

Case study

Ilifa Labantwana

A system change case study



PERCEPT

FUELLED BY EVIDENCE, PROPELLED BY INGENUITY.





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

📍 DG Murray House, 1 Wodin Road, Claremont, Cape Town 7700, South Africa

📞 +27 (21) 670 9848

✉️ info@ilifalabantwana.co.za

🌐 ilifalabantwana.co.za

📘 Ilifa Labantwana

🌐 Ilifa Labantwana

🐦 @IlifaLabantwana



Spring Impact are guided by social purpose to address social and environmental problems at scale, scaling up solutions successfully and sustainably to create social impact.

📍 32 Blackfriars Road, London SE18PB, UK

✉️ info@springimpact.org

🌐 springimpact.org

🌐 Spring Impact

🐦 @SpringImpact

📷 @springimpact



PERCEPT
FUELLED BY EVIDENCE, PROPELLED BY INGENUITY.

A South African transdisciplinary consultancy driven by heart and curiosity. Forging enduring relationships with clients who are also working towards a healthier, more resilient world.

📍 17 Kew Road, Mowbray, 7700, Cape Town, South Africa

✉️ info@percept.co.za

🌐 percept.co.za

🌐 Percept

📷 @more_than_george

Cover photo credit: Ilifa Labantwana

Authors:

Percept Collaborative Advisory & Spring Impact

25 September 2023

Contents

Acronyms and abbreviations	01
Key Terms	01
What is system change?	02
1 Introduction	02
1.1 Understanding South Africa's ECD ecosystem	02
2 The evolution of Ilifa's system strategy	06
2.1 Phase 1 (2009-2012): Programmatic demonstration	06
2.2 Phase II (2013-2016): From scalable programmes to enabling systems	07
2.3 Phase III (2017-2021): National-level partnerships	09
2.4 Phase IV (2023-): ECD as a systems lever to redress inequality	10
2.5 Reflections	10
3 Impact	12
3.1 Unlocking public funding	12
3.2 Reframing 'the system': Bridging between government support and multi-modal provision	17
3.3 Future opportunities to reframe the system	21
4 The systems change toolkit	24
4.1 Understand the system	24
4.2 Collaborate	25
4.3 Universalise Impact	27
4.4. Embrace emergence	27
4.5. Bridge the system	28
References	30

Acronyms and abbreviations

ANC	African National Congress
CG	Conditional Grant
CSG	Child Support Grant
CWP	Community Works Programme
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECD ESRF	ECD Employment Stimulus Relief Fund
ELP	Early Learning Programme
EPWP	Expanded Public Works Programme
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DCOG	Department of Cooperative Governance
DGMT	DG Murray Trust
DoH	Department of Health
DSD	Department of Social Development
FCM	Family and Community Motivator
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
MNCH	Maternal, Newborn and Child Health
NDSD	National Department of Social Development
NDOH	National Department of Health
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NPO	Non-Profit Organisation
NIECDP	National Integrated ECD Policy
NIP	National Integrated Plan
PPT	Project Preparation Trust
RTO	Resource and Training Organisation
SASCOWATCH	South African Civil Society Coalition for Women's and Child Health

Key Terms

Early Childhood Development (ECD)

The full essential package of early childhood development services, including early learning, social services, maternal and child healthcare, nutrition, and support for caregivers.

Early learning

The portion of the ECD essential package that provides early learning and stimulation to young children. This could be through a variety of early learning delivery models, including centre-based early learning programmes, home-based early learning programmes, toy libraries and day mothers.

Home visiting

Programmes that deliver support to caregivers of young children, supporting them to provide nurturing care, early learning, and stimulation to their child, and support their child's health, growth, and development. These could be delivered by non-state NGOs or community-based organisations or by government-employed community health workers. Ilifa is working with its close partners to support community health worker-led home visiting through government primary healthcare clinics.

ECD services

These include all services to support the health and development of children in their first six years of life. They include early learning programmes, maternal and child health services, social services, income support for caregivers, nutrition programmes and home visiting programmes.



Photo credit: Ilifa Labantwana

What is system change?

Systems change work usually happens in complex, social systems, where interactions between components of the system 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. Rather than being one-directional causal chains, **systems are constituted by reinforcing and balancing feedback loops**¹ By understanding shifting interdependencies within the system, and the consequences of those interactions, practitioners are more likely to spur the sea-change they hope for.

1 Introduction

Ilifa Labantwana (henceforth 'Ilifa') is a South African NGO that is driving system change in early childhood development (ECD).

It does this by strengthening and co-creating the institutions, strategies, and practices that the ECD ecosystem needs to thrive, and increasingly, by situating ECD as a multi-dimensional route to shifting South African inequality. This case study was undertaken to elevate Global South systems thinking, by reflecting 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 guiding question for this case study is 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. 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.

1.1 Understanding South Africa's ECD ecosystem

Robust international research shows that children's emotional, social, and cognitive development, as well as their future health, is calibrated in the first few years of life.²

The stimulation, nourishment and care that children receive in their first six years 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 participate fully in social and economic communities. For children to reach their full potential, they need love, care, nourishment and learning in their early years (including support for caregivers during pregnancy); and sustained, quality health, education, and social services in the years that follow.

The first democratic government of South Africa inherited a highly unequal ECD ecosystem. In the early learning sector, this meant white children attending government-funded pre-schools, while black children relied on a limited number of fee-paying community-based programmes. Meanwhile, progressive non-government organisations (NGOs) sought to support community-based and home-visiting programmes that located early learning services close to black children, drawing on local participation and indigenous practices.³ In 1994, the newly-elected African National Congress (ANC) identified ECD as an opportunity to redress apartheid inequities. The ECD dispensation, under democracy, has been marked by significantly

expanded, a drive to formalise and regulate the sector, and an uneasy partnership between the state and non-government ECD organisations.⁴ For many decades, the South African government's focus in providing services to young children has been on early education, and particularly, expanding access to Grade R (for children age 5-6) as part of a national programme of provision.⁵

As such, South Africa's ECD system has historically suffered from narrow definitions of what constitutes ECD (i.e., where the boundaries of the system are). Depending on one's location in an often-siloed system, ECD was either a 'childcare issue', a 'breastfeeding issue', or – most commonly – an 'early learning issue.' By 2015, however, the National Integrated ECD Policy (NIECDP) defined a comprehensive set of equally important ECD services and supported a mixed model of ECD provision (including home and community-based services). This shift was attributable to significant civil society mobilisation, including by some of Ilifa Labantwana's founders and partners.⁶

While siloed ways of working continue, national policy reflects a consensus that ECD encompasses a broad 'essential package', including early learning, maternal, newborn, and child health (MNCH), social services (like income protection) and nutrition for young children (aged 0-5). As such, responsibility for ECD services is spread across multiple government departments, often without clear delineations of responsibility or mandate.

The reflection of a holistic essential package in national policy is in large part attributable to the advocacy of Ilifa and its partners.⁷

Today, there are about 6.5 million children under the age of six in South Africa; four million of them live in the poorest 40% of households.⁸ This means that the majority of the country's children are born into contexts that make it difficult for them to realise their potential. These contexts are characterised by poor access to nutrition, inadequate living environments, a lack of security and social protection, and few opportunities for quality early learning and stimulation.⁹ The connection between household income, access to quality early learning, and children's outcomes, is a key driver of inequality in South Africa.¹⁰ Less than half of the country's 4-5 year-old children are on track to meet their physical growth and early learning development goals.¹¹ A flourishing early childhood development system can improve children's future chances, redress the historically undervaluing of women's work, stimulate local economies and shift intergenerational poverty.

ECD has been historically located in the ministry of the Department of Social Development (DSD) but since April 2022, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has been responsible for ECD in South Africa. ECD services are provided through a diverse mix of formal government institutions, civil society bodies, and a diverse informal economy of NPOs and micro-enterprises.

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 – CSG), 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 (RTOs), forums, and government.

While children, families and the ECD workforce are direct beneficiaries of the overall ECD ecosystem; as a systems actor, Ilifa's beneficiary is better described as the system itself (most especially government/public systems). 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.

Most early learning programmes in South Africa have not historically met the requirements for formal state registration. In 2021, only 42% of ELPs were formally registered with the DSD.¹² Not being registered has left the majority of programs ineligible for government funding that could help them sustain their services and improve quality. Without government subsidies, the supply of early learning for poor children rests on the willingness and ability of parents and caregivers to pay fees, with the average cost of enrolling a child in an ELP being R502 per month.¹³ This inevitably excludes South Africa's poorest children.

It is widely appreciated that the South African ECD sector is, at present, not able to produce the quality and scale of services needed to meet universal access targets or meaningfully expand work opportunities for women. Instead, the ECD landscape is starkly unequal. Many children, particularly the poorest, are being denied critical services, and the potential benefits for gender equity and economic prosperity are not being realised. Except for clinic-based health services and the rollout of social grants, service delivery for young children has been severely lacking. Currently, 25% of children under five are enrolled in ELPs in South Africa.¹⁴ Wealthy children are twice as likely to be enrolled in an early learning programme as poor children.¹⁵ Yet, only a third of the poorest children (quintiles 1-3) enrolled in ELPs are supported by state subsidies.¹⁶ Meanwhile, children in the critical first two years of life, who have the most to gain from home visiting programmes, caregiver support, and early access to the child support grant, are largely underserved. Community health workers providing home visiting programmes, whose role is to link vulnerable families to these services, are under-resourced, under-remunerated and under-supported.

This reality of poor, and starkly unequal, access reproduces intergenerational inequality and is largely attributed to an ECD system in which the regulations, structures and processes designed to support and coordinate ECD services are either missing, ill-fitting or have broken down.

