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journal
ISSN: 2820-7157

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INDEXED JOURNAL

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RECEIVED
17 August 2026



ACCEPTED
09 September 2026



PUBLISHED
1 October 2026

 **October 2026**

 **Volume 5**

 **Number 5**

 **126 to 139**

Early childhood development in the Republic of Guinea: a qualitative analysis of existing opportunities based on the perceptions of institutional and implementing stakeholders

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PREFIX : **10.63883**

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ABSTRACT

The positive benefits of the holistic development of children aged 0 to 8 are still not sufficiently understood or valued by families, communities and governments. Across the world, although many countries have the resources and potential, numerous children continue to suffer from neglect and various forms of violence. In Guinea, as in many other contexts, public policies designed to promote early childhood development are not always backed by budgetary resources commensurate with their stated ambitions. Political will is expressed more through official rhetoric than through concrete actions and commitments that are actually fulfilled. This limits the implementation of interventions and results in significant harm to children. Indeed, the aim of this research was to analyse, based on the perceptions of institutional and implementing stakeholders operating in Guinea, as well as policy and programme documents, the existing opportunities that could be harnessed to promote the harmonious development of children aged 0 to 8 in Guinea. Twenty-one participants from 18 institutions (state bodies, UN agencies, international NGOs and civil society organisations) took part in semi-structured interviews in Conakry between 21 November 2024 and 24 April 2025. These interviews revealed that the country is brimming with significant opportunities and that all that is needed is for early childhood to be made a national priority. The notable opportunities highlighted by these stakeholders include the existence of social services; the mobilisation of civil society and community groups; the large number of committed partners and stakeholders; the presence of the mass media to raise awareness, monitor, alert and educate families and children; the existence of mineral resources that are still undervalued; and the existence of a favourable political and framework. The presence of all these favourable factors provides significant leverage for a coordinated and effective multisectoral response in support of children aged 0 to 8.

Keywords: early childhood development, Guinea, opportunities, stakeholders, favourable.

Introduction

Human development has long been described by the developmental sciences as a process marked by distinct stages, each corresponding to specific cognitive, emotional, biological and social characteristics. Early childhood, which forms the foundation of this trajectory, appears to be a particularly crucial stage where the fulfilment or lack of fulfilment of basic needs during this period is likely to influence the individual's entire developmental trajectory (Diane & Papalia, 2014, p. 9). In line with this research,

numerous other studies on healthy development during these early years continue to flourish, highlighting the issues of neglect and violence during this particularly delicate stage. Despite all this evidence, the needs of many children around the world continue to be given marginal consideration in public policy, whereas they should be at the very top of the agenda for states and governments to ensure the emergence of human capital capable of meeting the challenges of governance and economic growth in their communities. Consequently, children moving out of early childhood must enjoy better physical and mental wellbeing; receive nutrition and care tailored to their needs; be emotionally capable of interacting positively with their carers, peers and teachers; be able to express themselves in their native languages; and be ready to learn during their primary education (Naudeau et al., 2012, p. 5). Public interventions leading to such outcomes by the end of early childhood are those that ensure the optimal delivery of services in the social sectors, which are key to sound overall development. The provision of safe drinking water to communities, the availability of adequate food, the provision of high-quality pre-school services, increased access to high-quality healthcare, supportive family attitudes and a stimulating and protective environment are all essential for the harmonious development of the individual during this period. An increasing number of states and international institutions, seeking a pool of qualified human resources, have recognised this pressing need to establish and support the implementation of early childhood policies and programmes. This enables children to acquire fundamental skills at an early age, upon which their future knowledge and abilities will be built. The holistic development of the child in the physical, cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional domains requires that this issue be placed at the top of the agenda for political and institutional decision-makers. Indeed, although an increasing number of countries around the world have committed to giving children a better start in life, there are still 162 million children under the age of five who face developmental delays due to chronic malnutrition (World Health Organisation, 2017, p. 1). These children, living in conditions of severe food deprivation and already suffering physical and cognitive impairments, will, according to the available data, be unable to reach their full potential. Compelling and well-documented research on the effects of chronic malnutrition in early childhood highlights limited access to education, school drop-out rates and insufficient earnings in adulthood (Shekar et al., 2017, p.17). The work by Wang and colleagues (2020, p.2) on 'The impact of school feeding on educational and health outcomes...' points in the same direction, highlighting the benefits of a school policy that places programmes providing regular food to children at the heart of its approach. The significant benefits that result help to optimise and ensure pupils' school attendance and

retention; minimise absenteeism due to various health problems; promote better overall well-being; and improve academic performance. Adequate nutrition in early childhood catalyses the balanced development of all relevant aspects and forms the foundation for better physical and mental wellbeing in adulthood, as well as making a lasting contribution to the socio-economic growth of families, communities and the country (Irwin et al, 2007, p.8).

Convinced of the validity of this evidence, the Republic of Guinea has, with great determination, embarked on the design and implementation of its national human capital development policy, which takes early childhood into account and is being progressively rolled out across all social sectors. This commitment, expressed at the highest level of government, is widely supported by the technical and financial partners operating in the country, for whom early childhood represents a strategic lever for the qualitative and sustainable transformation of Guinea. These interventions, which are evident in both rural and urban areas, are based on the construction and equipping of pre-school facilities, bringing health services closer to communities, the roll-out of civil registration services, the establishment of security services, and the introduction of judicial mechanisms to combat violence against children. The establishment of this comprehensive system for early childhood, as perceived by institutional and operational stakeholders, stems from a wide range of opportunities, which form the focus of this study.

