



5th International Conference on Early Childhood Development

**INVESTING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT:
BUILDING HUMAN CAPITAL**

Conference Report

APRIL 7 - 8, 2026

**Report
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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACTED	Agency for Technical Cooperation & Development
AIOU	Allama Iqbal Open University
AKU	Aga Khan University
ARNEC	Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood
AVPN	Asian Venture Philanthropy Network
AW-IP	Agah Walidain - Informed Parenting
BMI	Brain & Mind Institute
BRAC	Building Resources Across Communities (previously Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee)
CAEDO	Community & Enterprise Development Organization
CASI	Central Asia Stunting Initiative
CRESTA	Climate Responsive Early Childhood Care & Development Systems Thinking Approach
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DEO (EE-W)	District Education Officer (Elementary Education - Women)
DHIS	District Health Information Software
DIL	Developments in Literacy
ECCE	Early Childhood Care & Education
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECDAN	Early Childhood Development Action Network
ECD PREP	Early Childhood Development Parenting Readiness Education Program
ECE	Early Childhood Education
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
GDP	Gross Domestic Product

GIFIP	Global Islamic Finance Impact Programme for Climate, Nature & Development
GSED	Global Scales for Early Development
GCET	Government College for Elementary Teachers
HAT	Helping Adolescents Thrive
HEC	Higher Education Commission
IAEERD	Institute of Agricultural Extension, Education & Rural Development
IED	Institute for Educational Development
IDELA	International Development & Early Learning Assessment
IRF	International Research Force
ISSA	International Step by Step Association
ITA	Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agahi
IYCF	Infant & Young Child Feeding
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
KFCP	Key Family Care Practice
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability & Learning
MECCE	Monitoring & Evaluating Climate Communication & Education
MHPSS	Mental Health & Psychosocial Support
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
MoFEPT	Ministry of Federal Education & Professional Training
MoNHSR&C	Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations & Coordination
MoPD&SI	Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives
NAVTTTC	National Vocational & Technical Training Commission
NCF	Nurturing Care Framework
NCRC	National Commission on the Rights of Child

NCSW	National Commission on the Status of Women
NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PAFEC	Pakistan Alliance For Early Childhood
PPC	Pakistan Penal Code
PSEAH	Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, & Harassment
RDI	Rupani Development Initiatives
RF	Rupani Foundation
RSPN	Rural Support Programmes Network
SABER-ECD	Systems Approach for Better Education Results - Early Childhood Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SEL	Social-Emotional Learning
SICHN	Sindh Institute of Child Health & Neonatology
STEDA	Sindh Teacher Education Development Authority
STMU	Shifa Tameer-e-Millat University
SUN	Scaling Up Nutrition
TAF	The Asia Foundation
TMUC	The Millenium University College
TQUK	Training Qualifications UK
TRC	Teachers' Resource Centre
UMDC	University Medical & Dental College
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive Summary

The 5th International Conference on Early Childhood Development (ECD), titled **“Investing in Early Childhood Development – Building Human Capital,”** was held on 7–8 April 2026 at Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), Islamabad, Pakistan. The conference brought together approximately 370 participants, including ministers, policymakers, development partners, ECD experts across Pakistan and the globe, academia, philanthropists, practitioners, and researchers. The primary objective of the conference was to strengthen dialogue and collective action toward positioning ECD as a critical investment in human capital and sustainable development.

The conference was organized by the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives (MoPD&SI), AIOU, Rupani Foundation (RF), United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood (PAFEC), and other Rupani Development Initiatives (RDI).

The event was further strengthened through partnerships with national and international organizations, including The Asia Foundation (TAF), World Health Organization (WHO), Muslim Hands, Save the Children, University Medical & Dental College (UMDC), Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC), Asian Venture Philanthropy Network (AVPN), Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN), International Step by Step Association (ISSA), Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED), Sustainawiser, The Aga Khan University (AKU), Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN), Sybrid, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), International Research Force (IRF), Hashoo Foundation, and Omer-e-Rawan.

The two-day conference commenced with an opening ceremony presided over by Prof. Dr. Ahsan Iqbal, Federal Minister for Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, setting the overall tone for the event. This was followed by a welcome address by Prof. Dr. Nasir Mahmood, Vice Chancellor, AIOU, who highlighted progress over the past decade in ECD policy, multisectoral collaboration, and programme expansion, noting its growing recognition as a national priority. He called for continued coordinated action and collaboration across sectors to sustain momentum. A children’s performance, *“The Circle of Care,”* by children and mothers highlighted the importance of nurturing care, love, protection, and early learning in shaping every child’s potential. An animated video on Pakistan’s ECD/Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)/Early Childhood Education (ECE) journey since 1947 was also showcased, highlighting progress, achievements, and the way forward.

Opening remarks were delivered by Mr. Nasruddin Rupani, Chairman, RF, highlighted gratitude to partners and progress in ECD initiatives, emphasizing informed caregiving, stronger partnerships, and innovative financing to sustain ECD investments. Dr. Zafar Mirza, Former Federal Minister for Health, Ministry of National Health Services Regulation & Coordination (MoNHSR&C), gave the keynote address, discussing the status of ECD in Pakistan, key challenges faced by children, and potential pathways to address these issues. Over the course of two days, six plenary sessions were held, covering themes including **Economics and Sustainable Mechanisms – Innovative Approaches to ECD Finances, Nurturing Care Across Cultures: Innovations and Inclusive Approaches to ECD, Health, Nutrition and Safety & Security, Strengthening ECD Workforce & Regional Cooperation, Research, Measurement & Accountability Systems, and Caregivers’ Mental Health & Mental Health & Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Integration.** These sessions brought together national and international experts who shared insights through keynote presentations and moderated panel discussions.

In parallel, concurrent sessions enabled researchers and practitioners to present papers aligned with the conference themes, fostering deeper technical exchange. A key highlight was the roundtable discussions on operationalizing the National ECD Policy Framework, which brought together policymakers and practitioners for actionable dialogue. The conference also featured pre-conference workshops on **Prenatal Care, Environmental Stewardship in Formative Years, Play-Based Speech and Language Development, Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (PSEAH), and Mental Health of Parents & Children,** along with an exhibition of ECD models and early learning materials showcasing best practices and innovation.

The conference concluded with a closing ceremony presided over by the Chief Guest, Dr. Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui, Federal Minister for Education and Professional Training (MoFEPT), and Prof. Dr. Niaz Ahmad Akhtar (S.I), Chairman, Higher Education Commission (HEC), as Guest of Honor. The session included a welcome note by Mr. Nasruddin Rupani, reflections on the conference by Dr. Naeem Zafar, and presentation of key findings and recommendations by Prof. Dr. Nasir Mahmood, Vice Chancellor, AIOU, followed by addresses from the distinguished guests.

Guest of Honour, Prof. Dr. Niaz Ahmad Akhtar (S.I), Chairman, HEC, Pakistan, emphasized the need for continuity in quality education across all levels. He highlighted ECD as a foundation for long-term success and called for stronger foundational learning, quality assurance, and improved system-wide coordination, while appreciating the contributions of NGOs, international organizations, and foundations such as RF, AKU, and Muslim Hands.

The Chief Guest, Dr. Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui, Federal Minister for Education and Professional Training reiterated that ECD is central to cognitive, moral, and economic growth. He drew attention to challenges such as out-of-school children and learning poverty, stressing that education is key to social progress, economic resilience, and national security. He called for prioritizing human capital over short-term infrastructure-focused approaches, providing a fitting conclusion to the two-day conference and reflecting a shared commitment to investing in ECD as a cornerstone of sustainable development.





Day 1

Opening Ceremony

**Venue: W.M. Zaki Auditorium, Academic
Complex, Allama Iqbal Open University,
Islamabad**

Opening Proceedings

The formal proceedings began with welcome announcements inviting participants to take their seats. In her opening facilitation remarks, the conference host, **Ms. Wania Waseem**, welcomed distinguished guests, partners, speakers, and participants, and acknowledged the organizing partners whose collaborative efforts had made the event possible. In setting the tone, she emphasized that early childhood forms the bedrock of human development and noted that prior conferences since 2017 had already helped strengthen Pakistan's ECD ecosystem through nurturing care, professional pathways, community models, and policy dialogue. She highlighted as a major national milestone the formal notification of the National ECD Policy Framework in February 2025 and framed the current conference around the next major task: investment especially sustainable and innovative financing to strengthen integrated systems across health, nutrition, education, and social protection.

The gathering then observed the national anthem, followed by a recitation of a verse from the Holy Qur'an by **Mr. Ibtisam Al-Rehman** of the Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, AIU, along with Urdu and English translation. The chosen verses, centered on reading, knowledge, and learning, were especially fitting for a conference devoted to the formative years of human development.



In his welcome note, **Prof. Dr. Nasir Mahmood, Vice Chancellor, Allama Iqbal Open University**, highlighted the significance of the 5th International Conference on Early Childhood Development, centered on investing in ECD to build human capital.

He reflected on a decade of progress, including advancements in policy frameworks, multisectoral coordination, and programme implementation, including the development of a national policy framework, creation of a multisectoral task force, and use of evidence-based planning. He also noted the establishment of a national ECD platform,



expansion of ECD centres and classrooms, rollout of community and parenting programmes, and advances in workforce training.

He emphasized the increasing recognition of ECD as a vital national investment, supported by development partners and integrated approaches like nurturing care. He also underscored the conference as a platform for knowledge exchange and collaboration, calling for sustained commitment and coordinated efforts across sectors. He concluded by expressing appreciation to partners and organizers for their continued support in advancing ECD in Pakistan.

The opening ceremony of the 5th International Conference on Early Childhood Development featured a heartfelt children's performance, **"The Circle of Care,"** performed by children and mothers highlighted the importance of nurturing care, love, protection, and early learning which delivered a powerful emotional appeal on the importance of nurturing care. Through a moving narration, the performance highlighted that every child is born with immense potential, but their dreams can only flourish with love, protection, nurturing care and early learning opportunities while calling on adults to listen, nurture, and believe in them. The performance reinforced the compelling message that investing in ECD is ultimately an investment in the future of humanity.

Mr. Nasruddin Rupani, Chairman, Rupani Foundation, then delivered his remarks. He welcomed distinguished guests and expressed gratitude to co-hosts, sponsors, and partners for their support in making the conference possible.



He highlighted RF's community-based initiatives, including the Agha Walidain - Informed Parenting (AW-IP) Programme, and emphasized the importance of informed caregiving. He

acknowledged progress on Pakistan's national ECD framework and stressed the need for stronger partnerships with governments, the private sector, bilateral and multilateral partners, and communities, increased fiscal space, and innovative financing to sustain ECD investments. He concluded by noting the conference as an opportunity to reflect on progress and collectively shape the future ahead.

Moving on, the Chief Guest, **Prof. Dr. Ahsan Iqbal, Federal Minister for Planning, Development and Special Initiatives,** delivered his address, emphasizing that ECD is central to Pakistan's future and human capital development. He highlighted that the earliest years of life are critical for brain development and long-term productivity, making ECD not just a social priority but a strategic and economic imperative.



He also stressed targeted support for vulnerable children, professionalizing the ECD workforce with clear standards, and improving accountability through better data and monitoring systems. Finally, he called for coordinated federal-provincial action and greater engagement and stronger advocacy from academia, media, and civil society to prioritize long-term investment in children's early years for a more prosperous and competitive Pakistan.

Following that, an animated video showcasing Pakistan's ECD/ECCE journey was presented, highlighting decades of progress, key achievements, and the vision for the future of ECD in the country. The video traced developments from the post-independence period through Kachi class provision for children aged four to five, the growth of private and NGO-led ECE in the 1980s, and the formal introduction of ECD in the 1990s. It noted major milestones including the 2006-07 national ECE curriculum, teacher training modules, minimum learning standards, ECE classrooms, and teacher

recruitment; the inclusion of ECE in provincial reform programmes and the addition of a chapter in the National Education Policy; the 2017 revision of the curriculum into ECCE; and the introduction of university-level certificate, diploma, and degree programmes.

Provincial developments in Sindh, Punjab, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were highlighted, key steps taken by UNICEF and other key partners such as the introduction of the AW-IP model by RF in 2007. The video also documented the creation of the ECD Network Pakistan in 2013, later renamed Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood in 2018, and the eventual launch of the National ECD Policy Framework in February 2025 by the MoPD&SI. It closed by noting the contribution of health, nutrition, primary health care, and development partners, including UNICEF, WHO, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Bank, in strengthening Pakistan's ECD ecosystem.

Building on this, partner remarks were presented, beginning with **Mr. Muhammad Rafique Tahir, Board Member, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood**.



He highlighted the role of PAFEC as an open and leading national platform to promote holistic, inclusive and multisectoral ECD approaches and practices in the country through policy advocacy, workforce development, research and learning, knowledge management, experience sharing, professional development and capacity building with a focus on positive and responsive parenting and nurturing care.

Followed by this, **Ms. Pernille Ironside, Country Representative, UNICEF Pakistan**, was invited to give her remarks. She emphasized ECD as a fundamental investment in children's development and highlighted the need for integrated, multisectoral support systems combining health,



nutrition, learning, protection, and positive parenting. She also outlined UNICEF's ongoing efforts in Pakistan, including parenting programmes, integrated ECD services, workforce training, and community-based innovations to improve outcomes for young children.

This was followed by remarks from **Ms. Ellen Thom, Deputy Representative, WHO Pakistan**.



She highlighted the Nurturing Care Framework (NCF) and its focus on health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, early learning, and safety/security, while linking ECD to Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4.2. She also called for increased investment in pre-primary education, stronger integration of health and parenting services, and targeted support for vulnerable children, reaffirming WHO Pakistan's commitment to policy and systems strengthening.

Subsequently, **Ms. Noreen Bano, Chairperson, National Commission on the Status of Women Pakistan**, highlighted poverty and maternal well-being as central to ECD, calling for stronger policy attention to mothers' health, gender equality, fair pay for frontline female workers, and broader reforms linking ECD with social and economic justice.

Partner remarks continued with **Mr. Muzaffar ud Din, Country Representative, The Asia Foundation Pakistan**.



He reflected on earlier inclusive education and ECD work in Gilgit-Baltistan and lessons from Bangladesh's large-scale early childhood programmes, particularly BRAC's impact on literacy and poverty reduction. He then highlighted the role of TAF, including its Books for Asia initiative and the Let's Read Digital Library, offering around 11,000 books in 60 languages, including Urdu.

Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, Chief Nutrition, Scaling Up Nutrition Secretariat, Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives came next.



He spoke on nutrition and governance, and highlighted efforts to strengthen provincial governance structures, expand capacity-building for universities, colleges, and government institutions, and promote ECD-related curricula in universities. He also noted work on developing ECD markers and a budgeting "ECD lens," stressed provincial responsibility for implementation and stronger inclusion of ECD in Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP)/Associate Degree Programme (ADP) portfolios, and reiterated ECD and nutrition as government priorities, including their integration within the national nutrition programme in 40 districts.

After the partner remarks, **Dr. Saba, Manager ECD, UNICEF Pakistan**, came to the stage and shared an update on the previous conference's recommendations, focusing on three areas: policy and systems strengthening, institutional capacity, and community empowerment.



She highlighted progress in the national ECD policy framework, development of operational guidelines, expansion of training and Centres of Excellence, and growing integration of ECD into higher education. Dr. Saba also noted advancements in parenting programmes, ECD in emergencies, and digital innovations. She concluded that while significant progress has been made, greater efforts are needed to ensure scale, sustainability, and effective implementation.

Ms. Khadija Khan, CEO, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood, presented the conference objectives and outlined the two-day schedule, centered on the theme of investing in ECD.



She emphasized that ECD is a multi-sectoral agenda requiring coordination across health, education, nutrition, child protection, and nurturing care systems. Ms. Khadija noted that fragmented efforts weaken outcomes, while integrated approaches are essential for improving child development.

She highlighted that the conference aims to go beyond dialogue by focusing on implementation, investment models, and innovative financing approaches, including public sector allocation, community-based initiatives, and philanthropic support. She then outlined the programme, including plenary sessions with national and international experts, exhibitions of ECD models and learning materials, poster presentations, and parallel research sessions. Ms. Khadija also highlighted a policy roundtable focused on translating the national ECD framework into actionable provincial plans. She concluded by stating that the conference is expected to lead to concrete commitments and a shared call to action for strengthening ECD in Pakistan.

The keynote address on **“Investing in Early Childhood Development – Building Human Capital”** was delivered by **Dr. Zafar Mirza, former Federal Minister for Health, Ministry of National Health Services Regulation and Coordination.**



Dr. Zafar began by posing a fundamental question that framed his entire address: despite the abundance of evidence, frameworks, partnerships, and technical knowledge on ECD, why do Pakistan's children continue to experience such poor outcomes? Referring to the millions of children out of school and persistently high rates of stunting, he questioned why progress has remained limited despite decades of effort and growing understanding of what works in ECD.

His first key message was that ECD is no longer primarily a technical issue. While acknowledging the importance of evidence-based interventions and scientific understanding of child development, particularly during the earliest years of life, he argued that the real barriers are governance, political commitment, and moral responsibility. He called for ECD to move beyond technical

discussions and become a political agenda that shapes budgetary and policy decisions.

His second key message was that ECD cannot be addressed in isolation from Pakistan's broader human development challenges. Citing the country's declining ranking on the Human Development Index over the past decade, alongside indicators such as high neonatal mortality, widespread hepatitis C, diabetes, and hypertension, he emphasized that improvements in ECD cannot be achieved in isolation from broader investments in human wellbeing.

His third key message focused on fiscal prioritization. He argued that the challenge is not a lack of fiscal space but a lack of political willingness to allocate resources toward human development. Drawing on the example of Singapore's long-term investments in education and human capital, he emphasized that investing in people, particularly children, is a prerequisite for economic development rather than a consequence of it. He further highlighted the economic returns associated with investments in ECD.

His fourth key message concerned inequities in human development and ECD outcomes. Highlighting stark disparities in public spending and service coverage across districts, including within Punjab. Citing government data, he observed that per capita government health expenditure was approximately US\$70 in Lahore but less than US\$1 in districts such as Muzaffargarh and Dera Ghazi Khan. He argued that unequal resource allocation undermines opportunities for children in underserved areas and must be addressed through more equitable development policies and budgetary decisions.

In his concluding remarks, Dr. Mirza stressed that meaningful progress in ECD also requires stronger local governance. He called for greater devolution of authority and resources to district and local governments, arguing that accountable local institutions are essential for effective service delivery and improved outcomes for children.

Day 1

Plenary 1

Economics and Sustainable Mechanisms: Innovative Approaches to ECD Finances

Session Chair:

Ms. Romina Khurshid Alam, Coordinator to the Prime Minister on Climate Change & Environmental Coordination

Moderator:

Mr. Syed Jalal ud Din Shah, Global CEO, Rupani Foundation

Keynote Speaker:

Mr. Stephen Rasmussen, Chairman, Community and Enterprise Development Organization

Speakers:

- Dr. Adnan Aziz, Chief Programme Officer, Global Islamic Finance Impact Programme for Climate, Nature and Development, UAE
 - Ms. Katy Anis, Principal, Coalescence Advisory Service
 - Ms. Mina Zamand, Economist, World Bank Pakistan
 - Mr. Vikas Arora, Chief of Impact Investing & Blended Finance, Asian Venture Philanthropy Network
 - Ms. Shekufeh Zonji, Global Technical Lead, Early Childhood Development Action Network
-

Economics and Sustainable Mechanisms: Innovative Approaches to ECD Finances

The session on “**Economics and Sustainable Mechanisms: Innovative Approaches to ECD Finances**” was chaired by **Ms. Romina Khurshid Alam, Coordinator to the Prime Minister on Climate Change & Environmental Coordination**, and moderated by **Mr. Syed Jalal ud Din Shah, Global CEO, Rupani Foundation**. The discussion focused on the economic case for investing in ECD, highlighting global evidence of high returns, particularly in the context of Asia’s demographic transition and human capital development. Speakers explored innovative financing mechanisms, including venture philanthropy, blended finance, catalytic capital, corporate social responsibility, faith-based giving, and diaspora philanthropy as sustainable pathways to support ECD.



The first plenary opened with a keynote address by **Mr. Stephen Rasmussen, Chairman, Community and Enterprise Development Organization**, which set the foundation for the session by introducing innovative approaches to financing ECD at scale. His address highlighted the potential of microfinance and community-based economic models to support ECD delivery, particularly by enabling local entrepreneurs and service providers to establish and sustain early childhood services within their communities. Drawing on case studies from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India, including initiatives supported by the RF, he showed how local resources can be mobilized to establish and sustain ECD centers.

He emphasized that traditional funding approaches alone are insufficient to meet the scale required for ECD, and that integrating financial inclusion mechanisms with social development goals offers a viable pathway for expansion. He underscored strong community demand, low-cost, home-based



models, and the role of women entrepreneurs, supported through blended finance including Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and philanthropy. He also introduced climate-linked financing, where initiatives like tree planting can generate income through carbon markets and be reinvested into ECD. Highlighting Pakistan’s challenges: high illiteracy, limited access to ECD, and child stunting, he stressed that greater

commitment and community-driven approaches, alongside government efforts, are essential to address these gaps. By linking economic empowerment with caregiving and early learning services, such models can create self-sustaining systems that are rooted in community ownership and accountability.

The keynote further underscored the importance of designing financing strategies that are not only scalable but also responsive to local contexts, ensuring that services remain accessible and relevant to the communities they serve. It positioned ECD financing not merely as a funding challenge, but as a system design issue, requiring innovative partnerships, blended financing approaches, and stronger linkages between economic and social sectors.

The moderator, **Mr. Syed Jalal ud Din Shah**, steered the discussion toward one central proposition: ECD must no longer be framed as a consumption cost or a welfare-side social service expenditure, but as an investment in human capital. Throughout the plenary, he repeatedly linked the financing discussion to broader concerns about public financing constraints, climate finance, private capital, and the need to unlock new forms of investment rather than relying on traditional public-sector channels alone. In his transitions between speakers, he emphasized that the conference was trying to explore not only fiscal space within government budgets, but also alternative financing windows capable of supporting sustained ECD programming and infrastructure.



This framing was consistent with the conference's wider intellectual thread established earlier in the day, including Dr. Zafar Mirza's insistence that ECD must move from technical discussion into the domains of political will, financing, and system reform, and with the programme's design for Plenary 1, which explicitly foregrounded economics and sustainable financing mechanisms.

Ms. Romina Khurshid Alam, Coordinator to the Prime Minister on Climate Change & Environmental Coordination, started her argument strongly by saying that policy discussions alone are insufficient unless they translate into practical solutions at the local level. Drawing on field experience in rural Balochistan, she referred to projects that had reached 70,000 girls in public schools through training and the provision of "solution kits," using this as an example of localized, context-responsive implementation rather than consultant-heavy programming.



Ms. Romina emphasized that ECD discourse often highlights mothers but insufficiently recognizes the decisive role of fathers, especially in conservative and rural contexts where men can be gatekeepers to girls' mobility, health, and learning. She argued that community and religious actors also need to be engaged, and that schooling remains foundational because early school experiences shape life trajectories in enduring ways. She also stressed mental health, both of caregivers and of teachers, as a neglected component of child development, and cautioned against abstract language such as "capacity building" when what is really needed is shared learning, collaboration, and practical engagement. Her call for localization was especially striking; she argued that community systems, local councils, midwives, and local actors should be mobilized rather than waiting for top-down structures alone. She closed with an appeal for collective action, emphasizing "**it is not I, it is us,**" and linking resilient children with resilient societies.

Although her remarks were broader than the financing theme alone, they were important because they grounded the later financial discussion in lived realities: poverty, gender norms, social taboos, weak local engagement, teacher well-being, and the need for simple, localized solutions. In effect, her intervention reminded the conference that financing models must remain

accountable to actual community conditions rather than becoming purely technical or donor-facing constructs.

Following her remarks, the moderator acknowledged the strength of her intervention, noted that she had to leave early, and arranged for a shield presentation and group picture before resuming the panel discussion.

Dr. Adnan Aziz, Chief Programme Officer, Global Islamic Finance Impact Programme for Climate, Nature and Development, began by reframing the issue through a simple story of two children born on the same day but entering very different developmental trajectories because one had access to nutrition, stimulation, and caregiving support while the other did not.



He argued that the difference was not talent but investment, and that financing ECD should therefore be understood not as social spending but as the allocation of capital to shape the future of entire economies. In his view, the core challenge is not lack of money but fragmentation of capital and the failure to think of ECD as a system rather than a single project. He stressed that maternal health, nutrition, early learning, and caregiving support are interconnected and that siloed financing cannot effectively support them.

He then outlined a structured financing architecture. First, zakat and sadaqat could serve as a social protection layer, helping vulnerable households access nutrition and ECD services and functioning like first-loss capital that absorbs risk and ensures inclusion. Second, waqf could provide long-term sustainability by financing land, buildings, early childhood centers, and integrated service facilities. Third, climate and development finance could provide scale and bankability by supporting green centers, climate-resilient caregiving systems, and nutrition interventions in climate-affected communities. Bringing these layers together, he proposed a blended Islamic finance model for

human capital development in which zakat supports inclusion, waqf supports sustainability, and concessional climate and development finance supports scale eventually crowding in commercial capital.

A major contribution of his remarks was the insistence that human development should be treated as human infrastructure, not merely as a soft social agenda. He argued that climate finance remains too heavily focused on physical infrastructure and often ignores the vulnerability of children, nutrition systems, and caregiving structures. For Pakistan and similar contexts, he proposed the creation of national and regional financing platforms capable of pooling diverse capital sources, applying governance standards, and developing bankable, investable, scalable ECD programmes. In this framing, the question was not how to distribute scattered charity more efficiently, but how to deploy capital strategically at system level in order to treat ECD as a long-term investment in human capital.

Ms. Katy Anis, Principal, Coalescence Advisory Service, explicitly linked her intervention to an emerging conversation on how ECD could connect with climate adaptation, resilience, and finance, asking how governments and development partners might bring ECD into national climate and adaptation finance strategies.