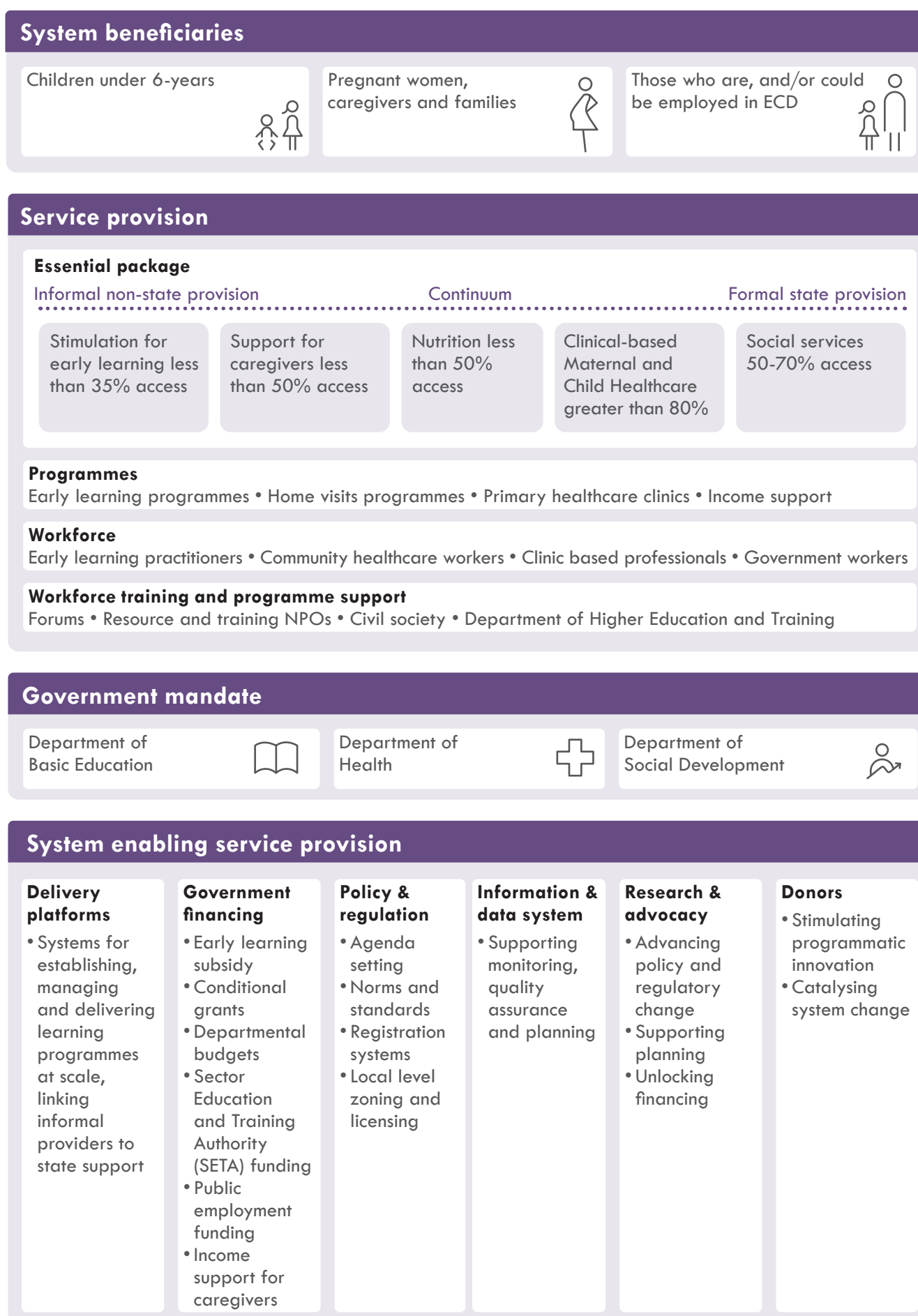


Figure 1 South Africa's ECD ecosystem

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



Photo credit: Ilifa Labantwana

2 The evolution of Ilifa's system strategy

The early roots of Ilifa Labantwana can be traced back to 2007 when the DG Murray Trust launched the Sobambisana initiative. Five non-profit organisations were commissioned to test diverse models of community based ECD in four of the country's provinces over a period of four years. These included home visiting programmes, community playgroups, parent education, as well as centre and school-based initiatives.¹⁷

With the National Integrated Plan (NIP) for ECD (2005-2010) having been recently drafted, Sobambisana was originally conceived as an instrument to support ECD policy implementation. The NIP reflected mounting political will to amplify, and invest in, ECD. To capitalise on this momentum, the DG Murray Trust, together with The ELMA Foundation and UBS Optimus, formed a joint strategic partnership to improve access to ECD programmes in South Africa – later named Ilifa Labantwana ('Ilifa').

Although the process has not been neatly linear, Ilifa has increasingly sought to position itself as a systems actor. This has included technical, relational, and increasingly political work, within a constantly shifting political and fiscal context. In the early years, Ilifa supported testing and learning from different models

of ECD service provision. But increasingly, Ilifa's has focused on strengthening the financial, regulatory, and operational systems that enable quality ECD services to be delivered at scale.

Over the course of this shift, Ilifa's attention has been drawn to larger and larger systems, becoming increasingly removed from the local-level implementation of ECD programming and ever-more embedded in national-level policy, financing, communication, and expansion planning. Although it has increasingly targeted systems over programmes, Ilifa has also sought to remain responsive to the needs of ECD providers and families working in close partnership with programmers and implementers, some of whom spun off from Ilifa's early work in the early learning implementation space.

2.1 Phase 1 (2009-2012): Programmatic demonstration



In 2008, Sobambisana was formalised as Ilifa's flagship intervention. At the start, Ilifa's primary role was to support Sobambisana initiatives in testing, iterating, and documenting different models of integrated, scalable, community based ECD provision that could achieve population coverage of ECD programmes for the poorest children.

It was through Sobambisana that testing and modelling, along with robust monitoring and evaluation, emerged as a key Ilifa strategy to scale learnings in ECD implementation. Ilifa's work over Phase I, along with the evidence it was generating, would inform the National Diagnostic Review on ECD, the new National ECD Policy, as well as the National Plan of Action and the Children's Act.

By the end of Phase I, The Kellogg Foundation was incorporated as an additional funding partner, offering core funding to support the programme, while staying largely removed from governance and strategy. This was the first demonstration of Ilifa's ability to secure funding but retain their flexibility in how that funding is used.

2.2 Phase II (2013-2016):

From scalable programmes to enabling systems



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

During Phase I, it became clear that achieving a 'quantum leap' in access to quality early childhood development would demand intervention not just at the level of ECD programmes, but at the level of the system. Over the course of Phase II, Ilifa shifted its positioning from that of a 'donor', providing resources to implementing partners, to becoming a participant and facilitator within the ECD ecosystem with its own agenda for change. As such, the language of 'enabling systems' for ECD started to enter the Ilifa lexicon more strongly. To make a system-level impact, Ilifa saw that it needed to act more deliberately within the public sector and political arena. This demanded an Ilifa team with the level of technical skill and political suss to make this impact.

Ilifa's Phase II shift towards a system focus demonstrated that, rather than attaching to a fixed strategy, and pursuing it at all costs, Ilifa was testing and reflexively adapting its approach. Through supporting community-based ECD providers to experiment and learn, Ilifa had unearthed obstacles in the ECD ecosystem (including registration, subsidy access, regulations, etc) and needed to be agile enough to respond to them.

"Rather than attaching to a fixed model and pushing this at all costs, Ilifa has undertaken to work with an organic or emergent approach. This has allowed the programme to unfold as it has moved with and within the sector and has deepened its experience and knowledge base. This responsive methodology has served Ilifa well as it has sought to tackle the numerous challenges in the sector, on the ground and at systems level."
Ilifa Labantwana 2014, A Quantum Leap

18

Spinning off new organisations and long-term partners

As Ilifa refined its role, it also spun off new organisations that could continue critical work in particular parts of the ECD ecosystem, while it remained focused on the system itself. For example: Ilifa's testing and piloting of early learning models, through Sobambisana, allowed Innovation Edge to spin out into its own entity with a deepened focus on early learning innovation and investing.

Today, Innovation Edge is a grant-making and investment funding organisation supporting unconventional ideas to shift early learning outcome in under-resourced communities. Innovation Edge provides strategic, financial, and technical assistance to transform innovative ideas into workable interventions which are then supported to scale.

"The other success of Ilifa I would say is the spawning of other organisations... To have the confidence to allow other organisations to do this important work so incredibly critical. And Ilifa has had that real view of – we will hold the centre - and we will try to hold the centre in a way that does not cause all other legitimate actors to be threatened." **Board Member**

While Innovation Edge continued to test and demonstrate scalable models of early learning provision, Ilifa chose, increasingly, to focus on the systems that would support programmes to be delivered at scale. During Phase II, it supported management and information systems at provincial and district levels, capacitated local-level staff, and developed appropriate finance models to enable widespread rollout of the ECD essential package. Additional focus was placed on building public demand for ECD services and generating implementation evidence at a large scale.

"Basing its evolution on perceived needs in the sector" Ilifa increasingly placed "... emphasis on finding mechanisms for provision that would shift delivery significantly, enabling ECD provision to take a quantum leap." (2012/2013 Strategy)

Through Sobambisana, Ilifa gained significant knowledge about early learning. It realised that, although government policy was committed to the provision of early learning, there was no coordinated mechanism to support the delivery of quality early learning at scale. But, as one of Ilifa's donors commented, if Ilifa were to have remained focused on early learning delivery mechanisms, "It would have distracted them from the systems building work that needed to be done." This was part of why Ilifa's collaborative of funders went on to found SmartStart.

Through its social franchise delivery platform, SmartStart aims to support and coordinate a heterogeneous informal early-learning sector, that, while being privately provided, is publicly supported. The model recruits and trains early learning facilitators across the country, and supports them to deliver a defined, quality daily programme for 3- and 4-year-olds.

