

2023 ASEAN LEADERS' DECLARATION ON EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Adopted in Jakarta, Indonesia on 5 September 2023

WE, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (hereinafter referred to as "ASEAN") namely, Brunei Darussalam, the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Republic of Indonesia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Malaysia, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, the Republic of the Philippines, the Republic of Singapore, the Kingdom of Thailand, and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, met at the 43rd ASEAN Summit in Jakarta on 5 September 2023;

RECALLING our commitments to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1995), the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015), the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (2012), the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Education for Out-of-School Children and Youth (2016), the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Ending All Forms of Malnutrition (2017), the ASEAN Declaration on Rights of Children in the Context of Migration (2019), the Declaration on the Protection of Children from All Forms of Exploitation and Abuse in ASEAN (2019), the ASEAN Roadmap on the Elimination of All Forms of Child Labour (2020), and the Declaration on the Elimination of Bullying in ASEAN (2021), which promote, respect and protect the rights of the child;

COGNISANT of the global and regional commitments on ECCE such as the SDG4 - Education 2030, the Putrajaya Declaration in 2016, the Kathmandu Statement of Action in 2018, and the global Tashkent Declaration and Commitments to Action for Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education in 2022; and **RECOGNISING** the opportunities to fully operationalise these commitments in Southeast Asia's context;

REAFFIRMING our commitments in the Declaration on Digital Transformation of Education Systems in ASEAN, adopted at the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summit in 2022, which recognise the need to adopt and transform education systems, including Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), in relation to the rapidly digitalised economy and society, promote the acquisition of relevant skills and competencies, and ensure that ASEAN education systems remain relevant in a rapidly changing world of work, society, and the environment;

RECOGNISING that all ASEAN Member States, individually and collectively, have made significant progress in improving the lives of children across the region and that significant efforts have been made by governments in Southeast Asia to provide a holistic and integrated approach to delivering ECCE services;

COGNISANT that children are better able to achieve their full developmental potential as adults and participate successfully in economic, social, and civic life when they are provided strong nurturing care in their early years – healthy, well-nourished, safe, stimulated, and learning; and that early childhood care and education is regarded as a means of promoting equity and social justice and as a vehicle for social mobility, inclusive economic growth and advancing sustainable development;

ACKNOWLEDGING that even before the pandemic, the ECCE sub-sector was already dealing with a wide range of challenges such as limited access, inadequate financing, uncoordinated governance, and fragmented policy support. This situation has now been exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19 on young children's learning, development, and home environments which have led to serious losses in cognitive and social-emotional learning;

NOTING with deep concern that post-pandemic recovery programs did not pay adequate attention to these impacts of COVID-19 on young children, especially those most marginalised and vulnerable, despite the fact that the early years are a crucial period of rapid cognitive and socio-emotional development that lays the foundation for good health and nutrition, later learning and future educational success, and economic productivity throughout life;

MINDFUL that full recovery in ECCE can only be realised when children, families, ECCE programs, and the sector as a whole are supported in areas such as policy, governance and finance; access to quality and inclusive ECCE services; a competent and adequately rewarded ECCE workforce; and innovations to promote resilient ECCE systems;

REALISING that young children of today will grow up as adults in a world very different than that of their parents, challenged by the impacts of climate change, environmental degradation, conflict, an increasing social and economic disparities and vulnerabilities, and digital technology and that a transformed ECCE sector will play an essential role in helping children and their families gain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to meet these challenges; and finally,

REAFFIRMING our continued commitment to ensuring universal access to, and improving the quality of both formal and non-formal ECCE.

DO HEREBY AGREE TO:

1. **ACCELERATE** children's access to and participation in high-quality inclusive ECCE, particularly for those from the most vulnerable and marginalised groups, in accordance with prevailing national laws, policies and regulations, to help ensure children's holistic and integrated development by stimulating their early learning and enhancing their health, nutrition, and well-being. These groups include but not limited to indigenous children, children with disabilities, economically underprivileged children, and children subjected to child labour;
2. **ENDEAVOR** to progressively allocate adequate percentage of education expenditures to ECCE, ensuring a child's access to one year of pre-primary education, and prioritising the poorest and most disadvantaged, where applicable;
3. **DEVELOP** a Roadmap for the implementation of this Declaration through concrete activities and actions that will complement the workplans of the ASEAN education sector and other relevant Sectoral Bodies;

