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POLICY BRIEF

# Intergenerational Pathways to Peace: Putting Children First

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this brief, we argue that Early Childhood Development (ECD) is a catalyst for intergenerational peacebuilding and community stability. ECD interventions, encompassing learning, stimulation, and social cohesion, foster vital skills for peaceful societies. We argue that nutrition serves as a critical entry point for implementing integrated ECD initiatives, which hold promise in advancing strategic peacebuilding. We underscore the significance of adequate nutrition and caregiver empowerment. Nutrition's role in positive social behavior and cognitive development is a critical component, offering



a pathway to a more peaceful society. Quality caregiving, influenced by caregiver mental health, directly impacts child development. Programs targeting maternal well-being, like Pakistan's Thinking Healthy initiative, yield positive outcomes for both mothers and children. Moreover, we highlight the essential pillars of social cohesion and economic development in peacebuilding. These elements reinforce each other, reducing conflict risks and fostering peaceful societies. Ultimately, we emphasize the transformative potential of children and families as peacebuilders, with ECD programs serving as a valuable tool for grass-roots peace initiatives. We conclude that investing in integrated ECD and nutrition programs, alongside caregiver empowerment, presents a cost-effective approach to impactful peacebuilding, nurturing sustainable peace, prosperity, and community cohesion.

## OVERVIEW

Early Childhood Development acts as a key pathway into intergenerational peacebuilding and community-stabilization efforts. By focusing on early childhood development (e.g. learning, stimulation, and social cohesiveness), ECD interventions contribute to the development of social, emotional, and cognitive skills essential for peaceful societies. Strategic peacebuilding—characterized by engaging caregivers, children, and community members with policymakers, practitioners, and powerbrokers—employs both bottom-up (individual-group) and top-down (group-individual) approaches to treat violence-ridden communities.<sup>1</sup>

We argue that integrated ECD and nutrition interventions effectively promote strategic peacebuilding. In areas where basic nutritional needs are not met, nutrition must function as an integral part of ECD interventions. Focusing on nutrition and ECD present benefits at the individual level while also promoting the longterm stability and resilience of communities.

As children feature amongst those most vulnerable to the adverse effects of conflict and social instability, the components of nutrition and ECD programs are critical aspects of a sustainable peacebuilding establishment.<sup>2</sup> During a child's first 1000 days of life, the brain undergoes significant changes, with malnutrition linked to long-term deficits in brain development and cognitive functioning. Within this crucial period, adequate nutrition and developmental support allows for optimal growth and cognitive functioning.<sup>3</sup>

Empowering caregivers to use nutrition as a channel for implementing ECD programs poses a powerful approach for promoting childhood well-being and laying a foundation for a culture of peace. We root this synergistic approach in the understanding that caregivers uniquely possess the skills and knowledge to positively shape early life experiences, including nutrition and environmental interactions, that play a crucial role in shaping a child's future.

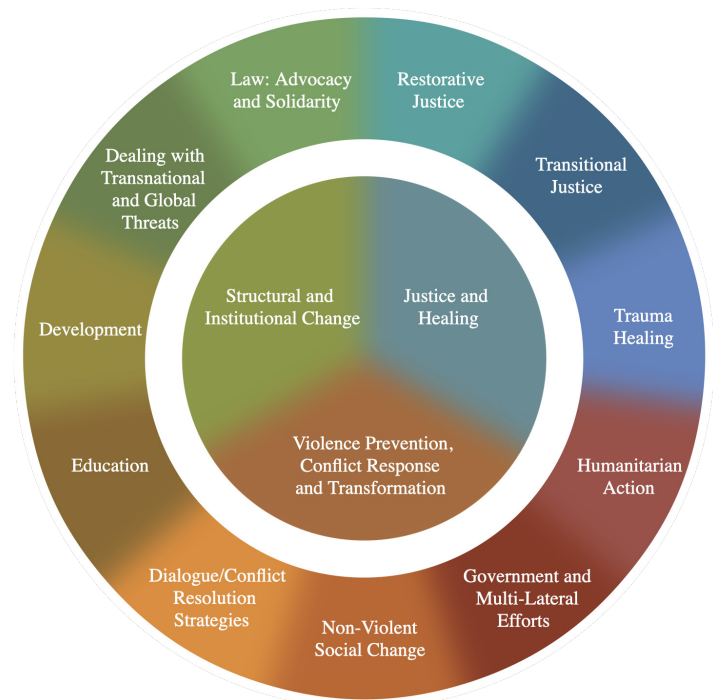


Image Source: Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies

Nutrition and ECD interventions initiated and led by caregivers encompass psychosocial stimulation and learning opportunities, not only leading to comprehensive benefits in childhood health and well-being but also community cohesion and peace. Such approaches are particularly advantageous in resource-limited settings, offering a more efficient delivery of services and increasing access to vital resources. This model promotes a view of child and community well-being that addresses both individual developmental needs and community level factors contributing to a child's growth.