She argued that climate change is not only an environmental crisis but also a human capital crisis, and that its earliest and most profound impacts are felt in early childhood. In her framing, care systems are climate infrastructure because they help protect children and stabilize families when climate shocks disrupt nutrition, learning, and caregiving. She argued that care should be understood as central to climate resilience, climate adaptation, mitigation, and long-term economic development. This meant rethinking childcare centers and early childhood

centers not merely as social facilities but as sites of climate resilience, equipped for passive cooling, solar energy, water systems, and local adaptation measures.

She broadened the discussion beyond buildings to include systems and services, emphasizing climate-responsive, disaster-ready systems that can keep centers open during crises, prevent dropout, create flexible workforce opportunities, and embed disaster preparedness into child-serving institutions. She argued that financially resilient care systems are essential because fragile and underfunded systems collapse most quickly during crises, with major implications for child development and long-term Gross Domestic Product (GDP). She then introduced the idea of connecting carbon markets and care services, asking whether “*investments in trees could finance investments in children.*” This led to her discussion of a possible carbon-to-care model, which she said had already been under dialogue with RF. In this model, revenue generated from carbon finance could be used to support childcare and family services, linking natural capital and human capital in a virtuous cycle.

Ms. Katy further suggested several practical instruments: carbon finance for care systems, parametric insurance for care centers, green certification for care providers, support for women-led care enterprises, and integration of care centers into the green economy and nature-based enterprise models. She also highlighted the strong compatibility of these ideas with Islamic finance, citing potential roles for zakat, waqf, sukuk, and takaful. Her overall message was that care is the missing infrastructure in climate action and that investment in care simultaneously supports children, mothers, fathers, economies, climate resilience, and mitigation.

The moderator invited **Ms. Mina Zamand, Economist, World Bank Pakistan**, to reflect on how development finance institutions work with governments and whether there is room to increase the social-sector and ECD share within development financing frameworks. Her intervention moved the conversation from innovative finance instruments toward the institutional and public-finance realities of ECD financing.

Speaking as an economist, she began with the problem of data and analytics. She argued that Pakistan lacks sufficiently detailed data on ECD spending, on where expenditures are occurring,



and on whether they are efficient. She referred to international experience, including a public expenditure review in South Africa comparing community caregiving models with more infrastructure-heavy models, to illustrate that similar returns can often be achieved with less expensive approaches if financing is designed intelligently. She called for detailed public expenditure reviews for ECD in Pakistan, acknowledging that this is more complicated than sector-specific analysis because ECD spans health, education, social protection, and allied sectors. Nonetheless, she insisted that such work is both possible and necessary.

Her second major point concerned institutional architecture. She argued that the financing challenge is not only about scarce resources, but about fragmented institutions. Because health, education, and social protection departments often work in silos, it becomes difficult to build financing frameworks unless there is a clear institutional anchor capable of coordinating across sectors. From the perspective of development banks, this institutional anchor is crucial for designing reform programmes that can actually work in practice.

Ms. Mina then cited an example from Morocco, where a large World Bank-supported programme significantly increased ECD enrollment through public-private partnerships that helped build around 10,000 ECE centers. She emphasized that this was not only an expansion of access, but also a case where financing was tied to results, thereby reinforcing accountability. She drew from this the lesson that Pakistan should think carefully about the role of NGOs, private actors, and public-private partnerships in moving the sector forward, especially where community-level providers and established civil society organizations already have experience in implementation.

At the same time, she strongly cautioned that financing models should not focus only on access or enrollment. They must incorporate what is required to sustain the quality of services over time. She said development partners, including the World Bank, are increasingly focusing on scale, sustainability, and system-building, with reforms layered and sequenced over time rather than treated as one-off projects. Her intervention thus reinforced the need for long-term planning horizons of 10 to 15 years, not short project cycles.

Perhaps the most politically relevant part of her remarks concerned how to persuade finance ministries. She acknowledged that while ECD is indeed a moral issue, moral argument alone does not usually persuade finance ministers. Instead, advocates must show what inaction costs in terms of GDP loss. Referring to simulations, she indicated that if Pakistan fails to raise ECCE participation to regional benchmark levels, the resulting annual GDP loss per cohort could be substantial, with figures rising sharply in higher-quality scenarios. Her point was that ECD needs to be framed in the language of macroeconomic loss and return, because that is the vocabulary in which ministries of finance and planning make decisions. She also offered a caution about impact bonds, noting that because many ECD outcomes materialize over long time horizons, such instruments still face limitations in attracting private investors. For now, she suggested that business-as-usual approaches may still dominate, but should become more coordinated, sequenced, and system-oriented.

The moderator next invited **Mr. Vikas Arora, Chief of Impact Investing & Blended Finance, Asian Venture Philanthropy Network**, to speak about how catalytic capital, venture philanthropy, and blended finance could help unlock private investment in early childhood systems.



Mr. Vikas began by clarifying what blended finance actually means. In his view, it is often misunderstood as merely combining different pools of capital, whereas its real function is to reallocate risk in ways that enable capital to move where it otherwise would not. He underlined that the largest pool of available capital is private capital, but that private capital will not move unless it sees a reasonable expectation of return within a reasonable time horizon. Instead of trying to change the “DNA” of private capital, he argued, the right approach is to use catalytic capital strategically to bear risks that commercial investors normally avoid.

He described catalytic capital as strategic risk-bearing capital, typically coming from philanthropies, governments, or development finance institutions. Its functions include absorbing downside risk through first-loss structures or guarantees, improving the overall return profile of transactions, and building markets by entering spaces where others are hesitant to invest. This, he argued, is especially relevant for ECD, where value is clearly generated but is often not captured directly by investors. The returns to ECD are spread across society and across sectors education, health, productivity, and long-term growth so from a purely commercial standpoint ECD can appear “uninvestable,” even though it yields high social returns.

Mr. Vikas then gave examples of how this might work in practice. He referred to development impact bonds, such as one supported by the UBS Optimus Foundation, where private investors provide upfront capital to service providers and are repaid by outcome funders only if agreed results are achieved. In such arrangements, philanthropic capital underwrites performance risk, allowing private investors to participate. He also cited the Catalyze Edu Finance Programme, which used a layered capital structure combining catalytic grants, blended loans, and commercial capital through intermediaries to reach non-state education providers in underserved communities. He highlighted the importance of aggregators or intermediaries in lowering transaction costs and of coupling finance with capacity building and outcome-linked incentives.

His intervention reinforced two key points that resonated throughout the plenary:

1. ECD does not suffer from a simple shortage of money so much as from a shortage of financial structures that turn impact into investable opportunities.
2. Sustainable private participation requires defined outcomes, credible accountability, and an ecosystem where philanthropy, public finance, and private capital each play differentiated but complementary roles.

The moderator asked how global and regional networks could help create not only financing windows, but a broader movement for ECD that would influence policymakers, civil society, bilaterals, and multilaterals. **Ms. Shekufeh Zonji, Global Technical Lead, Early Childhood Development Action Network**, responded by pushing the discussion beyond the language of “movement” toward the language of systems-building.



In her view, the ECD field has matured beyond simple awareness-raising and must now become more strategic in how it frames itself. She argued that the field needs to become much more forceful in positioning early childhood as an economic policy, a human capital policy, a care economy policy, and a resilience policy, while still retaining the rights, care, dignity, and equity foundations of the agenda. She warned that in times of global fiscal squeeze, ECD cannot survive on goodwill alone and must be argued as fiscally sensible as well as morally urgent.

Using Pakistan as an example, she noted that roughly 41% of children will not meet their developmental potential, making ECD not a side issue or a women’s issue, but a core national growth issue. She also emphasized that the

resilience argument is crucial: malnutrition, toxic stress, conflict, poor care environments, and intergenerational trauma all affect the youngest children most severely. At the same time, she cautioned against allowing economic framing to displace the rights-based nature of ECD, arguing that children matter not only because they are future workers, but because they are children.

Her practical recommendations were twofold:

1. The field must engage more seriously in building financial architecture and financing systems, testing what works while ensuring that public systems remain the backbone of delivery.
2. Networks such as ECDAN, AVPN, and organizations like RF should collaborate more intentionally.

In fact, she explicitly endorsed the idea of AVPN, ECDAN, and RF jointly hosting a deeper platform on the financing question. She also mentioned that a global technical financing forum would be convened in May to deepen these discussions. Her intervention effectively converted the session from a set of speaker inputs into a call for coordinated next steps in the financing agenda.

In concluding the plenary, Mr. Syed Jalal observed that Ms. Shekufeh’s contribution had effectively summarized both the discussion and the next steps. He noted that climate resilience and climate finance had emerged as key cross-cutting issues, and suggested that ECDAN, AVPN, and UNICEF could jointly develop an action plan around the themes raised by the keynote speaker, panelists, and chair’s guidance. He also acknowledged that the topic warranted a deeper standalone dialogue, perhaps a separate roundtable or even another one-day conference because of the breadth and complexity of the issues.

He thanked the international panelists for joining across different time zones and praised participants present in the hall for their commitment, noting that the audience had stayed engaged through the session despite the absence of a coffee break. The session then moved into the formal presentation of mementos to the speakers and moderator, while shields were awarded to the session chair and keynote speaker in recognition of their contributions. The session ended with a group photograph of all participants, after which participants were invited to visit the ECD exhibition.

Day 1

Plenary 2

Nurturing Care Across Cultures: Innovations & Inclusive Approaches to ECD

Session Chair:

Ms. Sharmeela Rassool, Deputy Country Representative, UNICEF Pakistan

Co-Chair:

Mr. Muzaffar ud Din, Country Representative, The Asia Foundation Pakistan

Moderator:

Dr. Shelina Bhamani, Associate Professor and Programme Director
Outreach Education, Lead ECD Parenting Readiness Education
Programme ObGyn, AKU

Keynote Speaker:

Mr. Shinozaki Yusuke, Chief Representative, Japan International Cooperation Agency Pakistan

Speakers:

- Dr. Qudsia Uzma, Programme Lead, WHO Pakistan
 - Dr. Saba Shuja, Manager ECD, UNICEF Pakistan
 - Dr. Naila Khalid, Health & Nutrition Advisor, Save the Children Pakistan
 - Mr. Jalaluddin Hunzai, CEO, Rupani Foundation
 - Mr. Sajjad Hyder, CEO, Gbeetechive
 - Dr. Zeba Rasmussen, Founder, Mehnaz Fatima Foundation
-

Nurturing Care Across Cultures: Innovations & Inclusive Approaches to ECD

The second plenary was convened under the theme of “**Nurturing Care Across Cultures: Innovations & Inclusive Approaches to ECD**”, bringing together global and national expertise to explore how parenting systems, responsive caregiving, community models, and inclusive innovations can strengthen early childhood outcomes.

The session was chaired by **Ms. Sharmeela Rassool, Deputy Country Representative, UNICEF Pakistan**, with **Mr. Muzaffar ud Din, Country Representative, The Asia Foundation Pakistan**, serving as Co-Chair. The session was moderated by **Dr. Shelina Bhamani, Associate Professor and Programme Director Outreach Education, Lead ECD Parenting Readiness Education Program, ObGyn, AKU**. The discussion emphasized that nurturing care must be understood as a system of relationships, practices, and services, rooted in both global evidence and local cultural realities.



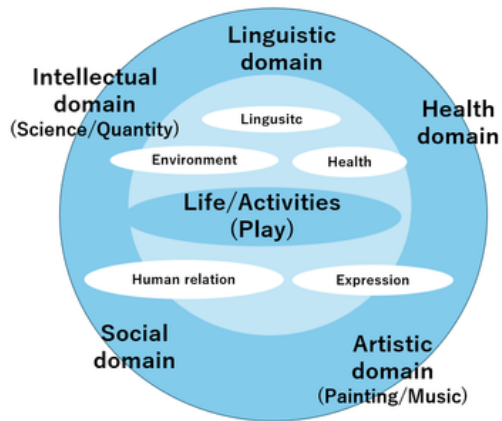
The keynote address by **Mr. Shinozaki Yusuke, Chief Representative, Japan International Cooperation Agency Pakistan**, set a strong systems-oriented tone for the plenary by reframing ECD as the foundation of lifelong learning, human capital formation, adaptability, resilience, and social participation, rather than merely a preparatory stage for schooling.

He began by reflecting on how ECD has historically been treated as a marginal component within education systems, often limited to pre-primary education. However, drawing on global evidence from neuroscience, economics, and education, he emphasized that early childhood represents the most critical phase for brain development, social learning, and behavioral formation.

A key element of his address was the Japanese model of ECE, which he described as fundamentally life-centered rather than academically driven.



He explained that this approach prioritizes children's everyday experiences, social interaction, play-based learning, and development of independence. Rather than focusing on early academic achievement, it fosters curiosity, resilience, and social competence skills essential for long-term success.



Objectives of five areas

- ① Health: Develop a healthy mind and body and develop the ability to create a healthy and safe life.
- ② Human relations: Develop a sense of independence and the ability to interact with others to live together and support each other.
- ③ Environment: Develop the ability to interact with the various surrounding environments with curiosity and a spirit of exploration and incorporate them into life.
- ④ Linguistic: Develop a willingness and attitude to express experiences and thoughts in one's own words, listen to what others say, and develop a sense for words and the ability to express them through words.
- ⑤ Expression: Develop rich sensitivity and the ability to express and enrich creativity by expressing what you feel and think in your way.

He emphasized that effective ECD systems must be multisectoral, integrating education, health, nutrition, caregiving, and protection. He highlighted that children's development cannot be addressed in isolation within classrooms, but must be supported through coordinated systems involving families, communities, and institutions. Drawing on JICA's experience, he shared examples of community-based ECD models, including initiatives in Pakistan where local-level coordination platforms brought together different sectors and stakeholders. These models demonstrated that community engagement and localized systems are critical for delivering integrated ECD services at scale.

He concluded by emphasizing that ECD should be viewed as a societal investment, requiring long-term commitment, cross-sector collaboration, and inclusive approaches that ensure all children particularly the most vulnerable have the opportunity to thrive.

The moderator asked **Dr. Qudsia Uzma, Programme Lead, WHO Pakistan**, for her insights into how nurturing care is understood and how it can be translated into daily family life and service delivery settings. She explained that nurturing care (particularly responsive caregiving) is a core pillar of the NCF, defined as caregivers' ability to observe, understand, and respond to a child's needs and signals in a warm and consistent manner.



She highlighted that everyday home routines such as feeding, bathing, and play are key opportunities for early learning, with "serve-and-return" interactions forming the basis of brain development and secure attachment. She emphasized that responsive caregiving strengthens emotional security, cognitive development, and social skills, forming the foundation for lifelong learning. She also linked responsive caregiving with broader nurturing care components, including health, nutrition, and safety. Dr. Qudsia also stressed the need to embed nurturing care within health and community systems, support caregivers' mental health, and promote positive discipline. She concluded that responsive caregiving is central to ECD outcomes, as it ultimately determines the quality of the caregiver-child relationship where development is shaped.

Moving on, **Dr. Saba Shuja, Manager ECD, UNICEF Pakistan**, was asked how family practices implemented across different contexts contribute to developmental gains in young children. She responded by saying that family practices are central to nurturing care and directly influence children's development, as ECD is shaped largely within the home through everyday caregiving rather than services alone.



She highlighted Pakistan's Key Family Care Practices (KFCEPs), which integrate health, nutrition, education, play, and caregiving through a life-cycle approach that also supports caregivers' wellbeing. She noted that these practices strengthen parental skills, improve father engagement, and help identify early developmental delays. She emphasized that nurturing care is still often treated as an add-on and is not yet fully integrated into systems, with significant data gaps on home-based learning and caregiving. She stressed the importance of integrating these initiatives within existing systems such as health services, community platforms, and education programmes.

Dr. Saba concluded that parenting programmes are a key tool for delivering nurturing care but need to be scaled and embedded across sectors for wider impact. Her remarks reinforced that responsive caregiving and informed parenting are central to ECD, and that interventions must go beyond awareness to build practical caregiving skills.

Dr. Shelina reiterated the message that healthy families raise healthy children and then subsequently invited **Dr. Naila Khalid, Health & Nutrition Advisor, Save the Children Pakistan**, to respond to how nutrition can be better integrated into responsive and nurturing caregiving. Dr. Naila Khalid responded that nurturing care is a critical investment area that directly influences human capital and long-term social and economic outcomes, noting that Pakistan is still underinvesting in ECD.



She emphasized that existing frontline health workers can play a key role in integrating nutrition and ECD messaging in routine services. For example, during nutrition or Infant and Young Child Feeding (IYCF) counseling, health workers can also demonstrate how responsive feeding, interaction, and communication support brain development and bonding.

She stressed that these integrated, low-cost interventions can simultaneously improve nutrition and early development outcomes. However, she noted that while integration has been discussed and piloted in several districts, there is still a need for better implementation, contextual adaptation, and course correction based on what works in different provinces.

The moderator then shifted the discussion towards implementation of nurturing care as a blueprint and called on **Mr. Jalaluddin Hunzai, CEO, Rupani Foundation**, to share how the organization has operationalized this through the AW-IP, programme and the outcomes it has generated. He shared that the initiative began over two decades ago as a vision of the founding chairman Mr. Nasruddin Rupani, starting with pilot community-based parenting interventions in Gilgit-Baltistan and rural Sindh. Over time, it expanded to more than 100 community-based centres, driven by growing community demand. The programme focuses on the critical 0–3 years and positions the household as the primary site of change through low-cost, structured parenting sessions delivered via existing community platforms.



He explained that AW-IP engages parents through structured sessions on early stimulation, nutrition, maternal wellbeing, and caregiving practices. The model is designed to be community-owned and scalable, with local spaces and resources supporting its implementation. It integrates health, nutrition, and social sectors and relies on demand generation rather than supply-driven delivery. He also highlighted innovations such as prenatal engagement, community mobilization, and pathways to formal education, demonstrating how parenting programmes can be integrated within broader ECD systems.

Mr. Jalaluddin concluded by saying that the model is culturally contextualized yet aligned with global nurturing care frameworks, and functions as a scalable, system-integrated approach that strengthens early development outcomes.

The question on leveraging digital platforms to scale nurturing care practices, expanding access to parenting support, and early learning, was directed to **Mr. Sajjad Hyder, CEO, Gbeetechive**. He demonstrated the AW-IP App, developed with support from the RF, as a practical example.



The platform enables parents to track their child's development on a weekly basis across cognitive, emotional, and physical domains, while also providing guided actions if developmental milestones are not met. Designed for low-resource settings like Gilgit-Baltistan, the app includes short video-based content and functions despite connectivity challenges.

He further highlighted that the platform is part of a broader digital ecosystem, extending into AI-based tools that support continued learning and career guidance, thereby creating a continuum from early childhood through later developmental stages. He highlighted how digital platforms can reach remote and underserved communities, providing caregivers with information and tools to support child development. He emphasized that digital solutions must be contextually relevant and accessible, complementing rather than replacing community-based interventions.

The question on how inclusion can be embedded and scaled within nurturing care practices was directed to **Dr. Zeba Rasmussen, Founder, Mehnaz Fatima Foundation**. Dr. Zeba Rasmussen brought a grassroots perspective, highlighting the challenges of implementing ECD interventions in rural and underserved areas. She emphasized that cultural norms, gender roles, and social barriers significantly influence caregiving practices. She stressed the importance of involving fathers, community leaders, and broader social structures in ECD interventions. Her remarks underscored that localization and cultural sensitivity are critical for effective ECD implementation.



She further defined inclusion as ensuring that every child (regardless of ability, background, language, or developmental pace) has access to quality learning and the support needed to thrive. Drawing from her personal experience and the journey of the Mehnaz Fatima School in Gilgit, she illustrated how inclusive models can be implemented in practice, with children of varying abilities learning together and supported through adapted teaching approaches and rehabilitation services. Dr. Zeba emphasized that inclusion begins with mindset (valuing every child equally and avoiding exclusionary assumptions) while also requiring investment in caregivers and educators through fair compensation, training, and support. Ultimately, she highlighted that inclusive nurturing care is built on dignity, empathy, and a system that supports both children and those who care for them.

Dr. Shelina then asked Dr. Saba Shuja to briefly outline what innovation in nurturing care should look like. Dr. Saba emphasized that innovation must combine digital solutions with existing systems, leveraging tools like AI and platforms such as

WhatsApp to expand outreach and enable early detection of developmental delays. She highlighted the need for a blended approach by integrating technology with community-based models to ensure wider, more equitable coverage and impact.

Mr. Sajjad Hyder added a brief comment on strengthening systems, emphasizing the importance of localization in digital solutions. While acknowledging global models such as Bebo and systems in countries like Malaysia and Singapore, he noted that such approaches must be adapted to local contexts. He stressed that for digital platforms to be effective in Pakistan (particularly in diverse regions) they must be designed to be accessible, culturally relevant, and responsive to the specific needs of caregivers.

Co-chair of the session, **Mr. Muzaffar ud Din, Country Representative, The Asia Foundation Pakistan**, reflected on the discussion by framing nurturing care through the lens of culture. He highlighted Pakistan's diversity as a “horizontal culture,” shaped by geography, demography, language, and urban-rural differences, all of which influence early childhood experiences.



He also pointed to “vertical culture,” referring to generational shifts, noting how evolving mindsets impact caregiving and learning practices. Further, he emphasized the role of institutional cultures (particularly families, schools, healthcare systems, and communities) in shaping nurturing care, especially within the socio-cultural context of Pakistan. He also introduced the idea of an emerging “future culture,” driven by rapid technological advancements such as AI. Mr. Muzaffar concluded by stressing the need for

platforms that enable learning across these varied cultural dimensions, allowing stakeholders to draw on diverse experiences to strengthen ECD approaches.

Session Chair **Ms. Sharmeela Rassool, Deputy Country Representative, UNICEF Pakistan**, synthesized the discussion by highlighting innovation and inclusion as the defining themes of the session. Given Pakistan's context of constrained fiscal space and widening socio-economic disparities, she emphasized that these two elements are critical to advancing ECD and broader social sector outcomes. Inclusion, she noted, enables systems to reach the most vulnerable and do more with limited resources, while innovation allows for new, adaptive approaches to scale impact effectively.



Drawing on the discussion, she outlined four key areas of focus:

1. Strategic clarity and direction; emphasizing the need to clearly define what ECD and nurturing care mean within the national context, and to prioritize goals with a clear line of sight to impact.
Ms. Sharmeela stressed that we cannot do everything at once, and while prioritization is essential, it is equally important to define clear goals within those priorities and the impact they are expected to achieve. She further highlighted that this can be driven through a collective platform, positioning PAFEC to play a central role in setting the tone, purpose, intended impact, priorities, and goals for coordinated engagement among stakeholders.
2. Execution and accountability; highlighting that while ideas are abundant, the real challenge lies in translating them into action, particularly by shifting focus from policy to implementation at the family level, which she identified as the core unit of investment.

3. Collaboration and communication; calling for stronger coordination across sectors and stakeholders, and encouraging greater exchange between global and locally developed innovations, particularly in digital solutions.

She added that here as well, PA FEC has a key role to play in ensuring that communication translates into transparency. She underscored the importance of breaking silos across health, nutrition, and education systems to ensure integrated service delivery.

4. Adaptability and continuous learning; noting that changing social dynamics and technological advancements require flexible systems and a mindset open to ongoing improvement.

As the plenary concluded, Ms. Sharmeela reiterated the importance of leveraging existing platforms such as primary healthcare systems and community networks, and called for collective action among government, development partners, and civil society. She underscored that sustained progress in ECD will depend on inclusive, well-coordinated, and innovation-driven approaches that place families and children at the center.

The plenary wrapped up with the formal presentation of mementos to the speakers and moderator, while shields were awarded to the session chair, co-chair, and keynote speaker in recognition of their contributions. The session ended with a group photograph of all participants.



Day 1

Plenary 3

Health, Nutrition and Safety & Security

Session Chair:

Dr. Naeem Zafar, Chairman, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood & President, PAHCHAAN

Moderator:

Dr. Hana Mahmood, Chief of Global Health, International Research Force

Keynote Speaker:

Prof. Dr. Syed Jamal Raza, Executive Director, Sindh Institute of Child Health and Neonatology, Karachi

Speakers:

- Mr. Anteneh Girma, Chief Nutrition, UNICEF Pakistan
 - Dr. Shahzad Khan, Vice Chancellor, Health Services Academy
 - Dr. Mehak Naeem, Member Punjab, National Commission on the Rights of Child, Pakistan
 - Dr. Salman Kirmani, Professor, Department of Pediatrics and Child Health, Aga Khan University
 - Dr. Fatima Rehman, Developmental Pediatrician, The Children's Hospital Lahore
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Health, Nutrition and Safety & Security

The final plenary session of Day 1 under the theme of “**Health, Nutrition and Safety & Security**” was held under the chairmanship of **Dr. Naeem Zafar, Chairman, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood & President, PAHCHAAN**, with **Dr. Hana Mahmood, Chief of Global Health, International Research Force**, serving as moderator. The session brought the focus to the biological and protection dimensions of ECD, examining how health systems, nutrition, and safety frameworks intersect to shape developmental outcomes.



The session featured a keynote address given by **Prof. Dr. Syed Jamal Raza, Executive Director, Sindh Institute of Child Health and Neonatology, Karachi**. In his address, he called for centrality of health systems, a shift in healthcare from a disease-focused approach to a holistic ECD perspective, emphasizing the need to support children’s cognitive, emotional, and social development alongside survival care.



He argued that survival alone is no longer a sufficient goal; the focus must shift toward ensuring that children achieve their full developmental potential. He highlighted the importance of the first

1,000 days, noting that early brain development depends on responsive “*serve-and-return*” interactions, stimulation, and caregiving. He also warned against reduced parent-child interaction due to excessive screen use and overly protective parenting practices. Prof. Syed Jamal Raza stressed the importance of integrating developmental screening into routine pediatric healthcare services so that delays can be identified and addressed early. In his view, health systems must evolve to support not only physical well-being but also cognitive and emotional development.

He concluded by urging stronger investment and practical implementation of ECD policies to translate evidence into improved outcomes for children.

Dr. Hana Mahmood directed the question to panelist Mr. Anteneh Girma asking how countries like Pakistan can shift from child-focused nutrition programmes to maternal-first interventions, particularly given that stunting begins before birth and within existing healthcare systems.

