Early Learning Programmes as micro-social enterprises:

unlocking women's economic participation through scaffolded support

Hopolang Selebalo, Victoria Duncan and Rebecca Hickman

This paper is a joint collaboration between SmartStart Early Learning NPC and Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator NPC.

This paper was originally developed for the Conference of *Financial Inclusion and Women Empowerment* in May 2025, as part of the G20 hosted in South Africa.

Funded by

IDRC · CRDI
International Development Research Centre
Centre de recherches pour le développement international

Canada

harambee YOUTH EMPLOYMENT ACCELERATOR

IMBE

smart start
GIVING EVERY CHILD THE POWER TO SUCCEED.

Foreword

Early childhood development has rightly become one of South Africa's most important national priorities. Research spanning decades confirms that the early years shape children's future learning, health and wellbeing, while also enabling parents and caregivers to participate more fully in the economy. Yet one of the sector's greatest strengths is still too often overlooked.

Across South Africa, thousands of women are running early learning programmes that do far more than provide care. They are entrepreneurs. They create livelihoods, sustain local economies, and deliver an essential public good in communities where formal services are often limited. Every day, they make countless business decisions while simultaneously nurturing the next generation.

This report makes an important contribution because it challenges us to rethink how we value these women and the systems that surround them. Too often, we expect extraordinary resilience from practitioners while providing insufficient support for them to build sustainable enterprises. Passion remains abundant, but passion alone cannot overcome barriers such as limited access to finance, complex regulatory requirements, inadequate infrastructure, or inconsistent income.

At IMBE, we see every day what becomes possible when women entrepreneurs are backed with practical business support alongside technical guidance. Equipped with the right tools, coaching and financial management skills, they build more resilient businesses that benefit children, families and entire communities.

This is why the concept of scaffolded support explored throughout this paper matters so much. The evidence shows that without it, incomes remain low and precarious; with it, women-led enterprises stabilise, grow and thrive. Sustainable change does not come from isolated interventions. It comes from building an ecosystem in which government, civil society, funders, financial institutions and intermediary organisations each play complementary roles in reducing barriers and enabling long-term success.

Government's commitment to expanding access to early learning by 2030 presents an unprecedented opportunity to grow one of South Africa's largest women-led entrepreneurship ecosystems. Achieving that ambition will require partnership at a scale we have not previously seen, together with a shared commitment to strengthening the systems that support early learning providers from start-up through to sustainability.

I hope this paper encourages further dialogue, deeper collaboration, and, most importantly, practical action. The returns speak for themselves: when we invest in women-led early learning enterprises, we are investing simultaneously in children's futures, women's economic participation and South Africa's long-term prosperity.

On behalf of IMBE, I congratulate Harambee and SmartStart on this thoughtful and timely contribution to the sector. We are proud to have been a part of this work and look forward to the partnerships and practical action it will inspire.

Samantha Maasdorp
Managing Director, IMBE

Abstract

Early learning programmes (ELPs) represent a crucial yet under-valued component of South Africa's social and economic landscape. As micro-social enterprises, home-and community-based ELPs serve as a source of income for thousands of women, while also providing developmental opportunities for young children and enabling primarily women caregivers to participate in work or study. Despite these benefits, ELP fees average just R218–R313 in quintiles 1-3 areas, resulting in nearly 90% of staff earning below the national minimum wage. Those delivering these programmes persistently face systemic barriers to financing, leaving many of them with limited pathways to sustainable earnings and livelihoods. **This paper examines how the provision of scaffolded support by the state and non-state actors – such as access to finance, training and resources – can de-risk the economic engagement of early learning providers.** Expanding state investment through wider subsidy disbursement, targeted grants, and optimised public employment programmes, can provide the necessary capital for women-led ELPs to be set-up and become sustainable. Additionally, simplifying regulatory frameworks and funding criteria is critical to ensuring that informal providers are not excluded from financial support. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also play a vital role in supporting the delivery of ECD services within communities. These organisations partner with ELPs to offer scaffolded support in the form of training and skills development, resources, business acumen, mentorship, as well as access to finance and upfront capital. **By leveraging both structured public investment and NGO intervention, ELPs can be provided with the wrap-around support required to move from financial precarity to viable, income-generating social enterprises. This is while simultaneously increasing access to quality early learning for children in low-income communities, and broader labour market participation by caregivers.**

Keywords: early learning programmes; home and community-based provision; women's economic empowerment; scaffolded support; micro-social enterprise; delivery systems; public employment programmes

Introduction

Despite growing recognition of the critical role that early learning programmes[1] (ELPs) play in benefiting children, women, and societies, much of the world—including South Africa—have yet to fully capitalise on the opportunities these present. While the value of ELPs in shaping children's development is increasingly acknowledged, there remains a significant gap in leveraging them as strategic investments capable of driving women's employment, job creation, and broader economic growth—particularly in low-income communities where their potential for transformation remains largely untapped.

