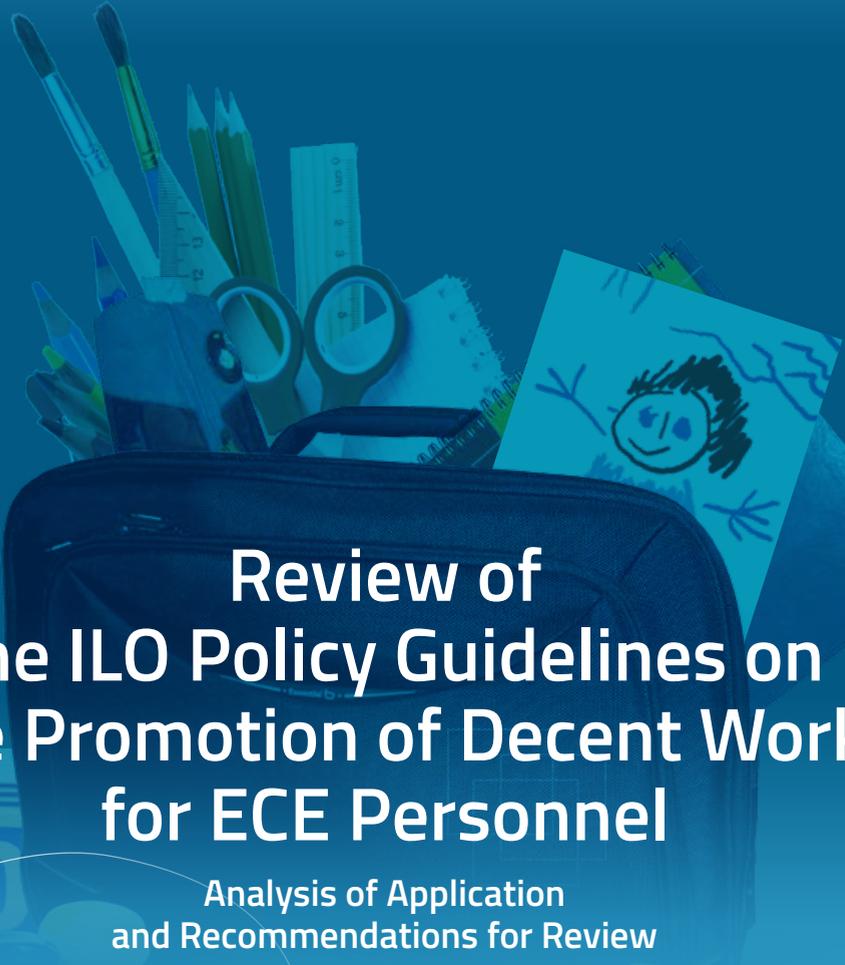


Meeting of Experts on
Policy Guidelines
on the Promotion of Decent Work
for Early Childhood
Education Personnel

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Review of the ILO Policy Guidelines on the Promotion of Decent Work for ECE Personnel

Analysis of Application
and Recommendations for Review

Colette Byrne, Mercedes Mayol Lassalle,
Carolina Semmoloni, Mathias Urban

March 2024



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About Education International:

Education International represents organisations of teachers and other education employees across the globe. It is the world's largest federation of unions and associations, representing thirty million education employees in about four hundred organisations in one hundred and seventy countries and territories, across the globe. Education International unites teachers and education employees.

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List of acronyms

ECE	<i>Early Childhood Education</i>
ECCE	<i>Early Childhood Care and Education</i>
ECP	<i>Early Childhood Personnel</i>
EU	<i>European Union</i>
ILO	<i>International Labour Organization</i>
OMEP	<i>World Organisation for Early Childhood Education</i>
SDG	<i>Sustainable Development Goals</i>
TES	<i>Transforming Education Summit</i>
UNESCO	<i>United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization</i>
UN	<i>United Nations</i>
WCCECE	<i>World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education</i>

Key Concepts and Terms

Early Childhood Education (ECE) refers to childhood programs and care needs for children from birth to 8 years of age that have an intentional education component (UNESCO, 2022). Early Childhood Education or the acronym of ECE is an internationally recognised term which will be used through this document. However, there are many names used to describe the sector such as Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) or Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Childcare and Early Years.

Early Childhood Personnel (ECP) refers to collectively to the workforce of professionals and paraprofessionals who purposefully educate and care for children from birth to 8 years of age in various educational and caregiving settings. ECP promotes a learning environment and activities for each stage that promote the holistic development of childhood across all developmental domains (cognitive, language, social, emotional, and physical) (UIS,2012). The roles and responsibilities of early childhood personnel can vary based on their specialisation, education, and the specific settings they work in.

Employment Regulation is the legal framework governing the relationship between states, employers, and employees within the sector. It sets out the rights and obligations of all parties as well as the procedures and remedies for resolving disputes or grievances (Deloitte, 2023).

Non-Pay Employment Conditions encompass aspects of employment beyond monetary compensation, such as working hours, leave policies, benefits policies (pension plan, health and wellbeing package, family policy, mental health programme, counselling), professional development, communities initiates programmes or other non-financial elements within the employment relationship.



Non-state actors are organizations or individuals who are not directly part of the government but are involved in education provision or policymaking, such as private schools, NGOs, and community-based organizations (UNESCO, 2023). It also takes into consideration ECCE financing and how it influences the state's direction in its obligation to fulfil the right to education (UNESCO, 2021).

High-quality Services encompass various factors that contribute to excellence. These factors comprise of a nurturing environment, skilled staff promptly attending to children's requirements, a small child-to-staff ratio that ensures personal attention, as well as a secure, healthy, stimulating, and engaging environment for children to learn and develop, with parental involvement.

Social Dialogue refers to the communication and collaboration process between and amongst governments, employers, workers, and their representatives to resolve employment-related issues and promote cooperation. It involves discussions, negotiations, and consultations on wages, working conditions, and social policies (Syndicat European Trade Union, 2023).

Note on terminology

The ILO Guidelines refer to the workforce as *early childhood education* (ECE) personnel. This emphasises the educational characteristics of their professional practice, alongside all other aspects of the education system (primary, secondary, tertiary etc.). However, as discussed in detail in this report, the purposeful engagement with young children and their families is complex, and extends beyond the traditional remit of schooling, or preparing for school. The internationally recognised nomenclature emphasises *care* as an essential element of the professional and paraprofessional practice, hence refers to the field as *early child-hood education and care* (ECEC, e.g. OMEP, EU, UNICEF, OECD), or *early childhood care and education* (ECCE, e.g. UNESCO). In the context of an emerging global support to recognise education as a fundamental right from birth (e.g. Tashkent Declaration, Abidjan Principles) it will be crucial for established education organisations (e.g. Education International, Teachers' Unions) to embrace the caring element of the work with young children as central to their professionalism. It will be equally crucial for the early childhood profession, collectively, to argue the case for their professional practice to be recognised as *education in the broadest sense*.





Summary

This report offers an analysis of the application of the ILO (2014) Policy Guidelines on the Promotion of Decent Work for ECE Personnel and provides recommendations for review. It addresses key themes, including the voluntary nature of a commitment level among state and non-state stakeholders, challenges in holding governments accountable without legal obligations, and the difficulties in establishing a standardised and workable monitoring framework. The report highlights the significance of the ILO Guidelines in promoting decent work for Early Childhood Personnel (ECP), while acknowledging the need to address challenges to ensure universal implementation and accountability. The research emphasizes the ongoing global efforts to assess and advance the progress of the ILO Guidelines by Education International, which aligns with the 10th anniversary of promoting decent work for ECP.

The significance of non-binding documents, such as the ILO ECE Guidelines, can influence political attitudes toward accountability for implementation. Touseef et al. (2023) discuss how, in nations with a strong cultural emphasis on collective responsibility and societal well-being, even non-binding ILO Guidelines may be more seamlessly integrated into national frameworks. However, in countries with diverse cultural perspectives, the lack of legal obligations might affect political attitudes, creating challenges to integrating the ILO Guidelines with deeply ingrained values. The absence of binding legislation may contribute to a slower progress in implementation, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between cultural contexts, governmental priorities, and international standards to ensure effective integration (Daniell, 2014).

This review delves into the complexities of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) sector, exploring key dimensions and challenges. It addresses the multifaceted nature of ECE, the difficulties in applying standardized ILO Guidelines due to diverse environments, and the impact of public and non-state entities on global and national variations. The review underscores challenges in implementing ILO Guidelines for a diverse ECE workforce, particularly those beyond the reach of unions and, more specifically, teachers' unions. It also highlights limitations in data and the urgent need for multi-sectoral and integrated data, as well as monitoring and evaluation strategies that are relevant for the complex ECE environment. The intricate interplay of these factors emphasizes the necessity of nuanced approaches for successful Guideline promotion and implementation across diverse regions.





Introduction

The International Labour Organization established the *Policy Guidelines on the Promotion of Decent Work for Early Childhood Education Personnel*, first published in 2014 (ILO, 2014). The ILO Guidelines aimed at supporting the transition towards universal access to high-quality early childhood education (ECE) services for children. They were intended to establish fundamental principles for promoting decent work for ECP within a fully regulated sector, encompassing a wide spectrum of elements from financing, curriculum, and employment conditions. The ILO Guidelines are meant to serve as a framework to outline the principles that should support and guide the implementation of measures specific to the ECE sector and to the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals 4.2:

All girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.

