

March 2019 | Country Brief

Ecuador

Professionalizing the Workforce Supporting Infants and Toddlers from Birth to 3

Country Brief Snapshot

In 2006, Ecuador enacted a ten-year education plan that included a policy to universalize early childhood education for children under the age of 5. The new policy, which calls for equitable and quality early childhood education (ECE), highlighted the importance of supporting children during the early years. Following this development, Ecuador adopted the *Holistic ECD Public Policy* which calls for investment in the physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development of children in their first years of life, as well as *Misión Ternura*, an integrated strategy that promotes ECD across the health, education, and protection sectors. As these policies and strategies highlight the importance of the early childhood workforce, the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion (MIES) has taken steps to strengthen the skills of those that work in childcare centers and home visiting programs. However, policymakers have grappled with challenges related to the quality of these programs, informed by evidence suggesting that staff delivering them have limited knowledge of child development. This brief highlights the government of Ecuador's approach to professionalizing these workers through pre- and in-service training that aims to improve their theoretical knowledge and practical skills and allows them to advance in their profession. It also analyzes the enabling conditions and barriers to implementation, as well as policy lessons for other countries looking to support the early childhood workforce.

Introduction: Ecuador's Focus on Early Childhood Development¹

Ecuador has made significant strides in increasing access to early childhood development (ECD) services and improving the health and development outcomes of its youngest children. In 2006, Ecuador universalized early childhood education for children under the age of 5 by constructing new schools and hiring new teachers to expand the public supply of educational services and eliminating school fees to stimulate demand.² From 2008 to 2014, spending on early childhood education increased from 0.28 percent to 0.64 percent of GDP.³ From 2010 to 2017, the gross enrollment rates in pre-primary education increased from 46 percent to 72 percent⁴ and the percentage of teachers trained in pre-primary education increased from 59 percent to 83 percent during that same period.⁵ In addition, the Government launched the *Holistic ECD Public Policy* for 2013-2017 that prioritized multi-sectoral infant and

child development and worked to ensure that children in their early years had access to child development programs. The Government also launched *Misión Ternura*, a multi-sectoral strategy that prioritizes services in the first 1,000 days of life and worked to increase the sustainability of investments in ECD.

Three key ministries oversee ECD services in Ecuador: The Ministry of Education, Ministry of Public Health, and the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion (MIES).⁶ MIES has focused on increasing the social and economic inclusion of Ecuador's most vulnerable populations, and in 2013,⁷ it increased its attention to early childhood development services and created a sub-secretariat for holistic ECD that is responsible for planning, coordinating, and evaluating ECD policies and programs.⁸

MIES is responsible for two main services that serve low-income children under 3: childcare centers and a home visiting service.⁹ Childcare centers, *los Centros Infantiles del Buen Vivir (CDI)*, primarily serve Ecuadorian children from low-income families ages 1 to 3 years, approximately 22 percent of whom were enrolled in these centers in 2018 (some at-risk children ages 0 to 11 months are also supported). CDIs¹⁰ provide care, feeding, preventative health, and early stimulation/education services.¹¹ The majority of these centers are MIES-financed and operate in partnership with GADS (*gobiernos autónomos descentralizados*), local, autonomous, and decentralized governments that run their own ECD services but have agreements with MIES. Some childcare centers are also operated by NGOs that have agreements with MIES, which is responsible for the monitoring and evaluation of childcare services.¹²

Creciendo con Nuestros Hijos (CNH) is a family education/home visiting modality for children under the age of 3 and their caregivers. CNH educators make weekly home visits to families with children under the age of two and weekly group visits in community spaces to families with children ages 2-3. During these visits, educators provide services that include nutrition advice, play and early stimulation, referrals and child protection, family counseling, and other parenting support.¹³ Similar to childcare centers, home visiting programs operate through agreements between MIES and GADS, and in early 2018, about 50 percent of children between the ages of 0 to 3 from low-income families received CNH services. Children from low-income families can simultaneously participate in the services offered by childcare centers and home visiting programs.

