

A global call to action: Stop neglecting pre-primary education investments

Early childhood is a critical period in a child's life, and gaps in development during this time can have a life-long impact on physical and mental health, learning, behaviour and the ability of a child to reach his or her full potential. Comprehensive early childhood development (ECD) programmes that include both stimulation, early learning and pre-primary education offer high returns on investments, improve primary school outcomes and provide the best chance to level the playing field for those children most likely to be left behind — girls, those with disabilities, those affected by HIV and AIDS and those from poorer communities and families.

Despite significant economic and neuroscience evidence on the benefits to individuals and economies of this package of early childhood interventions, there is both a scarcity of data to measure what's happening and a scarcity of funding where there is data. Across this early package of interventions, it is extremely difficult to measure and compare investments. This scorecard, the first in a series, thus focuses solely on one piece of this picture — reported aid to pre-primary education. To learn more about the comprehensive package of ECD and its impact on children, see our [ECD brief](#).

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 **Best Start**

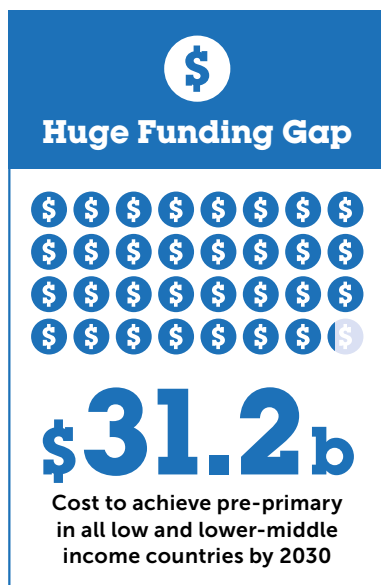
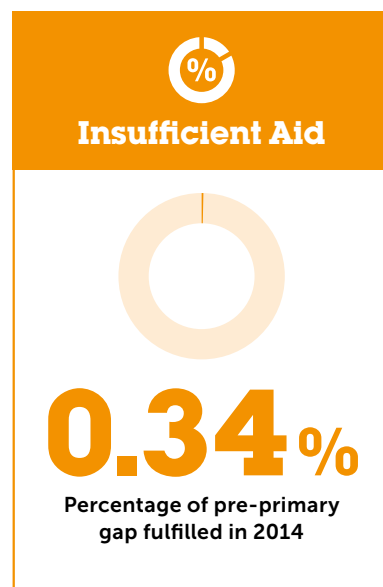
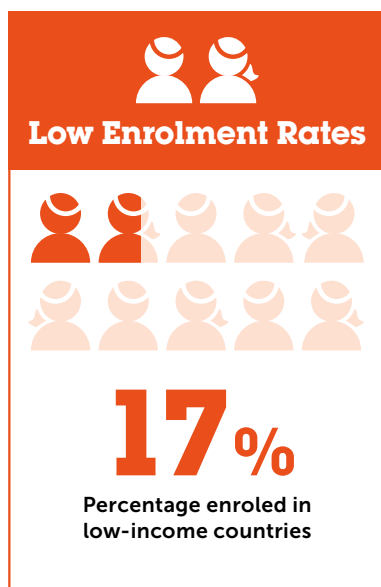


Pre-primary Global Trends

Pre-primary education is the earliest type of organised learning for children, including one to two years of early learning designed to help prepare them for the transition between home and formal schooling. Pre-primary learning increases a child's school readiness, by developing both cognitive and non-cognitive skills, leading to higher academic achievement and decreasing the likelihood that a child will repeat a grade or drop out.¹ Notably, the benefits of pre-primary are greatest for marginalised and disadvantaged children, who are often least prepared for primary school and therefore most likely to be left behind.² **Investments in early learning and pre-primary programmes therefore underpin and significantly strengthen investments in primary schooling, helping ensure positive primary outcomes.**

Despite expansion of pre-primary services over the past few decades, only 44% of the world's children and **just 17% in low-income countries** were enrolled in pre-primary education in 2014.³ Progress in pre-primary access has been uneven, and the poorest and most marginalised children are still the least likely to be enrolled in pre-primary school.⁴ In 2015, countries committed to improving enrolment by including universal access to pre-primary education as a specific target in the Sustainable Development Goals (4.2). Though governments are the primary responsibility holders for providing education, the huge gap between available government resources and total need means that education aid from donor governments remains essential to achieving universal access by 2030. However, pre-primary education remains continually **under-prioritised** and **underfunded** by donor governments, with **less than 0.5%** of the gap funded in 2014.

