Play and Resilience:
A China-Africa Collaboration Project for Building a Peaceful and Sustainable Future

Project document

World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP)

in collaboration with

Victoria Charitable Trust Fund
1. Rationale

Every child has the right not only to survive but also to thrive and develop to his or her fullest potential. All children are born with the inherent and inalienable rights to holistic early childhood care and education that covers protection, health and nutrition, early stimulation and learning. Today we have the research evidence that during the first years of life, the brain has the potential to develop at an astounding pace that is never repeated (700 neuronal connections per second). The child’s early experiences, particularly the quality of care, stimulation and learning experiences, determine his or her brain development and influence a broad range of skills, attitudes and learning capacities.

International community, policy makers and general public recognize that early childhood care and education, provided in a nurturing and safe environment, sets the foundation for the child’s future well-being and productivity, particularly for disadvantaged children. Moreover, research findings point to long-term benefits of early childhood care and education at the societal level, including cost savings through reduced school dropout and repetition, better health and a lower incidence of criminal behaviour in adulthood. In recognition of such foundational role of early childhood in building peaceful and inclusive societies, world leaders adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015, which included a specific target: ‘By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education’.

However, more children than ever are forced to live through natural disasters, socio-economic inequities, conflict or acts of terrorism today. Young children represent the highest percentage of affected populations in today’s global and local emergencies, and their physical and psychological dependency makes them uniquely vulnerable to the negative effects of these emergencies. While humanitarian response and risk reduction is essential, resilience (the quality of ‘bouncing back’) development offers a promising way to help children and families bounce back – not only from emergencies but also from serious life challenges – and thrive on. Early childhood is an important window of time for building resilience by developing positive attitudes, competencies and skills, such as self-regulation, empathy, confidence and responsibility.

2. Background

This project is inspired by Dr Maggie Koong, who has served as the World President of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) from 2014 to 2016. In January

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2016, OMEP launched the Play and Resilience World Project with the aim of promoting young children’s resilience and potential to foster a peaceful and sustainable future through play, conducted in a safe, child friendly, and stimulating environment. The first phase of the project consisted of the identification and dissemination of good practices on this topic. OMEP called for such good practices worldwide and attracted 36 project entries from 18 countries. Seven projects were selected as having demonstrated outstanding qualities and potential, and the representatives of these projects were invited to present their projects at the first Play and Resilience Symposium during the 2016 OMEP World Conference held in July 2016.

On 9 November 2016 during Geneva Peace Week, OMEP hosted a side event entitled ‘Teaching Peace and Building Resilience in Young Children through Play’ at the United Nations Office in Geneva. Dr Rima Salah, Chair of the Early Childhood Peace Consortium, together with the OMEP representatives, discussed the early childhood pathways to peace and introduce the Play and Resilience World Project to the participants.

Building on these experiences, Dr Koong explored further elaboration and field implementation of the project in collaboration with experts of OMEP-China and UNESCO, with a view to targeting disadvantaged communities in China and sub-Saharan Africa, where children are often deprived of interactions and resources that are critical to their full development in general and resilience development in particular. Resulting is this second phase of the OMEP Play and Resilience World Project, which will be managed by the Victoria Charitable Trust Fund based in Hong Kong SAR.

3. Project Goal and Objectives

**Goal:** To enhance young children’s resilience and potential to contribute to a peaceful and sustainable future.

**Specific objectives:**

i) *Awareness:* To raise awareness among parents, families and communities as well as policy makers about the importance of early childhood care and education and the value of play in building children’s resilience.

ii) *Tools development:* To develop and disseminate practical and adaptable materials and tools to improve the quality of childcare and learning environment and processes.

iii) *Capacity development:* To train preschool and nursery administrators, teachers and caregivers in developing and implementing effective curriculum on resilience building through play.

iv) *Relationship:* To foster sustainable collaborative relationships for children among families, preschools and communities to continue this work beyond the project.
4. Working Definitions and Conceptual Framework

4.1. Resilience

*Resilience* is commonly defined as the ability to adapt well in the face of significant sources of stress and recover from setbacks. Some children can ‘bounce back’ and rise above despite adverse contexts, such as family poverty, violence, parent mental illness, child neglect or maltreatment, while others have more difficulties in adapting well to those situations. Resilience is not a personal trait of the individual or an all-or-nothing phenomenon; neither is it fixed in time (Luthar 2013)².