It was anticipated that these changes could manifest in diverse forms, including policies, strategies, legislation, administrative initiatives, and social dialogue mechanisms, including collective bargaining agreements, at national level (ILO, 2018). In conjunction with the 10th anniversary of promoting decent work for ECP, Education International has initiated a review of the use, impact, and possible future development of the 2014 ILO Guidelines.

The study took a mixed-method approach (Fingeld-Connett, 2014) to explore the application of the *ILO Policy Guidelines*. The methodology included desk-based research, a survey of regional representatives of the OMEP (World Organisation for Early Childhood Education) and EI (Education International) to explore the challenges and support mechanisms available. A focus group discussion with the OMEP and EI representatives was also carried out.

The data collection and initial coding during the desk-based phase pointed towards data gaps and the complexities hindering the monitoring of the ILO Guidelines. The comprehensive data collection in this phase, acknowledges some limitations of proceeding with an aging document, that could impede the best possible outcomes. The research findings obtained at this stage played a pivotal role in offering processual validation (Hayashi et al, 2019) of whether implementation indicators might be developed in conjunction with a revision of the 2014 ILO Guidelines.

In a second phase of the research, the focus group with the participation of key OMEP and Education International (EI) stakeholders identified in close coordination with EI was carried out. The focus group discussion provided



a rich contextual insight into the implementation of the ILO Guidelines and validation of the overall findings. It also supported the research team in identifying data gaps and additional factors that would prevent accurate monitoring of the implementation of ILO Guidelines. The focus group was followed-up by a survey discussing the obstacles impacting their region-specific issues and their attempts if any, to strengthen the support systems to ECP. The questionnaire also examined the individual perspectives of participants, on the primary challenges faced by ECP. This inquiry delved into the presence of organizational support mechanisms for ECE personnel within their respective contexts. It also invited the participants to share key messages for policymakers in order to improve workforce conditions while considering the ILO Policy Guidelines for ECE personnel.

Based on the triangulation of findings the research team mapped out a picture of the state of data in relation to the ILO Guidelines. The work in this phase was facilitated by drawing on our previous work and experience with integrated data, monitoring, and evaluation in ECE (Urban et al, 2021; Urban et al, 2022). Finally, the research team developed a set of recommendations to support a pathway of implementation and evaluation of the ILO Guidelines and improving monitoring of their implementation.

Following the introduction to the ILO Guidelines, the report discusses the characteristics and challenges of ECE that distinguish the field from other areas of education. It examines key developments in the global early childhood policy context in the decade following the publication of the 2014 ILO Guidelines. The section Voices from the field reports on the focus group discussion with EI and OMEP representatives. Finally, we discuss the implications of the findings and present a preliminary roadmap towards revised ILO Guidelines and their implementation in the decade ahead.



The ILO Policy Guidelines on the Promotion of Decent Work for Early Childhood Education (ECE) Personnel

The ILO Guidelines cover conditions of work and employment, ECE financing, curricula and learning practices, social security, professional ethics, and ECE governance systems. In the context of the creation of the ILO Guidelines, three main stakeholders were involved: governments, employers, and workers. This approach can be described as a tripartite approach (International Labour Organisation, 2024), ensuring that perspectives from all three groups are considered in the formulation, hence promoting a balance and inclusivity in development of the ILO Guidelines. For this purpose, in 2013, a meeting of experts was formed to advance the working conditions for Early Childhood Education Personnel, with the participation of 15 experts representing governments, employers, and workers, alongside 34 governments and 10 worker observers. Additionally, seven observers from intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations were present.

The establishment of the ILO Guidelines for decent work for ECP was meant as a reference tool for designing and implementing ECE measures, such as policies, strategies, legislation, and collective bargaining agreements. The ILO Guidelines intend to create a supportive and dignified work environment for those who nurture, educate and care for young children.

While these ILO Guidelines carry considerable ethical weight, they lack a legally binding status, which poses challenges to universal implementation and accountability at a state level (Abhayawansa, Adams and Neesham, 2021). These challenges can be identified as the following:

- Firstly, the absence of legal obligations on states diminishes the effective mechanism typically associated with a binding instrument (Frey and MacNaughton, 2016). This voluntary nature of the adherence to the ILO Guidance has led to variations in commitment levels among state and non-state stakeholders to implement the global objective, potentially resulting in uneven implementation across many regions. Many states will differ in their progress to achieve the targets.
- Secondly, the lack of compulsory adherence poses limitations in holding governments accountable for implementing the ILO Guidelines. Without legally binding commitments, there may be a reduced incentive for governments to prioritise and invest resources in aligning with the recommended standards of the

ILO Guidelines for ECP. This could result in a lack of harmonised application of the ILO Guidelines, hindering the achievement of high-quality Early Childhood Educational practices.

- Thirdly, the non-compulsory nature of the ILO Guidelines presents difficulties in establishing a standardised monitoring and reporting framework. Governments may exhibit varying degrees of transparency and commitment, hindering accurate compliance assessments and impeding the identification of areas requiring improvement.

Many national governments, cultural values and political attitudes (Touseef et al., 2023) regarding work, education, and ECE, have shaped how well policies such as the ILO Guidelines have been integrated into national law. The slow progress of implementation could be attributed to the challenges faced by unions in these countries when it comes to applying the ILO Guidelines, in relation to negotiating and influencing the complex inter-relationship between policy adoption and accountability at national levels. For instance, Unions advocating for ECP face obstacles in ensuring fair treatment, adequate compensation, and favourable working conditions. Simultaneously, the process of translating legislative initiatives related to ECE rights into law is influenced by cultural values, political attitudes, and often political will. Cultural values often shape the political perception of the importance of ECE, affecting the willingness of governments to enact and enforce legislation, thereby impacting the overall status and conditions of ECP (Neuman and Power, 2021). The interplay between a union's challenges and the broader socio-political context underscores the complexity of advancing the interests of ECE within many countries.

Many nations with a strong emphasis on collective social responsibility and family structures may demonstrate a more seamless integration of ILO Guidelines into their legal frameworks, viewing ECE as an integral component of society's well-being. On the other hand, governments with opposing cultural perspectives may encounter challenges in reconciling these ILO Guidelines with deeply ingrained values. Hence, a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between cultural contexts, governmental priorities, and international standards is essential for assessing the effectiveness of this integration of the ILO guidelines. While the ILO Guidelines clearly serve as a valuable and comprehensive frame of reference for ECE workforce policy measures, their non-binding nature presents substantial challenges. The absence of legal obligations diminishes the effectiveness of the ILO Guidelines, resulting in varied commitment levels among states and hindering global implementation. Furthermore, the lack of compulsory adherence limits government accountability and complicates the establishment of a standardised monitoring framework.



Perceived Hierarchy: Formal Education vs. Early Childhood Education

In recent decades, the central construct of ECE has not essentially been to promote child development, but rather to address the need for women to enter the workforce in order to activate the labour force. While in the 1990's and 2000's a growing body of evidence established the importance of ECE to children's development (Barnett, 1990), it was not until the 2010's that a growing movement to recognise ECE as a global public good was established (UNESCO, 2010). This means that ECE is not just a private good that families should purchase on their own, but the responsibility of global institutions to co-ordinate and support member states to provide quality ECE provisions for their children (Cornes and Sandler, 1996). Fundamentally, it was acknowledged that this was unlikely to be achieved without a robust global ratified agreement, ensuring that decisions and actions are accountable and inclusive, representing the best interests of all current and future global citizens. A movement towards a rights-based approach was elevated through the monitoring and evaluation of implementation of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

This change in perspective highlighted the necessity for heightened investment in ECE programs to provide not just for care but also education in early years. Nonetheless, numerous states faced challenges in establishing accountability, leading to a sluggish pace in strengthening their investments to create the changes needed. As research in ECE progressed and children's rights gained more attention, the imperative for well-crafted, diverse ECE programs catering to the needs of our youngest citizens became evident. However, numerous states, constrained by budgetary limitations, perceive ECE as non-essential. This perception is exacerbated by the absence of legalised, rights-based entitlements within many states. Without a national rights-based framework, working conditions within ECE are not seen as essential in the same way as in other levels of education and faces challenges in securing fair treatment, adequate employment conditions, and essential rights. Moreover, the lack of a structured approach hinders state-level accountability, obstructing the establishment of robust mechanisms to ensure decent working conditions comparable to those in the broader education sector.

Early Childhood Education: Key Characteristics and Challenges

In this section, we address some of the key dimensions and challenges inherent in the ECE sector. The purpose is to provide an overview of the complex landscape of ECE globally, and to explore how these factors impact possible implementation of the ILO Guidelines. The results show that the implementation of ILO Guidelines faces substantial challenges attributed to the complexity and fragmentation within the ECE field. The multifaceted nature of ECE, encompassing both formal and informal settings, introduces difficulties in applying standardised ILO Guidelines. The inconsistency in governance and regulations across regions further compounds these challenges, hindering a cohesive and universal approach to applying the ILO Guidelines.

Complexity and Fragmentation of the Field

The implementation of the ILO Guidelines faces significant challenges due to the complexity and fragmentation inherent in the ECE field. The multifaceted nature of ECE as discussed by Minkin (2023), encompassing both formal and informal settings, non-state, and public, presents intricate challenges in applying standardised ILO Guidelines across diverse contexts.