Defined as the period from birth to eight years of age (UNICEF, 2022) Early Childhood Development (ECD) is crucial for a child's holistic development. According to the Nurturing Care Framework, ECD comprises five key components: good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, opportunities for early learning, and security and safety (WHO et al, 2018). Research demonstrates the profound and long-term impact of ELPs on children's schooling journeys. Quality early learning opportunities improve academic achievement, lower dropout rates, and ultimately foster healthier, more productive adults (OECD, 2020). Renowned economist, James Heckman (2013), highlights that the return on investment for early childhood care and education (ECCE) far exceeds that of any other stage of schooling, not only benefiting the child but also society in terms of reduced crime, greater social equity, and a more productive workforce, with up to 25% higher earnings in adulthood (Theirworld, n.d.).

The transformative potential of ELPs goes beyond child development. As micro-social enterprises, particularly in home- and community-based settings, ELPs provide income opportunities for women as providers, enable other caregivers—primarily women—to work or study, and meet a critical social need in underserved communities. However, South Africa's ELP landscape continues to face structural gaps in support and investment. Providers face deeply entrenched economic barriers, including limited access to finance, inability to access state subsidies due to complex compliance and registration requirements, and low or unpredictable income from parental fees. Most ELP practitioners earn below the national minimum wage (Thrive by Five, 2022).

ELPs require mechanisms to de-risk their establishment, daily operations and long-term growth. Referred to as *scaffolding*, these mechanisms offer temporary reprieve or bridge a gap, and can include:

- Expanded state investment through subsidies, grants or employment initiatives to provide the necessary set-up.
- Simplified regulatory frameworks and inclusive funding criteria, particularly targeted to informal providers.
- The provision of training and skills development, resources, business acumen, mentorship, and access to finance, often provided by NGO (non-governmental organisations) partners within the sector.

[1] For the purposes of this paper, we use the term *early learning programmes* or *ELPs* to refer to any pre-school programme attended by 0-5 year-olds in the absence of their parents, aimed at providing both childcare and early learning opportunities. In South Africa, ELPs are often referred to as 'ECD programmes', even though they form only one component of the broader Early Childhood Development (ECD) umbrella. Internationally, these services may go by various names —including early childhood care and education (ECCE), childcare, or early childhood education and care (ECEC).

These forms of support not only enable ELPs to set up and move onto a path of sustainability but also highlight the need for greater public and private investment in ECD. The case for such investment is compelling. One modelling approach (Theirworld, 2024) estimates that investing an additional 2.1% of GDP in universal preschool and childcare services in South Africa could increase female labour market participation by 54% in the medium term (year two); enabling 10.5 million more women to join the workforce over a three-year period; and potentially boost primary school enrolment rates, benefiting millions of children. This needs to be interpreted in the context of research by Kate Philip (2025), which notes that South Africa's labour market is characterised by persistently low demand and high exclusion, particularly for women, youth and people in marginalised areas. This means that care investments must be paired with deliberate strategies to expand labour absorption. Childcare provision itself presents one such strategy. This paper explores how ELPs—especially those operating in informal or under-resourced settings—can be better supported to serve as sustainable livelihoods for women. It asks — how can *scaffolded support* from the state and NGOs de-risk women's participation in the early learning economy?

By repositioning ELPs as a strategic site for investment—through targeted state financing, simplified regulatory frameworks, strengthened intermediary support, and partnership across the ecosystem to enable a holistic approach—South Africa can unlock the full developmental and economic promise of the early years.

The economic and social value of ELPs

This paper draws on two intersecting theoretical frameworks—feminist economics and systems thinking. A feminist economic lens foregrounds the often-invisible role of care work in sustaining both households and economies, challenging traditional economic models that undervalue or exclude these contributions (Rodriquez Enriquez, 2012). It recognises childcare not as a peripheral issue, but as an essential component of gender equity and infrastructure requirement for inclusive growth. Systems thinking, meanwhile, encourages a holistic analysis of the early learning ecosystem—understanding how policy, regulation, funding, and frontline provision interact to either constrain or enable access and sustainability (Matlhape & Hickman, 2025). Together, these frameworks offer a useful lens for understanding early learning programmes not only as services for children, but as embedded structures within broader economic and social systems.

Well-supported, ELPs can deliver a triple impact— they provide developmental opportunities for children; create income-generating work—primarily for women; and enable other caregivers, particularly mothers, to participate in education, training, or paid work. In addition, by contributing to the local exchange of goods and services, they strengthen the social economy in low-income areas.

