

MAY 6–8, 2026

INVESTING IN THE EARLY YEARS

A Global Technical Financing Forum

KIGALI, RWANDA

TRACK 3: EQUITY
May 6, 2026



In support of **actFOR**
Early Years





**Dialogue 2: How can we expand
resources, improve efficiency, and
ensure equity and quality services?**

**Securing sustainable public finance
for young children.**



Dialogue 2 Track 3: Equity (Gasabo 1st floor)

- **Focus:** Improving equity and quality: How do we ensure financing expands high-quality access to early years services equitably?
 - How do we budget and plan for quality and equity?
 - How can public financing reduce out-of-pocket burdens and expand access more equitably?
 - What safeguards are needed to ensure that financing expansion improves inclusion, quality, and fairness at the same time?
- **Chair:** Michelle Neuman, Senior Fellow, Results for Development
- **Framing:** Dominic Richardson, Managing Director, Learning for Well-being Institute & David Harris, Executive Director, Children's Research and Education Institute, Columbia University Center on Poverty and Social Policy
- **Discussants:**
 - Martha Odundo, Head of Directorate – ECDE, Ministry of Education, Kenya
 - Daniel McLaren, Public Finance Economist Ilifa Labantwana
 - Sarah Ul Haq, Knowledge, Evidence and Learning Lead, Moving Minds Alliance
 - Nang'andu (Nana) Chizyuka, Senior Program Manager, Clinton Health Initiative
- **Rapporteur:** Sumitra Mishra, Executive Director, Mobile Creches



Dominic Richardson

Managing Director,
Learning For Well-
being Institute



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INSTITUTE**



First Things First: A Hierarchy of Child Policies to optimize education and well- being

Dominic Richardson, PhD

— THE SCALE OF THE CRISIS

~290M



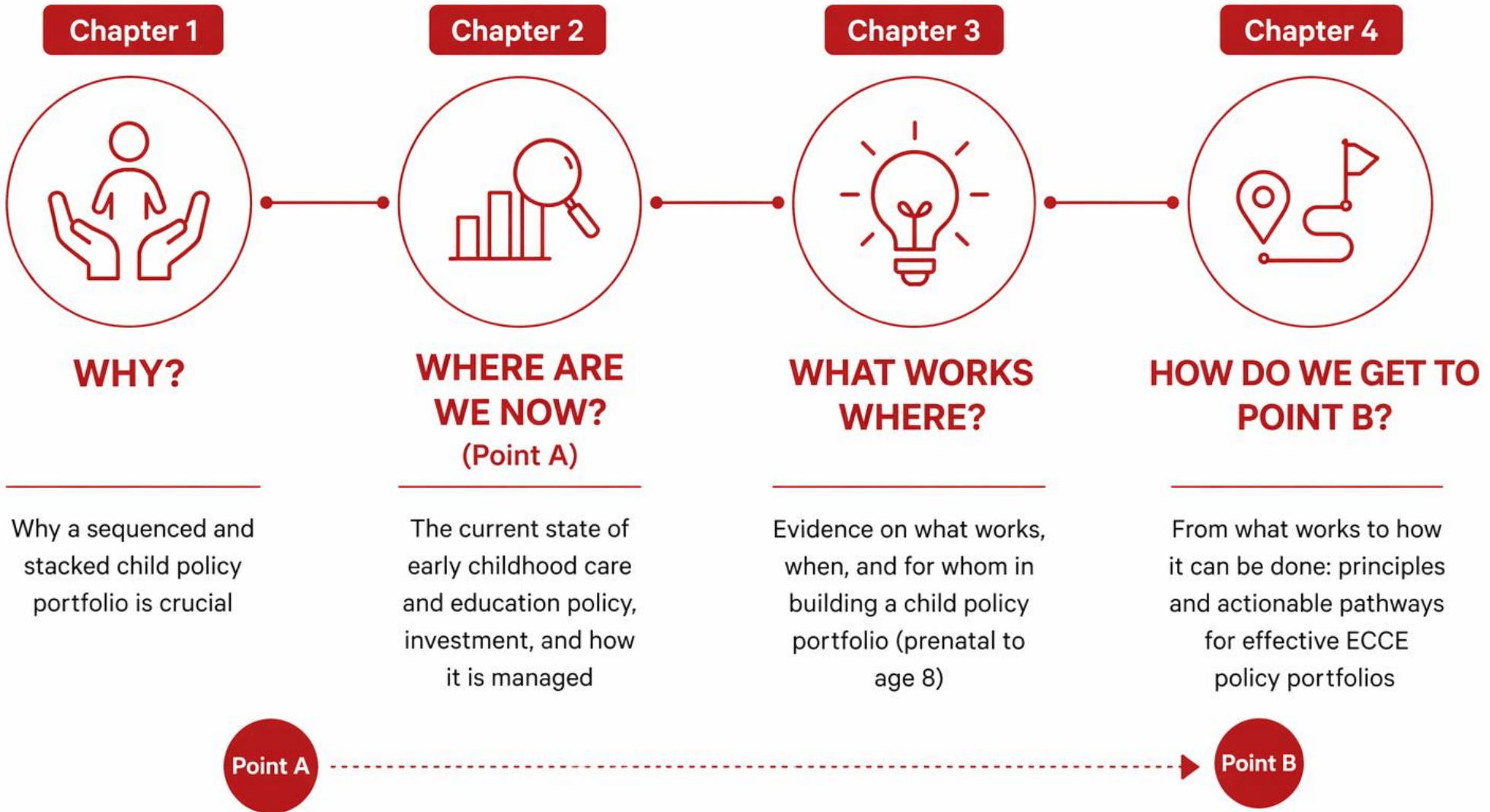
Children aged 0–5 in low-income countries are at risk of never reaching their potential. The window to act is now, and it is closing.



The **aim** of this report is to provide contextually-relevant recommendations of how to move from '**Point A**' to '**Point B**' to enable every child reach their full developmental potential (UNICEF, 2024).



How this report takes us from Point A to Point B



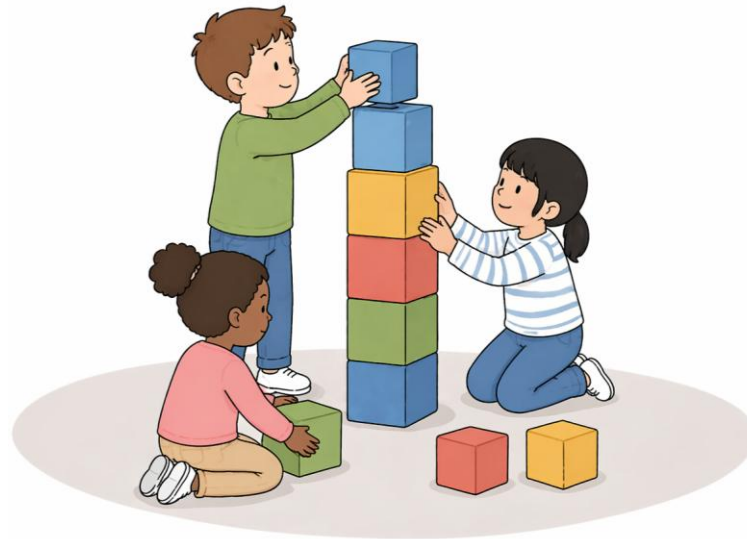
How this report examines pathways to reach ‘Point B’

The report is structured around **four guiding questions**, which together move from rationale, to diagnosis, to evidence, and finally to action:

1. **Why is a sequenced and stacked child policy portfolio crucial for a child’s holistic well-being, development, and rights across the life course?**
2. **What is the current state of early childhood care and education policy, investment, and how is it managed?**
3. **What works where, when building a child policy portfolio?**
4. **How do we get to where we want to be, in policy terms, without leaving any child behind?**