Policy Challenges

Although childcare centers and home visiting programs offer a wide range of services to support vulnerable children in Ecuador, several challenges threaten effective delivery. For example, childcare centers experience high child-to-caregiver ratios and a lack of adequate resources (e.g. learning materials, basic infrastructure). Moreover, childcare workers have consistently scored low on KIDI (Knowledge of Infant Development

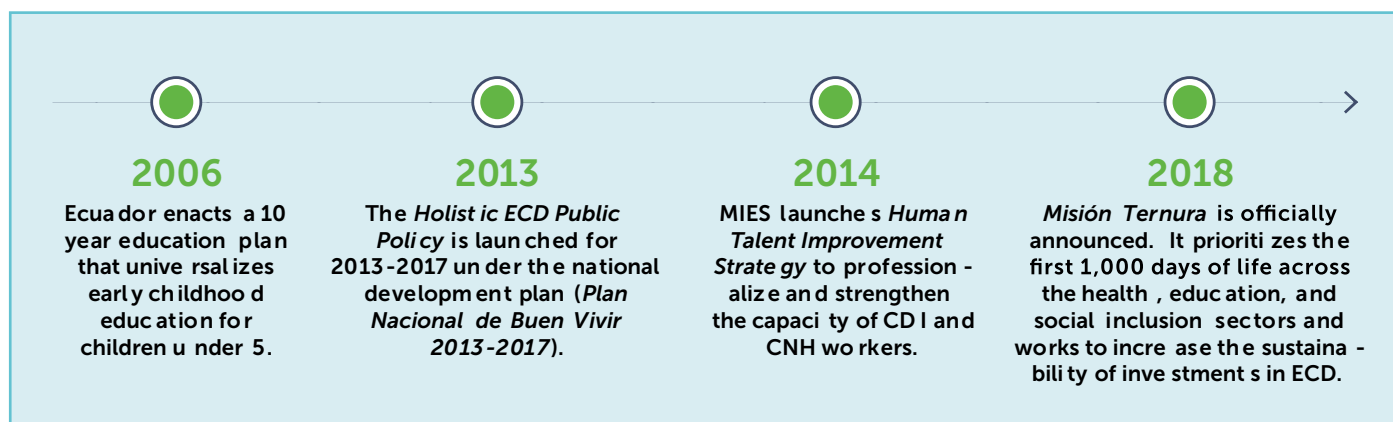
Inventory) evaluations meant to assess their knowledge of the motor, social, and cognitive development norms of children ages 0-5.^{14,15} Childcare and home visiting workers both receive limited mentorship and supervision from senior staff members and, although both programs aim to be pro-poor, there remains a significant gap in the number of children being reached relative to the number of children in need.¹⁶

Policy Responses

Through the *Holistic ECD Public Policy* and *Misión Ternura*, the Ecuadorian government has made efforts to provide workers with continuous training and support, both virtually and in person, and to provide workers with mentorship and feedback from their supervisors. To address the high child-to-caregiver ratios, in 2013

the government announced plans to hire an additional 3,000 workers and, in recent years, has announced plans to continue expanding the number of child development services available in all parts of the country.^{17,18} Figure 1 provides an overview of some of the key policy developments.

Figure 1: Timeline of Recent ECD Initiatives



The CDI and CNH Workforce

Childcare Centers (CDI)

Childcare centers are primarily staffed by coordinators (*coordinadora*) and care assistants (*asistente de cuidado*). There is generally one coordinator per center supervising care assistants who themselves are typically responsible for 10 children. Coordinators are expected to have a university degree in early childhood education and at least one year of experience directing or coordinating ECD activities.¹⁹ In 2015, coordinators working in centers that had an agreement with MIES earned on

average US\$534 per month.²⁰ Although newly established qualifications for the care assistant role specify a technical or university degree, most care assistants only have a high school or secondary school degree. To address this problem, the government created a technical career and in-service training program that allows staff members to earn a technical or university degree while working. On average, care assistants earn US\$434 per month.²¹

Home Visiting (CNH)

Home visiting services are delivered by an educator (*educador*) who is assigned to a group, or cluster of families. According to 2016 data provided by MIES, there was 1 educator per 60 children.²² Educators' responsibilities include carrying out hour-long individual weekly visits, 2-hour long weekly group sessions, and up to 3-hour

long family/community meetings. As with care assistants, educators are required to have a technical or university degree, although most only hold a secondary school degree and are hired directly by MIES and supervised by local governments.²³ On average, they earn US\$522 per month.²⁴

A Promising Approach: Expanding and Professionalizing the ECD Workforce

Professionalization of the childcare and home visiting workers under the Human Talent Improvement Strategy (2014)

In light of the challenges in ECD service delivery, the Government of Ecuador enacted the *Holistic ECD Public Policy (Política Pública del Desarrollo Infantil Integral)* for 2013-2017, under the national development plan (*Plan Nacional de Buen Vivir 2013-2017*).²⁵ The *Holistic ECD Public Policy's* primary objective is to ensure the adequate development of children under the age of 3 by investing in their physical, cognitive,

and socio-emotional development in their first years of life.