1. Context and research question

Like many other countries, the Republic of Guinea embarked in 2007 on a path towards the protection and development of early childhood services through a series of measures centred on establishing a legal framework and drawing up a national roadmap that takes account of the country's social, political and economic context (MASPFE, 2015, p.7). However, although numerous efforts have been made, the situation of children there remains highly alarming. This is not unique to Guinea. An increasing number of studies documenting children's living conditions worldwide report widespread deprivation and multiple forms of physical harm. Data available on the World Health Organisation's website highlights that 149 million children under the age of five are stunted, compared with 45 million cases of wasting and 37 million children who are overweight. Not to mention that 45 per cent of child deaths worldwide are a direct result of malnutrition. As regards infant mortality, 5.2 million preventable infant deaths are recorded, including 1.5 million among children under one year of age; 1.3 million children aged between 1 and 4 died; 2.4 million neonatal deaths and a further 500,000 deaths among children aged 5 to 9 were

recorded in 2019. In 2022, 2.3 million neonatal deaths were recorded worldwide. Fifty-seven per cent – or 2.8 million deaths – of children under the age of five occurred in countries south of the Sahara. In 2024, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia alone accounted for 80 per cent of child deaths, ranking as the regions where children are most vulnerable worldwide (World Health Organisation, 2024, p. 1). Added to this are the various forms of violence suffered by children within their immediate social environments, the impact of which is detrimental to their development. In fact, it is estimated that 400 million – or 6 out of 10 – children under the age of five worldwide are affected by physical abuse as well as sexual and psychological abuse. With an increase of 330 million, physical abuse constitutes the most common and damaging form (UNICEF, 2024, p. 1). It is all the more important to fully assess the challenges posed by children's vulnerability and to jointly lay the foundations for a qualitative and sustainable transformation of their environment. The recognition and adoption by states of international conventions on the fundamental rights of children reflect both a desire and a commitment to their well-being. The microsystem exerts a significant influence on early childhood development, particularly brain development. Newborns come into the world with a brain potential estimated at billions of neurons, the proper growth and interconnection of which result from social contact. A supportive environment is a crucial driver of cognitive, emotional, physical and linguistic development for children aged 0 to 8 (Irwin et al, 2007, p.4). In this regard, the governments of sub-Saharan Africa – where the findings of numerous studies highlight the acute vulnerability of early childhood – can play a leading role in reversing this trend by implementing inclusive social policies centred on families and communities, upon whom the bulk of the burden falls. The example of the research by Matingou (2025, p. 16), which highlights the situation of children in sub-Saharan Africa, calls for an appropriate response. In this research, the author highlights that between 76 and 85 per cent of children aged 1 to 14 south of the Sahara are subjected to harmful corporal punishment, which negatively affects their quality of life and their cognitive and socio-emotional skills; 24.5 per cent of children are drawn into economic activities at an early age rather than receiving early childhood education, which is essential for proper psychosocial development; skills in reading, writing and number recognition are underdeveloped due to low coverage of pre-school services, which varies from country to country. In the Republic of Guinea, significant progress has been made in recent years in the early childhood sub-sector. With technical and financial support from its numerous bilateral and multilateral partners, the Guinean Government is demonstrating its commitment to working for the well-being of children aged 0 to 8 by undertaking various initiatives, notably the implementation of a national early

childhood policy, the creation of a Guinean child protection system structured from the grassroots upwards; the development of a stronger legal framework that imposes harsher penalties on perpetrators of violence against children, particularly girls; and the construction and equipping of pre-school facilities in communities that were previously not covered. However, although these significant advances are being implemented in Guinea, the country remains one of the most marginalised in sub-Saharan Africa in this sub-sector, characterised by persistently high rates of malnutrition, low and uneven coverage of pre-school provision, child abandonment, female genital mutilation and very limited access to child health services. In 2024, police data on various forms of violence against children revealed alarming figures, reporting 100 cases of child rape, 46 abductions, 74 cases of child abandonment, 40 missing children and 26 cases of child abuse in just one year (OPROGEM, 2024, p.1). These rather worrying figures can be attributed to the persistence of socio-cultural practices, insufficient allocation of resources and the ineffectiveness of the protection mechanisms put in place. Similarly, a comprehensive assessment of the coverage of pre-school services revealed limitations and an uneven distribution of state provision in terms of human resources and infrastructure, highlighting a total of 437 functioning state pre-school facilities across the country, compared with 42 other facilities lacking teaching staff; four facilities that have been built are not yet operational, whilst 49 others are under construction (MEPU-A, 2025, p. 1). Similar studies on the nutritional status of children aged 6 to 59 have revealed significant vulnerabilities in early childhood in Guinea. At the heart of this vulnerability among children lies malnutrition, which affects a significant proportion of the child population. Indeed, an estimated 750,000 children suffer from stunted growth linked to chronic undernutrition. Boys are significantly more affected (28 per cent) than girls (23 per cent) (UNICEF-Guinea, 2022, p.6). With regard to children's health, growing challenges – notably frequent stock shortages, regional disparities in healthcare provision, the remoteness of healthcare facilities, understaffing and the poor quality of human resources in the sector – are generally the root causes of the high infant mortality rate, which peaks at 61 per cent (MSHP, 2026, p.1).