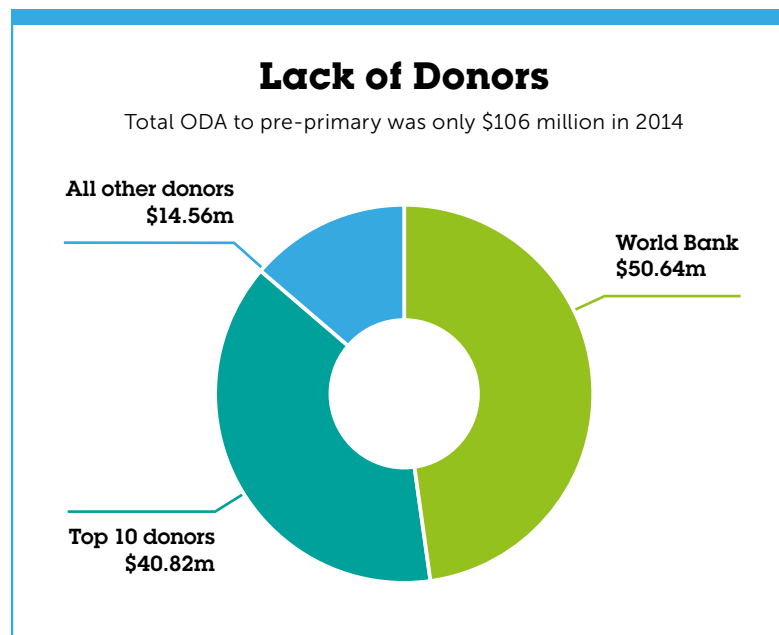
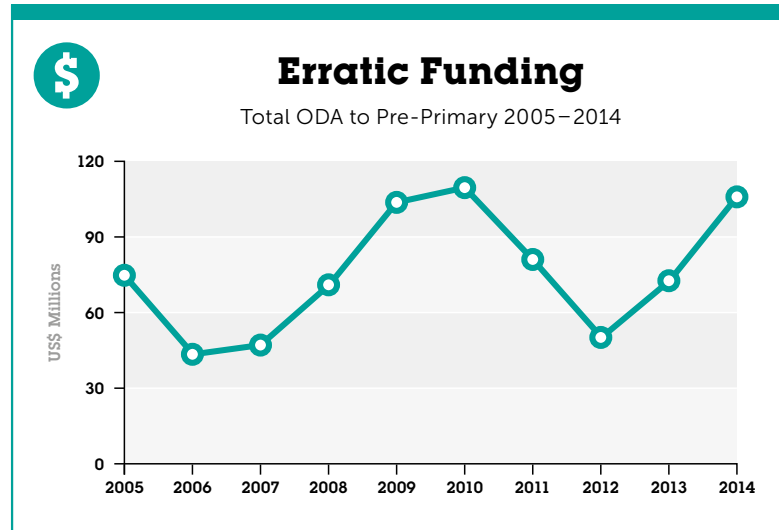
With an estimated annual cost of \$31.2 billion to achieve universal access to one year of pre-primary education, higher prioritisation and increased donor support is essential to making quality pre-primary education accessible to all children.⁵ **Insufficient and unpredictable funding continues to be a significant barrier**



to universal access to pre-primary programmes and seriously undermines investments in primary education.

In 2014, pre-primary education **received just 1.15% of total aid to education**, while higher education received more than 40%. This distribution is in opposition to the evidence on where the greatest economic and equity returns in education are made. Students accessing higher education typically come from more advantaged backgrounds, whereas pre-primary programmes benefit poor and marginalised children the most, creating greater, more widespread gains over time.