What is emerging from ‘resilience research’ is that resilience results from a dynamic interaction between the individual’s biology and social environment that builds the capacities to cope with adversity and overcome threats to healthy development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2015)³. Resilience development has different pathways depending on risk factors and affected population groups; however, the single most common factor for children who develop resilience is the presence of a strong, stable and supportive relationship with at least one adult. Such relationships provide the child with personalised responsiveness to and protection from ‘toxic stress’, which can cause physiological changes with a wear-and-tear effect on the developing brain and maturing organ systems. Responsive and caring interactions can help the child’s stress response systems return to their normal state and thus protect his or her development from disruption, making the potentially toxic stress to ‘tolerable stress’ (*ibid. p. 4*).

One of the most comprehensive categorisations of strategies for building young children’s resilience is the ‘7 Crucial Cs’ proposed by Ginsburg and Jablow (2015): competence, confidence, connection, character, contribution, coping and control⁴. These ingredients of resilience are closely interrelated and interwoven, forming ‘a web of 7 Cs’ (Figure 1).

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4.2. **The value of play**

Ginsburg and Jablow (2015) call play as ‘childhood’s inborn tool to build resilience’ (p.47). Like crying, eating or making sounds, children do not have to be taught how to play – it is instinctive, voluntary and often spontaneous. Play, particularly free and explorative play, is children’s means of learning and helps children ‘know’ through experience rather than by direct instruction (Else, 2009). Play has specific features that allow children to try out new and diverse strategies to solve problems and to promote both physical and emotional flexibility through trial and error (Play Wales, 2015). The more children play, the more competent they become in controlling over themselves and their environment; thus children gain a sense of control with an accompanying sense of achievement and confidence.

The generally accepted social, physical and cognitive benefits of play are particularly relevant to resilience as play does help the child develop the Critical 7 Cs by solving problems, developing independence and a sense of control, exercising imagination and creativity, connecting and negotiating with others, experiencing and learning to manage a range of emotions (ibid.). In fact, it is a right of all children to engage in age-appropriate play and recreational activities as enshrined in the Convention on the Right of the Child (1989). Nonetheless, in many parts of the world, children are not allowed to exercise this right due to

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different reasons ranging from inadequate environment and facilities to children’s highly
scheduled ‘free’ time crammed with activities such as homework, sports, music, tutoring, etc.
Children from disadvantaged backgrounds face particular obstacles that impede their right to
play, and their parents may not have the knowledge, time and resources to engage their
children in appropriate and stimulating play.

4.3. Building the child’s inner strengths and outside support
Resilience research also points to the importance of building both the child’s inner strengths
(e.g. self-control, thinking skills, confidence, positive outlook, responsibility and participation)
and outside support (e.g. caring relationships, positive role models in families and
communities, family and community resources) 6. In other words, efforts to support children’s
resilience building requires not only supporting individual children’s competencies, skills and
attitudes but also understanding and reducing the risks (Masten, Gewirtz and Sapienza 2013)7.

From this perspective, the project is framed within Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological
model of child development, which highlights the interconnections and mutual influences
between the social worlds of the child and her/his caregivers (Figure 2). Briefly, the child’s
everyday experiences are at the centre of and embedded in wider social systems — in
microsystems (peers, teachers and caregivers in everyday settings, at home, school, childcare
centre, etc.); mesosystems (things and roles individuals experience during shifts of settings or
ecological transitions); exosystems (areas of social life in which the child may not participate,
but which nonetheless impact on her/his life and well-being through interconnections with
microsystems); and macrosystem (policies, rights and responsibilities, culture and ideologies).
For any programmes to be effective and benefit most children, they must not only focus on
the children, but also take the agents in the environment and the larger socio-cultural contexts
into consideration.

6 Best Start Resource Centre. (2012). Building Resilience in Young Children: Booklet for parents of children from
Therefore, this project will encompass three levels with specific programmatic focus (Figure 3).

