ilifa labantwana

Annual Report 2025

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CSG	Child Support Grant
CoGTA	Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs
CHWs	Community Health Workers
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DoH	Department of Health
DSD	Department of Social Development
ECD	early childhood development
ELP	early learning programme
GGC	Grow Great Champions
NSAAC	National Strategy to Accelerate Action for Children
PMU	Project Management Unit
QASS	Quality Assurance and Support System

About us

Ilifa Labantwana is a South African systems-change organisation working towards universal access to quality early childhood development (ECD) services that benefit children and women in low-income households.

Our vision

Quality ECD for all children that also supports caregivers, creates sustainable livelihoods for women, and builds an equitable and prosperous South Africa.

Our mission

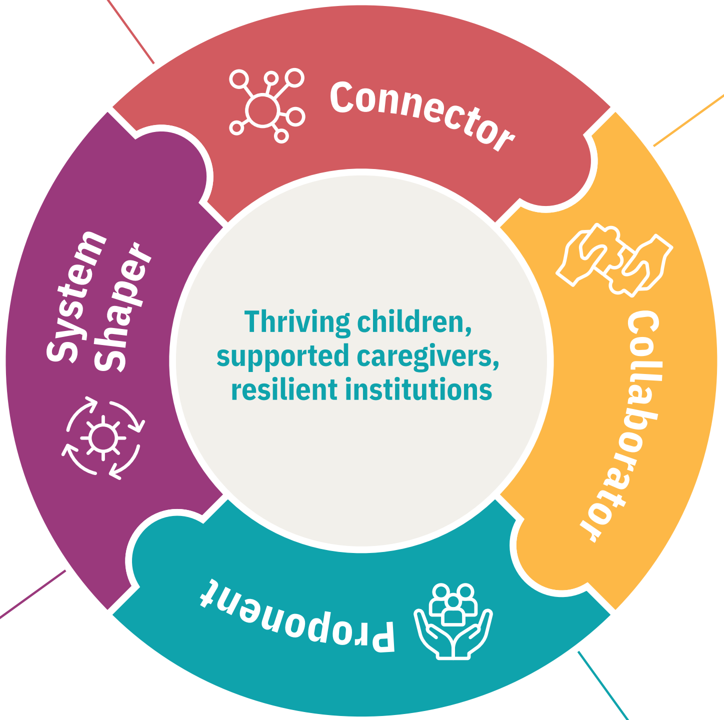
Ilifa Labantwana works towards a South Africa where everyone contributes to children reaching their full potential. We use our technical expertise and deep understanding of government alongside evidence, collaboration and advocacy to strengthen the ECD ecosystem.

Our approach

Ilifa improves the ECD ecosystem to enable stakeholders to play a role in securing quality ECD services for all children and their care-givers, whilst also allowing the women-led care economy to thrive. We play multiple roles in this process.

Connector

We see linkages between seemingly unrelated sectors, government departments, and processes. We analyse how their respective systems can interact and we create connections – all with the goal of expanding funded quality ECD services.



Collaborator

We understand that to go further, we must go together. We participate in, and occasionally initiate and guide, cross-sector partnerships that strengthen our shared impact. We are continually learning from these collaborations to generate knowledge and evidence, which we share freely.

System Shaper

We have deep contextual knowledge of public administration and financing. Armed with this expertise we support government and our partners to make the systems for delivering ECD services simpler, fairer, and more effective. We offer technical guidance on policy, programming, planning, and financing. When we hit roadblocks, we innovate and test new routes to our destination.

Proponent

We advocate for a fairer operating environment for all ECD stakeholders by equipping them with the knowledge, information, and tools they need to hold government accountable and drive change.

Our seven strategic goals

Our seven strategic focus areas are the conditions needed for the early childhood ecosystem to function at scale.

Message from the Chair of the Board

Data gives us the power to see every child – not as a statistic, but as a life whose potential depends on the choices we make. Having walked alongside Ilifa Labantwana for nearly two decades as a Board member, I deeply value, and do not take for granted, the data we now have available.

Over the past five years, the Department of Basic Education and its social compact partners, including Ilifa Labantwana, have transformed the availability and quality of data in the early childhood development (ECD) sector. We can now see the system more clearly than ever before – its strengths, its gaps, and the inequities that persist.

The Thrive by Five Index 2024, the only comprehensive national assessment of young children attending early learning programmes, found that just 42% of four-year-olds in ELPs are developmentally on track, with stark inequalities by programme fee level. Only 34% of children in the lowest-fee programmes are on track, compared to 69% in the highest-fee programmes. This is systemic failure, not isolated programme shortcomings. Programmes serving low-income communities remain fundamentally under-resourced and constrained in their ability to do right by our children.

At the same time, the government's new management information system, eCares, which is co-designed by Ilifa, is providing visibility into where programmes are located, who they serve, and how they are being resourced. Critically, we have evidence that this data is increasingly being embedded into decision-making, feedback loops, and adaptive practice.

Data shines a light on the realities children face, and in doing so, demands that we respond with urgency and intent. Ilifa is uniquely positioned to respond to the challenges made visible by newly available data, having helped to build the very evidence base that now shapes our understanding of the ECD system. Ilifa's strategic intent and activities, as outlined in this annual report, demonstrate the organisation's ability to translate evidence into coordinated, system-wide action. I commend the team at Ilifa for their work thus far, and I am confident they will continue to contribute to the system's growth and strengthening.

