlighted the need to support informal providers with structured, scalable tools.
- Promoted hybrid childcare models for adaptability in fragile contexts.
- Identified gaps in funding and regulation as barriers to quality and reach.
- Emphasised partnerships between governments, NGOs and local communities.

Universal Access to Quality Childcare and Child Protection Services for Children 0–5 Years

Prof. Teresa Mwoma –ECD Network of Kenya

Prof Mwoma provided a network-based view of policy advocacy in Kenya. She described how the ECD Network of Kenya drives awareness and action through campaigns, media engagement, webinars, and national dialogues. The six-month national childcare campaign launched with government support and built public momentum for improved access to affordable and quality childcare.

Key Impact and Learnings:

- Childcare campaign launched with government and media backing.
- Developed social behaviour change messages targeting caregivers, teachers and policymakers.
- Documented diverse childcare contexts: rural, urban, inclusive, and for children accompanying incarcerated women.
- Advocacy influenced Kenya's new Child Care Facilities Bill and ECD workforce professionalisation efforts.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- Fragmentation vs Integration: Even where policies exist, siloed implementation undermines effective delivery.
- Public Funding Is Not Enough: South Africa, despite high investment, cannot cover costs of quality care for all.
- Localised Approaches Work: Kenya's county-led efforts show how decentralisation can spur innovation.
- Recognition of Care as Infrastructure: Childcare must be seen as both a social good and economic infrastructure.
- Network Power: National ECD networks play a pivotal role in galvanising action and influencing policy.

Proposed Actions

- Adopt a systems approach integrating childcare with health, education, nutrition, and protection.
- Close funding gaps through increased national budgets and sustainable models.
- Formalise informal care providers using registration pathways and context-specific regulation.
- Strengthen national coordination and harmonise standards across counties and sectors.
- Invest in data and monitoring to support targeted interventions.
- Empower networks to amplify evidence and drive accountability.

Closing Reflections

This session underscored that policy is only as powerful as its implementation. While several countries have made significant strides in drafting legislation and allocating public funds for childcare, fragmentation, weak coordination and limited localisation continue to constrain impact. Presenters demonstrated that inclusive, consultative approaches — particularly those involving informal providers, caregivers and local authorities — lead to more grounded and scalable policy frameworks. Mr David Baysah closed the session by reaffirming the need for integrated systems thinking, especially in fragile and low-resource settings. He called on

governments and partners to align legal, financial and programmatic tools to ensure that childcare is recognised not only as a child development imperative but as a foundational enabler of women's empowerment, equity and social protection.

Parallel Session 5: Global Childcare Advocacy



Moderator: Ms. Mwajuma Rwebangila, Executive Director, Tanzania ECD Network

This parallel session brought together four Global Leaders from UNICEF, Aga Khan University, the Ministry of Health Zambia and REPSSI Mozambique to share innovative projects undertaken under the World Forum Foundation's Global Leaders for Young Children programme. The session was structured in two parts: (i) four presentations on childcare innovations led by emerging African leaders; and (ii) a rich interactive discussion exploring the integration of responsive caregiving, literacy, play and community engagement into ECD systems. A recurring theme was the importance of investing in both caregivers and community structures to embed sustainable change.

Presentation Summaries

Strengthening Institutional Child Caregivers' Capacity

Ms. Alinune Nsemwa (UNICEF Tanzania) Ms Nsemwa focused on building the skills of institutional childcare workers in Tanzania, especially those with minimal formal education. Her project trained caregivers in two centres to deliver integrated nurturing care – encompassing not only nutrition and education but also emotional and social development. Her work prompted the development of a national training package, now being adopted by the Tanzanian government.

Key Impact and Learnings:

- Institutional caregivers often lack formal training yet are responsible for holistic child development.
- Skill-building improves caregiving quality and systemic accountability.
- The project catalysed government efforts to scale caregiver training nationally.

Responsive Caregiving for Nurturing a Reading Culture

Ms. Beatrice Karimi (Aga Khan University, Kenya)

Ms Karimi explored how responsive caregiving can build a foundation for early literacy. Her project focused on children aged 0–3 and demonstrated how interaction with books, even before formal reading skills develop, builds language acquisition and stimulates cognitive growth. She contextualised this within Africa's storytelling traditions and emphasised the role of parents as first educators.