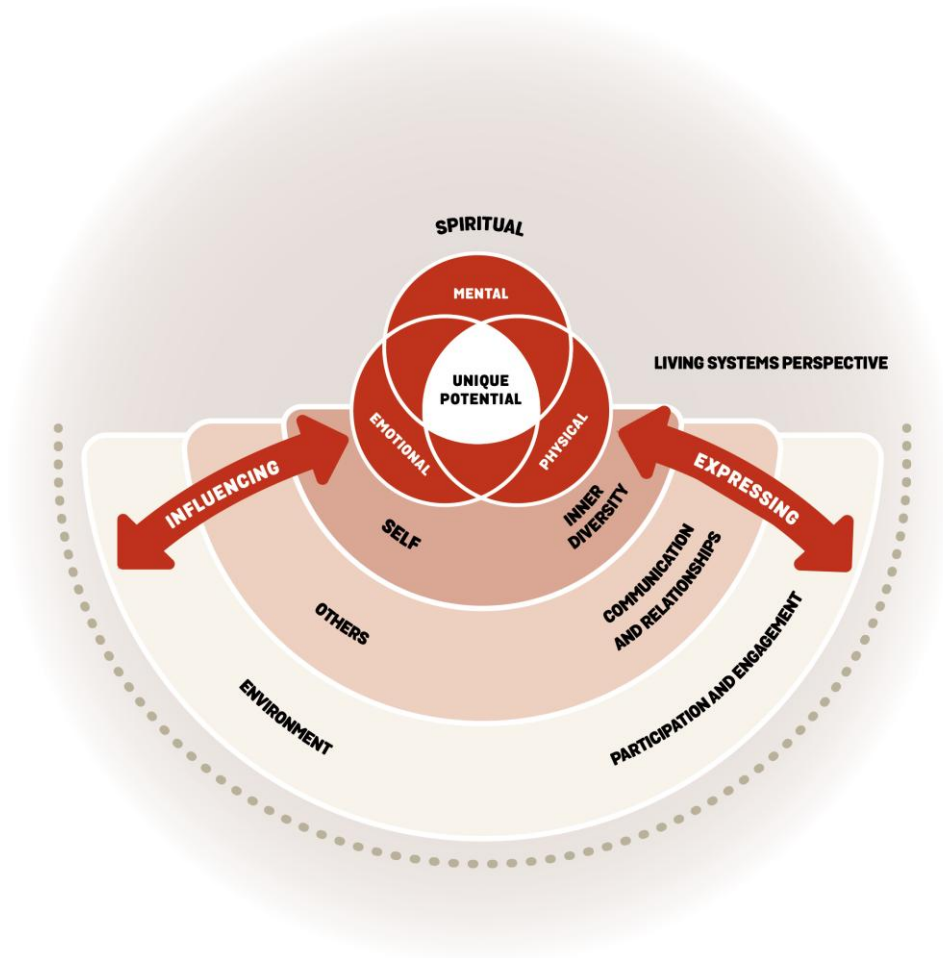
Why is a sequenced and stacked child policy portfolio crucial for a child's holistic well-being, development, and rights across the life course?



Components of holistic well-being and care

Learning for Well-Being Framework

(Gordon and O'Toole, 2015)



Nurturing Care Framework

(WHO & UNICEF, 2018)

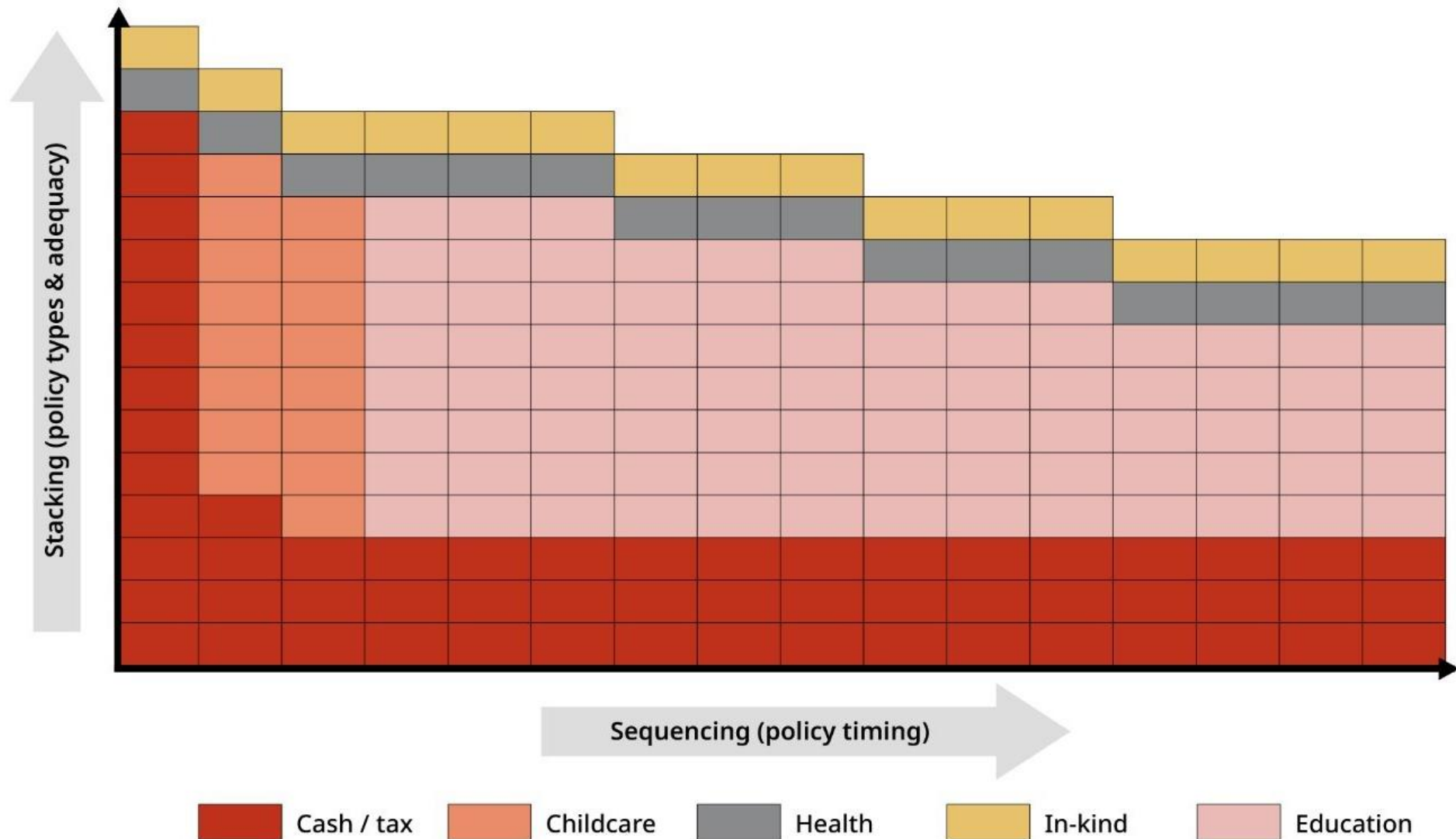


Why Children Need a Policy Portfolio

- Children's rights
- Children's development outcomes are interrelated and mutually reinforcing over time, requiring protection and promotion in every context
- Realities of child rearing
- Preventive, sequenced, and age-appropriate support reinforces gains across the life-course
- Progressive universalism and well-coordinated policy portfolios (from pre-natal through early-childhood) enable children to thrive



Sequencing and stacking pathways leads to stronger ECCE systems



What is the current state of early childhood care and education policy, investment, and how is it managed?



— THE WORLD SPENDS AT THE WRONG TIME

Children under 6 make up 1 in 3 of all children. Yet, this age group only receives

16%

of all child-related spending globally. The years with the highest developmental impact are the most underfunded.



— RICH VS. POOR: A 121X SPENDING GAP

HIGH-INCOME
COUNTRIES

\$219,000

vs.

