



Better Early Learning and Development at Scale (BELDS) Toolkit

Quality pre-primary
education for all

CONCEPT NOTE

1. OVERVIEW OF BELDS

The importance of quality early childhood education (ECE) is reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals, as target 4.2 calls for access to quality pre-primary education for all children. To achieve this ambition, it is important to ask a key question: *How can countries effectively plan, implement, and assure quality of early childhood education at scale?*

Globally, at least 175 million children are not enrolled in any form of ECE¹. In addition to access issues, ECE quality issues abound across contexts, including but not limited to the availability of qualified, trained teachers; provision of learning and teaching materials; age-appropriate, context-specific curriculum; and quality assurance mechanisms. Most governments in low-income countries need to increase their spending per child enrolled in ECE in order to ensure quality.² One solution to these challenges is to move ECE “from the margins of Education Sector Plans to their centre.”³ To make these monumental movements, ECE must be systematically integrated and/or ECE inputs strengthened within national budgets and cycles of education sector planning and policy implementation. Systematically defining a vision for context-specific, evidence-based, cost-effective quality ECE and integrating and/or strengthening this contextualized definition of ECE and its cost within education sector planning will support⁴ the ECE subsector and stakeholders and key government and development partners across sectors to achieve the broader objective of contributing to countries’ national education continuum’s efficiency and effectiveness over time. An underlying aim of BELDS is to support countries transition from project-focused ECE efforts of a few government, development and private partners that have prioritized ECE to ongoing, multi-year systems strengthening and capacity building efforts.

To this end, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and UNICEF have partnered under the BELDS initiative to pilot an innovative and consultative approach to strengthen national capacities to plan; cost and finance; and monitor ECE programmes and ensure that they are a crucial part of the processes for education sector planning and implementation.

The objective of this initiative is two-fold:

- Raise the profile of ECE at the national, regional and global levels so that it is recognized as an essential, integral part of Education Sector Plans (ESP) and policies and, in turn, make tangible improvements towards meeting the challenge to provide the world’s children with universal access to quality pre-primary education.
- Ensure that national education systems actors and institutions, including the ministry of education and other relevant ministries (i.e. Finance, Statistics, Social Welfare), are equipped with the capacities, resources and knowledge to mainstream ECE into policy strategies, Education Sector Plans, budgets and implementation strategies and plans.

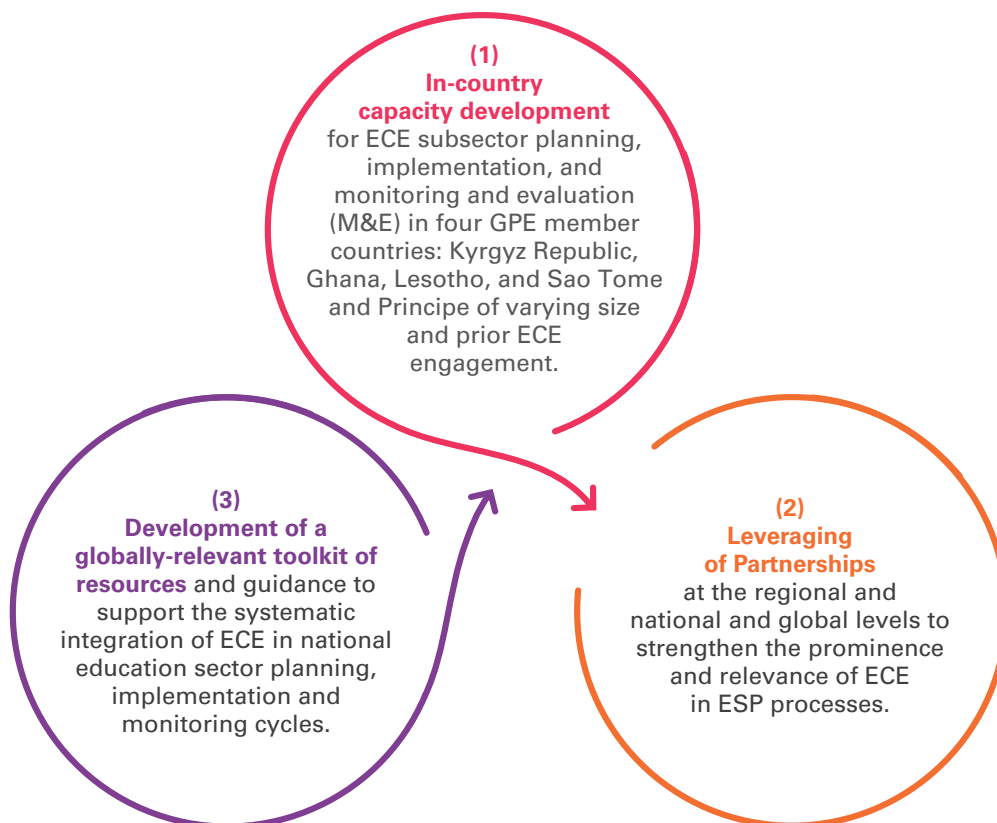
1 UNICEF (2019). *Global Report: A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing Quality Early Childhood Education*.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*

