

Blazing the Path

ECCD Leads the Way to a Sustainable Planet



by Adrián Cerezo

What Does a Sustainable Future Look Like?

We are very good at conceiving futures in which machines, aliens, zombies, asteroids and/or human folly bring about the end of the Earth. We imagine a myriad of scenarios in which human ingenuity can produce intelligent robots, spaceships, glass-encased houses, impossible hairstyles, very shiny clothing and laser weapons of every sort, but we still have not figured out how to care for each other and the natural environment. While these dystopic adventures make for exciting movies, they are



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not very helpful in charting the course towards a sustainable future.

What Does that Other Future Look Like?

Have you ever considered what your community would look like if we chose to relate to each other in peaceful and productive ways, while respecting the limits of nature? Try to imagine your community in 2090, 75 years after the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, if our aspirations to move towards a sustainable world succeed.

I have posed this challenge to hundreds of people, all over the world. Invariably, it is easier for them to describe a world that fails than to imagine a community that attends to the needs of people and nature. After a decade of struggling with this question, I have come up with a tentative explanation for this puzzling

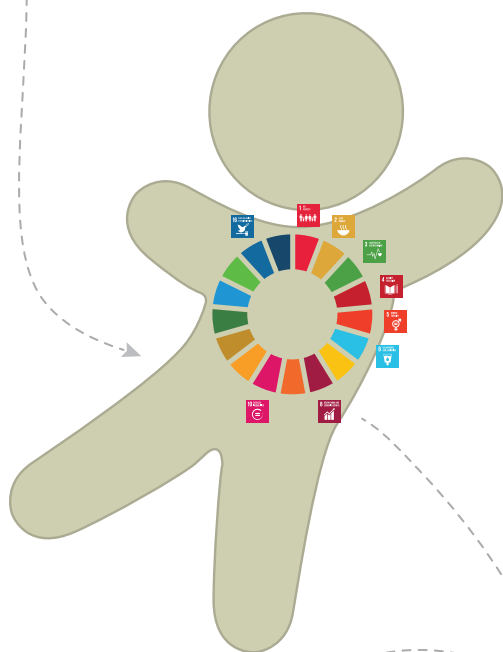
phenomenon. My realization came about when I was considering the phrase “reach their full potential.” This phrase is the core of quality ECCD: to provide each child with the tools and the motivation to make the most of life, while acknowledging that each individual has the freedom to steer that potential into his/her version of a fruitful and fulfilling life.

The SDGs provide a clear, comprehensive, and nuanced outline of the principles of sustainable development. But the day-to-day of a truly sustainable future is beyond our imagination. It is hard to envision what a sustainable world looks like, for the same reason it is hard to imagine what a child will make of her or his full potential. Not because it is impossible, but because the possibilities are endless.

It is not coincidental that the outcomes of ECCD and the SDGs are so aligned.

Individual + Immediate + Holistic

What begins as an intervention in the area of education, if designed and delivered effectively, impacts the individual's capacity to move away from poverty and to move towards appropriate employment, promotes short- and long-term health, ensures that the person receives appropriate nutrition and develops good eating habits, provides one of the most effective ways to promote gender equity and reduced inequality, and has been shown to support peacebuilding.