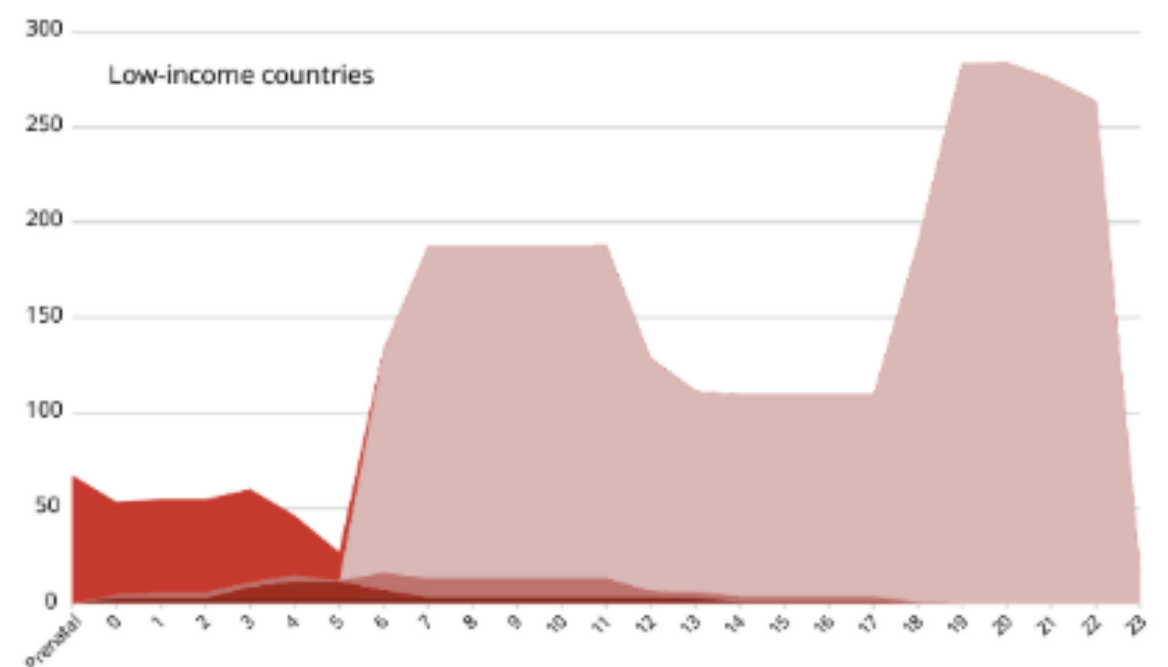
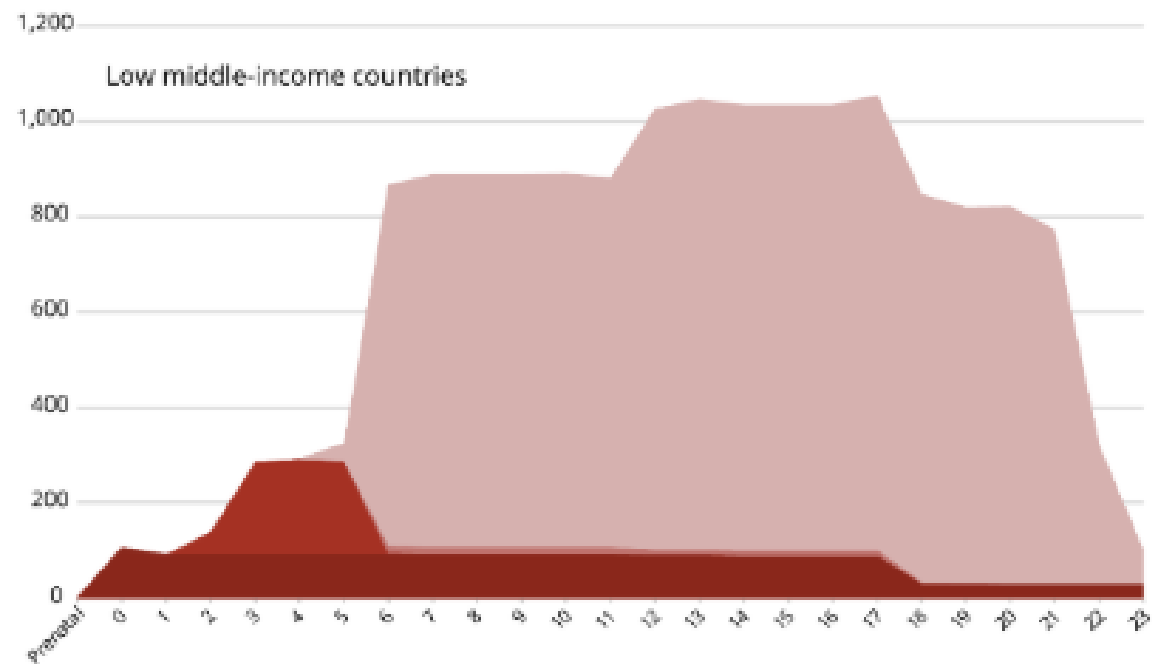
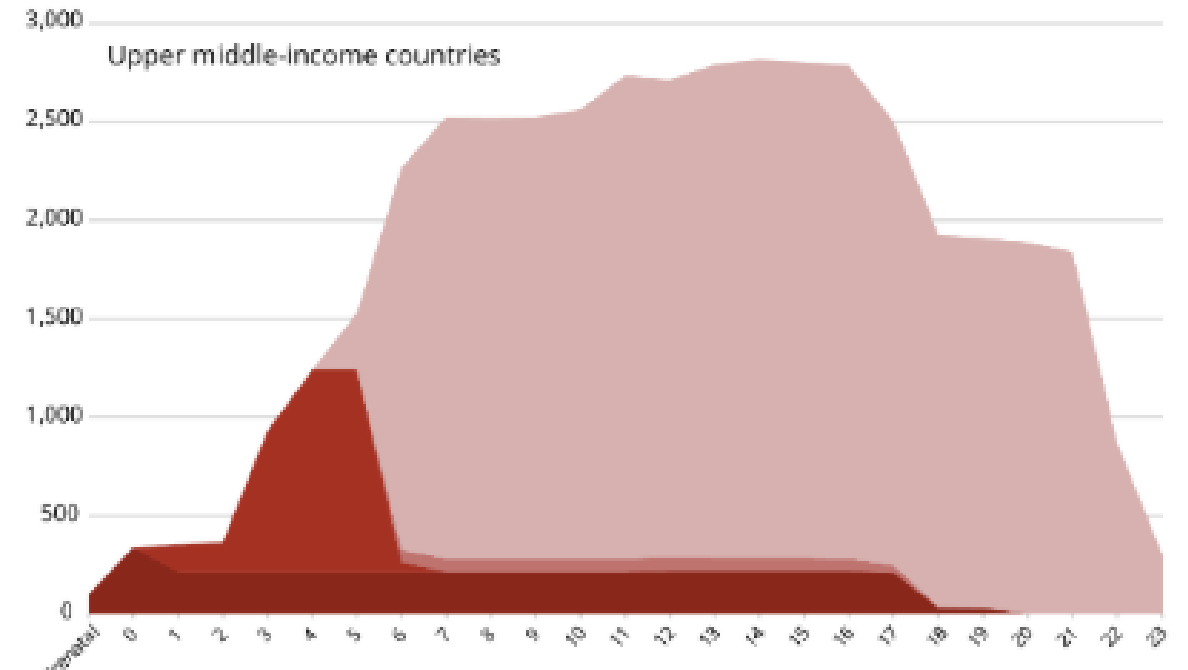
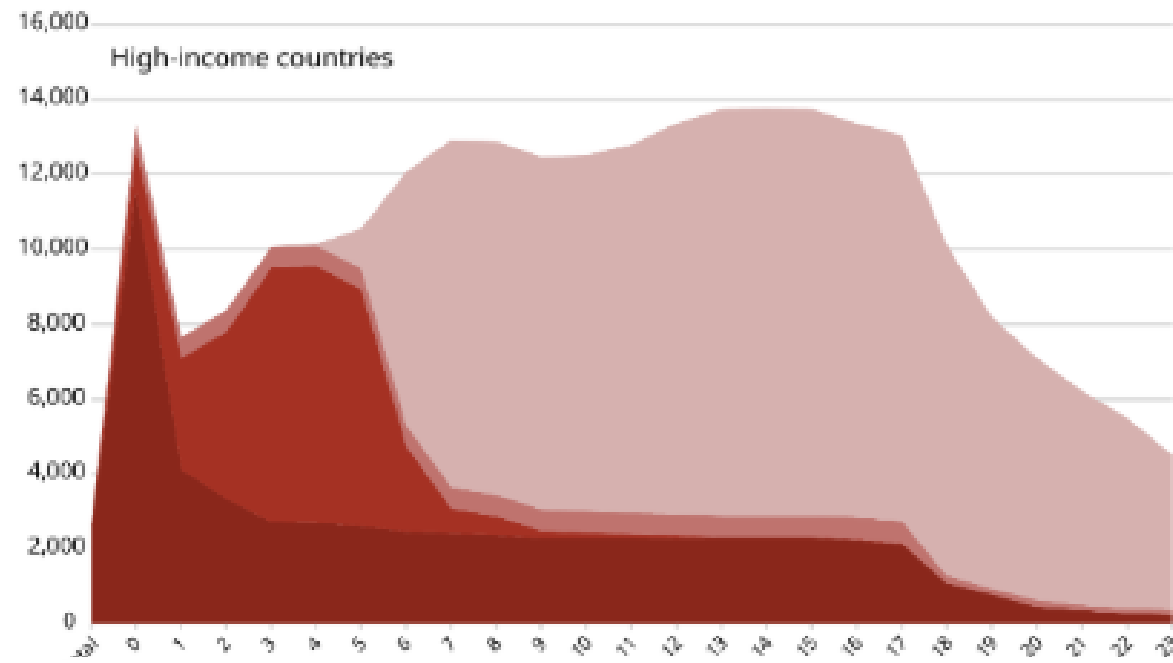
LOW-INCOME
COUNTRIES