Key Impact and Learnings:

- Responsive caregiving promotes early literacy and bonding.
- Storytelling traditions can be modernised to support reading culture.
- Community mobilisation, including religious leaders, increased parent participation.

Promoting Responsive Caregiving for Holistic Child Development

Ms. Judite Mutemba (REPSSI, Mozambique) Speaking through translation, Ms Mutemba described how her project addressed gaps in holistic child development through male engagement and community inclusion. A formative behavioural study informed parent education sessions and hands-on activities like toy-making from local materials. Key to success was the visible placement of toys to prompt daily interaction and play.

Key Impact and Learnings:

- Parents often lack awareness and support to provide holistic care.
- Behavioural nudges – like toy placement – can increase engagement.
- Community leaders and radio advocacy amplified the project's impact.

Community-Based ECD Advocacy Through Play

Ms. Elina Chiumya (Ministry of Health, Zambia) Ms Chiumya addressed underutilised ECD centres by embedding play and communication as essential pillars of nurturing care. Her project engaged 100 caregivers and focused on community ownership to ensure sustainability. Traditional leaders, mothers, and peer mentors were mobilised to integrate play into daily routines – from feeding to bathing.

Key Impact and Learnings:

- Play is critical to early brain development yet often neglected.
- Community ownership ensures sustainability beyond project cycles.
- Peer learning models build a continuous cycle of parent engagement.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- **Caregivers as Cornerstones:** Supporting both their skills and wellbeing is central to systemic improvement.
- **Literacy Starts at Home:** Early literacy is rooted in home interactions, not formal schooling.
- **Play as Advocacy:** Positioning play as a developmental tool reframes its role from luxury to necessity.
- **Male Engagement:** Inclusion of fathers requires behavioural insights, accessible tools, and consistent messaging.
- **Faith-Based Inclusion:** Religious leaders and institutions can be powerful advocates and service providers.
- **Community Ownership:** Sustainability hinges on local leadership and peer-based interventions.

Proposed Actions

- Develop and rollout training curricula for institutional and informal caregivers.
- Mobilise faith-based and community leaders to champion childcare reforms.
- Embed early literacy promotion into ECD and parenting programmes.
- Support the development of locally relevant storybooks in African languages.
- Expand community-based play advocacy using peer learning models.
- Integrate moral and spiritual development into nurturing care frameworks.

Closing Reflections

This session underscored the creative energy and strategic insight that community-rooted leaders bring to childcare advocacy. Presenters demonstrated how small-scale, context-specific innovations – from peer learning to toy visibility – can shape broader systems when supported with evidence and community mobilisation. Ms Mwajuma Rwebangila closed the session by reflecting on the urgency of embedding advocacy into everyday practice. 'Care is not a project,' she noted, 'it is a value system – and we must continue to build institutions that reflect that.'



Day Three: Evidence, Accountability, Financing, and Partnerships

Opening Remarks

Austin Makani, Master of Ceremonies, warmly welcomed delegates to the third and final day of the 2025 Africa Childcare Conference. He then handed over to Janet Muthoni Ouko for a comprehensive analysis of the key outcomes from the main sessions of Day Two, covering policy reform, multisectoral collaboration, advocacy and financing which served as a springboard for Day Three's deeper strategic sessions.

Analysis of Day Two

1. Policy Reform and Caregiving Support

- Harmonize national childcare policies across ministries and sectors.
- Legally recognize caregivers in laws and employment policies.
- Advocate for care-sensitive social protection systems, including expanded paternity leave.

"We must re-energise conversations around caregiving and reform rooted in equity and recognition."

2. Multisectoral Collaboration

- Siloed sector mandates continue to fail caregivers and children.
- Integrated approaches remain rare despite recognition of childcare's cross-cutting nature.
- Proposals include national and sub-national childcare coordination mechanisms and joint planning frameworks.

"We must bring planners, economists, and budget owners into the room or childcare won't feature in national strategies."