Globally, women carry a disproportionate share of unpaid care work, spending nearly three times as many hours as men on domestic responsibilities, including looking after children (Ban, 2024). The lack of affordable, reliable childcare is a significant barrier to women's labour force participation. In 2023, 708 million women of working age globally were either not working or not looking for work due to caregiving responsibilities—17 times more than the number of men (40 million), who reported being outside the labour force for the same reason (ILO, 2024). Childcare was the single most cited reason for women leaving the workforce.

Within South Africa, Quarterly Labour Force Survey data indicates that "for every man staying out of the labour force due to homemaking responsibilities, more than eight women are in the same position" (Stats SA, 2025b).

This care gap has vast economic implications, with unpaid care work accounting for 9% of global GDP (ILO, 2018). Recent estimates suggest that implementing universal childcare could expand the global economy by up to US$3.4 trillion by 2030, adding more than 116 million women to the workforce (Eurasia Group, 2023). **Care (and early learning) structures are a necessary catalyst to advance gender equality, generating substantial returns in job creation, labour force participation, productivity levels, poverty reduction, human capital and tax revenue (Women20, 2024).**

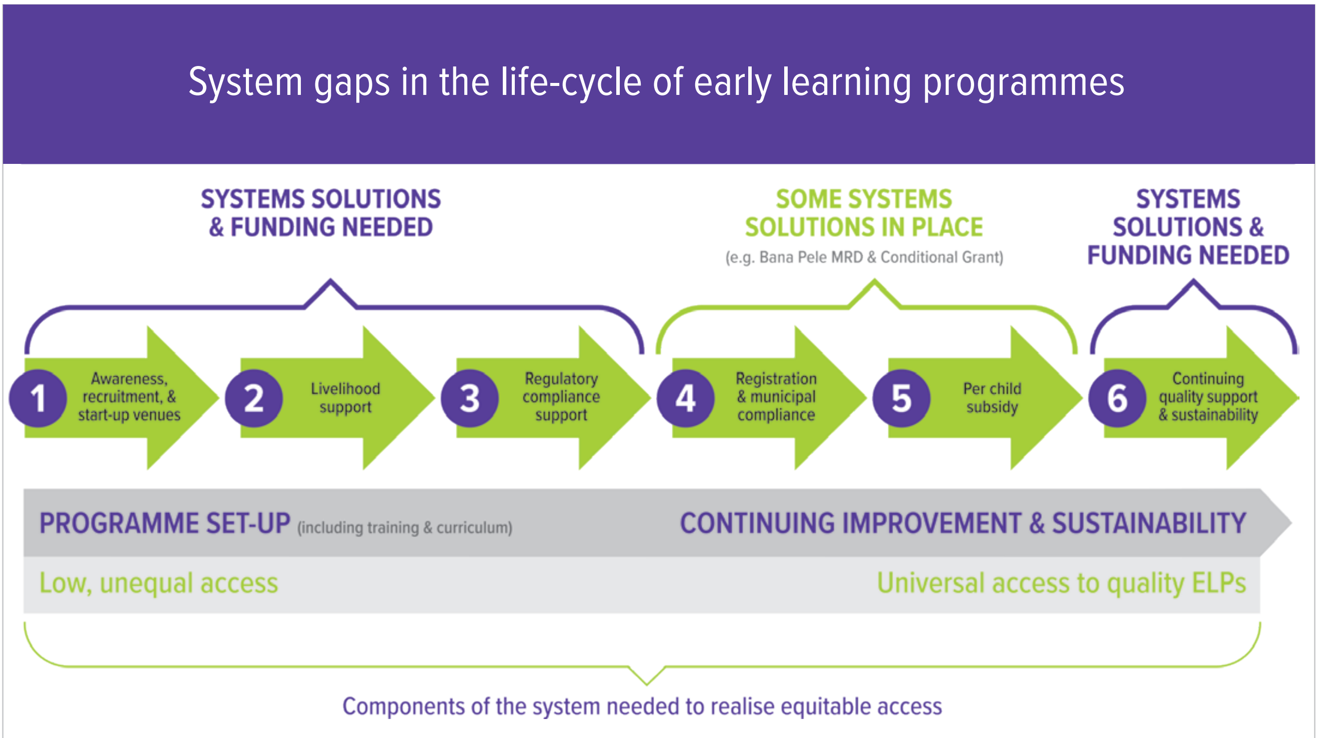
The wider benefits and contributions of ELPs are not well understood or strategically leveraged, in South Africa. Despite their proven impact, especially in low-income communities, ELPs remain informal, predominantly women-led (Thrive by Five, 2022), and largely excluded from public support. At the same time, South Africa faces high levels of unemployment, particularly amongst women and youth (Stats SA, 2026). ELPs offer a clear opportunity to unlock human potential—supporting women who may lack formal qualifications but have the capacity to provide quality early learning when they receive the necessary scaffolding support.

