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Applying developmental science to UNICEF programming for young children: Scenarios from China and Sierra Leone

The speaker will present a cross-sectoral community-based early childhood development (ECD) project in Sierra Leone, including the context, key interventions, theory of change, and emerging results. The presentation will highlight how developmental systems theory is applied on the project, for instance, focusing on promoting positive development in a challenging context. The speaker will also reflect on how her ECD programme experience in China has informed this project.

In Sierra Leone, among many challenges associated with poverty, the Under-five Mortality Rate and stunting rate are among the highest in the world, with the majority of the young children exposed to violent disciplining, and only 11 per cent of the young children attending pre-primary education. The community-based ECD project provided early stimulation and early learning opportunities for young children at ECD centres and through home visits in poor rural communities. In addition, the project supported parents and other caregivers to improve their child rearing practices in six key areas of ECD (nutrition, health, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), children protection, early stimulation, and early learning).

UNICEF SLCO provided technical guidance and funding for the project, and the Ministry of Education provided national coordination support and was committed to scale up the community-based model. The other key partners include local governments, other line ministries, religious leaders, NGO partners, local ECD experts, and communities.

After the presentation, the speaker will discuss with the participants how to better apply theories and research findings in developmental science to improve this project. The discussion will also be expanded to what are some of the ways to better bridge research with programming in the field, particularly for low-income countries like Sierra Leone.

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