Finally, on behalf of the Board, I am pleased to welcome two new members to the Ilifa board. Mary-Ann Boakye brings a valuable combination of financial and development expertise, while Julia de Bruyn offers over two decades of experience leading the education and labour units at National Treasury. We look forward to the insight and leadership they will bring to Ilifa's work.

Bernadette Moffat

Bernadette Moffat
Chairperson of the Board

Message from the Chief Executive Officer

Over the past two decades, the early childhood development (ECD) sector in South Africa has undergone a profound transformation. What was once a fragmented and under-recognised space is now increasingly understood as foundational to our country's future. As we reflect on the past year, I am struck by how far the sector has come.

In 2025, we saw a series of reinforcing shifts across funding, systems, and partnerships that together signal real momentum. The landmark allocation by the National Treasury to ECD – the largest investment in early learning in our country's history – demonstrates growing recognition that investing in young children is both a social and economic imperative. We were proud to support the Department of Basic Education (DBE) with this achievement and continue to work with them to ensure the money reaches our children.

At the same time, the leadership of the DBE, supported by a broad coalition of partners, is translating this fiscal commitment into practical reforms that are beginning to unlock access in a sustained manner. In this annual report, we outline our contribution to the Bana Pele initiative to bring as many previously unknown early learning programmes as possible into the regulatory net, and to support programmes to move from entry-level registration towards full compliance where they are able to apply for the subsidy. The new management information system for ECD, eCares, is a critically important part of this process as it enables data-led decision making.

> One of the most encouraging shifts has been in how we work together. Bana Pele reflects a maturing social compact - one that combines the accountability of government with the innovation and adaptability of its partners. An incredible example of this maturity is the development of the Bana Pele Shared Blueprint in 2025 as a bold roadmap to transform early learning in South Africa, building from the 2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programmes.

These developments did not happen overnight. They are the result of sustained, collective effort across the ecosystem – government, civil society, practitioners, researchers, and funders – working over many years to align around a shared vision. Together, we have contributed to strengthening the building blocks of a system that can deliver: clearer policies, simpler and fairer regulations, functional data systems, more coordinated delivery models, and a growing evidence base that continues to shape decision-making.

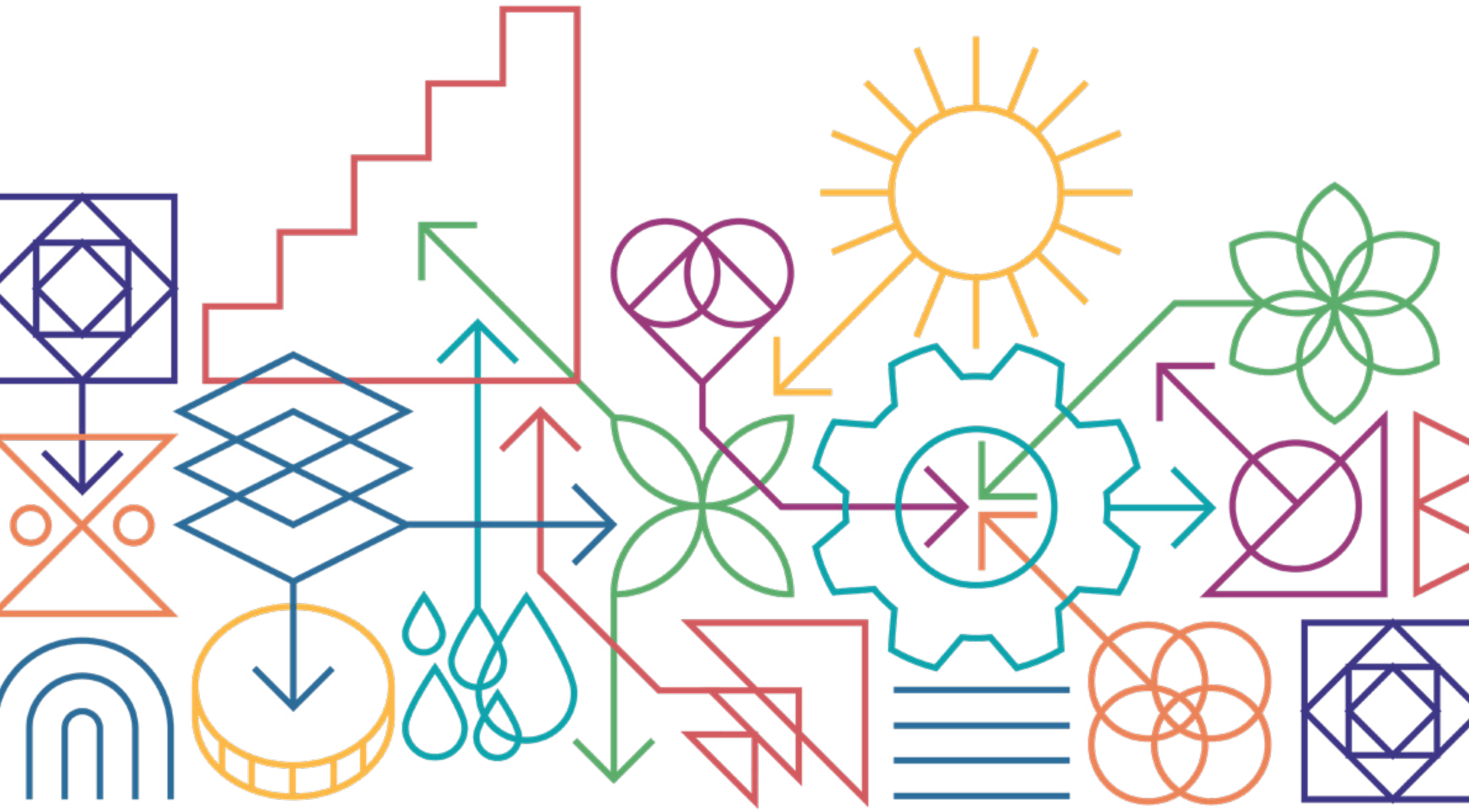
Equally important are the less visible, but deeply significant, shifts in how ECD is valued. Over time, we have seen growing recognition – from communities to the highest levels of political leadership – that ECD is an investment in our shared future. This change in mindset underpins and sustains the more visible policy and funding gains we are seeing today.