3. Advocacy and Visibility of Childcare

- Childcare remains low on political and financing agendas.
- Countries face fiscal constraints and debt distress, making direct asks for funding sensitive.
- Proposals: AU and RECs to institutionalise care in their advocacy agendas; build evidence and visibility targeting political and fiscal decision-makers.

"Childcare lacks visibility – until we build a strong evidence base, we will not gain traction with decision-makers."

4. Financing Childcare

- Still the weakest link in system development.
- Governments' roles remain unclear, with donor, employer and community co-financing filling the gap.
- Recommendations: Dedicated childcare budget lines, public financing as the foundation, and national expenditure tracking especially for ages 0–3.

"We must make a case for public investment—with complementary roles for private and development partners."

Session 9: Research & MEL of Childcare in Africa

Moderator: **Ms. Lilies Njanga** Program Officer, Global Early Childhood Development, CNHF



This session explored the role of evidence, data, and learning in advancing childcare policy and practice across Africa. Three leading researchers shared insights from pan-African monitoring frameworks, innovative research studies, and caregiver-focused metrics. The discussion underlined the importance of locally driven, data-informed approaches that are rooted in African realities. A central thread across all contributions was the call to move from knowledge to action – using evidence not only for analysis, but to shape policy, funding and service design.

Monitoring Child Development: The African Report on Child Wellbeing

Dr. Shimelis Tsegaye Tesemma, Director of Programs, African Child Policy Forum (ACPF)

"Monitoring tools must be contextual, constructive and based on government data to drive engagement and policy reform."

Dr Tesemma introduced the African Report on Child Wellbeing, a triennial rights-monitoring tool used across the continent. The report includes two indices – the Child Friendliness Index and the Girl Friendliness Index – which track countries' progress against 42 indicators. He stressed the value of contextualised monitoring rooted in African perspectives, noting that 'constructive engagement' is more effective than adversarial reporting. These tools aim to balance critique with a constructive tone, encouraging uptake by governments. By triangulating government and non-government data, the report enhances credibility and relevance while enabling self-assessment, policy dialogue, and regional benchmarking. Over time, performance monitoring has helped promote both accountability and improvement.

From Evidence to Policy to Practice

Dr. Patricia Kitsao-Wekulo Research Scientist African Population & Health Research Centre (APHRC)

"Caregivers preferred warmth and responsiveness over physical quality. Emotionally nurturing environments matter."

Dr Kitsao-Wekulo's presentation focused on improving childcare quality in disadvantaged communities. Drawing from research in Kenya and India, she highlighted significant gaps in caregiver training, infrastructure, and regulation, especially in informal settlements. Her studies found that 'caregiver warmth' was a decisive factor influencing parental decisions, often outweighing physical infrastructure. She described community of practice models that enabled informal providers to support each other through mentorship and shared learning. I

In Kajiado County, a collaborative process led to the development of a county-level childcare framework, demonstrating how locally grounded evidence can influence operational and legal frameworks. She concluded by calling for stronger public investment in childcare and continued support for peer learning structures.

From Numbers to Nurture: Tracking Child Development & Caregiver Wellbeing

Dr. Sara Naicker Senior Research Specialist Centre for Science in Society Human Sciences Research Council

“Data has transformative potential – it must be used for planning, policy, advocacy, and accountability.”

In her virtual presentation, Dr Naicker emphasised the transformative potential of data for shaping both child development and caregiver wellbeing. She presented findings from regional benchmarks such as the AfECN/UNICEF ECD Country Profiles and drew attention to critical gaps in national data systems. Only 16% of low- and middle-income countries, she noted, collect data on child functioning. Caregiver mental health – a key predictor of positive child outcomes – is also frequently overlooked. Her presentation highlighted examples from South

Africa, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda where targeted data collection has supported programme scale-up and policy adoption. She called for culturally relevant indicators, early detection tools, and better integration of maternal mental health into routine monitoring systems.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- Context matters – African-led research must reflect regional realities and values.
- Monitoring should be a tool for improvement, not just evaluation.
- Child development and caregiver wellbeing must be tracked in parallel.
- Policy frameworks must be informed by data from both formal and informal settings.
- Evidence must be used to shape resource allocation, programme design and advocacy.