In light of all this evidence, we asked ourselves: how do institutional and implementing stakeholders perceive the favourable circumstances that exist in the Guinean context for strengthening the integrated development of children aged 0 to 8?

2. Methodology

This analysis, which examines existing opportunities based on the perceptions of institutional and implementing stakeholders, adopts a qualitative approach. The interviews deliberately targeted two categories of key stakeholders, namely institutional stakeholders and operational stakeholders working in the early childhood sector in Guinea. A literature review of public policy documents from ministerial departments and official reports enabled the triangulation of sources. Participants in the first category comprised state actors (national directors) and non-state actors (programme directors) from UN agencies and international NGOs based in Guinea. These participants are leading figures in the development and monitoring of the implementation of public policies and programmes across various areas of early childhood. Operational stakeholders, meanwhile, come from civil society organisations accredited in Guinea, which are generally recruited by the former to carry out community projects. Data were collected in Conakry, from 21 November 2024 to 23 April 2025, from 18 institutions. A data collection framework facilitated the semi-structured interviews with these stakeholders. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes, depending on the participants. Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theoretical model, which is well-suited to an in-depth understanding of social interactions, served as the analytical framework.

3. Ethical considerations

Adherence to ethical standards is a key aspect of scientific research. This study, which involved human participants, took into account a number of ethical standards, relating in particular to its social relevance, the informed consent of participants, the anonymity of data, the guarantee to participants of the right to withdraw from or continue with the interview, respect for their opinions, and strict adherence to the principle of fairness in the conduct of the interviews. These ethical values, which ensure the validity and reliability of the results, were strictly observed throughout the study and enabled these findings to be achieved.

4. Results

4.1. The ecology of early childhood opportunities in Guinea

The ecological analysis of early childhood opportunities in Guinea reveals, based on a systemic framework, a multitude of opportunities that can be harnessed by the various organisations working in the field of early childhood, despite the country facing numerous challenges to overcome. There

are a significant number of beneficial opportunities that can be capitalised upon to provide a fair and high-quality start for children aged 0 to 8, as attested by the stakeholders. These opportunities represent favourable circumstances or periods that stakeholders can utilise to improve or resolve the many constraints hindering the harmonious development of young children. They relate to the advantages or potential (economic, human, material) available to Guinea that could boost the sector. Stakeholders simply need to know how to make the most of them. The institutional and operational stakeholders who took part in the interviews highlighted the rich, numerous and varied opportunities that need to be analysed.

4.1.1. The micro-system of early childhood opportunities in Guinea

The micro-system of early childhood opportunities in Guinea refers to the range of services found within a child's immediate and direct environment, where genuine, reciprocal interactions contribute to the child's sensitive development. The presence of high-quality microsystems within a community – such as pre-school programmes, community health centres and local sports teams in which the child is actively involved – is recognised as a reliable driver of the child's appropriate overall development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 7).

4.1.1.1. The opportunity presented by the existence of social services

The existence of social services in the Republic of Guinea represents a genuine opportunity for the harmonious development of children aged 0 to 8. Although there is a proven shortage of these services and their geographical coverage is very unevenly distributed, the existence of social services essential to early childhood development presents opportunities. Among these achievements are community care centres, nursery schools, maternal and child health facilities, perinatal programmes, as well as mechanisms to protect against various types of fundamental rights violations, such as civil registration offices, security units, reception centres and a number of play areas. Although they fall short of the communities' many expectations, their existence in the country represents a significant response to children's essential needs. Among the benefits are, for example, appropriate physical development that promotes stimulation, early socialisation and increased access to services. It should also be noted that the existence of these services enables parents to engage in income-generating activities, allowing them to care better for their children (Kamerman et al., 2003, p. 16). However, for these opportunities to be sufficiently beneficial, it is clear that state and non-state actors must

maximise their efforts to achieve optimal and equitable coverage of services across different areas, as evidenced by the *statements* from institutional actors below:

‘Although challenges remain, Guinea has made significant progress in expanding coverage and access to education. For example, the health system's efforts in vaccination and antenatal care are helping to reduce infant mortality and improve children's well-being from birth. The development of pre-school education, whilst limited in certain areas, is expanding. Initiatives such as community schools and educational care programmes are enabling more young children to access quality education. [...] The establishment of dedicated social protection bodies, such as the National Committee for Child Protection (CNPE), has been an important step. These structures have helped to strengthen collaboration between public authorities, NGOs and local communities to better identify and respond to the needs of vulnerable children. The Guinean Child Protection System (SYPEG) was established to provide a legal and practical framework for the protection of children against abuse, neglect and exploitation” (A. G., aged 48, END).

This *verbatim account* highlights the progress made to date in support of children aged 0 to 8 in Guinea, representing genuine opportunities for children's overall development. The services (health, education and social care) provided by experienced professionals give children vital advantages that enable them to get a good start in life. It therefore emerges from the interviewee's account that efforts to provide social services for children are underway. Community support centres, pre-school facilities, health programmes and the establishment of a protection framework aimed at preventing cases of violence – although inadequate and unevenly distributed – have beneficial effects on developing children. Lemay's (2012, p. 65) review of the literature on the effects of childcare services on vulnerable children highlighted the beneficial effects these services have on children, particularly in cognitive and socio-emotional terms. Returning to the topic of opportunities, the comments of the participant and institutional representative below echo those of the previous speaker as follows:

‘Free healthcare for children is one of the main opportunities in the field of child health. The other opportunity is the decentralisation of health services down to the community level. In every sub-prefecture and prefecture, we have a health centre. In larger villages, we have integrated health posts. These are major achievements that enable young children to access healthcare. Whether the quality is very good or poor, it is, in any case, a gateway for them. They can enter the healthcare system through these decentralised services. [...]