Inconsistency Regarding Governance and Regulations

As described above, ECE services are delivered in a wide range of both, formal settings, such as preschools, schools, crèches, childcare centres, and informal provisions, including home-based care and community initiatives (Raikes, et al., 2023). In many countries, ECE governance is split between the auspices of different government departments, ministries, and agencies (e.g. health, education, welfare, social and family affairs). Responsibility for different aspects of governance including funding, regulation, monitoring and evaluation, tends to be distributed between local, territorial/state, and national levels. This further complicates the picture, as has been pointed out consistently in the academic literature (Guevara et al., 2022) and international observers such as UNESCO(2020; 2007) and the World Bank (Bendini and Devercelli, 2022). Fragmentation and by-laws across different types of provisions, results in varied operational procedures, regulatory frameworks, and resource allocations.



Therefore, standardised Guidelines such as ILO Guidelines become challenging to implement.

Challenges within Public and Non-State Entities

The ECE sector is complex and diverse globally and within individual countries, which impacts the application of the ILO Guidelines. Before making comparisons between countries, it is important to understand the specific terms of “public” and “non-state actors” in each country (Guevara, 2022). The terms can have different meanings within different countries and their particular contexts. This can affect the quality, accessibility, and availability of ECE programmes, and the diverse group of professionals and paraprofessionals working in these environments.

While high standards exist in some countries, regardless of whether services and programmes are run by the government or by non-state actors, this is not always the case. Depending on the country's context, there may be lower standards for non-state actors in ECE programmes, or there may be little or no government oversight at all.

Below are some examples of the characteristics of how a “public” and a “non-state” actor can vary in meaning in different countries.

Brazil

The landscape of Early Childhood Education ECE is diverse. Private ECE programs often co-exist with public initiatives. Notably, the regulatory framework in Brazil varies, allowing for-profit entities to operate without stringent federal or state-level regulations, influencing the overall quality and equality of the ECE system (Raikes et al., 2023).

Norway

All ECEC programs are regulated by legislation and publicly funded, but there is a mix of private and public providers (Child Research. Net, 2013). While private kindergartens “may have a reasonable net profit for the year”, any government grants and fees received must be used according to government objectives and conditions and “must benefit the children in the kindergarten” (Kindergarten Act, 2005). All parental fees are formally regulated, enabling similar low fees and high-quality services throughout the countries.

United States of America

“Private” early childhood education programmes are typically run by for-profit companies, while “Public” early childhood education programmes are frequently run by the government (Kamerman and Gatenio Gabel, 2015). It is reported that in the US only 10 per cent of ECE programmes

are considered high-quality. While publicly funded programs are targeted only towards low-income families, availability and accessibility is a problem. Many programs of high quality are out of reach for many families (Workman and Ullrich, 2023).

The global and local complexity within the ECE landscape significantly influences the application of the ILO Guidelines. Recognising the distinct meanings and contexts of terms like “public” and “non-state actors” in each country is crucial for meaningful cross-country comparisons. Research by Education International’s (2010) cross-national investigation of early childhood systems across 17 countries revealed that educators in early childhood education, especially those in the private sector, predominantly lack union representation. Coupled with the variation in standards for ECE programs, whether government-run or managed by non-state actors, this underscores the need for more contextualised approaches in implementing the ILO Guidelines. These variations underscore the importance of considering local contexts when discussing decent work and employment conditions, ECE financing, curricula and learning practices, social security, pro-fessional ethics, and ECE governance systems and the complexities involved in implementing the ILO Guidelines across different regions.

The Obstacles to achieve a Diverse and qualified ECP

A barrier to effective implementation of the ILO Guidelines arises from the diversity of the ECP, extending beyond traditional teaching roles. The Early Childhood Workforce Initiatives (2020) highlight the challenge of establishing standardised ILO Guidelines for the diverse roles within the ECE sector. Notably, roles like childminders, a substantial part of the global ECP, often face underrepresentation and insufficient union support due to a lack of recognition and government acknowledgement of the various roles within the ECE system in different states.

According to the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW, 2017), the ECP in Canada comprises over 190,000 people working in ECE centres, classrooms, home ECE, preschools, parent drop-in programs, and ECEC programmes operated by non-profit agencies and for-profit companies. The Childcare Arrangements report (2023) states that by 2023, 1.5 million children were in a ECE provision in Canada. The report identified that 56% of children aged 0 to 5 were enrolled in licensed or unlicensed ECE, which is surpassing the rates in 2022 (52%) and 2020 (52%). However, this figure has not fully recovered to the pre-pandemic 2019 level, which stood at 60%. Interestingly, the report has distinguished the difference between licenced and unlicensed ECE services, recognising that a number of roles within the ECE may not be directly employed under the regulated field of ECE.



An analysis by Paschall et al. (2020), using demographic data on the characteristics of the ECP in the USA, recognised the diversity and makeup of the ECP environments. These include ECE centres and home-based services, which also reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of the ECP. This was completed through a number of qualitative surveys; the result acknowledged that the ECP consisted of a total of 999.610 centre-based ECP and 107.220 home-based ECP. As presented in the report (Paschall et al., 2020), the variations in professional training and preparation and the specific setting where the ECEC is offered influence the ECE roles and work. The qualification level, in turn, directly influences the quality of care and education provided to children.

A study analysing seven European Union nations (Urban 2009)- including Croatia, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and The Netherlands - revealed a prevalent trend within teacher unions. This trend involves a prioritization of professional development initiatives for early childhood teachers. However, this emphasis has led to limited representation of individuals working with children outside formal school structures or below preschool age.

The feminisation of the ECP often leads to undervaluation and inadequate recognition of its significance, reflecting broader societal biases (Centre for the study of Childcare Employment, 2021). In other words, the association of ECP with traditional gender roles has contributed to the underestimation of the importance of ECE, impacting policies and state recognition. As Thompson (2021) points out, gender imbalance plays a crucial role in how ECP are perceived to hold the lowest educational status than similar educational teachers in primary or secondary. Addressing the gender dimension in ECE is essential for acknowledging its value and ensuring equitable treatment and support.

Beyond the Reach of Unionisation

As identified before, a substantial portion of the ECP operate beyond the visibility and influence of teachers' unions, limiting the reach of organised efforts to advocate for enforcing and promoting the ILO Guidelines. The limited unionisation of ECP in the field of ECE can be attributed to various factors, notably the presence of numerous unregulated or unlicensed ECE provisions globally. Unlike formalised educational settings, these unregulated entities, such as childminders or non-licensed or non-regulated ECE providers, often operate independently, outside the conventional structures that unions traditionally engage with. Other roles within the ECE sector, which can also be affected by being beyond the reach of unionisation, include administrative and managerial roles, as well as certain specialised positions and generally all educators who work with the youngest children under three

years of age. This can be attributed to factors such as the diverse nature of responsibilities, complex employment conditions, and varying professional requirements within the sector.

The diverse and decentralized nature of ECE, including both regulated and unregulated components, poses challenges to the establishment of comprehensive union representation. Additionally, the perception of ECE as a nurturing profession might contribute to a lower inclination among personnel to seek collective bargaining through unions. The complex landscape of ECE, with a mix of formal and informal caregiving arrangements, requires nuanced strategies for unionisation to address the diverse needs of the workforce.

In 2019, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) significantly influenced the progress of the ECP in California. This impact was realised through the enactment of legislation that granted the opportunity for ECP in the state to unionise (Office of Governor Gavin Newsom, 2019). This supported the establishment of professional standards, qualifications, compensation, voluntary program accreditation, work environments and advocacy for its 60,000 members. While this was a watershed moment, the Centre for the Study of Childcare Employment (2020) reports that United States ECP remain at the bottom percentile in relation to pay in comparison to all other occupations, and this remains unchanged since the inaugural 2016 Index. Moreover, their research indicates that ECP working with children under five encounter a wage penalty compared to their counterparts in kindergarten. Considering the pivotal role, the early years play in shaping an individual's future, one must inquire about the persistent global phenomenon of comparatively lower compensation for ECP and examine the evolution of this scenario (McCarty Carino, 2020). In low- and middle-income countries, ECP often lack organised representation for effective participation in social dialogue and collective bargaining. Without any legally binding legislation, progress of ECP rights may remain slow within certain regions.

A report of data from the European Trade Union Committee for Education (2017) recognises the challenges faced by unions within the ECP. The report noted a relatively high prevalence (53.3%) of collective bargaining arrangements for negotiating pay in the ECE sector. The data further indicates that 51.1% of respondents report collective bargaining for non-pay employment conditions. However, it does not account for the entire ECP, indicating that a portion may not be covered by such arrangements. The report also pointed out that 46.7% of respondents indicate the employment of individuals in ECE roles without professional early childhood education qualifications, highlighting a segment of the personnel that may not be directly covered or regulated by unions.

It is noteworthy that the data suggests that while certainly, unions play a role in shaping certain aspects of employment conditions in European's ECP,



there are significant elements of the personnel and specific employment conditions that may fall beyond the direct reach or influence of unions.

Limited evidence indicates that only a few ECP within certain categories belong to trade unions. However, research carried out by Early Childhood Workforce Initiatives (2020:4) suggests that “*ECE workers are generally not organized to engage meaningfully in social dialogue and collective bargaining*”. This is in part due to the diverse roles, workplaces, and relatively lower status of ECP. Shaeffer’s (2015) research discovers that ECP have benefited less from workers’ rights movements than formal system teachers within Education. Many early years providers are set up as small businesses within many low and middle-income countries, which can further complicate the implementation efforts. Additionally, some teacher unions exclude ECE workers from their by-laws and constitutions. Even when integrated into formal education systems, ECP often find existing associations or unions dominated by concerns at higher education levels.