South Africa's early learning landscape - systemic barriers to entry and sustainability

Despite national commitments to achieving universal access to quality early learning by 2030, South Africa's ELP landscape remains constrained by systemic and structural challenges. These barriers not only restrict children's access to quality foundational development but also undermine the viability and sustainability of ELPs as an economic opportunity for women.

To illustrate these challenges, the figure below maps the typical life cycle of an ELP—from initial set-up through to long-term sustainability. It highlights where critical scaffolding and support are absent from the system, such as recruitment, access to venues, and livelihood support, alongside areas where partial systems exist.

Figure 1: System gaps from the perspective of the life-cycle of an early learning programme



Access to ELPs remains deeply unequal. Over 1 million children aged between three-and-five-years old are not enrolled in any form of ELP (Hall *et al*, 2024). This access gap is heavily skewed along socio-economic and geographic lines: while only 36% of children from wealthier families are excluded, up to 66% of children in the poorest households remain outside of any early learning provision (DBE, 2023). This is a staggering proportion given that two-thirds of South African children in this age group - around 4.5 million - reside in households within the poorest 40% of the population (Stats SA, 2022).[2] In rural and low-infrastructure areas (e.g. informal settlements), where 37% of children aged between zero-and-five-years-old live, opportunities for early learning are particularly scarce (DBE, 2023). Most early learning providers, particularly those operating from home- and community-based settings—struggle with severe financial insecurity. They typically operate as subsistence enterprises, relying on low and inconsistent fee income. Fees for ELPs in the lowest income quintiles (Q1–Q3) range from R218 to R313 per month (DBE, 2021).

[2] An income quintile is a method to measure the average (per capita monthly) household income of residents, ranking them from poorest to wealthiest, and then grouping them into five income quintiles (1 being poorest and 5 being wealthiest), each quintile containing approximately 20% of households.

The ECD subsidy—intended to support children from under-resourced homes who attend programmes in marginalised communities—is insufficient and inconsistently accessed (World Bank, 2023).[3] Even amongst those who do receive the subsidy, the amount is inadequate to cover core operational costs such as salaries, nutrition, and learning materials; and is compounded by challenges around subsidy payment delays, creating cash flow disruptions that risk programme stability.

In addition to financial constraints, **early learning providers face complex regulatory barriers**. Under the Children's Act 38 of 2005, ELPs must register with provincial departments and comply with a host of requirements, many of which are ill-suited to low-income or informal settings. Providers are often required to produce zoning certificates, approved building plans, and undertake costly infrastructure upgrades, which are frequently unattainable for operators in informal settlements or rural areas. As a result, many providers are unable to enter into the regulatory net and gain access to the ECD subsidy.

Early learning programmes, particularly those run by women in under-resourced communities, offer the potential for meaningful livelihoods—but without financial stability or regulatory inclusion, these opportunities remain fragile. The broader employment context highlights the urgency—in 2026, South Africa's unemployment rate for Black women stood at 40.5%, with broad youth unemployment (for those aged 18–34) at 54.6% (Stats SA, 2026). In 2022, over two million children under the age of five lived in households with no employed adults (Hall, 2024), while 22% of women not in education, employment, or training cited caregiving as the main barrier to economic participation (Brooks, n.d.).

Paradoxically, while the care burden keeps millions of women out of the labour force, there is a large, untapped pool of young, unemployed people—many of them women—who are both willing and able to work. Without systemic investment and structural change in the ELP sector, the ability to meet demand remains constrained. Many caregivers are unable to access services that would free up their time (due to barriers such as affordability, availability and accessibility), while the women best positioned to deliver those services—the providers—lack the financial and structural support to make them viable.

Early learning programmes, particularly those run by women under-resourced communities, offer the potential for meaningful livelihoods—but without financial stability or regulatory inclusion, these opportunities remain fragile.

[3] The ECD subsidy amount is inadequate to cover programme operating costs, which some recent costing work estimate at a minimum of R31 per child per-day.

Government as an enabler

Recent policy developments offer encouraging signs that the early learning sector is beginning to receive long-overdue attention. The Children's Amendment Bill holds the potential to create a more enabling regulatory environment—one that better reflects the realities of diverse ELP settings and supports more programmes to enter and stay within the system (PMG, 2024). Similarly, the DBE's first national 2030 ECD Strategy marks a significant step forward. It provides a unified, long-term vision for universal access to quality early learning, with an emphasis on equity, particularly for the most marginalised children. The strategy also highlights the sector's capacity to generate between 300,000–536,000 new jobs through expanded early learning delivery, making it one of the country's most powerful, untapped job creation opportunities (DBE, 2023; Wills & Leach, 2024).

