

Ilifa Labantwana

A case study of system
change in the Global South



PERCEPT

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Ilifa Labantwana works to secure an equal start for all children living in South Africa, through universal access to quality early childhood development.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ECD	Early Childhood Development
ELP	Early Learning Programme (including purpose-build centres, community-based centres, toy libraries, playgroups)
NGO	Non-government organisation
NPO	Non-profit organisation

Ilifa Labantwana: a system change case study

Ilifa Labantwana (henceforth 'Ilifa') is a South African non-governmental organisation (NGO) that is driving system change in early childhood development (ECD). A case study was undertaken to reflect on the tactical and theoretical approaches honed by Ilifa to unlock systems change in South Africa's ECD ecosystem and ultimately advance ECD as a critical human development lever. The case study was guided by a central research question: whether and how Ilifa has succeeded in strengthening South Africa's ECD ecosystem and its ability to deliver quality ECD services for all children. Its findings are informed by an archive of strategy documents and reports, regional and global systems change literature, and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders.

The case study aims to further a Global South view of systems change thinking and practice. Rather than covering Ilifa's full body of work over the past 15 years, the case study reflects on two of Ilifa's core system strategies – namely 'unlocking public financing' and 'reframing ECD service provision' – and explores inflection points, impacts, and lessons arising implementing these strategies over time. This is a summary of the case study and a full version of its findings can be accessed [here](#).

What is system change?

System change work usually happens in complex, social systems, where interactions between components are dynamic and unpredictable. Many of our most vexing social challenges, from poverty to climate change, are borne out of large, complex systems in which the pathway to change is uncertain and non-linear and patterns and behaviours in the system are deeply entrenched.

Systems change involves identifying actors, relationships, and patterns in a social system, as well as ways to leverage the system, to create lasting effects. It includes finding ways to learn and adapt as the system continues to change; as well as to embrace rather than eliminate complexity on the road to a healthier system. This approach differs from intervention-based programs, which focus on improving individual parts of the system. By understanding and shifting interdependencies within the system, systems change practitioners are more likely to spur continuous change. The knock-on effects of such continuous change can redress inequalities and disrupt cycles of poverty and can be used to ignite change across a range of sectors.

A common metaphor used to understand complex systems is Goodman's Iceberg Model (see Figure 1). This model suggests that the events and behaviours we observe in a system are produced through a network of underlying trends, relationships, and beliefs.

The South African ECD ecosystem

South Africa's ECD ecosystem is spread across multiple government departments and includes formal government institutions, civil society organisations, and a diverse informal economy of non-profit organisations and micro-enterprises. However, the system suffers from narrow definitions of what constitutes ECD, sectoral siloes, and a lack of clear delineations of responsibility or mandate.

A robust body of research shows that children's emotional, social, and cognitive development, as well as their future health, is calibrated in the first few years of her life.¹ The stimulation, nourishment and care that children receive in their first six years of life lay the foundations for their future learning, academic performance, and well-being, with implications for their survival rates, their job prospects, and their ability to escape intergenerational poverty.² Ultimately, the early foundations of South Africa's children are critical for the country's economic and social thriving. For children to reach their full potential, they need love, care, nourishment and learning in their early years (including caregiver support during pregnancy), and sustained and quality health, education and social services in the years that follow.

The 'full package' of essential ECD services spans maternal, newborn, and child health (MNCH) services; nutritional support; support for primary caregivers; social services and protection; early language development and quality stimulation for early learning. Formal provision of ECD services in South Africa includes clinic-based MNCH, home visits for pregnant women and new mothers (delivered by community health workers), income support to caregivers (through the Child Support Grant), and (severely limited) financial support for registered Early Learning Programmes (ELPs). Informal provision includes caregivers and families, as well as a resilient, resourceful, and extraordinarily diverse network of non-state, women led ELPs, varying supported by NPOs, resource and training organisations, forums, and government.