In addition to insufficient funding, pre-primary education is also **under-prioritised** or **excluded** from education aid strategies. Even some countries that fund pre-primary initiatives exclude specific pre-primary targets or clear articulations of the impact of pre-primary education on primary school outcomes in their overall strategy. **Lack of data** on pre-primary funding is also a serious hindrance to implementing and evaluating pre-primary initiatives. For example, in the past decade the United States only reported its funding to pre-primary education for one year – 2010. Lack of consistently updated and available funding information impedes accurate assessment of the overall challenge, and inhibits policy creation and targeted resource allocation.



All donors should:

Significantly increase resources for pre-primary education

Target pre-primary aid to countries most in need

Clearly articulate support for pre-primary interventions in donor strategy documents

Improve quantity and quality of pre-primary funding data

Top Ten Country Donors — Who Makes The Cut?

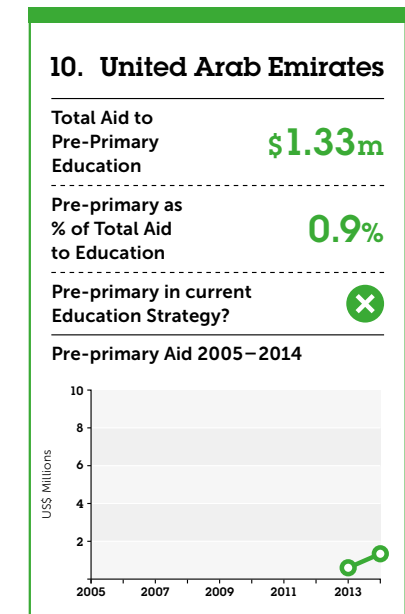
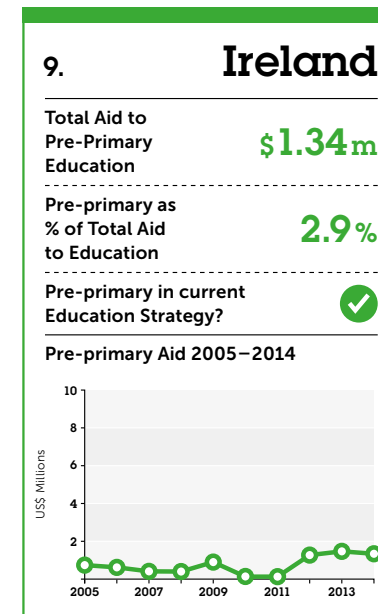
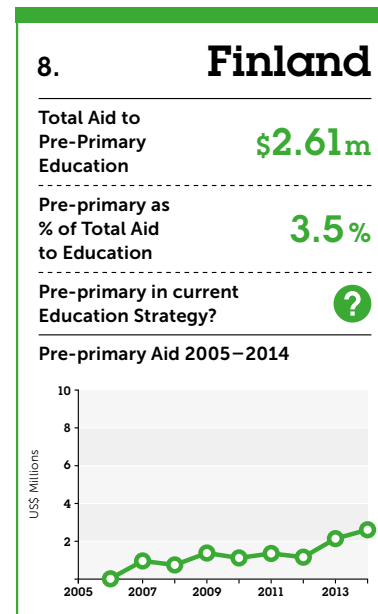
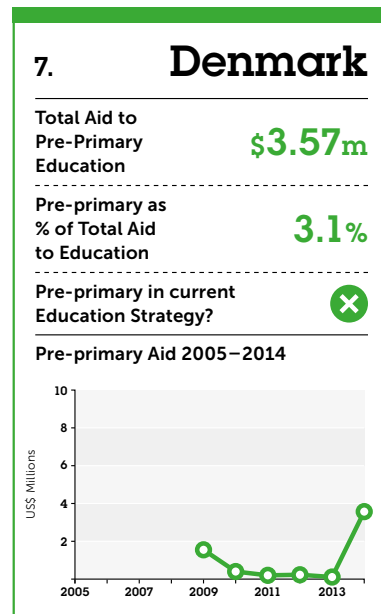
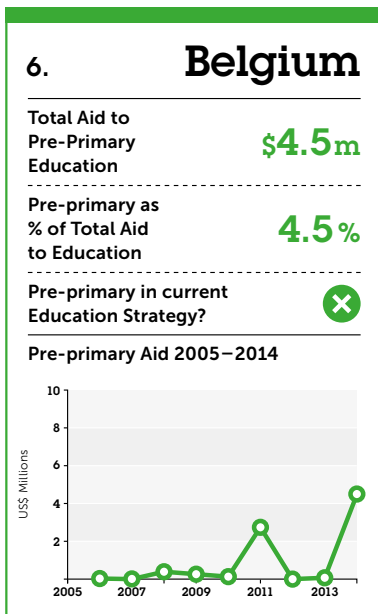
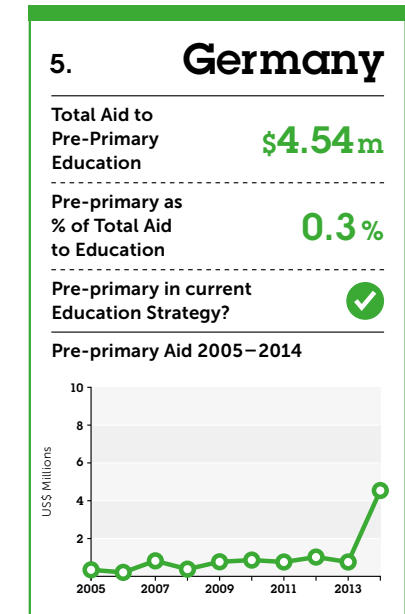
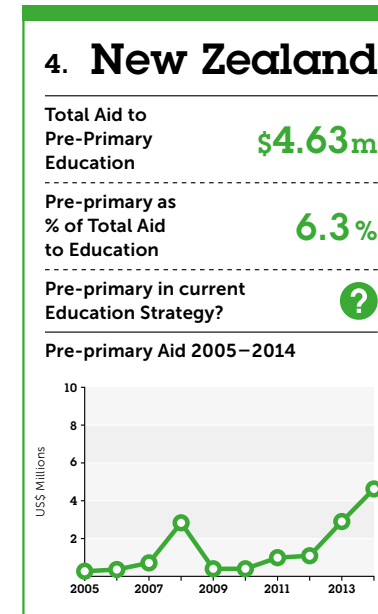
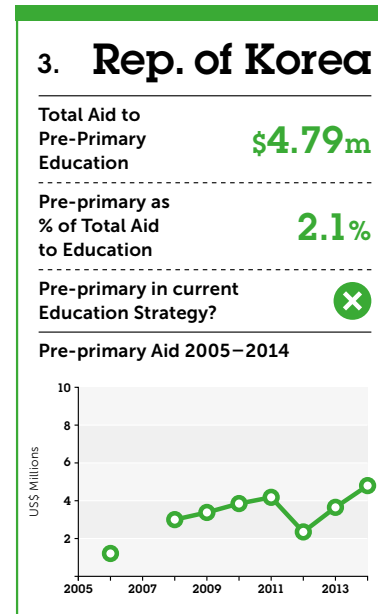
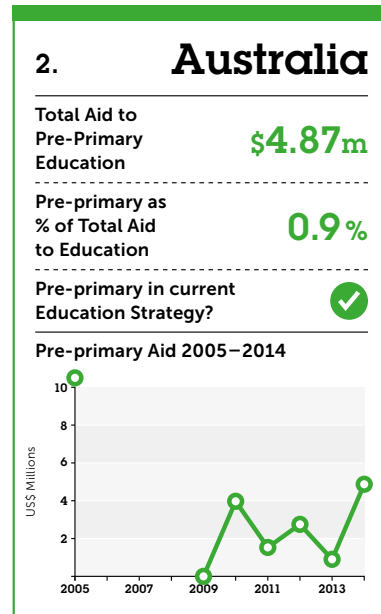
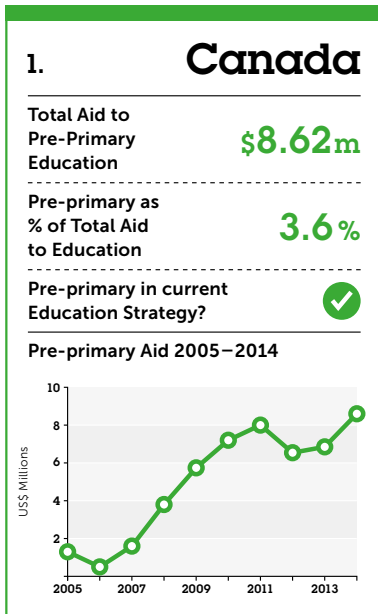
These **ten countries gave 38.5% of total aid to pre-primary in 2014 and 89% of bilateral aid**, underscoring the extreme lack of prioritisation of pre-primary funding by most donor countries. **Nine of the top ten countries increased their funding for pre-primary education between 2013 and 2014, potentially demonstrating a growing commitment to pre-primary.**