Proposed Actions

- Support country-led data systems for ECD monitoring and evaluation.
- Promote caregiver mental health tracking as part of routine ECD services.
- Expand training and support for informal childcare providers.
- Integrate peer learning and mentorship into quality improvement efforts.
- Leverage local evidence to advocate for public investment in childcare.

Closing Reflections

The session concluded with a collective call to move beyond data collection towards meaningful action. Speakers reiterated that evidence must be used to transform policy, funding and frontline practice. A nurturing care environment depends not just on numbers – but on how we interpret, communicate and act on them. As one participant noted, 'Care is not just a right, it is a responsibility – and we must be accountable for it at every level.'

Session 10: Role of Regional Communities in Advancing Childcare in Africa

Moderated by: **Ms. Rosemary Mwaisaka** Technical Advisor, AfECN



This session explored the role of regional communities in advancing childcare across Africa. It followed an earlier discussion on partnerships led by civil society and focused on how regional intergovernmental organisations are positioning childcare in policy frameworks, coordination platforms and implementation strategies. Panelists from the East African Community (EAC), East Central and Southern Africa Health Community (ECSA-HC), the Child Rights Network for Southern Africa (CRNSA) and the West African Health Organisation (WAHO) provided insights from their respective blocs.

East African Community (EAC)

Mr. Morris Tayebwa

"We must shift childcare from a private burden to a public good... and build the systems that support that shift."

Mr Tayebwa outlined how the EAC, comprising eight partner states, has embedded childcare within its regional frameworks, treating it as both a social and economic imperative. He detailed the EAC Child Policy (2016), and the Minimum Standards on Comprehensive Services (2018), which guide member states in harmonising laws, child protection systems, and service delivery. EAC's approach includes multi-stakeholder partnerships, integration of services across sectors and evaluation mechanisms to ensure impact and accountability. He highlighted EAC's collaboration with ILO on recognising domestic care workers, and the framing of childcare as economic infrastructure essential for women's empowerment, labour participation, and national productivity.

East, Central and Southern Africa Health Community (ECSA-HC)

Dr. Andrew Silumesii

"There can be no better revelation of society's soul than the way it treats its children." Nelson Mandela

Dr Silumesii described the ECSA-HC as a health-focused intergovernmental body with nine member states, offering unique opportunities for high-level health advocacy. He noted that ECSA's governance structure, which brings together ministers of health, allows childcare and ECD to be integrated into regional health strategies. Key contributions include: development of childcare-related resolutions; tracking implementation progress; supporting standards and guideline development; facilitating peer learning through an Experts Committee on Responsive Caregiving and hosting regional best practice forums. ECSA is also exploring capacity building through its College of Paediatrics and Child Health, and expanding its role in promoting integrated, high-impact child health interventions.

Child Rights Network for Southern Africa (CRNSA)

Ms. Felistus Motimedi

"There is credibility in numbers. When we speak as one, we are powerful and impactful."

Ms Motimedi highlighted the demographic opportunity in Southern Africa, where children and youth represent the majority population. Despite this, the SADC Treaty and existing protocols do not fully address child rights. CRNSA, with over 2,500 member organisations, is advocating for a regional legislative framework on child rights, including childcare and ECD. She identified structural challenges, including fragmented ministerial mandates and weak coordination, which limit regional coherence on child issues. CRNSA is lobbying for a unified child governance structure, improved reporting to human rights mechanisms, and policy harmonisation across SADC. She stressed the importance of partnerships, shared advocacy and amplifying collective voice for lasting impact.

West African Health Organisation (WAHO)

Dr. Yves Mongbo

"We must find our Bill Gates in West Africa – our own champions to fund and drive childcare investment."