Through ongoing partnerships with organisations involved in delivering ECD programming, Ilifa deepens its knowledge of the ECD ecosystem, including the realities of providers and implementers, and is better equipped to drive an evidence-based system strategy.

Government partnerships

The refinement of Ilifa's role during Phase II also meant redefining its partnerships – looking beyond programme implementers to system-level partners working at scale. During this period, Ilifa strengthened its government partnerships. This sharpened, systems focus drew a new funding partner for Phase II of the programme: In 2013, the FNB Fund became an equal Ilifa funding partner, at the same time as UBS Optimus moved into a less active donor role.

In Phase II, partnerships with local government focused on building institutional capacity and understanding provincial and local government's role in ECD service delivery. Meanwhile, Ilifa continued to test and iterate community based ECD delivery models, building these lessons into provincial systems. This included working with the North West Department of Social Development to build an integrated ECD delivery system from 0-5 that included the Family and Community Motivator programme (FCM) for home visiting, ECD centre enrichment with Ntataise and non-centre-based programmes with Cotlands.¹⁹ During this phase, Ilifa also partnered with Impande to develop and test Bhalisa Inkulisa, a structured workflow-based approach to registration for early learning programmes (ELPs). It also developed local-level approaches to support ELPs in meeting the infrastructure requirements to be registered and funded by government. This work on infrastructure support systems had been sparked by Innovation Edge and Ilifa's partnership with the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) provincial government. In KZN, Ilifa had partnered with Project Preparation Trust (PPT) to understand and develop models for local-level infrastructure planning, delivery, and financing. Their research found that ELPs needed extra financial support to upgrade physical infrastructure and meet the norms and standards that determine funding eligibility. This led to further partnerships with PPT, Lima, Assupol, and the National Department of Social Development (NDSD) to develop models that could address infrastructure challenges, including renovations and low-cost new builds. Later, it would also inform Ilifa's approach in co-designing a national-level framework to support ECD infrastructure (through the ECD Conditional Grant).



Photo credit: Ilifa Labantwana

2.3 Phase III (2017-2021): National-level partnerships



Lessons from their work with provinces pushed Ilifa to re-engage national government, despite earlier challenges in doing so. Over the course of Phase III, national-level government partnerships deepened, culminating in the introduction of the ECD Conditional Grant (CG). In South Africa, conditional grants have been used as a mechanism to allocate funding to provinces and municipalities to achieve national government policy objectives. The ECD CG saw significantly increased budget allocations for ECD, attributable in large part to Ilifa's work with the National Department of Social Development (NDSD) and Treasury.

The introduction of the CG was accompanied by the institution of a multi-stakeholder Conditional Grant Consortium, which opened the opportunity for Ilifa to formally partner with National DSD on reforms relating to data systems, financing, infrastructure, non-centre-based programming, and regulatory frameworks. In other words: Through the CG, Ilifa had the leverage to influence public sector reform for ECD. Lessons learnt through Bhala Inkulisa and the PPT partnership, along with detailed understanding of the challenges facing ELPs and the subsidy reforms needed, informed the framework for the ECD CG.

Recognising the opportunity presented by the CG Consortium and its deepening partnerships with national government, the primary goal of Ilifa in Phase III was: "to enable an additional 1 million children, aged 0-5 years, in South Africa, to access the Early Learning Subsidy so that they could attend a quality early learning programme." Ilifa's approach to this was two-pronged: First, to increase available funding, and second, to eliminate barriers to accessing this funding by changing the regulatory and subsidy system. During this period, Ilifa also worked with NDSD to develop a set of reforms for the subsidy to make the process simpler for both government officials and ELPs and supported the drafting of an ECD expansion strategy that informed resourcing allocations for ECD.

By reducing reliance on parent fees, government subsidies could make early learning more affordable and therefore more accessible to poor families. They could also provide the stable income required for early learning providers to improve quality. Ilifa therefore positioned the subsidy as a lever for radical change in the ECD ecosystem. Critically, it also advocated for children to access the subsidy regardless of whether they are attending an ECD centre or if they are accessing ECD through a non-centre-based programme.

Over this period, Ilifa established itself as a key government thought partner, offering technical support, and thought leadership, particularly on ECD financing and expansion planning. Ilifa also began to drive a much bigger role for the Department of Health (DoH) in ECD provision, recognising the scale of their potential impact. Each year, the DoH was distributing 1-million copies of the Road to Health Booklet

– a tool to aid parents, caregivers, and healthcare workers in supporting children's early development. Recognising the extraordinary reach of this material, and the need for more ECD information in poor households, Ilifa partnered with DoH and the South African Civil Society Coalition for Women's and Child Health (SACSOWACH) to re-design and improve the Road to Health booklet. This became part of a wider multi-channel mass communication campaign, Side-by-Side, which was launched as a collaborative initiative of DoH and Ilifa.

Since Phase III, Ilifa's support to parents, caregivers and the home environment has been channelled primarily through Side-by-Side, with a reliance on the newly formed Grow Great to drive improvements in community health worker-led home visiting. Grow Great's mandate is to address childhood stunting in South Africa through the expansion of a quality community health worker programme. The organisation was seeded through the same collective of donors as Ilifa, who recognised the importance of nutrition in the ECD package, the absence of a national programme to address it, and the potential role of community health workers.

During Phase III, Ilifa also offered technical support in the redrafting of the 2nd Children's Amendment Bill, with a focus on revising ill-fitting norms and standards that were making it difficult for the majority of ELPs to register, and therefore become eligible for government subsidies and oversight. The opportunity to redraft this Bill was attributable to the work of RealReform4ECD, an advocacy campaign which Ilifa helped found and is supported by 150 organisations.

Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on Ilifa's work and priorities during the latter part of Phase III. Ilifa collaborated with the sector to establish and implement the ECD Employment Stimulus Relief Fund. Through its Covid-19 response work, and collaboration on RealReform4ECD, Ilifa realised the power of sector-wide advocacy and action in igniting systems change. Prior to this, Ilifa's strategy to engage and shift the ECD ecosystem was almost-exclusively technical – growing the ECD evidence-base and collaborating to design and develop public systems. This technical role had wide-reaching, but limited, effect.

In Phase III, it became clear to Ilifa leadership that advocacy and coalition-building, while not sufficient, are necessary to achieve substantive social change. This is borne out in South African social movement history: The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), for example, used complementary strategies of litigation, government lobbying, and – critically – grassroots mobilisation, to achieve a free, public roll-out of HIV-treatment.²⁰ Following the unprecedented sectoral solidarity catalysed by Covid-19, and the relief funding that was unlocked and distributed through sectoral mobilisation; advocacy and civil society partnerships have become central to the Ilifa's Phase IV partnership strategy.

2.4 Phase IV (2023-): ECD as a systems lever to redress inequality



Today, Ilifa's vision as a systems-change organisation is to nurture a resilient and diverse early childhood development system that expands livelihoods for women, enriches local economies, supports caregivers, and unlocks children's potential. The diverse fruits of this ecosystem are expected to multiply and deepen over time, borne out in a thriving South Africa, in which skills beget skills, and cycles of poverty and inequality are disrupted. This strategy positions ECD as a driver of human capital development for women, children, and society at large with many 'productive returns.' It also furthers a pluralist approach to early childhood development, involving complex public-private partnerships between state institutions, NGOs, informal early learning, and care providers, as well as households.

With the ECD function (i.e., the overall responsibility for ECD) shifting from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Basic Education in 2022, Ilifa has had to reposition itself in relation to DBE, with whom it now has a formal relationship.

2.5 Reflections

Over the course of its lifespan, Ilifa has cemented itself as a system actor. Given that Ilifa was initially highly intervention-based, with limited appreciation for how different components of the ECD ecosystem related to each other, this has been a significant strategic shift.

"[In the early years, we] were not even starting to think about how you develop a more comprehensive picture of children using data, let alone the notion that the system had to cater for all children – not just those who happened to be in a registered ECD centre." **Board member**

A common metaphor used to understand complex systems is Goodman's Iceberg Model (see Figure 3). This model suggests that the events and behaviours we observe in a system are produced through a network of underlying trends, relationships, and beliefs.

What we see at the surface of the South African ECD ecosystem is starkly unequal access to ECD services with the odds stacked against poor children. Beneath this is a pattern of under-resourcing ECD services in poor areas, and an underlying regulatory and financing structure that makes it difficult for early learning providers to access government funding and support.

Alongside this partnership, Ilifa continues to engage National Treasury, NDoH as well as local governments through its collaboration with Kago YaBana (KYB).

In Phase IV, Ilifa intends to mobilise ECD information in support of the function shift, identifying key system challenges and opportunities to guide the work of DBE as well as its private and civil society partners. This will include mapping a pathway to universal access to quality ECD services, alongside plans for how to prioritise resources, expand ECD financing, and develop a system of quality assurance and support for early learning programmes.

Recognising the multi-sectoral nature of ECD and the limitations within DBE to embrace the full essential package, Ilifa's Phase IV strategy will also explore innovative institutional arrangements that can bring public and private partners together, including different parts of the public sector, to co-create systems that enable widespread delivery across the ECD essential package.

These structures are informed by a set of mental models: beliefs about what ECD is, who benefits from it, how it is best provided, and the extent of government mandate to support it.

In positioning itself as a system actor, Ilifa has increasingly targeted structures and mental models shaping the ECD ecosystem. Rather than 'scaling' particular models of ECD provision, it has focused on strengthening large-scale systems to support a range of models of ECD provision, and ultimately universalise access to quality ECD.

Ilifa has adopted several key approaches in its system change efforts. These approaches are referred to in this case study as Ilifa's system change 'toolkit':

Understand the system

through iterative testing, learning and integration

Collaborate

with diverse partners to compound system impact

Universalise impact

by focussing on operational support systems

Embracing emergence

by staying both patient and agile

Bridge the system

by building mechanisms to connect its disparate parts.



