

March 2019 | Country Brief

Georgia

Training Early Childhood Intervention Workers to Close a Workforce Gap

Country Brief Snapshot

In Georgia, services identifying and serving young children at high risk of developmental delays, malnutrition, disabilities, chronic illnesses and atypical behaviors have historically not existed. In order to address this gap, civil society organizations have worked to develop and expand early childhood intervention (ECI) services in Georgia for children from birth to seven years of age with a specific focus on the birth to three age group. These programs were first offered by a single NGO in 2006 and are now administered by 22 organizations. Services delivered by NGOs have been strengthened and institutionalized with support from the government including through policies such as the *Early Childhood Intervention State Action Plan (2018-2020)*¹. While recent policy changes indicate commitment to improving the reach, access and quality of ECI service provision, there is a shortage of workers for services supporting children with developmental delays and disabilities under three years of age. This brief highlights how partnership between the government, civil society and universities led to the development and implementation of a pre- and in-service training program for the ECI workforce and the consideration of accreditation mechanisms for building the capacity of ECI services and the workforce. This note also explores enabling conditions, barriers for implementation and policy lessons for other countries that may engage in similar efforts.

Introduction: Expansion of Early Childhood Intervention Services²

In Georgia, like in many other former Soviet Union countries, services identifying and serving young children at high risk of developmental delays, malnutrition, disabilities, chronic illnesses and atypical behaviors have not historically existed. In response, ECI services, which seek to improve the development of vulnerable children, enable them to achieve their full potential, and promote their inclusion in preschool, school and communities, and have been developed and expanded in Georgia since 2006. ECI³ is a process that includes the identification, assessment, planning and provision of services for

children from birth to seven years, with an emphasis on the birth to three age group, along with their families and caregivers. ECI services aim to improve children's development and prevent developmental delays and disabilities due to risk factors in the family or home environment. For children to benefit from ECI services, Early Intervention Specialists (EIS) and other ECI personnel work with the child and family in a setting that is familiar to them such as their home, a childcare center, preschool, kindergarten, primary school or any other place in the community that is routinely visited by the child and their parents.

Role of civil society in developing the ECI system

Civil society organizations have been very important in the development of a national ECI system in Georgia over the past decade. The NGO Georgian Portage Association established the first early childhood intervention service in Georgia in 2006. In 2011, two other NGOs, First Step Georgia and the Association of Neurologists and Neurosurgeons, initiated a project to create early intervention service standards for all service providers in Georgia. This initiative was supported by the Open Society Foundations (OSF) and laid the foundation for

the creation of the Georgian Coalition for Early Childhood Intervention in 2015. This collective body was formed by 13 non-governmental organization and has helped unify ECI service providers, parents and other key stakeholders. Partnering with the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs (MoLHSA)⁴ has led to the elaboration of ECI program service standards, service licensing procedures, program evaluation and monitoring tools, as well as basic training modules for primary service providers.

Institutionalizing support for ECI

In 2014, Georgia ratified the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). While there have been some challenges in implementing the CRPD, including around collecting data on persons with disabilities, the ratification set the stage for more formally expanding services for young children to prevent developmental delays and provide support for those with special needs and disabilities, particularly ECI services.

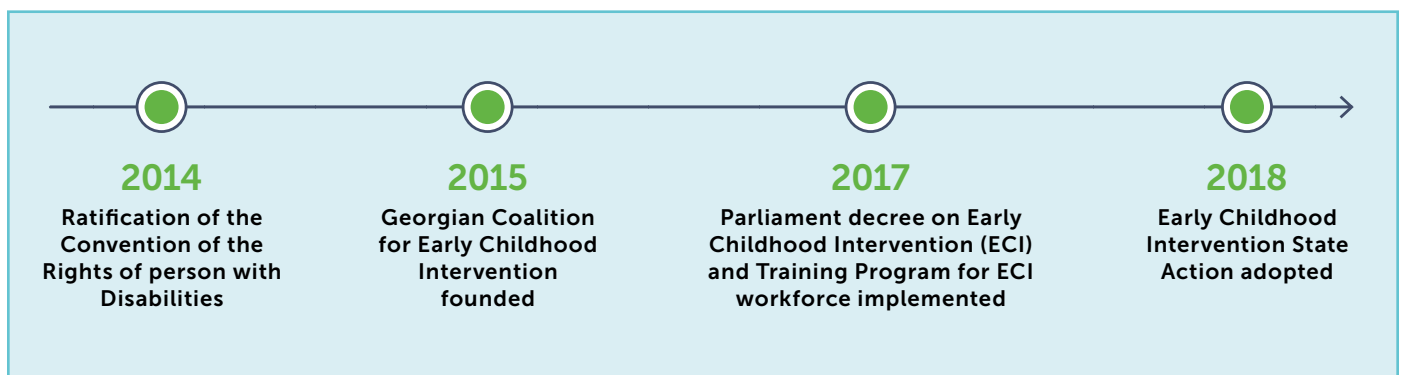
Growing momentum from the CRPD and support from civil society culminated in the adoption of the Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) State Action Plan (2018-2020) in May 2018,⁵ along with the convening of an inter-agency working group to oversee its implementation by the MoLHSA. The main objectives of the action plan (2018-2020) are to:

