

SOCIAL FRANCHISING

Social Franchising and the Power of the Community Work Programme applied to Early Learning Playgroups in North West Province

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A key challenge in South Africa and globally is how to scale ECD services to reach marginalised children, while at the same time maintaining quality standards. This challenge calls for solutions to multiple systemic issues, such as human resourcing, financing and quality assurance. Ilifa is working in partnership with government and Non-Governmental Organisations to explore the delivery of early learning playgroups through a social franchising model that draws on the human resource pool created through the government's Community Work Programme (CWP). The CWP component contributes the finances to cover stipends for playgroup facilitators. The social franchising component provides the mechanisms for standardising inputs and quality across multiple sites. In partnership with government, Cotlands, the Social Franchising for ECD project (SFECD) and the Rural Development Foundation (Lima) – which brings extensive expertise of working with the CWP programme; Ilifa is rolling out playgroups in four districts in North West. The reflections below provide insights into the process as it is unfolding.

Reflections on Social Franchising for ECD

In 2012 there were 5.3 million children under the age of five living in South Africa. While child poverty levels have fallen by as much as 15% over the past decade, the majority of South African children continue to live in poverty.¹ At the same time, the expansion of global awareness of the importance of ECD as a 'powerful equalizer'² and interest in promoting ECD – particularly for children from disadvantaged population groups – has grown. However, a key obstacle remains in the historic demographic poverty patterns which are replicated when it comes to accessing key ECD services, with only 20% of children from the poorest households attending an early learning programme.

Another key constraint, along with insufficient funding, has been the institutional landscape for ECD provision. ECD services are largely provided by the non-profit sector, without any guarantee of state funding to achieve specific targets of coverage.

Recognising the importance of early learning to children's later success as well as the huge gaps in provision, the SFECD



project was funded by the DG Murray Trust to conceptualise a pragmatic and low-cost solution to expanding access to early learning with rapidity and quality. Social franchises operate across a range of sectors, including health care and education, and are set up to maximise social impact instead of profits. Drawing from the systems and processes in commercial franchising that ensure a consistent range of services, social franchising typically creates an organised network of providers, which achieves economies of scale in common activities and processes, and utilises common metrics to monitor and assess performance.

Now supported by three key investors, the overall objective of the SFECD project is to build a mass-scale provisioning mechanism of early learning opportunities, focusing on play as learning, through informal playgroups and child-minding programmes, aimed specifically at the three to four year age

group. This social franchise mechanism aims to enable 75% coverage of the poorest two-thirds of three to four year olds by providing these children with quality early learning experiences.

In partnerships like the one being discussed in this article, the primary role of the SFECD project is to bring the design thinking for delivery at scale. Some examples of this design thinking include the choice of community playgroups over ECD centres. The set-up of playgroups is substantially quicker and less costly than centres, as playgroups rely on shorter hours, less qualified staff and use of existing infrastructure – but playgroups can still be effective³. Further evidence of design lies in finding standardised tools which can consistently select playgroup facilitators who are most suited to the job.

The Ilifa partnership provides the opportunity to test how playgroup delivery can be integrated into the Department of

Social Development (DSD) and the CWP in specific wards and districts, while assessing the effectiveness of playgroups and the opportunities and constraints to scaling up.

Some of the initial lessons include:

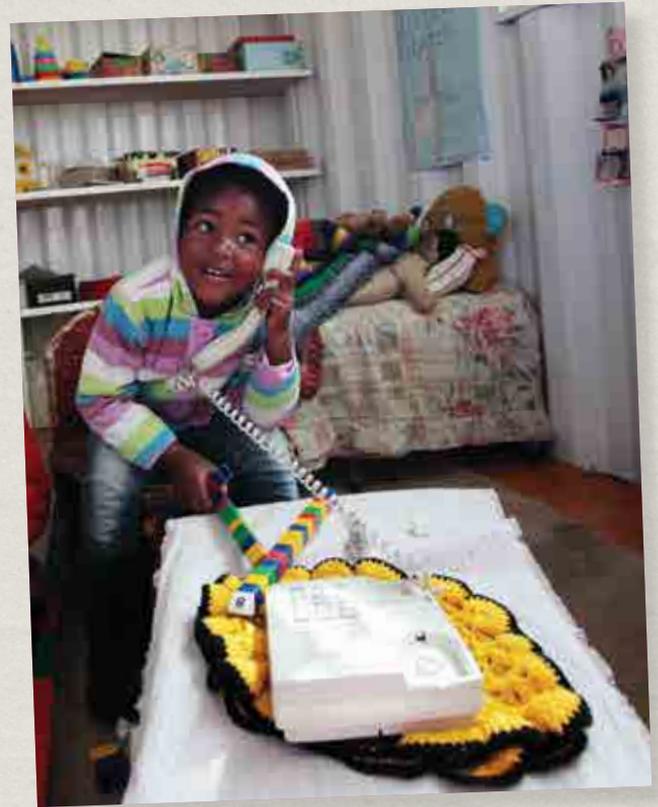
- The need for national-level agreements that capture the vision of scale-up and which provide the framework and support for local implementation.
- The importance of up-front agreements between all local partners that clearly map out the different roles and responsibilities.
- The skills, capacity and time to plan and learn together, while taking ownership for specific functions, within a multi-stakeholder partnership.
- The balance between local adaptation (for example to meet requirements of a rural, sparsely populated province) with the requirements for standardisation and quality assurance and how this impacts on costing and financial planning.

The rollout of playgroups through CWP is being piloted in North West as the first stage of operations for social franchising ECD. Cotlands and Lima have partnered with Ilifa and SFECD to implement and embed the early learning playgroups in North West. Their experiences below expand on some of the system integration lessons emerging from CWP implementation.

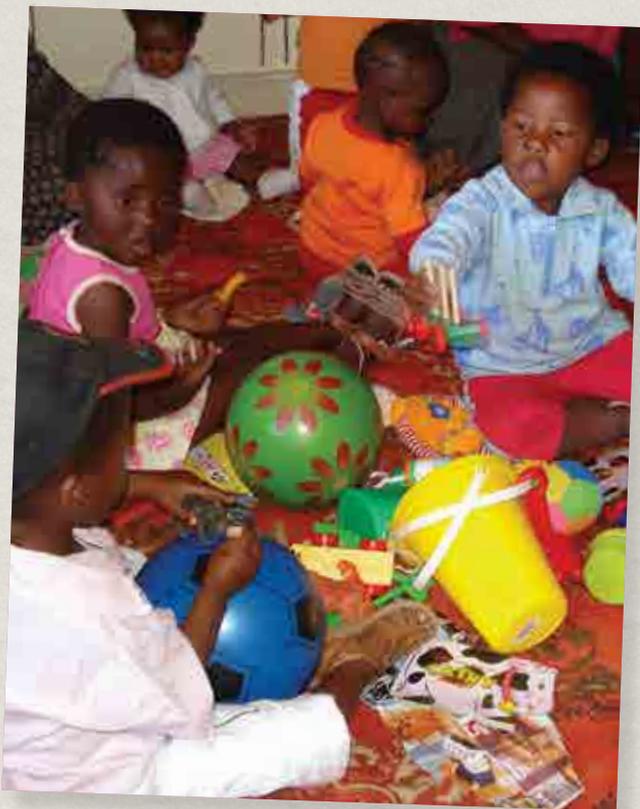
Lima reflections: Modelling early learning playgroups through CWP

The Community Work Programme is a national public employment programme. Working age individuals from the poorest households are recruited and paid a minimum wage stipend to perform “useful work” that benefits the community. The CWP is governed at local level by a multi-stakeholder forum led by the municipality. The national custodian is the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), with provincial government supporting the NGO implementing agents who carry out the programme. In our playgroup model, CWP participants are selected by Ilifa partners for training and support as early learning playgroup facilitators.

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Systematising playgroups into the DSD is a process which will require time. The process will involve action, evaluation, re-drafting plans and then modelling and testing those – all in the hope that eventually, bit by bit, all the required components would be in place and playgroups would form part of the non-centre-based system in North West.



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In order to achieve this goal, partnership with COGTA is a very desirable goal for Ilifa. However, the process of aligning an emerging early learning playgroup model with CWP norms and standards has proved both exciting and immensely challenging. On the positive side, COGTA has realised the value and potential of early learning playgroups to not only have powerful impact on ECD provision in communities where most children cannot access ECD centres, but importantly, to offer valuable training, work experience and potential career prospects for CWP participants. As a result, the department has enthusiastically endorsed and supported the partnership in North West.