Photo credit: Ilifa Labantwana

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 DBE 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.

3 Impact

While Ilifa has adopted a variety of strategies to strengthen the ECD ecosystem, and the early learning environment in particular, this case study homes in on two of these: 1) *Unlocking public funding for early learning* and 2) *Reframing ECD provision to include multi-modal programming, parenting and health*.

3.1 Unlocking public funding

Only about 1.5% of South Africa's GDP is spent on ECD, most of which funds child support grants and maternal and child healthcare.²¹ Of this budget, just 6.5% is allocated for early learning, nutrition support and supportive parenting programmes,²² which directly translates into the lesser reach and quality of these services.

Maternal & child primary health care

↑80% coverage

Social/welfare services

50-79% coverage

Nutrition support

↓50% coverage

Support for parenting

↓50% coverage

Stimulation for early learning

↓50% coverage

Figure 2 Coverage of Essential Package of ECD Services, as reported in 2022 Strategy.

Public spending on early learning (equating to R3.5 billion) 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.²³ This subsidy is means-tested and calculated on a per child, per day basis. While the current subsidy is R17 per child per day; Ilifa's estimate of the costs of minimum provision is ±R30 per day.²⁴ Underfunding also discourages early learning practitioners from entering the sector to start new ELPs, making it difficult to expand the supply of ELPs.²⁵

One way in which Ilifa has articulated systems dysfunction in the ECD sector is to describe a 'negative equilibrium' in early learning provision. To qualify for financial support, ELPs must meet certain pre-defined 'norms and standards' required for registration with government. ELPs that struggle most to meet these requirements are often those serving the poorest children. This means that supply of early learning services for poor children is constrained by the willingness and ability of parents and caregivers to pay fees, with the risk of condemning poor children to poor developmental outcomes.

Breaking this impasse demands not only that public funding for early learning increases, but also that early learning providers – in all their diversity – are able to access and absorb this funding in ways that improve quality and access.

In other words: the ability of parents or caregivers to afford, and support, early learning programmes will continue to drive inequality in both access and quality of early learning, unless wider and deeper sources of financing are unlocked.²⁶

"We see a very close relationship between poverty and exclusion of children from ECD. And the political systems of government that are not helping to make ECD provision in low-income communities happen" **Academic**

Arch of the Work

Phase I



Through Sobambisana, Ilifa funded individual, integrated ECD programmes to test and demonstrate models that could increase provision at a larger scale. Financing was not a significant part of its strategy at this stage. However, during this period, Ilifa undertook critical research to trace the flow of public funds for ECD, identifying a range regulatory and administrative obstacles to accessing funding.²⁷ This would lay the foundation for what would later become a robust body of work in understanding, and easing, funding flows for ECD provision.

Early research into funding flows also caught the attention of National Treasury who, at the time, were thinking about ways to reform NPO funding. This strengthened Ilifa's visibility and credibility as a potential government partner. It also allowed Ilifa, in its later engagements with Treasury, to advocate for a new framework for funding ECD provision, particularly for how to expand funding to non-centre-based models. So, In Phase I, two key approaches in Ilifa's system change toolkit were already taking root: deepening its **understanding of the system** and exploring **collaboration** with government and implementing partners at local levels.

Phase II



In its second phase, Ilifa **collaborated** with district and provincial governments, rather than just providers, to understand how ECD financing could be expanded. Towards the end of Phase II, it began working with the National Treasury, using the knowledge and experience gleaned from its implementing partnership with provincial governments. This represented both a growing focus on national-level systems, and the recognition that National Treasury was as important to the thriving of the ECD ecosystem as those departments directly responsible for ECD service delivery. This partnership was used to increase budget allocation for ECD and build the system required to channel increased budgets ECD providers.

In 2016, the National Department of Social Development (NDSD) announced the ECD Conditional Grant (CG). The CG was the first new money for ECD in years and was attributable, in large part, to Ilifa's technical support to National Treasury and National DSD. An additional R400m per year would be allocated to increase the number of children that received the early learning subsidy by ±120,000 per annum. This was on top of the estimated R2.5 billion usually allocated to early learning through the 'provincial equitable share' (a method for distributing national budgets to provinces). Ilifa's technical input into the ECD CG reflected its expertise in **bridging the system**, identifying weakened parts of the system that were making it difficult for funding to flow. Ilifa's collaborative research with PPT in KwaZulu-Natal had illustrated two critical systems weaknesses: firstly, ELPs faced insurmountable financial barriers to improve physical infrastructure in order to meet the norms and standards for registration; and secondly, that it was more cost-effective for government to expand its infrastructure approach to include both low-cost new builds and renovations.²⁸ This research informed the design of the 'maintenance component' of the ECD conditional grant, and added R100 million per year for the renovation of ECD centres.

Photo credit: Ilifa Labantwana



Phase III



Ilifa's move towards national-level impact continued during Phase II, through deepening partnerships with National Treasury, the NDSD, and the newly formed ECD Conditional Grant Consortium. The language of 'budget allocation' and 'ECD financing and expansion planning' also became much louder in Ilifa's articulation of its strategic priorities.

A core focus of Phase III was on building the evidence base to support the scaling of subsidies, with a specific focus on designing appropriate operational, payment, and regulatory systems. In the past, government had baulked at the potential full cost of universal access to early learning. Given the constraints on government budgets, Ilifa recognised the need for a progressive approach to financing and expanding ECD. At government's request, Ilifa also set about using the best available data to develop robust models that would support motivations for expanding the funding pool.

Over the course of Phase III, Ilifa cemented its position as credible, technical support to government in improving ECD systems. Over this period, Ilifa allocated its team's time almost entirely to supporting government on those priorities that were aligned with Ilifa's strategy (e.g., financing and infrastructure), allocated resources to testing these approaches in the operational environment, and finally, in collaboration with its Consortium, seconded human resources into government to give them much needed additional capacity. Government's trust in Ilifa was attributable both to Ilifa's rich **understanding of the system**, and its approach to **collaboration**: Ilifa deliberately positioned itself as a thought partner, rather than a service provider and did not seek credit or ownership.

"We have no pride of ownership. And frankly, that's how we got the conditional grant – the massive conditional grant that is currently in place, that even in this constrained fiscal environment, Treasury, saw fit to increase."

Board Member

Ilifa's combined work with the DSD 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, which includes increasing the per child subsidy from R15 to R17 in 2020 making it available to non-centre-based programmes. These combined efforts resulted in an increase in the number of children accessing the subsidy from 558,020 in 2016, to 668,518 by March 2021.

In unlocking budget for ECD, Ilifa has leveraged data and evidence, while also **embracing emergence**: It has been agile in **collaborating** with different departments and levels of government, as well as local NGOs, depending on where the system needs

and opportunities are. It has also had the patience to move slow, nurturing relationships with government partners, building the state's institutional capacity, shifting entrenched patterns of resource allocation, and incrementally building consensus between disparate stakeholders.

Towards the end of Phase III, Ilifa **collaborated** with ECD civil society in ways it had not done before, creating a strong and effective advocacy coalition in response to the effects of the Covid-19 lockdown. Ilifa, together with key sectoral partners, produced seminal evidence about the impact of Covid-19 lockdown on early learning providers, which contributed to the establishment of a R500 million ECD Employment Stimulus Relief Fund (ESRF). Ilifa played a central role in the design and administration of this fund, collaborating with civil society implementing partners, and ensuring that unregistered early learning programmes were also eligible for relief. In addition to the ECD ESRF, Ilifa also designed and implemented its own R36 million Covid-19 response effort, distributing vouchers to support ELPs as nutrition hubs and stimulate local economies.

Through the design and implementation of the ECD Employment Stimulation Relief Fund (ECD ESRF) and its own relief programme, Ilifa learned that intermediary organisations (NGOs connected to a network of ELP providers) could play a key role in **bridging** government funding and ECD providers: validating informal, unregistered early learning programmes and distributing funds. Ilifa is now investigating intermediary organisations as a potential solution to solving payment problems in the ECD sector. In seeking out methods to reliably distribute funds to informal early learning providers, Ilifa is testing, learning, and adapting, in response to its deepening **understanding of the system**.

By increasing access to the early learning subsidy and driving Covid-19 relief efforts, Ilifa's Phase III strategy sought to improve equity in a system that had historically excluded under-resourced early learning providers serving the poorest children.

Phase IV



In Phase IV, Ilifa has focused on positioning ECD as a key lever to shift inequality and drive human capital in South Africa. One of the ways Ilifa has sought to **bridge** the ECD ecosystem is by redrawing its boundaries.

While narrow understandings of the ECD ecosystem might have excluded public employment or small business from its ambit, reframing the ecosystem human capital terms has allowed a range of previously under-appreciated beneficiaries and potential funders to come into view. This has allowed Ilifa to motivate for public funding from a range of different funding pools, including budgets for small and medium enterprises and higher education and training.

"There's so many opportunities that clearly exist for small businesses that can be leveraged. But because we weren't utilising the lens or framework of care work and early childhood development as being real socio-economic development opportunities that can bring real social value and social good into communities, that was almost being missed as an opportunity by those thinking about how we support entrepreneurs in informal economies." **ECD Funder**

This new strategy recognises that: "the historical positioning of ECD as a 'childcare issue' has limited the potential to fully leverage other pockets of public financing."²⁹ To this end, Ilifa has supported research on how ECD services support women's labour force participation and what the multiplier effects of this participation might be.

Ilifa is also developing a 'capital framework' to articulate the pathways from ECD investment to wider impact. This research has formed part of a working paper series, in collaboration with Research for Social and Economic Policy (RESEP) at Stellenbosch University. Key themes in the working paper series have included financing and funding, labour, nutrition, ECD governance, regulation, economics, the household environment, and development outcomes of children.