- Develop and expand ECI services throughout Georgia;
- Elaborate guidelines for identification, referral and transition procedures related to ECI;

- Strengthen inter-agency collaboration and capacity building of municipal agencies to support ECI development across Georgia; and
- Prepare/train the Early Intervention workforce.

Owing to increased policy support and civil society efforts, geographical coverage of ECI services has expanded. While services were only available in the capital of Tbilisi in 2009, ECI centers are now operating in 11 municipalities (out of 64)⁶ and a rural model of ECI service delivery is being piloted in one municipality. Additionally, regional and local governments increasingly engage NGO partner organizations to implement programs for children at risk of developmental delays and those with identified disabilities and special needs. The number of organizations providing ECI services also increased, from two organizations providing ECI programs in 2012 to 22 organizations in 2018.

Figure 1: Timeline of Key Policy Developments

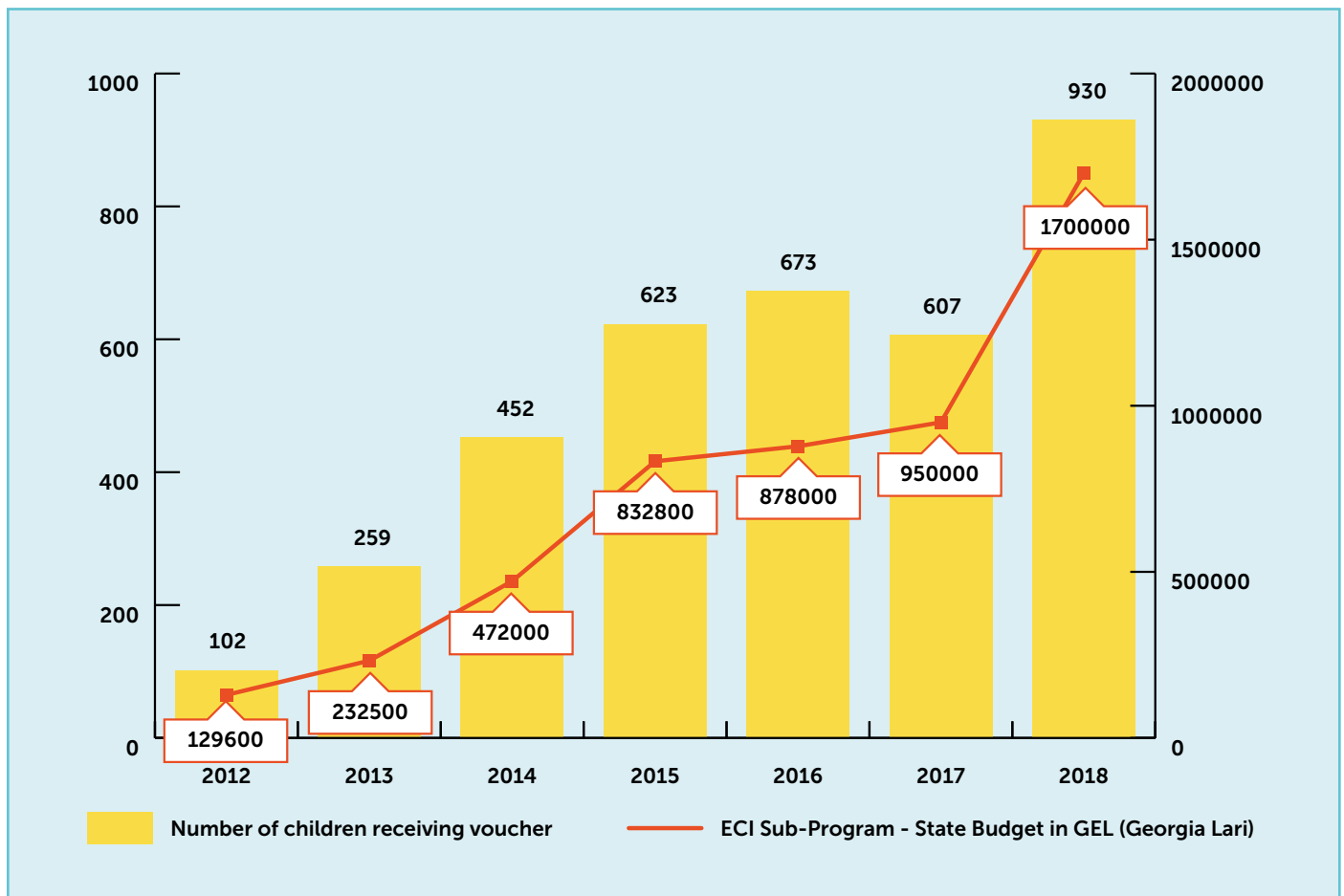


Governance and Financing of ECI services

In 2007, ECI services delivered by NGOs came under the purview of the Ministry of Education and then were moved to MoLHSA in 2009. While delivered by civil society, services are financed through the state voucher system by the State Social Service Agency under MoLHSA. ECI service vouchers cost 148 GEL (US\$57)

and cover 8 sessions per month at a family's choice of provider. Vouchers go directly to families with children who meet specific eligibility criteria.⁷ From 2012 to 2018, the number of vouchers and the ECI state budget gradually increased from 102 children receiving vouchers in 2012 to 930 children in 2018 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Investments in ECI and Reach of Vouchers



Source: Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs (MoLHSA).

State vouchers provided by the Ministry are used to cover staff salaries and other basic costs, which vary from one organization to another. As the Ministry only

partially funds the program, organizations are left to raise additional resources.

Policy Challenges

While service provision has grown, there are not enough professionally trained ECI personnel including Early Intervention Specialists (EIS) and similarly trained professionals in Georgia to support additional expansion

and quality service delivery. In addition, while NGOs receive some support from vouchers provided by the government, these service providers bear much of the cost of training and ongoing support for EIS.