Building on this, **Mr. Anteneh Girma, Chief Nutrition, UNICEF Pakistan**, emphasized the critical role of nutrition, particularly during the earliest stages of life. He explained that stunting remains one of the most significant barriers to child development and that its roots often lie in inadequate maternal nutrition and early feeding practices. He stressed that addressing malnutrition requires integrated interventions that combine nutrition, health, and caregiving support, rather than isolated programmes.



He noted that there is no one-size-fits-all answer, but global lessons offer clear direction. Countries like Nepal, Peru, and Uganda have achieved rapid reductions in stunting not through single interventions, but through coordinated, multisectoral efforts backed by strong political leadership and sustained public financing. The focus has been on a systems approach, bringing together health, nutrition, and broader determinants under the NCF.

A key lesson is the importance of early intervention across the life cycle, starting from pre-pregnancy through pregnancy and breastfeeding, supported by strong and well-coordinated health systems. He highlighted Pakistan's own Benazir Nashonuma Programme as a promising example, showing significant improvements among beneficiaries through a package of health, nutrition, and conditional cash interventions implemented at scale.

Looking ahead, he emphasized three priorities for Pakistan:

1. Adopting a holistic, life-cycle approach to break intergenerational malnutrition.
2. Strengthening and reorienting primary healthcare towards prevention, including family planning and birth spacing.

3. Taking deliberate action to reduce low birth weight through improved maternal nutrition, health services, and women's empowerment.

Ultimately, he stressed that while policies and strategies exist, their impact depends on effective implementation at scale, supported by data-driven decision-making and sustained commitment.

On the same note, the next question was directed to Dr. Shahzad Khan asking what structural changes are needed to fully embed ECD into the public health system rather than continuing with parallel or vertical programming.

Dr. Shahzad Khan, Vice Chancellor, Health Services Academy, responded that the most important structural shift currently underway (and urgently needed) is the integration of health, nutrition, and population services, which have historically operated in silos in Pakistan. He noted that this fragmentation, especially since the separation of the population welfare function from health, has weakened service delivery and limited the reach of ECD interventions at scale.



He explained that at the population level, the country is dealing with a very large annual cohort of births, many of which are unplanned, creating enormous pressure on already constrained systems. In such a context, standalone or project-based ECD initiatives cannot achieve meaningful impact unless they are embedded within an integrated system that combines primary healthcare, family planning, maternal nutrition, and child development services under one coordinated framework.

Dr. Shahzad emphasized that the most effective entry point is strengthening primary healthcare as a prevention-oriented platform, where ECD is not an add-on but part of routine service delivery. He also

highlighted that addressing unmet needs in family planning and ensuring adequate birth spacing are among the most practical and high-impact interventions for improving early childhood outcomes. He further underscored that beyond systems design, Pakistan's strongest asset remains the family unit, which continues to function as a key source of caregiving and support. Therefore, structural reform must recognize and work through families and communities, supported by trained frontline workers, rather than relying solely on formal institutions.

He concluded that true integration of ECD requires coordinated action between government, development partners, and civil society, with a shift from fragmented projects to system-wide implementation at scale, ensuring that health, nutrition, and early development are delivered together through one unified approach.

Building on the discussion, Dr. Mehak Naeem was asked why implementation of child protection policies remains uneven despite a strong legal framework, and what key barriers exist in translating policy into action.

Dr. Mehak Naeem, Member Punjab, National Commission on the Rights of Child, Pakistan, began by acknowledging that Pakistan actually has a robust legislative and policy framework on child protection, including laws on child marriage, child protection policies, amendments in the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), and provincial child protection authorities. On paper, she noted, the country has “covered a lot of ground,” including protections against offline abuse and emerging online safety concerns. However, she emphasized that the real challenge lies in implementation and enforcement.



One of the biggest gaps, she said, is the lack of prioritization and financing for child protection, particularly at the level of budgeting in schools, hospitals, and community systems. Unlike health

and education, child protection is still not systematically resourced.

She also pointed to fragmented coordination across departments, where mandates are limited and inter-sectoral collaboration remains weak, despite repeated recognition of the need for a multisectoral approach. Another key barrier she highlighted is the lack of trained child protection professionals and frontline capacity, including teachers, healthcare providers, and social workers who are often not equipped to identify or respond to abuse or protection risks. She stressed that there is still no strong academic pipeline producing dedicated child protection experts.

Dr. Mehak further underscored that child protection remains a sensitive and often under-discussed issue, influenced by social and cultural norms, including acceptance of harmful practices such as corporal punishment, which complicates implementation at the grassroots level. She concluded that addressing these barriers requires parallel shifts in: stronger system-level coordination and financing, widespread capacity building of frontline workers, and sustained behavior change efforts; alongside ensuring that children themselves are meaningfully included in conversations about their safety and protection.

Picking up from the discussion, the next response came from **Dr. Salman Kirmani, Professor, Department of Pediatrics and Child Health, Aga Khan University,** who was asked how early identification and inclusion of children with special needs can be strengthened within mainstream ECD systems in low-resource settings like Pakistan.



He responded by first highlighting the scale of vulnerability faced by families of children with special needs, noting that if the system is already struggling to support typically developing children, it becomes even more critical to intentionally prioritize those who need additional support. He

stressed that Pakistan cannot afford a fragmented approach to child development and must ensure that children with special needs are explicitly embedded within ECD policy and service delivery, rather than treated as an afterthought. He pointed out that what is not explicitly included in policy and programming often remains invisible in practice.

A key point he raised was the need to reduce stigma and misinformation around disability, especially the blame often placed on mothers and families. He called for stronger community awareness and education to normalize developmental differences and encourage early help-seeking. In his view, the approach must shift from “*adding inclusion later*” to designing ECD systems around the most vulnerable children from the beginning, ensuring they are placed at the center of policy and practice so that the entire system becomes more responsive and inclusive.

Moving on to **Dr. Fatima Rehman, Developmental Pediatrician, The Children’s Hospital Lahore**, the discussion focused on how developmental screening can be embedded into Pakistan’s primary healthcare system in the same way as routine immunization. Dr. Fatima Rehman emphasized that integrating developmental screening into Pakistan’s primary healthcare system requires a fundamental shift from specialist-led interventions to a standardized public health function. She noted that 15% of the global population lives with some form of disability, with one in six children affected by developmental disorders, and 85% of these children residing in low- and middle-income countries like Pakistan. The central challenge, she explained, is not only the high prevalence but also the late identification of developmental delays due to weak integration within primary healthcare systems.

She highlighted that pediatricians and general practitioners are often the first point of contact for

children, particularly during immunization visits or routine consultations. Therefore, developmental screening should be embedded within these existing touchpoints. This would require training frontline health workers, including lady health workers, vaccinators, and nurses, to conduct basic developmental screening at the community level, ensuring early identification without relying solely on specialists. Referring to global standards, she cited the American Academy of Pediatrics’ recommended screening intervals at 9, 18, 30, and 42 months, and proposed aligning these with Pakistan’s immunization schedule. She outlined a two-pronged approach: opportunistic integration, where every child-health interaction is used for screening, and system integration, where developmental milestones are incorporated into vaccination cards for parents to complete during clinic visits and reviewed by health providers.

Dr. Fatima Rehman emphasized that developmental screening must lead to action, with children at risk linked through clear referral pathways across all levels of care. She highlighted the shortage of developmental pediatricians in Pakistan and called for strengthening the capacity of general healthcare providers and integrating developmental health into medical education. She concluded that screening can be embedded within existing systems like the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) programme and lady health worker networks, alongside stronger parent awareness and community engagement, to ensure timely identification and support for every child.

Session Chair, Dr. Naeem Zafar, Chairman, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood & President PAHCHAAN, delivered the closing remarks. He began by noting that the session had effectively covered three of the five pillars of the NCF; health, nutrition, and protection, highlighting the richness of perspectives shared across the panel. He underscored a key overarching message from the discussion: Pakistan’s indicators do not reflect its economic progress, and the missing link is a consistent political will to translate knowledge and evidence into action.

He pointed out that while Pakistan is progressing economically toward middle-income status, its social and human development indicators remain weak, stressing that this gap reflects a lack of political will to translate knowledge into action. He emphasized that without strong leadership and prioritization at the policy level, scientific and





programmatic efforts cannot achieve large-scale impact. Dr. Naeem underscored the need to focus on early and preventive interventions, particularly for adolescent girls, noting that malnutrition often begins before pregnancy. He raised concern over high rates of early child marriage, citing that over 20% of marriages occur early and more than 5% involve girls under the age of 15, which significantly impacts maternal and child health outcomes. He also emphasized the importance of family-centered approaches, highlighting that engaging not only mothers but also fathers and grandparents can improve acceptance and sustainability of ECD interventions.

On child protection, he noted the changing risk landscape, drawing attention to emerging issues such as online safety, screen time, and digital grooming, and the need for increased awareness and preventive efforts. Addressing children with developmental delays and disabilities, he acknowledged their continued neglect and stressed the importance of safe motherhood, early detection, and advancements such as genetic research to improve outcomes. In conclusion, he reiterated that a holistic and inclusive approach, supported by political commitment, community engagement, and integration across sectors, is essential to advancing ECD in Pakistan.

A brief additional remark from Prof. Dr. Syed Jamal Raza reinforced a key point already raised in the discussion: while NGOs, individuals, and development partners are doing commendable work, the scale of Pakistan's child population makes it impossible for fragmented efforts alone to create system-wide impact. He highlighted that a very large proportion of Pakistan's population is under 25, with tens of millions of children in each age cohort, underscoring the magnitude of the challenge.

He emphasized that meaningful and sustained change in ECD outcomes will only be possible when government systems are fully engaged and take ownership at scale. He concluded with a clear message on alignment between commitment and action, stressing that investment and implementation must match the rhetoric if real impact is to be achieved.

At the end of the plenary, mementos were presented to the panelists and moderators in appreciation of their valuable contributions. Shields were also presented to the chair and keynote speaker as a token of gratitude and recognition for their leadership and insights.

Day 2

Opening Proceedings

**Venue: W.M. Zaki Auditorium, Academic
Complex, Allama Iqbal Open University,
Islamabad**

Proceedings

Day two of the conference commenced with formal opening remarks by the host, **Dr. Syed Babar Ali Zaidi**, who welcomed distinguished participants, development partners, researchers, and institutional representatives. The host acknowledged the leadership of Vice Chancellor Prof. Dr. Nasir Mehmood and appreciated AIOU for hosting the conference. The remarks positioned the event as a milestone reflecting perseverance, shared learning, and collective commitment to ECD.

It was emphasized that the conference was not merely a platform for presenting research, but an opportunity to reflect on the collective responsibility of shaping children's early years. The speaker noted that Day 1 had already covered core dimensions of ECD through global participation, and Day 2 would deepen the discussion through plenaries and parallel sessions. The session was then handed over to Ms. Khadija Khan to begin the first plenary.



Day 2

Plenary 1

Strengthening the Early Childhood Development Workforce & Regional Cooperation

Session Chair:

Prof. Dr. Nasir Mahmood, Vice Chancellor, Allama Iqbal Open University

Moderator:

Ms. Khadija Khan, CEO, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood

Keynote Speaker:

Prof. Dr Fareed Panjwani, Dean, Institute for Educational Development, Aga Khan University

Speakers:

- Ms. Sara Lajam, Programme Officer, Dubai Care
 - Mr. Syed Javed Gilani, Executive Director, Muslim Hands Pakistan
 - Dr. Mihaela Hanesu, Programme Director, International Step by Step Association
 - Ms. Ambreena Ahmed, Director, Teachers' Resource Centre, Pakistan
 - Mr. Siva Prasad, Programme Coordinator, Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood
 - Mr. Abid Gill, Deputy Chief Advisor, Japan International Cooperation Agency Pakistan
 - Ms. Nikita Srivastav, Assistant Director, Health Impact, Asian Venture Philanthropy Network
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Strengthening the Early Childhood Development Workforce & Regional Cooperation

Day 2 commenced with Plenary 1 focusing on **“Strengthening the Early Childhood Development Workforce & Advancing Regional Cooperation”**, recognizing that the quality of early childhood outcomes is fundamentally shaped by the people who care for, teach, and support young children. The session was chaired by **Prof. Dr. Nasir Mahmood, Vice Chancellor, Allama Iqbal Open University**, and moderated by **Ms. Khadija Khan, CEO, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood**. The discussion brought together academic leaders, development partners, and regional networks to explore how workforce systems can be strengthened through structured pathways, partnerships, and integrated approaches.



Ms. Khadija Khan opened the session by expanding the definition of workforce beyond teachers, explaining that it includes caregivers, parents, health professionals, frontline workers, and policymakers. She highlighted that despite their central role, these actors remain undertrained, under-supported, and under-recognized. The purpose of the session, she explained, was to explore challenges, learn from international experiences, and identify pathways for strengthening workforce systems through regional cooperation.

She initiated the discussion by situating it within the broader conference narrative. She reminded participants that Day 1 had repeatedly emphasized the importance of early years investment, and Day 2 would now focus on the people who make that investment meaningful to the ECD workforce.

Moving on, she invited **Prof. Dr. Fareed Panjwani, Dean, Institute for Educational Development, Aga Khan University**, to deliver his keynote speech.

He, in his keynote titled **“Childhood: Battleground of Ideologies and Ambassador of Hope,”** reflected on early childhood as both a deeply valuable opportunity and a global paradox. He began by emphasizing the intrinsic value of children in human life, arguing that children are not only beneficiaries of care but the very source of meaning, continuity, and healing in society. He illustrated this through personal reflection and philosophical insight, noting that humanity’s purpose and future are anchored in children.



He then contrasted this with the reality that children today are growing up in increasingly difficult conditions. He highlighted climate change, conflict, displacement, poverty, and inequality as systemic challenges disproportionately affecting children. He pointed out that despite global awareness and resources, societies continue to fail children due to structural imbalances, including extreme wealth concentration and misplaced priorities.

Dr. Fareed argued that modern systems particularly corporate, technological, and economic systems often treat children as consumers rather than individuals to be nurtured. He criticized how responsibility for addressing these systemic harms is shifted onto parents and teachers instead of being addressed at the structural level. He further argued that the traditional concept of a “*village raising a child*” has transformed into a global system that, in many ways, has become unsupportive of children.

In his closing remarks, Dr. Fareed outlined five priority actions for the ECD community and workforce:

1. Shifting focus from “*school readiness*” to “*flourishing children*”; where early childhood (the first seven to twelve years of life) is recognized as a meaningful stage in its own right, where there is more emphasis on development of a child’s personality, emotional well-being, curiosity, and creativity instead of focusing on academic achievements and checkpoints of life (to school, school to university, university to society/economy).
2. Placing relationships, families and responsive caregiving at the heart of the ECD curriculum; since children do not develop according to the clock, therefore, caregiving and learning environments should remain responsive and flexible to their questions, interests and developmental needs rather than being constrained by fixed schedules. Time itself should be treated as part of the curriculum, allowing children the space to grow and learn at their own pace.
3. Exercizing caution when it comes to the introduction of screens in early childhood; there is no clear developmental capacity that requires screen-based learning before the age of five or six. A more careful, needs-based approach to technology is suggested, with direct interaction, play and experiential learning taking precedence over digital exposure driven by external pressures.
4. Integrating nature to play a bigger part in the early childhood experience; meaningful engagement with natural environments is seen as critical for shaping children’s development and fostering a long-term connection with the natural world. This connection will serve future generations as they grow to care for and protect the environment.
5. Emphasizing the broader social context around ECD; children’s development is shaped not only in classrooms but also through families, communities, media and wider societal influences. Therefore, role of ECD workforce extends beyond education alone, and more engagement with these broader forces will contribute to a more equitable, caring and child-centered society.

Next, the moderator invited **Ms. Sara Lajam, Programme Officer, Dubai Care**, to present the key lessons learned by Dubai Cares through the implementation of its ECCE initiatives in Pakistan, and to share insights on the organization’s Framework for Global Education Transformation. Ms. Sara began her presentation by drawing on nearly two decades of experience in ECD across diverse contexts, including Pakistan.



She emphasized that ECD is foundational, as the early years shape not only individual life outcomes but also long-term social and economic trajectories. At Dubai Cares, ECD is not treated as a standalone sector but as a critical entry point for human development, where education, health, nutrition, protection, and caregiving intersect. When these systems are aligned, children thrive; when they are not, inequalities emerge early and persist.

She highlighted that over the past 19 years, Dubai Cares has invested more than \$40 million across 25

programmes, reaching over 7.1 million beneficiaries, with a consistent lesson: early investment yields lifelong returns, but only when quality and systems are strengthened together rather than in silos. She noted that challenges are particularly acute in low- and middle-income and crisis-affected settings, where children face the greatest risks but also stand to benefit the most from well-designed, system-aligned ECD interventions.

Presenting the framework, she described it as a systems map rather than a one-size-fits-all model, centered on children and youth and aimed at enabling them to thrive with agency, dignity, and purpose. The framework is built on four interconnected pillars: values, skills, knowledge, and experience, and recognizes that learning occurs across multiple spaces, including homes, communities, and schools. Within this, strengthening the ECD workforce is a key priority, as evidence shows that well-trained, supported, and fairly compensated practitioners lead to improved cognitive, language, and socio-emotional outcomes for children, while also enhancing system stability and family trust. She highlighted that investing in the ECD workforce strengthens human capital, boosts women's labor force participation, and enhances household resilience. She concluded by stressing regional cooperation, local ownership, and collective action, noting that while the framework provides shared guidance, it must remain adaptable to local contexts, and reaffirmed Dubai Cares' commitment to supporting integrated, system-level approaches for equitable and sustainable outcomes.

Following this, Ms. Khadija Khan invited **Mr. Syed Javed Gilani, Executive Director, Muslim Hands Pakistan**, to share his perspectives on the ECCE/ECD workforce in Pakistan. She asked what he considers to be the most critical gaps in the current ECCE/ECD workforce landscape and how Muslim Hands is addressing these challenges through its on-ground interventions. She also requested him to draw on the organization's experience across different countries to highlight successful examples of ECCE/ECD workforce development, and to share key lessons that Pakistan and the wider region can learn from these models.

Mr. Syed reflected on over 25 years of the organization's experience in humanitarian and development work, emphasizing that education



must be at the center of all interventions to effectively address poverty and drive sustainable change. He highlighted that Muslim Hands, working across 17 countries, adopts an integrated approach, combining education with health, nutrition, child protection, gender equity, and climate considerations. Drawing from programme evolution, he noted that interventions focused solely on education were insufficient; however, when complemented with nutrition, health, and family livelihood support, student retention improved significantly, even in the most disadvantaged contexts.

Focusing on ECD and education in Pakistan, he identified the teacher as the most critical factor, stressing that compromising on teacher quality has long-term consequences spanning decades. He pointed out several key gaps in the ECD workforce, including the shortage of trained ECD teachers, weak pre-service and in-service training systems, lack of continuous professional development, poor supervision and mentoring structures, and the absence of clear career pathways, which discourages individuals from entering and remaining in the profession.

He further emphasized that while much attention is often given to private and NGO-led education initiatives, over 70% of children in Pakistan are served by the public sector, making it essential to strengthen this system through public-private partnerships rather than working in silos. Addressing these gaps, he recommended establishing mandatory teacher certification programmes (ranging from six months to one year) prior to entering the workforce, alongside structured systems for ongoing training, coaching, and mentorship at school, union council, and district levels.

Mr. Syed also highlighted the importance of a holistic ECD approach, proposing a balanced daily framework that includes values-based learning, play-based activities, and health, nutrition, and

hygiene components. He stressed the need to integrate critical thinking skills from the earliest stages to prepare children for future challenges. In conclusion, he reiterated the importance of collaborative efforts, integrated programming, and sustained investment in teacher development to strengthen the ECD workforce and improve long-term outcomes for children in Pakistan and beyond.

Dr. Mihaela Hanescu, Programme Director, International Step by Step Association, shared a recorded message in response to a set of questions posed by the moderator. Her reflections focused on the key lessons learned from the work of ISSA in building and sustaining a strong ECD workforce, and why investing in a competent and well-supported workforce is critical for improving children's development and learning outcomes. She also highlighted the importance of global cooperation in supporting accreditation systems, recognition of qualifications, and the strengthening of ECD programmes across the region.



Her recorded talk highlighted that strengthening early childhood systems requires prioritizing the workforce that supports young children. She highlighted that across ISSA's network of nearly 100 organizations in over 40 countries, a consistent lesson has emerged: systems only work for young children when they also work for the workforce that supports them. She stressed that the conditions created for the early childhood workforce today directly shape the conditions in which children grow and develop.

She underscored four key priorities for building a strong ECD workforce:

1. A fundamental shift in perception, noting that early childhood professionals are often undervalued, underpaid, and under-supported despite carrying critical societal responsibility. She stressed that quality systems require dignity, recognition, and sustained investment in the workforce.

2. Continuous support must be embedded in daily practice, not limited to one-off training, but strengthened through coaching, reflection, collaboration, and trust that enables practitioners to continuously improve and transform their work.
3. Addressing inequities within the workforce itself, noting that those working with the most vulnerable children often have the least support, an imbalance she described as a systemic contradiction that must be corrected.
4. Significant involvement of the ECD workforce in policy and system design, rather than being passive recipients of decisions made for them.

She further emphasized that strengthening the ECD workforce is not only a technical reform but a matter of equity, justice, and opportunity, directly linked to children's developmental outcomes through everyday interactions with caregivers and educators. She noted that a well-supported workforce can create safe, stimulating, and inclusive environments where children thrive, while a weak workforce risks limiting children's potential from the start.

She also highlighted the importance of global cooperation, particularly in areas such as recognition and accreditation of qualifications. She stressed that no country or system should evolve in isolation and called for shared principles, institutional partnerships, and communities of practice that enable learning across borders while remaining grounded in local contexts. In conclusion, she urged participants to move beyond dialogue toward collective action, emphasizing that strengthening the workforce ultimately strengthens systems and ensures that children's potential is not limited by structural weaknesses.

Ms. Khadija Khan asked **Ms. Ambreena Ahmed, Director, Teachers' Resource Centre (TRC)**, about effective capacity-building models for strengthening the ECD workforce across countries, and how Pakistan can build an integrated ECD workforce pathway while leveraging regional cooperation. She started the conversation by mentioning the TRC's 40-year journey in strengthening ECE in Pakistan, emphasizing that its work began long before ECE was formally recognized as a human capital priority. She highlighted that TRC played a pioneering role in developing Pakistan's first national ECE curriculum in 2002, in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of



Education, which later became a foundational reference for provincial curriculum development after the 18th Amendment.

Ms. Ambreena explained that TRC's work spans the full spectrum from policy development to classroom practice, with a strong focus on teachers and community educators at the center. Over time, the organization has expanded its scope beyond traditional schooling to include diverse learning environments across rural and urban contexts, working with both formal and non-formal education systems. She emphasized that ECE remains TRC's core passion, even though its programmes extend up to secondary education.

A key highlight of this intervention was TRC's contribution to teacher professional development and certification systems. She noted that the organization is the only institution in Pakistan accredited by TQUK (Training Qualifications UK), offering a Level 4 Diploma in ECE with over 360 hours of mandatory field practicum. The programme includes pre-service, in-service, and community-based caregivers, and is delivered through hybrid, onsite, and online models. She added that the diploma is recognized by the Government of Sindh and is being aligned with NAVTTC (National Vocational and Technical Training Commission) accreditation, enhancing its national relevance.

Ms. Ambreena highlighted TRC's international reach and scholarship programmes for teachers from low-resource schools, noting their role in developing future leaders and education specialists. She emphasized that teacher quality is key to addressing Pakistan's foundational learning crisis, where most children are below grade level, and stressed the need to strengthen early childhood systems, including teacher training, mental health support, and social-emotional learning. She concluded that sustainable ECD progress depends on investing in the full ecosystem around educators, reaffirming TRC's commitment despite limited funding.

Followed by this the moderator directed the question to **Mr. Siva Prasad, Programme Coordinator, Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood**, on how SEL (Social-Emotional Learning) can be integrated into ECD and ECCE teacher training, what support systems are needed for educator well-being and resilience, and how the workforce can be prepared to help young children understand and respond to climate-related challenges. He explained that ARNEC is advancing a regional workforce initiative using an SEL-focused teacher training handbook developed in collaboration with UNESCO Bangkok, designed primarily to strengthen educators' well-being, resilience, and classroom practice.



He emphasized that SEL is not only beneficial for children but is especially critical for teachers, helping reduce burnout, strengthen coping skills, and improve their ability to manage the emotional demands of teaching. The initiative focuses on four key objectives:

1. Improving workforce policies
2. Strengthening country-level collaboration
3. Integrating SEL across training platforms
4. Addressing systemic workforce challenges through evidence-based approaches

He shared that the ARNEC handbook includes multiple modules focused on building calm, responsive, and inclusive classroom environments, promoting teacher well-being, and supporting positive behavior and learning outcomes in children. So far, ARNEC has trained 21 master trainers across seven countries and conducted workforce mapping in six countries, revealing high stress levels among ECD professionals and limited access to SEL-focused professional development.

Mr. Siva also highlighted the establishment of a regional learning community of around 50 stakeholders, which remains open for broader

participation and supports continuous professional development. Additionally, ARNEC has produced advocacy materials emphasizing SEL as a core competency for ECD teachers and the need to prioritize workforce well-being in policy frameworks. Sharing regional examples, he noted successful integration of SEL into teacher training and curricula in countries such as the Philippines (training 1,000 teachers and curriculum revision), Sri Lanka (national ECE curriculum embedding SEL), Bangladesh (integration through BRAC and humanitarian settings), and Malaysia, Fiji, Cambodia, and Vietnam through master training initiatives.

Strategic Opportunities for Partnership and Investment



Looking ahead, he emphasized expanding regional collaboration, strengthening coaching and reflective supervision systems, and developing stronger quality assurance and monitoring frameworks aligned with SDG 4.2. Finally, he highlighted ARNEC's work on climate-related ECD, stressing that climate change (through floods, heat, and pollution) directly affects child development, and positioning ECD as a cost-effective entry point for climate adaptation and resilience-building in early childhood systems.

Mr. Abid Gill, Deputy Chief Advisor, Japan International Cooperation Agency Pakistan, was asked by the moderator about what key lessons from JICA's experience in Pakistan and globally could help strengthen the ECD workforce, particularly in addressing out-of-school children and foundational learning gaps among ECCE children. He began by highlighting a fundamental gap in understanding that ECD is still not fully recognized as the starting point of the education system. He noted that even at the policy level, this lack of understanding results in weak prioritization of early years, which in turn affects the entire learning continuum.