\$1,800

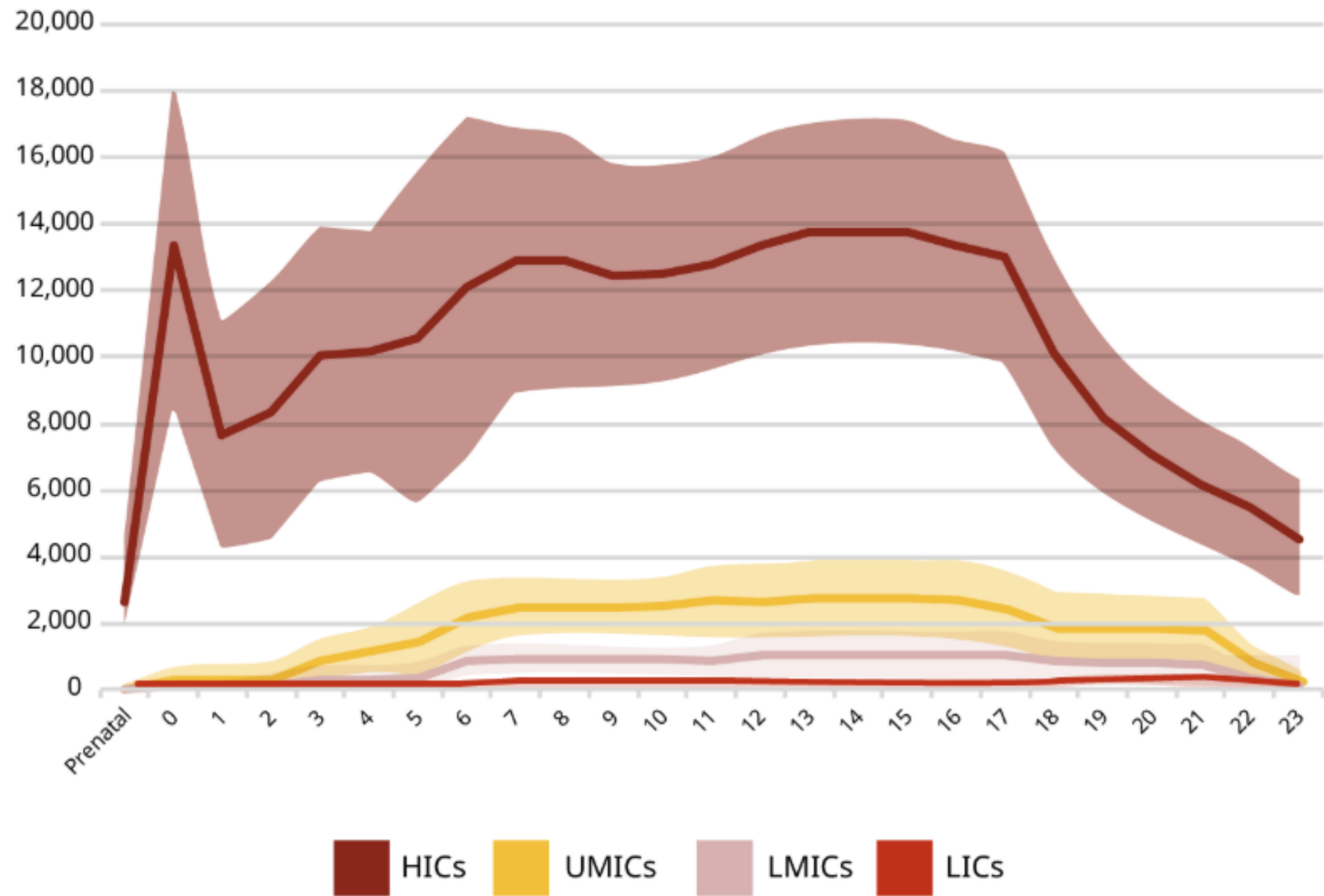
121x gap per child over childhood

The children who need investment the most
receive the least.

■ Cash benefits ■ Preschool or childcare ■ In-kind ■ Education ■ Health

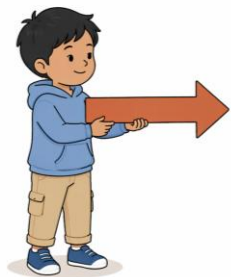


Comparing
spending
by age
by income
groups

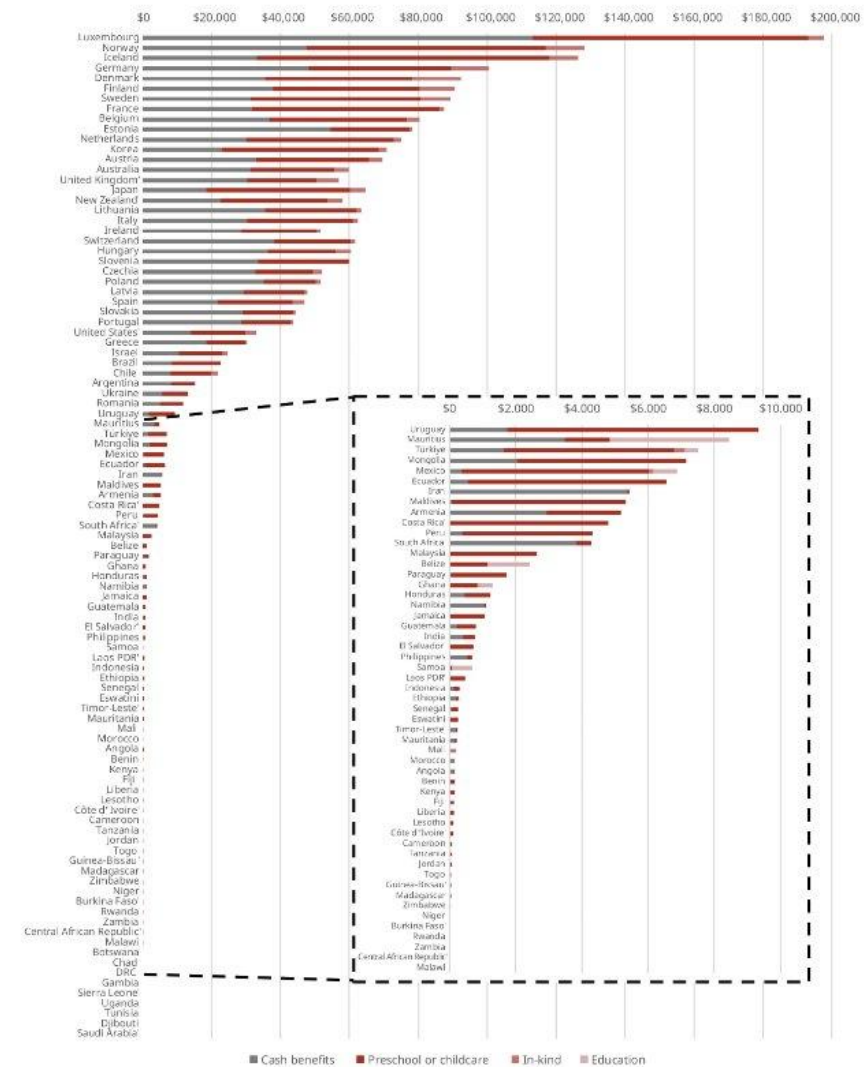


How a country allocates its spending on children is critical for achieving better ECD outcomes

- **Luxembourg is the highest spender** – allocating >50% of the total 0-6 budget to cash benefits
- **Several countries report zero spending on the preschool period** – including six from Sub-Saharan Africa (from Botswana to Uganda) and three from the Middle East and North Africa – Tunisia, Djibouti, and Saudi Arabia.



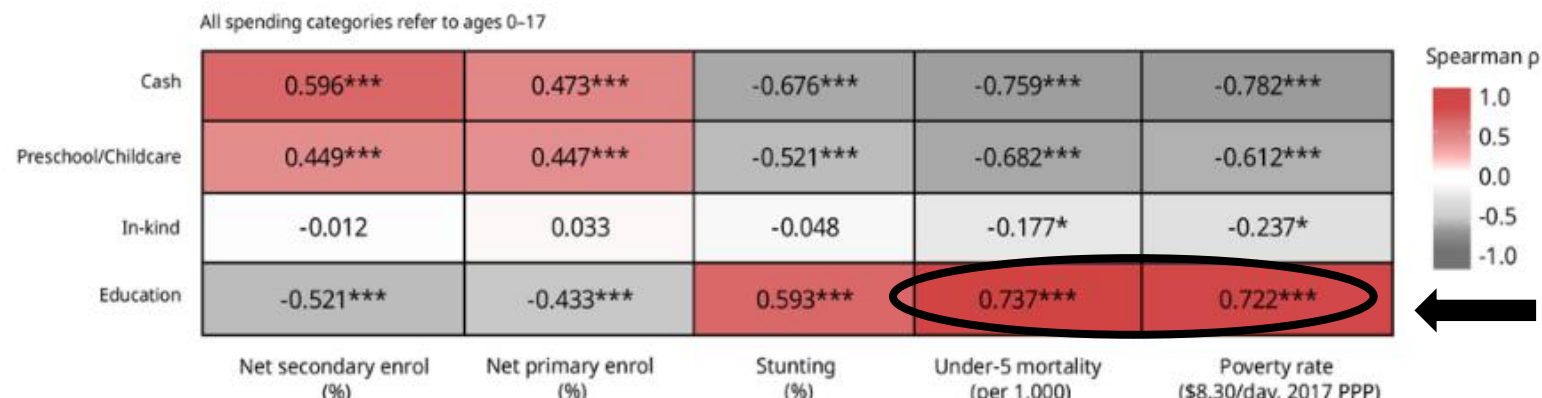
Trade-offs between cash and childcare spending highlight the **need for a balanced portfolio** that delivers both access and income support.