At Ilifa Labantwana, we remain committed to our role as a systems-change partner – working alongside others to strengthen the conditions required for universal access to quality ECD. While there is still a long way to go there is a growing sense of possibility. For the first time, we can see a credible pathway to reaching all children with quality early learning opportunities. The work ahead will require continued collaboration, sustained investment, and a willingness to keep learning and adapting.

I would like to extend my deepest appreciation to the Ilifa team, whose commitment, expertise, and persistence make this work possible every day and I thank our partners for their continued collaboration and trust.

Zaheera Mohamed

Zaheera Mohamed
Chief Executive Officer



Our approach to measuring impact

Measuring systems change remains a complex and evolving challenge. Systems change work focuses on influencing, catalysing, and orchestrating shifts across multiple actors, institutions, power dynamics, and layers of policy and practice. These shifts are often intangible, non-linear, and unfold over extended periods. At the core are the mental models that sustain the system – internal frameworks and assumptions that shape how people understand the ECD ecosystem and determine how they act to improve it.

> For us, impact is best understood as ripples of influence across the system. Because many of our goals are qualitative and the pathways to achieving them are non-linear, we pay close attention to small but significant shifts in how people think, relate, and act. An overemphasis on control, predictability, and attribution can obscure the deeper story of how systems evolve in response to sustained, enabling efforts.

We are increasingly investing in evidence-based storytelling to bring our learning and impact to life. We draw on reflective and interpretive methods – such as change stories and structured conversations with partners and stakeholders – to understand how perceived shifts in mental models, policies, resource allocations, practices, and power dynamics are contributing to the desired impact. These approaches allow for thoughtful sense-making about whether change is moving in a meaningful direction.

In this 2025 annual report, we present four stories of change that illustrate our approach, validate our strategies, and demonstrate our contribution to long-term systems resilience.

Importantly, these stories do not represent our impact alone. Systems change is collective and non-attributive by nature, and progress reflects the cumulative efforts of many actors across the ecosystem. Our contribution lies in helping enable, connect and strengthen these shifts over time.

As we approach two decades of systems change work, we have also developed a more grounded understanding of how mental models are shifting. Mental models are one component of systems change work and in the narrative section of this report – Shifts of Significance (from page 17 onwards) – we have highlighted observations on how these belief frameworks impact changes in the ecosystem.

Our year in brief - 2025

Over the past year, important political, policy, and system-level shifts created new opportunities to address long-standing inequities in ECD access, quality, and financing, while also surfacing new challenges. In the following section, we map key developments against our seven strategic goals.

Coordinated, collaborative and cohesive ECD service delivery model

Our strategy is to build effective partnership models for civil society to work with the government to accelerate delivery and support the government's capacity to plan and coordinate ECD.

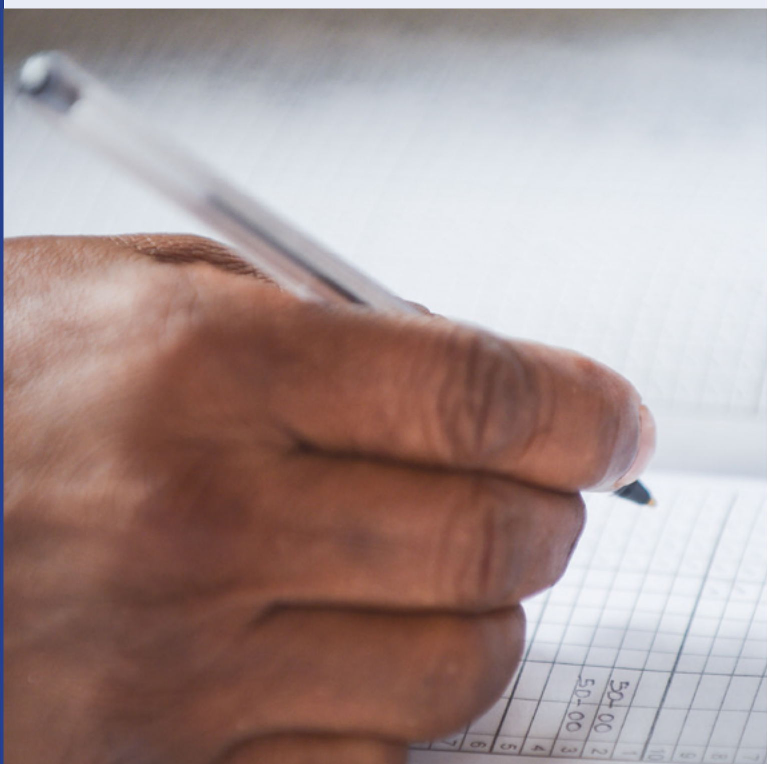
In December 2025, the National Strategy to Accelerate Action for Children (NSAAC) was approved by Cabinet, an important milestone for a process that had been in the making for nearly three years. The development of the NSAAC was led by the Presidency and supported by Ilifa and DGMT with consultation and input from a wide range of child advocates. The NSAAC is South Africa's first high-level strategy to improve outcomes for children, and the first to be initiated and led by the Presidency. The NSAAC defines 10 priorities, backs them with actions, and proposes a new way for all stakeholders responsible for children's outcomes to work together by emphasising shared responsibility, collaboration, and collective action.