This brief, therefore, evidences that investing in ECD programs creates intergenerational change for children and communities; nutrition and caregiver empowerment present one cost effective avenue for high-impact peacebuilding interventions.

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## ANALYSIS

### Intersections of Nutrition and Peace

In order to develop properly, the brain must intake essential nutrients. These include carbohydrates, amino acids, water, vitamins, and minerals. Deficiencies in micronutrients like zinc, folate, and iron early in life can result in detrimental effects such as stunting, congenital malformations, and anemia, respectively.<sup>4</sup> Cognitive deficits are also associated with malnourishment in children. In a study conducted by WHO in India from 1990-97, Intersections of Nutrition and Peace the researchers found that malnutrition was negatively correlated with cognitive test results regarding attention, cognitive flexibility, working memory, verbal comprehension, and memory.

Such aspects of neurocognitive functioning have been found to mediate a relationship between social behavior and nutrition, accounting for 55.6% of this linkage.<sup>5</sup> Previous research has linked malnutrition to problems in executive functioning, increased aggression, and externalizing behaviors and further demonstrated that nutritional supplementation can reduce behavioral problems in early childhood.

While research on the impacts of nutrition on positive social behavior is still in its infancy, existing studies point toward a positive link between the two. Nutritional status has been found to be positively correlated with positive playground social behavior, as measured by friendliness, extent of verbalization, social play, and exploratory behavior.<sup>6</sup> Anemia is associated with less, and slower expression of, positive affect and greater passive behavior.<sup>7</sup> Iron supplementation, when administered in infancy, was found to significantly promote adaptive behavior.<sup>8</sup>

Although further research is warranted, these findings are significant in demonstrating the role of nutrition in fostering peaceful societies. Enhanced neurocognitive functioning contributes to an improved quality of life, psychological well-being, and decreased instances of adolescent deviance and psychopathology. These factors are

associated with positive social outcomes that promote adaptive behaviors equipping individuals to navigate their surroundings with optimal success and minimal conflict.

### Empowering Care Givers to Cultivate Peace

Another key aspect in promoting positive social outcomes is quality caregiving, achieved by empowering caregivers. Caregivers are individuals who provide support and assistance to those with physical and emotional needs. Their knowledge and skills in providing responsive care, appropriate nutrition, and stimulating environments are paramount. The quality of caregiver-child interactions, including responsive feeding and play, directly impacts the child's development.

Quality caregiving is unequivocally dependent on the health and well-being of caregivers. As such, it is fundamentally crucial to address caregivers' mental health, particularly maternal depression, as it significantly affects the quality of care. Maternal depression, prevalent in both low- and high-income countries, can hinder a caregiver's emotional availability, affecting the child's developmental outcomes and nutritional status. Interventions targeting maternal mental health, such as the Thinking Healthy program in Pakistan, have shown to improve both maternal and child health outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

Further research is required to fully understand the impacts and optimize the effectiveness of interventions targeted toward empowering caregivers. This includes exploring how different nutrition and development messages can be effectively aligned and delivered to address the multifaceted needs of children and their families.

Successfully integrated programs share common features, such as structured curricula, use of low-cost materials, and parental engagement in play and stimulation activities. These elements underscore the importance of practical, accessible, and engaging approaches to fostering child development through engaging caregivers. This holistic, intergenerational approach contributes not only to the immediate well-being of children but also to the long-term social and economic fabric of communities that foster a culture of peace.

## Pillars of Peace: Social Cohesion and Economics

From both a social and economic sense, nutrition serves as a critical entry point for empowering caregivers to implement ECD programs that promote children’s wellbeing and construct cultures of peace.