The ECD landscape is starkly unequal, with many children (particularly the poorest) being denied critical services because these are either unaffordable or unavailable; and the potential benefits for gender equity and economic prosperity not being realised. Only 35% of children (aged 0-5) attend ELPs³; and of these, only 25% are subsidised by the state⁴; one in four of these children are nutritionally stunted.⁵

Over the course of its lifespan, Ilifa's focus has shifted increasingly to the systems level (illustrated in Figure 2), working to strengthen the systems that enable service provision, with a particular focus on areas where the essential package is not sufficiently developed (shown in darker shade of purple in Figure 2).

Figure 1 A systems view of the ECD ecosystem based on Goodman's Iceberg model

Events

Starkly unequal access to ECD services with the odds stacked against poor children. Intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality are reproduced

Patterns

Without stable funding, existing ELPs struggle to sustain services or improve programme quality, and new entrants are dissuaded.

Early learning and home visiting services for poor households are under-provided and under-resourced, placing a disproportionate burden on the families that can least afford it

Underlying structure

Eligibility requirements for early learning programmes (ELPs) to receive state support are ill-fitting to the realities of a largely-informal sector. Without this, ELPs rely heavily on caregiver fees, in contexts where caregiver income is limited and volatile.

Meanwhile, home visiting is deprioritised in public health systems with community health workers under-resourced and under-capacitated.

Mental models

An assumption that the public mandate to support ECD is limited to relatively formal service provision in purpose-built institutions. Outside of this, Early learning and care is assumed to be a private responsibility of families (mostly women).