For the past five years, we have worked, through our partner Equality Collective and our joint movement Real Reform for ECD, to equip early learning practitioners with the knowledge and confidence to hold local government accountable for ECD, while simultaneously equipping municipal officials with tools to support ECD. A 2025 review of the Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) in municipalities we work with showed progression from general recognition of ECD to clearer projects, improved data use, ward-level prioritisation, and longer-term planning, though was uneven. Read more about how we are supporting local government to work for children on page 21.

Simpler and fair regulations:

Our strategy is to rebuild a more inclusive regulatory environment that enables the women-led care economy to flourish.

As social compact partners to the Department of Basic Education, we form part of the Bana Pele Project Management Unit. Together with this group, we have co-constructed the approach to the mass registration drive to bring all early learning programmes (ELPs) within the regulatory framework. The majority of ELPs in South Africa operate in informal, low-resource environments and need substantial support to progress from entry-level registration to full compliance (which qualifies them for government support and subsidies). This is a complex issue that requires multiple actors to apply pressure on several ecosystem levers – local and national government regulations, health and safety requirements, budgets, data, and communication with ELPs and government workers. In 2025, Bana Pele evolved from focusing just on entry-level registration towards a more integrated reform agenda spanning progression through the registration pathway, subsidy eligibility, implementation oversight, and emerging quality support. These efforts are already showing results in bringing previously unfunded children into the subsidy net. Read the full story on page 17.



Data driven decision making and quality improvement

Our strategy is to build data-led systems for the planning, resourcing, and quality support of ECD.

We are proud co-creators of eCares, the government's management information system for ECD, which in 2025 made real-time data-driven decision-making possible for the first time in the history of South Africa's ECD sector. Read the full story of the game-changing eCares on page 19.

The Department of Basic Education's Quality Assurance Support Systems (QASS) assessment tool is now embedded into the Education Outcomes Fund (EOF) initiative, which will test a results-based financing approach to improving access and quality in 2,000 ELPs. The tool's inclusion creates a valuable opportunity to learn how resource and training organisations and ELPs embed QASS into their practice, and which strategies and interventions are most strongly associated with improved scores.

Increased budgets

Our strategy is to position early childhood development (ECD) as a key contributor to human capital to secure increased and more accessible funding to rapidly expand ECD.

The additional R10bn allocation to the ECD subsidy for the medium term, over and above R15bn already allocated, created a rare fiscal window to expand access at scale and has catalysed system-wide action to address long-standing registration and subsidisation bottlenecks. We provided technical support for the budget bid process and ongoing assistance with targeting and administering the expanded subsidy.

Informed and supported caregivers:

Our strategy is to develop mass communication techniques and materials that inform and support caregivers through the Side-by-Side campaign and translate the campaign's core components into a comprehensive Community Health Worker-led home-visiting system.

Mother and child during a Grow Great Champion-led home visit in Johannesburg (2025)

In 2025, the Grow Great Champion (GGC) programme, which we support, shifted from pilot delivery towards institutional adoption. GGCs are Community Health Workers (CHWs) trained to prevent child stunting and support vulnerable families during the first 1,000 days of life. The programme is increasingly being adopted by the public health system. Gauteng province – home to the most babies in the country – has formally incorporated into the curriculum and has initiated province-wide rollout.

Side-by-Side, which has the institutional backing of the National Department of Health (NDoH), remains South Africa's widest reaching and longest running ECD information campaign. Over 12mn caregivers are reached each week via public radio. In 2025, we worked with the NDoH to deepen the campaign's reach and impact in underserved and rural communities by forging partnerships with community radio stations.

Mobilised sector and accountable government

Our strategy is to generate knowledge and support advocacy to hold the government accountable for ECD.

Real Reform manifesto launch, Johannesburg (2024). Credit: Equality Collective

One way we support advocacy is through the Real Reform for ECD movement, which mobilises early learning practitioners and community organisations to hold the government accountable for ECD. In 2025, Real Reform led a campaign to defend and ultimately retain the historic ECD budget allocation of an additional R10bn, over and above the planned R15bn, during an unprecedented budget period in which South Africa's Cabinet failed to reach agreement on key fiscal choices.

We partnered with SmartStart and Equality Collective to build the foundation of what will become a national campaign to situate quality affordable care as a key priority in South Africa's development and economic agenda. Read the full story on page 23.

Real Reform for ECD continued to build the legal framework supporting the "right to ECD" in South Africa, in pursuit of our long-term goal to secure this right through standalone legislation. This future law will ultimately underpin our government's mandate to recognise and realise every young child's right to early childhood development. In May 2025, Real Reform for ECD hosted a symposium that brought together policymakers, civil society, and public interest law organisations to build legal consensus on rights-based imperatives that ground the state's duties to fund and expand access to ECD services.

Effective delivery systems

Our strategy is to develop effective systems to expedite ECD service delivery and ways for the government to utilise them.