So these are achievements that go unnoticed, but which are very important for a child's psychomotor development and for their overall health. This is extremely important, but we do not appreciate it. To appreciate an achievement, you have to lose it. When you lose it straight away, you'll realise how important it is' (M.K., aged 51, SMO).

Analysis of this *verbatim account* highlights two major health-related opportunities available to children aged 0 to 8 that benefit their development. These include free healthcare and the decentralisation of the health system across the country's various communities, thereby facilitating greater access for mothers to health facilities for the benefit of their children. Although it is recognised that the Guinean healthcare system suffers from a shortage of high-quality human resources and that the few qualified professionals remain concentrated at the central level (the capital), it should be noted that free child healthcare and the expansion of health centres in communities constitute a key driver of children's development (Toussaint et al., 2023, p. 13). This is consistent with numerous other studies (Chabot, 2022, p. 13; Wangakyumo et al., 2022, p. 65) which highlight the link between healthcare facilities and the development of children aged 0 to 8 years.

4.1.2. The mesosystem of early childhood opportunities in Guinea

Guinea's mesosystemic environment offers opportunities that can serve as important levers for optimising the development of children aged 0 to 8. It relates to the interrelationships that exist between the various direct microsystems that influence the interactions of the developing individual. When these various regular and genuine relationships are established between stakeholders, they represent a solid foundation for the child's harmonious development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 238). Thus, the data show that in many communities, a suitable community mesosystem has been established between families, essential service providers and local civil society organisations, thereby creating a network whose interventions are focused on early childhood. During the semi-structured interviews, institutional stakeholders highlighted the initiative to mobilise local actors in support of children aged 0 to 8, which can thus be seen as an opportunity.

4.1.2.1. Mobilising civil society and communities

The mobilisation of civil society and communities in support of children aged 0 to 8 represents a high-impact opportunity for early childhood development in Guinea. Organised around the ideals of peace and development, these local stakeholders are frequently involved in raising awareness amongst families and communities about changing practices and attitudes that

are harmful to children's health; they collaborate with peer NGOs to advocate for policy-makers to adopt a favourable stance towards essential child development services; they implement projects funded by donors and fulfil their role as civic watchdogs against violence affecting children. The most representative civil society organisations that have a proven track record in defending children's rights over the last three decades are as follows: Sabou Guinée (SB), Monde Des Enfants (MDE), the Guinean Centre for Training and Education for Development (CEGUIFED), Mamadou et Binéta (MB), OCPH, and Même Droits pour Tous (MDT). In addition to these, there are numerous other emerging organisations such as Fraternité Médicale Guinée (FMG) and many more besides. Most of these Guinean civil society organisations operate in communities where, since independence, the state has been more or less absent. As regards the communities, their work has been particularly notable over the last ten years in the management of community support centres, including the recruitment and direct supervision of contract teachers assigned to these centres, all within a challenging context of extreme poverty. The *quotes* below illustrate the added value of community mobilisation for the integrated development of children aged 0 to 8:

'Civil society organisations (CSOs) and community actors play a central role in supporting public policies, raising awareness of children's rights and promoting preventive care practices. These local actors enable an approach that is more attuned to community realities and ensure better dissemination of messages relating to child protection. For example, child protection committees and community liaisons play a key role in promoting education, reducing gender-based violence and combating child labour. [...] Consequently, the country has stepped up efforts to raise awareness amongst parents and communities about children's rights, particularly the rights to protection, health and education. Awareness-raising campaigns led by NGOs, in collaboration with local authorities, have helped to change attitudes and promote positive parenting practices (A. G., aged 46, END).

On closer analysis of this *verbatim account*, one realises just how significant the role of civil society organisations and communities is, and what a crucial opportunity they represent in the process of early childhood development. By fulfilling the roles of monitoring, protection, prevention and education, these community-based organisations – whose local roots provide an effective means of disseminating and integrating new positive parenting practices – emerge as leading figures in the field, offering children aged 0 to 8 optimal opportunities for development within a well-adapted mesosystem. Available and well-documented research has even highlighted

that positive parenting plays a significant role in the development of socio-emotional and behavioural aspects during early childhood (Messiaen & Invernizzi, 2022, p. 1). This previous *quote* on the mobilisation of civil society and community engagement is echoed by the comments of the participant below, thereby reinforcing the earlier point:

‘There is already a great opportunity: the existence of organisations dedicated to supporting early childhood. The other opportunity we have is that the parents themselves, I would say, are committed to early childhood. Take, for example, one of the villages I supervise in Balaké today: previously there was no community childcare centre there, but now children aged three to five have a small community childcare centre where they are taught to read and write. That in itself shows the communities’ commitment to their children’s education. Now it’s a question of how best to guide people, train them, equip them and provide suitable resources – that’s what it’s all about. Otherwise, in terms of opportunities, I think the opportunities are there (H. S., aged 48, fecinU).