Limitations and Data Gaps

Organisations like the International Step by Step Association (2020) detail how the lack of comprehensive and accessible data is critically impeding the progress of the status of the ECP and global targets. While global data from organisations like UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), the World Bank, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) exist, their capability to portray the extent of state-level implementation of the ILO Guidelines remains a challenge. As a result, it highlights the need for more nuanced assessment to accurately gauge the adherence to the ILO guidelines across different regions and jurisdictions. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2024) collects and disseminates data on education from over 200 countries and territories. While its ECE data is limited, it provides some valuable insights into the status of the ECP. For instance, the UIS dataset includes information on:

- The total number of individuals employed in ECE settings, the proportion of male and female ECE professionals, the age structure of the personnel, the level of education attained by ECE workers.

The World Bank (2024) collects and evaluates data on 189 countries. While not comprehensive, it offers valuable understanding into the ECP.

The World Bank collects and analyses data on a wider range of development issues, including annual statutory teacher salaries, gender distribution of qualified teachers, the proportion of teachers with minimum required qualifications, pupil-teacher ratios, attrition rates, and the number of teachers in early childhood educational development programs.

The Organisation for *Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD) is a 38-member organisation of developed nations that collects and examines data which includes ECP.

- The data indicators look at the percentage of children enrolled in ECE programs, assesses the quality of ECE programs, considering factors such as teacher-child ratios, group sizes, and the use of curriculum frameworks and finally the average costs of ECE services, highlighting potential affordability issues for families.

While these datasets are still limited in some respects to professionalised, regulated and pre-primary school levels, they provide valuable insight into the status of the ECP globally. The focus on formal ECEC and structured programs for children aged 3-6 may also contribute to the lack of comprehensive data. This narrative of data gathering introduces a disparity between professionalised, regulated ECE fields, and what is often perceived as non-professional and unregulated roles. The data collection bias towards one segment of the ECE intensifies the existing tensions between what is viewed as professional (regulated, licenced) and unprofessional (unregulated, unlicenced) within the broader ECE sector.

This reflects the need to expand and improve data collection efforts, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities that ECE systems are facing on a global scale.

Impact on Governance due to Covid-19 Pandemic

Globally, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought the early childhood education system to the brink of collapse, prompting prominent early childhood organisations to mobilise and advocate for financial packages aimed at safeguarding early education in many states (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020; Zero to Three, 2020). In fact, Devercelli & Beaton-Day, (2020) recognised that the global ECE sector was struggling, long before the Covid-19 pandemic. It shone a light on the diverse, fragmented, and often dysfunctional ECE systems within many countries. It identifies areas such as ineffective ECE governance and regulation in place for ECP which added to the crisis of outcomes for children (UNICEF, 2020b).

Closer scrutiny recognises the fact that ECP do not always work in a regulated fields or formalised conditions. The fragmentation, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, underscores the significance of effective governance and regulation in many states. The observed lack of regulation, licenced, and formalised conditions for ECP accentuates the divide between the regulated and non-regulated, licenced and non-licensed, professional and non-professional within ECE, which in turn, is contributing to a discourse on defining what high quality is for many children, families, and communities



in many states. However, it is apparent that ECE systems in their current state, within many countries, are not well prepared to cope with disruption, including future pandemics, leaving children at risk of becoming continual 'hidden victims' (UNICEF, 2020a). This adds further weight to arguments for more equal, just and sustainable ECE systems. Ensuring that all children have access to high-quality ECE will require each state to find multifaceted ways to address the challenges of regulation and fragmentation.

Impact on the Wellbeing of ECP due to the Covid-19 Pandemic

As a result of the downward pressure in many countries ECE system, personnel were laid off, and operations of ECE services were forced to be scaled back, to maintain sustainability. Research recognises that this had disastrous impact on children's learning and development, by providing fewer social experiences to learn from and engage with (Unicef, 2020b; Murdock Children's Research Institution, 2022).

The ECP as a whole have been adversely affected by the Covid-19 Pandemic (Gould et al., 2020; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020). As shutdown rules were implemented in ECE centres, it became apparent that lack of ECE services had a number of impacts to the functionality of essential services within many countries. Parallel to this new realisation, that ECP should be considered front line workers in the future pandemics, ECP were suffering from job loss, instability, stress from job uncertainty, mental health issues, low wages, and a now even greater accountability to achieve the outcomes for children laydown prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic exacerbated and compounded the ECP crisis that existed long before it. A recent report from the Center for the Study of Childcare Employment (2021) sheds light on the pervasive struggles faced by ECE in the United States, a situation reflective of many countries worldwide. ECE personnel's already meagre earnings are further compounded by a lack of essential health and wellbeing resources, such as comprehensive health insurance and paid sick leave. The Covid-19 pandemic starkly exposed the detrimental consequences of these longstanding issues, forcing many educators to make agonising choices between earning a living and prioritising their own health and that of their families. Many governments are now beginning to take account of the impact of the pandemic on their ECE landscape. For example, Canada (Government of Canada, 2021) statistics acknowledge employment of ECP is down by 21,000 in 2022 compared to 2021. While the USA (Khatter, and Coffey, 2023) employment rate amongst ECP is still down by 39,400 in 2023 compared to 2020 figures. These job losses have had a significant impact on the quality and availability of early childhood education services, leaving many families struggling to find accessible, affordable and reliable ECE.

While the pandemic created a tsunami of crisis, it also creates a historic opportunity to address the challenges the ECE sector now faces. In

response, this has influenced the formulation of new objectives and a global paradigm shift towards a more extensive mobilisation for education in early childhood. This instilled a greater focus than ever to establish methodologies to create the changes needed, emphasizing a renewed attention to establish effective mechanisms to address the complexity of early childhood systems in both the global south and north. It also propagated a glaring focus toward the lack of a cohesive approach for the ECP in comparison to other levels of education in many countries. This worldwide transformation has instilled a sense of urgency in some local and transnational actors and among early childhood advocacy organisations to initiate actions.

Unrecognised and Undervalued

Education International's (2023) recent International Barometer of the Health and Well-being of Education Personnel (I-BEST)¹ uncovered that globally, education professionals feel undervalued, which has been amplified by heavy workloads, challenging environments, insufficient recognition, and limited career prospects. The report highlights a concerning increase in workplace violence, emphasising the urgent need for supportive environments. Additionally, inadequate mental health support underscores the necessity for a uniform approach to addressing educators' well-being.

Vitorović (2023) examined the International Barometer of Education Staff in relation to ECP. The report comprised of 26,281 participants from countries including France, Spain, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Quebec, and Cameroon. The study revealed that 16.2% (4254 participants) were ECP. While this data provides a narrative understanding with the majority of participants working in a public system, there is a need to expand and build a full, global, comprehensive dataset to be able to tailor the ILO Guidelines to specific contexts and demographics, undermining the precision and effectiveness of implementation efforts. While some countries and global regions may have limited data on ECP pertaining to pre-primary settings, significant data gaps persist regarding the entirety of the ECP (Ionescu et al., 2016).

Lack of Systems-level Monitoring and Evaluation

ECE governance has undergone a significant shift in recent years. The rise of new governance stakeholders, arenas, processes, and structures driven by globalisation, has challenged traditional perspectives on ECE governance.

1 The International Barometer of the Health and Well-being of Education Personnel (I-BEST) was developed in connection with several organizations such as the Education and Solidarity Network and the Foundation for Public Health, in partnership with Education International and the UNESCO Chair Global Health & Education.



Due to the dramatic transformations in the global ECE landscape, a fresh theoretical framework is required to adequately understand and address these changes. A global governance framework significantly contributes to illuminating these critical mechanisms, encompassing and understanding the changes in the global education governance architecture, promoting specific values, concepts, and principles, implementing capacity-building measures, establishing international standards, and leveraging financial resources.

The lack of a robust framework for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the ILO Guidelines at a broader organisational level hinders the ability to assess the overall progress, identifying areas for improvement, and ensuring accountability. This deficiency in systematic oversight limits the capacity to address issues promptly and adapt strategies to evolving needs within the dynamic ECE landscape. Addressing these multifaceted obstacles requires a context-specific approach to ensure the ILO Guidelines' relevance and effectiveness across diverse global contexts. Recognising and comprehending the governance hurdles that lie ahead is a fundamental and essential stage in formulating effective solutions and ultimately fulfilling the full potential of the ILO Guidelines.

2014-2024: A transformed global ECE policy context and its implications for ECP

In the years since the ILO Guidelines were published, there has been a dynamic shift in the global agenda on the priorities, policies and approaches to Early Childhood Education and Care. In response, this has influenced the formulation of new objectives and a global paradigm shift towards a more extensive mobilisation for education in early childhood. The focus is to build these changes based on available evidence and data, emphasizing a renewed attention to complex early childhood systems in both the global south and north. This worldwide transformation has placed a prominent focus on the lack of a cohesive approach for the ECP in many countries and instilled a sense of urgency among early childhood actors and advocacy organisations to initiate actions. In this context, worldwide initiatives by actors including UNESCO, the World Bank, and regional entities like the European Council, and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), developed global and regional objectives to be achieved by states. Monitoring and evaluation systems were also created to assist nations in attaining these objectives by fostering increased investments, implementing effective mechanisms and tools to support the achievement of the goals. However, a universal rights-based approach to ECE can only be achieved through the correct conditions within the personnel and by strengthening the rights, remuneration that reflects the work, ensuring better employment conditions and adequate labour market opportunities to progress, and finally a government with the political will to achieve these goals.