Early learning playgroup in Cape Winelands District, Western Cape (2025)

Our work towards effective delivery systems is in close partnership with SmartStart South Africa. Roughly one-third of all entry-level registered ELPs are SmartStart franchisees: the SmartStart network is uniquely positioned to support ELPs to improve the quality of their programmes and to support women start up of new programmes.

In 2025, SmartStart advanced practical public-private partnership (PPP) models for scale, completing research on service commissioning options and providing extensive technical input during the Education Outcomes Fund (EOF) contracting phase. The EOF example offers a tangible opportunity to demonstrate the significant potential of how commissioning and public-private partnerships approaches could be generalised beyond a single project.

Shifts of significance

Mental model

How underlying beliefs shape systems and change

In the following section, we outline notable changes to the ecosystem in 2025 and our contribution to them. These changes typically involve shifts in policies, practices, and funding models. However, it is worth noting that mental models – the deeply-held beliefs and assumptions that shape how we think, talk, and act – are just as critical to systems change. Mental models are implicit "habits of thought" (which are not always visible to the thinker) and are the foundational drivers of stasis or change in any system. In the stories that follow, we share how we engage with mental models and treat them as one of the deepest leverage points of system change. In our experience, if mental models don't shift, systems tend to snap back to old patterns, even when policies or funding change.

Shift 1:

Expanding access by strengthening systems

In 2025, the National Treasury announced the largest-ever increase in funding for early learning, allocating R25bn over the financial years 2025/26–2027/28. This allocation, which includes R10bn over and above planned expenditure, has the potential to expand access to early learning for an additional 700,000 children by 2027. The largest portion of this amount would be spent on ECD subsidies.

Bana Pele promotional flyer. Credit: DBE

The allocation is significant because it signals that the multiple levers applied to the ecosystem from various directions are having the intended effect – opening the pathway to universal access to ECD services. The strategic direction set by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the additional public investment have created an enabling environment for a social compact, in which NGOs and funders have entered into a working partnership with the DBE, combining formal accountability with innovation and adaptability. The social compact is embodied through Bana Pele, a campaign launched in 2024, that has brought over 14,000 previously 'invisible' ELPs into the formal system, creating a foundation for improved oversight, support, and a "pipeline" of ELPs that require support and funding. A further lever was the evidence-backed technical knowledge and rigorous economic modelling that informed the budget bid, supported by our economics and finance team.

Mental model

Underlying all these levers is a shift in how ECD is valued and understood. Over the past 15 years, we have invested in local evidence and advocacy on the economic and social impact of investing in ECD for both children and the ECD workforce. We have also invested in the development of measurement tools – such as the Early Learning Outcomes Measurement (ELOM) used in the Thrive by Five Index – that have shaped collective understanding of the magnitude of the problem. This shift has occurred at the highest level of political leadership, with President Cyril Ramaphosa noting that ECD is an "investment in our country's future" (State of the Nation Address 2026).

In 2025, Bana Pele evolved from focusing just on entry-level registration towards a more integrated reform agenda spanning progression through the registration pathway, subsidy eligibility, implementation oversight, and emerging quality support.

The shift in Bana Pele's focus is important for ensuring that the expanded public funding can reach as many children as possible over the next three years. As a member of the Bana Pele Project Management Unit (PMU), we have invested substantial technical and operational resources in strengthening the PMU and, as a result, have guided significant developments in the registration system:

- The Bronze-Silver-Gold registration pathway is increasingly seen as a structured, developmentally-oriented system.
- The digital registration and administration of ELPs is possible for the first time ever in South Africa through the Ilifa-co-led system eCares.
- A new tool, called Registration Readiness Assessment, has generated data to inform the PMU's understanding of the types of targeted registration support ELPs require.
- A new intervention, curated and piloted by us and now formally adopted by the DBE, supplies Health and Safety packs to ELPs, helping them to meet health and safety requirements.
- Registration requirements and processes have been simplified, making it easier for ELP owners and government officials to navigate and complete. These advances lay the foundation for a more enabling regulatory approach and unlock the ECD subsidy for more ELPs in low-resource settings.
- The DBE, with our support, is designing a new funding instrument to be piloted at the provincial level in 2026. The instrument – Compliance Support – is a cash transfer to Bronze-registered ELPs that may be used to comply with Silver registration requirements. The instrument design is based on the agency inherent in ELPs.

Three stages of ELP registration

1 **APPLY:**
Bronze status is attained once ELPs submit basic information about their programmes to government.

2 **COMPLY:**
Bronze-status ELPs are requested to provide more detailed documentation and receive site visits by government officials who check their compliance with norms and standards.

3 **COMPLETE:**
Silver/Gold status is attained if an ELP complies with a minimum set of requirements (Silver) or with all requirements (Gold). Most ELPs operating in low-resource settings need external support to meet even the minimum set of requirements.

Mental model

Compliance Support represents a radical departure – a mental shift – from the belief that government procures and delivers support, towards recognising that ELPs are often best-placed to understand their own needs and can meet these much faster and more efficiently than a centralised government support programme. It also requires a shift from assuming that ELPs that do not meet compliance standards should not receive government support, to acknowledging that these programmes are already providing much-needed services to children and caregivers, employ women, and now need some financial support to improve.

Shift 2:

eCares – Digitally transforming ECD service delivery administration

Ilifa has for years supported the idea of a digital management information system (MIS) for ECD and has spent time exploring its potential complexity in the local context.