**Macrosystem**
(society and culture)

- **Project focus:**
  - Policy-level advocacy

**Micro- and Exosystems**
(The environment the child lives in)

- **Project focus:**
  - Family and community outreach
  - Teacher capacity development

**The Child**

- **Project focus:**
  - Building ‘7 Crucial Cs’ of resilience through play

Figure 2. Ecological model of child development. Graph adopted from Niederer et al. BMC Public Health 2009 9:94.

Figure 3. Project’s programmatic framework and focus.
5. **Beneficiary Groups**

The project aims to support resilience building among young children of preschool age in rural China and disadvantaged sectors of selected countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

In China, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) at the pre-primary level reached 84% in 2015 according to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics data, making it one of the countries with the highest GER at this educational level. However, there is a significant gap between rural and urban areas in the provision of services. As a result, the pre-primary enrolment rate in urban areas is as high as 99%, while the enrolment in some rural areas is as low as 10% (Rao et al., 2014). Space, play materials and staff capacity are limited in rural preschools and young children in remote villages are often deprived of the adult and peer interaction that is necessary and critical to their optimal development and building resilience.

Of particular concern is the plight of China’s so-called left-behind children. More than 61 million children in China – or one-third of children under 17 years of age – are living without care of their migrant worker parents and often denied access to essential services such as education and health care. The concern for the physical and psychological health of these children has been heightened recently, and the Chinese government and civil society have initiated various measures to tackle this massive social and human costs of the country’s economic development and urbanisation.

Despite the obvious socio-cultural differences, the challenges facing sub-Saharan Africa have similarities to those of rural China in many ways. The pre-primary enrolments in many African communities are low, with less than 12% of African children currently having access to early childhood services. The quality of infrastructure and teaching materials is poor, and there is a scarcity of qualified teachers and child caregivers who are sensitive to the children’s developmental needs (Awopegba, Oduolowu, & Nsamenang, 2013). While risks and sources of adversity may be very different, there is an opportunity for cross-national collaboration and sharing of good practices between China and Africa. For this phase of the Play and Resilience project, specific target groups will be selected for the project through a careful literature review and consultations. Indicatively, some 10 communities each in China and Africa will be selected for pilot implementation during this phase.

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6. Expected Results of the Project

Impact
Young children in disadvantaged communities of rural China and sub-Saharan Africa are developing attitudes, competencies and skills relevant to resilience.

Outcomes (behavioural changes)

a) Parents’ and families’ increased awareness and practical skills to protect, care and educate their young children, particularly, the value of play.

b) Teachers’ effectiveness in facilitating young children’s resilience development through play.

Outputs (concrete deliverables)
- Multimedia Play and Resilience resource materials
- Parent/family guidebook on effective parenting practices, with focus on play and resilience;
- Teacher training module on play and resilience (e.g. teacher training curriculum, pedagogical guide, resource materials)
- Teacher trainers, teachers/volunteers, school administrators, parents and families trained
- A policy brief
- A web portal on Play and Resilience

7. Activities

Activity 1: Development of project frameworks
- Guidance note on play and resilience will be developed to facilitate coherent content development in China and Africa, based on a literature review and a quick survey of relevant Chinese and African organizations and 67 OMEP National Committees. It will identify categories and examples of play activities that build resilience in young children, highlighting age- and culturally appropriate practices;
- Monitoring and evaluation framework of the project with success indicators and measurements identified for 3 levels (macrosystem, micro- and exosystems, and the child) will be developed in consultation with expert advisors.

Activity 2: Planning for project implementation in rural China and sub-Saharan Africa
- OMEP-China and UNESCO Regional Office for South Africa will be invited to submit a proposal to implement the project (Activity 3 below) in rural China and sub-Saharan Africa, respectively, with beneficiary countries/provinces and communities, key informants and collaborating tertiary institutions and other partners clearly identified and justified.
Activity 3: Field implementation

3a. Development of multimedia play materials and tools
- Compilation and documentation of existing good practices and resource materials in China and Africa that promote play in early childhood and resilience building through play
- Development of multimedia resource materials as well as demonstration/prototypical play materials that promote good child-adult interactions and stimulating play activities, etc.