QUALITY

4. **ENSURE** that the ECCE curriculum and pedagogy are play-based, child-centered, culturally responsive and based on local knowledge; are able to adapt to future crises such as climate change; promote global citizenship and sustainable development; protect child's rights; strengthen gender equality; respect diversity and are inclusive for every child; and, where possible, make available instruction in a child's mother tongue;
5. **DEVELOP** a monitoring system in order to evaluate and improve delivery of ECCE services and ensure operators and educators are exercising due care and diligence, teachers' professional program, development and implementation of curriculum in formal ECCE settings, cross-sectoral collaboration, and financing mechanisms;

ACCESS

6. **COMMIT** to developing affordable and accessible quality ECCE, both formal and non-formal, including complementary health, nutrition, and protection services, particularly for children living in disadvantaged and vulnerable environments;
7. **PRIORITISE** ECCE in political agenda by developing policy and legal frameworks, with sufficient budgetary allocation to ensure the fulfilment of every child's access to ECCE, particularly access to at least one year of preprimary education;
8. **STRENGTHEN** the transition from ECCE to Primary Education by aligning their curriculum and pedagogy, ensuring that training programs for ECCE and primary education teachers are also aligned and promote a seamless transition from play-based to other pedagogical methods, and deepening collaboration between relevant stakeholders;
9. **DEVELOP** policies and processes to ensure a smooth transition from ECCE to pre-primary education;

THE ECCE WORKFORCE

10. **ENHANCE** the knowledge, skills and competencies, and professional status of the ECCE workforce (teachers, facilitators, leaders, operators), including those who work in non-formal and non-state sectors. This should include providing a clear pathway for their future career growth;
11. **EXPAND** both pre-service and in-service high-quality professional development programs that are relevant and tailored to staff's needs for formal and non-formal teachers;
12. **ENSURE** that teachers' well-being is safeguarded especially post-COVID-19, by improving teachers' working conditions and remuneration and providing mental health support;
13. **TACKLE** the existing gender bias in the ECCE workforce by encouraging participation by men and women;

ECCE SECTOR GOVERNANCE AND PARTNERSHIPS

14. **PROMOTE** inter-ministerial collaboration in each country and intergovernmental agency collaboration across the region;
15. **STRENGTHEN** sustainable partnerships and cooperation between governments with civil society, international agencies, academic institutions, and the private sector. These partnerships should aim to supply the facilities and infrastructure needed for high quality inclusive ECCE and deliver holistic, integrated, and inclusive ECCE leading to stronger individual development and greater social equity;
16. **REINFORCE** the ECCE multisectoral collaboration among civil societies, international agencies, and private sectors;

PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

17. **ENHANCE** the capacity of parents and other caregivers in providing nurturing care to their children while ensuring that such actions are implemented in a culturally and linguistically sensitive manner and in ways that support their mental health;
18. **STRESS** the importance of shared parenting approaches in parenting education programs to encourage more gender-balanced child care and education;
19. **SUPPORT** parents to enroll and keep their children in ECCE programs through parent education, local ECCE campaigns, and, for vulnerable groups, family support policies;
20. **PROVIDE** support for parents to help them ensure a smooth transition for their children from home to ECCE and then to the early grades of primary education;

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

21. **EXPLORE and OPTIMISE** digital technology as a vehicle to provide alternative models of ECCE teacher professional development in order to provide greater accessibility, availability, and flexibility for teachers, especially in rural areas. To achieve this goal, central and local governments need to ensure digital equity between urban and rural areas;
22. **EQUIP** teachers with skills to use technology in a safe and ethical manner. This includes knowledge in regard to children's safety and protection in the online environment;
23. **DEVELOP** a multisectoral monitoring system for ensuring accountability and enhancing the effectiveness of the ECCE programme;
24. **INTRODUCE** digital technology to provide learning resources and training programs for parents and other caregivers;

FINANCE

25. **DEVELOP** evidence-based policy frameworks that mobilise and encourage the use of resources from multiple sources such as the governments, private sectors, international agencies and communities in the most efficient and ethical ways with priorities given to access and participation for the most vulnerable and marginalised children;
26. **TASK** the ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting (ASEM) to oversee the overall implementation of this Declaration, with the support of the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Education (SOM-ED), and in collaboration with other relevant ASEAN Sectoral Ministerial Bodies.

Adopted on this Fifth Day of September in the Year Two Thousand and Twenty-Three in a single original copy in the English Language.