Policy Responses

In responses to these challenges, civil society organizations, government, and universities are working in collaboration to improve the foundations for training

and ongoing support for ECI personnel within the system and implement new approaches to delivering them, as described below.

The ECI Workforce

According to the *State Early Intervention Sub-Program Standards*, organizations seeking to provide ECI services must be able to employ a minimum of three trained and qualified EIS with at least two years of experience and provide all services for children in homes or in some other natural environment for the child. The number of children that each service provider can serve is determined by the number of professionals working in the organizations providing the service (up to 1:12 adult/child ratio). ECI transdisciplinary teams include several types of professionals to provide comprehensive, individualized and intensive services to eligible children enrolled in ECI services: EIS, physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, special educators, and psychologists. While services are mainly provided by EIS, physical, occupational and speech therapists act as consultants and participate in development of individual plans on an as needed basis.

EIS have a number of responsibilities including conducting developmental screenings and assessments,

providing child development services, and preparing for the transition of the child and family to subsequent inclusive services (i.e., inclusive preschool or primary school, or in some instances to specialized services, such as a school for visually or hearing-impaired children, depending upon parental preference and service availability). In addition, EIS train and supervise paraprofessional home visitors in an effort to expand program coverage affordably.

Until 2015, there was extensive variability in personnel preparation. For example, some EIS in Georgia had local or international in-service certificates and a Bachelor's degree in a related field such as psychology or special education. At the same time, there were no undergraduate or postgraduate programs at any university in Georgia related to early intervention. To address this issue, beginning in 2015, the Georgian Coalition for Early Intervention launched a pre-service certification program, approved by the Ministry of Health, which is mandatory for all individuals looking to work as an EIS.

