Children are a common basis for all dimensions of sustainable development. No advances in sustainable development will occur in coming decades without multiple generations contributing to societal improvement. Moreover, beyond sheer survival, children have a right to thrive, develop to their full potential, and live in a sustainable world.¹

In this statement we present the rationale for putting children at the center of an integrated set of post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals. Many have argued that the challenges presented by sustainable development are integrated. Goals in the areas of poverty reduction, health, education, sustainable agriculture and energy, gender equality and social inclusion, and development within planetary boundaries must be tackled together, not separately. An inter-generational vision of societal development must underlie these goals; without this vision for the next generation, there will be no capacity for nations to actually bring about sustainable development.

Recommendation of the U.N. Sustainable Development Solutions Network for Target and Indicators on Early Childhood Development

**Target:** All children under the age of 5 reach their developmental potential through access to quality early childhood development programs and policies.

**Indicator:** Proportion of children receiving at least one year of a quality pre-primary education program.

**Indicator:** Early Child Development Index, based on existing UNICEF and other measures, encompassing children’s development across language/literacy, numeracy, physical, socio-emotional and cognitive development.

The SDSN also recommends disaggregation by age, distinguishing key indicators related to poverty eradication, water and sanitation, social protection, health and the right to development for the ages under one year (infants), 1-4 years 11 months (pre-school age), 5-14 years (school age), and childbearing age.

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THE LINK BETWEEN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Children’s health, learning and behavior during the early years are the foundation not only for later school success and completion, but also their capacity to participate in community, workplace and society. Young children’s growth and development, in addition, is profoundly shaped by the opportunities for learning, education, economic resources and interactions provided by adults – whether they encounter these adults in home, care, service or community contexts.

A powerful set of neuroscientific and economic evidence over the last 20 years now shows that early childhood is a critical stage of human development. The foundations of brain architecture and functioning, and subsequent lifelong developmental potential, are laid down in the early years in a process that is exquisitely sensitive to external influence. Early experiences in the home, in other care settings, and in communities interact with genes to shape the developing nature and quality of the brain’s architecture. The growth and then environmentally-based pruning of neuronal systems in the first years support a range of early skills, including cognitive (early language, literacy, math), social (empathy, prosocial behaviors), persistence, attention, self-regulation and executive function skills (the voluntary control of attention and behavior).2 Each of these skills, measured in early childhood, are predictive of school success and completion; higher earnings; active participation in communities and society; and reduced odds of delinquency, crime, and chronic and non-communicable disease.3

Later skills – in schooling; in employment; in family life -- build cumulatively upon these early skills. Therefore, as the Nobel-prize-winning economist James Heckman has shown, investment in early learning and development results in greater cost savings than investment later in the life cycle.4

THE STATE OF THE WORLD’S YOUNG CHILDREN

Despite the well-established importance of the early years, each year 7 million children worldwide do not survive to their fifth birthday, and over 200 million children who do survive...
do not reach their developmental potential in early childhood, as indexed by risks such as stunting or exposure to absolute poverty. Indeed, a range of powerful risk factors such as maternal undernutrition; lack of recommended breastfeeding; lack of access to clean water and sanitation; lack of stimulation in the home; and lack of learning opportunities in many low- and middle-income countries lead to this loss of human potential. Such experiences can get “under the skin,” overwhelming the young body’s stress mechanisms and immune functions. These 200 million children thus face high odds of early mortality; school failure; early pregnancy; joblessness; and chronic and costly diseases across the lifespan. This represents an enormous and perhaps the primary challenge to global sustainable development.

THE EVIDENCE ON ESSENTIAL EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS AND POLICIES

To address the growing challenges of environmental crises, poverty and inequality, and domestic and armed conflict, a transformative approach to early childhood development is required. In low-, middle-, and high-income countries alike, ECD services encompassing proven approaches to health, education, social protection and child protection are some of the most cost-effective interventions for a range of long-term outcomes important to society, including completed schooling, higher lifelong earnings, and reduced crime. These programs begin before birth and include comprehensive family planning, complete birth registration, and a package of proven health services encompassing preventive and curative care. They include nutrition programs that integrate an emphasis on supporting stimulating and responsive feeding, a combination of services with powerful effects on both health and learning. By preprimary age, they include quality learning and education programs, whether

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implemented in home-based or center-based settings, with continued attention to health and social and emotional development. These solutions to maximize children’s future contributions sustainable development are available and known: we refer the reader to recent reviews of this strong and extensive evaluation science base.\textsuperscript{11}

The economic benefits of investing in young children globally are well-established. Quality preprimary education has been shown to produce substantial economic benefits, including higher rates of primary and secondary completion, higher earnings in adulthood, and lower crime.\textsuperscript{12} Raising preschool enrollment to 50% in low- and middle-income countries has been estimated to result in benefits of over $33 billion US, with a benefit-cost ratio of between 7.8 and 17.6, depending on the discount rate.\textsuperscript{13} A nutrition and parenting stimulation intervention for infants and toddlers resulted in impacts 20 years later in raising IQ; reducing anxiety, depression and violence; and increasing earnings by 50%.\textsuperscript{14} Such services contribute substantially to a broader development agenda to fight poverty and inequality.\textsuperscript{15} Not acting on these proven solutions -- not integrating them into progress on global targets and indicators -- will thus have substantial costs to societies.

The SDSN Thematic Workgroup on Early Childhood Development, Education and the Transition to Work has put forward a target and indicators that reflect the comprehensive nature of early development across physical, cognitive, language, socio-emotional domains and realize children’s rights to their full developing humanity (see sidebar).\textsuperscript{16} Governance and


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implementation approaches to assure that the evidence-based programs to support these outcomes also exist to guide nations to ensure maximum results on their investment in young children.\textsuperscript{17}

In addition to these indicators specific to young children, it is critically important that indicators tracking the entire range of sustainable development goals be disaggregated by age (early childhood; primary school age; secondary school age; the transition to adulthood; child-bearing age and beyond). Without this disaggregation, progress towards sustainable development for the most vulnerable cannot be measured. For example, stunting is well-established and difficult to reverse by age 2. Rates of household poverty are the highest for families with young children, and harmful effects of poverty are also largest when experienced in the early years.\textsuperscript{18} Without disaggregation by age of poverty indicators, the impact of social protection on the most vulnerable will be unknown. Similarly, efforts to increase gender equality; reduce population burdens on the planet; provide improved water sources and sanitation; and prevent HIV infection all have particularly powerful and long-lasting influences between birth and school entry. Disaggregating indicators by age must therefore distinguish the birth to 2 and 2- to 5-year age periods, in addition to primary- and secondary-school ages.

The large number of the world’s children starting life at severe risk and experiencing toxic stress threatens all other goals of sustainable development.\textsuperscript{19} The capacity of a nation to build sustainable systems and infrastructure, innovate and invest in technology, and grow while reducing impact on the earth’s resources all depend on a workforce with the skills that are foundational to productivity, civic engagement, and innovation. Not pursuing an early childhood development goal, moreover, would not only compromise achievement of all other sustainable development goals, but also violate the right of every child to develop to his or her potential. It is for these reasons that children must be at the very center of the Sustainable Development Goals.

