

# Early Childhood Development

UNICEF Australia's Priority Programs Results 2017 – 2020



# The first thing we would like to say is thank you.

Thank you for generously supporting UNICEF Australia's work with children, families and their communities around the world. Your support is having a huge impact for children, making sure that all children have the opportunity for the best start in life, and that no one is left behind.



**119,306 children**

benefitting from Early Childhood Development programs to ensure they have the best start in life



**35,654**

children accessing early learning opportunities, such as community-based preschools



**7,036**

teachers, health workers and community members trained in delivering high quality, inclusive early childhood development services



**163**

new early childhood education centres established



**97,875**

children benefitting from health and nutrition interventions



**208,396**

parents and caregivers receiving information and support to provide quality nurturing care to young children



**4**

countries supported to improve coordination of early childhood development services

# Where we work

*This map highlights the countries in the world where Priority Programs for children, families and communities were implemented.*



## Cambodia

### Child Protection:

Protect children from violence, abuse, exploitation, and unnecessary family separation.

### Early Childhood Development:

Prioritising inclusion to meet the holistic needs of children.



## Pacific

### Child Survival:

Saving lives by protecting children against rotavirus in Kiribati.

Drone delivery of vaccines and health supplies to remote, inaccessible communities in Vanuatu.

Sustainable introduction of rotavirus, pneumococcal and HPV vaccines in 9 Pacific Island Countries to improve child survival.

### Early Childhood Development:

Investing in Guadalcanal's best human capital – children.

### WASH:

Reach for the Stars: improving access to WASH in schools using the Three Star Approach in Fiji.

### COVID-19 Response:

COVID-19 support to health, nutrition, WASH and communication.

COVID-19 response to education in the Solomon Islands.



## Laos

### Child Protection:

Strengthening community based child protection services for vulnerable children.

### Child Survival:

Addressing chronic malnutrition in rural communities.

### Early Childhood Development:

Improving access to early learning for remote communities from ethnic minorities.

### WASH:

Improving access to WASH in rural Savannakhet and providing support to communities in the flood impacted region of Attapeu.

### COVID-19 Response:

COVID-19 support to education, ECD and child protection.

### Social Protection:

Leaving no one behind: establishing the basis for social protection floors.



## Indonesia

### Child Survival:

Scaling up the integrated management of acute malnutrition.



## Myanmar

### Child Protection:

An integrated child protection system for the prevention and response to violence against children.

### WASH:

Thant Shin Star: Improving access to WASH in remote rural schools by piloting the Three Star Approach in Chin and Kachin states



## Papua New Guinea

### Child Protection:

Supporting accelerated implementation of Child Protection Act and National Child Protection Policy.

### Child Survival:

Roll out of early essential newborn care (EENC) with a focus on prevention and management of neonatal hypothermia.

### Early Childhood Development:

Ensuring equitable access to ECD for all children in Papua New Guinea.

### COVID-19 Response:

Responding to child protection and nutrition needs in COVID-19 response.



## Timor-Leste

### Child Protection:

Momentum and Opportunity: Strengthening the Child and Family Welfare System.

### Child Survival:

Improvement of healthcare quality for maternal and child survival.

### Early Childhood Development:

Inspiring teachers and accelerating learning through play.

### COVID-19 Response:

Addressing the secondary impacts of COVID-19.



## Zimbabwe

### Child Survival:

Improving child survival through quality maternal, newborn and child health services in rural health facilities and communities.

### WASH:

Improving access to WASH in remote and isolated schools.



## Bangladesh

### Early Childhood Development:

Ensuring children in Rohingya refugee communities don't miss out on the best start in life.



# Foreword

Early childhood, from conception to age five, is a unique time in a child's life, when their cognitive and physical development occurs at a pace which is never again repeated. During the first two years of life, a child's brain is developing more than 1,000 connections per second, and 85% of the brain is developed by age three. In order to have the best possible start in life, all children need good health and nutrition, stimulation and early learning, and protection and care – they need to Eat, Play, Love.

But many children are missing out on these essential foundations. UNICEF estimates that 249 million children around the world are at risk of missing development milestones.