In his virtual presentation, Dr Mongbo described WAHO's mandate to support the 15 ECOWAS member states in improving maternal and child health outcomes. He outlined their strategic plan for 2026–2030, which focuses on reducing maternal and child mortality through high-impact interventions. WAHO's work includes policy harmonisation, regional best practice forums, cross-country learning and multi-sectoral collaboration. They are integrating child health and ECD into their health frameworks, aligning with AU and WHO agendas and strengthening implementation through resource mobilisation and coordination. He emphasised that despite funding constraints, community and partner contributions remain vital, and called for better use of regional assets such as extractive industries to fund health and childcare development.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- Childcare must be framed as both a public good and an economic investment at regional level.
- Regional organisations play a critical role in harmonising laws, standards, and policy frameworks.
- Cross-border and inter-sectoral collaboration is essential for addressing systemic gaps and sustaining progress.
- Regional platforms such as ministers' councils and health forums are powerful avenues for high-level advocacy.
- Caregiver support, workforce recognition, and community-based childcare models are gaining traction.

Proposed Actions

- Develop and adopt regional legislative frameworks on children's rights and childcare (e.g. within SADC and ECOWAS).
- Enhance integration of childcare into health and social protection strategies at regional and national levels.

- Strengthen monitoring systems and reporting mechanisms to track childcare outcomes.
- Facilitate peer learning, best practice exchanges and regional capacity building on childcare.
- Increase domestic financing and leverage private sector support to sustain childcare services.

Closing Reflections

The session concluded with a shared commitment to translating regional mandates into grassroots realities. Panelists urged stronger linkage between regional and community levels, emphasising that childcare policy must be accessible and actionable for families and service providers. The panel agreed that building and sustaining partnerships, from AU to communities, is the surest way to accelerate inclusive, quality childcare across Africa.

Session 11: Childcare in Crisis – Humanitarian Settings, Climate Change, and Refugee Realities

The final session of the 2025 Africa Childcare Conference brought into sharp focus the profound vulnerability of children in humanitarian and climate-affected contexts. Held on World Refugee Day, the session was opened with a solemn reminder of the scale of displacement across Africa and the urgency to embed childcare within humanitarian planning. The session featured a statement from Prof. Julio Rakotonirina, Director for Health and Humanitarian Affairs at the African Union Commission, and a panel discussion moderated by Ms. Chantal Mutamoriza, Senior Humanitarian and Educational Advocacy Advisor at Save the Children. The session highlighted evidence, policy gaps and programmatic responses to the childcare crisis in displacement and climate-affected zones.

World Refugee Day Commemoration



"Solidarity means more than shelter – it means justice, opportunity and dignity."

The session opened with a solemn address by Prof. Julio Rakotonirina who delivered the African Union Commission's formal message in honour of World Refugee Day, affirming the AU's solidarity with over 13 million refugees and displaced persons across Africa. He commended member states and communities who continue to uphold the rights of displaced people despite economic, political and environmental pressures. The AU renewed its call for intensified partnership and resourcing, particularly the rapid operationalisation of the African Humanitarian Agency, and affirmed its commitment to Agenda 2063 in ensuring no refugee is left behind.

Following this address, delegates stood for a moment of silence in honour of displaced persons who have lost their lives fleeing conflict and persecution.

Panel Session: Childcare in Crisis

Moderator: **Ms. Chantal Mutamuriza** Senior Humanitarian & Education Advocacy Adviser, Save the Children International



Presentations

Children in Humanitarian Crises

Ms. Mildred Linet Nafula Ouma Senior Legal Officer, HHS, AUC

"We must plan for emergencies before they happen – children cannot wait for care, even in crisis."

Ms. Ouma outlined the scale of displacement, with 60% of Africa's 48 million forcibly displaced persons being children. She detailed the multiple layers of vulnerability that refugee children face including separation from families and loss of caregivers to exposure to violence, hunger and the breakdown of social protections. She shared AU responses which include: promoting early planning for child protection in crises; supporting registration and inclusion of displaced children in national systems; operationalising the Statelessness Protocol to safeguard nationality rights; and collaborating with partners to build child-sensitive humanitarian responses.

Positioning Childcare in a Two-Generation Approach

Mr. Godfrey Mwesigye Policy and Advocacy Manager, Kulea Watoto, IRC

"Investing in both child and caregiver yields long-term social and economic dividends."