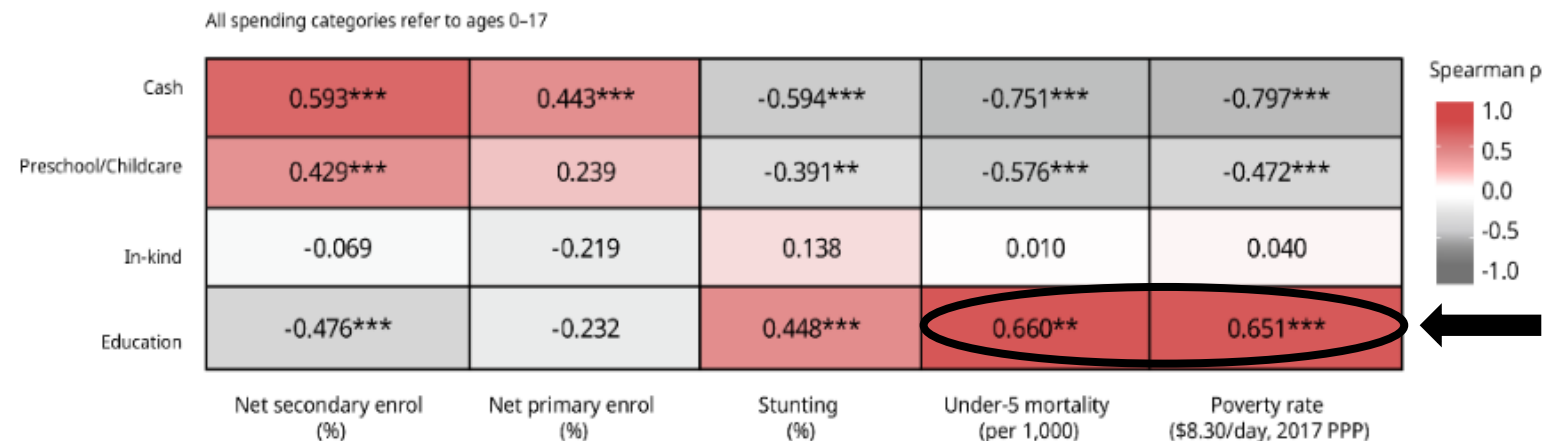
If over-concentrated in education, outcomes **decline**

A balanced portfolio is needed to sustain outcomes

Associations between spending and child outcomes (After 2 years)

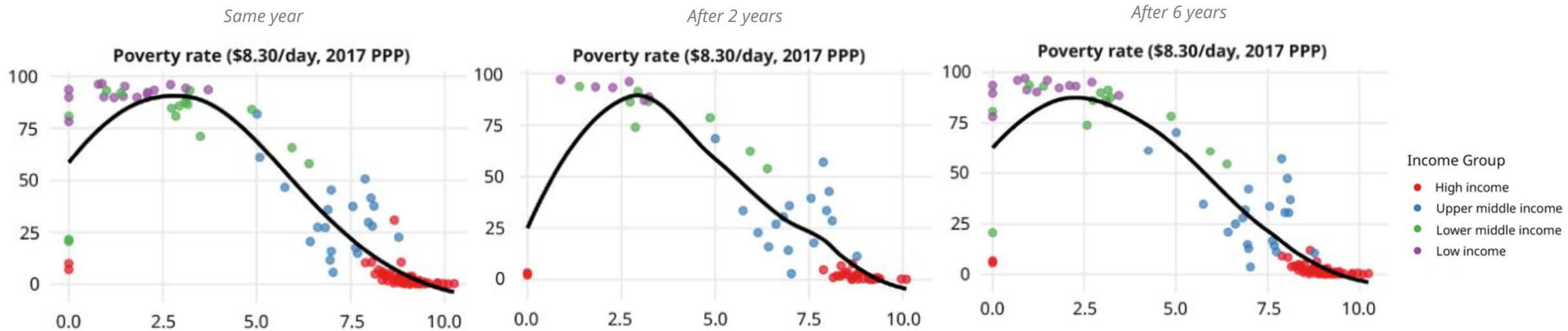


Associations between spending and child outcomes (After 6 years)



As total spending on children increases, the speed at which household income poverty declines is faster

Total spending (USD/PPP) and poverty



Notes and sources: Each dot represents a country. The horizontal axis shows the level of total public spending on children on a logarithmic scale, while the vertical axis shows corresponding child outcomes. Moving from left to right on the x-axis indicates higher levels of spending on children, while moving upwards indicates higher values of the child outcomes. For enrolment indicators, this reflects higher participation rates and therefore more favorable outcomes. For poverty, stunting, and under 5 mortality, higher values indicate worse outcomes. The fitted curve on the plot shows the overall patterns cross countries, helping to identify where incremental increases in spending are associated with improvements in child outcomes. Poverty rates are the proportions of households where incomes are lower than 8.30 USD PPP per household member per day, series have been filled using estimation based on observed values. Author's calculations.

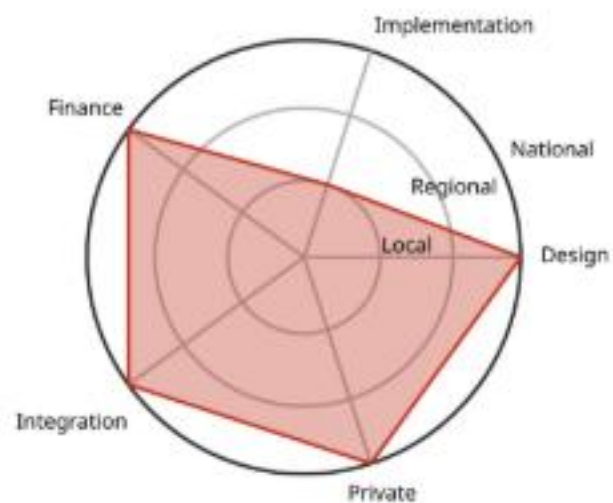


The Level of Centralisation and Coordination in Child Policy Governance Vary Across Countries ECCE Policy Portfolios...