4 Note: Achieving ECE subsector aims is also contingent upon adequate financing and political will. Experience shows in BELDS target countries increased political momentum and financing for ECE is stimulated through enhanced, evidence-based ECE sub-sector planning.

As an entry point to advancing access to and quality of ECE, BELDS aims to help governments systematically incorporate and/or strengthen pre-primary education into their national Education Sector Plans by leveraging three interrelated components:



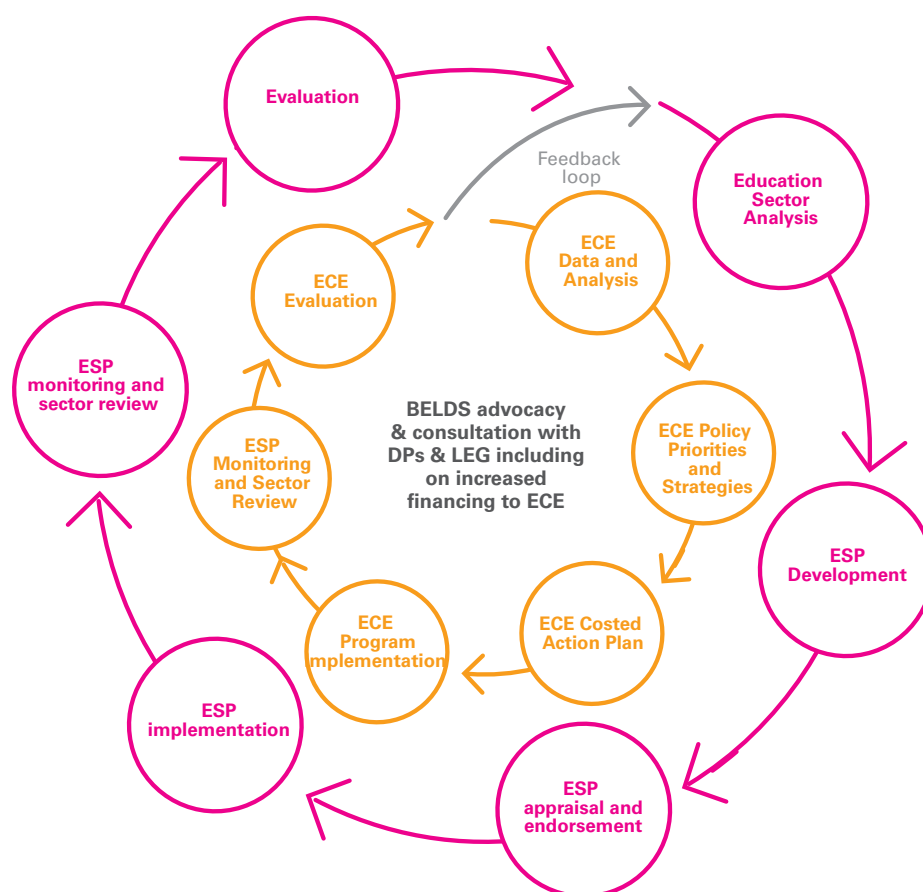
2. OVERVIEW OF BELDS TOOLKIT

(a) Framework for the BELDS toolkit

The approach to developing the toolkit will underscore ECE as a vitally important element of, and foundation for, equitable and effective education systems broadly, including national Education Sector Plans, specifically. The figure below illustrates the overall education planning cycle and the vision that ECE is adequately embedded across all stages. This framework reflects the process required to integrate ECE throughout the policy cycle and represents an ideal structure for integrating and/or strengthening ECE into national education sector planning (ESP) processes.