With all the good will in the world, partners with different agendas and priorities, different methods and approaches are nonetheless bound from time to time to face challenges. The key elements of successfully negotiating these new and sometimes awkward spaces in North West have so far proven to be a commitment to partnership and the common goal.

In North West, despite well-structured planning meetings between the stakeholders, a number of unforeseen challenges have appeared at times when the implementation process was already in full swing. One such example is the non-negotiable requirement that CWP participants physically sign a register upon arriving at and departing from their work sites daily, in the presence of a CWP coordinator. Second, is the requirement that CWP participants work two 8-hour days a week. The Cotlands early learning playgroup model, based on research around ECD good practice for dosage, recommends facilitators spend 4 hours a day, three days a week with their playgroups and another morning in training and/or a mentored review of their practice. The CWP register is not designed to easily accommodate this structure of working and therefore became logistically problematic for both the CWP implementing agent and the Ilifa implementing partner.

Invariably, however, when people believe in the value of the work and the impact it promises, they will work together to find solutions. The dedicated problem-solvers from the various parties at all levels of this partnership have succeeded in surmounting these and other challenges that have arisen. If we continue with this level of commitment and can get this model to work in North West, the positive impact on ECD provision nationally will be significant.

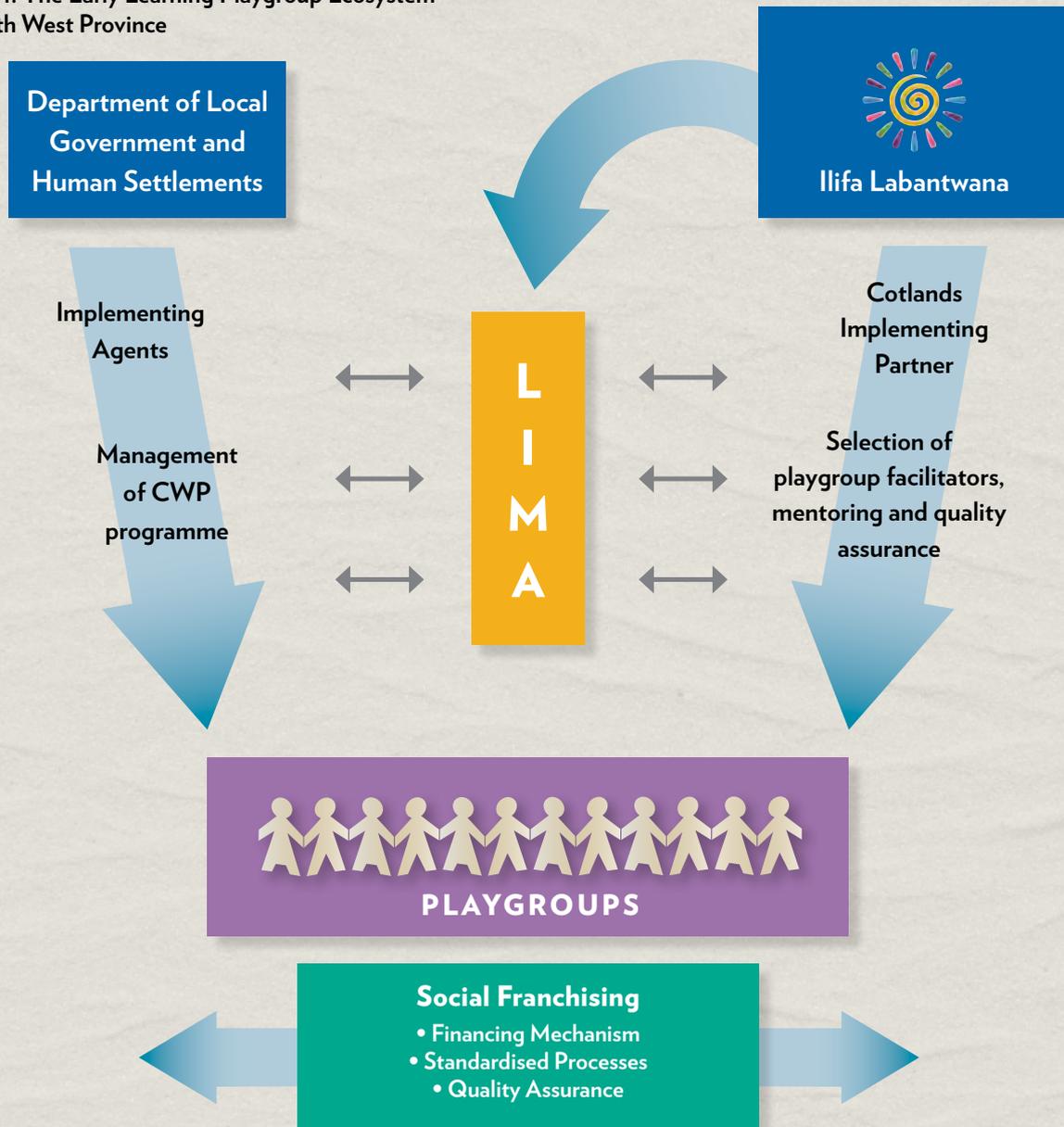
Cotlands reflections: Practical lessons from playgroup implementation