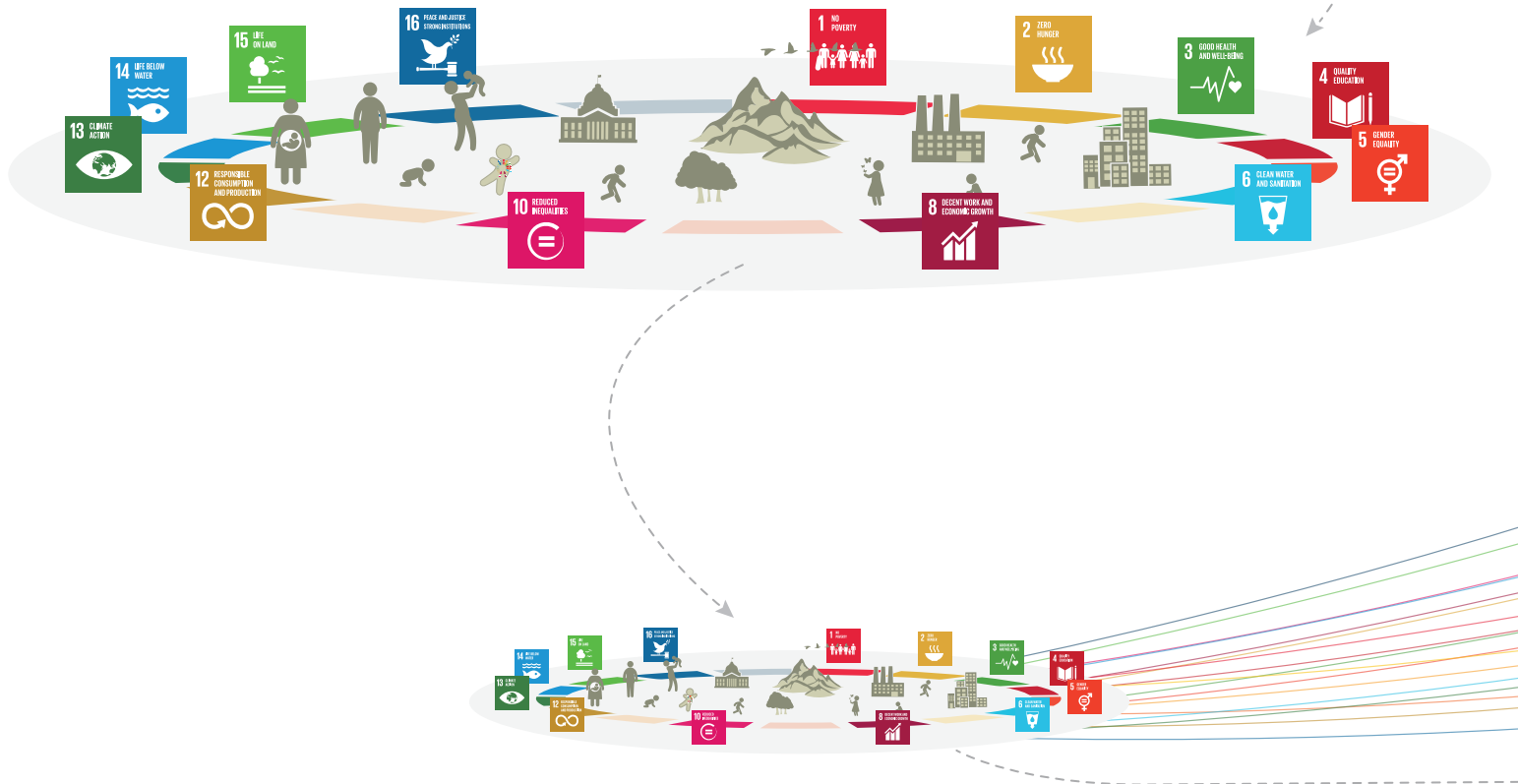
Human development and the conservation of nature are inextricably connected. This was the conclusion of the very first UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972. The Declaration from that conference states, "Both aspects of [hu]man's environment, the natural and the [hu]man-made, are essential to his[/her] well-being and to the enjoyment of basic human rights — the right to life itself."

The fundamental building blocks of environmental protection and wildlife conservation are human dignity, justice, equity, and quality of life.

Since 1972 we have learned much about how early childhood development and human development are inextricably connected. Research in a wide range of fields show the fundamental role of early childhood interventions in ensuring that humans reach their full potential. It also shows how interventions in early childhood development have a direct and substantial role in promoting quality of life in communities. Investing in early childhood development is the most cost-effective, immediate, and integrated way of achieving long-term, systemic, and cumulative improvements in the human environment. That is why I believe that in a normal day parents and caregivers can do more to promote sustainable development than the largest conservation organizations can do in their best days.

Systemic + Inclusive + Equitable

Projected to the community, the impacts add up to improved use of resources, less waste, a reduced need for the production of medicines and assistive devices to address chronic and preventable illness, increased inclination and capacity to be involved in civic actions to address conservation and environmental challenges.



The adoption of the SDGs provides an opportunity to connect the dots and highlight the fundamental importance of ECCD in sustainable development. Few other policies and interventions have the capacity to provide immediate, individual, comprehensive benefits that are also systemic, inclusive and equitable, and over time are enduring, incremental, and cumulative. Well-designed, high-quality, integrated early childhood policies and programs have this capacity, and can set the stage for communities that are more sustainable for humans and more capable of engaging in the complex challenges of environmental and wildlife conservation.