Anchoring his argument in data, he pointed out that 26 million children in Pakistan are out of school, and even those within schools are often not learning effectively. He argued that both these crises



access and learning stem from weak or absent ECD systems, making ECD not just an education issue but a broader human development challenge. He then drew on JICA's experience to present a set of practical lessons:

1. Caution against over-reliance on teacher training alone. While training is important, he stressed that teachers often fail to perform effectively because classrooms lack support systems such as mentoring, supervision, and enabling environments. Without this support, training does not translate into improved learning outcomes.
2. Challenging the conventional dependence on formal school infrastructure. In contexts like Pakistan, particularly in regions such as Balochistan where thousands of settlements lack schools, learning must go beyond school buildings. He advocated for community-based and home-based learning spaces, effectively arguing for "*learning without schooling*" as a necessary parallel strategy.
3. To make sure there is adequate public financing at the scale required, specifically for education. Ensuring well-paced and the smooth running of a number of initiatives in order to produce ECD professionals that uphold the standards of the system.

He further stressed the need for an integrated approach, arguing that ECD cannot be addressed through education alone. Health, nutrition, wellbeing, and social development must be treated as part of a unified ecosystem.

In his concluding remarks, Mr. Abid called for a fundamental shift: from fragmented, project-based interventions to system-wide, human capital-focused approaches. He emphasized that without investing in strong early foundations, it will be impossible to build a strong nation.

Moving on to the next panelist, **Ms. Nikita Srivastav, Assistant Director, Health Impact, Asian Venture Philanthropy Network**, who had joined the session virtually, the moderator invited her to respond to the following questions: How can health and nutrition interventions be effectively integrated to build a responsive and competent ECD workforce across the region? Additionally, what are the major gaps in the current ECD workforce landscape, and which strategies can most effectively address these challenges?



Responding to the questions, Ms. Nikita Srivastava brought a regional and cross-sectoral perspective, focusing on the intersection of health, nutrition, and ECD workforce systems. She began by emphasizing that ECD outcomes are deeply shaped before children enter school, particularly through maternal health, nutrition, and caregiving environments. She stressed that ECD must not be treated as an isolated sector but as an integrated human development agenda. Using global evidence, she highlighted that malnutrition alone results in massive economic losses (estimated at \$3.5 trillion globally), reinforcing that ECD is not just a social issue but a major economic concern. A central theme of her remarks was the need to design systems around the child, not sectors. She argued that current systems are fragmented education, health, and nutrition operate in silos whereas a child experiences these dimensions simultaneously.

She proposed practical ways to integrate health and nutrition into the ECD workforce: Embedding basic nutrition knowledge into ECD training, enabling educators to identify early signs of malnutrition and developmental delays, linking educators to referral systems, so they are not working in isolation. She clarified that this does not mean turning teachers into health experts but rather equipping them to act as first-line support for children's holistic wellbeing. She then identified two major systemic gaps: First, fragmentation of

services, in which different sectors operate independently, leading to missed opportunities for early detection and support. Second, capability gaps in the workforce, even where systems exist, workers lack practical tools, continuous training, and cross-sector exposure.

She emphasized the need for: continuous, modular, and practical training systems, regional learning platforms and knowledge exchange mechanisms, digital and institutional learning hubs (e.g., Centers of Excellence for ECD). Another important dimension introduced was the wellbeing of the workforce itself. She noted that health issues such as anemia and malnutrition especially among women reduce productivity and caregiving capacity, directly affecting ECD outcomes. Concluding her presentation, Ms. Nikita emphasized that integrated ECD models (education + health + nutrition) are now gaining traction, partnerships and cross-country collaboration are key to scaling solutions, and platforms like this conference are critical for alignment, advocacy, and collective action.

Ms. Khadija Khan summarized the discussion by bringing together key strands emerging from the keynote address and panelists. She emphasized that the discussion had clearly established that the ECD workforce is the backbone of any effective early childhood system, and that without investing in people, no amount of policy or infrastructure can deliver results.

She highlighted three central takeaways;

1. Workforce strengthening must move beyond training to include continuous support, recognition, and career pathways.
2. Urgent focus on integrating ECD workforce development across sectors, linking education, health, nutrition, and child protection.
3. The voice of practitioners must be central in policymaking and system design, echoing the global perspectives shared during the session.

She concluded that Pakistan has both the opportunity and the responsibility to build a strong, integrated workforce system by learning from international experiences while adapting solutions to local realities. The session was then formally transitioned to Chair's synthesis and conclusion.

Session Chair, **Prof. Dr. Nasir Mehmood, Vice Chancellor, Allama Iqbal Open University**, concluded the session by appreciating the panelists for their focused and substantive contributions. He reflected on the expanding scope of ECD and raised a concern about its increasing breadth, cautioning that while many stakeholders (teachers, caregivers, nutritionists, parents, psychologists, and others) are rightly connected to ECD, excessive expansion of the field without clear boundaries could risk making it less manageable and potentially dilute its focus over time.

He drew an analogy from psychology, noting how intelligence theory expanded from a single concept to multiple intelligence before being refined again, and suggested that ECD may be experiencing a similar trend of over-expansion. He emphasized the need for careful conceptual clarity to avoid “*false alarms*” or unnecessary overextension of the field, while still acknowledging the importance of its interdisciplinary nature.

Prof. Dr. Nasir highlighted the need for a more structured human resource competency framework for ECD, stating that although general frameworks and guidelines exist, there is currently no comprehensive system that clearly defines the competencies required across all roles in the ECD ecosystem. He stressed that such a framework is essential to ensure alignment between policy, training, and implementation.

In conclusion, he suggested that developing a unified competency framework for ECD professionals could serve as a critical way forward, helping define required skills for different roles, strengthen workforce planning, and ensure that the sector remains focused, effective, and aligned with broader policy objectives.



Day 2

Plenary 2

Research, Measurement & Accountability Systems

Session Chair:

Ms. Rabia Awan, Director General, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics

Moderator:

Dr. Shahzad Mithani, Education Policy Expert

Keynote Speaker:

Ms. Vanessa Cavallera, WHO Geneva

Speakers:

- Dr. Shahid Soroya, Director General, Pakistan Institute of Education
 - Dr. Mazhar Iqbal, Nutrition Specialist, UNICEF Pakistan
 - Ms. Jalila Hehldi, Co-founder, Sustainawiser
 - Dr. Tooba Saleem, Assistant Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University
 - Mr. Ghulam Muhammad Shah, Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning Specialist
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Research, Measurement & Accountability Systems

Day 2 Plenary 2, titled “**Research, Measurement and Accountability Systems**”, was chaired by **Ms. Rabia Awan, Director General, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics**, and moderated by **Dr. Shahzad Mithani, Education Policy Expert**. The plenary focused on strengthening data systems, indicators, and evidence generation for ECD. Discussions highlighted global measurement frameworks such as MECCE (Monitoring and Evaluating Climate Communication and Education) and SABER-ECD (Systems Approach for Better Education Results-Early Childhood Development), and the importance of integrating early childhood data into national systems for improved tracking and decision-making.



The keynote address on ECD measurement, focusing on the Global Scales for Early Development (GSED), was comprehensively delivered by **Ms. Vanessa Cavallera, WHO Geneva**. She emphasized that ECD must be advanced through a system-wide, evidence-driven approach, integrating policy, services, and investment across sectors. Reflecting on the conference discussions, she noted that while key areas such as financing, nurturing care, workforce development, and mental health were well covered, a central concern remains: ensuring that efforts are effectively improving children’s developmental outcomes. This underscores the urgent need for stronger measurement and data systems.

She highlighted the importance of the early years, particularly the first 1,000 days, as a critical window for brain development, where early experiences shape lifelong outcomes. Introducing the concept of brain health (encompassing cognitive, emotional,



behavioral, and motor functioning) she emphasized that nutrition, healthcare, safety, and responsive caregiving are essential for children’s development and future well-being.

A major challenge she identified was the lack of consistent measurement of developmental outcomes. While child survival is widely tracked, whether children are truly thriving remains less

understood. Globally, over 250 million children under five are at risk of not reaching their developmental potential, making this a significant public health and equity issue. Without measurement, such challenges remain invisible and unaddressed. To address this gap, she introduced the GSED, developed by WHO and partners, as a standardized and globally comparable tool to measure child development from birth to three years. A key innovation is the D-score, which captures development as a continuous process, enabling better monitoring and comparison across contexts. She also highlighted Pakistan's contribution to its validation through institutions such as AKU.

She stressed that measurement must lead to action: informing policy, guiding investments, strengthening programmes, and enabling early identification of children needing support. It can also help align sectors such as health, education, and social protection around shared developmental outcomes. In conclusion, she highlighted three key priorities: integrating ECD into existing systems, particularly health systems; ensuring that data is actively used for decision-making; and maintaining a strong focus on equity. She reiterated that while ECD builds human capital, measurement ensures accountability, and true progress lies not just in helping children survive, but in ensuring they thrive.

The plenary commenced with **Dr. Shahid Soroya, Director General, Pakistan Institute of Education**, who was invited to share his insights on strengthening indicators, data systems, tracking mechanisms, and data integration at the early childhood level in Pakistan, with a particular focus on the role of local governments.

Responding to the moderator's question, he highlighted progress in strengthening Pakistan's education data systems through the national data standardization framework developed with

provinces, with a strong focus on early childhood indicators, school entry age, and ECE experience.

He explained that a data standardization framework has been developed in collaboration with provinces, introducing key indicators not only for ECE but also for school facilities and access. A significant advancement includes the standardized recording of children's age at enrollment, ensuring better tracking of when children enter pre-primary or primary education. Additionally, new indicators now capture whether children entering Grade 1 have prior ECE experience, enabling analysis of how early learning exposure influences later academic outcomes.

Dr. Shahid noted that Pakistan's education data systems are becoming more comprehensive and inclusive, with upcoming reports incorporating expanded indicators under the updated framework. He also highlighted the inclusion of the Washington Group Short Questions to capture data on children with disabilities, an important step toward more inclusive policy planning and targeted interventions. On learning outcomes, he emphasized a major milestone: Pakistan's move toward foundational learning assessment. While national assessments previously focused on Grades 4 and 8, the country is now implementing its first large-scale foundational learning assessment following a successful pilot. This will enable Pakistan to better track early learning progress and report on global indicators such as SDG 4.1.1.

In conclusion, he underscored that the integration of education data and learning assessment systems will provide a more complete evidence base to guide policymaking, curriculum development, and targeted interventions at both national and provincial levels, ultimately supporting more informed and effective decision-making in the education sector.

The next panelist, **Dr. Mazhar Iqbal, Nutrition Specialist, UNICEF Pakistan**, spoke about UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and the ECD Dashboard, highlighting ongoing efforts to strengthen the collection, integration, and use of data for informed decision-making in ECD. He explained that UNICEF is working on an ECD Dashboard designed to bring together multiple sectoral data systems: health, nutrition, early learning, responsive caregiving, and child protection, under a unified, child-centered framework aligned with the nurturing care model.



The aim is to move beyond isolated programme indicators and instead measure how different interventions collectively influence children's developmental outcomes.

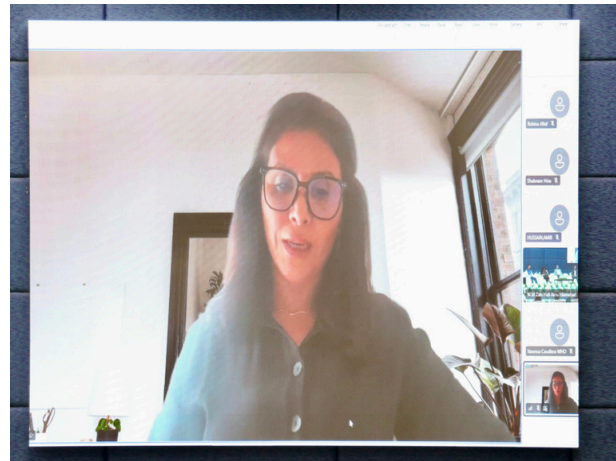


Dr. Mazhar emphasized that many interventions are already in place, but the key challenge now is measuring their combined impact, particularly whether children are achieving expected developmental milestones. A consultative process with federal and provincial governments has helped identify and agree on a core set of indicators, which are now in the final approval stage. He further noted that the dashboard will not replace existing systems such as DHIS2 (District Health Information Software) or provincial nutrition platforms, but will link them together through integration mechanisms, ensuring better coordination rather than duplication of data systems. The approach is designed to ensure that data can be used effectively by policymakers at all levels.

In addition, UNICEF, with support from the Bureau of Statistics, is strengthening the MICS by incorporating ECD indicators. This will enable measurement not only of service coverage but also of outcomes such as child development status, early learning, nutrition, parental engagement, and home-based stimulation. He concluded that the goal is to create a child-centered, multi-source data system, where information flows from district to provincial and national levels, enabling stronger accountability, evidence-based planning, and improved outcomes for children across Pakistan.

Followed by this, **Ms. Jalila Hehldi, Co-founder, Sustainawiser**, highlighted the importance of cross-regional collaboration in advancing ECD, emphasizing her partnership with the RF and broader ECD networks in the UAE and beyond. She

introduced a social impact and systems-thinking perspective on ECD measurement, focusing not only on data collection but on how impact is defined, interpreted, and used. Drawing on experience across development institutions, she stressed the need to move beyond purely quantitative approaches toward more holistic and culturally grounded frameworks.



Ms. Jalila proposed that ECD measurement should be guided by a localized sustainability lens, referencing Islamic finance and governance principles such as zakat, waqf, sukuk, and sadaqah as systems for equitable social investment. She argued that these frameworks already offer structured approaches for redistribution and social justice that can inform impact measurement models. She outlined a “Three Cs” framework emphasizing clarity in defining purpose and distinguishing between outputs, outcomes, and true impact; capacity and consciousness to ensure a shared understanding of what systems aim to change; and commitment and engagement to meaningfully involve stakeholders (especially parents and communities) as active participants rather than passive beneficiaries, alongside stronger communication and cooperation to enable scaling and cross-regional learning.

A key distinction she made was between outcomes and impact, explaining that while outcomes measure immediate outputs like schools built or enrollment numbers, impact reflects deeper, longer-term societal transformation. She cautioned against relying solely on numbers without understanding on-the-ground realities, where cultural, infrastructural, and gender-related barriers often shape actual access and participation. In conclusion, she emphasized that children should not be reduced to indicators or future economic outputs. Instead, ECD systems should prioritize

human dignity, uniqueness, and well-being, ensuring that children grow in environments grounded in security, peace, and love. She called for balancing global standards with local realities and reaffirmed that ECD is an end in itself; it is not only a pathway to future productivity, but a foundation for human flourishing.

Dr. Tooba Saleem, Assistant Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University, was asked to shed light on development of integrated, real-time and policy-responsive data systems and tools. She shared her experience on developing integrated, real-time, and policy-responsive data systems for ECD, with a focus on results, measurement, and accountability.



She explained that the ECD field has evolved from ECE alone to a broader holistic framework now encompassing child health, nutrition, education, safety, and early learning across different developmental stages and domains. While this conceptual shift is a major achievement, she stressed that the key challenge lies in measurement and integration of data across sectors. Dr. Tooba noted that current data systems remain fragmented, especially in early childhood domains such as early learning and stimulation, which are still largely missing from routine national datasets. She emphasized that without integrating data across health, education, and nutrition, it is difficult to understand how early experiences (such as chronic illness or nutrition deficits) affect long-term brain development and learning outcomes.

She further highlighted concerns around data authenticity and reliability, pointing out that multiple data sources (such as household surveys and health facility records) often vary in quality, which can limit the usefulness of even well-designed indicators and frameworks. A key gap she identified is the absence of real-time, continuous data systems, especially for early childhood indicators.

She stressed that delayed or periodic data reduces policy relevance, as decisions are often made after the developmental window has already passed. She therefore underscored the importance of digital dashboards and real-time systems, while also cautioning that their effectiveness depends on strong underlying data collection mechanisms.

Finally, she noted important implementation challenges, including equity considerations and the digital divide between rural and urban populations. She concluded that while Pakistan is moving in the right direction conceptually, achieving meaningful impact will require integrated, timely, and context-sensitive data systems that capture the full early childhood period (not just school-entry years) and translate evidence into actionable policy decisions.

The next panelist, **Mr. Ghulam Muhammad Shah, Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning Specialist**, was invited to speak on the use of data. He highlighted that while collaboration with the government does exist, most actors in the ECD space continue to work in silos, with each organization focusing on its own indicators rather than contributing to a shared system of accountability, coordination, and learning.



He stressed that while there is broad agreement on the importance of data, measurement, and accountability, the central challenge remains: how to translate data into real, usable action. Drawing on discussions from the conference, he emphasized that measurement is not an end in itself but a tool, and the real objective is the effective utilization of data for decision-making and impact.

He described the current state of ECD systems in the region as data-rich but decision-poor, where large volumes of information are collected but not effectively converted into insights or action. He noted that countries like Norway and Singapore provide strong examples of systems where ECD data is not only generated but actively used to

inform policy and improve outcomes. Mr. Shah pointed out that in many contexts, data is not used in real time, leading to missed opportunities during critical stages of child development. He emphasized the need for a shift from simply producing dashboards to generating actionable insights that influence behavior and decision-making across stakeholders.

He further outlined that effective ECD data systems must go beyond enrollment and output tracking to assess readiness gaps, improve sense-making, and ensure that data leads to behavioral and policy change. Without this, even well-funded data systems risk becoming underutilized. In conclusion, he emphasized that true transformation lies in moving from data reporting systems to learning and decision-making systems, where ECD data is designed backwards from policy decisions, and where its value is realized only when it actively shapes actions, improves systems, and transforms outcomes for children.

The broader panel discussion reinforced the importance of making data usable. It was emphasized that data must serve multiple stakeholders, i.e. government, development partners, and communities and should move beyond collection toward application in decision-making. The discussion highlighted the need for bottom-up data systems, where information originates at the local level and feeds upward into national systems, rather than relying solely on top-down data collection approaches. A question-and-answer session followed, where audience members raised concerns about the limited and unclear space for early years in Pakistan, noting that ECD is often still grouped with primary education and inconsistently reflected in national data and indicators. It was highlighted that existing figures vary widely and do not fully capture quality, while links between early years data, foundational learning, and broader ECD outcomes remain weak. A key concern raised was the lack of a unified understanding of indicators and their meaning, with a call for stronger data coherence and alignment across systems. The need for a joint technical working group was emphasized to harmonize indicators and ensure that data is not only consistent but also actionable, supporting multi-sectoral collaboration in ECD across Pakistan.

The Session Chair, **Ms. Rabia Awan, Director General, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics**, described this session as one of the most critical parts of the conference, stressing that data is the backbone of all planning and decision-making. She reminded participants that behind every number is a child whose future depends on whether they are accurately counted, properly understood, and effectively supported. In ECD, she emphasized, data is not an end in itself but must lead to utilization, impact, and measurable outcomes. Without translating data into action, systems cannot identify inequalities, set priorities, or move beyond guesswork in planning.



She highlighted Pakistan's demographic reality as both a challenge and an opportunity, noting that a large proportion of the population is under the age of eight, the most critical period for child development, learning capacity, and lifelong productivity. Despite this, she cautioned that available data is not being used to its full potential. A major concern is the continued fragmentation of data systems, where multiple institutions collect similar information in silos using different frameworks, leading to duplication, inconsistencies, and weak integration at the national level.

She underscored the urgent need for standardized and integrated data systems across federal and provincial levels, especially in the post-devolution context. While acknowledging important initiatives such as MICS and other sectoral data systems, she noted that variations in timing and methodology across provinces limit comparability and weaken national-level planning and policy coherence.

Representing the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, she reaffirmed the institution's mandate not only as the country's primary data-producing body but also as a key pillar of Pakistan's decision-making infrastructure. She referenced major national

surveys such as the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey, upcoming updates on child health, nutrition, and ECD indicators, and other large-scale datasets that provide essential insights into population and development trends. She also stressed that Pakistan already has rich datasets, including census data and household surveys, but the core challenge remains their effective use. Data must flow seamlessly from the lowest administrative levels to policymakers through integrated systems and real-time monitoring mechanisms, including local dashboards where possible.

In conclusion, she called for a clear shift from data collection to data utilization, from fragmented measurement to integrated systems, and from reporting numbers to generating real accountability and impact. She emphasized that strengthening coordination, ensuring system sustainability, and improving data use are essential steps forward. Ultimately, she reminded the audience that every data point represents a child's life, and improving how data is used directly translates into improving children's futures.



Day 2

Plenary 3

Caregivers' Mental Health & MHPSS Integration

Session Chair:

Ms. Ellen Thom, Deputy Country Representative, WHO Pakistan

Moderator:

Dr. Roop Zainab Rana, Psychiatrist, Expert Infant Mental Health, & CEO, The Healing Triad

Speakers:

- Dr. Mowadat Hussain Rana, Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences
 - Dr. Abdul Wahab Yousafzai, Professor of Psychiatry, Shifa International Hospital
 - Ms. Falak Madhani, Brain and Mind Institute, Aga Khan University
 - Ms. Safina Abdulloeva, Health Manager, UNICEF Pakistan
 - Dr. Asma Humayun, National Technical Advisor for Mental Health, Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives
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Caregivers' Mental Health & MHPSS Integration

The third plenary of Day 2 centered on the critical theme of **“Caregivers’ Mental Health & MHPSS Integration within ECD systems.”** The session was chaired by **Ms. Ellen Thom, Deputy Country Representative, WHO Pakistan**, and moderated by **Dr. Roop Zainab Rana, Psychiatrist, Expert Infant Mental Health, & CEO, Healing Triad**. The discussion brought together clinical experts, policymakers, and development practitioners to explore how caregiver wellbeing directly shapes child development outcomes and how systems can respond at scale.

The moderator opened the session by grounding the discussion in neuroscience and human development. She explained that children are born with immense neurological potential, but the formation of neural connections depends on the quality of caregiving they receive. Responsive, emotionally available caregivers create the environment in which children learn, regulate emotions, build relationships, and develop resilience. She emphasized that caregiving is not only a behavioral function but an emotional and psychological ecosystem, and that when caregivers are overwhelmed, stressed, or unsupported, this directly affects the child’s developmental trajectory. Her framing positioned caregiver mental health as foundational to ECD rather than a supplementary concern.



Initiating the panel discussion, the moderator posed a key question to **Dr. Mowadat Hussain Rana, Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences**, noting that caregiver mental health is a critical but often overlooked outcomes and of child development outcomes, and asked about the consequences of not integrating it into early childhood systems. In response, Dr. Mowadat emphasized that the consequences of neglecting caregiver mental health are profound and far-reaching, affecting not only individual children but society as a whole. He stressed that caregiving is central to human development, and when caregiving systems are weak or dysfunctional, the long-term outcomes can be deeply damaging, shaping patterns of behavior, emotional wellbeing,



and social functioning across generations.

He explained that children learn far more than language, values, or rituals from caregivers; they

absorb behaviors, emotional responses, and relational patterns from everything they observe around them. In this sense, children function like “sponge-like learners,” continuously internalizing their environment. Therefore, any form of negative, inconsistent, or distressed caregiving can directly influence how children grow, behave, and eventually replicate caregiving patterns in the future.

Dr. Mowadat further highlighted that caregiving must be understood within a biopsychosocial and ecological framework, rather than as a simple or isolated responsibility. In Pakistan, he noted, caregiving systems are highly diverse and complex. They range from nuclear families with a single primary caregiver, often the mother, to joint and extended family structures where multiple adults influence child-rearing practices. In some cases, caregiving is also delegated to domestic workers, who themselves may be adolescents or individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Each of these arrangements shape the child’s developmental environment differently, often creating competing influences and, at times, household tensions regarding child-rearing decisions.

He pointed out that this complexity means caregiving cannot be reduced to a mother-only responsibility. Policy and programmatic approaches must reflect the full spectrum of caregiving actors, including fathers, extended family members, and paid caregivers, in order to design meaningful early childhood interventions.

Dr. Mowadat emphasized the under-recognized role of fathers in caregiving, noting that in many contexts, including Pakistan, it is still viewed as a primarily feminine responsibility, which often discourages male involvement; he stressed the need to actively engage fathers as equal caregivers given their impact on child development and family wellbeing. He further highlighted that caregiving extends into adolescence (up to around 18 years) and warned that both neglectful and overprotective parenting can be harmful, referring to “*intact umbilical cord syndrome*” to illustrate how excessive maternal attachment may limit a child’s independence and emotional growth. In conclusion, he called on policymakers to move beyond narrow, surface-level understandings of caregiving and instead recognize its deeper psychological, social, and systemic dimensions, integrating caregiver mental health as a core pillar of ECD systems.

Next, **Dr. Abdul Wahab Yousafzai, Professor of Psychiatry, Shifa International Hospital**, was invited to discuss the integration of MHPSS into primary healthcare. He emphasized that integrating MHPSS into primary healthcare requires a comprehensive, system-level approach, rather than fragmented or standalone initiatives, to ensure sustainable and effective service delivery.



He explained that the foundational step involves equipping primary healthcare providers with standardized tools, including WHO-recommended guidelines and validated screening instruments, so that mental health conditions can be identified early at the community or primary care level. He emphasized that this initial detection stage is only effective if it is linked to a well-functioning “*step-up*” or referral system, which allows patients to be smoothly transferred from primary care to secondary or tertiary services when required. Without this structured referral pathway, he noted, integration efforts remain incomplete and do not translate into meaningful service delivery.

He further discussed the structural and policy-level barriers in Pakistan that continue to limit progress in this area. These include insufficient funding for mental health, weak institutional prioritization, and a lack of sustained political commitment to integrating mental health into mainstream health systems. He pointed out that despite repeated recognition of mental health as an important public health concern, it has not been consistently embedded within national health financing and service delivery frameworks, which weakens its operational implementation.