Mr. Mwesigye presented on Kulea Watoto, a three-year program supporting over 6,500 households in Uganda's refugee-hosting districts. The model provides early childhood care, home learning centres, and livelihood support for caregivers. Home learning centres became safe spaces for children and encouraged community-based care. The 'household visioning'

approach empowered families to prioritise ECCD goals. Mr. Mwesigye stressed that refugee contexts demand more time and flexibility due to instability and funding gaps.

Climate Change and Childcare

Dr. Rongedzayi Fambasayi Technical Advisor – Climate Action, AfECN

"Childcare cannot continue to fall through the cracks—climate action must include young children."

Dr. Fambasayi's powerful presentation revealed how climate change is already disrupting child development across Africa. Cyclones, droughts and floods have displaced millions of children and destroyed schools, particularly in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Madagascar and Malawi. Fragmented governance and exclusion of childcare from climate policy leave major protection gaps. A continental landscape study by AfECN found little coordination between climate, education and child rights frameworks. He called for harmonisation of climate and childcare laws, climate literacy at pre-primary level, investment in climate-resilient ECCD infrastructure and integration of childcare in climate summits and declarations.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- Refugee children are the majority among Africa's displaced populations and face acute risks.
- Two-generation models offer scalable, integrated solutions for refugee-hosting communities.
- Climate change is a cross-cutting threat, demanding integrated responses across environment, education and ECD sectors.
- Fragmented governance and underfunded childcare systems leave children at risk in crisis settings.

Proposed Actions

- Finalise and implement national childcare policies, especially in refugee contexts.
- Integrate child protection and childcare into national disaster preparedness and planning.
- Promote child-centred planning and budget allocation in climate and humanitarian response frameworks. Strengthen data systems to better track the intersection of climate impact and child wellbeing.
- Position childcare and ECD on the agenda of the upcoming AU Climate Summit in Addis Ababa.

Closing Reflections

This final session of the conference closed with a powerful call to action: childcare cannot be an afterthought in emergency response or long-term development planning. As refugee numbers rise and climate shocks intensify, children are increasingly pushed to the margins of care and protection systems. The panel reinforced that childcare must be positioned as a foundational right – and a critical building block for resilience, stability and human development. Delegates were reminded that sustained investment in both caregivers and early learning is essential, not only in times of peace and prosperity, but especially in contexts of fragility. Moving forward, the integration of childcare in humanitarian frameworks and climate policy must be non-negotiable. African-led innovations and partnerships, grounded in solidarity and dignity, will be essential in rebuilding a stronger, more inclusive future for Africa's children after crises such as displacement and climate shocks.

Captured Moments: A Visual Journey



As the conference drew to a close, **Mr. Robert Dersley** invited participants to reflect on their experience through a unique medium a live illustrated visual narrative capturing key moments and themes from the past three days. In a brief address, he shared how his illustrations had been shaped by the voices, energy and insights of the delegates, bringing to life the spirit of dialogue and collaboration. His work provided not only a creative record of the proceedings, but also a powerful tool for engagement, helping participants revisit and internalise the messages shared. He invited delegates to walk through the display, ask questions and take photographs, turning the visual summary into a collective celebration of the journey they had all taken together.

Closing Ceremony

Call to Action: Building Strong Partnerships for Inclusive Childcare in Africa

Hon. Fatou Kinteh Minister of Gender, Children and Social Welfare, The Gambia

"Childcare is not a privilege. It is a right. It is also the foundation of any healthy, productive society."

The Africa Childcare Conference concluded with the formal adoption of a comprehensive Call to Action, delivered by Hon. Fatou Kinteh, Minister of Gender, Children and Social Welfare of The Gambia. Speaking on behalf of a collective gathering of ministers, civil society actors, development partners and technical experts, she underscored the shared continental responsibility to make accessible, affordable and quality childcare a reality for every child. The Call to Action, deeply rooted in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2040, highlighted the transformative potential of childcare in

advancing gender equality, promoting early childhood development, and enabling women's economic empowerment across Africa.

The Call urged African Union Member States to enact supportive national policies and commit domestic budget lines to scale up childcare, particularly for informal workers and rural communities. It called for inter-ministerial coordination across sectors such as education, health, labour, gender and finance. The importance of investing in community-based models, family-friendly workplace solutions and formal training for caregivers was emphasised, alongside the need for establishing national standards to professionalise the workforce and ensure dignified working conditions. Better data systems, universal birth registration and investment in locally generated evidence were also cited as critical enablers of progress.