Reading through this account from our participant, it becomes clear that the momentum among parents to foster a genuine commitment to pre-school initiatives for their children is tangible proof of their determination to reverse the trend and break the cycle of poverty. As communities become aware of the lack of public investment in their local areas, they are organising themselves to set up early learning programmes whose sole aim is to give young children a good start in life. This surge of solidarity and the involvement of civil society and community organisations in local initiatives promotes the sustainability of these interventions and their adaptation to the local context. Hence the need to strengthen their capacity in terms of organisation, resources and integration into existing coordination mechanisms; this will undoubtedly enable them to eradicate poverty and transform their daily lives through the development of human capital. This is increasingly supported by research into the impact of community-based initiatives (Panet-Raymond & Lavoie 2011, p. 169; Bilodeau et al., 2014, p. 35).

4.1.3. The exosystem of early childhood opportunities in Guinea

The Guinean exosystem for children aged 0 to 8 offers a wealth of opportunities for qualitative transformation of the early years sector in Guinea. At least, this is what the data collected from institutional stakeholders who freely agreed to take part in this research suggest. As previously mentioned, the exosystem encompasses the various environments frequented by parents in which the developing child does not

participate, but which undoubtedly influence them. These may include associations, decentralised state bodies, media organisations or local authorities. These multiple and varied environments, which are external to the child, exert their influence through the parents who work in or frequent them. In the Guinean context, the exosystemic environment has been highlighted by stakeholders as brimming with genuine opportunities that can contribute to the harmonious development of children aged 0 to 8, as this sub-section emphasises.

4.1.3.1. Opportunities arising from the large number of committed partners and stakeholders

The Republic of Guinea is one of the countries that has particularly distinguished itself through a strong presence of technical and financial partners. Every year, the country continues to attract new partners willing to work alongside the government on the country’s various development projects. One is led to wonder whether this positive and continuous influx is the result of the population’s vulnerability or rather of the favourable business climate, despite a socio-political context that is at times unstable. Nevertheless, this substantial presence of partners and committed stakeholders – some of whom (such as certain UN agencies) have been established since the 1960s, whilst others (such as Plan International, for example) since the 1980s – contributes significantly to improving the early childhood environment, representing a major opportunity to steer the early childhood sector towards a brighter future. Alongside these institutions, we can mention international humanitarian NGOs (*ChildFund*, *Catholic Relief Services*, *Terre des Hommes*, *SOS Children’s Villages*) and stakeholders from development partner countries (the European Union, AFD, GIZ) and many others, bringing both expertise and financial resources to the country. Aware of this reality, their presence in Guinea is seen by stakeholders as a favourable circumstance that can be capitalised on by those working in the early childhood sector. The *direct quotes* from our participants below confirm this reality of Guinea’s exosystem:

‘The diversification of technical and financial partners presents an opportunity for the implementation of ECD policies in Guinea. I shall begin by mentioning UNICEF, which we have described as a key partner. Why? Because since 1998, there have been five-year programmes between this international organisation and the Guinean Government – specifically, the departments within the Guinean education system. Thus, within these five-year programmes, early years education – although initially the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs – was taken into account in terms of access, quality and management. In terms of access, this

involved supporting community initiatives in the establishment and management of community-based childcare centres. UNICEF therefore supported the National Directorate for Pre-school Education and Child Protection in raising awareness amongst communities in the programme's intervention areas. [...]

In addition to this key partner, there was also the World Bank, which supported the National Directorate of Pre-school Education and Child Protection as part of the Education Sector Programme (PSE1 and PSE2). Within PSE1, there was a sub-component (early childhood development) under the quality component of the PSE. The PSE also comprised the access component, the quality component and the management component. It was within the quality component that the early childhood development (ECD) sub-component was housed. So, at this level too, community support centres were built in six pilot prefectures across the country. I will mention Téliélé, Dalaba, Mamou, Dabola, Kouroussa and Mandiana. In these six prefectures, the project operated in two sub-prefectures, making a total of 12 sub-prefectures. [...] There are also international NGOs involved, such as ChildFund and Plan International.

ChildFund operates in two prefectures in the country (Dabola and Kindia), where it supports not only the construction of the CECs, the training of educators, and the provision of teaching and play materials for these CECs. [...]

Plan Guinea also ran a project in Foresterie, specifically in Gueckédou, where it supported local communities in building the CECs, which are managed by the communities themselves. Plan Guinea equips these ECCs with teaching materials and then trains locally recruited educators in early childhood care and education techniques. So they run activities in these centres and, at the same time, organise activities for parents. [...] I know that UNESCO supported us with a survey. [...]

This participant's comments highlight both the main technical and financial partners and their various contributions to the country's development process in general and to early childhood in particular. Although focused on the educational aspect, this *transcript* provides an insight into the external support provided by these institutions across various sectors (education, health, nutrition, protection) for the holistic development of children aged 0 to 8 in Guinea. Their support, aimed at raising community awareness of the importance of early childhood development, funding the construction and management of community care centres, and underpinning public policies, represents a genuine opportunity for the

country's future. The *transcript* below echoes that of the previous speaker in the following terms:

'Guinea benefits from the active support of international partners such as UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank, UNFPA, and international and local NGOs, which support the implementation of early childhood development programmes. These partners provide financial resources, technical expertise and monitoring tools to assist the Government in implementing effective policies' (A. G., aged 48, END).