"I am really excited about the work that Ilifa is doing with research at Stellenbosch University and being able to put out the evidence-based research to make the case for providing universal access to an ECD and I think that is an area we perhaps there's also scope for further work for the future, because not many ECD organisations are doing the type of research work" **Academic**

Historically, Ilifa's work to unlock public funding has been geared towards early learning programmes. In Phase IV of the strategy, closer attention has been given to the importance of home visiting programmes as a key intervention for 0-2 year-olds and designing financing mechanisms for systems that support CHW's.

Income support for pregnant women has also been costed and Ilifa is supporting a campaign led by Grow Great for government to adopt this proposal. This represents an opportunity to leverage the relationship with government to unlock new pots of funding for this broader spectrum of ECD activities.

3.2 Reframing ‘the system’: Bridging between government support and multi-modal provision

From its inception, Ilifa has understood that the provision of early learning, stimulation and care 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 ELPs. 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 years, for example, receive care, nourishment, and early learning at home, but their caregivers are under-supported. While there has been growing recognition of ECD as a public good, and increased commitment from government to support it; the question of how government should best interface with a largely informal and extraordinarily diverse sector of ECD providers – including families, early learning practitioners, micro-enterprises, community health workers, clinics, social services, and NPOs – remains unresolved. Ilifa has recognised that this interface needs to be **bridged** by enabling systems.

“We don’t see the solution as government being the provider of ECD. We see the solution as government being a keen enabler through policies, registration etc.” **Academic**

Arch of work

Phase I: Shifting mental models and universalising impact

Rather than seeking to transform a diverse economy of ECD providers into standardised, formal channels of delivery, Ilifa believes that an ideal system would enhance and build on the assets of a resilient informal economy. This means acknowledging and supporting the range of ECD modalities offering critical services to children, not only through registered early learning centres and formal primary healthcare clinics, but also through informal micro-enterprises, and indeed through communities and households.

To bring homes and communities closer to government support systems, Ilifa had to build **bridges** – driving research to elevate the role and impact of caregivers and community-based ECD. Ilifa’s first phase focused on the home environment as a pivotal site of ECD. Home visiting programmes implemented through Sobambisana included both early learning components and maternal and child health services. These programmes were shown to not only improve children’s holistic developmental outcomes, but also families’ early access to the CSG.³⁰

By testing home visiting models, in particular, Ilifa was responding to an identified weakness, and lever for change, in the ECD ecosystem. Very young children (0-2 years), pregnant women, and new mothers – for whom care happens at home – are underserved in the current ecosystem. Barring the time that women and babies spend in clinics (only 20 out of the child’s first 1000 days of life), families receive little support in these early years. Yet this period is critical for the wellbeing of both mother and child, as well as for children’s future development. Ilifa’s research during Phase I showed that children’s home environments could moderate the impact of even the best-designed programming: children that were malnourished or under-developed benefited less from early learning programmes, suggesting the need to support parents and caregivers in the home as a critical lever for improved ECD outcomes.³¹

The work of Sobambisana sought to demonstrate that, beyond registered centre-based ELPs, are a range of other modalities offering critical, quality services to children. Without the right systems to support this diverse economy of provision, it will be difficult to grow supply, advance quality, or even deliver funding to informal providers.

In reframing ECD provision, Ilifa has sought to shift inappropriate mental models that are making universal access to quality ECD more difficult to achieve. Among the mental models that Ilifa has sought to shift are that: 1) that ECD is synonymous with group early learning, and 2) that quality early learning programmes can only be delivered in purpose-built centres.

Through Sobambisana and its deepening **understanding of the system**, Ilifa began to articulate several principles that would influence not only its own scope of work, but also how ECD came to be framed by policy makers and programmers:

- That ECD provision needed to span from **pre-birth** upwards.
- That ECD, rather than being synonymous with ‘group early learning’, is an integrated **essential package** of services, including stimulation for early learning, nutrition, social services, as well as maternal and child healthcare.
- That ECD is fundamentally community-based and, as such, support for ECD must be fitting to a community-based context. Sobambisana demonstrated that expanding non-centre-based provision, and improving the quality of centre-based programming, are equally important routes to expanding quality coverage.
- That quality, access and equity are all critical to achieving universal access to ECD.

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.³² Instead of focusing on 'scaling out' 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').³³ By operating at the level of systems, values, and beliefs, Ilifa has sought to **universalise** rather than 'scale' its impact.

In shifting its approach to scale, Ilifa showed its ability to slow down and adapt. Systems change means **embracing emergence** and creating conditions to test, change, learn, and fail.

Photo credit: Ilifa Labantwana

Phase II: Foregrounding families and bridging the early learning system.

During Phase II, Ilifa refined its goal of 'scaling up quality ECD provision in South Africa', to focus on "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 6 years of age" (2015/2016 Interim Report).

Implied in Ilifa's ways of working during this period was that this 'consensus' needed to be built among government stakeholders, supported by robust evidence of ECD programming models that could be delivered at scale. 'Consensus' also had to be seeded among parents and families through deliberate strategies of 'public engagement' that would grow 'demand' for ECD services. This included a national #LovePlayTalk communications campaign to activate the significant role of the caregiver in the First 1000 Days of a child's life.

In Phase II, Ilifa continued to test and demonstrate non-centre-based models of ECD provision, while deliberately nurturing local government partnerships to integrate learnings into provincial systems. During this period, Ilifa showed particular interest in demonstrating home visiting models to support caregivers in the critical first 1000 days of their child's life: In partnership with ELRU, they supported the North-West province to implement a home visiting programme to support families of vulnerable children (aged 0-6) and pregnant women. The programme was shown to boost jobs and skills for young people, support caregiver coping, improve child stimulation, and increase coverage of the child support grant.³⁴

Examples of services delivered to children and care-givers through home visiting

- Psycho-social support
- Nutrition support
- Birth registration
- Social grants
- Referrals to services
- Early learning
- Parenting skills
- Safe, healthy home

Ilifa also supported research demonstrating other models of home-based support for parents, specifically the Philani Mentor Mothers³⁵ and Sinovuyo Positive Parenting Programme.³⁶ This research supported the leadership of these organisations to become one of the biggest parenting programmes in the world, and the leading home visiting model to support pregnant women and mothers.



While much of Ilifa's language at the time spoke about engaging parents/caregivers as a route to stimulating 'demand' for ECD services; it also recognised caregivers and families as essential providers of ECD. This would be a critical move in locating households as potential beneficiaries of ECD funding, capacitation, and support.

While centring the home environment, Ilifa also sought to build support systems to better meet the needs of early learning providers.

Ilifa's Phase I research into ECD funding flows showed that early learning providers were facing a range of regulatory obstacles in their attempts to access state funding. During Phase II, Ilifa worked with local governments to demonstrate systems that could expand and ease access to government support for community based ELPs. While this work was about unlocking public funding, it also demanded that Ilifa reframe provision, drawing attention to the needs and realities of unregistered early learning providers. Government systems had historically operated under the assumption that only 'quality' programmes that met prerequisite norms and standards should be eligible funding. Through the work of Phase II, Ilifa sought to demonstrate that quality improvement was often dependent on funding. More so, the ability of some programmes to meet certain norms and standards, like those determined for physical infrastructure for example, was less about the quality of care and learning being provided, and more about their access to resources. What was required was a developmental approach to meeting the norms and standards for registration. This has not only improved access for the poorest children, but has also made a whole economy of provision more viable

"Ilifa quickly realised the fact that we have those [norms and] standards in place...but in South Africa, majority of ECD facilities are unable to meet that. And so it supported the DSD with bringing in a differentiated registration framework.... And I think a developmental approach really helps government understand the sector much better and how to approach implementing ECD within the sector."

DBE representative

In testing and iterating systems to bridge ELPs to state funding, Ilifa were opportunistic, seeing where there was momentum and building on it. More so, experimentation was not an end in itself, but was instead geared towards systems-level learnings:

"It was figuring out what comes out of that [local-level experimentation], how to interface that into the system, how to interface that into what government understands, what the system understands, trying to make sure that whatever happens interfaces in a way that becomes useful." **Board Member**

Together with Impande (a KZN-based ECD organisation), Ilifa proposed a simpler, faster, and data-driven registration process: Bhalisa Inkulisa, which was tested with 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.

One of the key missing pieces in the early learning ecosystem has been the interface between government support and the sector's ability to receive that support. Here, some stakeholders have described Ilifa as providing a critical **bridge**, reframing the provider landscape in the eyes of government. Although government's standard approach to 'supporting' the informal early learning sector has been to formalise it, Ilifa has, from the start, asserted the diversity and informality of the early learning sector as an asset. The heterogeneity and responsiveness of South Africa's early learning ecosystem has allowed the sector to be adaptable, context specific and needs-oriented. Ilifa has offered government a holistic, evidence-based view of the provider ecosystem, to improve the relevance of state regulatory and funding mechanisms. Meanwhile, it has also sought to support early learning providers, developing tools and processes to assist them in meeting government registration and funding criteria, while also amplifying their voices towards advocacy.

Phase III: Caregiver demand

Over the course of Phase II, Ilifa's partnership strategy shifted, with Ilifa narrowing and focusing its attention on national-level government partnerships, including National DSD, Treasury and the ECD Conditional Grant Consortium. While much of Ilifa's focus during Phase III was on expanding access to the early learning subsidy, this was also the period in which it cemented its partnership with the National Department of Health (DoH).

Together with DoH, Ilifa design and launched a dynamic multi-channel communication campaign (radio, in-person, print and digital) called Side-by-Side. Based on the redesigned Road to Health Book, Side-by-Side equips caregivers with the knowledge and tools to support early stimulation and healthy development for their children. The launch of Side-by-Side coincided with the launch of the World Health Assembly's Nurturing Care Framework, which advocated, in line with the National Integrated Policy for ECD, for integrated services that went beyond child survival (in the health sector) or early learning (in the education sector) to include nutrition, safety, security and responsive caregiving.