He also discussed how mental health has historically been excluded from major health protection schemes such as the Sehat Card initiative, noting that psychiatry and psychological care were not initially included as part of essential health coverage. He highlighted this as a major gap

in equity and access, arguing that mental health should be treated as an essential component of universal health coverage rather than an optional or secondary service. He emphasized that while global estimates suggest that around 16–20% of mothers experience postpartum depression, evidence from Pakistan indicates much higher rates, potentially affecting up to 50% of mothers in some datasets. He stressed that this represents a major public health concern, especially given that maternal wellbeing is directly linked to ECD outcomes, caregiving quality, and intergenerational health.

He highlighted the critical role of data in strengthening mental health systems for planning, monitoring, and decision-making, while cautioning that mental health data must be interpreted carefully due to its deep cultural, social, and contextual influences. Although large-scale digital data is expanding with widespread smartphone use, he noted that mental health remains uniquely complex, shaped by local idioms of distress and culturally specific expressions that are not easily captured through standard metrics. He also pointed to the growing role of artificial intelligence in analyzing large datasets, suggesting it will increasingly inform health systems, but warned that AI may struggle to accurately interpret culturally grounded and non-clinical manifestations of psychological conditions. Concluding, he emphasized the need for a comprehensive and resilient system that integrates strong policy commitment, adequate financing, trained primary healthcare providers, effective referral pathways, and culturally informed data systems, arguing that only such a coordinated approach can meaningfully embed mental health into primary healthcare and ECD in Pakistan.

Moving on, **Ms. Falak Madhani, Brain and Mind Institute, Aga Khan University**, was invited to share insights from community-based work done in Gilgit-Baltistan by the BMI of AKU, Karachi. She shared insights from the project, emphasizing that caregiver mental health is a foundational determinant of child development and cannot be separated from broader family and community wellbeing. She began by reinforcing the idea, echoed by other speakers, that children cannot thrive without thriving caregivers, and that mental health outcomes for children are directly linked to the emotional and psychological wellbeing of parents, grandparents, and wider caregiving systems. She stressed that

strengthening child development outcomes therefore requires simultaneous investment in caregiver wellbeing, particularly in contexts where maternal mental health challenges are highly prevalent.



She explained that in northern Pakistan, working with the Aga Khan Health Service system provided a unique opportunity, as over 90% of women already access antenatal care through formal health facilities, creating an entry point for MHPSS interventions. Drawing on existing evidence, including high rates of perinatal depression in the region, she described how her team sought to design an intervention that was both evidence-based and contextually grounded. While the Thinking Healthy Programme provided a strong scientific foundation, she noted that its original design targeted individuals with diagnosed depression, which risked increasing stigma if implemented in isolation within community settings. To address this, the programme was reimagined as a universal, group-based intervention rather than a selective clinical one, making it more acceptable and accessible at community level.

She further described how the programme was developed through extensive consultation with mothers, community members, healthcare providers, and academic partners to ensure cultural relevance and acceptability. The final model focused on strengthening positive mental health rather than only treating illness, with early identification and structured referral pathways to formal health systems as a key component. Importantly, she emphasized that at the community level, the role is not to diagnose or provide clinical treatment, but to provide psychosocial support, promote resilience, and facilitate timely linkage to care when needed.

Ms. Falak highlighted that the intervention was deliberately designed as a stepped-care model integrated into the existing health system. Community peer volunteers were trained and mobilized to deliver group-based sessions for both mothers and fathers of young children, reflecting an intentional shift away from mother-only caregiving models. These volunteers were embedded within their own communities and supported by nearby health facilities, where nurses were also trained in basic identification of mental health conditions and psychosocial support. This created a structured linkage between community-based support and formal health services, with clear referral criteria guiding escalation of care to psychologists or psychiatrists when required.

She highlighted highly encouraging implementation outcomes, noting that the programme engaged 140 community volunteers across nine remote valleys, reaching around 120,000 people, with over 90% of volunteers successfully delivering two full cycles of weekly sessions and more than 80% of caregivers consistently participating. Volunteer retention remained strong at 83%, reflecting community ownership, while pre- and post-intervention data showed significant improvements in caregiver mental health, including reductions in depression, anxiety, and suicidality, alongside hundreds of effective referrals into formal health services. Concluding, she stressed that programmes must be designed with scalability from the outset (co-created with communities, integrated into existing systems, and aligned with government structures) and shared that the model is now being adopted by Aga Khan Health Service and piloted with government Lady Health Workers, with strong potential for national scale-up.

Followed by this, **Ms. Safina Abdulloeva, Health Manager, UNICEF Pakistan**, shared insights on the Helping Adolescents Thrive (HAT) programme, positioning adolescents as a critical yet often overlooked group in strengthening mental health systems and future caregiving capacity. She began by reinforcing that caregiving is not limited to mothers alone and highlighted how unaddressed childhood trauma can carry across generations, shaping long-term mental health outcomes. In response, she explained that UNICEF, in partnership with the Global Institute of Human Development and Shifa Tameer-e-Millat University (STMU), has adapted and scaled the WHO-UNICEF HAT framework in Pakistan, translating it into local



languages and implementing it across 150 schools in Rawalpindi.

She described the programme as a preventive, school-based model that focuses on building adolescents' social and emotional competencies, including emotional regulation, resilience, problem-solving, and relationship skills. By helping young people understand and differentiate emotions (such as sadness, anxiety, and depression) the programme equips them with tools to manage their own wellbeing while also preparing them for their future roles as caregivers. At the same time, teachers are trained to recognize early signs of distress in students and link them to appropriate support systems, creating a bridge between education and health sectors.

Ms. Safina emphasized that the programme extends beyond students to include parents and caregivers, while also acknowledging the challenge of reaching out-of-school children, an area where community-based approaches can play a complementary role. She underscored that mental health must be understood as a multi-sectoral issue, not confined to healthcare alone, and highlighted the importance of embedding psychosocial support within education systems.

A key focus of her remarks was the shift from reactive to preventive mental health systems. By investing in adolescents early, the programme builds protective factors that reduce vulnerability to stress, violence, and poor mental health outcomes, while strengthening empathy, communication, and caregiving capacities that persist into adulthood. Given that adolescents make up a significant proportion of Pakistan's population, she noted that empowering this group represents a powerful opportunity to drive intergenerational change and improve long-term societal wellbeing.

In conclusion, she emphasized that initiatives like HAT represent a broader shift toward recognizing mental health as central to development. By integrating research, documentation, and referral mechanisms into education systems, and by fostering early awareness among young people, such programmes lay the foundation for healthier families, stronger communities, and more resilient future generations.

Next, **Dr. Asma Humayun, National Technical Advisor for Mental Health, Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives**, was invited to present Pakistan's emerging MHPSS systems model, emphasizing both the gaps and the pathway forward. She noted that existing services are largely limited to tertiary care or private psychiatry, dominated by a biomedical, diagnosis-and-medication approach, with minimal access to psychological services, particularly at the community level. Highlighting systemic inequities, she pointed out that many districts lack even a single psychiatrist, while services remain expensive, unregulated, and inaccessible for caregivers already burdened by daily stressors.



In response, she described a government-led effort initiated in 2020 to develop a scalable, rights-based, and evidence-driven MHPSS model, now piloted in districts across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Balochistan. The model adopts a tiered, integrated approach: at the community level, a trained “*Hamdard Force*” of local volunteers identifies and supports individuals using digital tools, feeding anonymized data into a centralized system. This is linked to a supervised network of psychologists and primary care physicians, enabling case assessment, triage, and referrals through a structured step-up system. Over 400 community members and 200+ primary care doctors have been trained, with ongoing supervision ensuring quality and continuity of care.

A key innovation is the digital integration of services, including mobile applications and a central data portal that allows real-time monitoring, remote consultations, and confidential case management. The model also emphasizes preventive care, enabling individuals to self-assess stress and access early support, while allowing escalation to specialized care when needed. Dr. Asma stressed that this approach shifts Pakistan from a purely biomedical model to a biopsychosocial and public health framework, optimizing limited human resources and expanding access at scale.

She further highlighted the importance of data-driven planning, noting the severe lack of reliable mental health data in Pakistan and the need to use community-level insights to inform policy and service delivery. Encouragingly, she shared that provincial governments have begun allocating public funding for MHPSS for the first time, signaling growing institutional commitment.

In conclusion, she emphasized that building a coordinated system, rather than isolated interventions, is key to sustainability and scale, allowing successful initiatives in communities and schools to be integrated, expanded, and adapted across contexts.

Session Chair, **Ms. Ellen Thom, Deputy Representative, WHO Pakistan**, in her concluding remarks, thanked participants and highlighted that the session had been deeply informative, reinforcing that mental health, particularly caregiver mental health, remains a critically neglected yet essential component of holistic wellbeing and ECD. She emphasized that the evidence is clear and cannot be ignored: mental health challenges affect approximately one in six pregnant women and one in five postpartum women, making it a widespread and urgent issue that requires immediate attention.



She underscored a key takeaway from the discussion (that children learn directly from their caregivers) making it imperative to support caregivers' mental health to ensure positive developmental outcomes for children. Neglecting this, she cautioned, has long-term societal consequences. She also stressed that caregiving should not be viewed solely as a mother's responsibility, calling for the active inclusion of fathers as equal participants. Additionally, she highlighted that caregiving extends beyond early childhood into adolescence, requiring sustained support over time.

Ms. Ellen pointed to the importance of balanced caregiving, noting that both neglect and over-involvement can be harmful. She also raised concerns about the growing influence of AI and digital technologies, stressing the need for greater awareness and regulation, particularly given risks such as harmful information exposure among children. Referring to Pakistan's Sehat Sahulat Programme, she emphasized the need to formally integrate mental health services within such national health initiatives, recognizing it as an essential component of care.

She further highlighted that while integrating mental health into primary healthcare is critical, it must also extend across sectors, particularly education. This requires a trained and well-distributed workforce capable of supporting caregivers wherever they seek services.

She noted that existing tools from WHO, UNICEF, and partners provide a strong foundation for standardized yet contextually adapted care. Drawing on examples shared during the session (from AKU, government initiatives, and UNICEF), she emphasized the need to scale up community-based mental health services, adapting them to diverse local contexts rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach. She also stressed the importance of adopting a rights-based, holistic approach, addressing stigma, and moving beyond a purely biomedical model toward more comprehensive care.

Finally, she highlighted the need for innovation, including telehealth solutions that can connect underserved populations to specialists and establish clear referral pathways across different levels of care. She concluded by reaffirming that caregiver mental health must be treated as a central pillar of ECD, not as an afterthought, and called for sustained commitment to integrating it across systems and sectors.



Day 2

Roundtable

Operationalization of the National ECD Policy Framework

Session Chair:

Col. (Rtd.) Abrar Ismail, Minister for Finance, Government of Gilgit-Baltistan

Co-Chair:

Prof. Dr. Nasir Mehmood, Vice Chancellor, Allama Iqbal Open University

Moderator:

Dr. Ehtasham Anwar, Team Lead, Data and Research in Education, Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office

Speakers:

- Ms. Khadija Khan, CEO, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood
 - Dr. Saba Shuja, Manager ECD, UNICEF Pakistan
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Proceedings

The roundtable commenced at 2:00 PM on Day 2 in Room 104, Academic Complex, AIOU, under the facilitation of key ECD experts. The session was chaired by **Col. (Rtd.) Abrar Ismail, Minister for Finance, Government of Gilgit-Baltistan**, with **Prof. Dr. Nasir Mehmood, Vice Chancellor, Allama Iqbal Open University**, serving as Co-Chair. **Dr. Ehtasham Anwar, Team Lead, Data and Research in Education, Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office**, moderated the discussion.

The discussion focused on translating the National ECD Policy Framework into actionable provincial implementation strategies, strengthening coordination between federal and provincial stakeholders, aligning policy priorities with service delivery mechanisms, and promoting evidence-based, data-driven decision-making for effective operationalization of ECD across provinces.



Dr. Ehtasham Anwar, Team Lead, Data and Research in Education, Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, opened the session by warmly welcoming participants and setting a thoughtful and inclusive tone for the roundtable. He noted that the day was significant not just for the gathering itself, but for the importance of the topic under discussion, ECD in Pakistan, an area that has historically received limited attention within broader education discourse.

He emphasized that early childhood forms the very foundation of all future learning, noting that without investing in this critical stage, the entire structure of education cannot stand on strong footing. He highlighted that while education conversations often focus on later stages, the reality is that meaningful and lasting impact begins in the earliest years of a child's life.

He invited the session to formally begin with a recitation from the Holy Quran, encouraging any volunteer to lead. Following this, he outlined the participatory nature of the session, stressing the importance of introductions to build familiarity and openness. Before opening the floor, he briefly introduced key distinguished guests, including:

- **Col. (Rtd.) Abrar Ismail, Minister for Finance, Government of Gilgit-Baltistan**
- **Prof. Dr. Nasir Mehmood, Vice Chancellor, Allama Iqbal Open University**
- **Mr. Raja Shehbaz Khan, Minister for Tourism, Trade and Culture, Government of Gilgit-Baltistan**
- **Mr. Nasruddin Rupani, Chairman, Rupani Foundation**

He then invited all participants to introduce themselves, initiating a round of introductions to foster engagement and set the stage for a productive and inclusive discussion.

Col. (Rtd.) Abrar Ismail, Minister for Finance, Government of Gilgit-Baltistan highlighted the unique geographic and socioeconomic challenges of Gilgit-Baltistan and their implications for ECD and for the overall development of the area. He noted that the region's widely dispersed population, difficult terrain, and limited accessibility create major barriers to service delivery, particularly for vulnerable women and children. He stressed that these conditions make many communities highly underserved and in need of focused support from both government and development partners.



He emphasized that disparities exist across the region, with areas such as Diamer Division, including Chilas and Astore, facing greater developmental and security-related challenges, while districts like Hunza and Ghizer are comparatively more developed. He urged stakeholders, including NGOs, international organizations, and government representatives, to prioritize marginalized and underdeveloped areas in their ECD planning and interventions.

While acknowledging the efforts of organizations such as the RF and other partners working in the region, he noted that current initiatives are still insufficient to address the scale of need. He called for greater collaboration and sustained support for underserved communities.

In his concluding remarks, he underscored the importance of technical and vocational education as a pathway for long-term socioeconomic improvement in Gilgit-Baltistan, linking skills development to broader community wellbeing and future opportunities for children and families.

Ms. Khadija Khan, CEO, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood, presented an overview of the National ECD Policy Framework, highlighting its evolution, guiding principles, and implementation approach. She acknowledged UNICEF and Dr. Ayesha Yousafzai for their contributions to the policy and explained that the process began in 2015 under the MoPD&SI with UNICEF's support. She further added that over the years, awareness and political commitment to ECD significantly increased, leading to the policy's formal launch in 2025.



She described the establishment of a dedicated Technical Working Group by the MoPD&SI, comprising key representatives from relevant ministries and departments, development partners, and organizations such as PAFEC and RF. Extensive national and provincial consultations shaped the policy.

Ms. Khadija emphasized that the framework adopts a holistic and inclusive approach based on the NCF for children from conception to eight years, including children with disabilities. The policy recognizes ECD as a multisectoral issue requiring coordinated efforts across health, education, nutrition, child protection, family support, and community development.

She further noted that the framework provides guiding principles for developing coordinated strategies and action plans. Core values include equity, inclusion, child rights, gender transformation, and community engagement. The policy highlights the central role of families and communities, and stresses shared caregiving responsibilities between mothers and fathers.

Additionally, the framework promotes trust, respect, transparency, context-specific programming, strong governance, accountability, evidence-based decision-making, and environmentally responsible practices to ensure effective and sustainable implementation of ECD initiatives.

Dr. Saba Shuja, Manager ECD, UNICEF Pakistan thanked Ms. Khadija Khan for the overview and further elaborated on the ECD Policy Framework. She explained that the framework is built around eleven strategic objectives containing policy statements to guide implementation. Highlighting the framework's multisectoral approach, she emphasized the importance of coordinated action across sectors such as health, education, nutrition, and child protection to provide integrated support for children and families.

She stressed that nurturing care and family support are central to the policy, alongside a life-cycle and continuum-of-care approach that ensures children receive consistent support from early childhood through schooling. She also highlighted maternal MHPSS as important emerging priorities within ECD.

Dr. Saba further discussed strategic objectives related to strengthening ECE, improving service delivery, linking health and education systems, and prioritizing child protection at home, in schools, and within communities. She noted that the policy serves as a national guiding framework for coordinated implementation, governance, and multisectoral collaboration, particularly at the local level.

She emphasized the importance of public financing, sustainable funding, private sector engagement, accountability systems, data management, evidence-based decision-making, and environmentally responsible approaches. Reflecting on the policy process, she acknowledged the collective advocacy efforts of UNICEF, PAFEC, RF, and other partners, noting that the policy was formally endorsed and launched in February 2025 after several years of sustained efforts.

Following the launch, provincial consultations were conducted in Gilgit-Baltistan, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with Sindh and Balochistan consultations planned. She shared that provincial recommendation reports and implementation roadmaps are being developed, including costed provincial action plans to estimate ECD financing needs.

Dr. Saba also highlighted recommendations for introducing ECD expenditure tagging mechanisms, similar to gender and climate budgeting tags, to improve tracking of investments and strengthen resource advocacy. She concluded by emphasizing the importance of developing ECD indicators and markers, continued stakeholder collaboration, and

shared learning to ensure effective implementation of the framework.

The roundtable was then opened for discussion, inviting participants to reflect on the policy framework and share insights from their respective fields.

Dr. Mowadat Hussain Rana, Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences emphasized that the effectiveness of the ECD policy should be judged by how well it improves the everyday experiences and wellbeing of children and families, rather than by policy design alone. He advocated for a child-centered “*experience lens*” that begins before birth, addressing maternal and paternal health, genetic risks, psychosocial conditions, and family dynamics that influence development.

He highlighted key early childhood challenges, particularly during ages zero to three, including maternal mental health issues, poor nutrition, weak caregiving support, and the isolation of nuclear families. He stressed the importance of equipping caregivers with parenting skills, emotional support, and stress-management strategies to create nurturing environments.

Dr. Mowadat also expressed concern about domestic conflict, parental stress, and harsh schooling practices such as fear, bullying, and punitive discipline. He emphasized that early education should instead foster joy, curiosity, emotional safety, and positive child-teacher relationships. In conclusion, he noted that the policy's true success will depend on its ability to create measurable improvements in children's real-life experiences and long-term development.

Dr. Irfan Ahmed Khan, Civil & Environmental Engineering Consultant emphasized that ECD is the most critical leverage point, as the first three to five years of a child's life are foundational for lifelong development. He stressed that policy effectiveness depends not only on strategy but also on proper human resource placement, ensuring that individuals in early childhood roles are both professionally qualified and intrinsically motivated, curious, and committed to nurturing young learners. He identified aligning policy priorities with the right people in the right roles as a major systemic challenge that must be addressed for meaningful impact.

Dr. Zeba Rasmussen, Founder, Mehnaz Fatima Foundation contributed by stressing the importance of clearly defining the end goals of the consultation. She argued that having well-articulated objectives is essential to steer the discussion toward actionable priorities and ensure that the outcomes translate into practical and meaningful results.

Mr. Syed Jalal ud Din Shah, Global CEO, Rupani Foundation, placed the ECD policy within a long historical context, noting that it has been shaped by nearly two decades of sustained effort, including advocacy since 2008 by RF and formalization over the past three years. He highlighted that early awareness of ECD (especially for children aged “*minus one to three*”) initially faced low acceptance, and that development partners also only later aligned with this priority.

He stressed the significant “*cost of inaction*,” citing major economic losses in areas such as nutrition (estimated at USD 76 billion, or around 3% of GDP), underscoring the urgency of effective implementation. He cautioned that the key challenge now is moving from policy to action, warning that poor execution could undermine progress or even lead to policy setbacks.

To address this, he proposed a phased, evidence-based approach involving piloting key interventions, learning from results, and feeding evidence back into provincial and national planning systems, including the Planning Commission, before scaling up.

Dr. Saba supported this direction, emphasizing that there is no single solution to ECD and that a multi-pronged strategy combining systems strengthening with targeted pilots is essential. She noted that key human-centered and ethical considerations are already reflected in the policy and encouraged stakeholders to engage more deeply with the document.

She concluded by reiterating that the purpose of the roundtable is to move beyond policy formulation toward concrete provincial-level implementation, ensuring that the framework is actively operationalized rather than remaining theoretical.

Prof. Dr. Nasir Mehmood, Vice Chancellor, Allama Iqbal Open University, focused the discussion on

the transition from policy formulation to implementation. He noted that participants were already familiar with the ECD Policy Framework and emphasized that the next key step is structured piloting to test and refine implementation in practice.

He highlighted the importance of coordinated pilot initiatives across provinces, especially in the post-18th Amendment context where responsibilities are more decentralized. This, he explained, requires stronger coherence to avoid duplication of efforts and inefficient use of resources.

He further stressed the need to develop jointly agreed implementation guidelines with provincial governments, enabling a unified approach to piloting. These pilots would help identify practical challenges and generate evidence to improve and refine the policy before scaling it up nationally. He concluded by underscoring collaboration as essential for translating the ECD policy into effective, context-sensitive action across provinces.

Mr. Mustafa Bhaiwala, CEO, Rangoonwala Trust, emphasized that the main challenge is not policy formulation but ensuring effective implementation. He proposed that policy processes should follow a structured, iterative lifecycle similar to software development, beginning with planning, followed by policy design and development.

He suggested that implementation should start with carefully designed pilot phases in selected schools and communities, where interventions can be closely monitored. The results should then be used to identify gaps, address challenges, and refine the approach before wider rollout.

He warned that without strong monitoring during the pilot stage, large-scale implementation could become costly and risk failure. Overall, he advocated for an evidence-based, cyclical process of piloting, feedback, refinement, and scaling to ensure successful policy implementation.

Dr. Ambreen Nizar, Department of Pediatrics, Aga Khan University, stressed the need for a standardized and comparable measurement framework across provinces and programmes to effectively implement and evaluate ECD interventions. She emphasized that a clear, unified baseline is essential for accurately measuring programme outcomes and assessing impact over time.

She further noted that consistent indicators across regions would enable evidence-based evaluation, support comparison of results, and help identify successful interventions that can be replicated elsewhere, ultimately improving scalability and the overall effectiveness of ECD initiatives.

Mr. Ali Jabbar, Planning and Development Department, Government of Gilgit-Baltistan

emphasized that ECD is a cross-cutting area requiring coordinated action from multiple stakeholders, including government bodies, UNICEF, foundations, and academic networks. He welcomed the development of the ECD Policy Framework, noting that establishing a clear foundation is a major step toward effective implementation.

He shared progress from Gilgit-Baltistan, where implementation efforts are already underway in partnership with key organizations, including the establishment of 750 ECD centers, of which around 86% are functional. He also noted that remaining gaps are being addressed through joint funding arrangements.

He highlighted ongoing challenges, particularly the need for reliable and complete data systems for effective planning. He cited gaps in birth registration rates and stressed that weak data limits planning and implementation effectiveness.

He further referenced improvements in key development indicators shown in MICS surveys and expressed optimism that upcoming data (MICS 7) will further support evidence-based planning. He concluded by emphasizing continued collaboration for strengthening and scaling ECD implementation in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Dr. Mazhar Iqbal, Nutrition Specialist, UNICEF Pakistan

emphasized that since the discussion has already covered challenges and policy directions, the immediate priority is coordinated provincial-level action. He called for all ECD stakeholders to jointly engage at the provincial level to map ongoing initiatives, clearly define roles, and establish a unified, multi-sectoral coordination mechanism with measurable milestones.

He stressed the importance of joint progress reviews and shared accountability, warning against fragmented or parallel efforts. He concluded that effective implementation requires sustained coordination, collective planning, and unified

tracking systems so that all actors work within a coherent framework rather than in isolation.

Mr. Ghulam Shah, MEAL Specialist raised three key priorities for strengthening ECD implementation:

1. Clarifying the legislative status of the ECD Policy Framework and formally integrating it with national and provincial education policies. Defining ECD's placement within the education system (whether within primary or pre-primary education) is essential for its institutional anchoring.
2. Endorsing a phased pilot approach, given that the policy's multiple strategic objectives are extensive and require testing through structured pilots across provinces before full-scale implementation.
3. Embedding ECD indicators into national education surveys and monitoring systems to generate reliable data and support evidence-based decision-making. While it has been discussed in policy terms, it has yet to be effectively translated into measurable indicators.

Dr. Naeem Zafar, Chairman, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood & President, PAHCHAAN,

emphasized that the key challenge in ECD implementation is the limited understanding and alignment among frontline stakeholders. He observed that both the health and education systems are largely focused on tertiary-level outcomes (treating illness in healthcare and exam results in education) rather than prioritizing preventive and early developmental approaches.



He noted that ECD is often overlooked in favor of academic performance indicators and curriculum-related discussions, leaving foundational development in the early years under-prioritized. He also highlighted gaps in awareness around early childhood protection issues, such as newborn vulnerabilities and early risks like child marriage.

He concluded that without a shared and adequate understanding of ECD across provincial systems and key actors, effective implementation will remain difficult, as low awareness continues to be a major barrier to translating policy into practice.

Mr. Zain ul Abidin Laghari, Director, Sindh Teacher Education Development Authority, provided an update on ECD and teacher education reforms in Sindh, highlighting significant progress in institutionalization and workforce development. He noted that the teacher licensing system has been revised to include ECE as a dedicated category, addressing an earlier gap in the policy framework.

He shared that Sindh has strengthened its ECD workforce through the recruitment of 600 early childhood teachers in the first phase and an additional 1,100 in the second phase. He also highlighted institutional reforms, including the establishment of a separate Directorate for ECE to ensure focused governance and implementation.

He further reported progress on developing a comprehensive teacher education policy and the use of extensive workforce data covering around 75% of public sector teachers to support evidence-based planning. In addition, Sindh has introduced a revised ECE curriculum structured around six core skill areas, supported by updated textbooks.

He concluded that these initiatives demonstrate Sindh's commitment to strengthening systems, improving teacher preparation, and moving from policy formulation toward effective implementation in ECE.

Moderator, **Dr. Ehtasham Anwar** concluded the roundtable by thanking all participants for their valuable contributions and summarizing the key directions emerging from the discussion. He reiterated the collective agreement on the need to move from policy formulation towards effective implementation, with stronger emphasis on institutional coordination across organizations as well as provincial governments.