The ECD function shift from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the DBE in 2022, followed by the release of the DBE's 2030 Strategy for universal access, provided a runway for the MIS to take flight. Government officials agreed that improving access to and the quality of ELPs would be impossible without dramatically improving data access and administrative systems. In 2023, with support from the LEGO Foundation, the DBE and Ilifa began to build a comprehensive set of requirements for a national ECD MIS – now called the Early Childhood Administration & Reporting System (eCares).

The launch of Bana Pele in 2024 turbocharged the development and implementation of eCares. The newly built MIS enabled ELPs to register online for the first time ever and provided the national-level Bana Pele PMU and the provinces with a real-time view of the thousands of ELPs entering the regulatory net.

As Bana Pele's focus has expanded to systemic reform of the Bronze-Silver-Gold registration process, eCares has added further functionality to support the growing needs of the ecosystem. The key third stage of the registration process (the point at which an ELP attains Silver/Gold registration and can apply for subsidies) was designed, consulted on, and built into eCares in 2025. With the full end-to-end registration processes now fully digitised, the system offers a complete and streamlined registration workflow. eCares marks a significant shift in how ELPs engage with government systems. It streamlines and standardises business processes, enables communication between the DBE and ELPs, and gathers data to inform immediate operational decision-making and long-term planning. Linked to the underlying data in the system, a suite of dashboards provide a real-time view of what is happening in the system at a district, provincial, and national level across all of the relevant administrative process – giving a view of where applicants are dropping off in the registration process, and where additional support is needed.

Below are some examples of how the data is already being used to guide strategic decisions:

- Viewable and downloadable lists of every registered ELP in South Africa are linked to the full set of DBE's reporting requirements.
- eCares generated bi-weekly lists of incomplete Bronze registration ELPs to be used by the Bana Pele call centre for targeted support.
- eCares dashboards allowed government officials to view where ELPs were stuck in the registration process, and enabled monitoring of the processing workload of frontline officials.
- Data from eCares guided the DBE on which ELPs to prioritise when allocating maintenance grant funding, and to guide allocation of health and safety packs.

eCares is now firmly embedded in the DBE's ways of working, priorities, and systems. Provincial education department officials in all provinces have been trained as new functionality is built into the system. Importantly, the DBE has allocated significant funding towards implementing Bana Pele and eCares over the medium term. We will continue to support the iteration of eCares and its future capabilities, which include subsidy administration and reporting, as well as its integration and interoperability with adjacent government digital systems.

eCares demonstrates the value of bringing together partners with diverse strengths – leadership from government, implementation and innovation capacity from civil society, technical expertise from the private sector, and catalytic financing from philanthropy.

Shift 3:

Municipal systems that work for young children – lessons from the local level

Working with municipalities is the last mile of systems change. Local government is the sphere closest to children and service providers, and it also acts as the primary gatekeeper for infrastructure, health, safety, and land-use regulations. However, municipalities' constitutional autonomy makes scaling work difficult. In the past year, we made considerable inroads towards ECD being considered in local government planning processes and regulatory frameworks.

A 2025 review of the Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) in eight municipalities showed progression from general recognition of ECD to clearer projects, improved data use, ward-level prioritisation, and longer-term planning, though progress was uneven. This has been driven by higher-quality and greater quantity of ECD practitioners' engagement in local government processes, as well as local government's increased appetite for engagement.

This work is largely driven by our partner Equality Collective and the grassroots movement for ELP practitioners we support together, Real Reform for ECD. Over the past five years, Equality Collective and Real Reform have steadily and consistently nurtured these eight constituencies, building relationships and trust with local government officials, and practitioners' capacity and confidence to engage in the various municipal processes. Lessons in changing processes and practices at the local government levels centre on establishing and maintaining trust, building collective pride and cohesion within groups, and remaining focused on a common vision of better outcomes for children.

Mental model

Our work with Real Reform for ECD has also shifted an important mental model about who has the agency to demand legislative change. ELP practitioners tend to be under-resourced, under-appreciated, and under-valued in South African society, despite the transformative power they hold in children's lives and in their communities. The Real Reform for ECD Movement was founded to harness this power for change. However, despite demonstrating their collective power in overturning the unjust Children's Act revision in 2022, Real Reform for ECD found it difficult to shift ELP practitioners' own perceptions of their limited agency. Real Reform has spent years building out the inherent agency of practitioners and producing high-quality capacity-building products – templates for input into IDPs, toolkits, videos, webinars, and in-person coaching. The consistency has paid off. Real Reform members are capable and confident to engage with ward councillors and government officials directly, and do. The 2025 review proves that their inputs are filtering through to planning, budgeting, and decision-making at the local level.

We have found that macro legal and policy work, coupled with localised support and partnership building can result in effective and pragmatic scale-out of functional ECD processes at the local government level.

With the Ministry for Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), our partner Kago Ya Bana facilitated the drafting of municipal guidelines and case studies on municipal best practice to prioritise ECD. The guidelines have been signed by the DBE minister and await final sign-off from the CoGTA Minister. They introduce a strong directive from CoGTA to incorporate ECD IDP indicators in municipal planning and are well-timed to support advocacy to cascade ECD priorities into election manifestos ahead of the 2026 local government elections. The elections are also an opportunity to test and improve our understanding of what works to create impact at local government.

Following the elections, in partnership with the South African Local Government Association, CoGTA will champion the inclusion of ECD indicators in the IDP template, to be rolled out nationwide.

