

# Successful Early Childhood Development Requires a Holistic Approach

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Early childhood development is key to Rwanda's future. Committed to becoming a knowledge-based economy by 2050, the Rwandan government established the National Early Childhood Development Program (NECDP) in 2017 to ensure that the children being born in Rwanda today have all the nutritional, nurturing and early educational advantages possible to become central actors in this ambitious national goal. The Government of Rwanda understands that to get better results in early childhood development it needs to be done in a holistic manner. To this end, the NECDP was created as an umbrella organization coordinating government, private industry, development partners, religious-based organizations and civil society, with a mission to pool resources, put them into coordinated action, and confirm appropriate delivery of services.

The NECDP coordinates interventions that have anything to do with the development of children in their earliest years. This is encapsulated in the Six Pillars of the national early childhood development policy, covering health, nutrition, hygiene, brain stimulation and early learning, and child protection. These combined form the basis of the program's positive parenting advocacy. The NECDP has been tasked by the government to coordinate all these efforts into an integrated context that allows parents to understand the child development process, and the actions required to give their child the best start possible in life.

Improved early childhood nutrition is fundamental to achieving NECDP's mission. While there have been some improvements in key areas, such as reducing childhood stunting



from 51% in 2005 down to 35% in 2018, this figure is far from acceptable, and requires much hard work from the government, all its instruments, and the cooperation of all stake holders, including development partners, to achieve the goal of 19% by 2024. Currently, the NECDP is working with JICA on Nutrition Improvement through Agricultural Transformation, a three-year project that aims to improve nutrition-sensitive agriculture through multi-sectoral coordination. This broad-sweeping program coordinates an array of existing initiatives, including increasing nutrition content, commodity selection and delivery, and age-appropriate nutrition education.

As any parent knows, raising a child is a multi-faceted and highly integrated process, and while the scale is different, the process is the same when dealt with at a national level.

The ability of JICA to work across multiple sectors for coordination and implementation is highly complementary with the NECDP's core mission, and I am optimistic about getting good results in fighting undernutrition and further reducing childhood stunting. To be honest, we simply must succeed, as the children who are yet to be born, or are in their earliest years now, will be at the center of the new vision for Rwanda. It is essential that their potential is maximized by acting now to ensure they have the best start in life possible..

**Profile:**

Anita Asimwe is a specialist in public health strategies, with extensive experience in tackling the HIV/AIDS epidemic and other health conditions. A medical doctor by profession, she also holds a Master's degree in Public Health from the University of Dundee in UK.