The African Union Commission, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and the African Committee of Experts were urged to mainstream childcare in continental policy frameworks, endorse male engagement, and elevate childcare in upcoming AU meetings. The call further recommended the institutionalisation of a biennial AU Childcare Conference and the establishment of a continental knowledge hub. A significant proposal by the Republic of Uganda (**Hon. Balaam Barugahara Ateenyi** Minister of State for Youth and Children Affairs) supported by several delegations was the endorsement of childcare and early childhood development as the African Union Theme of the Year for 2027. Development partners and civil society were called upon to align their efforts with continental priorities, facilitate south–south learning and support governments in implementing national frameworks with strong accountability mechanisms. In closing, the Call to Action reaffirmed that childcare is not a peripheral issue but a powerful investment in Africa's human capital – central to realising the full rights and potential of every child.

Closing Remarks: A Continent United for its Children

In the final address of the conference Prof. Julio Rakotonirina began by thanking all delegates, with special recognition of the ministers, for their passionate and unwavering commitment to the cause of childcare. Prof. Rakotonirina affirmed that the values and aspirations expressed during the conference were fully aligned with the African Union's long-term vision under Agenda 2063 and its child-focused commitments in Agenda 2040. He praised the level of political will shown by member states, noting that it had elevated childcare from a social service issue to a matter of economic justice and sustainable development.

Prof. Rakotonirina reflected on the themes that had emerged over the three days: the importance of partnerships, the urgency of political leadership and the need for sustainable financing. He acknowledged the persistent challenges related to funding and called on all actors – national governments, development partners, private sector stakeholders and communities – to share responsibility in ensuring access to care for every child. The inclusion of displaced children and those living in crisis-affected contexts was underscored, particularly in light of World Refugee Day, which coincided with the closing day of the conference.

In conclusion, Prof. Rakotonirina endorsed Uganda's proposal to designate Childcare and Early Childhood Development as the African Union Theme of the Year for 2027, noting that such a move would provide strong political momentum and continental visibility. In his closing sentiments, Prof. Rakotonirina reminded participants that building inclusive childcare systems

“No child must be left behind. Every child must thrive. That is our duty, and that is our future.”

Prof. Julio Rakotonirina,
Director for Health and Humanitarian Affairs, AUC

is a moral and developmental imperative – one that Africa must embrace with urgency, unity and ambition.

Field Visit

After lunch, delegates were invited to participate in a field trip which provided an opportunity to observe local childcare practices in action and conclude the conference with real-world insights. The Office of the Mayor of Addis Ababa led delegates to places of regeneration in the city, which included children's playgrounds and memorial sites then finished up at the Museum of Adwa.³

A Monument to African Resistance and Self-Determination

The Museum commemorates the Battle of Adwa (1896), where Ethiopian forces triumphed over colonial invasion, becoming a global symbol of African resistance, unity, and sovereignty. This spirit of self-determination mirrors the current movement to reclaim childcare as a public good, a right, and a foundation for development across Africa, rather than a private, marginal concern. *“Just as Adwa symbolised defiance against domination, so must our childcare systems resist marginalisation and neglect.”*

The Museum of Adwa is not only a symbolic backdrop but a living metaphor for the fight for equity in childcare. It powerfully links the past to the future, making it an ideal site to reflect on the moral, political, and developmental imperative of investing in Africa's youngest citizens. It affirms that caring for children is both a resistance strategy and a blueprint for liberation.



³ Watch a brief report on the tour [here](#).

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS FOR
ACCELERATING ACTION...

...TOWARDS QUALITY AND
INCLUSIVE CHILDCARE IN
AFRICA



Supported by:



Designed by:
Derrick Oduck Ochuot,
Strategic Communication Expert, AUC

AFRICA CONFERENCE ON CHILDCARE

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS FOR ACCELERATING ACTION
TOWARDS QUALITY AND INCLUSIVE CHILDCARE IN AFRICA

REPORT

AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION HEADQUARTERS

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
18 – 20 June 2025