Efforts such as the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) *Bana Pele Blueprint* create a cohesive roadmap to meet the goals of the 2030 ECD Strategy through ecosystem co-ordination, increased resources and optimised government systems. Glimmers of success are already being seen through:

- **The Mass Registration Drive**, which brings unregistered programmes into the regulatory net through a tiered framework. This model recognises that many providers operate in constrained environments and need time, support, and investment to meet full compliance requirements.
- **The Technical Task Team on ECD Red Tape Reduction**, established in 2023, has been working across departments and with local government to develop more enabling approaches to the municipal requirements for ECD registration.
- **Recent increases in budget allocations to the ECD sector**, signaling government recognition of the value of early learning services, and their contribution to social and economic growth. The funding boost of R10 billion in the 2025 National Budget, which increases the ECD subsidy from R17 to R24 per child per year marks a critical step toward making early learning a viable livelihood option in quintile one and two communities and moves closer to positioning early learning provision as a public service.

The progress made within government reflects that systemic change within the sector is feasible, particularly when matched with policy clarity and partnership across the ecosystem. **To further build on this work and catalyse universal early learning expansion, delivery capacity is required.** This speaks to the need to create robust delivery systems that ensure quality ELPs are available in every community, especially those historically underserved. In addition, there is also an opportunity for greater involvement from the economic cluster of government—particularly those focused on enterprise development and job creation—to fully realise ELPs as a lever for inclusive growth and local economic participation.

Scaffolding for scale to unlock the potential of women-led ELPs

For early learning programmes to operate as viable micro-social enterprises the women who provide them need more than just passion and resilience. Without structured support, providers are left to navigate an unforgiving system on their own, facing deep financial precarity and regulatory barriers that threaten the sustainability of their work. **Scaffolding provides a critical buffer—offering structured, strategic support that reduces risk, strengthens viability, and enables women to participate meaningfully and sustainably in the early learning economy.**

Scaffolded support refers to the set of enabling mechanisms that make it possible for individuals—particularly those in low-income or informal settings—to engage in economic activity sustainably. Data[4] from SA Youth (2024) reflects that when young people are left to 'hustle' on their own, incomes are low and precarious, averaging at R700–R900 per month. However, when individuals have access to scaffolding support, usually through intermediaries, monthly incomes become significantly higher, reaching R3000–R5000 (Harambee, 2024).

Within the early learning context, scaffolding may include:

- Funding during the pre-registration phase
- Access to basic infrastructure support, particularly for home-based settings
- Training, coaching, and mentorship—both pedagogical and enterprise-related
- Assistance in navigating registration processes and accessing public subsidies.
- Quality assurance and monitoring systems to support continuous improvement
- Micro-finance

[4] Sample size is 3,777

Insights on scaffolding in practice

SmartStart:

In the context of ELPs, SmartStart is one organisation that demonstrates scaffolding in practice - delivering early learning through a national delivery platform designed for scale. **Using a social franchise model, it works with a network of local implementing partners—referred to as '*franchisors*'—to recruit, train, and support women to establish and run home- and community-based early learning micro-enterprises.** With a focus on expanding access in under-served communities, the platform enables women—many of whom are unemployed or underemployed—to deliver affordable, quality early learning, while earning a livelihood. The *franchisors* provide ongoing support and oversight, helping ensure programme quality, consistency, and alignment with national standards across diverse local settings.

Central to SmartStart's approach is a structured and holistic support package designed to de-risk participation, ensure quality, and build sustainable micro-enterprises. The model includes recruitment, training, and on-the-ground coaching, alongside tailored support to meet registration requirements. After licensing, practitioners receive stipends to support income stability during the critical start-up phase, while business development training assists in strengthening operations and reducing attrition. Rather than leaving practitioners to navigate a fragmented system alone, the platform holds them within a supportive network and creates pathways to economic participation.

A Stoplight Livelihoods' evaluation (2022) conducted with SmartStart practitioners or '*franchisees*'[5], between 2021 and 2022, across the City of Johannesburg, City of Tshwane and Amahlati and Buffalo City, shows notable improvements in household earnings over time. For example **in the City of Johannesburg, more than half (54%) of SmartStart *franchisee* households surveyed indicated they were earning more than R5,000 per month, a 35-percentage point increase from baseline figures.**

Beyond income growth, the evaluation found notable gains in access to credit facilities. At baseline, *franchisees* in the City of Johannesburg, and Amahlati and Buffalo City described themselves as *"stuck"* when it came to access to credit. By endline, important shifts had emerged. **In Amahlati and Buffalo City, the proportion of *franchisee* households with access to formal credit nearly doubled, increasing from 21% to 44%**. These households not only gained access but were also able to manage their loans.