Integrating and/or strengthening ECE within ESP processes is only the beginning of the journey for enhancing the prominence of the ECE subsector. The ESP is a key entry point and provides a “blueprint” for influencing education systems. However, there is a future need to go beyond ESP processes and looking at implementation capacities and resources required to effectively deliver and monitor.

Given the limited duration of the BELDS initiative, and noting key gaps identified in the 2018 GPE review of Education Sector Plans, **the toolkit proposes to prioritize the first two stages – Education Sector Analysis and Education Sector Plan development.** The toolkit will be a “living” toolkit that will be added to over time. In the future, additional tools across the other stages may be developed. Implementation and monitoring-related tools are not the focus of this initial toolkit and these phases and associated tools will be addressed in the future.



The Rationale for the BELDS Toolkit

Why the BELDS Toolkit? A mapping and review exercise of Education Sector Analyses (ESAs) and Education Sector Plans (ESPs) suggested evidence-based ECE sub-sector information was weak and/or not prominently or consistently featured.

What is the toolkit? ECE specific tools to integrate and/or strengthen the ECE subsector within education analyses and plans.

Who is the toolkit audience? This toolkit is geared towards countries with varying ECE capacity in terms of the country's historical subsector evidence-base, policies, programmes, and human and financial resources. The main audience targets ECE specific actors and actors from planning and finance sectors; development partners, and civil society organizations that support ECE planning and management of ECE service provision monitoring (see more information on the target audience below and in the BELDS Toolkit FAQ).

The toolkit will support countries define and clarify the scope of ECE and the subsector vision in their context. This clarification will allow its integration or strengthening in ESAs and ESPs. Defining and strengthening ECE within ESAs and ESPs will also support enhanced coordination within the education sector and across sectors (i.e. health, nutrition, social welfare, etc.).

(b) Target audience of the toolkit

The main audience of the BELDS toolkit consists of:

- ECE specific actors (i.e. preschool directorate staff from Ministries of Education) and actors from planning and finance (i.e. stakeholders from Ministries responsible for planning and financing)
- practitioners and stakeholders whose work involves education sector planning; ECE policy-setting; programming; financing and management of ECE service provision implementation and its related monitoring/supervision;
- development partners especially those part of preschool, ECE/ECD working groups/networks at sub-national and national levels that serve as coordinating agencies, Local Education Group (or similar development partner coordination forum) members, civil society organizations and private sector partners;
- any other organizations that accompany and provide technical assistance to governments throughout the national education sector planning and implementation cycles.

(c) Purpose and objectives of BELDS toolkit

The toolkit will **support the target audience (above) identify “where they are” in the ESA and ESP process to determine which BELDS tools are relevant for their country’s use. Subsequent use of the BELDS tools will support the target audience integrate and/or strengthen ECE in national planning and policy implementation cycles.**

Drawing from the capacity development pilots in the four BELDS countries (Kyrgyz Republic, Ghana, Lesotho, and Sao Tome and Principe), development of the flexible, adaptable globally-relevant toolkit across countries and contexts will culminate in an online knowledge-sharing platform. This platform will offer guidance, tools and linkages with existing subsector resources developed by partner organizations, as well as recent examples of “what the tools look like in practice” from both the pilot countries and other countries. Ultimately, the toolkit will serve as an ECE global knowledge product for all countries to learn from and build upon.

The BELDS toolkit aims to:

- Support countries in developing and mainstreaming evidence-based, consultatively developed ECE subsector plans into the broader Education Sector Plans and Budgets; and
- Build capacity in basic ECE data analysis, prioritization, planning, and costing for enhanced overall subsector development.