Transforming our world: the 2023 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The United Nations' "*Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*" (2015) is a comprehensive blueprint for global development. It encompasses 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), addressing various challenges, including eradicating (child) poverty, inequalities, and achieving environmental sustainability. Among other crucial issues, this agenda highlights the vital role of quality education in achieving these goals, emphasizing inclusive and equitable learning opportunities for all children from birth. It calls for access to lifelong learning, skills development, and the promotion of global citizenship to foster a more sustainable and



prosperous future. This framework guides international efforts to transform education for children and to align with the broader aims of the Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 4 focuses specifically on education:

- **SDG 4** - By 2030, Ensure inclusive and equitable, quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
- **SDG 4.2** - By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.

Within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Target 4.c underscores the imperative to significantly strengthen the availability of qualified teachers by 2030. This involves a commitment to international collaboration, particularly in providing teacher training in developing nations, with a specific focus on the unique challenges faced by least-developed countries and small-island developing States. This targeted effort aims to strengthen educational systems and ensure a robust supply of well-trained teachers, (including early childhood) contributing to the overarching goal of inclusive and quality education for all.

To enhance the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is imperative to emphasize success through enhanced accountability, linking UN goals intricately with current monitoring processes. In the report *'Metadata for the global and thematic indicators for the follow-up and review of SDG 4 and Education 2030'* (2018), the UNESCO Institute for Statistics introduced concrete criteria and measurable thematic indicators related to ECP.² This informative process, while valuable in providing insights, would benefit from a comprehensive evaluation of the extent to which the ILO Guidelines have been implemented within member states, as well as an assessment of existing governing bodies or tools designed to oversee and

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- 2 The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) provides various indicators for Early Childhood Education (ECE) including --
4. c - By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States.
 - 4.c.1 - Proportion of teachers in (a) pre-primary education; (b) primary education; (c) lower secondary education; and (d) upper secondary education who have received at least the minimum organized teacher training (e.g., pedagogical training) pre-service or in-service required for teaching at the relevant level in a given country, by sex
 - 4.c.2 - Pupil-trained teacher ratio by education level
 - 4.c.3 - Proportion of teachers qualified according to national standards by education level and type of institution
 - 4.c.4 -Pupil-qualified teacher ratio by education level
 - 4.c.5- Average teacher salary relative to other professions requiring a comparable level of qualification
 - 4.c.6 - Teacher attrition rate by education level
 - 4.c.7 - Percentage of teachers who received in-service training in the last 12 months by type of training

enforce ECP employment regulations. By addressing these gaps, we can gain a clearer understanding of the progress of implementation across member states (UNESCO, 2020).

Global initiatives within all states are currently engaging in substantial efforts to achieve the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. As the ILO Guidelines predates the SDGs, these are not yet referred to in the Guidelines. Nevertheless, to understand the transitional process of the SDG 4.2 goal we should consider the current position of ECE working conditions and regulation within each member state. This would involve scrutinising how member states are incorporating a revised (up to date) ILO Guidelines into their policies. An evaluation could involve reassessing and benchmarking pay, non-pay employment conditions against other educational sectors within a state and internationally.

To support the implementation of the ILO Guidelines there is a need for the creation of regulatory mechanisms to safeguard the well-being and rights of ECP in alignment with SDG4. Finally, there is also a need to establish the effectiveness and level of adherence to ECE employment regulations at a national level, conducting audits of a state's tools for accountability, and ensuring accuracy and transparency in mechanisms aligned with ILO Guidelines.

A Systemic Turn

Since the adoption of the *Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, attention to early childhood research and global actors has begun. While the goals are not legally binding, its importance lies in its ability to create a range of influential mechanisms that shape the framework and operations of the global education system. Evolution on a global level has created a greater understanding of the challenges facing implementation of the ambitious goals and complexities for both national governments and intergovernmental organisations. This recognition has fostered a shift in focus, towards the need to develop the early childhood system, encompassing its various components rather than solely concentrating on discrete programs or initiatives. This systemic approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of all aspects of early childhood development and the need for coordinated efforts to achieve optimal outcomes (Urban et al., 2012).

This 'systemic turn' (Urban, 2022) is particularly pronounced in the global south, notably in Latin America, and is gradually gaining momentum in the global north. A prevailing consensus now emphasizes the interdependence of the SDGs, highlighting their realisation within a unified framework. In this comprehensive perspective, Early Childhood Education emerges as a pivotal enabler.



The transition towards this achievement involves fostering a more integrated and transdisciplinary mindset and approach, emphasising greater collaboration across multiple sectors while focusing on a goal to create a “competent system” (Urban et al., 2012). The concept of the ‘competent system’ was developed in an international comparative research project conducted by Urban et al. for the European Commission (2011). It captures the interrelationship between all actors and actants in an early childhood system (e.g. individual educators, institutions, governance), in a framework of shared *knowledge, practices, and orienting values*.

This shift towards a systemic perspective is not merely a localised phenomenon but has gained recognition from influential international institutions such as the World Bank. The World Bank points out that a number of initiatives are required including “*constructing systems that offer widespread quality early learning necessitates intentional, gradual development through meticulous planning and various investments. This process may entail a systematic change, requiring strategic adjustments in policies, curricula, and educational infrastructure to create a more comprehensive and equitable foundation for early childhood education*” (World Bank, 2022a).

Reports from The World Bank (2015, 2022b) emphasise the need for coherence and alignment across key elements within a broader framework. The reports emphasise that individual efforts, no matter how effective, are insufficient, compelling a systemic approach to ensure efficient implementation to support a child’s overall learning. The concept of defining early learning systems is introduced, incorporating direct service provision and the infrastructure supporting it. The report suggests steps for building systems, including contextual awareness, alignment, delivery, implementation, and assessment for continuous improvement (World Bank, 2022b). It concludes that a systems approach is crucial for fostering quality, equitable distribution, scalability, and efficiency in early learning services, representing a pressing need and a significant opportunity for successful implementation and scaling.

Kagan and Dermody (2022) recognise how a system’s approach takes into consideration a set of important steps such as defining early learning systems, holistic planning for change, implementing contextual sensitivities to facilitate the success of the implementation of interventions. Even where such data exists, it is often located within incompatible data systems, for instance the Social Care System (SCS), Educational Management Information System (EMIS), Health Information Management Services (HMIS), and Social Welfare System (SWS).

In 2022, Think 20, one of the official engagement groups of the annual Group of 20 (G20) summits adopted and published *Education for Survival. Strengthening multi-sectoral and integrated policy approaches to early childhood education, care, and development as a global common good*. The

document is the most recent in a series of policy briefs within the G20 context that provide evidence-based policy recommendations towards whole-systems approaches to ECE (Urban, Cardini, & Flórez-Romero, 2018; Urban et al., 2019; Urban et al., 2021; Urban et al., 2022).

The 2022 policy brief provided recommendations centred on promoting participatory, community-level, and culturally responsive solutions. It aimed to advocate for young children from birth onward, their families, and communities by advancing sustainable, cost-effective policies, action plans, and systems for early childhood development, education, and care. Stressing that the early development and education of all children are integral to a global common good and a fundamental human right, the policy brief underscores their importance in realising the SDG 2030 framework. It also acknowledges that fulfilling children's rights and developmental goals not only enhances individual's well-being, but also equips them, to contribute meaningfully to humanity's resilience, particularly in times of global existential crises. Aligning ECE reforms with the principles of a rights-based approach can enhance quality and equitable early childhood systems for all children.

The Abidjan Principles

The Abidjan Principles (2019) are a set of principles that place concrete obligations on states to provide free public education and regulate private involvement in education. The Abidjan Principles emphasize the importance of the right to education as a fundamental human right from birth and provide guidance on various aspects, including the role of private actors in education, accountability mechanisms, and the responsibilities of states in ensuring equitable access to quality education. The principles, in line with other recent policy documents, recognise early childhood as a distinct period and define that education begins at birth. The Abidjan Principles offer a framework for evaluating the systematic transformation of Early Childhood Education (ECE) systems.

While the primary focus of the Abidjan principles is on the right to education, they encompass factors such as non-discrimination, equality, and inclusive education, which inherently contribute to creating an environment that recognises and supports the rights and conditions of ECP in the broader context of advancing education.



Transforming Education Summit

At the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the global education community was grappling with the aftermath of extended school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In response to these challenges, a high-level second review of SDG4 was established, prioritising education on the global agenda. The UN (2022a) Transforming Education Summit (TES) aimed at creating greater mobilisation, political ambition, and action to commit to reversing the slide on achieving the SDG 4 goals. The purpose was to re-imagine education by accelerating progress on education and the 2030 Agenda more broadly for the world. The UN TES established five key thematic action trackers as a mechanism to transform key priority areas within the entire educational system. Among them is an indicator relating to *“Teachers, teaching and the teaching profession”* (UN,2022b:1), which identifies that the profession has been confronted with major challenges. It acknowledges that these issues can only be overcome *“when education is adequately funded, and policies recognise and support the teaching profession, to improve their status and working conditions”* (ibid). While many states are working towards achieving SDG 4.2, it became apparent that there is a notable lack of data concerning ECP within each state to support the achievement of the goal. One of the central outcomes of the summit was the establishment of the UN High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession, which specifically focuses on teachers and the global shortage (UN, 2023).