This can have a negative ripple effect on each child for the rest of their life. In Asia Pacific, issues of chronic and acute malnutrition, lack of access to quality pre-primary education, high rates of violence against children and limited support for parents to provide nurturing care, means that children are disadvantaged from the very beginning.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened the challenges faced by young children and their families. Preschools are closed, economic downturn increases the risk of malnutrition, pressures placed on families increases the rate of violence in the home and reduces parents' capacity to provide that

responsive care and stimulation that young children so need.

Evidence shows that early childhood presents one of the most cost-effective times to invest in changing the course of a child's life. We know what works in each individual sector – how to prevent and treat malnutrition, how to deliver early childhood education – and drawing on this knowledge and experience to provide coordinated services which directly and comprehensively meet the needs of children and their families during this period can significantly accelerate the outcomes of each individual service.



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“Through early childhood development we can invest in the potential of all young children to transform the future for themselves and their communities.”

– Alice Hall, International Programs Manager, Early Childhood Development, UNICEF Australia

# UNICEF Australia's Early Childhood Development Program

UNICEF Australia's Early Childhood Development (ECD) Program combines the components of nurturing care to provide high quality, integrated and inclusive services to young children and their families. Since 2017, UNICEF Australia has supported ECD projects which improve coordination of services for improved effectiveness and efficiency, strengthen the capacity of frontline workers to deliver high quality health, nutrition, education and protection services, and support parents to provide nurturing care. Our projects take an equity approach, to ensure that children from the most marginalised groups benefit.



Investments in the early years are most effective when implemented using a multisectoral approach. By bringing together the sectors of health, education, nutrition and child protection, projects can support the child as a whole, considering all their developmental needs. The Nurturing Care Framework (above) demonstrates how all the needs of young children can be brought together in a coherent and effective approach. Across the region, UNICEF is working with government and non-government partners to improve the systems in place to ensure that children and families receive the support they need for the best start in life.

Over the 2017-20 period, UNICEF Australia supported ECD projects in six countries in Asia Pacific, contributing to the development of new and innovative models which lay the foundation for sustainable and scalable change, with the potential to change the course of child development for many more children.

In Cambodia, Laos, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Solomon Islands, UNICEF supported the establishment of strong national or provincial government ECD coordination mechanisms. Through these mechanisms, ministries of

health, education, protection, finance and planning work together to find more effective and efficient mechanisms to reach children and families, strengthening service delivery and reaching the hardest to reach. In Laos this is through a multisectoral parenting package which is delivered through community volunteers, health centres, and preschools for improved reach and consistency of messaging. In Solomon Islands, this is a formalised government mechanism which is committed to creating sustainable change for its youngest citizens. In Cambodia and PNG, the delivery of health services through preschools has enabled efficient improvement in their coverage, while preschools enhance their role as community focal points for families with young children.

Early childhood is one of the best times to begin to address disadvantage and inequality. By ensuring that all children receive all that they need from the first days of life and addressing early any barriers which prevent full participation in society, any negative longer-term impacts can be minimised as much as possible. By strengthening access to and quality of services for children from marginalised groups,

such as ethnic minorities and children with disabilities, early childhood projects can truly change the story for all.

For example, by ensuring that children with disabilities receive early intervention services, and are supported to participate in early childhood education, the foundations are laid for improved school readiness, and a smooth transition to primary school for children with disabilities. Similarly, by promoting disability inclusion messages among parents of young children, stigma around disability can begin to be addressed, creating a more inclusive environment for all children to access services equally.

During 2017-20, UNICEF Australia supported disability inclusive early childhood education in five countries, training over 2,000 early childhood teachers in inclusive education. In Papua New Guinea and Cambodia, this inclusive education training has been institutionalised in teacher training colleges, ensuring that all new early childhood teachers will graduate with a strong knowledge of how to create inclusive classroom environments which meet the learning needs of all students.

# Improving access to early learning for remote, ethnic minority communities in Laos



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40% of five year-olds in Laos do not have access to pre-primary education, especially those in rural and remote communities and children from ethnic minorities. So through this project, UNICEF has worked to improve early learning opportunities for children in hard-to-reach communities.