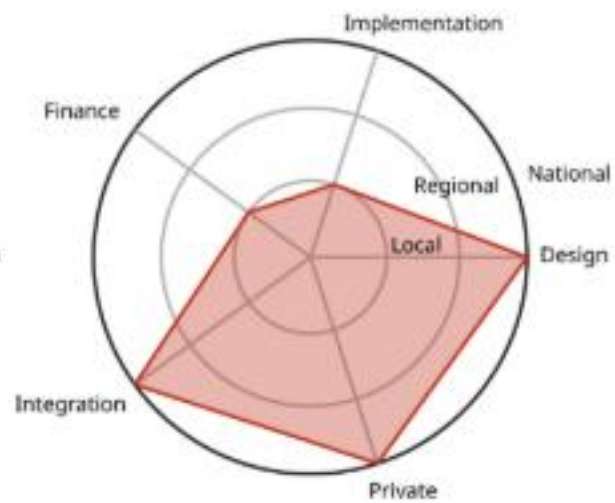


Childcare policies

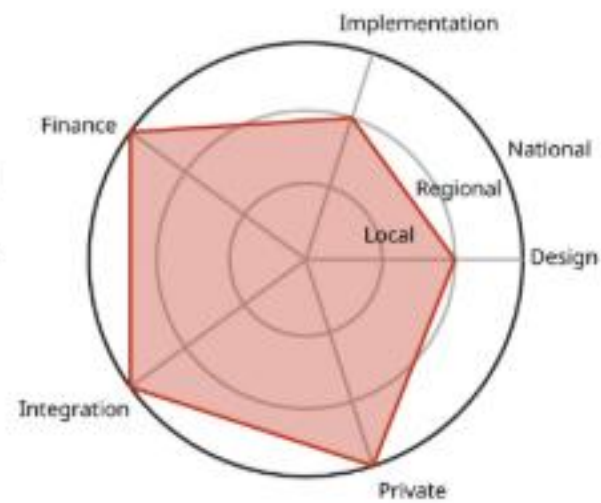
Tanzania



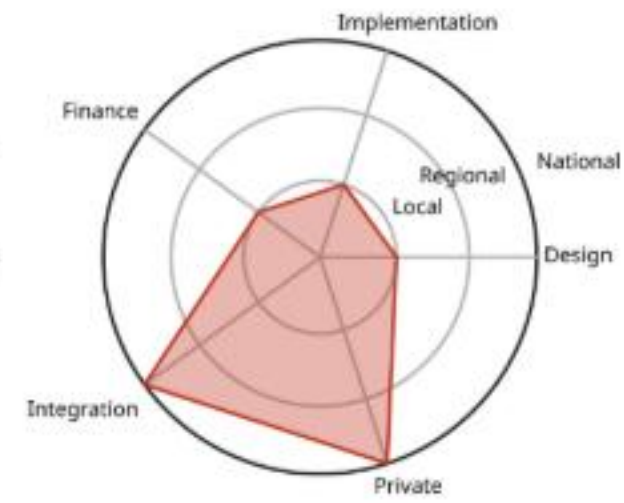
Brazil



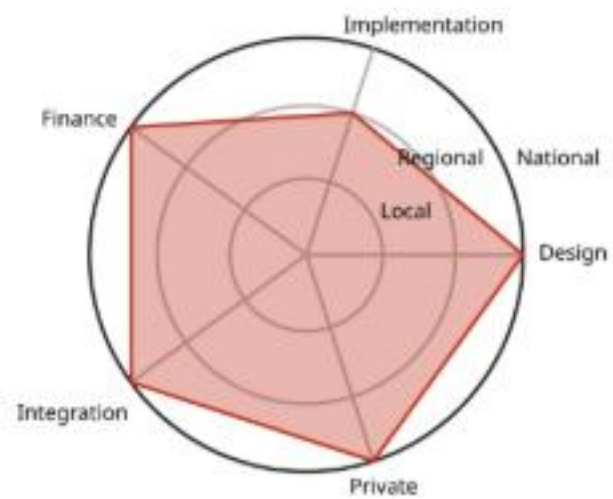
Canada



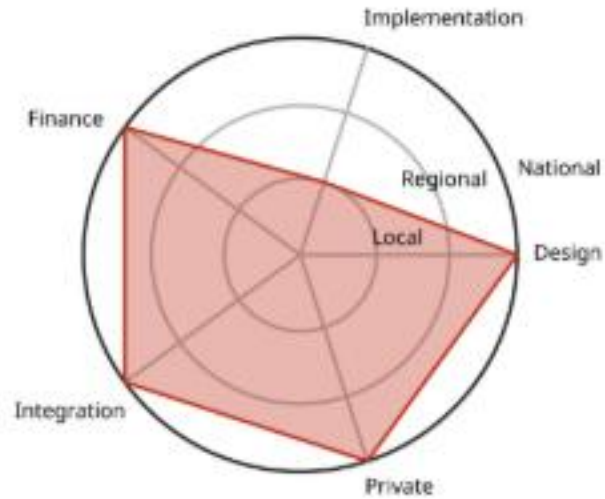
China



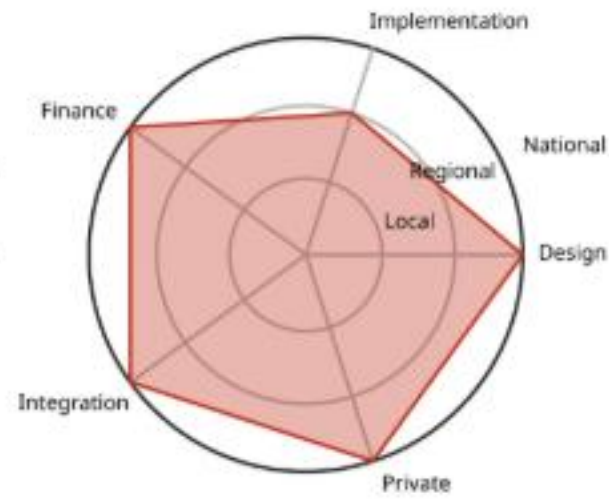
India



Netherlands

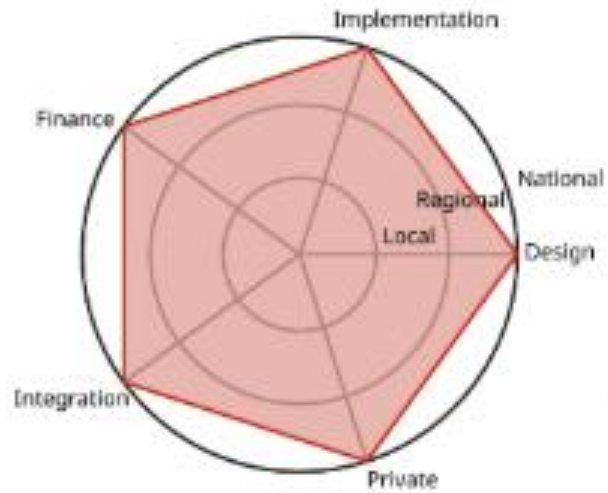


United Arab Emirates

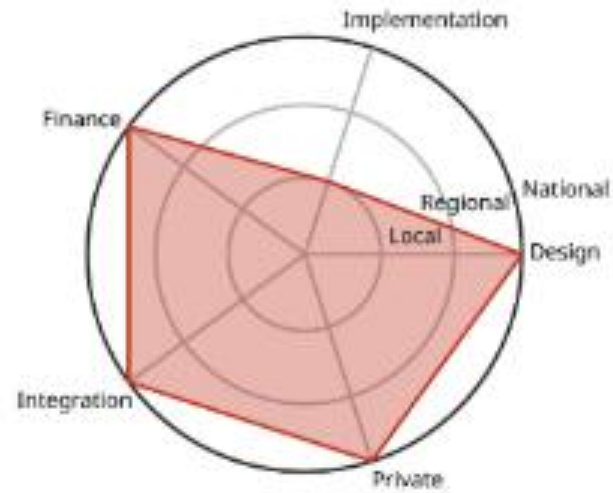


Family or child allowances

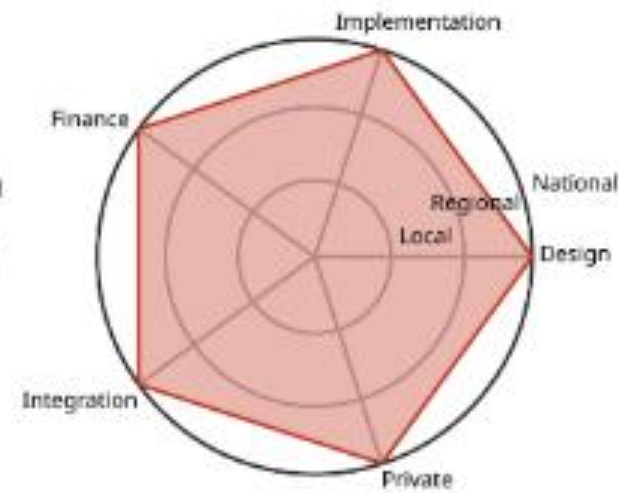
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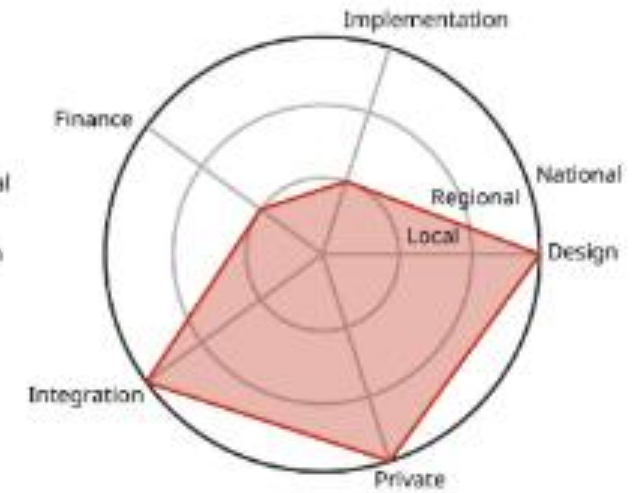
Brazil