The UN Transforming Education Summit (2022a), was assembled by the UN Secretary- General to support the acceleration of the SDG goals. The summit report highlighted a mammoth triple crisis of equity and inclusion, quality and finally a crisis of relevance. It acknowledges the imperative envision and the need to overhaul the education system collaboratively with member states, to ensure the alignment with the SDG goals. To ensure the efficacy of these initiatives, participating countries have committed to define precise performance metrics, establish clear targets, and conduct annual assessments to gauge their progress (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022). A recent report by Vitorovic (2023a) indicates that, during the Transforming Education Summit, no topic received universal and meaningful commitments from all countries. Many national statements of commitment are better described as reflections of the current state rather than expressions of genuine commitment to educational transformation. Additionally, numerous commitments seem to be reiterations of previous targets to early years, highlighting the necessity for significant efforts to truly transform the sector. This approach may not construct sufficient data on the entire ECP to make an impact and bring about an inclusive change for the whole ECE sector. Oversight of this process has fallen under the remit of the SDG 4 High-level Steering Committee and in collaboration with the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2023) and the GEM Report.

Tashkent Declaration

The Tashkent Declaration and Commitments to Action for Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education (UNESCO, 2022) was adopted by member states at the second UNESCO World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education (WCECCE) in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in November 2022. The Declaration sets out a global agenda for Early Childhood Education for the decade ahead. It establishes a set of four guiding principles including a call to action for:

1. Equitable and inclusive quality ECCE services for all.
2. ECP.
3. Innovation for advancing transformation.
4. Policy, governance, and finance.

The declaration acknowledges several key areas within the ECP section, fundamental to the achievement of the SDG4.2 targets. These are:

- Strengthening the education and training systems of ECP;
- Enhancing the attractiveness of the ECE profession and provide opportunities for career advancement;
- Regulating ECP in the non-state sector;
- Enhancing support to parents, families and other caregivers.

The conference sought to reassert the entitlement of each young child to high-quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) spanning from birth to 8 years. Its objectives included the renewal and enhancement of political dedication and efforts, as well as the continued mobilisation of Member States and the global community to craft inclusive and rights-oriented policies and initiatives in ECE.

The Tashkent Declaration established a set of key actions to support member states in achieving these targets through a monitoring and reporting structure and coordinating, partnership and monitoring group.

Global Partnership Strategy for Early Childhood 2021-2030

The Global Partnership Strategy (GPS) for Early Childhood (UNESCO, 2022) is a bridging strategy that was formed in December 2021. It was created to offset the negative trend happening in education and to overcome the reduction and closure of services for health, nutrition, sanitation, and child protection in all world regions during the Covid-19 pandemic. The GPS brings together UNESCO, OMEP, ECDAN and calls for action by governments, organisations, groups and individuals to renew the commitment for early childhood education. The GPS was aimed at supporting states in their



obligations to ensure quality ECE to children and families and aligns with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's Target 4.2. The overall goal of the GPS is to ensure that ECE, Early childhood development, and Early childhood investment services are fully inclusive, accessible, affordable, gender-responsive and equitable for each child.

The strategy aims to:

- Strengthen governance and financing mechanisms to ensure that ECE is prioritised in national policies and budgets.
- Improve the quality of ECE services through the development of standards, curricula, and teacher training programs.
- Expand access to ECE services for all children, especially those who are marginalised or disadvantaged.
- Promote innovation and research to improve the effectiveness of ECE services.
- Strengthen partnerships and advocacy to mobilise resources and support for ECE.

The Global Partnership Strategy for Early Childhood 2021-2030 can play a crucial role in advancing the implementation of ILO guidelines for decent work for ECP by incorporating these principles into its framework, fostering collaboration, advocating for policy changes, and supporting capacity-building initiatives. The overall aim of the Global Partnership Strategy places emphasis on collaborative efforts, to align policy efforts, and cross-sector accountability to ensure holistic achievement of ECE goals. Quality early childhood education relies on well-supported and professionally fulfilled ECP. Fundamentally the achievement of the UNESCO goals is contingent upon establishing and maintaining conducive working conditions and professional standards for ECP.

Voices from the field

Methodology

To gather some first-hand insights into the use of the ILO Guidelines we conducted a focus group discussion with representatives of the ECE field in selected countries. Ten participants were invited, selected evenly between OMEP and EI member unions. The focus group was attended by seven participants representing both the global south and north. Participants were invited to discuss a set of key questions about their understanding, as well as the use and effectiveness of the ILO Guidelines, with all stakeholders (government, unions, and educators) at local and national levels. The aim was to hear voices from a diversity of roles within the ECE field. The purpose of the focus group was to gather further insights from early childhood policy actors from both groups concerning their awareness of the ILO Guidelines, and how they impact their national or regional early childhood policy developments, especially those concerning the ECE workforce. The following section highlights key findings from the focus group discussion.

Findings: Voices and themes of the focus group

The presentation of the findings is organised from a discussion involving members of OMEP and teachers' unions. The themes explored the awareness, the application, and challenges associated with the ILO Guidelines. The observations of the focus group included varying levels of awareness among OMEP members and union representatives, the limited utilisation of the ILO Guidelines in some regions, challenges related to policymakers' involvement, diversity within the ECE field, and considerations about the current relevance and applicability of the guidelines in different contexts. These insights contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted issues surrounding the implementation of international standards in early childhood education.

Awareness and application of the ILO Guidelines

An OMEP member started by saying *"I remember in 2014 or 15 using those guidelines in order to set our guidelines and to make sure that we are linked"*, however, the same OMEP member went on to acknowledge they were less relevant today. Another OMEP representative acknowledged



she was unaware of the document saying, *"I am working as a kindergarten teacher for 20 years, so I'm a bit connected with the professionals in the field, they don't even know that there is something like this policy guidelines existing, and recently in this part of the world, so I'm talking about former Yugoslav Republics, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia. So, this part of the world, there are some kind of reforms in early childhood education and still no one used that document."* Answering the same question another member of the focus group who identified himself as both a union representative and OMEP representative responded that, *"we have not been able to utilize the guidelines of it, but it's a good document"*. A union representative admitted that *"Policy makers normally in Sri Lanka, the government, normally they don't invite the Union members or Union leaders to meetings. That's their way. But we sometimes fight for our rights."* Again, acknowledging the union is constrained to utilising the ILO Guidelines to build leverage. A second union member identified that ECP in his country would benefit most from a union activation but, *"I would guess now, and this is an uninformed guess, but they would probably not be aware of these guidelines in many cases."*

Involvement of Teachers' Unions

A union member representative stated that, *"Actually, in Sri Lanka policymakers are also the politicians, not the teachers or the leaders of the teacher Union organizations because they don't care what we say, or the leaders say, because that's why we had a very big struggle last year."* It was acknowledged at this point that maybe there is a need for a shift in thinking to embed the ILO guidelines within countries.

Diversity of the ECE field

An OMEP member acknowledged that *"some educators, they are not inside the ministers of the systems educational systems. They are out of that. So, there are different rules"*. While joining the conversation a union member said, *"I think this is a point that we can relate to in Canada quite a bit because if we look at the guidelines, this is something there for the unionized staff, most of what is in there that is covered through the teacher collective agreement. He goes on to identify that "it's not just that we focus on one part, they're covered by the same agreement for all teaching. I mean, we have an age group of zero to two and two to four, so these are not the colleagues that we usually represent as teachers unions simply because public school starts, at the earliest, at the age of four for kids in Canada. While a second union member acknowledges that "when it comes to issues relating to the condition of service of early years teachers working in the private sector, they are not unionized" in his country.*

Level of specificity

One union member discussed *“when everything is going well, when basic standards are being met, then it might actually be a good sign that, no, we don’t have to use the minimum, because in the end, let’s face it, if 200 countries come together for international standards, it’s going to be some sort of a minimum, smallest common denominator, we can all agree on that. And then if we would have to use the document constantly, that means something’s probably seriously going wrong in our country because we can’t even meet minimal international standards.”* While another OMEP representative said *“I believe that currently the laws and the rules for teachers in the regions are constantly changing”,* therefore they are unable to apply them. A second union member identifies that *“the question becomes, well because how does it apply to me specifically, how do I use that in the work that I’m currently doing?”*

Current Relevance

While discussing the relevance of the ILO Guidelines, one union member suggested it *“might be helpful to look at the standards from different audience’s point of view. So, for example, how does it relate to me as an early childhood educator? What can I take from it? How does it impact me as a federation, as a union?”* but ultimately acknowledged *“So it’s yes, updating it to see if there are pieces that are still relevant. We’ve had the integration of technology, for example, in the past several years is something that has significantly impacted everybody’s work”.*

Another suggestion by a union member, *“If we look at the violence-free workplace chapter, we have since had the passing of the ILO Convention 190. So, this is just something that international law has evolved that then can be reflected in the guidelines. So, our guidelines have to reflect the progress of international law. Just again, it comes with time passing and then updating accordingly. So, this is kind of the top-down thing that we can just do from here.”* Another two union members discussed how digitalisation and AI affects start in preschool. *“I would add to the point that [an earlier speaker] made, by the way, I found super important. Here we can probably be a bit cutting edge, more so within technology, and the impact of the workplace, what is happening with AI right now. So questions like, what kind of jobs do we allow for, or what kind of role do we want for technology in the classroom? There’re some scary discussions going on at the international summit of the teaching profession. So, I’m not great fan of the thought of robot teachers, let’s put it like this. In short, I would be absolutely in favour of having something, like a chapter there, a guideline, teaching actually means a person. As simple as that. If we can*



all agree on that, that actually when we say teacher, we don't mean a robot. That's already something I take action on at this point."