At a moment when the pressures on human and non-human systems is the

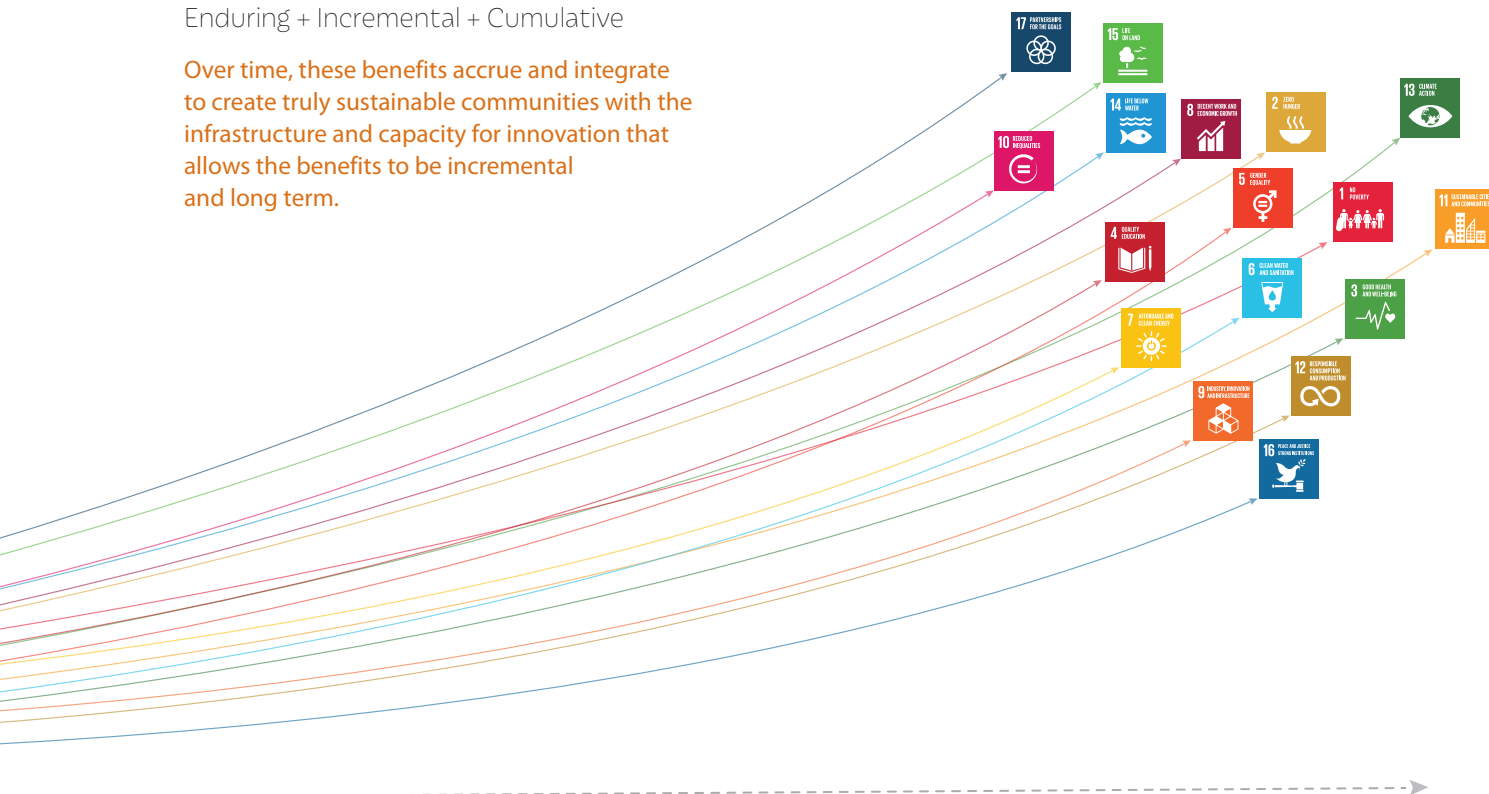
highest in history and the resources are scarcest, it is imperative that we focus our attention on the policies and programs that can yield the most benefits, over the longest term, with the least cost. ECCD policies and programs provide an additional enticement that is not present in most other approaches to sustainability: even if they succeed in the narrowest terms, they still improve the quality of life of individuals and communities involved.

Child care and preschool programs serve as an excellent example of the power of ECCD in achieving the UN SDGs. What begins as an intervention in the area of education, if designed and delivered effectively, improves the individual's capacity to move away from poverty to move towards

appropriate employment, it promotes short- and long-term health, ensures appropriate nutrition and develops good eating habits, provides one of the most effective ways to promote gender equity and reduced inequality, and has been shown to support peacebuilding. Projected to the community, the impacts add up to improved use of resources, less waste, a reduced need for the production of medicines and assistive devices to address chronic and preventable illness, increased inclination and capacity to be involved in civic actions to address conservation and environmental challenges. Over time, these benefits integrate to create truly sustainable communities with the infrastructure and capacity for innovation that allows the benefits to be incremental and long term.

Enduring + Incremental + Cumulative

Over time, these benefits accrue and integrate to create truly sustainable communities with the infrastructure and capacity for innovation that allows the benefits to be incremental and long term.



The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals provides an opportunity to raise awareness about the important role of ECCD. But just as important, they provide an opportunity for professionals in the field of ECCD, from child care providers to global policy experts, to continuously increase the quality, integration, and access of our efforts. After all, the power of ECCD policies and programs is directly related to their quality, level of integration, and accessibility. In the context of sustainable development, the integration has to go beyond our regular areas of interest (education, health, and social protection) and actively explore avenues of integration with each of the SDGs. This ensures that what are now indirect relations become direct, strong, and reliable connections.

In the bold spirit of this reflection, I would like to end with two challenges, the first to parents and ECCD professionals: That every day we embrace our fundamental role in building a sustainable future. Our actions must be guided by our responsibility to provide each child a better life and with the capacity and inclination to share in the project of building a better world.

The second challenge is to institutions that develop and fund sustainable development: It is time to recognize the fundamental role of ECCD in undertaking sustainable development in an expeditious, practical, and effective way. It is your responsibility to provide programs that serve young children with the resources and support they

need to successfully take on their awesome responsibility.

What Does a Sustainable Future Look Like?

Flash forward 75 years. Whether we are surrounded by spaceships, intelligent robots, impossible hairstyles or very shiny clothing, the real measure of our success will be this: Do adults live with the same sense of freedom and possibilities as their childhood selves? When we provide high-quality, comprehensive, equitable, and accessible ECCD programs, we make a sustainable future real.