This *verbatim account*, like the previous one, highlights the effects of the fruitful partnership between accredited international institutions and the Guinean state. This strong mobilisation of international actors, which takes the form of financial resources, technical expertise and monitoring tools, enables Guinea to begin a transition towards greater optimisation of interventions in essential early childhood development services. This will, of course, require a strong commitment from stakeholders at the strategic level and a clearly demonstrated political will at the highest level – essential conditions for a substantial improvement in children's well-being. The work of Basset & Nieto (2017, p. 2) on the 'Action Network for Early Childhood Development' show that the synergy of coordinated actions between institutional stakeholders, substantial budgetary allocation coupled with a full understanding of the importance of early childhood, are essential drivers of the harmonious development of children aged 0 to 8. This research is consistent with numerous other studies on the subject, such as those by Hyde and Kabiru (2006, p. 16); Irwin and colleagues (2007, p. 28); and Naudeau and colleagues (2012, p. 6).

4.1.3.2. The opportunities presented by the existence of the mass media

The existence in the Republic of Guinea of mass media such as television, radio, newspapers, the internet and telephone networks is of vital importance for the holistic development of children aged 0 to 8. They constitute an effective means of education, change and the promotion of best practice in both community and urban contexts. In fulfilling their roles, the media inform the public, expose abuses and various forms of violence affecting young children, and disseminate messages promoting positive parenting attitudes regarding the essential services (health, nutrition, education and protection) required for the harmonious development of young children. With decision-makers, they also play a leading role in advocacy on specific issues (social justice, water, the environment, urbanisation), the impact of which is closely linked to the daily lives of households. They also act as a warning system and citizen watchdog, thereby working to hold the authorities to

account and mobilise communities. All these actions fall directly within the framework of social improvement and well-being, of which children are the beneficiaries, thus constituting a major opportunity for early childhood development. The participants' *quotes* below help to illustrate how their work impacts the early childhood sector in Guinea:

'[...] The other opportunity we have is the existence of the media. People can access health information through the media. This could be rural radio stations. It could be television, and so on. Another opportunity is the country's mobile phone network coverage. The Ministry of Health can obtain information on infections, vaccination and the distribution of mosquito nets for children. The fact that we have a dense network capable of informing children and their parents is an opportunity (Mr K., aged 51, SMO).

On closer examination of this *transcript*, it becomes clear that the increased availability of communication tools such as radio, television and telephones for informing, educating and raising awareness has beneficial effects. Thanks to the proliferation of these communication tools, the authorities can be alerted to an outbreak that might occur in a specific part of the country through health workers, some of whom are now equipped with vehicles and telephones. Parents and children can also access accurate information on personal and food hygiene. This provides an opportunity for young children to experience appropriate all-round development. The interviewee's comments naturally corroborate those of the participant below regarding the benefits of the mass media in Guinea, a reliable driver of the holistic development of children aged 0 to 8:

'The growing involvement of the media and information technologies presents an opportunity for early childhood development. The media and information technologies can play a vital role in raising community awareness and in early childhood education. For example, radio awareness campaigns, television programmes and digital platforms have the potential to reach a wide audience, even in the most remote regions. The increased use of social media and mobile apps for early childhood education and parental training is a rapidly expanding field that can contribute to the rapid and widespread dissemination of good practices" (A.G., aged 48, END).

The emergence of press freedom in the Republic of Guinea over the last twenty years is a factor that could contribute to the harmonious development of children aged 0 to 8; this, at least, is what emerges from the analysis of this *verbatim transcript*, thereby confirming the comments of the previous participant. Greater use of the mass media in initiatives

promoting best parenting practices offers multiple benefits linked to the holistic development of young children, helping parents to understand the issues surrounding healthy growth and promoting a healthy, balanced diet (Cabañero-Verzosa & Elaheebocus, 2011, p. 375; Fonseca et al., 2011, p. 114). The mass media offer significant added value in terms of raising awareness and sharing relevant information within the protection chain (state, partners, communities, families) surrounding the developing individual. Hence the need to actively involve them in the implementation of various early childhood interventions.

4.1.4. The macro-system of early childhood opportunities in Guinea

Guinea's macro-system (economic and political context), with its vast economic, human and social potential, offers numerous major strengths that can be harnessed for the integrated development of young children. The empirical data collected as part of this research reveal a variety of opportunities at the macro-system level, the most frequently highlighted by stakeholders being the existence of mineral resources and the presence of a currently favourable policy framework. The abundance of natural resources (arable land, watercourses, timber and minerals), which are still undervalued, and the existence of a suitable policy framework constitute, according to the data, major strengths that can be harnessed to ensure optimal interventions in essential services for children aged 0 to 8.

4.1.4.1. Opportunity arising from the existence of mineral resources

Since the 1960s, the Republic of Guinea has continued to attract a rush of international firms. The abundant wealth of its soil and subsoil represents a rare opportunity to support early childhood development. If exploited rationally, this economic potential can generate significant financial returns for the Guinean Government. This would make it possible both to allocate optimal funding to pre-school, health, sports, child protection and child nutrition infrastructure, and to reduce persistent geographical inequalities between rural and urban areas in terms of coverage. The data show that the natural resources currently being exploited represent a sure pathway to profound and qualitative transformation of the current environment for children aged 0 to 8, ensuring they have a better start in life. The following *direct quotes* from our participants confirm this assertion:

'Yes. In Guinea, there are so many opportunities here that we can capitalise on to develop early childhood. The presence of international companies engaged in mining. This is a great

opportunity that we can seize, but our soils are also still very rich. We can make use of them, and there is also the availability of food. In Guinea, we are not starving. The soil is arable. So, all of this represents an opportunity we can seize. [...] We simply need to make it a national priority so that all these mining companies invest here. Instead of handing out billions to us (adults) who are already limited in our thinking. Why not use those billions to invest in early childhood so that we have thoughtful leaders tomorrow? Personally, I don't hold it against the people who throw stones here and there because they're... you've seen? Their way of thinking isn't the same. The time a young Japanese person can take to think things through – we Africans, particularly Guineans, can't manage even a tenth of that. We're already exhausted. So, there are plenty of opportunities (T. M. K., aged 47, IP).