While another union member said *"I also wanted us to be cautious of drifting in the use of robots to replace early childhood educators. Teachers cannot be replaced by robots. So I agree with one of the earlier speakers, and I want us to hold, and discuss this extensively."* He went on to say *"So in terms of technology, I want us to look at what ways can we use to enhance learning for our children, but not to replace our teachers with robots. That is very, very important."*

There were several themes and topics discussed throughout the discussion in relation to each country's perspective which provided a rich contextual insight into their current countries. In the section below we will discuss our interpretation of the findings.

Interpretation and discussion of findings

The key themes from the desk-based analysis, survey and focus group discussion revolve around the awareness, utilisation, and perceived effectiveness of the ILO Guidelines within ECE sector. How have they supported the implementation of a worker's rights within a national framework? All findings point towards establishing current contextual relevance of the ILO Guidelines for decent work for ECP in 10 years on. Recognising the evolvement of the sector, from the commitment of member states to the Sustainable Development Goals and the systematic changes that they will require. Also acknowledging the new right to education from birth through the Abidjan principles, to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic had on the ECP due to instability of working terms and conditions, and finally the commitment of states in the Transforming Education Summit and the Tashkent declaration to bring about the changes needed.

Participants within the focus group acknowledged the need to strengthen the initial ILO Guidelines by providing a more robust framework for collective bargaining. This would offer support by outlining clearer standards and objectives, supporting the unions' position in negotiations and advocating for improved working conditions and fair compensation for their members. A survey conducted by Education International (2023) on promoting decent work for ECP through social dialogue and collective bargaining, prior to this research, acknowledged that just over half of the respondents were familiar with the ILO Guidelines, emphasizing the need for heightened awareness efforts within union organisation. While many utilised it to build awareness within their membership, only 30% of those aware reported rare usage, especially in contexts with more advanced legislation, which suggests a need to reassess the ILO Guidelines to bring it up to date. The report goes on to acknowledge that approximately one-third of organizations expressed dissatisfaction with social dialogue practices on ECE, citing governmental disinterest and a lack of spaces for negotiation. In light of these challenges, many unions affirmed the occurrence of collective bargaining in their countries, primarily focusing on early childhood personnel's working conditions and wage discussions.

The participants of the focus group of this study also acknowledged the challenges in implementation the ILO Guidelines at local and national levels. This was due to the non-legally binding nature of the ILO Guidelines which has hindered their integration into collective agreements. This was amplified by the desk-based analysis recognising the multifaceted nature of ECE, involving formal and informal settings, non-state and public



entities, poses intricate challenges in applying standardised guidelines across diverse contexts (Minkin, 2023; Raikes et al., 2023). Both strands of research recognised the diversity, including variations between unionised and non-unionised staff, regulated, non-regulated ECE fields and personnel. Acknowledging the challenges faced by ECP in different educational systems further complicates the effective application of the ILO Guidelines. Often there are variations of rules and conditions between, with, and for different ECP roles and systems. This included distinctions between how public and non-state actors can impact unionised or non-unionised personnel. While the focus group, the desk-based analysis and supportive research by Education International all underscore challenges of implementation, they also emphasise the need for a review of evidence to address the complexities and enhance the ILO Guidelines' effectiveness across diverse contexts. The research findings acknowledge the composition of the ECP to be predominantly female, which is marked by a gender imbalance. This in turn, has unfairly contributed to the under-valuation and inadequate recognition of decent work in the field of ECE. Therefore, this sector often lacks policies and state recognition (Thompson, 2021). As a result, a substantial portion of the ECP operates beyond the visibility and influence of teachers' unions, limiting organised efforts to advocate for enforcing and promoting the ILO Guidelines. Limited evidence indicates that ECP within many countries, where child's rights-based approach is not fully implemented, often lack the unionised membership or fully representation by trade union (Early Childhood Workforce Initiatives, 2020; Shaeffer, 2015).

The participants of the focus group highlighted contemporary issues, such as technology integration and the evolving international legal landscape, including the passing of ILO Convention 190 on violence-free workplaces. Furthermore, the Abidjan Principles (2019) further compound the need for children's rights to education from birth. Within the focus group, global and local perspectives revealed discrepancies in the relevance and utilisation of the ILO Guidelines based on unique contextual factors in each country. This calls for a shift in thinking, recognising the influence of policymakers who may not prioritise input from ECP or union leaders. Within the focus group unanswered questions and concerns about the ILO Guidelines being overly unspecific were raised, indicating potential gaps in communication and knowledge sharing.

These findings have significant implications for both governments and unions involved in the ECE sector. For governments, understanding the multifaceted nature of the ECE sector, which encompasses formal and informal settings, non-state and public entities, is crucial. The complexities in governance and regulations underscore the need for a coordinated and standardised approach to ensure effective implementation of ILO Guidelines. Recognising the diversity within the ECP, including varied roles and gender imbalances, is essential for policymakers to tailor ILO Guidelines that address the unique challenges faced by the ECE sector.



For unions, the findings highlight the need to navigate the diverse roles and workplaces within the ECP. The predominantly female composition of the workforce and the limited union representation underscore the importance of advocating for the rights and recognition of ECP. Efforts should focus on overcoming barriers to unionisation, especially for those operating beyond the visibility of teachers' unions. Additionally, unions play a critical role in addressing the data gaps and limitations in comprehensive ECP information, advocating for improved monitoring and evaluation systems, and promoting awareness and utilisation of ILO Guidelines among their members.

To conclude, both governments and unions need to collaboratively address the complexities and challenges identified in the ECE sector to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of the ILO Guidelines. Governments and unions should consider these insights to develop targeted strategies that enhance awareness, promote utilisation, and ensure the relevance of the ILO Guidelines in the ever-evolving context of Early Childhood Education. Enhancing it further, a context-specific approach that considers the diverse nature of the personnel, governance structures, and regulatory employment frameworks is essential for promoting positive outcomes in the global ECE landscape. Reflections on the document's impact highlight the challenges arising from the non-binding nature of the ILO Guidelines, hindering effective monitoring and evaluation at various levels.



Conclusion

Participants reflected on the impact of the ILO Guidelines, proposing considerations for updates and enhancements based on changing conditions and international developments. One of the key challenges in implementation, arising from the non-binding nature of the ILO Guidelines, hinder effective monitoring and evaluation at local, national, and international levels. Upon reflection, the findings acknowledge a fundamental weakness of the ILO Guidelines, as they do not adequately capture the diversity of ECP. This diversity encompasses both unionised and non-unionised staff, professional and non-professional roles, and variations across different educational systems to name a few. The challenges stem from variations in the extent to which implementation is integrated within specific states and a prevalent lack of commitment from governments to adopt it. Participants from unions highlighted challenges in implementing these ILO Guidelines at both local and national levels, emphasizing factors such as the non-binding nature of the ILO Guidelines and the absence of integration into collective agreements. These tensions pose significant obstacles to the effective incorporation of ILO initiatives, raising pertinent questions about the overall success and sustainability of implementation efforts. The disparities in embedding implementation across states underscore the varied landscape of policy application. This diversity can be attributed to a range of factors, including different regional priorities, institutional and state funding capacities, and varying degrees of awareness among stakeholders. Such disparities introduce complexities in achieving a cohesive and standardised approach to implementation.

The discussion within the focus group also brought attention to the diversity within the sector, suggesting a need for updates to address contemporary issues and a potential shift in thinking to effectively embed the ILO Guidelines within the roles and states. A key reflection of the findings also recognises the limited awareness and utilisation of the ILO Guidelines offering valuable insights for further exploration and potential improvements in utilisation of the ILO Guidelines within the ECE sector. The insights from the focus group and the desk-based review highlight the critical need for strategic recommendations to address the identified challenges in the awareness, employment, and specificity of the ILO Guidelines within the ECE sector.

Recommendations: a roadmap towards revised ILO Guidelines 2024-2034

The recommendations presented in this section build upon the materials in the preceding sections. They take into account the desk-based analysis, the focus group discussion and survey within the field, and finally, our own deliberations as a research group.

A roadmap towards revised ILO Guidelines 2024 - 2034

1. *Adopt a long-term vision*

Promote the review of the ILO Guidelines for the next decade, to improve the sustainability of their implementation, combining data-driven insights with strong accountability, to shape the future of working conditions for ECP across the world. Recommend the ILO Guidelines incorporate the contemporary challenges in the field of ECE, the evolving conditions, and the global advancements. Additionally, we suggest integrating insights from recent academic works in ECE policy and practice to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of the ILO guidelines.

Responsibilities

- ILO, UNESCO and Global Partners: should lead the initiative by spearheading the process of incorporating insights from evolving conditions, global advancements, and contemporary challenges of the last 10 years within the field of ECE. Ensure alignment with international labour standards by integrating relevant educational perspectives. Foster a comprehensive approach that considers both ECP and educational dimensions.
- Educational International: Contribute expertise from the global education sector, providing insights into the specific needs and challenges educators face in the ECE field.
- National Governments: Participate in the revision process, offering context-specific input and ensuring that the ILO Guidelines are adaptable to diverse national educational systems, supporting labour activation within the ECE context.