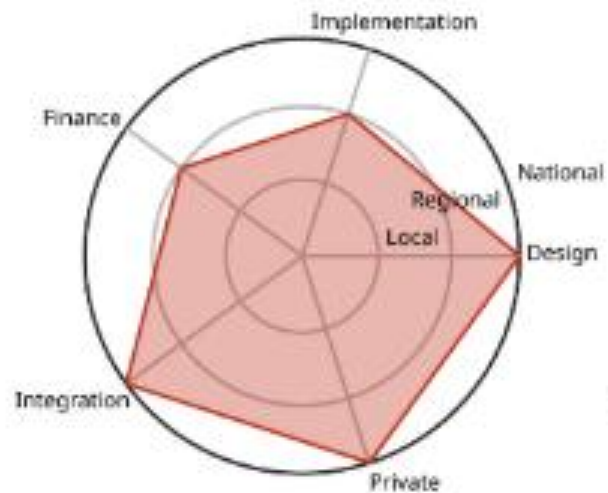
Canada



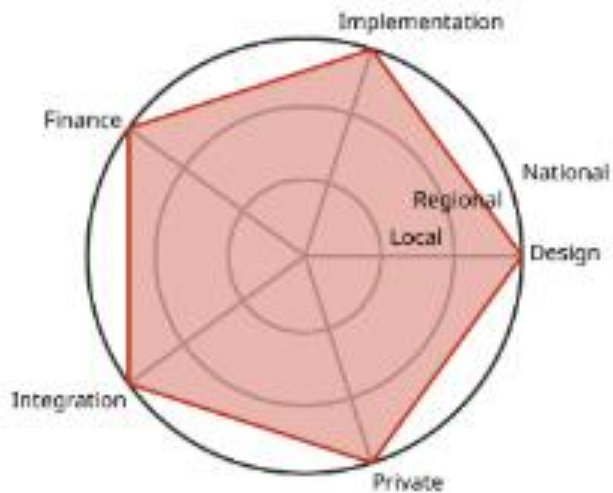
China



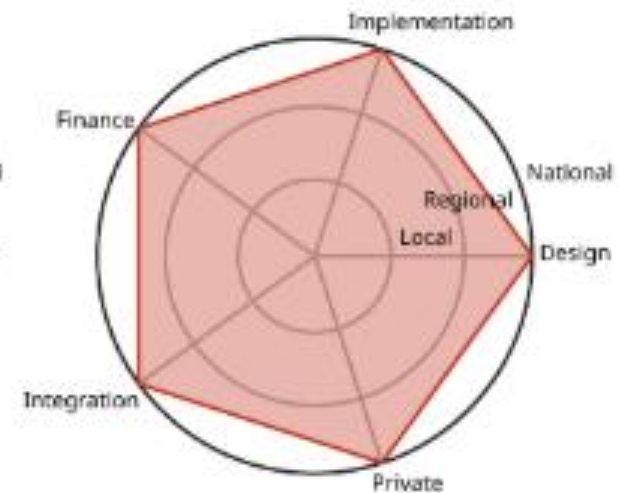
India



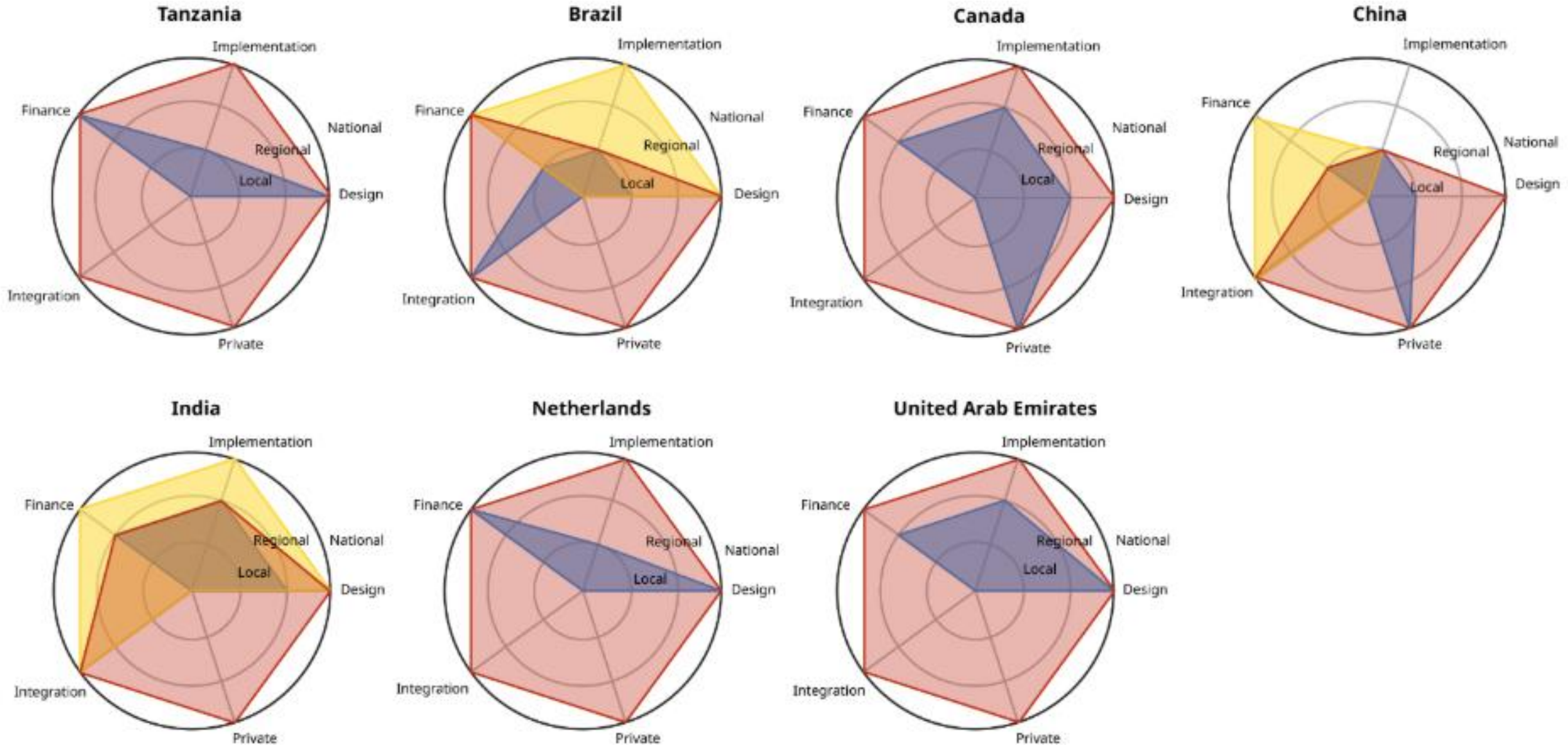
Netherlands



United Arab Emirates



Fragmented governance can complicate integration and coordination





**What works when
building a child
policy portfolio?**



Pregnancy to age 3: The developmental base

What works when?

This phase includes:

- **Universal family social protection** around birth (maternity/paternity/parental leave and child benefits) with automatic enrolment into complementary primary health
- **Birth registration; immunization; early nutrition** (including breastfeeding support and micronutrients)
- **Responsive caregiving** and **parenting support services**
- **Access to affordable childcare and early childhood care services**; early detection and additional support interventions for children vulnerable to delays or disabilities and shock-responsive social protection programmes.



0 to age 3

These measures create the *time, resources, information, and agency* families need for nurturing care, and set the foundation for lifelong holistic well-being.



What works when?

Age 3 to 6: Universal early learning

This phase includes:

- **Access to no- and low-fee high-quality public childcare/preschool** with predictable hours, play-based pedagogy
- **Inclusion** (for all children – especially those facing poverty, disability, displacement, minority/indigenous language status, or restrictive gender/social norms)
- A **supported workforce** (training and coaching, with a focus on working with child and families from more marginalized backgrounds)



3 to age 6

Universal social protection rights and access to health, housing and protection services (as necessary) need to be guaranteed, which along with stacked interventions such as school meals/fortification, remove practical barriers to enrolment and regular attendance.



What works when?

Age 6 to 8: Transition and consolidation

This phase includes:

- **Aligned early-grade pedagogy** (including mother-tongue instruction where relevant)
- **Light-touch assessment for foundational learning**, targeted catch-up/accelerated learning where needed, inclusive education supports, **well-being supports** in schools, nutritional support and in-school feeding
- **Continued income support for the poorest** to prevent drop-off at school entry.