The BELDS toolkit is meant to support countries from varying starting points with respect to ECE evidence gathering and use and ECE subsector capacity. For countries where there have not been historical or current investments in supporting equitable, quality ECE evidence building, planning, or costing through the use of existing analytical tools (for example, SABER, ESA Methodological Guidelines, etc.), the BELDS toolkit will serve as an entry point to begin this process. Where these or other existing tools have been used by one or more partners, **the purpose of the BELDS toolkit is to support a broad group of ECE stakeholders understand how to assess existing assess ECE data, create an evidence plan to address ECE data gaps in the short and long-term, and come to a consensus on an ECE vision to strategically inform the ESP through an ongoing consultative, technical process at the country-level.**

Key Features of the BELDS Toolkit

1. **Simple and practical:** What will someone pick up and read “at a glance”? What can move a country from point A to point B? What is easily navigable, e.g. content on ECE costing should this be where assistance is required?
2. **Applied content:** Less lengthy, detailed guidance on the “what” that is found in traditional guideline documents, and more on the “how” – the toolkit aims to be operational to support putting in practice the “what” (practical processes).
3. **Case studies in narrative and short video form that highlight applied content and demonstrate processes for effective use of the tools:** Country examples showcase how a tool/resource has been used, which may take the form of short narrative examples or short videos highlighting a government or development partners’ experience.
4. **Link applied content in the tools/resources to a few prioritized external resources:** Inclusive of theoretical/background information, other broader guidance/guidelines and narrative content, and in what context they may be applied. This will support practitioners navigate additional ECE tools and decide which to apply based on desired results.
5. **Adaptability to country contexts with varying historical engagement in the ECE subsector and potentially for use in protracted crises/countries defining Transitional Education Plans.**

As mentioned, an underlying aim of BELDS, and this toolkit, is to help countries transition from project-focused ECE support of a few government and development partners to ongoing, multi-year systems' strengthening and capacity building as part of education sector planning. These multi-year efforts would be spearheaded by a core ECE technical working group established from the membership of existing technical working groups (i.e. broader education, ECD and/or ECE technical working groups). This Core ECETWG will be comprised of inter-sectoral actors, both ECE specific (i.e. Preschool directorate staff from Ministries of Education) and those from planning and finance (i.e. stakeholders from Ministries responsible for planning and financing).

(d) Examples of types of tools/resources in the toolkit

- Lists (proposed data sources and data types, proposed indicators across thematic categories, etc.)
- Generic, adaptable terms of reference
- Annotated templates of ECE sections of ESAs and ESPs
- Examples of plans, EMIS modules, key core indicators, cost simulation and unit cost examples, etc.
- Short list of guiding analytical questions organized around themes (ex. questions to understand existing data reliability and qualitative and quantitative data which needs to be collected)
- Ranking/rating sheets (with guiding questions/considerations to rank/prioritize ECE policy priorities and trade-offs based on data)
- Linkages with existing national and/or global ECE resources such as national standards (early learning and development and/or workforce), SABER, SECT, UNESCO IIEP, UNICEF and GPE's ECE MOOC. The tools to be presented in the toolkit **will not be exhaustive**. The idea is to have a set of key tools and resources that can practically support the integration of ECE in sector planning and that links to relevant external resources. These tools and resources may be further refined, added to and enhanced over time through ongoing country, regional and/or global ECE subsector capacity building efforts across partners.

(e) Format

The vision is for the BELDS toolkit to be hosted on a web-based interactive and user-friendly knowledge-sharing platform. All of the online platform's content will be available for downloading for offline use and translation. This digital version will be a "living platform", such that additions, improvements, revisions and adaptations can easily be made as the toolkit is used and lessons learned emerge to enhance the content. This platform will potentially be integrated into the Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX) platform when it goes live approximately in August 2020.

The format of the online toolkit will be practical, user-friendly and flexible, so that it can be easily accessed, downloadable, and utilized in multiple ways and by multiple types of users. The toolkit will be organized across sections that highlight key steps or "milestones" along the process of integrating evidence-based ECE data into ESAs and developing evidence-informed ECE sections of ESPs. Some users may decide to use the toolkit's specific sections and sub-sections' guidance and related tools, while others may choose to go through the entire toolkit, section by section. The toolkit is thus flexible for these scenarios and does not constrain users to a single method for use. The toolkit will include an "entry points assessment"

to support users identify how to initiate toolkit use based on where their country is with regards to the toolkits' "milestones" or sections.