Figure 2 South Africa's ECD ecosystem

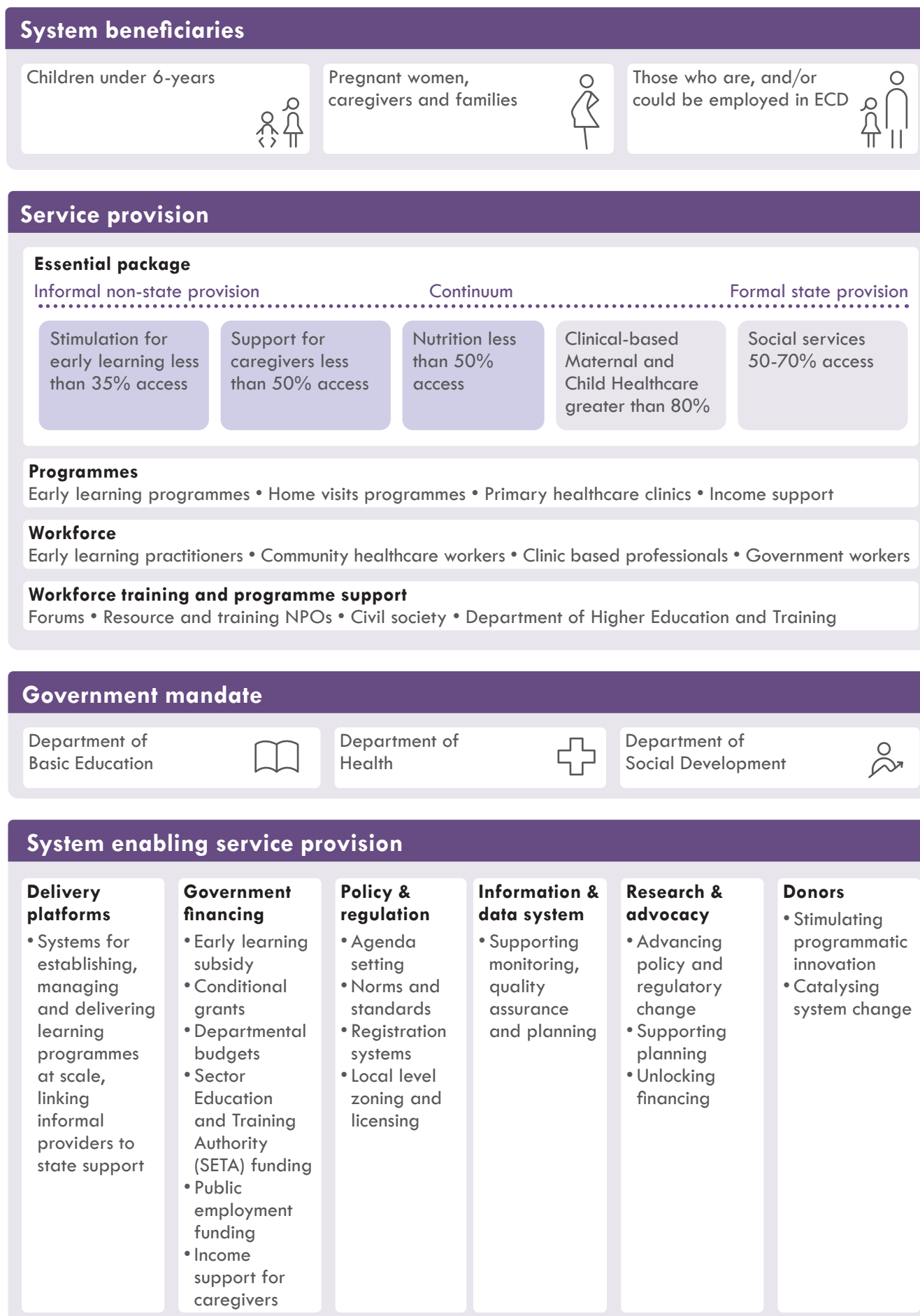




Photo credit: Ilifa Labantwana

Shifts toward a system's approach

Programmatic interventions help people beat the odds. Systemic interventions can help change their odds. **Karen Pittman**

Over the years, Ilifa has shifted its positioning from that of 'donor', supporting local-level ECD programmatic pilots with the intention to learn and scale; to that of a participant and facilitator within the ECD ecosystem, driving a systems-level change agenda. Through the incubation of new organisations, and a focus on **collaboration** and coalition building, Ilifa could continue critical work in particular parts of the system, while it remained focused on the system itself. Drawing on a deepening **understanding of the system**, Ilifa has continually refined its goals and strategy, focusing on "building the systems and consensus necessary to enable the delivery of quality ECD services at scale to the poorest 40% of the population, from conception to six years of age". This iterative refinement has been enabled by long-term flexible funding that has enabled agility and long-term gains. Ilifa, and some of its key partners, have been supported by a **group** of funders, with shared interest in ECD system change encouraging collective strategy and governance.

Table 1 overleaf summarises Ilifa's strategic shifts towards a systems approach:

Two core strategies to strengthen the ECD ecosystem

Recognising that it has neither the capacity nor the expertise to attend to every part of the ECD essential package, Ilifa has chosen to focus especially on systems to support early learning, although systems to support caregivers at home have also received targeted attention over the years.

While Ilifa has adopted a range of strategies to strengthen the ECD ecosystem, and the early learning environment in particular, this case study hones in on two of these: 1) Unlocking public funding for early learning and 2) Reframing ELP provision.

Unlocking public financing

Only about 1.5% of South Africa's GDP is spent on ECD, most of which funds child support grants and clinic-based maternal and child healthcare.⁶ Of this budget, just 6.5% is allocated for early learning, nutrition support and supportive parenting programmes, which directly translates into the lesser reach and quality of these services.⁷ Public spending on early learning is channelled almost exclusively through the early learning subsidy, which is paid to registered early learning programmes that have met the required norms and standards. Ilifa's approach

to addressing this is two-pronged and has become progressively systemic and universalised through Ilifa's working phases. The first prong is increasing the pool of public funds for ECD, while the second is eliminating barriers to **accessing** this funding by changing the subsidy system. In the early years, Ilifa sought to understand funding flows at the local-level and understand the access challenges of early learning providers. It has since moved through higher levels of the system, with its current strategy focused on national regulation and budget allocations. Ilifa's combined work with the Department of Social Development and National Treasury has, over time, resulted in an increase of the ECD budget from R2.98 billion in 2017 to R3.47 billion in 2021/22.

