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BUILDING LOCAL ECD KNOWLEDGE: EVIDENCE FROM THE SOBAMBISANA INITIATIVE





BUILDING LOCAL ECD KNOWLEDGE: EVIDENCE FROM THE SOBAMBISANA INITIATIVE

Ilifa Labantwana is a national Early Childhood Development Programme in South Africa. Ilifa Labantwana is concerned with the design and testing of scalable integrated and affordable ECD models which can be taken forward to ensure that all children in South Africa have access to the services they need to develop to their full potential. It is within this context that Ilifa funded five organisations to test what they believed would be workable models in the context in which they were working. What emerged was a community of practice known as the Sobambisana (Help each other) Initiative.

The Sobambisana Initiative was carried out over a four year period and tracked by a robust research process focusing on monitoring and evaluation the models being implemented. Based on this research, a series of five learning briefs has been published, this is the second in the series. It focuses specifically on ECD as a development concern in a South African context, offering lessons learned from the Sobambisana interventions.

Sobambisana and ECD policy

The provision of early childhood development services is a development priority in South Africa. Government is aiming to rapidly scale up services for young children, giving priority to the 2.5 million poorest and vulnerable children. The National Integrated Plan (NIP) for ECD 2005 - 2010 and the Children's Act No 38 of 2005 provide the framework for delivering a comprehensive range of ECD programmes and services to children under school-going age. Features of the NIP include:

- Integrated and inter-sectoral service delivery;
- A comprehensive package of services (including birth registration, maternal and child-health services, immunisation, nutrition, referrals for social security and social services, early learning stimulation and psychosocial programmes);
- Service delivery at a range of sites ranging from ECD centres to communities and homes;
- Multiple approaches to developing young children, including direct services, training practitioners and educating parents and caregivers, promoting community development and building public awareness about the needs of young children.

As ECD centres normally do not reach the poorest, youngest and most vulnerable children, a particular priority of the NIP is to support other programmes and approaches so that access can be increased.

The scaling up of services is normally understood as offering access to greater numbers of people in an area or to new target groups, but it can also involve offering a wider range of service components and improving service quality.

It is essential that ECD services are scaled up using the best available evidence of such interventions. South Africa has limited evidence of the effectiveness of interventions to promote ECD, apart from some studies of centre-based provision. Little is known about other non-centre-based models that could be taken to scale. We have therefore largely relied on what has been found to be good practice in high-income countries and on the limited evidence from low and middle-income regions.





Overall Sobambisana goals and interventions

The Sobambisana Initiative explored a range of approaches to the delivery of services in terms of the priorities of the NIP. It aimed to establish the effectiveness of models in addressing the needs of vulnerable children, especially those who have been out of the ECD service loop. Sobambisana also investigated what worked in different contexts, rural and peri-urban, as well as the length and intensity of participation required in programmes to make a difference to children and their caregivers.

Specifically, the goals were to:

1. Increase access to early childhood-development services for children from vulnerable households and communities who are currently excluded, by means of the provision of home visits and community playgroup programmes;
2. Assess the effects of these programmes on child development;

3. Assess whether home visiting improved the quality of care and early stimulation received by children;
4. Improve the care and learning environments of community ECD centres so as to enhance the quality of programming for young children;
5. Engage stakeholders in the community and government to improve the provision of integrated, holistic services to vulnerable young children and their families; and
6. Assess the impact of the Sobambisana interventions on children once they reach Grade R.

Programmes were implemented in six communities in four provinces by five not-for-profit (NPO) ECD Resource & Training Organisations (RTOs). These are listed in Table 1.





Table 1: Sobambisana interventions conducted by each NPO

Interventions	NPO ECD Organisation				
	Training & Resources for Early Education (TREE)	Khululeka Community Education Development Centre (KCEDC)	Early Learning Resource Unit (ELRU)	Ntataise	Centre for Early Childhood Development (CECD)
	Indaka KwaZulu Natal	Queenstown area Eastern Cape	Lusikisiki Eastern Cape	Rammulotsi Free State	Grabouw Western Cape
Centre-based training and enrichment to improve ECD centre quality	X	X	X	X	X
Advocacy with government structures to improve services to young children	X	X	X		X
Home-based interventions to improve health, nutrition and early learning environments of children not in formal ECD		X	X		X
Community playgroups to provide ECD education for parents and stimulation for children not in formal ECD	X			X	
Parent education by means of workshops		X		X	X





Evaluation design

The Sobambisana Initiative is the first attempt in South Africa to develop a local base of evidence for interventions that seek to improve social-sector ECD services.

Commencing in April 2008 and terminating in December 2011, the evaluation was fourfold:

- 1. Participatory evaluation:** partners were introduced to the methodology for evaluation and the importance of regular monitoring of programme implementation and beneficiary participation. Monitoring tools were developed and the evaluation of outcome and impact was designed collaboratively. Instruments for measuring the quality of an ECD centre, adult outcomes and child-development outcomes were agreed upon with implementing partners and used for evaluation. These were sourced from international and national literature. Most were standardised. Where necessary, local adjustments were made.
- 2. Implementation evaluation:** to assess whether programmes had reached their intended beneficiaries and whether they had been implemented as designed. Lessons learnt in each intervention were compiled following interviews with programme staff and beneficiaries. These lessons are important for scaling up the programmes in other areas.