Relative to other education spending however, even the top ten donors fall short, investing in pre-primary least of all sectors by far. In 2014, the top ten donors gave 1.7% of their education aid to pre-primary, but almost 60% to tertiary education. Further, the past decade has shown that pre-primary funding from most of the top ten donors has been insufficient, irregular and unpredictable, with six of the ten countries not even providing complete data for their funding flows since 2005.

Notably the top ten does not include three of the top five donors to primary education — the United States, United Kingdom and Norway.⁶ This is surprising, as these investments would clearly strengthen later investments in primary schooling, helping ensure positive primary outcomes from those programmes. Ignoring pre-primary is a potentially big strategic misstep that could ultimately undermine important investments in primary.

Top Ten Bilateral Donors to Pre-Primary Education 2014

1.	Canada	\$8.62m
2.	Australia	\$4.87m
3.	Rep. of Korea	\$4.79m
4.	New Zealand	\$4.63m
5.	Germany	\$4.54m
6.	Belgium	\$4.5m
7.	Denmark	\$3.57m
8.	Finland	\$2.61m
9.	Ireland	\$1.34m
10.	UAE	\$1.33m



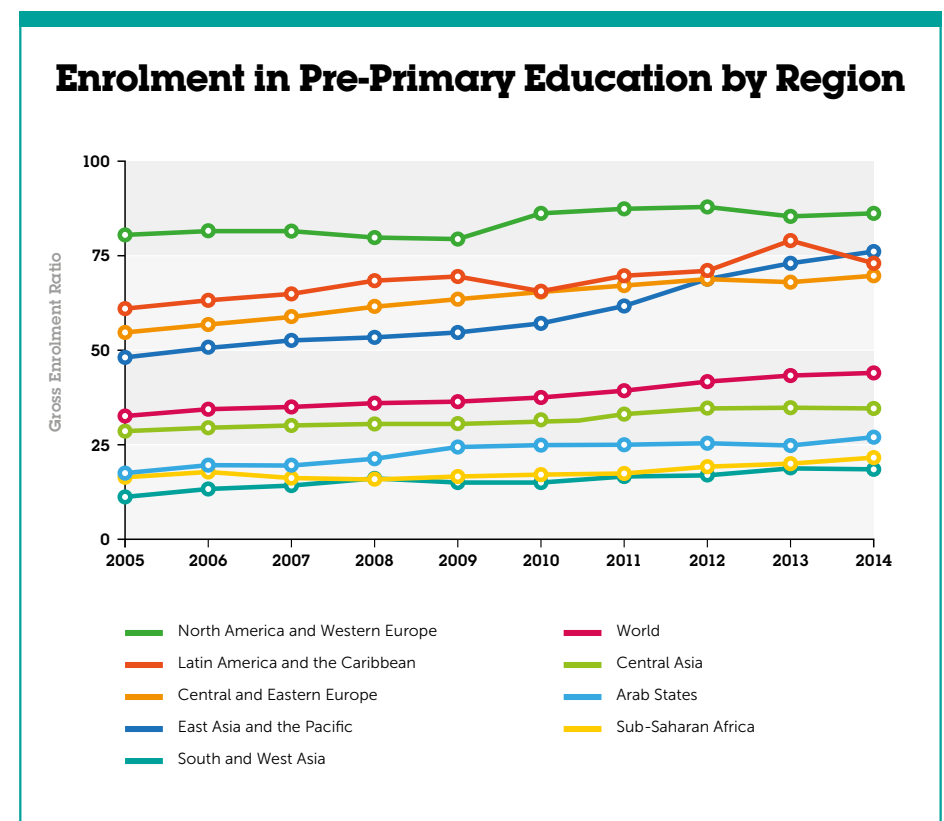
Extremely slow progress and disparities between aid and need