In unlocking budget for ECD, Ilifa has been **agile** in collaborating with different departments and levels of government, depending on where the system needs and opportunities are. It has also had the patience to **move slow**, nurturing relationships with government, building the state's institutional capacity, shifting entrenched patterns of resource allocation, and incrementally building consensus between disparate stakeholders. Through trusting and lasting relationships with the Treasury, Basic Education and Social Development departments, Ilifa has established itself as a key thought partner in ECD financing and expansion planning, unlocking significant budgetary allocations. Realising that local governments have greater jurisdiction over ECD infrastructure budgets than national government, Ilifa partnered with Project Preparation Trust in KwaZulu Natal province to show that ELPs needed extra financial support to upgrade physical infrastructure and meet the norms and standards that determine funding eligibility. This research would inform the design of the maintenance component of the ECD conditional grant, adding R100 million budget per year for the renovation and maintenance of ECD centres.

Ilifa has gained credibility with government by leveraging its technical expertise and **understanding of the system**. It has operated as a government thought partner, rather than a service provider; without the need for credit or ownership and with an explicit aim to strengthen state capacity.

In response to Covid-19, Ilifa collaborated with civil society to understand the impact of the pandemic, and lockdown, on the sector, and generate evidence. Collectively, Ilifa and its partners were able to motivate for a R400 million employment stimulus package to safeguard ELP practitioners. They also provided technical capacity to government to implement the package and convened and engaged donors to unlock extra R36million in relief funding. Ilifa's successes have come from diverse **collaboration** and a deliberate aim to **bridge** the disconnect between public systems with civil society realities.

Table 1 Summary of Ilifa's Strategic Shifts Over Time

▶ Phase I (2009-2012) Programmatic demonstration and research 		▶ Phase II (2013-2016) From 'scale-able' programmes to enabling systems 	
Primary Role	Donor with a focus on building implementation evidence	Systems actor leveraging evidence and technical expertise for local-level system strengthening	
Primary goal/s	Build an evidence-base for successful models of integrated, community-based ECD provision.	Capacitate local and provincial government systems for ECD. Increase caregiver demand for ECD services. Design and fund a comprehensive approach to ECD service provision.	
Implied theory of change	ECD policy implementation can be supported by demonstrating quality, cost-efficient models of community-based ECD provision, that can be embedded at scale.	To improve and scale community-based early learning programmes (ELPs), we need enabling public systems: information systems, funding mechanisms, regulation, and a capacitated workforce. Quality supply and consistent demand for ELPs are interdependent.	
Lessons learnt	Achieving a 'quantum leap' for children demands operating at a system level in the political arena. Research must be translated into practice.	A systems change organisation like Ilifa is not necessarily best placed to lead on programmatic roll-out at scale. In fact, trying to operate in every part of the system can constrain impact. ECD services cannot be scaled without capacitating and strengthening regulatory, financing and operational systems.	

► Phase III (2017-2021)

National level partnerships for ECD to build government capacity and public systems



► Phase IV (2023 -)

Positioning ECD as a systems lever to redress inequality



Technical partner in co-creating national, evidence-based public systems for ECD

Facilitator of a whole-of-society investment in ECD

Unlock access to the early learning subsidy through systems reforms.

Increase funding for ECD

Scale mass communication to parents/caregivers as essential ECD providers.

Galvanise the sector to support ELPs through Covid-19 lockdown.

Build evidence and advocacy on the multiplier effects of ECD to unlock new public funding.

Strengthen systems that interface between government systems and a diverse ECD provider base.