[5] Ninety (90) SmartStart franchisees completed the baseline surveys in 2021 and eighty (80) of the same SmartStart franchisees completed the second surveys in 2022.

SmartStart's model also delivers strong child development outcomes. An independent evaluation using the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM) tool found that children attending SmartStart programmes made meaningful developmental gains. In a representative sample of 551 children, **the proportion who were *'on track'* across key developmental domains—including executive functioning and emergent numeracy—increased by 20 percentage points, from 45% to 65%, over just eight months, while the proportion of children *'falling far behind'* nearly halved.** Notably, SmartStart programmes helped close the equity gap; the performance gap between children from the poorest and wealthiest households narrowed from 25 percentage points to just six. Compared to the nationally representative 2021 Thrive by Five Index; SmartStart children scored, on average, 11 points higher at endline.

IMBE:

Another example of scaffolding within the ECD sector is seen with IMBE, whose **12-month Accelerator Programme provides targeted business management support to ELPs through the development of financial and business acumen, and assistive technology.** IMBE supports early learning providers through practical interventions such as Growth Workshops, which help them strengthen their value proposition and plan for long-term growth. These sessions use simulations to build business and financial skills. Practitioners also receive support to manage their income and expenses through a digital tool that tracks finances and learner data— assisting them to run more sustainable programmes. **This data creates an alternative set of records that reflect the potential 'bankability' of ELPs, offering promising underwriting insights for future access to credit and insurance services.** Engagement with the digital tool is supported by a once-off, in-person onboarding session, followed by ongoing personalised advice. The tailored support fosters consistent app usage, strengthens sound financial habits, and grows practitioners' confidence —helping to secure the long-term sustainability of their programmes.

The Accelerator Programme also offers assistance with registration as a mechanism to unlock access to the ECD subsidy, through infrastructure assessment visits and the provision of soft and hard infrastructure tailored to the individual needs of each site. Ultimately, the wrap-around support provided in the programme is intensive, customised and keeps individuals engaged with IMBE past programme completion - creating a 'business partner for life'. A total of 4,727 practitioners have been through the programme with 88% still open and operational (IMBE, 2025). A 2024 study conducted on a sample of 1,039 practitioners indicate that **57% of those who participated in the programme had growth in some form, driven by increases in the number of children attending and in fees charged** (Firdale Consulting, 2024). Critically, this has had a direct impact on the earnings of ECD practitioners, with a small subset experiencing a rise in their real income of nearly R10,000 per month.

These two examples demonstrate what is possible when scaffolded support is deliberately structured and designed for scale. However limitations do exist – practitioners face regulatory barriers and childcare infrastructure in South Africa remains fragmented. Even the strongest non-profit models cannot carry the burden of system-wide transformation alone. Realising the full potential of ELPs will require the state to move beyond policy intent and invest in the delivery systems that allow programmes to set up, stabilise, and thrive.

Leveraging scaffolding support for systemic change

Achieving universal access to early learning requires more than just funding per-child programme costs. **It requires public investment in the full delivery system: the essential but often invisible components that make quality, affordable ELPs possible, particularly in underserved communities.** These include recruitment pipelines, public information campaigns, training, managed programme set-up, support for regulatory compliance, and venue and infrastructure assistance. They also encompass coaching, quality assurance, administrative systems, and business development support to help early learning sites transition from start-up to sustainability. These delivery system costs have remained largely invisible in government planning and budgeting—treated as optional extras rather than fundamental enablers of scale and quality.

In addition, **government must address a critical gap in support for new providers.** Currently, there is no formal strategy or funding mechanism to assist women who are in the early stages of establishing ELPs in low-income communities, where generating fee income is extremely difficult. Expecting them to do so without income support is both unrealistic and inequitable. What is needed is a targeted strategy to bridge the pre-registration income gap, offering stipends and funding support that enable women to establish services while meeting compliance requirements. This is not a long-term cost, it is a tapering one, offering interim support as they move to sustainability.