Under the national development plan, the *Human Talent Improvement Strategy (2014)*, aimed to professionalize and strengthen the capacity of workers in childcare centers and home visiting programs. The strategy included the following components:^{26, 27}

Childcare Centers:

- *Hiring new CDI coordinators with a background in early childhood development* to ensure that qualified professionals run childcare centers. In 2013, MIES hired 3,000 university graduates in ECD as coordinators and offered those who lacked higher education the option of working as care assistants while earning a technical degree in ECD.²⁸
- *Professionalizing/upskilling existing CDI assistants* by creating a new technical career path in holistic ECD.

Launched in 2014 by MIES in partnership with public higher education institutions (under the National Secretary of Higher Education, Senescyt), its goal was to enroll 10,000 care assistants by 2017 to ensure that trained staff provide all services. The required courses combine theory with practical application and can be completed on the job.²⁹

- *Continuous training* for coordinators and care assistants through study circles (*círculos de estudio*).

These study circles allow childcare center workers to strengthen the knowledge they have acquired in their professional lives by promoting self-reflection and

evaluation, encouraging open dialogue, and increasing collaboration among peers.³⁰

Childcare Centers and Home Visiting Program:

- *Certification of professional competences*, which involves a two-month theoretical and practical evaluation workshop that is accessible to care assistants, coordinators, and educators. The workshop is conducted both face-to-face and virtually and covers topics such as early childhood care, nutrition, health, early stimulation, and engagement with families. Upon successful completion of the workshop, participants receive a certificate of work competences.³¹
- *Continuous training* for childcare center and home visiting staff to be provided via an online training platform. The platform can be used by coordinators, care assistants, and educators and allows participants to access a virtual classroom with training plans, online publications, and interactive resources. It also highlights general and specific competences, capacities, and performance standards to guide workers in achieving their professional development goals.^{32, 33, 34}

Workforce Support under *Misión Ternura*, 2017-21

Building on these efforts to expand and professionalize the workforce, in 2017, *Toda una vida*, a national development plan for 2017 to 2021, was launched to improve the health of children under five.³⁵ As part of this development plan, *Misión Ternura*, a multi-sectoral ECD strategy that had been under development for ten years, was announced in early 2018 and included a US\$180 million investment in ECD. *Misión Ternura's* primary objective is to create a national ECD law (*Ley de Primera Infancia*) along with corresponding regulations to ensure sustainability, coherence, and sufficiency of investment in ECD.³⁶ It prioritizes the first 1,000 days of life and focuses on promoting breastfeeding, reducing stunting rates, strengthening family and parental education, and furthering efforts to professionalize CNH and CDI workers.

The workforce-focused initiatives include providing competency certifications and continuous trainings in topics such as early stimulation and language development to those who lack higher education in ECD. It also calls for the expansion of CNH programs, which are expected to reach an additional 37,800 children with 891 educators over three phases. *Misión Ternura* also offers a continuous training model that operates in parallel to the *Holistic ECD Public Policy's* virtual trainings. This training model uses an "experiential learning" approach that features online trainings, in-person feedback, and virtual tutorials.³⁷ Figure 2 provides a summary of initiatives under the *Human Talent Improvement Strategy* and *Misión Ternura*.

Figure 2: Summary of Initiatives to Support and Expand the Early Childhood Workforce Under the Human Talent Improvement Strategy and *Misión Ternura*

	Coordinators	Care assistants	Educators
Human Talent Improvement Strategy			
Hiring new workers into the field: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hired 3,000 new university graduates in ECD as coordinators in 2013 and allows existing workers who lack formal higher education to work as care assistants while pursuing a technical degree in ECD. 	X	X	
Certification of professional competences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grants a certificate of labor competences to childcare center and home visiting workers who successfully complete a theoretical-practical workshop on topics that include health and early stimulation. 	X	X	X
Creating a technical career path in Holistic ECD: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Created a technical degree in ECD that existing care assistants are required to complete. The degree includes ECD courses that combine theory with practical application and can be completed while working. 		X	
Continuous trainings via study circles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotes a collaborative learning methodology that emphasizes reflection, dialogue, action, and evaluation. Allows childcare center workers to come together, share experiences, and exchange ideas on how to improve the quality of their services. 	X	X	
Continuous trainings via an online training platform: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows participants to access a virtual classroom with training plans, online publications, and interactive resources to assist workers with their teaching. Highlights the competences, capacities, and performance standards needed to advance in the field to guide workers to their professional development goals. 	X	X	X
<i>Misión Ternura</i>			
Expansion of home visiting programs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Calls for the expansion of home visiting programs to reach an additional 37,800 children with 891 educators over three phases. 			X
Continuous training program offered online: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses an “experiential learning” approach that features in-person feedback, online trainings, and virtual tutorials. 			X

Reflections on Implementation: Enablers and Barriers

The following section reflects on the enabling environment in Ecuador for supporting the early childhood workforce and the experience of applying a new approach to support these personnel. It highlights factors which have facilitated the introduction of new policies and programs, as well as those that have created barriers to implementation.