## Improving access to and quality of ECE

Through this project, UNICEF has established 90 community-based school readiness centres, to provide access to quality early childhood education for over 3,000 children aged three to five, living in rural communities. Many of these centres are in predominantly ethnic minority communities, aiming to provide a mechanism which enables children to learn from a teacher who speaks their mother-tongue language, and commence learning Lao to support their transition to school. Of these 90 centres, 28 have already become self-sustaining, and three have become fully government-funded preschools. In the three years since the project started, UNICEF has been able to establish triple the number of new community-based school readiness

centres than originally planned.

UNICEF has also been working with 30 existing government preschools in rural and remote areas to enhance the knowledge of preschool teachers to provide effective early childhood education through hands-on learning, so that they can best meet the developmental needs of their students and prepare them for school.

## WASH in preschools

Clean water and sanitation facilities are essential infrastructure in any school. Without them, children may not attend school, or be more likely to become sick and miss days of school. Through this project, UNICEF installed water pumps, toilets and handwashing stations in 33 preschools, and trained teachers and students to apply good hygiene in their school routine. The facilities have been especially designed to be an appropriate size for young children, making them safe and easy to use. For many communities, this has become the first access they have to clean water nearby, and so the

installation of these facilities has benefitted the whole community.

## Supporting parents

Parents and families are the most essential part of a young child's life, being their first and main point of contact to receive the nurturing care they need to grow and develop. But one challenge many parents face in providing this care is lack of access to timely, trustworthy information about child development. That's why UNICEF and partners developed the **Love and Care for Every Child** parenting package – a collection of resources and information for Lao parents providing accurate information on all aspects of child development. This package is designed to provide the information which Lao parents told us they were lacking, dispel myths and harmful cultural norms, and promote gender equality and disability inclusion. The package will be piloted in two provinces from 2021, with home visits to provide the highest quality support for parents and caregivers.

Taason wants to be a teacher when he grows up. He wants to teach other children what he is learning every day in his community-based preschool, established by UNICEF. Taason's mother Rao just wants Taason to have the chance to finish school. "We want them to succeed because that's something we did not have. The community preschool program is a good start for them to have that chance."

The Ministry of Education plans to upgrade Taason's community preschool into a government-run preschool to ensure that it can continue to operate sustainably and provide high quality education to more children in the future.



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"I want to prepare children to learn better. I have seen that those who don't have a hard time getting to primary school"

– Kham, Taason's community preschool teacher



# Prioritising inclusion to meet the holistic needs of children in Cambodia



UNICEF is working with preschools and health centres in northeast Cambodia as critical platforms for delivering holistic early childhood services to children and their parents, enabling young children in northeast Cambodia to grow and develop to their full potential.

## Inclusive, effective preschool classrooms

Access to preschool education in Cambodia has improved significantly over recent years, but children with disabilities and children from ethnic minorities continue to experience exclusion from these early learning opportunities. During this project, UNICEF and the Ministry of Education have worked to address this through training and mentoring over 200 preschool teachers to provide disability-inclusive education, multilingual education and promote socio-emotional learning. Teachers received high quality learning materials and resources to help them apply these skills in the classroom. Preschools have also been supported to improve playgrounds, and water and sanitation facilities to create child-friendly learning environments.

## Preschool Health Screenings

Preschools provide a strategic location for young children to receive health and nutrition services, particularly where they may have missed accessing these services through health centres. UNICEF has supported

collaboration of provincial health and education authorities in Kratie and Ratanakiri to pilot implementation of health screenings in preschools and provision of catch-up health services.

During 2018-20, nearly 7,600 children were screened and follow up services provided to over 700 of these children. This included over 60 children treated for severe acute malnutrition (SAM), 600 children receiving catch up vaccinations, and nearly 50 children receiving services for vision impairments (such as glasses and corrective surgery).

Based on the success of this approach, UNICEF is working to scale it up at the provincial level and to replicate the model in other provinces.

## Improving Nutrition

UNICEF is working to address malnutrition across Cambodia by scaling up access to nutrition screening and treatment. Progress towards this includes an update to the national guidelines on treatment of SAM and training for over 3,500 health workers to implement these guidelines. Over 63,000 children have

been screened, and 5,700 children treated as a result.