He stressed the importance of ensuring dedicated financial mechanisms for ECD, including the establishment of separate budget lines in all provinces, alongside a structured approach to piloting interventions, learning from implementation, and scaling successful models nationally.

Dr. Ehtasham further highlighted the need for robust data systems, monitoring, and accountability tools to track progress and strengthen decision-making. He emphasized that the ultimate focus of all efforts must remain on improving the actual experiences and outcomes of the child, which was a central theme throughout the discussion.



He also echoed earlier suggestions regarding the potential need for a stronger coordinating structure, including the idea of an ECD Commission, to ensure alignment and collective action across stakeholders. Before formally closing the session, he announced that the closing ceremony of the conference would begin shortly and requested participants to proceed to the main hall.

Exhibition of ECD Models & Early Learning Materials

An exhibition of ECD models and early learning materials, featuring innovative practices and successful interventions from across the country, was showcased by key ECD partners during the conference. A total of sixteen stalls were organized by development partners, academic institutions, and organizations working to advance ECD in Pakistan. Each stall highlighted unique interventions, research initiatives, learning resources, and community-based programmes aimed at supporting the holistic growth and development of young children. The exhibition provided participants with an engaging opportunity to interact directly with practitioners, explore evidence-based approaches, and gain insights into ECD initiatives being implemented across different sectors and regions of the country.

The participating organizations included:

- | | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| ● UNICEF Pakistan | ● Aga Khan University | ● Ekko Therapy | ● Al-Bayan Foundation |
| ● Muslim Hands Pakistan | ● 3P Learning | ● STEMp21 | ● Allama Iqbal Open University |
| ● Save the Children Pakistan | ● TeleTaleem | ● ECD PREP ObGyn | ● Association for Academic Quality |
| ● Rupani Foundation | ● Hashoo Foundation | ● Developments in Literacy | ● Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agahi |

These organizations displayed a wide range of ECD materials, including learning kits, digital resources, therapy tools, storybooks, curriculum packages, and teacher-support materials specifically designed to promote early learning and child development.



For instance, **UNICEF Pakistan** showcased its ECD Kit designed for children from zero up to eight years of age. The kit included arts and crafts materials, toys, storytelling resources, expressive activities, and activity cards for caregivers. Another notable display was presented by **Rupani Foundation** which highlighted its parenting model, AW-IP aimed at enhancing the knowledge and skills of parents and primary caregivers to support holistic development of children aged 0–3 years. Similarly, **Ekko Therapy** displayed devices and therapy programmes designed to support children experiencing speech delays and cognitive challenges.

Muslim Hands Pakistan exhibited its annual reports and programme materials to highlight its achievements and ongoing contributions in the field of early years. **Save the Children Pakistan** showcased its longstanding commitment to protecting children's rights and promoting child wellbeing through community engagement, advocacy, and partnerships with governments and international organizations. Their stall highlighted the organization's ongoing interventions and achievements in these areas.

Developments in Literacy presented its initiatives focused on providing quality education to underserved children across Pakistan. The organization displayed curriculum packages, daily lesson plans, scripted instruction materials, activity kits, storybooks, audio resources, workbooks, and reference materials designed to support early learning. Similarly, **Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agahi** exhibited its ECE kits, storybooks, and other educational resources, highlighting its contributions to strengthening ECE in Pakistan.

Aga Khan University showcased its academic programmes, research initiatives, and project achievements in the fields of early learning, health, and nutrition. The university highlighted its efforts to develop skilled professionals and leaders in the field of ECD. An additional attraction at the exhibition was the stall of the **ECD PREP ObGyn Department** under AKU. The department shared information about its programme components, including antenatal education, newborn parenting education, school-based parent education programmes, community outreach initiatives, and system strengthening and advocacy efforts for the promotion of ECD.

Hashoo Foundation displayed its work in expanding access to quality early learning services and shared success stories highlighting its contributions to child development. Likewise, the **Department of Early Childhood Education and Care** at AIOU presented details of its academic programmes and initiatives focused on promoting holistic development of young children. The department emphasized its commitment to quality teacher education, innovative research, and community engagement.

TeleTaleem showcased technology-enabled learning models designed to improve access to early learning, strengthen teaching practices, and deliver measurable impact in underserved communities. In addition, **3P Learning** demonstrated a variety of digital learning packages and educational resources focused on mathematics and literacy development in early years. Their stall featured worksheets, lesson plans, and interactive learning tools aimed at enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes.

STEMp21 highlighted its innovative educational programmes and resources developed to equip children with the knowledge, skills, and confidence required to thrive in a rapidly evolving world. Meanwhile, the **Association for Academic Quality** showcased its contributions to improving education particularly for early years in Pakistan through curriculum development, textbooks, children's publications, teacher training, career counselling, student assessment, and digital learning solutions. Their stall featured textbooks, children's literature, teacher training materials, and digital platforms including e-learning solutions, e-readers, teaching videos, and the Sun, Iqbal, and Nakhlah series.

Al-Bayan Foundation exhibited its developmental initiatives and highlighted its contributions in the areas of education, healthcare, and clean water projects, reflecting its broader commitment to community development and child wellbeing.

Day 2

Concurrent Session

Early Learning Opportunities

Session Chair:

Ms. Izza Farrakh, Senior Education Specialist, World Bank Pakistan

Moderator:

Dr. Seema Lasi, Assistant Professor, Aga Khan University

Rapporteur:

Ms. Samina Ghafoor, ECCE Curriculum Expert

Speakers:

- Dr. Shelina Bhamani, Associate Professor & Lead ECD, Aga Khan University
 - Dr. Tabassum Naz, Director, National Curriculum Council
 - Ms. Erum Barki, Education Specialist, UNICEF Pakistan
 - Ms. Sehar Taimoor, Education Advisor, Save the Children Pakistan
 - Ms. Fakhira Najeeb, Board Director, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood & CEO, POWER99 Foundation
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Early Learning Opportunities

The concurrent session on “Early Learning Opportunities” was chaired by **Ms. Izza Farrakh, Senior Education Specialist, World Bank Pakistan**, with **Dr. Seema Lasi, Assistant Professor, Aga Khan University**, as Moderator, and **Ms. Samina Ghafoor, ECCE Curriculum Expert**, as Rapporteur.

The session focused on strengthening early learning from conception to age 8 through home and community-based learning, play-based early learning environments, and smooth transitions into foundational primary education. Key priorities included caregiver support for early stimulation and language exposure, development of safe and inclusive play-based spaces, alignment of curriculum, teaching, and assessment for foundational literacy and numeracy, trained educators, engaged families, climate-resilient child-friendly infrastructure, and continuous monitoring for equitable access.



Ms. Izza Farrakh, Senior Education Specialist, World Bank Pakistan, commenced the session by warmly welcoming the participants and introducing the distinguished panel of speakers. Providing a brief overview of each speaker’s professional background and contributions to the field of education, she invited them to take their seats on the stage before initiating the discussion.

Dr. Shelina Bhamani, Associate Professor & Lead ECD, Aga Khan University, began with a powerful story illustrating how, despite adversity such as poverty and disability, responsive parenting and strong home environments can significantly shape a child’s development. She emphasized that early learning does not begin in schools but starts from

the womb and is rooted in the home, which serves as the child’s first and most influential learning environment.

She highlighted that everyday interactions, not expensive resources drive early development, including brain growth, language acquisition, executive functioning, and emotional regulation. Routine activities such as storytelling, family conversations, problem-solving during daily tasks, and even small household interactions provide rich learning opportunities. In this sense, the home naturally offers low-cost, high-impact learning experiences through sensory exposure, relationships, and real-life situations.



Addressing the question of what an effective home learning environment looks like, she stressed that it does not require wealth or sophisticated tools, but rather consistent routines, responsive caregiving, and meaningful engagement. She pointed out that parents often need simple, practical, and relatable guidance, such as short demonstration videos showing real-life interactions (e.g., reading a book, packing a bag) instead of complex or idealized parenting models that are difficult to implement.

Moving beyond individual households, Dr. Shelina called for a system-level shift, urging that homes be recognized as a core part of national learning infrastructure. She advocated for integrating home learning into policy frameworks, institutionalizing school readiness indicators, and embedding caregiver capacity as a component of human capital development. She also emphasized the need for equitable, context-sensitive parenting programmes, particularly for families facing poverty, disability, or other vulnerabilities.

In conclusion, she reinforced that every home is a learning environment, either positively or negatively shaped, and it is a collective societal responsibility to strengthen it. By reframing home learning as a central pillar of early childhood systems, she argued, Pakistan can build stronger foundations for children's development and long-term outcomes.

Dr. Tabassum Naz, Director, National Curriculum Council, reflected on her experience in public schools, highlighting how ECE is often reduced to quantifiable achievements such as counting or writing numbers, which she argued should instead be seen as negative indicators of inappropriate learning expectations. She emphasized that introducing worksheets, rote tasks, and pencil-based activities too early undermines the development of social-emotional skills, creativity, and physical growth, which are central to early years learning. Critiquing the system's over-reliance on measurable academic outcomes, she noted that while students may achieve high grades later, they



often lack essential values and behavioral competencies, as these are neither assessed nor prioritized from the start.

She stressed the importance of educating both teachers and parents that early learning is not defined by literacy or numeracy alone, but by holistic development of the child. Drawing attention to language challenges, she explained that many children struggle academically because they are not taught in their familiar language, leading to weak conceptual understanding, reflected in statistics showing a large proportion of children unable to read or comprehend by age 10. She advocated for mother tongue-based early education, allowing children to build conceptual clarity before transitioning to additional languages.

Dr. Tabassum also highlighted systemic issues, including the low status of ECE within schools, where early grades are often assigned to less experienced teachers, despite being the most critical developmental stage. She called for a shift in perception, urging that the most skilled teachers be placed in early years classrooms. Furthermore, she emphasized that curriculum reforms alone are insufficient without teacher training, institutional leadership, and resource readiness to effectively implement them.

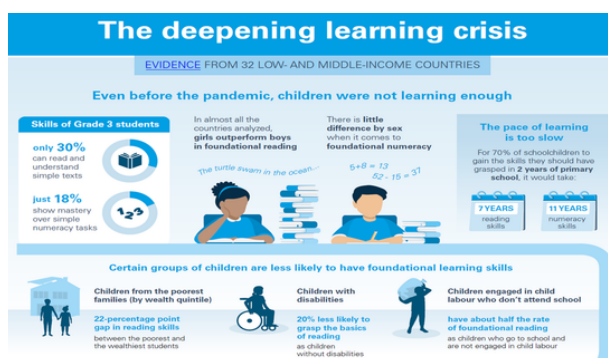
Concluding, she warned against overloading children cognitively at an early age, noting that while it may show short-term gains, it ultimately leads to stagnation in later years. Instead, she advocated for reducing cognitive load and prioritizing developmentally appropriate practices to ensure stronger, more sustainable learning outcomes.

Ms. Erum Barki, Education Specialist, UNICEF Pakistan, highlighted that while children in Pakistan are often socially and emotionally prepared for early learning (benefiting from strong family structures, storytelling, and caregiving

environments) the real challenge lies in whether schools are ready to receive them. She pointed out that this transition from home to formal schooling is weak, particularly in the public sector, where infrastructure is limited, classrooms are overcrowded or multi-grade, and learning environments are not conducive to early childhood needs. In contrast, the private sector has increasingly filled this gap, especially in urban areas.



She emphasized that Pakistan is facing a twin crisis: a large number of out-of-school children and, equally concerning, children who are in school but not learning. Foundational learning (comprising basic literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills developed between ages 3 to 10) has been severely neglected, contributing to a learning poverty rate where nearly 75–76% of children cannot read a simple sentence by age 10. She noted that this failure in early foundations leads to long-term educational setbacks, including high dropout rates, particularly during transitions from pre-primary (kachi) to Grade 1 and again after primary school.



Drawing on data, she highlighted disparities between urban and rural areas, with the majority of out-of-school children located in rural regions and attending under-resourced public schools. She also pointed to the broader systemic issue of a growing NEET population (youth not in education, employment, or training), especially among young women, which reflects the long-term

consequences of weak foundational learning systems. Ms. Erum stressed that the issue is not a lack of policies or training, thousands of teachers have received ECE training, but rather the absence of effective governance, implementation, and accountability mechanisms. She noted that despite public school teachers being more qualified and better paid, learning outcomes are often lower compared to low-cost private schools due to differences in teacher engagement and instructional time.

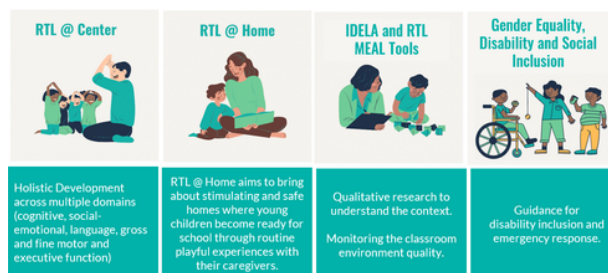
In conclusion, she underscored that Pakistan does not lack frameworks or curriculum documents, but struggles with translating them into practice at scale. She called for stronger governance, improved school readiness, and coordinated efforts to ensure that foundational learning is effectively delivered, emphasizing that addressing the learning crisis will ultimately reduce dropout rates and improve overall educational outcomes.

Ms. Sehar Taimoor, Education Advisor, Save the Children Pakistan, highlighted the organization's long-standing role in advancing ECE in Pakistan, noting that its work spans over two decades (from introducing early learning models to influencing policy and scaling foundational literacy and numeracy programmes such as Literacy Boost and Numeracy Boost). While reaffirming the well-established importance of early learning in driving long-term economic and developmental outcomes, she emphasized that Pakistan's reality is far more complex, shaped by climate shocks, emergencies, and conflict, all of which directly impact children's access to consistent learning opportunities. As a result, Save the Children has increasingly integrated climate resilience into ECD programming.



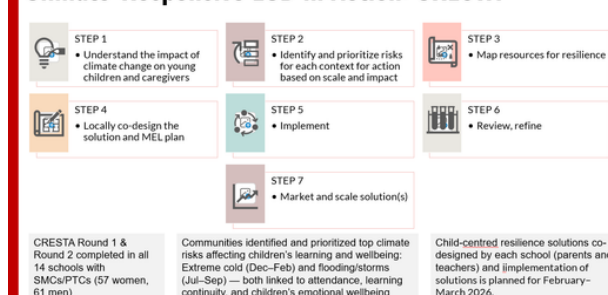
She underscored that school readiness must be understood holistically, extending beyond language and academics to include emotional development, play-based learning, and caregiver engagement. To

address this, she presented the “Ready to Learn” model, which operates across multiple levels: strengthening learning environments in schools, engaging parents at the household level, and using structured tools such as IDELA (International Development and Early Learning Assessment) for assessment, alongside continuous monitoring and classroom observation. Inclusivity and gender integration, she noted, remain central to all interventions.



Drawing on field examples from post-flood interventions in Swat, she illustrated how low-cost, locally adapted solutions can transform learning environments, creating child-friendly, engaging classrooms without reliance on expensive infrastructure. She further introduced CRESTA (Climate Responsive Early childhood care and development Systems Thinking Approach), a community-driven approach that integrates climate-resilient education by involving teachers, parents, and youth in designing localized solutions to challenges affecting early learning. These include practical interventions such as winterization kits, solar-powered systems, safe learning spaces during extreme weather, and community-based early warning systems.

Climate-Responsive ECD in Action: CRESTA



Importantly, she highlighted the role of parents and communities as active partners in learning, promoting home-based learning through everyday resources and strengthening communication through local networks, including mosques and digital platforms. Concluding, she noted that these models are now being scaled across hundreds of schools, reflecting a shift toward adaptable,

community-rooted, and resilient ECD systems capable of sustaining learning even in crisis contexts.

Ms. Fakhira Najeeb, Board Director, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood & CEO, POWER99 Foundation, built on the broader discussion around curriculum reform, teacher training, and holistic child development by showcasing an innovative approach to reaching underserved populations through radio and digital platforms. She emphasized that while much of the sector focuses on improving classroom practices, there remains a critical need to address access, particularly for the millions of out-of-school children in Pakistan, over half of whom are girls.



Through the Foundation’s “Listen to Learn” programme, she demonstrated how radio can serve as a powerful and scalable medium to deliver both child-centered learning and teacher training, especially in remote and hard-to-reach areas. The programme transforms traditional, rote-based teaching into interactive and engaging learning experiences, incorporating games, storytelling, and rhymes, elements that were previously absent in many classrooms. Teachers reported a noticeable shift in classroom dynamics, with increased student participation and enjoyment.

A key strength of the initiative lies in its integrated approach, combining approximately 40 hours of teacher training with curriculum-aligned audio content that promotes not only literacy and numeracy but also social values such as gender equality. By deliberately challenging traditional stereotypes; for example, portraying boys in caregiving roles and girls in active play, the programme seeks to reshape societal norms alongside educational outcomes.

Implemented across 35 districts, including some of the most remote regions, the initiative extends beyond formal schooling to influence community engagement and social behavior, using culturally

relevant content to strengthen learning environments. Its impact and innovation have been internationally recognized, including acknowledgment by the United Nations as a best practice for advancing SDG 4 (Quality Education). In conclusion, Ms. Fakhira highlighted that leveraging accessible technologies like radio allows for cost-effective, large-scale outreach, ensuring that learning remains inclusive, adaptable, and contextually relevant, particularly for marginalized children and communities often left out of conventional education systems.

In the open discussion, the moderator invited questions from the audience after the panel presentations on early learning. An audience member raised concerns about the lack of alignment and continuity in provincial policies, weak documentation and visibility of existing ECD projects, and the absence of clear preparation for the 0–4 age group entering the education system. He stressed that without better policy coordination, data consolidation, and early childhood readiness planning, efforts in the sector would remain fragmented and unsustainable.

In response, panelists emphasized that policy implementation must account for Pakistan's provincial diversity, noting that uniform approaches are not feasible due to significant differences in resources and schooling contexts across regions. They also pointed out that decentralization has not yet effectively reached district and school levels, which limits coherence in implementation and highlights a broader governance gap in the education system. The discussion also addressed inclusive education when a participant asked about curricula for children with dyslexia, ADHD, and autism. Panelists clarified that a separate curriculum is not required; instead, inclusive pedagogy and teacher training are key. By adapting teaching methods within the existing curriculum and providing classroom-based support, children with diverse learning needs can be effectively included in mainstream education systems.

In her closing remarks, moderator, **Ms. Seema Lasi**, reflected on the key discussions from the panel on early learning, framed within the NCF developed by UNICEF, WHO, and the World Bank. She reiterated that early learning begins before birth and emphasized that improving outcomes for children cannot wait until formal schooling, as by then it is often too late. Instead, she stressed the importance



of engaging mothers during pregnancy and strengthening early interventions through both families and education systems.

She highlighted key insights from the panel, noting Dr. Shelina Bhamani's emphasis on home as a central learning hub, Ms. Sehar Taimoor's focus on structural and process reforms for enabling learning environments, Dr. Tabassum Naz's reflections on ECE curriculum reform and perception change, Ms. Erum Barki's discussion on school readiness and foundational learning gaps, and Ms. Fakhira Najeeb's innovative use of radio-based learning to support literacy in ECE. She also underscored the persistent challenge of children being "*out of school*" as well as "*out of learning*," stressing that learning deficits remain a critical concern even for enrolled children.

Ms. Seema then raised broader unresolved questions emerging from the discussion, including how to effectively support parents in home learning, what the ideal profile of an early childhood teacher should look like in Pakistan, how to address learning poverty among enrolled children, and how to scale successful pilot innovations into wider systems. She concluded by noting that while many solutions and ideas were shared, the key challenge moving forward is translating these into scalable, sustainable action across contexts, before inviting closing remarks from the final speaker.

Day 2

Concurrent Session

Paper Presentation Session I

Economic and Sustainable Mechanisms: Innovative Approaches to ECD Financing

Session Chair:

Dr. Muhammad Ayub Buzdar, Associate Professor, Department of Secondary Teacher Education, Allama Iqbal Open University

Moderator:

Dr. Farkhunda Rasheed, Assistant Professor, Education Planning, Policy Studies and Leadership, Allama Iqbal Open University

Rapporteur:

Ms. Jamila Javed, Lecturer, Allama Iqbal Open University

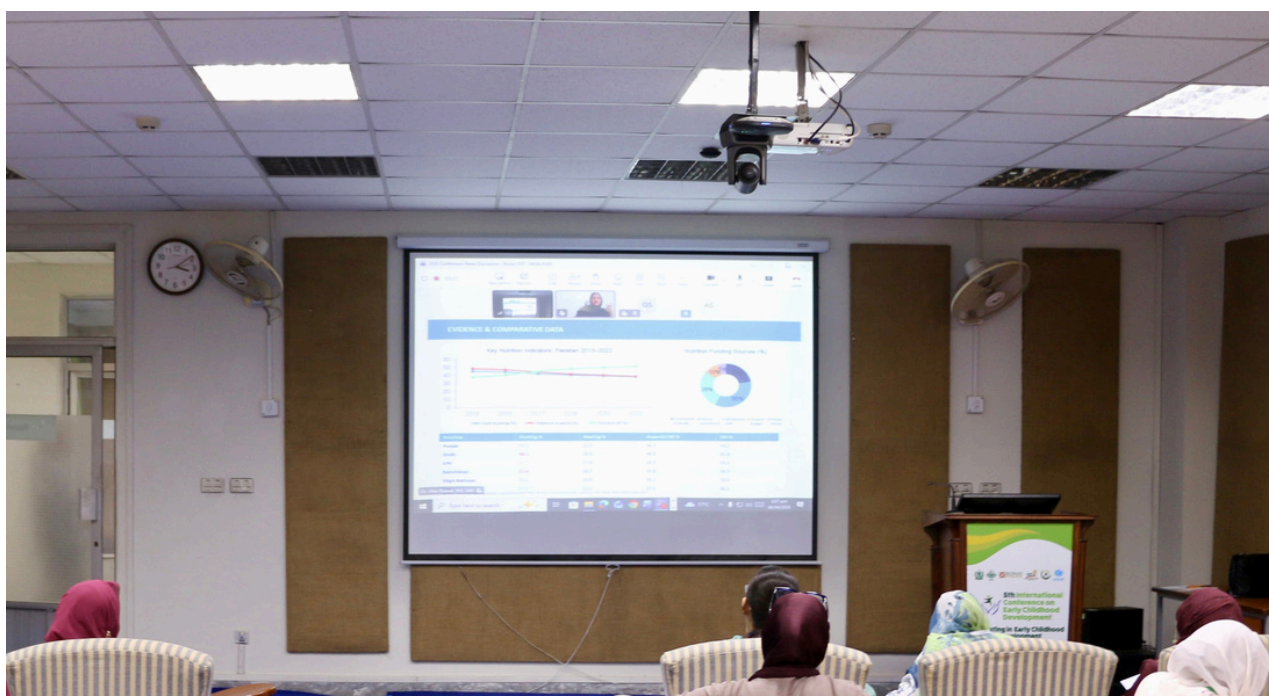
Speakers:

- Ms. Sumaira Bibi, Islamabad Model College for Girls, Islamabad
 - Ms. Hira Iftikhar, The University of Faisalabad
 - Ms. Salma Durrani, Social Welfare & Special Education Department, Balochistan
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Session I: Economic and Sustainable Mechanisms: Innovative Approaches to ECD Financing

The paper presentations as part of the concurrent sessions were underway. The first session on the theme **“Economic and Sustainable Mechanisms: Innovative Approaches to ECD Financing”** was held in Room 107 of the Academic Complex at AIOU. The session was chaired by **Dr. Muhammad Ayub Buzdar, Associate Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University**, with **Dr. Farkhunda Rasheed, Assistant Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University**, serving as moderator and **Ms. Jamila Javed, Lecturer, Allama Iqbal Open University**, as rapporteur.

The session focused on the need for integrated efforts across the education, child and maternal health, nutrition, and social sectors to ensure equitable access, disability-inclusive approaches, and improved outcomes for all children. Discussions reinforced that effective policy implementation, capacity building, multisectoral coordination, strong government engagement, and targeted investments, particularly in underserved regions, are essential for achieving long-term impact.



Ms. Sumaira Bibi, Islamabad Model College for Girls, presented the paper titled **“Managing ECE Programs in Islamabad.”** She emphasized stronger alignment between ECE and primary education through smoother transitions, greater autonomy for school heads, sustained funding for ECE resource centres, and enhanced community engagement.

The next presenter, **Ms. Hira Iftikhar, The University of Faisalabad**, presented **Transforming Maternal and Child Health through Nutrition: Pakistan’s Experience with the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement**. Her presentation highlighted addressing stunting and malnutrition through targeted interventions in high-burden regions, alongside improved programme implementation, climate resilience, and long-term financing mechanisms.

The final presenter, **Ms. Salma Durrani, Social Welfare and Special Education Department, Balochistan**, presented **Role of the Government of Balochistan in Meeting the Educational Needs of Children with Disabilities in Balochistan**. She stressed inclusive infrastructure, provision of Braille materials and assistive hearing devices, teacher training, and awareness initiatives to improve educational access for children with disabilities.

Day 2

Concurrent Session

Paper Presentation Session II

Nurturing Care Across Cultures: Innovations & Inclusive Approaches to ECD

Session Chair:

Prof. Dr. Abdul Hameed, Board Director, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood, & Managing Director, Center for Inclusive Education and Research

Moderator:

Dr. Hina Noor, Assistant Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University

Rapporteur:

Dr. Sana Qaisar, Lecturer, Special Education, Allama Iqbal Open University

Speakers:

- Dr. Sarwat Maqbool, Allama Iqbal Open University
 - Dr. Zahid Majeed, Allama Iqbal Open University
 - Ms. Musarrat Rani, Irshad Amtul Reproductive Health and Midwifery Services
 - Ms. Syeda Fatima Kazmi and Ms. Salma Nazar Khan, The Millennium University College
 - Dr. Shamaila Haleem, Islamabad Model College for Girls
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Session II: Nurturing Care Across Cultures: Innovations & Inclusive Approaches to ECD

The second paper presentation session on the theme “**Nurturing Care Across Cultures: Innovations & Inclusive Approaches to ECD**” was held in Room 108, Academic Complex, AIOU. The session was chaired by **Prof. Dr. Abdul Hameed, Board Director, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood & Managing Director, Center for Inclusive Education and Research**, with **Dr. Hina Noor, Assistant Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University**, serving as moderator and **Dr. Sana Qaisar, Lecturer, Special Education, Allama Iqbal Open University**, as rapporteur.