Through these remarks, the participant highlights the many opportunities Guinea offers in terms of its soil and natural resources. Guinea is a country where everything is green, with vegetation consisting mainly of mangroves, open woodland, wooded savannah and dense forest, making the soil rich and suitable for agriculture. Numerous watercourses, spread across various river basins, water the country. In terms of its subsoil, mineral resources – the most significant of which are iron, bauxite, gold, diamonds and uranium – are still undervalued. This presents significant opportunities that can be seized for the benefit of young children. He believes that simply by making the sector a national priority, the companies currently exploiting Guinea's mineral resources will have made optimal investments in the sector, which will bring about a qualitative and sustainable improvement in the daily lives of children aged 0 to 8 in Guinea, enabling the country to develop the talent capable of shaping and advancing Guinea's future. The economic benefits arising from public investment in early childhood development services are highly advantageous for both stakeholders and the nation as a whole. These benefits stem from a reduction in crime rates, school drop-out rates and disease on the one hand, and the optimisation of financial resources on the other (Barnett & Nores, 2017, 81). This analysis of the opportunities linked to the existence of natural resources is not an isolated one. The majority of participants highlighted the many opportunities the country offers, as confirmed by the *verbatim quote* below:

'In my view, there are always favourable circumstances. As far as Guinea is concerned, it is really the economic potential that continues to attract investors. I suppose that if we had nothing beneath our soil, I don't know if we would have been visited to this day. So that is an opportunity from which the country can benefit, but then, how can we channel that benefit towards the development of children, who are the guarantors of the country's future? Because if, for example, children's

most fundamental rights are not guaranteed, it is in vain that we dream of establishing a sustainable development programme for the country. So, for me, yes. There are opportunities in terms of development potential. There are opportunities in that this potential itself attracts people to the country. We could really build on the fact that the investors who continue to come here could be key players in supporting children's development through various development programmes (D.G., aged 43, FECINU).

This *verbatim* echo the previous one by confirming that the country's economic potential is a key driver for stimulating massive investment in the environment for children aged 0 to 8 in the Republic of Guinea. An analysis of our participant's comments shows that Guinea is a prime destination for investors due to its vast mineral resources. This represents a clear opportunity to breathe new life into the various basic social services to which early childhood development remains closely linked. According to the participant, the formulation of a clear national strategy that engages multinationals operating in Guinea's mining sector as part of the response to the many problems threatening the well-being of developing individuals will have a positive and lasting impact on the early childhood sector in Guinea, offering young children greater benefits in adulthood. Children emerging from this crucial stage of life must be physically, cognitively, socially and emotionally ready to take full advantage of the various services available and to behave in a pro-social manner towards their communities. This presupposes that they have been well-nourished and well-cared for; that they have benefited both from secure attachment and from skills in mutually enriching interactions with their peers, being able to express their thoughts easily and being willing to learn more actively (Naudeau et al., 2012, p. 38). Numerous recent studies on the benefits of appropriate investment in the lives of children aged 0 to 8 support this research. Examples include (De Bodman et al. 2017, p. 5; Clerc & Dolé 2018, p. 1; Béhaghel & Gurgand 2023, p. 5).

4.1.4.2. Opportunities arising from a favourable policy framework

The inclusion of early childhood in sectoral policies is now a reality in Guinea. The existence of a favourable policy framework in the Republic of Guinea paves the way for greater consideration of the sector and for its sustainable and optimal development, given the many opportunities this represents for both stakeholders and beneficiaries (children aged 0 to 8 and their families). The establishment of institutions that promote the harmonious development of young children, coupled with the formulation of appropriate sectoral strategies and policies, demonstrates a political

commitment that is gaining momentum. The most significant institutions worthy of mention include the establishment of the National Directorate for Children (DNE), which falls under the remit of the Ministry for the Advancement of Women, Children and Vulnerable People (MPFEPV); the National Directorate for Family Health and Nutrition (DNSFN), which falls under the Ministry of Health and Public Hygiene (MSHP); the National Directorate for Pre-school Education (DNP), attached to the Ministry of Pre-university Education and Literacy (MEPU-A); The National Directorate for Labour and Social Legislation (DNTLS), housed within the Ministry of Labour and the Civil Service (MTFP); The National Directorate for Supervised Education (DNES), which falls under the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights (MJDH); and the Office for the Protection of Gender, Children and Public Morals (OPROGEM), attached to the Ministry of Security and Civil Protection (MSPC). In addition, there are inter-ministerial bodies such as the Inter-ministerial Committee on Nutrition. The establishment of all these mechanisms reflects a clearly stated political commitment, offering the various stakeholders (both state and non-state) the opportunity to optimise interventions in support of children aged 0 to 8. Furthermore, the existence of these mechanisms serves not only as a more effective tool for integrating or coordinating actions on the ground, but also as a legal and operational framework to guide the delivery of services (pre-school, health, sport, nutrition and protection), the benefits of which are still underestimated. The data show that the existence of favourable political will in the country presents an opportunity to be seized to develop the sector. The *verbatim quotes* below help to better illustrate this reality:

“The Government’s visible commitment represents a major opportunity. Guinea has reaffirmed its commitment to early childhood through the adoption of policies and strategies aimed at improving the health, education and protection of young children. The country has ratified several international conventions, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and has incorporated the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), which include specific measures for early childhood. The National Action Plan for Early Childhood Protection, together with the involvement of government bodies such as the Ministry of National Education and the Ministry of Health, demonstrates a growing political commitment to placing early childhood at the heart of national priorities. [...] The country has developed a multi-sectoral approach to meet the needs of young children. Several ministries (health, education, social affairs) are working together to provide integrated services. For example, the Maternal and Child Health Programme (PSMI) aims to improve the health of children under the age of five, whilst

initiatives such as pre-school education and child protection are gradually being taken on by the state (A.G., aged 46, END).

An analysis of our participant’s comments provides an insight into the Guinean state’s efforts to promote the holistic development of children aged 0 to 8. The implementation of policies across various sectors, coupled with the definition of intervention strategies; the ratification of international conventions on child protection; the country’s alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals; and multisectoral integration constitute a comprehensive approach to promoting the sector, stemming from the existence of a favourable policy framework. Although major constraints and significant challenges remain, Guinea’s political macro-system offers favourable conditions for stakeholders and actors already operating within the early childhood ecosystem in Guinea. The data show that the existence of this political will is an opportunity without which children aged 0 to 8 would not have benefited from the limited interventions currently in place in the sector. This surge in commitment, reflected in the ratification of various conventions and the implementation of various policies (on pre-school education, health, nutrition and child protection), stems from the State’s sound approach to working towards both improving the framework for early-velopment and increasing family incomes (Négrier, 2020, p. 11). The *verbatim quote* highlighted below confirms this reality of the Guinean policy framework’s predisposition towards the integrated development of children in Guinea:

‘The availability of policies relating to early childhood represents a genuine opportunity for Guinea. Often, when we meet with our friends (from other countries), they talk to us about certain things. Firstly, in terms of policy documents, Guinea has them. And the Guinean Child Protection System (SYPEG) that we have here – very few countries have one like it, though of course they have other forms and systems elsewhere. But when we tell them that here, you cannot carry out an activity without involving members of SYPEG, they say to us, ‘Ah! Your processes... that’s where the opportunities lie.’ And currently, at the level of services and institutions, we can see that topics related to children are being taught. Also, initially in Guinea, the training of social workers was done on the job. In other words, you learnt by being in the thick of things, but now the government has signed a contract with the ENI in Kindia to train social workers. And eventually, the Jean Paul II Centre here in Conakry was chosen to train social workers. But you see? You need someone at a high level to think about this sort of thing. It’s not just a matter of sporadic visits, where people come to film and say, ‘So-and-so is in charge of children.’ Otherwise, there really are opportunities available in terms of staffing, but there is a

serious lack of political will to make them a reality. So that's generally how it is in the context of child protection' (A. K., aged 46, EDM).

Analysing these comments from our participant, we can see that they echo those of the previous interviewee, thus confirming progress in the implementation of early childhood development policies in Guinea. One area of progress highlighted in this *transcript* is the training of social workers at the Kindia Teacher Training College and the Jean Paul II Centre in Conakry. Added to this is the establishment of Guinea's child protection system, which is structured from the bottom up, and the inclusion of early childhood in the country's various initiatives. The participant, however, goes on to highlight the lack of political will (already discussed in the previous section) to translate these various policies into concrete action. Political will remains the cornerstone for initiating genuine qualitative transformations in the environment of young children in Guinea. Without it, nothing can begin. It is from this that all possible interventions in favour of children aged 0 to 8 stem; at least, this is what the data collected as part of this research show. Senior officials at central government level who are committed to and support early childhood development make a significant contribution to the survival of young children by maximising their chances of success in adulthood (Irwin et al., 2007, p. 4). These findings are supported by numerous other studies advocating for increased investment in early childhood, including those by Bolduc & Manningham (2022, p. 353); Borri-Anadon et al. (2022, p. 6); and Pirard and his collaborator Garnier (2024, p. 10).

The early childhood environment in Guinea offers increasingly favourable conditions. In light of the significant data presented and interpreted in this section, it is clear that the Republic of Guinea is brimming with a multitude of opportunities that can be seized by stakeholders for the benefit of children aged 0 to 8. However, despite this wealth of assets, the sector remains, for the time being, trapped in a cycle of limited provision, seriously affecting the well-being of young children.

Conclusion

The landscape of early childhood opportunities in Guinea is a complex system, comprising multiple and interconnected environments. Each of these environments presents opportunities that have so far remained unexplored. To fill this gap, we undertook a rigorous, holistic analysis of the sector's enabling conditions, structured around the microsystems in which children live and spend their time; the mesosystems, which concern the interrelationships (communication)

between the various microsystems involved; the exosystem, referring to the various activities and involvement of parents or guardians; and the macrosystems, or global system, reflecting the norms, religious beliefs and policies (economic, educational, health, nutritional and protective) defined at national level. Given the comprehensive nature of the study, it should be noted that this article, which highlights data from institutional stakeholders and those implementing various interventions in this field, does not claim to have provided an exhaustive analysis of the many opportunities in early childhood in Guinea. Nevertheless, the analysis paves the way by providing an overview of these factors with a view to guiding both decision-making at national level and implementation at operational level.

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