Progress has flat lined where most needed

While global enrolment in pre-primary education has increased significantly over the past few decades, progress has been slow and uneven, with only marginal improvements seen in many regions of the world. The global enrolment ratio reached only 44% in 2014, meaning more than half of the world's children are still excluded from the benefits of pre-primary education.

Progress has been seen primarily in Asia – with the biggest growth in enrolment in East Asia and the Pacific – but has been markedly uneven around the world over the last decade, with most regions experiencing only small gains in their enrolment. **Sub-Saharan Africa had 16.4% enrolment in 2005 and only 21.6% in 2014, the Arab States went from 17.5% to just 27% and South & West Asia went from 11.2% to only 18.5% – all significantly lower than the global average.** The regions with the lowest enrolment in 2005 remained the lowest in 2014, and consequently the most disadvantaged children continue to be left out. Progress in North America and Western Europe has also been slow – going from 80% to 86% in a decade.

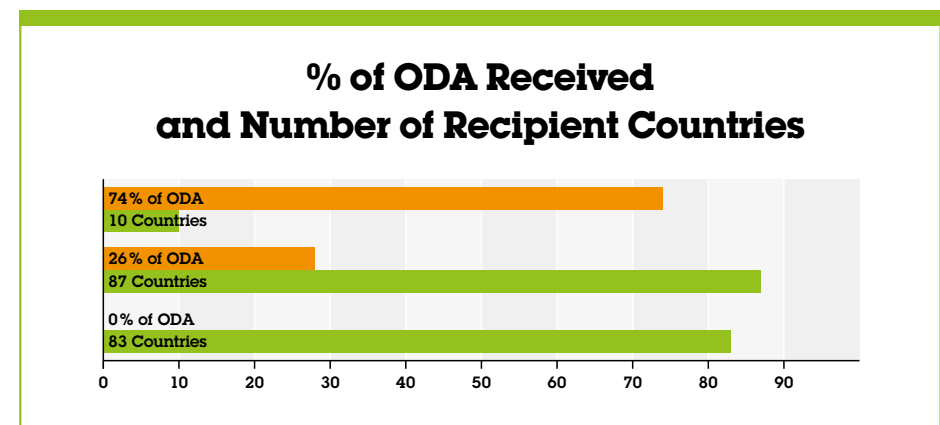
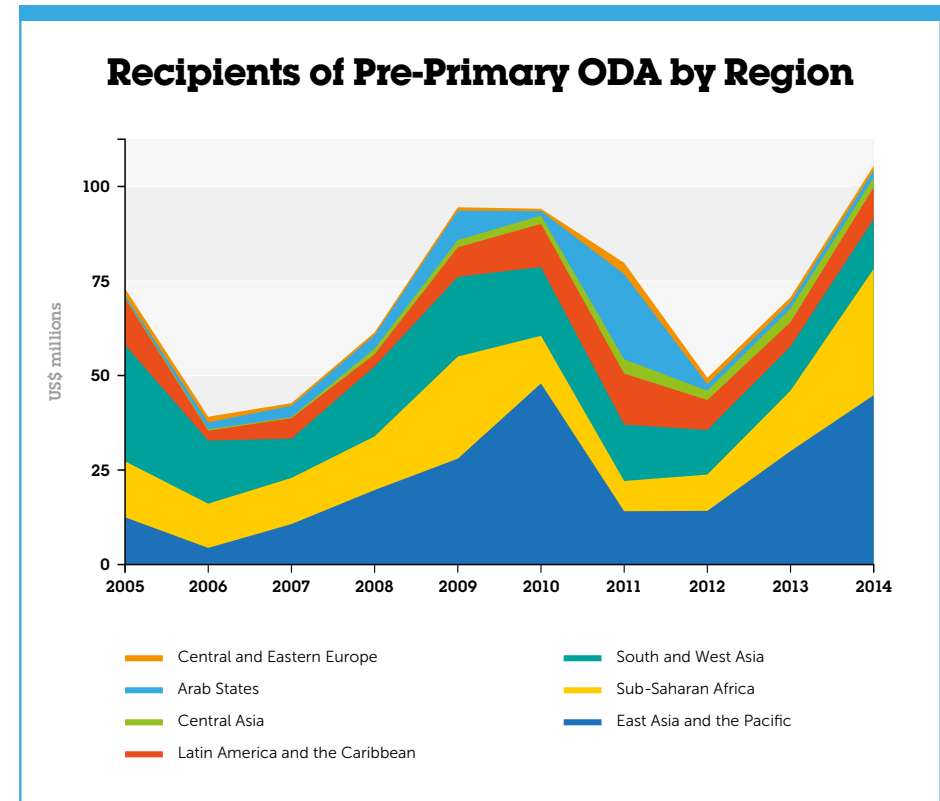
The graph, right, demonstrates clearly the **lack of significant progress** made in most regions and the **uneven improvements in enrolment rates**. Aid to pre-primary education – only \$106 million in 2014 – has been so inadequate that, at current rates, very few countries stand a chance to achieve universal pre-primary by 2030. Increasing access to pre-primary programmes will require a serious commitment to greater investment and prioritisation of pre-primary education by donors and country governments alike.