Support the Department of basic Education to take on the ECD function.

Focus as much on quality as on access.

Establish appropriate planning and coordination mechanisms to support the full essential package.

Drive a coalition approach to expanding quality ECD.

The early learning subsidy is a lever for radical change in improving both the accessibility and quality of early learning.

Parents/caregivers are primary providers of ECD and therefore at the core of the 'system' that Ilifa is supporting

Positioning ECD as a human capital development lever will strengthen the public mandate, unlock new public funding for ECD, and improve quality through the greater capacitation and recognition of the ECD workforce.

ECD systems change will be driven primarily by the public sector. To amplify government's impact on ECD, coordination must be improved and innovative mechanisms to interface with the non-state sector must be developed.

Emphasising a delivery system, rather than delivery of programmes, is more likely to achieve universal access to quality ECD.

Being a system change actor means actively participating in the ECD ecosystem, backed by evidence and a deep understanding of the system.

To build critical partnerships with provincial and local government requires organisational capacity.

Showing up and being visible in sector forums strengthens partnerships and legitimacy.

To galvanise multi-stakeholder support, you need to develop a common vision for ECD.

While supporting public sector reform, it is important to amplify the power of the ECD provider base that is outside of government.

Diversifying government partnerships can mitigate risk.

Supporting ECD service provision

From its inception, Ilifa has understood that the provision of early learning and stimulation for young children is provided predominantly by parents, caregivers, sole proprietors, and micro-enterprises operating at community level. Yet, government's engagement with early learning has historically been restricted to supporting a small minority of children attending registered, centre-based early learning programmes. This not only excludes children attending unregistered and/or non-centre-based forms of programming; it also excludes the millions of children not accessing an early learning programme at all. Most children under the age of 3yrs receive care, nourishment, and early learning at home, but their caregivers are under-supported.

Ilifa's work to support multi-modal ECD provision has entailed a sharpening of its approach to questions of scale. 'Scaling' is borne out of an idea that social change can be achieved through an industrial-style replication of successful approach. During Phase I, Ilifa learned that there was no 'one size fits all' model for achieving population coverage for ECD. Instead, what was needed was a range of context-specific and adaptable approaches that could support children's holistic needs as they grew older. Increasingly system change catalysts, especially those in the Global South, are demonstrating ways to achieve scale without 'scaling', usually by working at the level of the system itself, partnering with government, business, and civil society organisations.⁸ Instead of focusing on scaling successful community-based delivery models, Ilifa has increasingly focused on changing conditions within the system, through regulation, financing, policy, and capacitation (what some call 'scaling out'). It has also worked to shift power and disrupt established ways of thinking (what some call 'scaling deep').⁹ By operating at the level of systems, values, and beliefs; Ilifa has sought to **universalise** rather than 'scale' its impact.

Among the mental models that Ilifa has sought to shift are that: 1) that ECD is synonymous with early learning, 2) that quality early learning programmes can only be delivered in purpose-built centres, and 3) that only 'quality' programmes should get funding. Instead, it has sought to demonstrate that 1) that ECD is a holistic package of services, 2) that quality early learning programmes can take many shapes and forms, 3) that maintaining and improving quality often depends on funding.

Ilifa's partnership with the National Department of Health on the Side-by-Side campaign is an example of a shift away from viewing ECD simply as group early learning. Ilifa collaborated with the department to design, deliver and co-fund a dynamic multi-channel ECD communications campaign (radio, in-person, print and digital) called Side-by-Side. Side-by-Side equips caregivers with the knowledge and tools to support early stimulation and healthy development for their children.

In doing so, Side-by-Side is also *shifting power* in the ECD ecosystem, empower poorer families, who often have lesser access to ECD information, with resources to support both their caregiving and their choice-making.