Scholars posit that there exists two types of peace — negative peace and positive peace. Negative peace is defined as the absence of violence and conflict; positive peace is defined as the system of structures and institutions that function to create and sustain peaceful societies.<sup>10</sup> Negative and positive peace are not contradictory, but rather complementary. Economic prosperity and social cohesion are recognized as two critical pillars of positive peace.<sup>11</sup>

Social cohesion is a key pillar of positive peace. Positive relations among individuals, groups, and society, known as social cohesion, counter the drivers of conflict.<sup>12</sup> Conflict is often driven by high levels of division and mistrust within and between groups and state institutions. In the Tillaberi region of Niger, improving social cohesion has been demonstrated to build trust, cooperation, and a sense of shared purpose between historically divided groups.<sup>13</sup>

Aspects of social cohesion, namely trust-building and interactions between communities, are associated with reduced support for violence in conflict settings.<sup>14</sup> The 2018 World Bank-United Nations Report, *Pathways to Peace*, reinforces the role of social cohesion in building peaceful societies. It argues that social cohesion supports societal resilience through investment in inclusive and sustainable development.<sup>15</sup>

Economic development is another component of peace building. When combined with social cohesion, the two mutually reinforce each other. Every 2.9% increase in GDP growth per capita corresponds to a 1% increase in positive peace.<sup>16</sup> There is a difference in inflation rates between the most and least peaceful countries—3.5% and 9.7%, respectively.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, economically sustainable societies reinforce other positive peace pillars, including educational services, unemployment, and health services.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, economic sustainability reduces risk factors for conflict and instability, such as poverty and inequality. In 2009, a report by the UN Secretary General identified economic revitalization as one of the five core areas of peacebuilding in the first two years after conflict.<sup>19</sup> Evidently, positive peace and economics have the potential to create virtuous cycles where improvements in one drive improvements in the other.

Economic prosperity and social cohesion prove to be plausible pathways to peace. Peacebuilding efforts should adopt a multifaceted approach that centers these two essential pillars of positive peace.

## Children and Families as Peacebuilding Agents

Peacebuilding efforts most often proceed with a top-down outlook; intergovernmental agencies like the United Nations and international governments pour financial investment and humanitarian effort into states in conflict, primarily focusing on treaties, dialogue, and far-reaching policy. Holistic approaches to peacebuilding are commonly left ignored, more often than not as they pertain to the individual level, specifically the stage of early childhood development.

Now more than ever, studies are emerging demonstrating the transformative power of children and their families as a source of change towards peace in their communities. What was once a focus simply on saving young children and infants’ lives in times of crisis is now expanding to view their potential as agents for peacebuilding.

According to the 2015 UNICEF brief, *“Starting Early to Build Stronger and More Peaceful Societies,”* there are six ways in which ECD programming can contribute to building peace and social cohesion:

1. Providing safe, caring and loving environments for young children.
  2. Promoting positive attitudes and skills in children.
  3. Improving caregiver and child well-being.
  4. Reducing conflict and violence.
  5. Diminishing inequities and contributing to social justice.
  6. Serving as platforms for community cohesion.
- The fields of neurobiology, developmental

psychology, family studies, and conflict resolution are all beginning to demonstrate the strong link between early childhood and a community's peace levels, though more investment is integral in order to more adeptly indicate these connections. The child can impact the family, the community, and beyond, as it relates to peace, defined either negatively as an "absence of violence" or positively as "security, justice and dignity within and between groups."<sup>20</sup> Programs that focus on early childhood development are often already holistic. Despite the fact that interventions with parents of young children frequently target a child's welfare and development, these initiatives have positive impacts for the families themselves. Benefits include improved communication and problem solving, which creates a positive cycle of enhanced family function, which then impacts a community at large.<sup>21</sup> Experts suggest that this phenomenon, at its core, is what indicates a direct path between early childhood development and peace at various levels.

In 2012, 167 experts participated in a poll regarding the impact of family life on ECD, and its significance for peacebuilding.<sup>22</sup> The experts' responses emphasized the importance of early development of social skills and attitudes such as resiliency, conflict resolution, tolerance, and the likelihood that values and practices learned in the home would be generalized to other social contexts. 95% of these professionals confirmed that changes in parenting style could influence the parenting styles of the next generation. 84% supported links between family conflict and community conflict.

Most notably, an emotionally fulfilling early relationship with one or both parents was regarded as increasing the likelihood that the child will behave in a more peaceful, cooperative way in later childhood and more peaceably with rivals or outgroups in adolescence and adulthood.<sup>23</sup>

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## CASE STUDIES THAT INFORM OUR APPROACH

Intergenerational early childhood care and education programs facilitated by youth aged 18-24 years old work toward Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by engaging multiple generations in the implementation of ECD. Early childhood care and education programs can be center-, group-, or community-based.