There is a clear precedent to draw on. Public Employment Programmes (PEPs), such as the Social Employment Fund (SEF), the Community Works Programme (CWP), and the National Youth Service (NYS), have demonstrated how temporary work opportunities and stipends can inject capacity into the system and de-risk participation. SEF enables practitioners to work while they get off the ground; NYS and CWP provide much-needed sector capacity in the form of additional classroom support, infrastructure maintenance, and nutrition services. **These interventions not only support the establishment of new programmes but also help sustain existing ones—while opening up critical pathways for young people to enter the ECD sector.**

Beyond the early phase, scaffolding must continue. **High-quality early learning depends on ongoing investment in training, infrastructure, coaching, and quality assurance.** This includes tapping into under-utilised funding mechanisms. The Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA), for example, is well-positioned to support practitioner development and skills-building. At the same time, better use of existing resources is also critical. The infrastructure component of the ECD conditional grant could be unlocked to support improvements in home- and community-based venues, many of which are excluded from current infrastructure funding due to ownership and/or zoning constraints.

Finally, scaffolding support need not be delivered by the state alone. Local NGOs and intermediary organisations already play a vital role in offering coaching, training, compliance navigation, and community trust—especially in areas where government presence is limited. But to meet the scale of national need, **these efforts must be supported by a clear framework that enables structured partnerships, not ad-hoc arrangements.**

Scaffolding is not an extra—it is the architecture that enables scale, sustainability, and equity. Without it, universal access remains out of reach. With it, we have a viable path to inclusive growth, better child outcomes, and meaningful livelihoods for thousands of women.

Conclusion

There is growing recognition within government of the importance of ELPs for young children, caregivers and as a source of job creation. Recent policy developments such as the Children's Amendment Bill, the publication of the 2030 ECD Strategy, the launch of the Bana Pele Blueprint and Mass Registration Drive, and the Presidency's ECD Task Team for Red Tape Reduction all signal a positive shift toward a more enabling environment for ELPs. These are welcome and necessary steps.

These shifts in policy lay essential groundwork, however realising the full potential of ELPs will require tackling the systemic constraints that continue to limit scale, sustainability, and equity, *and* the provision of support to address gaps that exist.

Home- and community-based ELPs represent a uniquely powerful lever for advancing both early learning outcomes and women's economic participation. Yet their full potential remains constrained by the absence of systems-level investment and coordination. Unlocking this opportunity requires a set of strategic shifts, such as:

- **addressing the income gap** that prevents women from establishing and sustaining programmes in the poorest communities through targeted, tapering support during the pre-registration phase;
- **recognising and resourcing enabling infrastructure**—such as recruitment pipelines, training, coaching, quality assurance, and administrative systems—as an essential part of the early learning delivery system; and
- **positioning NGOs, intermediaries, and private actors as core partners**, not peripheral players, in a national strategy for inclusive early learning.

ELPs offer an intersectional solution to some of South Africa's most persistent challenges, but realising this promise requires a fundamental shift in how they are valued and supported. With deliberate scaffolding to de-risk and sustain provision, they can move beyond fragile services to become enduring engines of child development, women's economic participation, and inclusive growth.

References

Ban, R. (2024), 'How strengthening the care economy can boost women's workforce participation', Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 21 November, Available at: https://www.gatesfoundation.org/ideas/articles/women-global-care-economy

Brooks, L. (n.d.), 'Supporting livelihoods in early childhood development drives multiple gendered benefits'. Independent Philanthropy Association South Africa, Available at: https://ipa-sa.org.za/public/supporting-livelihoods-in-early-childhood-development-drives-multiple-gendered-benefits/

Department of Basic Education [DBE], (2021), 'ECD Census 2021 Report', Pretoria: Department of Basic Education Available at: https://datadrive2030.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/ecdc-2021-report.pdf

DBE, (2023), 'South Africa's 2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programmes', Pretoria: Department of Basic Education, Available at: https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/ODG%20Workspace/2024Lekgotla/South%20Africas%202030%20Strategy%20for%20Early%20Childhood%20Development%20Programmes%20FINAL.pdf?ver=2024-03-13-105446-230

Eurasia Group, (2023), 'Women's economic power', 27 October, Available at: https://www.eurasiagroup.net/live-post/womens-economic-power

Firdale Consulting, (2024), 'IMBE Enterprise Incubator Data Analysis 2024', August.