The Bana Pele PMU has also adopted an increased focus on local government, with the understanding that multiple departments and partners need to work together to unlock blockages ELPs face in obtaining municipal compliance.

The PMU Local Government Workstream is strengthening the working relationship between municipalities and DBE districts by bringing Environmental Health Practitioners closer into the process and promoting intergovernmental collaboration. The goal is to encourage a more developmental approach to compliance and improve pathways to compliance for ELPs.

Real Reform for ECD member at a demonstration march. (2024) Credit: Equality Collective

Shift 4:

Building momentum for universal access to affordable, quality childcare

In 2025, we intensified our efforts to make the case for accessible childcare as an enabler of women's labour force participation, growing South Africa's human capital. Together with SmartStart and the Equality Collective, we entered a partnership with the Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN) to support the implementation of its Childcare Advocacy, Research, and Engagement (CARE) Initiative in South Africa. The CARE Initiative is a multi-sectoral, multi-donor collaborative in three countries (South Africa, Tanzania, and Bangladesh) that supports and catalyses local coordinated advocacy to influence childcare policies at a national level.

Mental model

Mental models shape how people think about childcare, who is responsible for it, and what it's worth. These mental models hold the childcare system in place. In South Africa, that place is within a contested hybrid care regime characterised by inequalities along class, racial, and gender lines. Mental models include the idea that childcare is the family's responsibility rather than a public good, which keeps public investment in childcare systems low. Another harmful mental model is that childcare is "natural" women's work rather than skilled labour, which devalues ELP practitioners and makes it difficult to build a high-quality, stable workforce. These and other mental models contribute to a lack of political and public will to make universal access to affordable quality childcare an apex priority for human and economic development. Ultimately, women carry the burden of unpaid childcare work, and this prevents them from participating fully in the economy.

Key objectives of the CARE Initiative include breaking down silos between the ECD sector, gender equality and workers' rights movements, developing a shared understanding of childcare systems and catalysing coordinated campaigns to drive policy change. Equality Collective will serve as the prime partner, leading the campaign with Real Reform for ECD to generate public demand for a state-supported childcare system grounded in gender equality, decent work, and children's rights. SmartStart will leverage their expertise and network to lead on the delivery systems component. We will drive the systems reform aspect to create the political will and enabling environment to achieve universal access to affordable, quality childcare.

Work on the CARE Initiative kicked off with the publication of a review of South Africa's childcare system that helped to refine our strategic interest and positioning on this issue. In the third quarter of 2025, we co-hosted an Early Childhood Care and Education Systems Mapping workshop with the DBE, SmartStart, Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, and ECDAN. The purpose was to build a shared understanding of what shapes the system, its coherences and inconsistencies and to work off this common understanding to construct a vision for a functioning, equitable, and fair childcare system.

Knowledge hub

Early Childhood Systems: Perspectives and Research working paper and webinar series

We continued our "Early Childhood Systems: Perspectives and Research" webinar and working paper series in collaboration with the Research on Socio-Economic Policy unit at Stellenbosch University and DataDrive2030. The series promotes research that addresses the major systemic issues facing the ECD sector in South Africa. In 2025, we hosted 9 webinars, reaching close to 800 people at each event and attracting diverse international audiences.

BROWSE THE SERIES HERE

Unlocking affordable and quality childcare to benefit women, children, and the broader society

This report provides a comprehensive review of South Africa's childcare system, examining its structure, accessibility, and alignment with broader social and economic policies. It advocates for a systemic approach to childcare reform, emphasising the need for coordinated policy frameworks, increased public investment, and regulatory improvements to ensure quality standards. Recommendations include expanding subsidies for vulnerable households, strengthening workforce development for childcare providers, and embedding childcare within national strategies for gender equality and economic growth.

READ THE REPORT HERE

Harnessing the power of South Africa's G20 presidency

This advocacy brief, co-published with SmartStart, and Theirworld, details South Africa's ECD strategy to unite stakeholders behind three transformative goals: universal access to quality primary healthcare, universal preschool education, and universal family support through affordable childcare and benefits. The brief was published in alignment with South Africa's G20 Presidency and provides a blueprint for other nations to adopt a systemic approach to ECD service provision.

