

Systems Thinking for Early Childhood Development



**HARVARD
T.H. CHAN**
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

The Systems Thinking for Early Childhood Development (ECD) Initiative is a partnership between ECDAN and Harvard University and supported by Porticus. It aims to integrate systems thinking approaches in the field of child development. The initiative is working toward advancing the knowledge and application of systems thinking approaches in ECD by producing and disseminating research and global knowledge products, working with country- and global-level partners to pilot systems solutions and design systems learning hubs, facilitating learning exchange and dialogue, and providing capacity building opportunities in systems thinking to a wide range of stakeholders including practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and donors. The initiative is steered by an Expert Advisory Group of 30+ experts in ECD and systems thinking across sectors.



**SYSTEMS
THINKING**
FOR ECD

Why Systems Thinking

In their early years, children experience a period of rapid and critical development and need access to quality nurturing care including, adequate nutrition, good health care, safety and protection, responsive caregiving, and early education. Typically, the provision of these services is complex as it involves multiple actors, sectors, and stakeholders at the governmental, non-governmental, and community levels who often work in silos. Despite this complexity, the ECD field typically emphasizes the implementation and scale-up of single interventions. This is insufficient to address the holistic needs and equitable outcomes of children, especially those living in vulnerable environments, at scale.

A systems approach, on the other hand, focuses on the relationships between actors and how they work together to provide children with optimal care. Improving ECD requires an understanding of the system as a whole and how its components interact. Systems thinking approaches thus hold the potential to accelerate ECD at scale effectively, equitably, and sustainably. It improves the understanding of a whole, its parts, interactions, interconnectedness between components, and their interdependencies.



What We Do

Equitable access to early opportunities requires a paradigm shift from intervention thinking to systems thinking to develop collective capabilities to plan, implement, and invest systemically. The systems initiative works across four pillars, with learning and knowledge exchange, and advocacy underpinning all areas of work.

Systems Investments

Integrating systems approaches in child development requires innovative approaches to shift the existing funding landscape toward systems-centric funding models. To achieve this, the team conducts individual donor consultations and facilitates donor dialogues to document the experience of systems donors, explore systems investment strategies, and understand and mitigate potential risks in systems investments in the ECD landscape.

Systems Design and Implementation

Systems tools, frameworks, and approaches for the field of child development need to be localized, adapted, and tested across various contexts for validation and wider use. Through the systems design and implementation workstream, we work closely with local partners, policymakers, experts, and other stakeholders to test and validate different systems tools including systems maps, facilitate learning exchange through webinars and workshops, and document case studies and examples across sectoral systems. Our ongoing work includes a deep exploration and understanding of humanitarian ECD systems, childcare systems, and parenting systems across low- and middle-income countries.

Systems Research

Systems approaches have been well-developed and practiced across sectors like agriculture, WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene), and health, to name a few. However, there is limited knowledge of how to integrate these approaches into child development. To address this gap, the team undertakes research activities, including landscape reviews and qualitative studies to explore effective strategies to integrate system thinking approaches in child development.

Systems Measurement

Measuring systems change is complex, and there is an urgent need in the field for appropriate data and indicators to measure systemic change. We are currently consolidating existing systems measurement frameworks, tools, approaches, and methods and drawing out their implications for ECD as well as hosting virtual capacity building learning sessions on systems thinking and evaluation.



Find more resources on systems thinking on our webpage

<https://ecdand.org/ecd-systems/>

Contact: info@ecdand.org