In the long-term review process, supply data on the local context and ensure that the revised ILO Guidelines are effectively implemented and aligned with national priorities.

- National unions: Actively engage in the revision process, representing the interests of ECP and contributing valuable insights into the practical implementation and monitoring of ILO Guidelines at local and national levels.
- ECP: Offer practical input based on their experiences and different roles, ensuring that the revised ILO Guidelines resonate with the entire field's day-to-day and reflect the realities of ECP.

2. Address the diversity of the ECP

Recommend exploring the intricate dynamics of the global ECP, to identify and categorise the various types of work and personnel, including professional teachers, personnel, caregivers, and support staff. This exploration should encompass those working with children aged from birth to 8 years, considering both the state and non-state sectors across diverse regions. Explore progressive ways to establish unionisation within the different roles and fields of ECP in each member state. Bring unlicensed and unregulated elements of sectors within the regulated field of ECE. We also suggest refining this analysis by strengthening the foundations for evidence-based decision-making.

Responsibilities

- National Governments: Recommend the collection of national data to gain a nuanced understanding of the ECP composition within the early childhood education.
- Unions: Advocate for unions to launch a targeted campaign aimed at both raising awareness and aligning their recruitment policies. This initiative should emphasize the importance of embracing diversity within the ECE sector, promoting inclusive practices, contributing to a more representative and equitable work environment.
- Academics: Develop where needed context-based research initiatives tailored to the unique characteristics of each locality, facilitating a more in-depth exploration of the sector's dynamics to progress the ILO Guidelines in a localised context.
- Education International: It is recommended to conduct a global mapping exercise to assess the total representation of ECP, and governing regulations on a global scale. This will provide insights into the effectiveness of current representation and inform strategies to enhance ECP diversity and efficacy within the ECE sector.

3. Ensure complete and reliable information on ECP

Consolidate information and data collection systems, to allow strengthening the implementation and monitoring of policies aimed at ECP. Establish a comprehensive and collaborative platform to provide an in-depth understanding of the status of ECP such as benchmarked employment and working conditions to other educational systems.

Responsibilities

- National Governments and Unions: We recommend that national governments and unions take a leading role in establishing and coordinating comprehensive data collection systems to monitor and evaluate, the implementation of the ILO Guidelines within their respective jurisdictions. Taking into consideration the varied needs and challenges experienced by ECP at both local and national levels. The information should be disseminated amongst international, regional, and local stakeholders.
- Education International: Collaborate with relevant international organizations, such as UNESCO and ILO, to facilitate a global approach to data collection of the implementation, ensuring consistency and comparability across different regions.
- Educators: Play an active role in the data collection process by providing accurate and context-specific information about their roles, employment and working conditions.

4. Identify the frameworks that regulate ECP

Develop a comprehensive database of current legal employment frameworks that regulate work within different levels and sectors of ECP, as well as collective agreements in the private sector. Include the advances made by the feminist movement in the field of ECE. Identify best frameworks and practices that align with the implementation of the ILO Guidelines.

Responsibilities

- National Governments or relevant departments within Government: take the lead in compiling and updating legal frameworks at different levels of government and across sectors depending on the type or split systems of education and care within states. Ensure collaboration with relevant government departments to gather accurate and current data such as the central statistics office.
- ILO: Provide expertise on international labour standards and collaborate with national governments to ensure alignment with



the ILO Guidelines. Facilitate the identification of best practices and frameworks that enhance the implementation of the ILO Guidelines.

- UNESCO and Educational International: Ensure collaboration with National Governments reflects a holistic and accurate database that recognises the legal landscape governing ECP. Incorporating perspectives from government bodies, international organisations, unions, and educators.
- Unions: Actively participate in the development of the database by contributing insights into collective agreements in the state and non-state sectors highlighting the impacts on ECP. Represent the interests of ECP to ensure their needs are considered in the identification of best frameworks.

5. Disseminate and communicate the ILO Guidelines

Implement specific training programs at all levels of ECP, unions, and governments, to address the lack of knowledge about the ILO Guidelines. Mobilise public awareness about the social and educational importance of ECP and the relevance of decent work to ensure quality education for young children. State governments to implement training, unions to facilitate awareness, and states to provide resources and guidance.

Responsibilities

- ILO and Education International: Lead the dissemination efforts, providing expertise on labour standards, and collaborating with UNESCO to ensure a comprehensive approach to training programs.
- National Governments or Relevant Departments within Government: Implement the training programs at a national level, providing resources and guidance. Each state government should take a supportive role, providing resources and guidance for the implementation of training programs, and ensuring alignment with national priorities. Collaborate with ILO, UNESCO, and EI to ensure the incorporation of national contexts.
- Unions: Facilitate awareness by actively participating in the dissemination of the ILO Guidelines and contributing to the development of training programs, focusing on addressing the specific concerns and needs of ECP.

6. Guarantee the collective representation of Personnel

Guarantee the recognition of decent work and freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining of ECE workers, ensuring that states guarantee these rights of all ECP. Strengthen effective mechanisms for access to justice, which ensure protection and reparation of violated rights. State governments to ensure recognition, unions to advocate, and ILO to support mechanisms for collective bargaining.

Responsibilities

- ILO: Take a lead role in supporting mechanisms for collective bargaining, providing expertise, guidance, and support to ensure that international labour standards are upheld.
- Unions: Advocate for the recognition of decent work, freedom of association, and collective bargaining rights of ECP. Actively engage in negotiations to safeguard the rights of personnel.
- State Governments or Relevant Departments within Government: Ensure the recognition of these rights and provide the legal framework for collective bargaining. Collaborate with unions to establish effective mechanisms for access to justice.

7. Review process

Establish a comprehensive post-review monitoring mechanism, incorporating parameters and indicators for evaluating the effectiveness and impact of the ILO Guidelines.

Responsibilities

- Education International: Take a lead role in overseeing and coordinating the establishment of the post-review monitoring mechanism. Leverage its position as a union representation entity to ensure that the perspectives and concerns of ECP are adequately represented in the monitoring framework.
- ILO: Collaborate with Education International to provide technical expertise and guidance, ensuring that the monitoring mechanism aligns with international labour standards and effectively measures the impact of the ILO Guidelines.
- Unions: Actively participate in the development and implementation of the monitoring mechanism at a local level. Leverage their representation role to advocate for the inclusion of relevant parameters and indicators that address the unique needs and challenges faced by ECP.



- National Governments or Relevant Departments within Government: Implement the monitoring mechanism at a national level, aligning it with the country's specific context. Collaborate with unions and EI to ensure the framework considers national variations.
- Educators: Engage with localised unions to provide feedback on the practical implications of the ILO Guidelines. Actively participate in the monitoring process to ensure that the indicators reflect the real-world experiences of ECP.

Limitations of the Study

This study comes with certain limitations that warrant consideration. Firstly, we examined the ILO Guidelines through a desk-based analysis. Secondly, on analysing information gathered in a focus group and from a survey. Although this approach provided valuable insights, it is important to recognise that our interpretations were based on the actual sample of ten participants. As with all qualitative studies, we did not aim at achieving representability. However, even though participants, although diverse in their roles and regions, may not 'represent' the breath of perspectives within the entire global ECE field, the participation of five regional Vice Presidents of OMEP (or their representatives) lends weight to their expert views.

We recognise the difficulty of presenting well-defined indicators relating to the 10-year-old document at this stage. This challenge is attributed to the current dynamic nature of the ECE field, the challenges arising from factors such as outdated data, changes in the educational landscape, and an increased awareness of diversity within the sector, making it difficult to adapt indicators originally crafted for the regulated educational sector to the dynamic context of ECE. These complexities make it challenging to adapt indicators originally crafted for the regulated educational sector to the nuanced and evolving context of ECE. The diverse regulatory frameworks and the presence of both regulated and non-regulated fields, along with the involvement of private and non-state actors, further contribute to the intricacies of indicator development. Uneven data collection practices within ECE field, also pose challenges in formulating indicators that accurately capture the multifaceted dimensions of ECP's work and roles.

Given these challenges, we recommend a strategic and collaborative approach for the next steps. It is imperative to engage in a comprehensive consultation process involving key stakeholders, including Education International, unions, national governments, academics and ECP. This collaborative effort should focus on revisiting and adapting existing indicators to the unique characteristics of the ECE sector. Additionally, investing in new research methodologies and data collection strategies that are attuned to the dynamic nature within, of, and for ECE will be crucial in developing a robust and relevant monitoring indicator. To enhance the robustness and applicability of future studies, it is recommended that a larger follow-up project would certainly capture a broader picture to provide an enriched landscape of the global ECE sector. We would suggest prioritising the establishment of a dedicated working group or task force, comprising representatives from ILO, UNESCO, academics, Education International,



unions, government departments, and ECP of all role types, to collaboratively design and refine indicators.

This iterative process will help ensure that the monitoring framework is not only reflective of the current state of the ECE field, but also adaptable to its ongoing evolution. By fostering a collaborative and consultative approach, we aim to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of the monitoring indicators, ultimately contributing to the improvement of working conditions for ECP.

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Education Personnel

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Analysis of Application and Recommendations for Review

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