UNICEF has partnered with the Ministry of Health and a private sector company – Danish Food Care – to develop, test and manufacture locally produced nutrition supplements and therapeutic food for young children. These foods are designed to be a low cost, local alternative to existing therapeutic foods such as Plumpy Nut, which meets the taste and texture preferences of Cambodian children. The local factory now distributes these products to health centres and preschools, and they are available as nutritious snacks in local shops. This marks the first time locally produced therapeutic food has been used in Cambodia to treat children with SAM, offering an effective and sustainable solution as the Government scales up the prevention and management of acute malnutrition.

**“I really didn’t know how to help children with disabilities. Now, I have the techniques and knowledge.”**

- Sorn Socheta, preschool teacher in Kratie Province



“He was malnourished and got sick often...he was not growing well.” Socheat’s son, Minghak, now 30 months old, was diagnosed as having severe acute malnutrition through a UNICEF-supported project. He and his mother were transported to a nearby Health Centre where they were provided with Ready-To-Use therapeutic food to help Minghak recover at home. Socheat also received information about health, hygiene and nutrition, resulting in many changes in her daily life, such as the construction of a shaded shelter in the fields for children, handwashing before meals and provision of nutritious meals.

# Ensuring equitable access to ECD for all children in Papua New Guinea



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Prior to 2020, preschool education did not exist in the education system of PNG. ECD was mainly available in urban areas, delivered by private providers, churches and NGOs, but numbers were incredibly low – reaching only 8% of four to five year-olds across the country. [UNICEF has responded to this challenge in two ways](#) – by establishing 73 new ECD centres in hard to reach communities, benefiting over 7,000 children, including 245 children with disabilities; and by working closely with the PNG Government to advocate for the importance of early learning and early childhood development. This has culminated in the momentous announcement in early 2020 by PNG's Minister for Education that, for the first time, two years of preschool would be incorporated into PNG's education system.

## Scale up of access to education across

Papua New Guinea's remote and rugged geography will be challenging, but over the past three years UNICEF has been working with partners to prepare for this. In 2019, supported by UNICEF, the first ever cohort of preschool trainee teachers commenced study at PNG Education Institute, paving the way for professionalising the workforce. UNICEF is also supporting the government to plan budget allocation for sustainable scale up of preschool education by government and partners to reach all children nationally by 2030.

Amidst this national level work, UNICEF also worked to directly impact the lives of communities in three Provinces – Milne Bay, Morobe and Western Highlands. UNICEF supported communities to establish and run ECD centres, often making education available in that community for the first time. UNICEF and partners provided

training, seed funding, learning materials and ongoing support and mentoring to community teachers and newly established Boards of Management to ensure they are able to provide high quality, inclusive, play-based early learning for children. ECD centres also work with local health centres to undertake health screening and provide basic services.

[Inspiringly, communities have co-contributed](#) to this process to provide educational opportunities for their children. Community members built classrooms and playgrounds, helped make additional learning resources out of locally available materials, and supported the volunteer community teachers, through contributions of funds and food.

A priority for UNICEF has been ensuring that all children have access to the ECD centres. In PNG, because children with disabilities are often

excluded from education, UNICEF prioritises inclusion for children with disabilities in ECD, as a gateway to also supporting their effective transition to school. Training teachers on inclusive education, supporting communities to build physically accessible classrooms, and actively engaging with parents to promote and facilitate enrolment of children with disabilities has led to great success. The enrolment rate of children with disabilities has tripled in just two years in target communities, demonstrating success in meeting the needs of all students through providing an inclusive and equitable learning environment.

[“When there was no school in the area, our small children suffered. Now that we have a school here...we see many good changes in the small children.”](#)

– Peter, father of two



© UNICEF PNG/2020/Campbell

“This classroom was built by us, the mothers... We wanted to build a school because all the schools are too far away from our community,” says Jacklyn, a member of the Board of Management for her community's new ECD centre. Following training and support from UNICEF, Jacklyn and other mothers in her community led the way to establish an ECD centre to ensure that their children could access early learning opportunities for the first time. Now UNICEF has also supported the installation of a water tank at the centre so that they can continue to operate, while implementing COVID-19 health precautions.