For youth, facilitation of early childhood care and education programs provides positive developmental experiences that can build leadership skills and inform future aspirations. At the same time, these programs introduce children to young adult mentors and provide stimulation during a critical developmental period.

In addition to fulfilling SDGs 4 and 8, youth-led ECD represents an essential avenue forward in order to address workforce gaps in lower/middle-income countries (LMICs). Youth tend to exhibit higher unemployment rates than adults. The youth population at present (1.8billion) is the highest ever, of whom 13% are unemployed. Due to the large workforce gap within early childhood care and education, training youth to facilitate ECD programs can reduce the workforce gap while providing youth essential leadership and technical skills and professional exposure. Because youth tend to be "important agents of social awareness, social transformation, and community mobilization in multiple global contexts," youth-led ECD also promotes positive social change and cohesion in communities.<sup>24</sup>

Importantly, youth-led ECD engages children and offers essential stimulation at a critical stage in development. At present, an estimated 250 million children fall short of their developmental potential from the ages of 0 to 5 years old. This deficit manifests itself in poor educational achievement and decreased later-life success (e.g. earnings, community engagement, delinquency, crime, and health outcomes).

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## SEEDS OF PEACE IN USA, PALESTINE, AND INDIA

The Seeds of Peace program engages youth leaders in personal transformation workshops to inspire widespread societal impact. The program selectively invites adolescents from around the world between the ages of 14 and 16 to the United States to participate in small-group dialogue sessions organized by conflict region. Alongside their peers and mentors, youth leaders engage in intimate, challenging, and often divisive discussions surrounding their conflict areas and personal experiences. Such discourse provides a platform for youth leaders to become comfortable with reflecting and challenging competing narratives and connecting with others in knowledgeable, nurturing, and empathetic manners. This program capitalizes on the transformative power of empathy, especially as it relates to the “out group” and works to equip youth and educators with the skills and relationships to work in solidarity across lines of difference to create more just and inclusive societies.<sup>27</sup> Such development of prosocial and adaptive behaviors prepares youth leaders to employ anti-conflict measures, advance social cohesion, and build cultures of peace within their communities. Today, the program exists in 27 countries, with more than 8,000 alumni, and 40 intergenerational peacebuilding initiatives.

**SEEDS  
OF PEACE**

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## LEAPS IN PAKISTAN

The Youth Leaders for Early Childhood Ensuring Children are Prepared for School (LEAPS) program implemented in Pakistan illustrates the capacity for intergenerational programs to build upon existing relationships among child development, social capital, and peace. This program trained female youth ages 18-24 years old for seven months to provide early childhood care and education in rural Pakistan through community-based preschools serving children ages 3.5 to 6.5 years old. In addition to empowering young women with vocational training, a mentorship program, and a community of education practitioners, the LEAPS program produced a 14% increase in children’s school readiness as well as significant improvements in executive functioning, working memory, and cognitive flexibility. Beyond addressing developmental concerns among children, youth volunteers also gained positive perspectives with regards to social capital by gaining mentorship relationships, a sense of empowerment, and opportunities for professional growth.<sup>25</sup> These benefits elucidate the role of youth-led ECD programs in promoting peacebuilding through ECD while also by dismantling traditional hierarchical governance structures and adultism that can lead to conflict and increase the vulnerabilities of young people.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the LEAPS program addresses the workforce gap, thereby strengthening the economy and creating the conditions conducive to sustainable peace.





## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Advance a renewed agenda linking nutrition as a multisectoral platform for achieving the holistic development of young children (ECD) specifically in humanitarian settings. This includes investing in research that studies the importance of integrated nutrition–ECD interventions, and determining effective delivery of such programs.
- Invest in programs that provide caregivers with simultaneous child training and mental and physical support specific to humanitarian settings. These programs should aim to (i) equip caregivers with the knowledge and skills for providing nutritious diets and stimulating environments for children, and (ii) promote a continued and active caregiver presence in the child's life. This recognizes caregiver mental health as a direct impact on the quality of care and nutrition provided to children.
- Link complementary interventions for children and caregivers to optimize economic and social benefits where ECD interventions already exist. Intergenerational ECD programs should prioritize long-term peacebuilding and build upon successes in childhood development, education, and nutrition.
- Engage civil society organizations, governments, and stakeholders in enhancing ECD interventions to be more age and gender inclusive, ultimately promoting more peaceful societies.

### Recommended Citation

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## ENDNOTES

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