Through Side-by-Side Ilifa sought to reframe ECD provision in several ways:

- First, it sought to demonstrate that ECD was not just a matter of early learning.
- Second, it sought to demonstrate the potential role of the DoH in supporting ECD and the potential reach of a, still underutilised, public health system.
- Third, it sought to affirm that ECD starts from conception.
- Finally, it sought to show that driving caregiver demand for ECD services is as important as expanding and improving supply. Households were as important to providing care as health facilities.

Side-by-Side has shifted power in the ECD ecosystem, empowering poorer families, who do not have access to ECD information, with resources to support their caregiving and choice-making. Its central message to caregivers was: 'You are central to your child's nurturing, care, and protection – and their lifelong health outcomes. Your health worker is there to support you.'³⁷

Today, Side-by-Side's radio show reaches 5.4 million listeners on eleven SABC African language stations, the redesigned Road to Health booklet is given to every new caregiver in both the public and private sector (over one million copies handed to new parents by the DOH every year) and engages with over 35,000 followers on its Facebook page. Building this partnership with DoH, and achieving this level of reach, took extensive patience, effort, and capacitation, including two secondments to DoH to drive the campaign. Although Ilifa resourced the full cost of Side-by-Side in the first two years, DoH is now the majority funder.

The Side-by-Side campaign reflected a significant shift in Ilifa's approach to the home environment. Where it had historically undertaken significant testing and demonstration of home visiting programmes, in Phase III Ilifa shifted its efforts to support households towards national-level communication systems targeted at caregivers. Notwithstanding the successes of Side-by-Side, Ilifa has had limited success in supporting systems of care and nourishment outside of the early learning environment. The ECD sector continues to struggle to see ECD as it is defined in policy, with the biggest focus being on early learning. This near-exclusive emphasis on early learning remains a risk, and perhaps even more so, following the function shift to the Department of Basic Education. Recognising its limitations in this area, Ilifa is reliant on its close partner, Grow Great, to drive programmatic learning and innovation in community health worker-led home visiting, which it then intends to support.

Phase IV: Women and workforce

In Phases II and III, Ilifa sought to position caregivers families as both recipients and providers of ECD services. In Phase IV, it has sought to do the same with the early learning workforce. Early learning practitioners, community health workers and other employees in the ECD ecosystem are not only providers of ECD services; they are also beneficiaries of an ECD ecosystem that has the capacity to produce quality jobs. More so, accessible, affordable, and quality childcare also frees up women and caregivers to enter the labour market. This reframing has been part of Ilifa's larger drive to position ECD as a lever for human capital development, with impacts for job creation, women's upliftment, local economies, and the future outcomes of children.

3.3 Future opportunities to reframe the system

Staying connected to providers.

Some stakeholders have argued that in narrowing its focus to national support mechanisms, Ilifa has not given sufficient attention to the local-level contexts in which ECD provision unfolds. "My concern" one participant said, "is that we will end up spending so much more time and focus on what we need to do structurally and..., not really thinking about the child and the family at the centre."

While the decision to focus on the system level has been a deliberate decision, there is scope for Ilifa to expand support to ECD providers and families through its long-established relationships with programmatic partners.

Elevating the understanding and prioritisation of ECD

Working closely with centers of power within government, like the Presidency, Ilifa also aims to build bridges between various stakeholders in the ECD eco-system,

both government and non-government. This will broaden the understanding of ECD – not just as a childcare question but as a developmental lever – and support accountability arrangements in the ECD eco-system.

Delivery platforms

In Phase IV, Ilifa has deepened its long-term partnerships with SmartStart and Grow Great, both of whom have large scale delivery programmes. Increasingly, Ilifa has recognised that the realisation of public sector system reforms depends on large scale delivery platforms that can connect providers to systems of support quickly, and at scale.

Even with the right regulation and resourcing in place, informal early learning providers need to be able to plug into a system that can help them get started and stay afloat. This is part of what it will take to meaningfully **bridge the system**. SmartStart remains a critical partner in developing systems thinking on this front. By knitting training, resourcing, licensing, quality and provision together, delivery platforms like SmartStart have the potential to help drive coordination, scale, and quality in the early learning system, while also helping funders and regulators interface with a heterogeneous informal economy.

“How do we make the concept of delivery platform as a systemic intervention really work? And also why I like that it’s not only a government issue, it’s a platform that brings in a whole host of expertise, brings in external funding sources... for me it’s a good example of how a public private partnership can work.”
Ilifa representative

The importance of a delivery system that can create a harmonised pipeline of early learning practitioners, venues, and set-up is emerging as critical in Phase IV, as Ilifa leans into its role as a facilitator of social compacts.

Home visiting programmes

In Ilifa’s Phase IV strategy, there is a deliberate re-centring of the home environment, and the potential power of home visiting as a systems lever. Partnering with Grow Great is allowing Ilifa to map opportunities in the government community health worker system. Re-focusing on parents and caregivers has also redrawn Ilifa’s attention to the pre-birth period and early years of a child’s life. For example, Ilifa intends to partner with Grow Great on advocacy towards the Maternal Support Grant.

“I feel sometimes a lot of our work focuses so much on increasing net supply, fixing a broken government system, that we end up forgetting about the caregiver, and the importance of just trying to shift our thinking around that space.”
Ilifa leadership

Refocusing on the workforce

Despite appearing in strategy documents, the ECD workforce has been relatively muted in Ilifa’s work since Phase I. Given the scope of activity in this part of the system, including questions surrounding training and accreditation; wages and benefits; as well as working conditions; Ilifa had decided it was not best placed to be a major player in this arena. However, Ilifa’s Phase IV strategy positions ECD as a driver of employment for women, elevating funding and capacitation of the ECD workforce as a key lever for change. How Ilifa will contribute to advocacy and action in relation to the workforce remains to be seen. A number of interviewees for this case study reflected on the need to prioritise the ECD workforce and position the ‘care economy’ as a significant employment opportunity.

“There’s obviously a lot of emphasis around employment now. And a lot of funding that’s going into that. And so I think... leveraging this concept of the care economy, and thinking about how we really build that, not just creating jobs, but actually combining that with the skills and the support needed to make people effective as practitioners.”

Social entrepreneur and researcher

New evidence

While most interviewees for this case study did not believe that informal services and quality were mutually exclusive, others argued that without formalisation, the realities of early learning remain “really a black box, because we don’t really know the circumstances within which those facilities are actually operating” (National Treasury Representative). What both camps agreed on was the need for sophisticated, but currently underdeveloped, data systems, to assess the extent and variety of needs, levels of quality, and appropriate types of support, especially for the poorest children (many of whom are not in ELPs).

It is also important to signal that, despite its role in articulating an essential package of services for ECD, Ilifa’s evidence generation has (barring the South African Early Childhood Review) focused nearly exclusively on early learning. Since evidence has often served Ilifa’s ability to make credible inputs in driving systems change; a dearth of system-level evidence in relation to community health worker-led home visiting, for example, may be limiting its impact in these areas.

Similarly, while focusing on children, Ilifa has not generated significant evidence on parents/caregivers nor the ECD workforce as key beneficiaries of ECD provision, until very recently. If Ilifa’s past is anything to go by, its impact in these domains will rest on the strength of its evidence, or its ability to build relationships with evidence-generating implementing partners.



Photo credit: Ilifa Labantwana

4 The 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.

4.1 Understand the system

Building a strong evidence base is as much a strategy in itself, as it is the soil from which other systems change strategies are seeded and sustained. Ilifa recognised early on that systems-related evidence was lacking in the ECD sector, and articulated evidence generation as one of its key roles and purposes. Without understanding how the system is organised, it is impossible to re-organise resources and processes towards lasting change.

"...Just describing and, and quantifying the challenges, the red tape, the administrative blockages... [so that] it's not just... a big black hole. We can actually tease out what all those blockages are exactly... how they contribute to the overall system. When you understand that, you can start to address things."

ECD civil society member

How Ilifa has used it

Ilifa's strategy is shaped, and re-shaped, by ongoing research and experimentation, undertaken by Ilifa and its coalition of partners. It is also co-creating the conditions for continuous learning in the ECD ecosystem itself by supporting evidence generation and co-developing appropriate information systems. Through evidence generation, Ilifa strengthens its credibility as a system actor, galvanises partnerships, and can make evidence-based decisions on how and where to target its efforts.

Impact

Ilifa's evidence generation has been critical to shifting South Africa's ECD systems. Ilifa has used evidence and technical capability to motivate for changes in financing and regulation, demonstrate new models of ECD provision, and track progress. It has also sought to stimulate the evidence-generation capacity of the system itself, funding research into ECD systems, producing the South African Early Childhood Review, and catalysing data-driven ECD organisations like Innovation Edge (who produced the ELOM). It has also supported data and information systems within government, with the intention to improve data-driven decision making by government.

Ilifa's ability to generate, mobilise and engage ECD evidence is at the heart of its unique capability. This is not only how it is able to identify critical levers for systems change, but also how it is able to remain responsive and agile should the evidence point in a new direction. Evidence has also been critical to Ilifa's credibility with key partners – like government – allowing entry into spaces of large-scale decision making. It is also Ilifa's evidence-generation capacity, and relatedly its technical expertise, that make them an advantageous advocacy partner for civil society organisations.

But while Ilifa's evidence-generation positions them as a critical asset to the sector, and a key role player in systems change efforts; Ilifa also relies on good relationships, and capacity, within the sector to generate reliable, regular, and robust evidence. While Ilifa's emphasis on evidence generation has been purposeful, it might also contribute to a particular reading of Ilifa as a high-level, technical, policy organisation that is disconnected from, and at risk of being irrelevant to, the everyday realities of ECD implementation.