3b. Policy-level advocacy
- Preparation and dissemination of a policy brief

3c. Family and community outreach
- Community consultations and needs assessment
- Identification of available resources in and outside the communities (e.g. services, materials, community leaders, experts, volunteers)
- Development of culturally appropriate parent/family guidebook on effective parenting practices, with focus on play and resilience
- Community-based parent/family workshops on play and resilience

3d. Teacher capacity development
- Development of a teacher training module on play and resilience in early childhood (e.g. curriculum, pedagogical guide, resource materials)
- Training of teacher trainers
- In-service training of early childhood teachers/volunteers and school principals/administrators of target communities

3e. Organization of play activities with children
- Ongoing support for parents and families through family visits
- Observation and mentoring of trained teachers/volunteers

Activity 4: Dissemination and China-Africa exchange of project experiences
- Play and Resilience Symposia at the 2017 and 2018 OMEP World Conferences
- Development of a web portal for the Play and Resilience project

Activity 5: Monitoring and Evaluation
- Ongoing monitoring of the project implementation according to the time frame and the M&E framework
- Final evaluation
### 8. Implementation Timeline (January 2017 to June 2019)

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9. Project Management

Under OMEP’s auspices, the Victoria Charitable Trust Fund has set up a project management team based in Hong Kong SAR to manage the second phase of the project with the overall management responsibilities for day-to-day substantive and financial implementation, quality assurance and monitoring.

World OMEP

- Prof. Eunhye Park, World President

Project management team (Victoria Charitable Trust Fund)

- Director: Dr Maggie Koong
- Principal project manager: Dr Mami Umayahara
- Project support and communications officer
- Finance and administrative officer

Project implementation partners

- OMEP-China Team, led by Prof. Jing Zhou, Professor and Director of the International Research Center on Child Development and Education in East China Normal University, Shanghai, China.
- UNESCO Team, led by Dr Patience Awopegba, PhD, Program Specialist at UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa based in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Expert advisors

- Prof. Sharon Lynn Kagan, Virginia and Leonard Marx Professor of Early Childhood and Family Policy and Co-Director of the National Center for Children and Families at Teachers College, Columbia University and Professor Adjunct at Yale University's Child Study Center.
- Prof. Nirmala Rao, Serena H.C. Yang Professor in Early Childhood Development and Education at The University of Hong Kong
- Dr Rima Sala, Chair of the Early Childhood Peace Consortium (ECPC) and Adjunct Faculty Member at the Child Study Centre, Yale University
- Prof. Michael Ungar, Canada Research Chair in Child, Family and Community Resilience; Professor of Social Work and Director of Resilience Research Centre at Dalhousie University, Canada

10. Monitoring and Evaluation

The project team with a consultant will develop an M&E framework for the project, which, together with the conceptual framework, will be then discussed among the project implementation partners and expert advisors. The M&E framework will include a set of success indicators for children, teachers, parents and families as well as the means of data
The project implementation partners will be responsible for collecting and analysing the baseline and post-intervention data using the indicators and for monitoring the progress of the implementation of project activities in the field. Ongoing formative feedback on the project deliverables will be provided by expert advisors.

At the end of the project, the project team will commission a final evaluation to independent external evaluators to assess the relevance, effectiveness, sustainability and impact of the project.

11. Sustainability of the Outcomes of the Project

The project aims to achieve sustainability of its outcomes by taking into account and addressing the needs of diverse levels of the child’s ecology and developing their capacity to support young children’s resilience building: namely, policy, communities, family and parents, and pre-school or childcare centres. Therefore, resource materials, play materials and tools, and pedagogical approaches will be grounded in the respective countries and communities, while good practices will be identified across the world through the OMEP network and China-Africa exchanges will be promoted.

The trained local teacher trainers will serve as trainers and mentors for parents and families as well as local teachers or community volunteers who will in turn directly work with children to build the latter’s resilience through play.

The online multimedia materials and tools will be accessible freely and continue to serve as references for those who are interested in play and resilience development in early childhood. The project will stimulate discussions on play and resilience building and support the efforts of early childhood, education, social welfare and research communities to advance this field.