Dr. Sarwat Maqbool, Allama Iqbal Open University, began her presentation by exploring the traditionally limited role of fathers in childcare within Pakistani society. She identified socio-cultural and economic barriers restricting paternal involvement and recommended policy-level interventions to promote father-inclusive parenting practices.

The next presenter, **Dr. Zahid Majeed, Allama Iqbal Open University**, emphasized the impact of climate change on early learning environments. He shared community-based strategies for resilience in ECE systems and advocated for integrating environmental awareness into early education curricula.

Then came **Ms. Musarrat Rani, Irshad Amtul Reproductive Health and Midwifery Services**, who explored cultural, social, and personal barriers limiting fathers' involvement in childcare. She highlighted the importance of awareness and behavioral change interventions and suggested community-level programmes to normalize active father participation.

The next presenters, **Ms. Syeda Fatima Kazmi** and **Ms. Salma Nazar Khan, The Millennium University College**, focused on inclusive education through regional collaboration and knowledge exchange. They highlighted the role of teacher training and preparedness in inclusive classrooms and emphasized capacity building for sustainable improvements in ECD systems.

Moving on to the final presenter, **Dr. Shamaila Haleem, Islamabad Model College for Girls**, who presented Malaysia's structured approach to ECD curriculum development, emphasized alignment of curriculum with developmental milestones and cultural context. She concluded by suggesting the adaptability of international models to local educational systems.

Day 2

Concurrent Session

Paper Presentation Session III

Strengthening the ECD Workforce & Regional Cooperation

Session Chair:

Dr. Naveed Sultana, Associate Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University

Moderator:

Dr. Muhammad Tanveer Afzal, Associate Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University

Rapporteur:

Dr. Arshad Qamar, Lecturer, Allama Iqbal Open University

Speakers:

- Ms. Hadiqa Qaisar, HBS Medical College, Islamabad
 - Ms. Zehra Khushal, Curriculum Trainer, and Dr. Rukhsana Durrani, Allama Iqbal Open University
 - Ms. Sanober Nadeem, Aga Khan Health Service
 - Ms. Benish Saif and Ms. Salma Nazar Khan, The Millennium University College
 - Dr. Nuzhat Naz, College of Education, Ziauddin University, and Mr. Muhammad Nizam ud Din, Sindh Madrasatul Islam University, Karachi
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Session III: Strengthening the ECD Workforce & Regional Cooperation

The third paper presentation session on the theme “Strengthening the ECD Workforce & Regional Cooperation” was held in Room 204, Academic Complex, AIQU. The session was chaired by **Dr. Naveed Sultana, Associate Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University** with **Dr. Muhammad Tanveer Afzal, Associate Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University**, serving as moderator and **Dr. Arshad Qamar, Lecturer, Allama Iqbal Open University**, as rapporteur.



Ms. Hadiqa Qaisar, HBS Medical College, started of the session with a presentation titled “**Study on Exploring the Caregiver-Preschoolers Interface: A Review of Factors Influencing Healthy Eating Habits.**” She examined how caregiver attitudes and behaviours shape preschoolers’ dietary habits, highlighting the importance of strengthening the caregiver-child relationship to promote healthier eating in early childhood.

Following this, **Ms. Zehra Khushal, Curriculum Trainer** and **Dr. Rukhsana Durrani, Allama Iqbal Open University**, presented **Reimagining Teacher Preparation for STEAM Integration in ECE**. They emphasized integrating STEAM education into ECE and explored improved teacher preparation approaches to foster creativity and critical thinking in young learners.

Next came **Ms. Sanobar Nadeem, Aga Khan Health Service**, who presented **Central Asia Stunting Initiative (CASI) Programme Overview and Achievements**. She highlighted key achievements of the programme in addressing malnutrition and

stunting across Central Asia, emphasizing the importance of nutrition and early intervention in reducing stunting in children.

Following this, **Ms. Benish Saif** and **Ms. Salma Nazar Khan, The Millennium University College**, presented **Cognitive Growth or Cognitive Overload? Exploring Digital Learning and Parental Mediation in ECE**. They discussed the impact of digital learning on cognitive development and stressed the role of parental mediation in balancing screen time and learning benefits.

Finally, **Dr. Nuzhat Naz, College of Education, Ziauddin University**, and **Mr. Muhammad Nizam ud Din, Sindh Madrasatul Islam University**, presented **Future-Ready Beginnings: Reimagining ECE in a Rapidly Evolving World: Evidence from Urban Karachi**. They shared evidence from urban Karachi on reimagining ECE to meet future needs, emphasizing adaptability, innovation, and the role of technology in early learning.

Day 2

Concurrent Session

Paper Presentation Session IV

Early Learning Opportunities

Session Chair:

Dr. Muhammad Athar Hussain, Associate Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University

Moderator:

Dr. Batool Atta, Board Director, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood & Assistant Professor, Institute of Education, University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir

Rapporteur:

Dr. Hamid Ali Nadeem, Lecturer, Department of Educational Planning, Policy Studies, and Leadership, Allama Iqbal Open University

Speakers:

- Ms. Nosheen Anjum, Dr. Muhammad Samiullah, Mr. Aftab Ahmed, and Mr. Arshad Mehmood, Allama Iqbal Open University
 - Ms. Pari Bano, Project Coordinator, Rupani Foundation
 - Dr. Abdul Basit Rana, Special Needs Educationist, Government of Punjab
 - Dr. Nuzhat Saadia Qureshi and Mr. Hammad Ahmad, Allama Iqbal Open University
 - Ms. Samina Islam, Deputy District Education Officer, Elementary Education-Women, Tehsil Gujar Khan Rawalpindi, and Dr. Rao Nadeem Alam, former Assistant Professor, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad
 - Ms. Muhammad Mumtaz Khan, Government College for Elementary Teachers, Bagh AJK, Dr. Rahmat Ullah Bhatti, Assistant Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University, and Mr. Zeeshan Mumtaz, COMSATS Islamabad
 - Ms. Saira Khan, Institute of Agricultural Extension, Education and Rural Development, University of Agriculture, Faisalabad
 - Mr. Amir Hussain and Dr. Syed Nasir Hussain, Associate Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University
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Session IV: Early Learning Opportunities

The fourth session on the theme “Early Learning Opportunities” was held in Room 205, Academic Complex, AIQU. The session was chaired by **Dr. Muhammad Athar Hussain, Associate Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University**, with **Dr. Batool Atta, Board Director, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood & Assistant Professor, Institute of Education, University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir** serving as moderator and **Dr. Hamid Ali Nadeem, Lecturer, Allama Iqbal Open University**, as rapporteur.



The session began with **Ms. Nosheen Anjum, Dr. Muhammad Samiullah, Mr. Aftab Ahmed, and Mr. Arshad Mehmood, Allama Iqbal Open University**, who presented *Development of Paragraph Writing Skills Through Communicative Tasks Among Early Graders*. They focused on improving early graders' paragraph writing skills through communicative and interactive classroom activities.

Following this, **Ms. Pari Bano, Project Coordinator, Rupani Foundation**, presented *The Role of Early Learning Opportunities on Holistic Development in Preschool Children (Everyday Learning in a Nurturing Environment)*. She emphasized the importance of early learning experiences in fostering holistic development within nurturing environments.

Next came **Dr. Abdul Basit Rana, Special Needs Educationist, Government of Punjab**, who presented *Fostering Fine Motor Skills of Children with Cerebral Palsy: Exercises & Therapies*. He highlighted therapeutic exercises and strategies aimed at improving fine motor skills and promoting independence among children with cerebral palsy.

Then **Dr. Nuzhat Saadia Qureshi and Mr. Hammad Ahmad, Allama Iqbal Open University**, presented *Exploring the Efficacy of Digital Storytelling in Enhancing Language Acquisition in ECE*. They explored how digital storytelling can effectively support language development in ECE.

Following this, **Ms. Samina Islam, Deputy District**

Education Officer, Elementary Education-Women, Tehsil Gujar Khan Rawalpindi, and **Dr. Rao Nadeem Alam, former Assistant Professor, Quaid-i-Azam University**, presented *Beyond the Classroom: The Impact of Outdoor Activities and Storytelling on ECD*. They emphasized the role of outdoor learning and storytelling in supporting cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Next came **Ms. Muhammad Mumtaz Khan, Government College for Elementary Teachers, Bagh AJK, Dr. Rahmat Ullah Bhatti, Assistant Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University**, and **Mr. Zeeshan Mumtaz, COMSATS Islamabad**, who presented *Effect of Play-Based Activities on Development of Social Skills Among Early Graders*. They highlighted how play-based learning environments enhance socialization and interpersonal skills among young learners.

Following this, **Ms. Saira Khan, the University of Agriculture**, presented *Influence of Reinforcement on Performance of Primary Level Students in Subject of Science*. She discussed how reinforcement techniques improve student motivation and performance in science education.

Finally, **Mr. Amir Hussain and Dr. Syed Nasir Hussain, Associate Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University**, presented *Scaffolding Higher Order Thinking Skills Through Visuals at ECE Level*. They emphasized the use of visual aids to develop critical thinking and higher-order cognitive skills in early learners.

Day 2

Concurrent Session

Paper Presentation Session V

Research, Measurement & Accountability Systems

Session Chair:

Dr. Shahid Soroya, Director General, Pakistan Institute of Education

Moderator:

Dr. Tooba Saleem, Assistant Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University

Rapporteur:

Dr. Irsa Zahoor, Lecturer, Allama Iqbal Open University

Speakers:

- Dr. Rukhsana Durrani, Assistant Professor, and Ms. Mahnoor, Allama Iqbal Open University
 - Ms. Riffat Bano, Allama Iqbal Open University
 - Dr. Irfan Khan, University of Lakki Marwat
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Session V: Research, Measurement & Accountability Systems

The fifth session on the theme “**Research, Measurement & Accountability Systems**” was held in Room 206, Academic Complex, AIQU. The session was chaired by **Dr. Shahid Soroya, Director General, Pakistan Institute of Education**, with **Dr. Tooba Saleem, Assistant Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University**, serving as moderator and **Dr. Irsa Zahoor, Lecturer, Allama Iqbal Open University**, as rapporteur.



The session opened with **Dr. Ruksana Durrani, Assistant Professor** and **Ms. Mahnoor, Allama Iqbal Open University**, who presented ***Causes for Disruptive Behaviors in ECE Children of Public Primary Schools: An Action Research***. They identified key factors contributing to disruptive behaviours in early childhood classrooms and proposed strategies to improve classroom management and student behavior.

Following this, **Ms. Riffat Bano, Allama Iqbal Open University**, presented ***Exploring the Role of Positive Education in ECE: A Pathway to Socio-Emotional Well-Being***. She highlighted how positive education practices support socio-emotional development, resilience, self-awareness, and emotional regulation among young children.

Next came **Dr. Irfan Khan, University of Lakki Marwat**, who presented ***A Study on the Significance of Equality and Inclusion in ECD at the Primary Level in District Lakki Marwat***. He emphasized the importance of inclusive and equitable educational practices and their role in strengthening ECD at the primary level.

Day 2

Concurrent Session

Paper Presentation Session VI

Caregivers' Mental Health & MHPSS Integration

Session Chair:

Prof. Dr. Aneela Maqsood, Assistant Professor, Fatima Jinnah Women University

Moderator:

Dr. Jahan Ara Shams, Assistant Professor, Department of Early Childhood Education & Care, Allama Iqbal Open University

Rapporteur:

Dr. Aneela Alam, Lecturer, Allama Iqbal Open University

Speakers:

- Ms. Laiba Akram, HBS Medical and Dental College, Islamabad
 - Dr. Saeed Anwar, Director, Prime Institute of Public Health, Peshawar
 - Ms. Musarrat Rani, Irshad Amtul Reproductive Health and Midwifery Services
 - Dr. Mubeshera Tufail, Assistant Professor, and Ms. Robina Altaf, Allama Iqbal Open University
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Session VI: Caregivers' Mental Health & MHPSS Integration

The sixth session on the theme “**Caregivers' Mental Health & MHPSS Integration**” was held in Room 207, Academic Complex, AIOU. The session was chaired by **Prof. Dr. Aneela Maqsood, Assistant Professor, Fatima Jinnah Women University**, with **Dr. Jahan Ara Shams, Assistant Professor, Department of Early Childhood Education & Care, Allama Iqbal Open University**, serving as moderator and **Dr. Aneela Alam, Lecturer, Allama Iqbal Open University**, as rapporteur.



The session opened with **Ms. Laiba Akram, HBS Medical and Dental College**, who delivered a systematic review on maternal dietary patterns from pregnancy to the post-partum period. She highlighted nutritional requirements across maternal stages, the impact of balanced nutrition on fetal and infant development, and emphasized the need for awareness, counselling, and policy-level interventions for maternal nutrition support.

Following this, **Dr. Saeed Anwar, Director, Prime Institute of Public Health, Peshawar** presented on faith-based parenting and the role of spirituality in managing parental stress. He discussed the impact of chronic stress on parenting and child outcomes, highlighted Tawakkul as a coping mechanism, and emphasized strengthening parent-child relationships through faith-based approaches and awareness programmes.

Next came **Ms. Musarrat Rani, Irshad Amtul Reproductive Health and Midwifery Services**, who focused on mental health and nursing care interventions for caregivers and children. She stressed early identification of mental health concerns, caregiver well-being as a key factor in child development, and the importance of integrated healthcare approaches and awareness programmes.

Finally, **Dr. Mubeshera Tufail, Assistant Professor**, and **Ms. Robina Altaf, Allama Iqbal Open University**, presented on teachers' attitudes towards play-based learning. She reported generally positive perceptions of play-based methods, noted variations based on gender, experience, and qualifications, and emphasized the need for professional development, instructional support, and curriculum integration of play-based learning.

Day 2

Closing Ceremony

**Venue: W.M. Zaki Auditorium, Academic
Complex, Allama Iqbal Open University,
Islamabad**



Closing Proceedings

The closing ceremony commenced with a formal announcement inviting the Chief Guest, Guest of Honour, and Vice Chancellor to take their seats on the stage. This was followed by the National Anthem of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, for which all participants were requested to rise, setting a tone of national significance and collective responsibility for the discussions that had unfolded over the past two days.

The master of ceremony formally welcomed **Prof. Dr. Niaz Ahmed Akhtar, Chairman, Higher Education Commission** as Guest of Honour, and **Dr. Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui, Federal Minister for Education and Professional Training** as Chief Guest. Their presence was explicitly acknowledged as a reflection of the government's commitment to advancing ECD in Pakistan.

The proceedings began with the recitation from the Holy Quran, delivered by **Prof. Dr. Shah Mohiuddin Hashmi**, establishing a reflective foundation for the concluding session.

In his welcome address, **Mr. Nasruddin Rupani** began by expressing gratitude to the Vice Chancellor and AIOU for hosting the conference, describing it as both an honour and a milestone moment. He acknowledged the presence of the Federal Minister and emphasized the importance of



political leadership in advancing the ECD agenda.

Reflecting on the two-day conference, he noted that the gathering had brought together stakeholders from government, international organizations, and academia, united by a shared understanding that investment in early childhood is fundamentally an investment in the future of society. He emphasized that the discussions had consistently reinforced the economic argument for ECD, highlighting that investments in early years yield the highest returns at both individual and national levels.

He elaborated that the conference had repeatedly underscored the centrality of parents and caregivers, describing families as the first and most influential environment for children's development.

He also pointed to the collective emphasis on expanding access to quality early learning opportunities, particularly for underserved communities, and on strengthening the ECD workforce to ensure that practitioners are adequately trained and supported.

A significant portion of his address focused on integration across sectors, noting that ECD cannot be effectively advanced unless health, nutrition, education, and social protection systems work in alignment. He stressed that ECD is not the responsibility of a single institution but requires collective leadership and sustained commitment.

Mr. Rupani then highlighted the establishment of the Center of Excellence on Early Childhood Development at AIOU, describing it as a transformative initiative. He explained that the center would serve as a hub for research, training, and policy dialogue, enabling evidence-based decision-making and fostering innovation in the sector. He positioned the center as a long-term institutional mechanism to sustain momentum beyond the conference itself.

He concluded by acknowledging the contributions of key partners, including AIOU, UNICEF, and TAF, and expressed appreciation for their continued collaboration in advancing the ECD agenda in Pakistan.

Dr. Naeem Zafar provided a comprehensive reflection on the conference proceedings, drawing on his experience of attending all five editions of the ECD conference. He described this edition as one of the most intellectually rich, noting that both the theme and sub-themes had evolved significantly in depth and scope.



He systematically walked the audience through the structure of the conference, explaining that discussions had covered a wide range of thematic areas, including:

- Economic and sustainable financing mechanisms
- Nurturing care across cultures and inclusion
- Health, nutrition, and child safety
- Mental health and psychosocial support
- Workforce development and regional cooperation
- Research, measurement, and accountability
- Early learning opportunities

He further highlighted that the conference included seven concurrent sessions, poster presentations and culminated in a roundtable policy dialogue on operationalizing the national ECD policy framework, with a specific focus on translating federal-level commitments into provincial implementation.

Providing an overview of participation, he noted that the conference brought together approximately 400 registered participants, including over 13 international speakers and 50 national experts, reflecting a strong multi-stakeholder engagement.

In his concluding remarks, Dr. Zafar emphasized that the conference had moved beyond financial investment alone, focusing equally on human capital development. He stressed that the key takeaway was the need for collective belief in the importance of ECD, followed by coordinated commitment across institutions and provinces to take the agenda forward.

In his address, **Dr. Niaz Ahmed Akhtar** reflected on his experience of visiting the conference exhibition and engaging with participating organizations. He acknowledged the contributions of various stakeholders, including NGOs and international organizations, and expressed appreciation for their efforts in advancing ECD.



Drawing from his experience in higher education, he emphasized that many challenges observed at university level can be traced back to weak

foundations in early childhood and primary education. He illustrated this through a systemic perspective, explaining how deficiencies at early stages cascade through the education system, ultimately affecting the quality of graduates.

He stressed that quality of education must be ensured at every stage, beginning from early childhood, and that strong foundational learning is essential for long-term academic and professional success. He also emphasized that parents must prioritize quality over convenience when making educational choices for their children.

In his keynote address, **Dr. Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui** positioned ECD within a broader national and ideological context, emphasizing that Pakistan's future depends on the development of its people.



He highlighted the demographic reality of Pakistan, noting the large youth population and framing it as either a potential asset or liability, depending on how early investments are made. He emphasized that the first years of life are critical in shaping not only cognitive development but also moral, social, and emotional foundations.

He candidly acknowledged systemic challenges, including:

- High numbers of out-of-school children
- Learning poverty within the education system
- Weak quality assurance mechanisms

He argued that while access remains a challenge, quality of education is an even more critical issue, requiring urgent attention.

Expanding beyond education, he highlighted deeper societal challenges, including what he described as a trust deficit and moral deficit, suggesting that sustainable development requires addressing these underlying issues alongside technical reforms. He concluded by emphasizing that investment in ECD is not only an economic necessity but also a pathway to societal transformation, calling for collective action to improve both education and broader social outcomes.



Institutional Commitments and Signing of MoUs

A key feature of the closing ceremony was the formal announcement and symbolic signing of three Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs):

- Rupani Foundation and Omer-e-Rawan
- Rupani Foundation and Quebec Consulting
- Rupani Foundation and Gilgit-Baltistan Rural Support Programme

These agreements signified concrete steps toward institutional collaboration and programme expansion, reinforcing the conference's shift from dialogue to action.

The ceremony concluded with the presentation of shields and mementos to:

- Conference organizer and committee members
- National and international speakers
- Institutional partners

This segment acknowledged the collective effort behind the successful organization of the conference and reinforced the collaborative spirit that defined the event.

The closing ceremony marked a transition from dialogue to commitment, reinforcing that ECD in Pakistan has moved beyond awareness toward structured action, institutionalization, and national prioritization.



Conference Recommendations

After two days of intensive deliberations, insightful panel discussions by leading national and international ECD experts, and strong commitments expressed by key ministers, the conference culminated in a set of transformative recommendations aimed at advancing ECD in Pakistan. The recommendations reflecting a shared national vision and collective resolve for investing in children's early years, were presented during the closing ceremony by **Prof. Dr. Nasir Mahmood, VC, AIU**. Below are the details of the key recommendations:

- Recognize ECD as a national development and human capital priority rather than a purely technical sectoral issue
- Promote stronger political ownership, moral responsibility, and sustained long-term commitment to ECD
- Ensure coordinated federal-provincial action to harmonize the ECD Policy Framework implementation, financing, and accountability mechanisms
- Strengthen institutional coordination between health, education, nutrition, social protection, and child protection sectors
- Introduce structured mechanisms for piloting interventions, learning from implementation, and scaling successful models nationally
- Develop dedicated ECD budget lines in all provinces to institutionalize financing commitments
- Position ECD financing as a systems-design challenge requiring innovative partnerships rather than relying solely on traditional public financing
- Create financing structures that transform social impact into investable opportunities with clear accountability and measurable outcomes
- Expand the use of blended finance approaches and encourage complementary roles for philanthropy, public finance, private investment, and development finance institutions
- Explore climate-linked financing models, including carbon market initiatives that can generate sustainable funding for ECD programmes
- Conduct comprehensive public expenditure reviews for ECD across health, education, nutrition, and social protection sectors
- Promote results-based financing and accountability-linked investment models
- Use macroeconomic evidence and GDP loss simulations to strengthen the case for increased ECD investment in finance and planning ministries
- Design and implement interventions & ECD models involving communities and civil society actors that are culturally grounded and adapted to local realities
- Engage fathers, caregivers, community leaders, and religious institutions in promoting child wellbeing and responsive caregiving
- Fully integrate nurturing care into health, education, and community systems rather than treating it as an optional add-on
- Embed responsive caregiving and home learning support into existing programmes such as nutrition counselling and primary healthcare services

- Move beyond awareness campaigns toward practical skill-building interventions for caregivers and families
- Strengthen caregiver capacity through parenting programmes, responsive feeding demonstrations, and home-based learning support
- Adopt a holistic life-cycle approach integrating interventions spanning pre-pregnancy, pregnancy, breastfeeding, early childhood and beyond
- Ensure targeted support for vulnerable children, including children with disabilities and special needs
- Reduce stunting through improved maternal nutrition, infant feeding practices, family planning, birth spacing, and women's empowerment
- Reorient primary healthcare systems toward prevention and early intervention
- Embed developmental screening into routine health touchpoints such as immunization visits and pediatric consultations
- Train frontline workers (including lady health workers, nurses, vaccinators, and community workers) to conduct basic developmental screening at community level
- Integrate mental health services into national programmes such as the Sehat Sahulat Programme and primary healthcare systems
- Shift from a purely biomedical approach toward a biopsychosocial and public health framework for child and caregiver wellbeing
- Develop trained and well-distributed MHPSS personnel across health and education sectors
- Adopt rights-based and holistic approaches to mental health that address stigma and social barriers
- Establish a comprehensive competency framework defining required skills, qualifications, and standards across all ECD roles in all the relevant sectors
- Align policy, training systems, workforce planning, and implementation through standardized professional benchmarks
- Strengthen teacher licensing systems to explicitly include ECD professionals
- Improve workforce accreditation, certification, and continuous professional development mechanisms
- Encourage international partnerships, recognition of qualifications, institutional collaboration, and global communities of practice to strengthen workforce development
- Develop integrated education, health, nutrition, and ECD data systems to support evidence-based policymaking and planning
- Harmonize indicators across sectors and provinces through coordinated technical mechanisms
- Shift from fragmented data collection toward actionable data utilization and accountability systems

- Use learning assessments, developmental data, and monitoring systems to guide targeted interventions and resource allocation
- Strengthen monitoring, evaluation, and reporting systems to improve implementation quality and decision-making
- Recognize that every data point reflects a child's lived experience and future outcomes
- Integrate school readiness indicators into policy and programming frameworks
- Improve foundational learning systems and home-based learning support to reduce dropout rates and strengthen long-term educational outcomes
- Combine digital innovation with existing community and public systems rather than replacing human-centered approaches
- Build flexible systems capable of adapting to changing social dynamics, technological advancement, and emerging child development needs
- Strengthen advocacy by academia, media, civil society, and community actors to elevate ECD as a national priority

Annex I: Conference Programme



International Conference on
Early Childhood Development

5th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Investing in Early Childhood Development
Building Human Capital

April 7 - 8, 2026

Venue:

W.M. Zaki Auditorium, Academic Complex
Allama Iqbal Open University,
Islamabad, Pakistan



The Asia Foundation



Save the Children



International Conference on
Early Childhood Development
in Pakistan

5th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

April 7– 8, 2026

Investing in Early Childhood Development – Building Human Capital

Venue: W.M. Zaki Auditorium, Academic Complex

Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan

DAY-1: TUESDAY - APRIL 7, 2026

OPENING CEREMONY

Venue: W.M. Zaki Auditorium, Academic Complex

08:30 am	Registration of participants
08:30 - 09:30 am	Guests to be seated
10:00 am	Arrival of the Chief Guest – Prof. Dr Ahsan Iqbal, Federal Minister Planning, Development & Special Initiatives
10:00 - 10:05 am	National Anthem
10:05 - 10:10 am	Recitation and Translation from the Holy Quran – Mr. Ibtisam-ur-Rehman, Arabic & Islamic Studies, Allama Iqbal Open University
10:10 - 10:15 am	Welcome Address - Prof. Dr. Nasir Mahmood, Vice Chancellor, Allam Iqbal Open University
10:15 - 10:20 am	Children's Performance (Skit) – The Circle of Care
10:20 – 10:25 am	Opening Remarks – Mr. Nasruddin Rupani – Chairman Rupani Foundation
10:25-10:55 am	Pakistan's journey in ECD/ECCE/ECE-Animated Video Remarks by Partners:

	- Dr Nazeer Ahmed - Chief Nutrition, SUN Secretariate, Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives - Ms. Pernille Ironside – Country Representative, UNICEF Pakistan - Ms. Ellen Thom – Deputy Representative, WHO Pakistan - Mr. Muhammad Rafique Tahir – Board of Director - Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood - Ms. Noreen Bano Lehri – Chairperson of the National Commission on the Status of Women - Mr. Muzaffar Ud Din – Country Representative (Pakistan), The Asia Foundation Pakistan
10:55 - 11:10 am	Update on the previous Conference’s Recommendations - Dr Saba Shuja, Manager ECD, UNICEF Pakistan Sharing the Conference Objectives & Schedule Overview of the 5th International Conference on ECD - Ms. Khadija Khan, CEO, PAFEC
11:10 – 11:30 am	Keynote Address: Investing in Early Childhood Development – Building Human Capital Presenter: Dr Zafar Mirza – Former Federal Minister Health, Ministry of National Health Services Regulation & Coordination
11:30 am	Address by the Chief Guest
	i. Presentation of Mementos ii. Group Photo iii. Visiting ECD Exhibition iv. Tea Break & Networking

DAY-1 - PLENARY-1: TUESDAY - APRIL 7, 2026
Venue: W.M. Zaki Auditorium, Academic Complex

Session Chair: Ms. Romina Khurshid Alam, Coordinator to the Prime Minister on Climate Change & Environmental Coordination
Moderator: Syed Jalal ud Din Shah, Global CEO Rupani Foundation

12:00 - 1:30 pm	Keynote Address: How Microfinance can support ECD Entrepreneurs at Community Level to take ECD to scale Presenter: Mr. Stephen Rasmussen – Chairman, Community & Enterprise Development Organization Theme 1: Economics and Sustainable Mechanisms- Innovative Approaches to ECD Finances • Global economic evidence on high returns to ECD with reference to Asia's demographic transition and human capital dividend - Case Study from Pakistan • Venture philanthropy, blended finance and catalytic capital, corporate social responsibility models and faith-based giving, family foundations and diaspora philanthropy • Linking climate justice with child development, green ECD centers and climate-adaptive infrastructure, carbon finance mechanisms for caregiving programs • Trauma Informed Care and Investing in Neurobiology • Blended Social Financing for ECD, the Combined Role of Catalytic Capital and Venture Philanthropy • Unlocking financing for young children Key Speakers: 1. Dr. Adnan Aziz, Chief Program Officer, Global Islamic Finance Impact Program for Climate, Nature and Development, UAE (Virtual) 2. Ms. Katy Anis, Principal, Coalescence Advisory Service(Virtual) 3. Ms. Mina Zamand, Economist, World Bank Pakistan (In-person) 4. Mr. Vikas Arora, Chief of Impact Investing & Blended Finance, AVPN Limited (Virtual) 5. Ms. Shekufeh Zonji, Early Childhood Development Action Network (Virtual)
	Q&A Session
	Conclusion by the Chair
	Presentation of Mementos to Speakers and Chair
1:30 - 2:30 pm	Lunch Break & Networking

DAY-1 - PLENARY-2: TUESDAY - APRIL 7, 2026
Venue: W.M. Zaki Auditorium, Academic Complex

Session Chair: Ms. Sharmeela Rassool, Deputy Country Representative, UNICEF Pakistan
Co-Chair: Mr. Muzaffar Ud Din, Country Representative, The Asia Foundation Pakistan
Moderator: Dr Shelina Bhamani, Associate Professor, Program Director Outreach Education & Lead ECD PREP ObGyn Aga Khan University

2:30 - 3:30 pm	Keynote Address: Mr. Shinozaki Yusuke, Chief Representative, JICA Pakistan Theme 2: Nurturing Care Across Cultures: Innovations and Inclusive Approaches to ECD • Parenting models and family-strengthening systems – Key Family Care Practices (KFCPs) & Scaling-up Parenting Programme in Pakistan • Responsive Caregiving • RDI/Rupani Foundation’s AWIP model as a regional example • Digital parenting platforms and remote learning tools • Inclusive approaches to Early Childhood Development Key Speakers 1. Dr. Saba Shuja, Manager ECD, UNICEF Pakistan(In-person) 2. Dr. Qudsia Uzma, Programme Lead, WHO Pakistan (In-person) 3. Mr. Jalaluddin Hunzai, CEO, Rupani Foundation(In-person) 4. Mr. Sajjad Hyder, CEO, Gbeetechive(In-person) 5. Dr. Zeba Rasmussen, Founder of Mehnaz Fatima Foundation(In-person) 6. Dr. Naila Khalid, Health & Nutrition Advisor, Save the Children Pakistan (In-person)
	Q&A Session
	Conclusion by the Chair
	Presentation of Mementos to Speakers and Chair
3:30 - 3:45 pm	Tea Break & Networking

DAY-1 - PLENARY-3: TUESDAY - APRIL 7, 2026
Venue: W.M. Zaki Auditorium, Academic Complex

Session Chair: Dr. Naeem Zafar, Chairman, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood & President, PAHCHAAN

Moderator: Dr. Hana Mahmood, Chief of Global Health, International Research Force

3:45 – 5:00 pm	Keynote Address: Prof. Dr. Syed Jamal Raza, Executive Director, Sindh Institute of Child Health and Neonatology, Karachi Theme 3: Health, Nutrition and Safety & Security • Integrating developmental milestones, early detection & early intervention into Pakistan’s primary health care services • Stunting prevention through adequate nutrition – it starts in the womb • Strengthening ECD through Food Security and Healthy Dietary Practices • From policy to practice: advancing child safety and protection in Pakistan • Integrating ECD into Public Health Care • Fulfilling the ECD promise for children with special needs • Safe Cities for Children to Thrive Key Speakers: 1. Mr. Anteneh Girma, Chief Nutrition, UNICEF Pakistan(In-person) 2. Dr. Salman Kirmani, Professor, Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, Aga Khan University(In-person) 3. Dr. Fatima Rehman, Developmental Pediatrician, The Children’s Hospital Lahore(In-person) 4. Dr. Mehek Naeem, Member Punjab, National Commission on the Rights of Child Pakistan (In-person) 5. Dr. Shahzad Khan, VC, Health Services Academy(In-person)
	Q&A Session
	Conclusion by the Chair
	Presentation of Mementos to Speakers and Chair

DAY-2 - PLENARY 1: WEDNESDAY - APRIL 8, 2026
Venue: W.M. Zaki Auditorium, Academic Complex

Session Chair: Dr. Nasir Mehmood, Vice Chancellor, Allama Iqbal Open University
Moderator: Ms. Khadija Khan, Chief Executive Officer, Pakistan Alliance for Early Childhood

09:30 – 10:45 am	Keynote Address: Childhood-battleground of Ideologies and Ambassador of hope Presenter: Prof. Dr. Fareed Panjwani, Dean, Institute for Educational Development (IED), Aga Khan University Theme 4: Strengthening ECD Workforce & Regional Cooperation • Academic pathways through Centers of Excellence (e.g., AIU) • Credentialing, scholarships, and digital upskilling • Workforce mobility across the region • Capacity-building initiatives and cross-country learning • Regional cooperation for quality assurance in ECD • Workforce issues including social-emotional learning of ECCE teachers, ARNEC • Tackling OOSC, low literacy and ECCE gaps through strengthening ECD Workforce • How can health be integrated to build an effective and responsive ECD workforce for the region? Key Speakers: 1. Ms. Sara Lajam, Programme Officer, Dubai Care(Virtual) 2. Ms. Ambreena Ahmed, Director, Teachers' Resource Centre (TRC), Pakistan(In-person) 3. Mr. Abid Gill, Deputy Chief Advisor, Japan International Cooperation Agency Pakistan (In-person) 4. Mr. Syed Javid Gillani, Executive Director, Muslim Hands Pakistan (In-person) 5. Mr. Siva Prasad, Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (Virtual) 6. Dr. Mihaela Ionesco, Programme Director, ISSA (Virtual) 7. Ms. Nikita Srivastav, Assistant Director, Health Impact, AVPN Limited (Virtual)
	Q&A Session
	Conclusion by the Chair
	Presentation of Mementos to Speakers and Chair

10:45 – 11:00 am	Tea Break & Networking
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DAY-2 - PLENARY 2: WEDNESDAY - APRIL 8, 2026
Venue: W.M. Zaki Auditorium, Academic Complex

Session Chair: Ms. Rabia Awan, Director General, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics
Moderator: Dr Shehzad Mithani, Education Policy Expert

10:45 - 12:00 pm	Keynote Address: WHO Global Scale for Early Development (GSED) in ECD Measurement Presenter: Ms. Vanessa Cavallera, ECD, WHO Geneva Theme 5: Research, Measurement & Accountability Systems • Strengthening indicators, data systems, and tracking and data integration at early childhood level • Global measurement frameworks (MECCE, SABER-ECD) • Academic collaboration and regional research networks • Role of local government in providing data services • Multi Indicator Cluster Survey & ECD Dashboard • Development of integrated, real-time and policy-responsive data systems and tools Key Speakers: 1. Dr. Mazhar Iqbal, Nutrition Specialist, UNICEF Pakistan (In-person) 2. Dr. Shahid Soroya, Director General, Pakistan Institute of Education(In-person) 3. Ms. Jalila Hehldi, Co-founder, Sustainwiser(In-person) 4. Dr Tooba Saleem, Assistant Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University(In-person) 5. Mr. Ghulam Muhammad Shah – Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) Specialist
	Q&A Session
	Conclusion by the Chair
	Presentation of Mementos to Speakers and Chair

12:00 – 1:15 pm	Theme 6: Caregivers' Mental Health & MH&PSS Integration • Caring for the caregivers, global best practices • UNICEF maternal mental health frameworks • Integrating mental health into primary healthcare • Holistic mind–body–spirit models - research findings from parental support groups that we have run in Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral through peer volunteers • Rights-based & scalable MHPSS model for Pakistan Key Speakers: 1. Dr. Mowadat Hussain Rana, Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences(In-person) 2. Dr. Abdul Wahab Yousafzai, Psychiatrist, Shifa International Hospital(In-person) 3. Ms. Safina Abdulloeva, Health Manager – UNICEF Pakistan (In-person) 4. Ms. Falak Madhani, Brain and Mind Institute(BMI), Aga Khan University(In-person) 5. Dr. Asma Humayun, National Technical Advisor Mental Health Strategic Planning & Coordination Unit Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives(In-person)
	Q&A Session
	Conclusion by the Chair
	Presentation of Mementos to Speakers and Chair
1:15 – 2:00 pm	Lunch Break & Networking

CONCURRENT SESSIONS

DAY-2: WEDNESDAY - APRIL 8, 2026

Venue: W.M. Zaki Auditorium, Academic Complex

Session Chair: Ms. Izza Farrakh, Senior Education Specialist, World Bank Pakistan

Moderator: Dr. Seema Lasi, Assistant Professor, Aga Khan University

Rapporteur: Ms. Samina Ghafoor, ECCE Curriculum Expert

2:00 – 3:30 pm	Theme 7: Early Learning Opportunities • Strengthen Home and Community Based Learning Environments by equipping parents and caregivers with structural guidance to provide early stimulation, language exposure, and nurturing interactions during conception to 3 years of age. • Design Play-Based Early Learning Spaces safe, inclusive, and stimulating environments that promote exploration, creativity, social-emotional growth, and foundational literacy and numeracy in pre-primary schools. • Ensure strong transitions and foundational skills in the early primary years by aligning curriculum, teaching practices, and assessment to build reading fluency, numeracy competence, executive functioning, and problem-solving skills. • Trained educators, engaged families, build climate-resilient child friendly infrastructure, and continuous monitoring to ensure equitable and scalable early learning access from pre-conception to 8 years Key Speakers: 1. Dr Shelina Bhamani, Associate Professor & Lead ECD, AKU(In-person) 2. Ms. Erum Barki, Education Specialist, UNICEF Pakistan(In-person) 3. Ms. Sehar Taimoor, Education Advisor, Save the Children Pakistan (In-person) 4. Dr Tabassum Naz, Director, National Curriculum Council(In-person) 5. Ms. Fakhira Najeeb, Board Director, PAFEC & Chief Executive Officer, POWER99 Foundation(In-person)
	Q&A Session
	Conclusion by the Chair
	Presentation of Mementos to Speakers and Chair

Roundtable on the Operationalization of the National ECD Policy Framework with Provincial Ministers and Other Government Officials Facilitated by Key ECD Experts

DAY-2: WEDNESDAY - APRIL 8, 2026

Venue: Room 104, Academic Complex, AIOU

Session Chair: Col. Rtd. Abrar Ismail, Minister Finance, Government of Gilgit Baltistan

Co-Chair: Prof. Dr Nasir Mehmood, Vice-Chancellor, AIOU

Moderator: Dr. Ehtasham Anwar, Team Lead, Data and Research in Education, FCDO

2:00 pm

PAPER PRESENTERS

DAY-2: WEDNESDAY - APRIL 8, 2026 (Concurrent Sessions)

Venue: Room 107, Academic Complex, AIOU

Session I: Economics and Sustainable Mechanisms- Innovative Approaches to ECD Finances

Session Chair: Dr. Muhammad Ayub Buzdar, Associate Professor, Department of Secondary Teacher Education, AIOU

Moderator: Dr. Farkhunda Rasheed, Assistant Professor, Education Planning, Policy Studies and Leadership, AIOU

Rapporteur: Ms. Jamila Javed, Lecturer, AIOU

02:00 - 02:10
pm

Opening of Session by Moderator

Paper Title and Authors

02:10 - 02:20
pm

Managing Early Childhood Education Programs in Islamabad: Challenges Faced by School Leaders in 100 Public Schools
Presenter(s): Sumaira BiBi (Islamabad Model College for Girls. Islamabad) (In-person)

02:20 - 02:30
pm

Transforming Maternal and Child Health through Nutrition: Pakistan's Experience with the Scaling Up Nutrition Movement
Presenter(s): Hira Iftikhar, Faisalabad(Virtual)

02:30 - 02:40
pm

Role of Government of Balochistan in meeting educational needs of children with disabilities in Baluchistan Presenter(s): Salma Durrani, Social Welfare and Special Education Department (Virtual)

DAY-2: WEDNESDAY - APRIL 8, 2026
Venue: Room 108 Academic Complex, AIOU

Session II: Nurturing Care Across Cultures: Innovations and Inclusive Approaches to ECD

Session Chair: Prof. Dr. Abdul Hameed, Board Director, PAFEC & Managing Director, Center for Inclusive Education and Research
Moderator: Dr. Hina Noor, Assistant Professor, AIOU
Rapporteur: Dr. Sana Qaisar, Lecturer, Special Education, AIOU

02:00 - 02:10 pm	Opening of Session by Moderator
	Paper Title and Authors
02:10 - 02:20 pm	Exploring the Role of Fathers in Childcare in Pakistani Context: Challenges, Opportunities, and Policy Implications Presenter(s): Sarwat Maqbool, AIOU (Virtual)
02:20 - 02:30 pm	Building Resilient Early Childhood Education Systems: Community-Based Insights on Climate Change and Learning in Pakistan Presenter(s): Dr. Zahid Majeed, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad(In-person)
02:30 - 02:40 pm	Identify and remove barriers—such as cultural, social, and personal—that limit fathers’ involvement in raising their children Presenter(s): Ms. Musarrat Rani, Irshad Amtul Reproductive Health and Midwifery Services(In-person)
02:40 - 02:50 pm	Strengthening Inclusive Early Childhood Education through Regional Knowledge Exchange, Capacity Building, and Teacher Preparedness Presenter(s): Syeda Fatima Kazmi, The Millennium University College Pakistan (in affiliation with University of Hertfordshire, UK)); Salma Nazar Khan, The Millennium University College Pakistan (in affiliation with University of Hertfordshire, UK)) (Virtual)
02:50 – 03:00 pm	Malaysia’s structured approach to ECD curriculum development Presenter(s): Dr. Sumaila Haleem

DAY-2: WEDNESDAY - APRIL 8, 2026
Venue: Room 204 Academic Complex, AIOU

Session III: Strengthening the ECD Workforce & Regional Cooperation

Session Chair: Dr. Naveed Sultana, Associate Professor, AIOU
Moderator: Dr. Muhammad Tanveer Afzal, Associate Professor, AIOU
Rapporteur: Dr. Arshad Qamar, Lecturer, AIOU

02:00 - 02:10 pm	Opening of Session by Moderator
	Paper Title and Authors
02:10 - 02:20 pm	Study on exploring the caregiver-preschoolers interface: a review of factors influencing healthy eating habits Presenter(s): Hadiqa Qaisar, HBS Medical College, Islamabad(In-person)
02:20 - 02:30 pm	Reimagining Teacher Preparation for STEAM Integration in Early Childhood Education Presenter(s): Zehra Khushal, Education; Dr Rukhsana Durrani, AIOU(In-person)
02:30 - 02:40 pm	Central Asia Stunting Initiative (CASI) Program overview and Achievements Presenter(s): Sanobar Nadeem, Aga Khan Health Service (Virtual)
02:40 - 02:50 pm	Cognitive Growth or Cognitive Overload? Exploring Digital Learning and Parental Mediation in Early Childhood Education Presenter(s): Benish Saif, The Millenium Universal College ; Salma Nazar Khan, The Millenium Universal College, University of Hertfordshire UK(Virtual)
02:50 - 03:00 pm	Future-Ready Beginnings: Reimagining Early Childhood Education in a Rapidly Evolving World—Evidence from Urban Karachi Presenter(s): Dr. Nuzhat Naz, College of Education, Ziauddin University, Karachi; Muhammad Nizam Uddin, M.S. Scholar, Sindh Madrasatul Islam University, Karachi(Virtual)

DAY-2: WEDNESDAY - APRIL 8, 2026
Venue: Room 205 Academic Complex, AIOU

Session IV: Early Learning Opportunities

Session Chair: Dr. Muhammad Athar Hussain, Associate Professor, AIOU
Moderator: Dr. Batool Ata, Board Director, PAFEC & Assistant Professor, Institute of Education, University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir
Rapporteur: Dr. Hamid Ali Nadeem, Lecturer, Department of Educational Planning, Policy Studies, and Leadership, AIOU

02:00 - 02:10 pm	Opening of Session by Moderator
	Paper Title and Authors
02:10 - 02:20 pm	Development Of Paragraph Writing Skills Through Communicative Tasks Among Early Graders Presenter(s): Nosheen Anjum (Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad); Dr. Muhammad Samiullah, ECE&ETED AIOU Islamabad; Aftab Ahmed, AIOU ISLAMABAD; Arshad Mehmood AIOU ISLAMABAD(In-person)
02:20 - 02:30 pm	The Role of Early Learning Opportunities on Holistic Development in Preschool Children (Everyday Learning in a Nurturing Environment) Presenter(s): Pari Bano, Rupani Foundation (In-person)
02:30 - 02:40 pm	Fostering Fine Motor Skills of Children with Cerebral Palsy: Exercises & Therapies Presenter(s): Dr. Abdul Basit Rana, Department of Special Education(In-person)
02:40 - 02:50 pm	Exploring the Efficacy of Digital Storytelling in Enhancing Language Acquisition in Early Childhood Education Presenter(s): Dr. Nuzhat Saadia Qureshi, AIOU; Hammad Ahmad, AIOU(In-person)
02:50 - 03:00 pm	Beyond the Classroom: The Impact of Outdoor Activities and Storytelling on Early Childhood Development Presenter(s): Samina Islam (Dy. DEO EE-W, Tehsil Gujar Khan Rawalpindi; Dr. Rao Nadeem Alam, former Assistant Professor, QAU Islamabad(In-person)
03:00 - 03:10 pm	Effect of Play Based Activities on development of Social Skills among Early Graders Presenter(s): Muhammad Mumtaz Khan, GCET Bagh AJK; Dr. Rahmat Ullah Bhatti, AIOU; Zeeshan Mumtaz, COMSATS Islamabad(In-person)
03:10 - 03:20 pm	Influence of Reinforcement on Performance of Primary Level Students in Subject of Science Presenter(s): Saira Khanm, University of Agriculture, IAEERD(Virtual)

03:20 - 03:30 pm	Scaffolding Higher Order Thinking Skills Through Visuals at ECE Level Presenter(s): Amir Hussain, AIOU Islamabad; Dr. Syed Nasir Hussain, AIOU Islamabad(In-person)
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DAY-2: WEDNESDAY - APRIL 8, 2026
Venue: Room 206 Academic Complex, AIOU

Session V: Research, Measurement & Accountability Systems

Session Chair: Dr. Shahid Soroya, Director General, Pakistan Institute of Education
Moderator: Dr. Tooba Saleem, Assistant Professor, AIOU
Rapporteur: Dr. Irsa Zahoor, Lecturer, AIOU

02:00 - 02:10 pm	Opening of Session by Moderator
	Paper Title and Authors
02:10 - 02:20 pm	Causes for Disruptive Behaviors in ECE Children of Public Primary Schools: An Action Research Presenter(s): Dr. Rukhsana Durrani AIOU; Mahnoor, AIOU(In-person)
02:20 - 02:30 pm	Exploring the Role of Positive Education in Early Childhood Education: A Pathway to Socio-Emotional Well-Being Presenter(s): Riffat Bano, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad(Virtual)
02:30 - 02:40 pm	A Study on the Significance of Equality and Inclusion In Early Childhood Development At The Primary Level In District Lakki Marwat Presenter(s): Dr. Irfan Khan, University of Lakki Marwat(Virtual)

DAY-2: WEDNESDAY - APRIL 8, 2026
Venue: Room 207 Academic Complex, AIOU

Session VI: Caregivers' Mental Health & MH&PSS Integration

Session Chair: Prof. Dr. Aneela Maqsood, Assistant Professor, Fatima Jinnah Women University
Moderator: Dr. Jahan Ara Shams, Assistant Professor, Department of Early Childhood Education & Care, AIOU
Rapporteur: Dr. Aneela Alam, Lecturer, AIOU

02:00 - 02:10 pm	Opening of Session by Moderator
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	Paper Title and Authors
02:10 - 02:20 pm	Study on Systemic Review of maternal dietary patterns from pregnancy to postpartum Presenter(s): Laiba Akram, HBS Medical and Dental College, Islamabad(In-person)
02:20 - 02:30 pm	Faith-Based Parenting: Managing Stress to Enhance ECD Presenter(s): SAEED ANWAR, Riphah Internation University, Islamabad, Pakistan(In-person)
02:30 - 02:40 pm	Mental Health and Nursing Care: Interventions to Support Caregivers and Children Presenter(s): Ms. Musarrat Rani, Irshad Amtul Reproductive Health and Midwifery Services(In-person)
02:40 - 02:50 pm	Unlocking Play -based Teaching: Analysing the Attitude and Practices of Teachers at Early Childhood Education Level Presenter(s): Robina Altaf (AIOU); Mubeshera Tufail, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad(Virtual)

POSTER PRESENTERS

DAY-2: WEDNESDAY - APRIL 8, 2026

Venue: Lobby First Floor, Academic Complex, AIOU

Paper Title and Authors
Development and Piloting of a Qualitative Measure of a Home Observation Tool on Caregiver-Child Interaction and Engagement in the Context of Pakistan Presenter(s): Taiba Baig (Agha Khan University Human Development Programme); Dr.Seema Laasi (Agha Khan University Human Development Programme); Yasmeen Mehboob (Agha Khan University Human Development Programme))
STEAM Integration and safe use of technology to enhance the learning & teaching in ECE Presenter(s): Khet Kumar (Red Pi)
Involvement of Fathers in social development of children at Early Childhood Education in Pakistan: A phenomenological Study Presenter(s): Uzma Mazhar, NUML; Qurat Ul Ain Hina, NUML
To Observe and Compare the Classroom Quality Indicators of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Public and Private Schools in Gilgit Baltistan Presenter(s): Meher Kamil, AKU
Prospects And Challenges Of Early Childhood Care And Education In Azad Jammu And Kashmir Presenter(s): Jawad Zareen Shah, Arid Agriculture University; Imran Yousuf, PMAS-Arid Agriculture University

DAY - 2: WEDNESDAY - APRIL 8, 2026

CLOSING CEREMONY

Venue: Venue: W.M. Zaki Auditorium, Academic Complex

4:00 PM	Guest to be seated & arrival of the Chief Guest & Guest of Honour: - Dr. Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui, Federal Minister for Education and Professional Training - Prof. Dr. Niaz Ahmad Akhtar (S.I) – Chairman, Higher Education Commission, Pakistan
4:00-4:05 pm	National Anthem
4:05-4:10 pm	Recitation from Holy Quran – Prof. Dr Shah Mohyuddin Hashmi, Dean Faculty of Arabic and Islamic Studies
4:10-4:25 pm	Welcome Note – Mr. Nasruddin Rupani, Chairman Rupani Foundation
4:25-4:40 pm	Reflection on the Conference – Dr. Naeem Zafar, Chairman PAFEC and a female participant
4:40-4:55pm	Conference Findings and Recommendations - Professor. Dr Nasir Mahmood, VC Allama Iqbal Open University Call to Action Signing of MoUs and Partner Commitments
4:55 pm	Address by the Guest of Honour and Chief Guest
	i. Presentation of Mementos ii. Group Photo iii. Tea & Departure

Annex II: Conference Core Committee

Conference Core Committee

The conference was organized by the MoPD&SI, AIOU, UNICEF Pakistan, RF, PAFEC, and RDI.

Name	Designation/Organization	Committee Position
Prof. Dr. Nasir Mahmood	Vice Chancellor, Allama Iqbal Open University	Conference Chair
Mr. Nasruddin Rupani	Chairman, Rupani Foundation	Co-Chair
Ms. Khadija Khan	CEO, Pakistan Alliance For Early Childhood	Conference Convener
Dr. Tooba Saleem	Assistant Professor, Allama Iqbal Open University	Conference Secretary
Mr. Syed Jalal ud Din Shah	Global CEO, Rupani Foundation	Member
Mr. Jalaluddin Hunzai	CEO, Rupani Foundation	Member
Mr. Waseem Samad	CEO, Apex & Co., Rupani Foundation	Member
Dr. Saba Shuja	Manager ECD, UNICEF Pakistan	Member
Dr. Muhammad Ayub Buzdar	Associate Professor, Department of Secondary Teacher Education, Allama Iqbal Open University	Member
Dr. Saima Nasir	Director, QEC	Member



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