Countries most in need are left out

The proportion of aid to pre-primary education in each region **differs significantly from the need**. A large portion of aid does not go to the regions most in need and almost entirely ignores the Arab States. Despite having by far the lowest enrolment rates, in 2014 South & West Asia received only 13.2% of aid to pre-primary education, while the Middle East received just 1.8%. In comparison, East Asia and the Pacific received nearly 42%, despite significantly higher enrolment rates. The graph, right, reveals how this imbalance between need and aid flows has remained consistent throughout the past decade; even when funding to pre-primary education rose, **the proportion of aid to each region stayed roughly the same**, consistently underfunding the regions that need aid most. If the aim is to reach the world's poorest and most marginalised children, funding must be increased and targeted to match the greatest need.

Additionally, only 10 countries — none in the Middle East — received **74%** of the total aid to pre-primary education in 2014. 87 countries received the remaining 26% — less than \$27 million total — and **83 countries received absolutely zero pre-primary aid**. The majority of funding reaches only a very small number of countries and is completely insufficient to make real progress at expanding pre-primary access. Moreover, the small amount of aid available is **not systematically directed to the regions with the lowest enrolment levels** where it would have the greatest impact, leaving many of the world's poorest and most marginalised children completely excluded from access to pre-primary education.



Recommendations

With early childhood development included explicitly in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the scientific and economic evidence on early interventions clearly established, the global moment is finally here to make significant leaps forward in early childhood development. As one of the most cost-effective and successful strategies for levelling the playing field for disadvantaged and marginalised children, pre-primary education must be central to the focus on ensuring equitable access to quality education opportunities for all children. Donors must do more to prioritise pre-primary in both strategic planning and financing.

Donors must significantly increase their prioritisation and financial support for pre-primary education programmes.

Pre-primary education has consistently remained the least funded education sector, despite the critical role pre-primary programmes play in preparing children for success in school later on. With the enormous estimated annual funding gap of US\$31.2 billion to achieve

universal pre-primary education by 2030, countries cannot do it alone. In order to achieve this goal and ensure all children have the best start in life, donors must urgently increase their funding to pre-primary education.