A Promising Approach: Public-Private Partnerships to Develop a Comprehensive Training Program for the Early Childhood Intervention Workforce

Standardizing initial preparation and strengthening the workforce to deliver ECI services has involved collaboration among a number of actors including civil

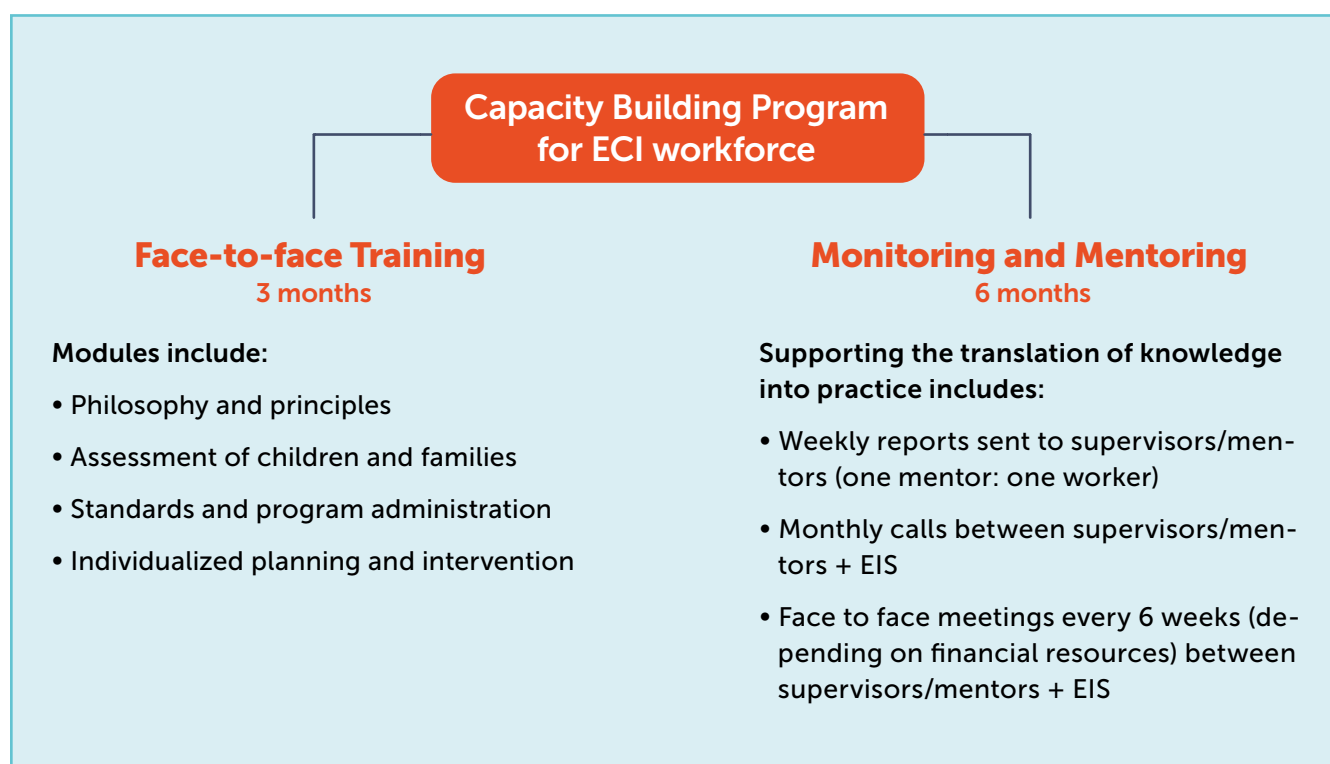
society, government, and universities. These collaborations are summarized below.

Civil Society-Government Partnership for In-service Training of Early Intervention Specialists

To address workforce shortages and the professional development needs of EIS, the Georgian Coalition for Early Childhood Intervention developed and implemented an in-service training program in 2015 for organizations providing ECI services and working with children with special needs. When NGOs express interest in implementing programs for children with special needs, they are identified by the Ministry and

their staff are required to undergo the in-service training program offered by the Coalition. This in-service training program includes face-to-face training and mentoring and monitoring and is paid by the training. The program lasts 9 months with 125 hours of theoretical training and requires a minimum of 50 hours of practical training. The program is divided in two phases (see Figure 3):

Figure 3: Coalition-sponsored In-service Training for the ECI Workforce



When first established, the face-to-face training was one-month long. However, after it proved too short for trainees to apply what they learned in practice, it was extended to three months. During the first year of implementation, the program included 5-6 staff from each of the 5 participating NGOs from different regions. Since 2015, 120 individuals have

been trained. To-date, the program has yet to be evaluated.