3. TOOLKIT STRUCTURE AND PROPOSED CONTENT

(a) Structure

Initially the toolkit adopted a modular structure with four distinct units, or modules, on ECE data and policy analysis, planning, costing, and M&E. The structure of the BELDS toolkit evolved during a co-creation meeting with country-level stakeholders from the four BELDS countries (Kyrgyz Republic, Ghana, Lesotho, and Sao Tome and Principe) in November 2019.

The co-created structure resulting from this meeting follows the "journey" and journey "milestones," that a country goes through to integrate and/or strengthen ECE into the ESP development process. While each of the country experiences of the four BELDS countries were unique, there were milestones or "steps" and related, detailed actions to define each step that were generally the same across countries. These steps and their related actions informed the ultimate sections, sub-sections and actions of the toolkit. It is important to note that the journey is not a linear process; rather, it is composed of iterative "actions" across the ESP cycle. For example, monitoring and evaluation and costing-related actions recur throughout the process and are spread out across the "steps" or sections.

Corresponding ESA/ESP Phase	Toolkit Section Number	Toolkit Section Description
Pre-ESA/ESP Development	1	Establish an ECE TWG for ESP Processes
Education Sector Analysis (ESA)	2	Conduct ECE Data and Policy Mapping and Analysis to Inform the ESA
Education Sector Plan (ESP)	3	Establish an ECE Subsector Vision to Inform the ESP by Identifying Evidence-Based ECE Policy Priorities and Goals
Education Sector Plan (ESP)	4	Translate ECE Policy Priorities and Goals into ECE Strategies to Inform the ESP
Education Sector Plan (ESP)	5	Develop the ECE Action Plan and Action Plan Results Framework Aligned with the ESP
Joint Sector Review (JSR)	6	Reporting ECE Progress against ECE Annual and Multi-Year Action Plans to Inform Sector Reviews

Financing and Costing Technical Content Across the Toolkit Sections

Financing and costing for ECE are relevant and important at every point in the process of developing pre-primary subsector strategies and action plans to inform and align with countries' Education Sector Plans.

In this Toolkit, costing content is included, and resources suggested, at multiple points, including but not limited to:

- When ECE-related data are being identified, including data on historical and current budget allocations, unit costs, etc.;
- When dialogue about current country capacity to conduct ECE cost analyses is initiated; and
- When conducting cost simulations related to the ECE policy vision;
- When establishing budgets for the ECE Action Plan and related Action Plan's annual work plan (including monitoring and evaluation of the plans' cost).

Rather than leaving these issues until the concluding phases of the country's "journey," or as a stand-alone topic, experience suggests that attention should be given throughout the ESA/ESP process.

Monitoring and Evaluation Technical Content Across the Toolkit Sections

Similar to financing/costing content, content related to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for ECE are relevant and important at every point in the process of developing pre-primary subsector strategies and action plans to inform and align with countries' Education Sector Plans.

In this Toolkit, M&E content is included, and resources suggested, at multiple points, including but not limited to:

- When ECE-related data are being identified, including the extent to which monitoring is currently being conducted for ECE, and using which indicators;
- When establishing ECE M&E frameworks aligned with the vision, strategies, and standards (quality standards, early learning and development standards, etc.) well before action planning and implementation;
- When the ECE subsector policies, strategies and M&E frameworks are used to inform content for the ESP to ensure core ECE indicators are considered within monitoring and evaluation frameworks of the entire education sector;
- And when creating multi-year and annual ECE action plans aligned with the ESP.

Rather than leaving monitoring and evaluation considerations until action planning and/or implementation, these considerations, with specific focus on ECE, should be focused on in an iterative way throughout a country's unique process. Several resources in this Toolkit may help maintain that focus while sharpening it over time independent of where a country is on their ESA/ESP development "journey."

To illustrate this common journey countries generally will take across contexts, the following “steps” or sections were identified:

A self-assessment will be on the platform’s landing page to support users identify which section or sections are most relevant for their context as an “entry point” for toolkit use based on varying ECE subsector considerations such as:

- Countries without or with limited existing ECE data/evidence base, investments, policies or plans;
- Countries with ECE policies, plans, actions, and investments but with several identified areas for improvement (i.e. ECE policies exist, but they lack costed action plans and/or accountability mechanisms; ECE subsector data is outdated, not routinely collected/analyzed which does not enable policy makers to understand the current subsector situation); or
- Countries with operational challenges in one or two areas (costing or monitoring and evaluation).