Specifically, the top donors to primary education need to invest more in pre-primary education to bolster their own investments.

Children who attend pre-primary programmes are better prepared for the transition to primary school and, as a result, are more likely to stay in school and achieve better grades and are less likely to repeat a grade or drop out. Higher education is currently the most prioritised sector in education aid, but donors must increase the proportion of funding focused on pre-primary education for a more coherent overall approach. By failing to invest in pre-primary, the top donors to primary education stand to undermine their own investments and fail to reach the most marginalised children.

Funding for pre-primary must be better targeted to countries most in need, particularly in the Middle East, South & West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

The miniscule amount of funding currently available to pre-primary programmes means that only a select few countries receive aid for pre-primary interventions. In addition to increasing funding for pre-primary, donors need to better target this aid so that it is directed to countries with the lowest enrolment rates, in order to reach those children most likely to be left behind. As disadvantaged children benefit most from ECD interventions, targeting aid to the most marginalised is also a more efficient use of available resources.

Donors need to clearly articulate their support for pre-primary education in their education and overall aid strategies.

Clearly articulated strategies which value the role of pre-primary education are an essential complement to scaled-up financing. The strategic aid policies of many education donors do not acknowledge early childhood as a critical stage in the education of a child, and even fewer list pre-primary explicitly as a priority. With the adoption of SDG4, donor strategies should clearly align and articulate access to pre-primary

programmes as a priority — and explicitly recognise the contributions of early learning and pre-primary education to their overall education goals.

Both the quantity and quality of pre-primary funding data (and overall early childhood development) must be improved.

Transparent, reliable and regular data on all pre-primary investments is essential to evidenced-based policy-making and scaled-up financing. The current funding data on the overall package of ECD services is poor and no data exists on comprehensive ECD financing that includes all of its components — pre-primary education, health, nutrition and social protection. Public funding reports are not always up to date and some donors could be investing but publish no statistics on their aid to pre-primary education. This lack of data and lack of transparency will continue to hamper efforts to accurately track progress of pre-primary provision and calculate how many children are not being reached. Regular, accurate data on funding to a defined package of ECD programmes — pre-primary education to start — as well as better coordination between donors will be essential to ensuring all children have a healthy and equitable start.

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Theirworld is an innovative charity which helps children to unlock their potential. Through research, pilot projects and campaigning, Theirworld is at the forefront of testing and shaping new ideas to help give children around the world the best possible start in life.

Best Start

Best Start is a global campaign for Early Childhood Development led by children's charity Theirworld as part of a wider initiative supported by the [Conrad N Hilton Foundation](#) and others. The campaign seeks to make the case for greater global investment in Early Childhood Development to ensure that all girls and boys can have access to the best start in life. For more information go to www.theirworld.org

How do we measure donor aid and access to pre-primary education?

This scorecard measures donor government aid to "early childhood education" in developing countries using Official Development Assistance (ODA), which is aid funding from official government agencies to developing countries.⁷ ODA data specifically for pre-primary education funding is unavailable — a persistent problem in research on pre-primary education — so funding for early childhood education was used as a substitute. This demonstrates clearly **how available data on pre-primary aid remains incomplete and insufficient**. Enrolment figures were taken from UNESCO Institute for Statistics data, which offers gross enrolment ratios (GER) specifically for pre-primary education. GER measures the number of students of any age enrolled in pre-primary education as a percentage of the total children of the official school age population.

References

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3. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. [Gross Enrolment Ratio by Level of Education](#). Data retrieved 12 June 2016.
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5. Education for All Global Monitoring Report. (2015). [Pricing the Right to Education: The Costs of Reaching New Targets by 2030](#). Policy Paper 18: July 2015 Update. (Pp. 5).
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7. OECD DAC Creditor Reporting System. Data retrieved 9 May 2016.

Cover A child plays during the Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme in Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya. Photograph by Adriane Ohanesian.

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