Through improving connections between government support and early learning providers, Ilifa has helped **bridge the system**. To do this, it has used both bottom-up and top-down tactics – targeting national regulatory and financing systems along with systems of local-level support. Through its work with RealReform4ECD, Ilifa built civil society coalitions to advocate for ELP registration requirements to better reflect the realities of a largely informal sector. Meanwhile, it also worked with Impande (a KZN-based ECD organisation) to develop Bhalisa Inkulisa, a simpler, faster, and data-driven registration process, which was tested with both the KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape governments. Lessons from Bhalisa Inkulisa informed a progressive "tiered" registration framework that has since been adopted by national government. The framework allows for the "conditional registration" of ELPs by giving them an opportunity to meet norms and standards over time. Insights from this work have also become the backbone of government's Vangasali campaign, which seeks to find, record, and register every ELP in the country. In KwaZulu-Natal, Ilifa collaborated on infrastructure support systems to accelerate funding eligibility for those ELPs not meeting requirements. This developmental approach to supporting infrastructure upgrades became national precedent through the maintenance component of the ECD Conditional Grant.

Ilifa's successes in reframing provision have come from diverse **collaboration** and a deliberate aim to **bridge** the disconnect between public systems with civil society realities.

In shifting its approach to scale, Ilifa showed its ability to **embrace emergence**. Systems change means getting comfortable with emergence and creating conditions to test, change, learn, and fail.

Through **collaboration** with implementers and programmers as well as government partners, Ilifa has been able to focus on system-level change to support provision, while remaining connected to the context of provision.

Ilifa's Systems Change Toolkit

This case study contributes to a collective and cumulative body of operational knowledge that can support systems change catalysts to shift system dynamics and expand their toolkits. Ilifa's work has shown that systems change is complex and requires a deep understanding of the local context, collaboration, and a willingness to adapt, learn and fail. By adopting a humble and flexible approach, organisations can make meaningful progress towards systems change, even in highly contested spaces.

Tool	Why it matters
Understand the system	A rich understanding of the players, rules, relationships and effects in the ECD ecosystem is essential for continuous learning, adaptation and improvement – all of which are signs of system health. Ilifa has generated and synthesized evidence in ways that bolster its credibility and make system levers visible to different actors in the system.
Collaborate	Being a system change actor does not mean working in every part of the system. It means playing to your positioning and leveraging partnerships to amplify impact. Partnering with government Ilifa has acted from the premise that the path to quality universal ECD access is one that the Government must own and fund. Strengthening government's capacity to hold this role is therefore central to Ilifa's strategy. Partnering with other organisations in the ECD ecosystem Through collaboration, Ilifa has been able to focus on system-level change to support provision, while remaining connected to the context of provision, including provider needs (through Smart Start and Grow Great), municipal blockages (through Kago Ya Bana) and cutting-edge evidence (through DataDrive2030, Thrive by Five and other).
Universalise impact	'Scaling' usually means replicating a particular intervention across contexts to reach greater numbers of beneficiaries. The problem with this approach is that it treats social change like a factory line – contexts and systems are often invisible. How do we achieve change at scale without scaling? Ilifa has chosen to focus on regulatory, financing operational systems to support ECD programming, while also challenging attitudes and values in the ECD ecosystem to shift behaviour at scale.
Embrace emergence	Systems change work does not have linear, direct outcomes or predictable timelines. It often involves slow relationship-building and carefully chipping away at old patterns. But it also requires enough agility to respond to emergent opportunities, to work with complexity, and change course when a strategy isn't working. Ilifa's shift from scaling to universalising impact is one example of this. Long-term flexible funding is best-placed to support an emergent approach, along with alternative approaches to measuring system impact.
Bridge the system	Complex systems are often challenged by poor coordination, ill-fitting structures and even hostility between stakeholders. System change catalysts must collaborate and communicate in ways that strengthen connections between disparate parts of the system. Ilifa does this by designing and strengthening systems that interface between government support, informal ECD providers and caregivers.

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