4.2 Collaborate

Inherently, one cannot change a system alone. Instead, system change work requires adopting a range of tactical coalitions and partnerships to facilitate working across the system. In Ilifa's case, this began first and foremost with coalition-building; bringing together close partners and allies that included implementers, innovators, and funders. Increasingly, it has also meant playing in the political arena, and developing partnerships with government. As one Board Member argued, collaboration is a "delicate dance: Ilifa has adopted an approach that sees the value of alliance rather than antagonism."

"Relational work takes time. It takes decades. But it's needed to build trust, which is also catalytic." **Jeroo Billimoria, Catalyst 2030**

Partnering with government

How Ilifa has used it

Ilifa has been agile in partnering with different departments and levels of government, depending on where the systems needs and opportunities are. It has gained credibility with government by leveraging its technical expertise and knowledge of the system. In partnering with government, Ilifa has operated as a thought partner, rather than a service provider. Without a need for credit or ownership, they have worked deliberately to strengthen state capacity.

Impact

Through concerted long-term technical support and seconding capacity to the DoH, Ilifa was able to co-develop, grow, and sustain the Side-by-Side mass communication campaign. Similarly, by building trusting and lasting relationships with Treasury and supporting the Department of Basic Education in taking on the ECD function, Ilifa has established itself as a reliable thought partner in ECD financing and expansion planning.

Working with the North West Department of Social Development, Ilifa was also able to co-develop an integrated ECD delivery system, exploring different models of community-based delivery and the systems needed to support them.

Realising that local governments have greater jurisdiction over ECD infrastructure budgets than national government, Ilifa partnered with Kago Ya Bana as a strategy to support shifts in local practices despite Ilifa having limited capacity or reach across municipalities.

Partnering with other organisations in the ECD ecosystem

How Ilifa has used it

By seeding and nurturing enduring partnerships with a close coalition of organisations (SmartStart, Grow Great, Innovation Edge, Kago Yabana, and DG Murray Trust), Ilifa strengthens (and is strengthened by) a wider ECD ecosystem.

Impact

Core coalition: Partnerships have allowed Ilifa to focus on national system-level change, while remaining connected to programming (through Smart Start and Grow Great), municipal blockages (through Kago Yabana) and cutting-edge evidence (through Innovation Edge, DataDrive2030, RESEP etc.). These organisations are reciprocally informing and complementing one another's approaches. Meanwhile, Ilifa's partnership with the Equality Collective, which gave rise to RealReform4ECD, has translated into a greater prioritisation of sector-wide coalition-building and advocacy.

Emergent partnerships in response to ad hoc system needs and shared interests, i.e., advocacy and alliance-building work has only accelerated in response to Covid-19

Rather than being in service of their organisation, systems change practitioners need to be in service of addressing the problem. To do this requires a rich understanding of how other actors are working, and where the opportunities are to collaborate and compound one's impact. This is an area where Ilifa leadership acknowledges room to grow: Ilifa has not worked concertedly enough to understand the diversity of players in the ECD sector nor opportunities for collaboration. Instead, these collaborations have been relatively ad hoc, or drawn on long-established relationships. Ilifa has nonetheless acknowledged that it cannot (and should not) act in every part of the system but should rather focus on those areas where it is best placed to unlock impact.

System change work recognises government as an essential partner. It is difficult to achieve widespread systems change without government taking meaningful ownership of the problem. Ilifa's leadership believes that the biggest change in the ECD ecosystem needs to be with government. Ilifa's own modelling and expansion work suggests that substantive change in the ECD ecosystem will come from significant increases in the annual ECD budget, along with the regulations and systems that allow for an accountable flow of funds to children's benefit. Recognising government as an essential partner to system change requires system actors to work alongside state partners, concertedly building their capacity. It also means having the patience to grapple with, and if needs be reform,

chunky government systems. Ilifa's partnerships with government have taken a long time to grow and deepen. They have shown that, to meaningfully collaborate with government, one must involve them early: coming to a shared understanding of the problems in the system and their root causes. To do this often means leveraging evidence and drawing in diverse voices, de-centring individual contributions in favour of trust-building.

Ilifa's leadership has made a deliberate decision to target government systems, where it believes the biggest wins for the ECD ecosystem can be achieved. But it has also acknowledged the costs involved in this approach.

While it is important to acknowledge government's critical role in the system, it is as important not to see government as the system. By focusing too narrowly on government's role, Ilifa risks operating under the pretence that ECD is the sole purview of the state. Government has, in many ways, become Ilifa's prime beneficiary. One Board Member argued that by directing so much effort towards supporting the Department of Education (DBE) to take on the function shift, for example, Ilifa risked "taking the eye off the prize – which is a comprehensive programme for children for the country." Government is only one role-player in a vast and complex ECD ecosystem in which most provision is happening outside of the state.

Some ECD sector stakeholders interviewed for this case study worried about the implications Ilifa's increasingly narrow focus on government partnerships would have on its relationships with civil society, and its ability to hold the state accountable. "When you've sort of signed an MOU with government," one ECD social entrepreneur said, "you're almost working for them so it's hard to kind of push against them."

This perception poses potential challenges for Ilifa's coalition-building and advocacy efforts, which are receiving growing emphasis in Phase IV of its work. Because of its focus on government systems, and its history of largely-technical work; the extent of Ilifa's collaboration with other players in the ECD ecosystem has been relatively contained. Although collaboration has been a powerful tool in Ilifa's system change toolkit, it has also been limited to a select coalition of close partners. This leaves Ilifa's role as an advocate for, or representative of, the sector up for contest.

Given what is perceived as a growing distance between Ilifa and ECD providers and families on the ground, some interviewees for this case study raised concerns about Ilifa's ability to represent the sector to government, whose attention it was sometimes seen to have monopolised.

Others, however, have argued that it is precisely Ilifa's close relationship with government that gives it leverage in advocating for change on behalf of the sector. In the eyes of these commentators, Ilifa holds an often-delicate balance between supporting and capacitating Government, while also holding them to account.

While negotiating the right relationship with government and other partners is critical, many systems change catalysts will argue that you can't do systems work without government, particularly if you want the system to be sustainability funded. For Ilifa, intentional collaboration in the ECD ecosystem must include government, who hold the mandate and responsibility for ECD. But they alone cannot succeed.

Funders can benefit from collaboration

Ilifa's collaborative ethos is also mirrored in its collaborative of funders who have offered the long-term, flexible funding required for systems change. In addition to coming together to fund Ilifa, this group of funders has also subsequently worked on a range of other things together, supporting spin-off projects in the ECD implementation and innovation space, while protecting Ilifa's ability to focus on systems.

By working collaboratively with other ECD funders, each individual Ilifa funder has also magnified its impact on the system. By working together towards common problem, funders can pool resources, instead of acting in isolation with lesser impact. Given the slowness of system-level work, collaboration can also ease the pressure on funders.

"I think the pooled funding is a very, very important component of Ilifa – the fact that all the donors put their money into one pot reduces the risk of being tugged in different directions. And it forces the discipline of a joint governance structure, because the funders want to know how the money is spent."
– Board Member and Funder

4.3 Universalise Impact

Ilifa has sought to universalise, rather than ‘scale’ its impact. Ilifa tries not to use the language of scale because it usually includes an assumption that higher impact is achieved by increasing throughput in a system. In other words: “We want social welfare to be like McDonald’s.”³⁸ But in complex social systems, where context matters, impact often depends on sustained and more tailored tactics. Global South research³⁹ on ECD ecosystems affirms that although broad national programmes are required to support ECD at scale, these must be flexible enough to remain responsive to local norms and practices.

⁴⁰ In system change, “the social change practitioner is not just responsible for planting the seed (scaling), but also for gaining access to land, cultivating the soil, remaining vigilant for pests and disease, and trusting that optimal weather conditions will materialize for that seed to grow. Ultimately, the conditions are far out of the hands of a single farmer and will largely rely on the broader ecosystem in which the planting takes place.” **Rayner & Bonnici, in *The System Work of Social Change***

How Ilifa has used it

Over time, Ilifa has sharpened its approach to scale. Instead of focusing on ‘scaling out’ successful programmatic interventions, it has increasingly focused

on what it calls universality – or building the conditions in which scale is possible. This means working at the level of policy, regulation and financing to change conditions in the system (what some call ‘scaling up’) and shifting power, attitudes and values in the system (what some call ‘scaling deep’)

Impact

Ilifa’s strategy has increasingly focused on strengthening public systems that create the conditions for ECD services to thrive – policy, regulation, financing, information systems, as well as quality assurance and support. Ilifa is also working with partners, like SmartStart, to support a viable, large-scale delivery platform that can link government and ECD providers through established networks that engender mutual trust.

Shifting power: By equipping caregivers with the knowledge and tools to support early stimulation and healthy development for their children, the Side-by-Side campaign is expanding access to information and shifting power to families and households.

Shifting values and attitudes: Among the assumptions that Ilifa has sought to shift are that: 1) that quality early learning programmes can only be delivered in purpose-built centres, 2) that only ‘quality’ programmes should get funding. Instead, it has sought to demonstrate that 1) quality early learning programmes can take many shapes and forms, and 2) that quality improvement often depends on funding.

4.4. Embrace emergence

Trying to shift complex social systems means working with complexity. To hold complexity means, on the one hand, leveraging data and models that can help us understand the system, and explain the complexity we are experiencing; while on the other hand surrendering to the uncertainty that complex systems pose. In other words: understanding the system and embracing emergence must exist in productive tension.

⁴¹ “With this dual approach, we are prepared for the opportunity that complexity affords us: the chance to learn” **Rayner & Bonnici, in *The System Work of Social Change***

Embracing emergence often requires a delicate balance of patience and agility. To allow things to emerge, system change catalysts must give in to the pace of things. Big, complex systems are clunky and difficult to shift. Achieving change means sticking it out for the long-haul, building up the evidence, relationships, and credibility to realise substantive change. But while system change can be slow, system change catalysts must be able to move quickly when opportunities arise. This demands agility.