Enabling Conditions

- **Existing policy and legal frameworks that focus on ECD** – Since 2006, the government of Ecuador has placed ECD at the center of policy discussions and highlighted the need for inclusive early childhood education and a strong ECD workforce. This has allowed for the development of competences and standards as well as the expansion of in-service training opportunities within CDI and CNH programs.
- **Increased ECD spending** – From 2008 to 2014, social spending on ECD has more than doubled. In addition to allowing CDI and CNH programs to reach more children, this investment also expanded the number of services offered and strengthened the pre-and in-training options available to the workforce.



Barriers to Implementation

- **High turnover rates and low retention** – MIES is unable to match the pay offered by the Ministry of Education, which follows a different scale of salaries for its employees. As a result, workers transition out of positions under MIES into the education sector, which creates a shortage in the number of qualified professionals working in CNH and CDIs.
- **Insufficient data on process quality** – Most available data focus on the educational background or the training a worker has but offer limited insight into other factors which affect quality, such as whether they can effectively communicate with the families they are serving or if they use harsh methods to discipline the children under their care. As such, existing data fails to provide a comprehensive view of the challenges facing the CNH and CDI workforces.
- **Limited access to technology/ICT** – In order to use the training platform, workers must have access to a computer with reliable internet access. This requirement limits those who live in remote areas with poor internet access and those who do not have access to a computer from benefiting.

Policy Lessons

As policymakers look to support the early childhood workforce in expanding service offerings and improving the quality of programs for children 0–3, the following are lessons to consider from Ecuador’s experience.



Standardizing competence requirements and pre-service training is essential for ensuring that early childhood workers have a common set of skills. In recent years, MIES has taken steps to ensure that all incoming personnel receive the same training by issuing technical certificates and university degrees to those who complete in-service trainings on ECD-related topics. At the same time, in allowing underqualified staff members to continue working as they attain these skills, efforts have been made to ensure that existing workers are not pushed out of their roles in the process. Flexibly introducing common standards and training reduces the likelihood that staff enter the profession without the requisite knowledge and skills while ensuring that existing members of the workforce have opportunities to gain them as well.



Pre-service training should be complemented by ongoing support, including mentoring:

While pre-service training programs are an important way of ensuring that staff members have a common set of knowledge and skills, many CDI and CNH workers in Ecuador do not have formal tertiary education and lack the knowledge and skills needed to effectively perform their tasks. Ongoing support in the form of in-service trainings can help to bridge this gap in knowledge and skills and allow workers to apply the knowledge they have learned in the classroom to their roles. Mentoring can also ensure that workers have the support they need to incorporate what they have learned to support diverse populations while study circles promote collaboration, reflection, and dialogue among different personnel to strengthen the quality of early childhood services. These supportive mechanisms not only provide staff members that lack a formal degree in ECD with the skills they need, but also pave the way for all staff members to advance in their careers.



Flexible in-service training programs can allow staff with limited formal education to receive the training they need to professionalize. Ecuador’s virtual training platform allows participants to move at their own pace and continue working while receiving training. Online support presented in a user-friendly format allows staff members with limited formal education to understand the content shared and incorporate it into their professions. Catering to a diverse set of learning styles and needs, and ensuring access to technology among personnel can maximize the efficiency of the training programs and ensure that those using these platforms are able to successfully utilize them and reap their benefits.

Endnotes

- 1 We extend our gratitude to the following individuals who offered invaluable insight as key informants: Cecilia Vaca Jones (Bernard van Leer Foundation), Julia Johannsen (Inter-American Development Bank), and officials from the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion in Ecuador.
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EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE INITIATIVE

The Early Childhood Workforce Initiative is a global, multi-sectoral effort to mobilize countries and international partners to support and empower those who work with families and children under age 8. This initiative is jointly led by Results for Development (R4D) and the International Step by Step Association (ISSA), and supported by a consortium of funders including Bernard van Leer Foundation, Open Society Foundations, and ELMA Foundation.