After identifying the most relevant section, each section will include an introduction that outlines the following:

- (1) Section objective
- (2) General guidance on activities/actions and use of tools

Each Section is then broken down into more specific actions involved. For these actions, proposed key tool(s) are presented, with associated guidance and country examples.

(b) Proposed content of the sections

A detailed outline of each Toolkit Section as per the table above is provided in **Annex 1**. The detailed outline highlights, for each Section, the concrete activities/actions that countries undertake within that specific component of the overall journey and maps out the key tools and resources that can be used (adapted and tailored to the country’s context) to support the successful operationalization/implementation of the activities/actions.

4. MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER TO DEVELOP THE BELDS TOOLKIT

The further successful development of the BELDS toolkit relies on critical engagement at the global and country levels through an organic process.

(a) Country-level engagement with BELDS pilot countries

At the country level, the on-going learning, testing and piloting of tools and processes through the capacity development aspect of the BELDS approach will inform and further shape the content of the BELDS toolkit. The lessons learned and best practices that emerge from the in-country work will be incorporated and showcased in the toolkit to illustrate which tools/resources might be pertinent, useful or practical, and how such tools/resources can be used. For example, the experience of a country using a list of key ECE indicators to develop the ECE section of an ESA can provide the following inputs:

- The list of key indicators will support the activity of “identifying and assessing available ECE data”; and
- A country example of how this tool is helpful, how it has been used, and the immediate and longer-term result the toolkit’s action(s) and/or use of a specific tool helped country stakeholders achieve.

The BELDS pilot countries are thus considered “co-creators” of the initial version of the toolkit and will have a role in reviewing and providing feedback on the toolkit content to ensure that it is relevant and useful. They will also be considered as resource hubs for other countries.

(b) Global-level engagement

The global aspect of the BELDS toolkit entails an inherent process of engaging widely with a broad range of partners to review and co-create the contents of the toolkit through the review and toolkit piloting process (see timeline below). Partners include but are not limited to those such as UNESCO and UNESCO IIEP the World Bank, Brookings Institution, INGOs such as Plan International, Save the Children, and ChildFund International, global and regional networks such as ECDAN, AfECN, ARNEC, and ISSA, and partners in academia. Partners will be based at global institutional, regional, and country levels, and will review the toolkit with the view of ensuring the technical soundness of the toolkit’s content and approach as well as leveraging the global network to share and promote good practices.

To this end, a reference group comprised of global ECE partners is envisioned and their direct engagement to determine their level of involvement with the toolkit will be assessed in January 2020. The contribution and inputs of the global reference group will bring on board will be based on their varied perspectives and knowledge, as well as tools and resources that their institution have or are currently developing which can enhance the BELDS toolkit’s structure and content. Reference group members will be invited to participate to give their inputs into the overall toolkit outline and to review – based on interest and availability - the entire toolkit; preferred, specific sections and/or sub-sections; and/or specific tools.

(c) Dissemination of the BELDS Toolkit

The success of the BELDS toolkit will only be possible if it is used and put in practice across countries. As

such, a variety of activities are planned to foster knowledge exchange and learning as well as promote uptake of the BELDS toolkit, including the below possibilities:

- GPE developing country partner meetings (GPE approval pending) to offer an opportunity for knowledge exchange and peer-to-peer learning among education planners from GPE member countries;
- Partnerships across development partner institutions that would like to integrate the BELDS toolkit into their country, regional or global capacity building and technical assistance efforts;
- Webinar series to foster knowledge exchange and sharing of good practices, with BELDS webinars aimed to reach both BELDS and non-BELDS countries;
- Leveraging opportunities to connect BELDS activities with UNICEF's knowledge events, including global-level UNICEF and Regional Education Network events; and
- A BELDS knowledge exchange and dissemination global meeting.

5. PROPOSED TIMELINE FOR TOOLKIT DEVELOPMENT

The figure below shows a tentative timeline for the further development of the BELDS toolkit.

