

OMEP WORLD ASSEMBLY DECLARATION, 28 August 2021

Supporting a holistic approach in early childhood care and education (ECCE)

We, all members of the World Executive Committee of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP), Presidents and delegates of the National Committees present at the 73rd World Assembly, renew our call to states, international and multilateral organizations involved in the management of public policies, **to consider the *principle of comprehensiveness of human rights, for the effective realization of the right to early childhood care and education (ECCE)***, within implemented responses and recovery plans from the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Building on our previous 2020 World Declaration, **we affirm that:**

Our house is on fire. Due to the Pandemic, the world is going through a health, economic and social crisis that, together with natural disasters and the consequences of climate change, may prevent the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. COVID-19 deepened the situation of pre-existing social and economic vulnerability; there is an increase in inequalities, poverty and misery that particularly affects women with children. The economic crisis also affects the political stability of countries and puts peace and coexistence at risk, deepens violence, wars and famines that have led to an increase in migration and requests for refuge.

Children are hidden victims. The problems of children are neglected and unnoticed. Public policies are constructed from an adult-centric and strongly health perspective, characterized by fragmentation and inequalities of access and quality to the ECCE. Childhood experiences and social interactions are altered as an effect of the pandemic and confinements, limiting the possibilities of learning, play and movement. Attendance at ECCE centers and primary health care has been restricted, neglecting chronic diseases, common childhood illnesses, disabilities, vaccination schedules and nutrition needs.

OMEP recognizes that:

ECCE centers are meeting places. ECCE is fundamental for the development and well-being of children and their families, not only for the acquisition of knowledge but also for emotional and physical development, socialization, play, as well as comprehensive health care. The health emergency highlighted the relevant comprehensive protection role played by ECCE. Therefore, the recognition of its social and educational value has been expanded.

Early childhood educators have demonstrated great ability, commitment, and agility to develop innovative responses to ensure that no child is left behind. They have worked to influence policy decisions and to find and create alternative learning resources and environments, in order to ensure the continuity of the links between children's homes and ECCE services that sustains children's learning. Educators and civil society organizations have supported governments and ECCE systems to enable reopening plans and support children and families during temporary closures of ECCE centers.

Public policies for ECCE are fragmented. In most countries of the world, ECCE is fragmented by age, governance, and other variables. The persistent divisions between "care" and "education" services do not consider the *best interests of the child*. Education and care are inseparable social practices.

The ECCE must be inclusive, acceptable and adaptable. Fragmentation affects the holistic nature of ECCE and risks the prioritization of work-related care and/or premature schoolification in the search for supposed academic achievements over child-centred, play-based approaches. Policies that prioritize ECCE as work-related care respond to the needs of adults linked to the economy, labor market, increase in poverty and exclusion, among other factors. Overschooling conceives that the main function of early

childhood education is preparation for later schooling stages. ECCE must be acceptable, that is, appropriate to the developmental characteristics of early childhood, realizing their right to play, generating environments of well-being, offering security for the exploration of the environment, promoting social interactions and affective bonds. ECCE must also be adaptable and respectful of the families and cultures in which children grow up. Therefore, an enriched education must be offered that enables participation, creativity, art, imagination, fantasy, exploration, freedom of expression, in order to build humanity in pleasant and welcoming environments in which children and families enjoy coexistence.

Education cannot act alone. Comprehensive protection of human rights in early childhood requires wide-ranging public policies based on the conviction that childhood development must be holistic. States should design and implement more systematic, comprehensive, and coordinated approaches and processes to develop acceptable and adaptable responses to the situation of different children's experiences and the cultural, economic and social resources of their families and communities. The role of the ECCE is fundamental, but it must be strengthened by the action of other areas, such as health, social protection, justice, economy, city planning and architecture, articulated by a common sustainable vision.

OMEP URGES STATES, INTERNATIONAL AND MULTILATERAL ORGANIZATIONS to consider young children and their families as a priority in building responses and recovery plans from the COVID-19 pandemic. This requires public policies that:

- Guarantee the comprehensive protection of the human rights of early childhood, considering the principle of the *best interests of the child* in all measures that may affect his or her present and future.
- Overcome fragmentation in management and budgets for ECCE, building powerful policies with a coordinated, comprehensive and multisectoral approach.
- Ensure sufficient budgets so that the austerity measures adopted do not compromise necessary funding for ECCE.
- Guarantee the participation of educators, families, women, and communities, as well as the consideration of children's perspectives, in the construction of responses and recovery plans.
- Expand the accessibility and quality of ECCE centers, ensuring complementary programs that sustain a real inclusion for every child.