3. Outcome evaluation: to measure the effects of the interventions on the quality of ECD centres, on household safety and hygiene, on childcare and stimulation, on children's cognitive and language development and on the responsiveness of local authorities to the needs of vulnerable families and young children. Children were assessed on growth status (height and weight for age) and cognitive and language development. The outcome of home visits was evaluated using quasi-experimental designs that compared children and caregivers who had received Sobambisana interventions with those who had not.

4. Impact evaluation: More than 300 children were tested in Grade R to measure the long-term impact of home visits, community playgroups and attendance at a community ECD centre. The performance of children who had participated in one or other of the Sobambisana interventions was compared with those who had no exposure to an ECD programme. Indicators included children's growth status, their levels of cognitive and language development, their numeracy and their readiness to learn.

Evaluation design

NPO ECD Organisation					
2008	2009 – 2010		2009 – 2010		
1. Start Up	2. Outcome Evaluations		3. Outcome Evaluations	4. Impact Evaluation	
1. Develop relationship with partners. 2. Develop Evaluation Designs & Tools.	Partner Interventions Enrol First Cohorts		Partner Interventions Enrol Second Cohorts		Grade R Child Testing
	Monitoring Implementation				
	Child, Audit and ECD Site Assessments				
	Baseline	Follow-up	Baseline	Follow-up	





In the context of scaling up services for vulnerable young children and their families, several promising findings were made from the outcomes and impact evaluations of the Sobambisana Initiative. Key findings from this study are presented in Learning Brief 1: Towards Effective ECD: Evidence from the Sobambisana Initiative.

How far does the Sobambisana evaluation take us and what are the limitations?

The Sobambisana evaluation sought, among other goals, to improve the evidence for ECD service delivery to those children and their caregivers who experience poverty and other deprivation.

The implementation-evaluation component provides us with a number of pointers as to what is required for sound programme delivery. In that regard, sight must not be lost of the fact that the quality of the implementation makes a critical difference to the achievement of the desired outcomes. No matter how well the programme is designed, if it is not delivered according to the necessary standards, the desired results will not be realised.

Implementation evaluation also draws attention to the need for those developing programmes in South Africa to be aware of what has been found to work locally and in other parts of the world. This is very important as such knowledge can assist local organisations to improve their programmes while also reducing the likelihood that ineffective interventions will continue to be delivered.

The evaluation showed that, regardless of the effort put into community and site-based formal ECD programming, the child and her home environment plays a significant role in moderating the influence of the programme.

Children who were malnourished and who started the intervention well below the norm for their age regarding cognitive development showed little change as a result of the intervention.

This observation indicates that we have to be realistic about what can be achieved in community-based programmes with children in very compromised circumstances. It is clear that holistic programmes that provide support to their caregivers and assist them in accessing the necessary services will be of great benefit. However, early deprivation may be too challenging to overcome without intensive, long-term support.

While programmes to improve children's readiness for school are necessary, in order to achieve the best outcome for children in poor circumstances, such programmes need to be nested within an holistic approach.

The Sobambisana evaluation provides us with a number of important findings and lessons. However, there are methodological limitations. In order to test the effectiveness of the programmes, one should have a group that does not receive the programmes for comparison purposes. For a number of reasons, this was possible only in the evaluation of the Sobambisana home visiting programmes. In the evaluation of impact, however, it was possible to compare children who had received no intervention with those who had received one or other Sobambisana programme. While not an ideal method, the comparison gives us a sense of the relative effects of exposure to different types of early childhood programmes on the status of children once they are in Grade R.

The goal was to develop evidence of the effectiveness of provision of ECD services to those who are most vulnerable. While Sobambisana takes us some distance, if we want to be confident in our claims about the effectiveness of community-based programmes for improving child-development outcomes in particular, large samples with rigorous research designs are essential.

The Sobambisana Evaluation was conducted by Andy Dawes of the University of Cape Town Department of Psychology together with Linda Biersteker and Lynn Hendricks of the Early Learning Resource Unit.

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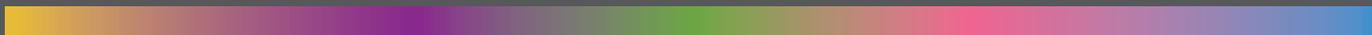
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Ilifa Labantwana is a multi-donor partnership which supports integrated early childhood development (ECD) in South Africa. The donor partners include the ELMA Foundation, the UBS Optimus Foundation and the DG Murray Trust. Ilifa Labantwana aims to increase access to, and improve the quality of integrated early childhood development services for children in under-served communities; and to support South African policy implementation of integrated ECD interventions in a sustainable manner.



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