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# Inspiring teachers and accelerating learning through play in Timor-Leste

In Timor-Leste, 27% of students repeat the first year of primary school. Of the many complex reasons for this, one key contributor is that, not having had access to any early learning opportunities, many children simply aren't ready for school. While UNICEF and the Ministry of Education work together to increase access to pre-school education, this innovative project is rapidly increasing school readiness among children and helping young students transition into a primary school environment which is welcoming and conducive to learning.

“This school is an example to which other schools can look for inspiration... I hope this continues, because children’s futures are in our hands.”

- Cidalio Leite, Timor-Leste Ministry of Education

School readiness can be defined in three parts:

- Ready children** - children moving into and adjusting to new learning environments
- Ready families** - families learning to work with a sociocultural system (i.e. education)
- Ready schools** - schools making provisions for admitting new children into the system, representing individual and societal diversity

To improve school readiness, UNICEF developed a new approach, working hand-in-hand with schools to test this,

with the aim that it can be quickly and cost-effectively scaled up nationally to address some of the underlying challenges hindering learning. Over the past two years, this project has seen the following achievements:

- Training for Grade 1 and 2 teachers in over 20 primary schools to deliver a play-based curriculum to their students, accelerating their learning and creating a child friendly classroom environment
- Establishing a buddy system whereby over 200 Grade 5 and 6 students have buddied with over 900 Grade 1 and 2 students to provide peer support, support play-based learning and create a more welcoming and friendly school environment, especially for students new to school
- Engaging with over 1,000 parents to promote play-based learning in school and at home, and delivering a back-to-school campaign
- Finalising a model for a bridging program which will provide

accelerated school readiness and learning for children who have been unable to access preschool

It may sound simple, but the practice of teachers engaging in play with their students is an unusual concept in Timor-Leste, and one which teachers are now embracing. Following training and support from UNICEF, Grade 1 teachers use games and songs to teach their new students, rather than teaching by rote. This has made an immediate difference to not only students’ learning, but their engagement as well – young students are developing a love of school and of learning which hopefully continue to inspire them into the future.

Following the successes of this pilot, UNICEF and the Ministry of Education are looking to evaluate the approach and scale it up to other municipalities.



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Sonia, a Grade 1 teacher, took part in the UNICEF teachers’ training session on school readiness, where she learnt how to use new learning materials to engage in play with her young students, creating a friendly and welcoming environment which facilitates improved learning for all.

“I now have the skills to teach children through play, which is different to what I have done before,” she says. “I think these teaching methods will help us to create child-friendly learning environments, especially for those new to school. I think these materials will really help them pick things up quickly.”

# Investing in Guadalcanal's best human capital – children

Early childhood development outcomes in Guadalcanal province in Solomon Islands show how vast scores of young children are deprived of their rights to optimal development. The province has the highest rates of stunting in the country – 36% - and one of the lowest pre-primary enrolment rates.

UNICEF is working at a regional, national and sub-national level across the Pacific to implement strategies which improve early childhood outcomes for all children. Through this project, UNICEF has partnered with the Guadalcanal Provincial Government to design and test a new model to coordinate and implement quality services for young children and their families. This game changing approach is designed to provide strong evidence as to how this approach can be scaled up nationally, and across the Pacific region. The project focuses on three key outcome areas:

**Establish a provincial mechanism to coordinate and strengthen delivery of holistic ECD services**

Through UNICEF support, Guadalcanal has now established an ECD Provincial Technical Working Group, which is now overseeing the strategic coordination and implementation of ECD projects and services in Guadalcanal. The purpose of this Technical Working Group is to improve

collaboration between health, education, child protection and other sectors, to improve efficiency and effectiveness of ECD service delivery, ensuring that young children and families receive timely, relevant services which ultimately improve children's healthy development.

**Build capacity of frontline workers to deliver quality services for young children and their parents**

ECD workers include health workers, preschool teachers, police, and social welfare workers. Many of these workers do not receive regular professional development and have very limited knowledge about how children develop in the early years. UNICEF has developed training to support skill development of frontline workers, such as how health workers can conduct community consultation sessions to improve the quality of health services. Ultimately all relevant frontline workers in Guadalcanal will receive training in early childhood development, including nurturing care and the building blocks for brain development, and how workers in each sector can best support this

process. Under this project, for the first time ever, Guadalcanal Province now has a trained social welfare officer, who has commenced provision of social welfare services, including responding to child protection cases. Through this social welfare officer, Guadalcanal is now able to provide a formal referral mechanism for any child protection concerns identified in the community.