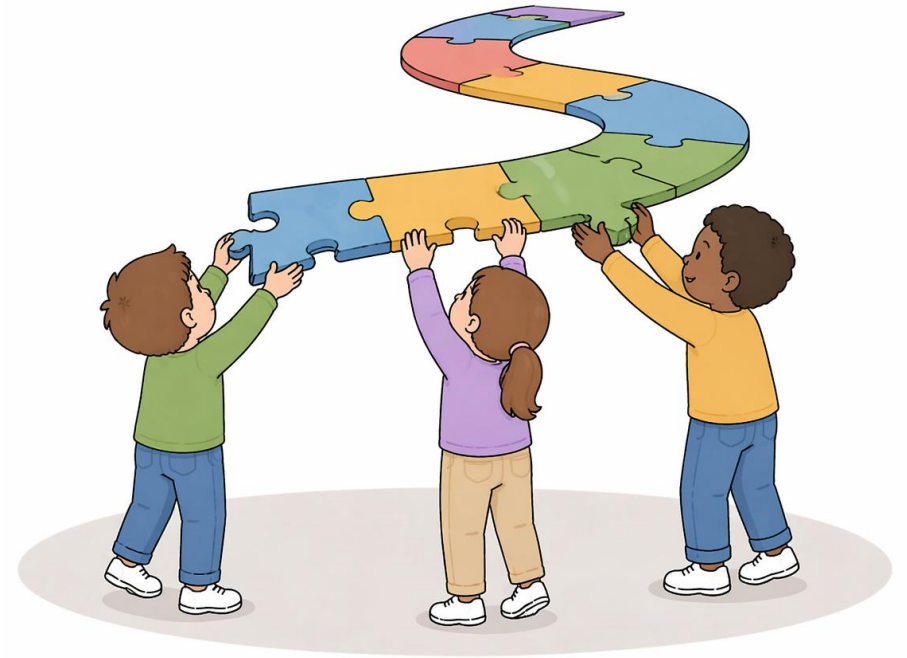


6 to age 8

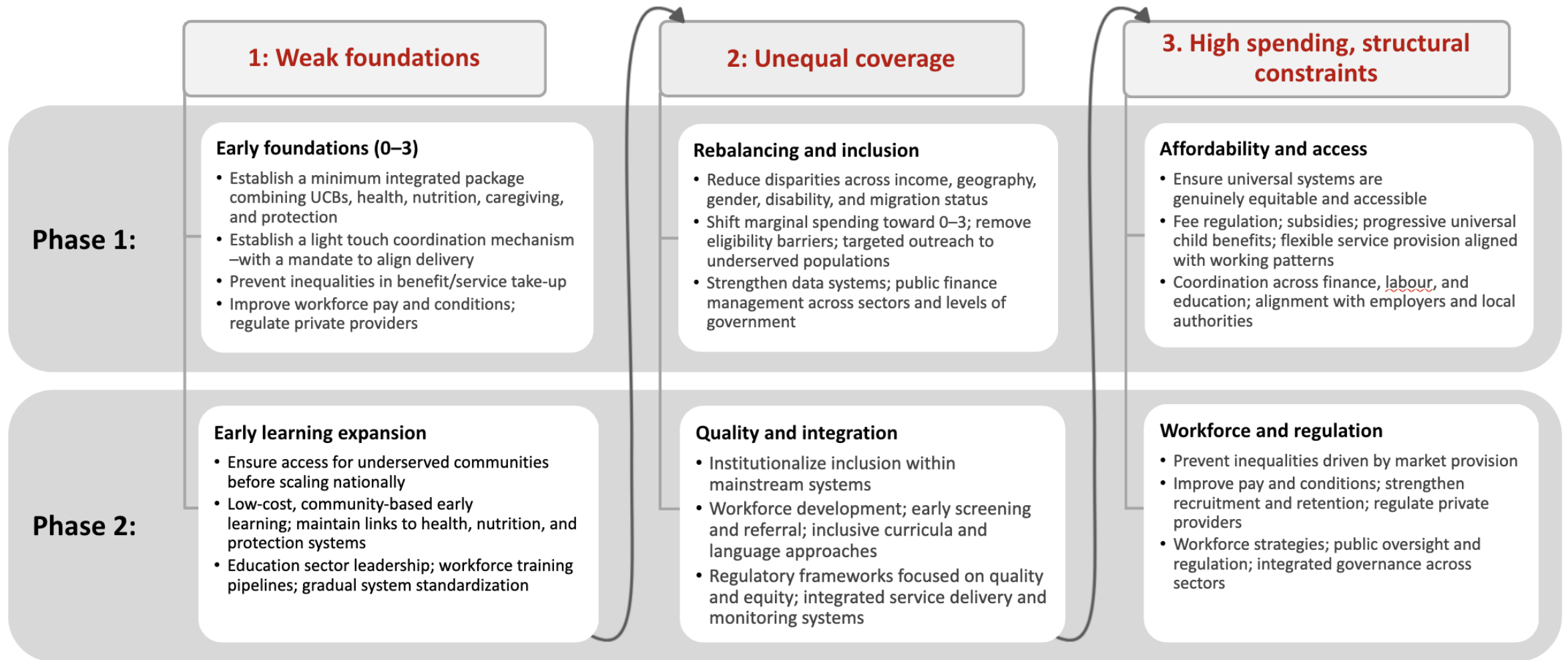
Universal social protection rights and access to health, housing and protection services. (as necessary) continue to be guaranteed.



How do we get to where we want to be, in policy terms, without leaving any child behind?



Which pathway is suitable for my country given my context?



An integrated ECCE system that starts child policy early, reduces exclusion before scaling, aligns across sectors and governance levels, and then consolidates quality and system-wide integration.

The problem is not only a lack of investment – it's when and how countries are investing

Spending comes

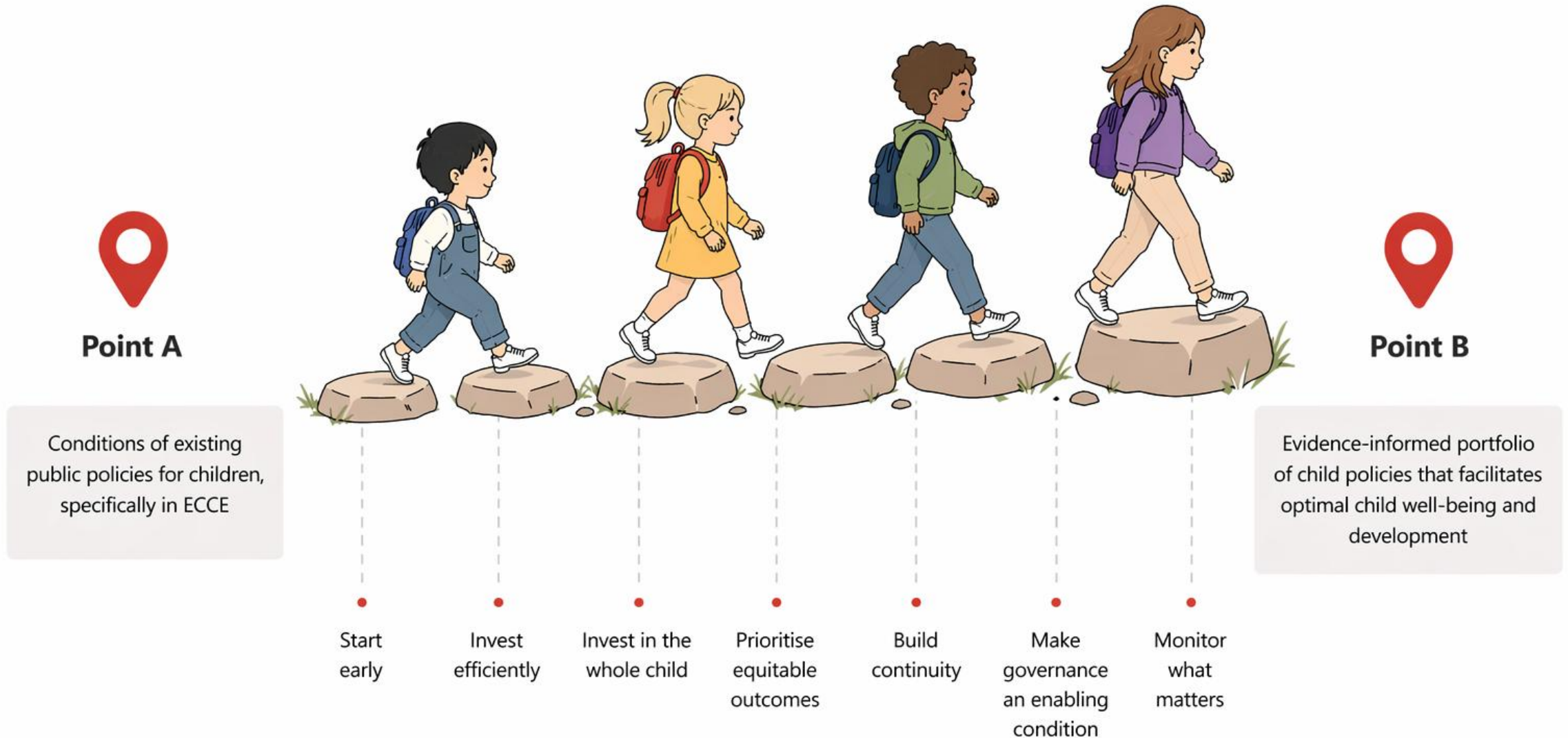
- Too late
- Too fragmented
- Too concentrated on later-stage education



► ► ► ***To protect and optimize all children's development, spending needs to shift earlier through phased reforms***



7 Principles for Point B: Inclusive and comprehensive reform of ECD systems



Thank you

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www.l4wb-i.org

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Guiding Questions

1. How do we budget and plan for quality and equity?
 2. How can public financing reduce out-of-pocket burdens and expand access more equitably?
 3. What safeguards are needed to ensure that financing expansion improves inclusion, quality, and fairness at the same time?
- 
- 

Think-Pair-Share

Inclusion, quality, and access are often treated as separate problems that are addressed through separate budgets, separate ministries, and separate programs. But for children who are excluded, these are one and the same.

Turn to the person next to you and discuss:

In the country or context(s) where you work, how does fragmentation undermine equitable access to quality, inclusive early years services? What is one change needed to fix it?



Thank you

Together, we can unlock financing that will translate evidence into budgets and budgets into services for young children and their families!