Hall, K. (2024), 'Unemployment in the household', Children Count, University of Cape Town: Children's Institute, August, Available at: http://childrencount.uct.ac.za/indicator.php?domain=2&indicator=52

Hall, K., Almeleh, C., Giese, S., Mphaphuli, E., Slemming, W., Mathys, R., Droomer, L., Proudlock, P., Kotze, J., and Sadan, M. [Hall et al], (2024), 'South African Early Childhood Review 2024', Cape Town: Children's Institute University of Cape Town and Ilifa Labantwana, July, Available at: https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/SA-early-childhood-review-2024-FINAL.pdf

Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator [Harambee], (2024), 'Young people want to work, not wait', Johannesburg: Harambee, 13 June, Available at: https://www.harambee.co.za/young-people-want-to-work-not-wait/

Heckman, J.J. (2013), 'Invest in early childhood development: Reduce deficits, strengthen the economy', The Heckman Equation, Available at: https://heckmanequation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/F_HeckmanDeficitPieceCUSTOM-Generic_052714-3-1.pdf

IMBE Enterprise Incubator [IMBE], (2025), sample size = 4,727

International Labour Organization [ILO], (2018), 'Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work', Geneva: International Labour Office, Available at: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/@publ/documents/publication/wcms_633166.pdf

ILO, (2024), 'The impact of care responsibilities on women's labour force participation', Statistical Brief, October, Available at: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/GEDI-STAT%20brief_formatted_28.10.24_final.pdf

ILO, (2025), 'Women at Work in G20 countries: Progress and policy action in 2024', G20 South Africa 2025 Labour and Employment Ministers' Meeting, July, Available at: https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/250729_G20_Women%20at%20Work%20report_final.pdf

Matlhape, G. and Hickman, R. (2025).' A different policy lens for at-scale early learning delivery', 5 February, Apolitical. Available at: https://apolitical.co/solution-articles/en/a-different-policy-lens-for-at-scale-early-learning-delivery-487

OECD, (2020), 'Early Learning and Child Well-being: A Study of Five-year-Olds in England, Estonia, and the United States', OECD Publishing, Paris, Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2020/03/early-learning-and-child-well-being_74042660/3990407f-en.pdf

Parliamentary Monitoring Group [PMG], (2024). 'Call for Public Comment: Children's Amendment Bill [B19 – 2023]', 14 May, Available at: https://pmg.org.za/call-for-comment/1478/

Philip, K. (2025), 'Public employment programmes in South Africa's changing social protection landscape', Agence Française de Développement (AFD), 10 January, Available at: https://www.afd.fr/en/ressources/public-employment-programmes-south-africas-changing-social-protection-landscape

Rodriquez Enríquez, C. (2012), 'Care: the missing link in economic analysis?', CEPAL Review, no. 106, April: pp. 23-35, Available at: https://repositorio.cepal.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/9cd897cb-ba52-4a88-a29b-5fc39b1ba377/content

SA Youth Platform Data [SA Youth], (2024), sample size=3,777

SmartStart, (2025), 'Briefing 1: Summary of Findings – SmartStart Child Outcomes Evaluation 2023', Available at: https://smartstart.org.za/files/briefing-1.pdf

Statistics South Africa [Stats SA]', (2022), 'What do South African households look like?', 23 June, Available at: https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=15473#:~:text=%5Bi%5D%20An%20income%20quintile%20is,7%25%20owned%20a%20land%20line)

Stats SA (2025a), 'Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) Q2:2025'. Available at: https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02112ndQuarter2025.pdf

Stats SA, (2025b), 'Gender Gaps Persist in South Africa's Labour Market', QLFS Q2 2025, August, Available at: https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=18668

Stats SA (2026), 'Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) Q1:2026'. February. Available at: https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02111stQuarter2026.pdf

The Stoplight Livelihoods Project, (2022) 'SmartStart – Impact Report', Available upon request.

Theirworld, (2024), 'Every Family, Every Child: The case for investing in the early years to break cycles of poverty and inequality', An Act for Early Years Report, September, Available at: https://actforearlyyears.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/261/TW_REPORT-OCT-2024.pdf

Theirworld, (n.d.), 'Early childhood development', Theirworld Resources, Available at: https://theirworld.org/resources/early-childhood-development/

Thrive by Five, (2022), 'Baseline assessment: Technical report', Department of Basic Education, Available at: https://thrivebyfive.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Baseline-Assessment-Report.-2022-1.pdf

United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], (2023), 'Early childhood development: UNICEF vision for every child', New York: UNICEF. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/media/145336/file/Early_Childhood_Development_-_UNICEF_Vision_for_Every_Child.pdf

Wills, G. and Leach, G. (2024), 'Early childhood development in South Africa: Current and future workforce requirements', Ilifa Labantwana & RESEP research report, July, Available at: https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Ilifa-HR-research-report-V6.pdf

Women20, (2024), 'W20 Communique 2024 Brasil', November, Available at: https://women20.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Copia-de-Communique-V7.docx.pdf

World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund and World Bank Group [WHO et al], (2018), 'Nurturing care for early childhood development: a framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential', Geneva: World Health Organization. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. Available: https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/272603/9789241514064-eng.pdf

www.harambee.co.za www.imbe.org.za www.smartstart.org.za