**Support parents, caregivers and community actors to provide nurturing care for their young children**

So far, over 700 parents and caregivers have participated in community workshops about child development, positive discipline and protecting children from harm. These workshops will be expanded to include information across all sectors relevant to early childhood development, ensuring all parents in Guadalcanal can access the information they need to provide quality nurturing care.

**"It is a bold step, and I see better a Guadalcanal Province in the coming years."**

- Gloria, ECD Manager, Guadalcanal



The Pacific region is leading the way on ECD, developing best practice models for coordination and monitoring to improve outcomes for children. And Guadalcanal is modelling sub-national implementation of this approach.

"ECD is a new concept for most leaders in the province but seems so easy for them to connect to ... they are really serious in bridging the gap and are considering good options to make things possible for children in Guadalcanal Province," says Guadalcanal ECD Manager, Gloria .



# Ensuring children in Rohingya refugee communities in Bangladesh don't miss out on the best start in life



Over 16,000 Rohingya children under the age of five live in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Many have lived in the camps their entire life, and all experience hardship on a daily basis. Due to restrictions on movement and work rights, families rely on humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs.

UNICEF is responsible for delivery of health, education and nutrition services

in many parts of the refugee camps, and is now working to integrate these services to provide the most effective support to families to give their children the best start in life, despite the difficult conditions in which they live. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the Rohingya communities in Cox's Bazar, but UNICEF and partners have been able to continue to ensure families have access to essential services in the safest possible way.

Through this project, UNICEF has been able to provide essential early childhood services to children and their families.

- Over 6,800 children are accessing early learning services, delivered by 260 trained facilitators, all women, who deliver these services in their homes
- Nearly 900 children under five have been treated for severe acute malnutrition, with nutrition counselling

and support provided to caregivers

- Over 15,000 pregnant women, mothers, fathers and caregivers provided with information on infant and young child feeding, positive health behaviours, newborn care and child development
- Over 200 ECD kits procured and delivered to nutrition facilities to promote play and stimulation as an important component of recovery from malnutrition
- Nearly 1,700 pregnant women provided with four antenatal care visits for safe and healthy pregnancy
- 720 pregnant adolescent girls identified as having high risk pregnancies and provided with additional antenatal care
- Over 2,000 newborns provided with essential newborn care

One significant achievement which has been achieved through this project is the incorporation of play into the provision of nutrition services.

Evidence shows that stimulation and

play can contribute to faster and more successful recovery from chronic malnutrition, and this can contribute to improved cognitive development. So UNICEF has provided nutrition centres with ECD kits containing toys and play materials, and provided training to health workers in those centres on how to use the kits, and how to engage with parents to use the play materials while they are waiting to access services. The ECD kits are used to stimulate play, foster a sense of stability and safety and provide children with learning materials. This has been highly successful, and UNICEF has received requests to expand this approach further.

**"Each day the children are bursting with energy, they learn how to share, how to play together, while building blocks of knowledge for the future."**

– Khaleda, volunteer ECD teacher



"I feel empowered knowing that I am contributing to something positive for these children. Each day I see them learn new skills, while remembering things from the day before. I am also enhancing my own skills through teacher trainings," says Khaleda, a volunteer ECD teacher and Rohingya refugee who teaches young children in her home. Rohingya women face limitations on their movements due to cultural norms in their communities. Delivering home-based learning offers opportunities for Rohingya women they may not find elsewhere.

UNICEF Australia would like to thank its supporters for their generosity in making the above-mentioned Early Childhood Development projects possible and giving over 119,000 children in Asia Pacific the best start in life. The results and impacts delivered by these projects would not be possible without your support.

UNICEF Australia would like to acknowledge the support of the Australian Government through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP). ANCP funds contributed to ECD projects in Cambodia, Laos, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands.

Special thanks to IKEA, AMP and Sol EDU for their targeted support to ECD projects in Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. Their investment in children from the earliest years has enabled us to change the story for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Further thanks to those donors who aren't listed here, but whose generous, ongoing support and commitment to early childhood makes it possible to achieve the results reported here.