How Ilifa has used it

Patience: Ilifa’s partnerships, particularly with government, have been hard-won. Over many years, they have worked to slowly build institutional capacity, unsettle entrenched attitudes, shift patterns of resource allocation, and establish consensus between disparate stakeholders. This would not be possible without patience and flexible funding.

Agility: System change work is as much relational as it is technical. It requires building connections across scope and sectors. Relationships facilitate agility, allowing system actors to responsively come together to address emergent needs, shared interests.

Impact

Long-term gains: Many of Ilifa’s biggest wins (including increased budget allocations for ECD, changes in registration requirements for early learning programmes, or the Side-by-Side communication campaign) have required sustained, long-term partnership building.

Responsiveness: Ilifa demonstrated this agility in response to Covid-19: They were able to galvanise new and established partners in advocacy and relief efforts, and document learnings to inform systems for distributing funds to informal ELPs.

4.5. Bridge the system

Being a systems actor demands certain types of people—people who can do the technical work of understanding systems and building diverse partnerships, but also those who can straddle government and civil society, holding their various interests.

“The reason the Ilifa can have as much success today is that a team has developed at Ilifa that is incredibly well balanced in terms of their understanding of the NGO sector, and their vulnerabilities, and understanding of the state actors and their vulnerabilities.” **Funder and Ilifa Founder**

How Ilifa has used it

Ilifa has often acted as an intermediary between various stakeholders within the ECD ecosystem. In doing so, it has paid attention to the interdependencies and feedback loops in the system: understanding what needs to change, but also strengthening the system’s ability to manage, and benefit from, that change.

Most especially, Ilifa has served to mediate and bridge government support systems and the early learning sector’s ability to receive and absorb that support to advance quality and access.

Impact

Through its work, Ilifa aims to build and improve linkages between government regulation, financing, and policy systems and the everyday needs and contexts of diverse ECD providers. Part of this work is identifying the best levers to bridge the system and, in doing so, ease the flow of resources, information and funding to ECD providers: Ilifa has advocated for ELP registration requirements to better meet the needs of a largely informal sector and developing financing mechanisms to support infrastructure upgrades. But it has also recognised that the impact of these changes will not be realised without systems to support local-level implementers, like social workers who must allocate and monitor new money.

Another example is Ilifa’s ability to identify the mass communication opportunity presented by the distribution of the Road to Health (R2H) booklet, along with the system dependencies and weaknesses that would need to be addressed to leverage this opportunity. To enable a system change, Ilifa had to strengthen linkages in the system (i.e. bridge the system): seconding capacity to the Department of Health (DoH) to support the development of the Side-by-Side campaign, recognising that health workers would need to be supported in using the newly designed R2H, and slowly supporting DoH in taking primary financial ownership for the campaign.

System change funders must get comfortable with emergence

This means supporting organisations to test, adapt, learn, and fail; and finding alternative strategies for impact measurement. This means building flexibility, patience, and collaboration into their practices. Ilifa, and some of its key partners, have been supported by a group of funders, with shared interest in ECD system change. Long-term flexible funding has encouraged collective strategy and governance, while also enabling agility and long-term gains.

Embracing emergence also means shifting how impact is measured

Impact measurement is widely acknowledged as a challenge for systems change organisations. This is because systems change often involves many actors and events over long periods of time, during which circumstances, opportunities and obstacles are likely to change. Traditional impact measurement has led to significant bureaucratic burden for NGO actors and a high degree of control from funders. Often, NGOs are pulled from their core work to meet funders’

requirements and struggle to find funding for the work they fund most impactful.

Rather than being punitive and restrictive, the role of a system change funder should be to ask excellent questions. This includes accepting that you cannot, and should not, measure everything, and revising impact measurement frameworks so that they facilitate meaningful learning.

‘Vanity metrics’, like the number of beneficiaries reached, often encourage organisations to focus on ‘proof’ of their good work, using linear models of individual causality that are ill-fitting to systems change. Instead, systems change metrics should incentivise testing, learning, responsiveness, and collaboration.

Since Ilifa is a systems-change organisation, its impact must surely be measured at the level of the system – focusing on how the system itself, or knowledge of the system, has shifted (or not) and measuring appropriate milestones along the way.

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.

References

- 1 Ross D. Arnold and Jon P. Wade, 'A Definition of Systems Thinking: A Systems Approach', *Procedia Computer Science* 44 (2015): 669–78, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2015.03.050>.
- 2 The Lancet, "Advancing Early Childhood Development: From Science to Scale: Executive Summary," *The Lancet* 389, no. 10064 (2016).
- 3 N Rudolph, Z Millei, and M Alasuutari, "Data Practices and Inequality in South African Early Childhood Development Policy: Technocratic Management versus Social Transformation," *South African Journal of Childhood Education* 9, no. 1 (2019).
- 4 Petero Rule, "Ten Years of Early Childhood Development: A Case Study of Little Elephant Training Centre for Early Education," *Journal of Education* 35, no. 1 (2005): 121–38.
- 5 Atmore, "Early Childhood Development in South Africa – Progress since the End of Apartheid," *International Journal of Early Years Education* 21 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2013.832941>.
- 6 R Martorell, "Improved Nutrition in the First 1000 Days and Adult Human Capital and Health," *American Journal of Human Biology* 29, no. e22952 (2017).
- 7 Martorell.
- 8 Ilifa Labantwana, "South African ECD Review," 2019.
- 9 Ilifa Labantwana.
- 10 Eldridge Moses, "Enrolment in Early Childhood Care and Education Programmes in South Africa – Challenges and Opportunities," *The Ilifa-Resep ECD Working Paper Series* 002 (2021).
- 11 Thrive by Five, 'Thrive by Five Index', 2022, <https://thrivebyfive.co.za/>.
- 12 Department of Basic Education, "ECD Census 2021" (Pretoria, 2022), <https://datadrive2030.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/ecdc-2021-report.pdf>.
- 13 Department of Basic Education.
- 14 Department of Basic Education.
- 15 Department of Basic Education.
- 16 Ilifa Labantwana, 'Own Calculations Leveraging Survey Data', 2022.
- 17 A Dawes and L Biersteker, "Towards Integrated Early Childhood Development" (Ilifa Labantwana, 2012), <https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Evaluation-of-the-Sobambisana-Initiative.pdf>.
- 18 Ilifa Labantwana, "A Quantum Leap: The Ilifa Labantwana Story Phase I 2009-2013," 2014, <https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/the-ilifa-labantwana-story/>.
- 19 L Biersteker and A Dawes, "An Evaluation of the Implementation, Outcomes and Integration of the ELRU Family and Community Motivator Programme into the Early Childhood Development Programme of the North West Department of Social Development, 2015–2016," 2016.
- 20 S Robins and B Von Lieres, "Remaking Citizenship, Unmaking Marginalisation: The Treatment Action Campaign in Post-Apartheid South Africa," 2004 38, no. 3 (n.d.): 575–86.
- 21 Ilifa Labantwana and Kago Ya Bana, "A Plan to Achieve Universal Coverage of Early Childhood Development Services by 2030," Discussion Document (Unpublished, 2018).
- 22 Ilifa Labantwana and Kago Ya Bana.
- 23 Ilifa Labantwana, "Towards Universal Access: A Three-Year Acceleration Plan for ECD Funding," *ECD Accelerator Series*, 2022, <https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ECD-Acceleration-Funding-2022-Digital.pdf>.
- 24 Ilifa Labantwana.
- 25 Ilifa Labantwana.
- 26 G Wills and J Kika-Mistry, "Early Childhood Development in South Africa in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence from NIDS-CRAM Eaves 2-5," Wave 5, NIDS-CRAM, 2021, <https://cramsurvey.org/reports/#wave-5>.
- 27 S Giese et al., "Government Funding for Early Childhood Development: Can Those Who Need It Get It?" 2011, <https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Government-Funding-for-ECD-can-those-who-need-it-get-it.pdf>.
- 28 PPT, "Municipal Role in Early Childhood Development: KZN ECD Community of Practice," 2022, <https://www.bridge.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/20220315-Municipal-role-in-ECD-eThekweni-.pdf>.
- 29 Ilifa Labantwana, "Towards Universal Access: A Three-Year Acceleration Plan for ECD Funding."
- 30 Dawes and Biersteker, "Towards Integrated Early Childhood Development."
- 31 Dawes and Biersteker.
- 32 Cynthia Rayner and Francois Bonnici, *The Systems Work of Social Change* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

- 33 Michele-Lee Moore, Darcy Ridell, and Dana Vocisano, "Scaling out, Scaling up, Scaling Deep: Strategies of Non-Profits in Advancing Systemic Social Innovation," *Journal of Corporate Citizenship* 58 (2015): 67–84.
- 34 Biersteker and Dawes, "An Evaluation of the Implementation, Outcomes and Integration of the ELRU Family and Community Motivator Programme into the Early Childhood Development Programme of the North West Department of Social Development, 2015–2016."
- 35 Ilifa Labantwana, "Philani Mentor Mothers Programme," 2022, <https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/project/philani-mentor-mothers-programme/>.
- 36 Ilifa Labantwana, "The Sinovuyo Caring Families Project: Testing Positive Parenting," Lessons from the Field, 2014, <https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/The-Sinovuyo-Caring-Families-Project.pdf>.
- 37 Wiedaad Slemming, "The New Road to Health Booklet Demands a Paradigm Shift," *South African Journal of Child Health* 12, no. 3 (2018): 86–87.
- 38 Rayner and Bonnici, *The Systems Work of Social Change*.
- 39 S Goldhill and P Lewis, "Early Childhood Development in the Global South," *Journal of the British Academy* 8, no. 2 (2020): 1–7.
- 40 Rayner and Bonnici, *The Systems Work of Social Change*.
- 41 Rayner and Bonnici.