While the Coalition aims to scale up this ongoing support, it does not have funding to do so. As such, the Coalition has prioritized advocacy for the mobilization of additional financial support for the program.

Civil society-University partnerships to prepare Early Intervention Specialists and other early childhood professionals

In addition to these training offerings, a number of efforts led by the Georgia Coalition of Early Childhood Intervention are underway to build a pipeline of professionally trained EIS and other early childhood personnel through the establishment and enhancement of academic programs on ECI in Georgia.

Master's Degree programs for EIS and other professionals: This program will be initially offered at the Master's level by three universities: Tbilisi State University, Ilia State University and Kutaisi State University, and an undergraduate and in-service certificate program is expected to follow. To ensure

the existence of trained field mentors and supervisors, four Georgian specialists have completed an ECD Master's degree at Haifa University, Israel.

Master's program in Communication, Speech and Language Therapy⁸: Since provision of ECI services requires a transdisciplinary approach, involvement of other professionals is highly important. As a result, since 2014, Ilia State University has been working on developing a Master's program in Communication, Speech and Language Therapy with support from professionals at Groningen, Aveiro, Porto, Zagreb, Quince College and Haifa Universities. The program's first cohort of students enrolled in Fall 2018.

University programs supporting the preparation of the preschool workforce in inclusive education⁹

While efforts have been made to create pre- and in-service training programs on early intervention for those working with children under three, there are still gaps in inclusive preschool service provision for children with special needs and children with disabilities. In response to this gap, members of Georgian Coalition for Early Intervention began developing pre- and in-service training programs on inclusive education in universities, complementing efforts to build an ECI workforce and an ECI system. By supporting the development of inclusive preschool education and a workforce which delivers it, there is potential to ensure a child's smooth transition between home and preschool settings. Below are some of these efforts:

- *Pre-service training on inclusive education:* Bridge for Social Inclusion, an NGO in Kutaisi, in cooperation with Kutaisi State University is creating a "Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports¹⁰" training module for the preschool workforce. Another NGO, Innovations for Inclusive Society, is working with the Ministry of Education to create another training module, "Transition Protocol and Guidelines for inclusive education."
- *University-based in-service training programs on inclusive education:* To support inclusive education in preschool for children ages two through six, a new University accredited in-service training course, "Inclusive Early Education," was launched at Ilia State University under the umbrella of an OSF-funded project run by the Georgian Portage Association (GPA) in 2015. This 6-credit course (150 hours) is divided into theory and practice and employs innovative methods (e.g., case studies, reflective supervision and on-site coaching) to help kindergarten teachers translate theoretical knowledge into practice. Currently, the team at Ilia State University is training staff at other universities in Batumi, Kutaisi, Gori, Telavi and Akhaltsikhe in delivering this course. In addition, a textbook on Inclusive Preschool Education is being prepared under this same project that will be distributed by the Ministry of Education among municipal Kindergarten Management Agencies.

In addition to these two initiatives, planning is underway in Georgian state universities to develop an undergraduate program in ECD which would provide an applied academic foundation for personnel supporting programs for children birth to age seven on topics such as early intervention and early education.

Reflections on Implementation: Enablers and Barriers

The following section reflects on the enabling environment in Georgia for developing an ECI workforce. It highlights factors which have facilitated the introduction of new training and ongoing support for ECI personnel, as well as those that have created barriers to implementation.



Enabling Conditions

- **Increased governmental interest in ensuring access to ECI services:** Ratification of UN conventions on child and disability rights set into motion a number of policy changes in Georgia. While the State sub-program for Early Intervention since 2007 has ensured the existence of services, since 2016, a number of policies have aimed at developing standards for the workforce and early childhood services targeting children from birth to six years of age. This government support has enabled the development of better aligned pre- and in-service training for current and future professionals.
- **Active civil society:** Civil society organizations have pioneered programs and facilitated public-private partnerships which contribute to the Government's efforts to build an early childhood intervention workforce. A highlight of civil society engagement has been support from the Georgian Coalition for Early Intervention which collaborates closely with the government to ensure quality provision of ECI services.
- **University capacity and leadership:** Two strong higher education institutions –Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University - have led the way in developing academic programs in ECI.