The image of building an aeroplane while in flight comes to mind when reflecting on the process of implementing the playgroup programme in North West. The classic definition of systematisation – referring to order, organisation and interdependence – did not initially reflect how the programme was conceptualised and operationalised.

Initial conversations were overly ambitious and occasionally ambiguous. However, the teething problems became lessons and the implementing partnership never lost sight of the hugely innovative and exciting end goal of taking playgroups to scale. At the start of this year, the series of conversations focusing on implementation started giving shape to the aeroplane we were building.

So, how did it take flight? Simply, we just started. As the playgroup facilitators, Cotlands realised that starting the process

Figure 1: The Early Learning Playgroup Ecosystem in North West Province



would be the catalyst to identifying what other elements should be considered within this system.

The task was to establish 40 early learning playgroups and 10 toy libraries, to reach a total of 800 children aged three to four years in predetermined geographical locations. Community workers were selected, trained and supported to become early learning playgroup facilitators by mentor-trainers employed by Cotlands and toy libraries. Cotlands used tried and tested tools in the process – an operational calendar, a basic project process map and a project plan detailing implementation.

The project plan provided a road map. By mid-April, the first playgroups took off. The newly trained playgroup facilitators were given a week to find venues and to register children. In certain identified wards there were no children meeting the criteria, which resulted in Cotlands having to re-think whether playgroups should be established in these areas. The first two in-service training sessions focused on the content of week one's and week two's playgroups, as well as agreeing on job descriptions, determining logistics and issuing supplies.

The required systems and processes were designed “in flight”, as and when required. The guiding principle was to start small, model, test and learn before proceeding. The greatest lesson learned during this period was the importance of effective communication. A single oversight can be potentially harmful to partner relationships and threatening to the programme.

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Endnotes

- 1 Statistics South Africa (2004; 2012). General Household survey 2003 and 2011. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katherine Hall, Children's Institute, UCT.
- 2 Irwin, L.G., Siddiqi, A. and Hertzman, C. 2007. *Early Child Development: A Powerful Equalizer. Final Report for the World Health Organization's Commission on the Social Determinants of Health.* Vancouver: HELP/WHO.
- 3 Cambodian children attending home based groups offered through village mothers groups, facilitated by a core mother with a short training, had substantially



better development outcomes than children who had no ECD input, though children in high quality state preschools did better (Rao, N., Sun, J., Pearson, V., Pearson, E., Liu, H., Consta, M. A., & Engle, P. L. (2012). Is something better than nothing? An evaluation of early childhood programs in Cambodia. *Child Development*, 83(3), 864- 876). Data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children has shown significant independent associations between playgroup participation and learning and socio-emotional outcomes for children aged 4 to 5 years (Hancock, K., Lawrence, D., Mitrou, F., Zarb, D., Berthelsen, D., Nicholson, J., Zubrick, S. (2012). The association between playgroup participation, learning competence and social-emotional wellbeing for children aged four-five

years in Australia *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 37(2): 72-8). In South Africa, the impact of once weekly playgroups (for 3-5 year olds who did not have access to preschools) provided by Ntataise was evaluated as part of the Sobambisana initiative. Children who attended 15 or more sessions showed significant improvements in emotional readiness and cognition, compared with children who attended fewer sessions. These gains appear to have been sustained in Grade R, with differences approaching statistical significance, but not as definitively demonstrated as for children who attended ECD centres. (Dawes, A., Biersteker, L. (2012). *Towards Integrated Early Childhood Development: An evaluation of the Sobambisana Initiative*. Cape Town: Ilifa Labantwana).