Barriers to Implementation

- **Fragmented workforce intervention:** While efforts have been made to develop a workforce for ECI services, there is a workforce capacity gap between early intervention and preschool services which has not yet been addressed by the Government. This leads to difficult transitions for children from one service to another.
- **Limited financial investment in training and professional development.** Implementing training programs in partnership with civil society has addressed workforce shortages and needs in the short-term. Less attention has been given by the government to the funding and sustainability of the ECI programs and to building the capacity of the workforce in the long-term. Despite annual increases in the government's budget for the early intervention sub-program, the budget does not allow program coverage for all regions in Georgia and is insufficient to cover basic needs such as transportation for specialists and the costs of supervision. The government's financial involvement is too limited and relies heavily on the financial capacity of civil society organizations.
- **Lack of support for the hard-to-reach workforce:** It is difficult to ensure access to training services in the mountainous regions of Georgia where there are no NGOs and/or para-professionals. The Coalition does not have enough resources to carry out onsite monitoring and technical support for all personnel.

Policy Lessons

As policymakers look to develop capacity to deliver ECI services, the following are lessons to consider from Georgia's experience.



Training should be complemented with mentoring and monitoring to ensure that skills are being transferred to program beneficiaries. Training should be complemented with mentoring and monitoring to ensure that skills are being transferred to program beneficiaries. The Georgian Early Intervention program provided training which embedded follow-up mentoring and monitoring and resulted in improved skills in observation, assessment and planning in comparison with training which was not supported by monitoring and mentoring. Many countries design independent and stand-alone in-service teacher trainings without considering these critical aspects of ongoing support.



Early childhood programs need to ensure the continuity of service and the smooth transition from one service to another for all children at risk of developmental delays, and those with identified disabilities and special needs. While early childhood intervention services are being developed and institutionalized, it is equally important to equip the existing early childhood education and care services and staff with the competence needed to welcome children who are requiring special attention in their development and learning, thus ensuring continuity and consistency in how their needs and rights are met. This requires the harmonization of the pre- and in-service curriculum with the expected competences required for the workforce while working in inclusive environments.



Partnerships among government, academia, and civil society can help generate momentum for new service areas and capacity building for the workforce. The development of the Georgian Early Intervention program provides an example of how civil society actors can work with the government and universities to design and implement early childhood programs as well as complementary pre- and in-service training programs. These partnerships have helped to encourage the government to make some financial contributions toward the sustainability of pre- and in-service programs for the early childhood workforce.

Endnotes

- 1 Government of Georgia. "საქართველოს მთავრობის დადგენილება №234 [Decree of the Government of Georgia №234]," 2018. http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=uby&sec_id=496&info_id=65763.
- 2 We extend our gratitude to the following individuals who offered invaluable insights as key informants and expert reviewers: Tamar Gagoshidze (Tbilisi State University), Nino Tsintsadze (Georgian Coalition for Early Childhood Intervention, Ilia State University), Nini Beselia (Ministry of Education), Maia Kuparadze (UNICEF), Emily Vargas Baron (RISE Institute), and Hollie Hix Small (Portland State University).
- 3 Delivery of ECI services begins with the implementation of a low-cost, easy-to-use screening system to identify children who may require additional support. A "positive screen" is conducted to determine if the child is eligible to receive services, establish a diagnosis, and inform service planning. Intervention services are functional, individualized to the strengths and needs of the child, and delivered by the child's parents with support from EI professionals. Progress is then monitored via parent and caregiver observation and formal data tracking systems. The ECI team, including the parent, then works to facilitate transitions from ECI settings to early childhood special education settings and future education settings.
- 4 Currently the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs.
- 5 Government of Georgia. "საქართველოს მთავრობის დადგენილება №234 [Decree of the Government of Georgia №234]," 2018. http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=uby&sec_id=496&info_id=65763.
- 6 Tbilisi, Batumi, Kutaisi, Kobuleti, Chakvi, Zugdidi, Gori, Telavi, Lagodekhi, Akhaltsikhe, Borjomi.
- 7 Child must have perceptual, gross motor, fine motor, language, cognitive, social or emotional delay or disability as assessed and diagnosed by a neuro-developmental or medical professional.
- 8 The initiative has been supported by the Open Society Foundations.
- 9 The development of both university programs has been supported by the Open Society Foundations.
- 10 Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support."Training." <https://www.pbis.org/training>.

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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.