READ THE BRIEF HERE

Finance report

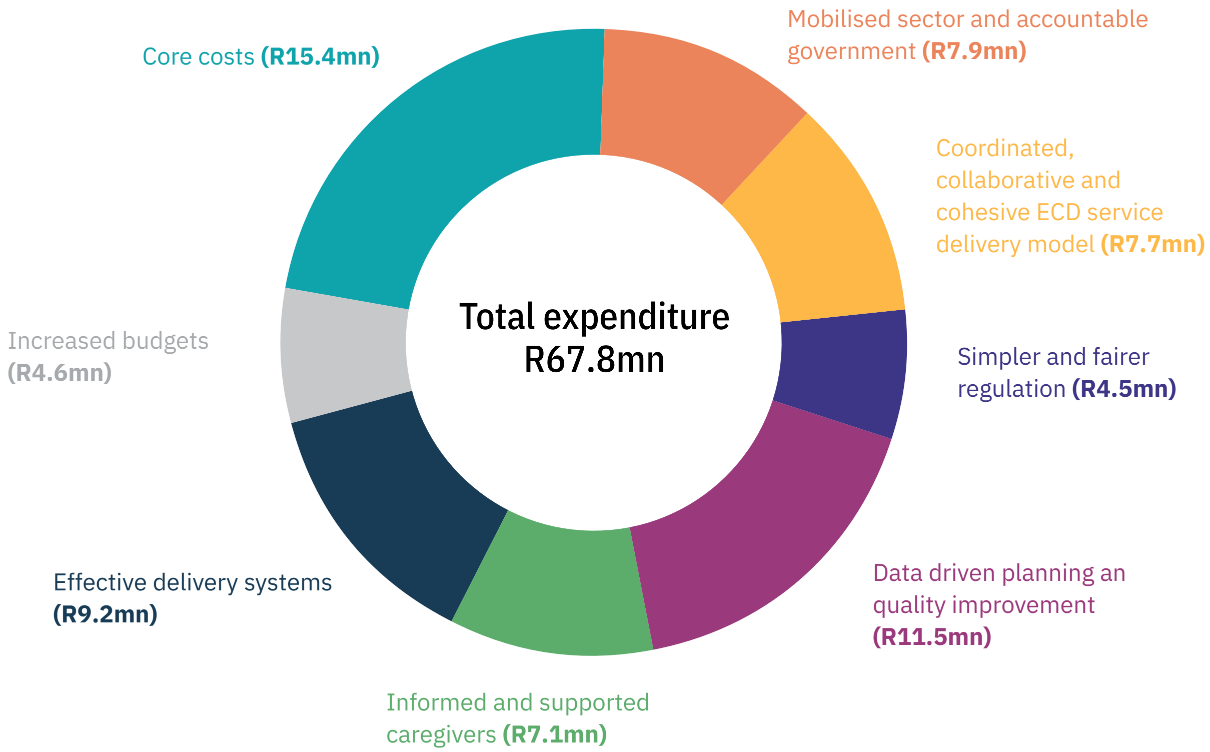
2025 marked a year of strengthened execution and improved financial performance for Ilifa. Funding income increased to R97.0mn (2024: R53.5mn), while finance income grew to R7.8mn (2024: R5.7mn), reflecting continued donor confidence in our mission and prudent management of available resources.

Expenditure increased to R67.8mn (2024: R53.8mn) as implementation capacity expanded and programme delivery accelerated. Budget utilisation improved significantly to 84% (2024: 67%), demonstrating stronger planning, operational execution and conversion of funding into impact, despite the inherent complexity and unpredictability of systems change work.

Ilifa closed the year in a strong financial position, with total assets of R126.9mn of which R116.1mn (91%) represents cash and cash equivalents. The cash balance includes reserves and donor funding received in advance of programme implementation. Liabilities decreased slightly to R76.4m of which R66.5mn (88%) represents deferred revenue for funding received in advance for future utilisation. Reserves of R50.4mn now includes a Reserve Fund of R29.3mn recognised for the first time in 2025 as a result of Ilifa receiving an Equivalency Determination certification during the year. This Reserve Fund has been established to strengthen the organisation's financial sustainability and resilience.

Looking ahead, Ilifa remains well-positioned to advance its strategic objectives while continuing to implement its multi-year resource mobilisation strategy to sustain impact and support long-term financial sustainability beyond the current grant cycle.

Figure 1: 2025 expenditure by strategic objective (Rmn)



Ilifa Labantwana Foundation (RF) NPC

(Registration Number 2019/094849/08)

Extracts of Annual Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2025

General information

Country of Incorporation and Domicile	South Africa
Registration Number	2019/094849/08
Nature of Business and Principal Activities	South African organisation that focuses on policy creation aimed at improving early childhood development programs
Directors	Bernadette Erlefreda Moffat David Brandon Harrison Janet Du Preez (Resigned 29 January 2025) Mary-Ann Boakye (Appointed 24 June 2025) Michael Sachs Zaheera Mohamed - Ex Officio
Registered Office	DG Murray House 1 Wodin Road Claremont 7770
Level of Assurance	These annual financial statements have been audited in compliance with the applicable requirements of the Companies Act 71 of 2008
Auditor	BDO South Africa Incorporated Chartered Accountants (SA) Registered Auditors
Compiler	Iridium Business Solutions (Pty) Ltd Unit B Cirtech House 12 Stibitz Street Westlake Cape Town 7954

Ilifa Labantwana Foundation (RF) NPC

(Registration Number 2019/094849/08)
Extracts of Annual Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2025

Statement of financial position

Figures in R	Notes	2025	2024
Assets			
Non-current assets			
Property, plant and equipment	3	645,516	511,453
Current assets			
Trade and other receivables	4	10,147,411	11,311,497
Cash and cash equivalents	5	116,086,712	79,211,567
Total current assets		**126,234,123**	**90,523,064**
Total assets		**126,879,639**	**91,034,517**
Reserves and liabilities			
Reserves			
Retained income		21,192,970	13,402,326
Reserve fund	10	29,255,182	-
Total reserves		**50,448,152**	**13,402,326**
Liabilities			
Current liabilities			
Deferred Revenue	6	66,487,118	66,865,171
Provisions	7	1,255,559	656,830
Trade and other payables	8	8,688,810	10,110,190
Total current liabilities		**76,431,487**	**77,632,191**
Total reserves and liabilities		**126,879,639**	**91,034,517**

Ilifa Labantwana Foundation (RF) NPC

(Registration Number 2019/094849/08)
Extracts of Annual Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2025

Statement of comprehensive income

Figures in R	Notes	2025	2024
Funding income		97,024,380	53,515,268
Expenses		(67,769,198)	(53,777,257)
(Deficit) / Surplus from operating activities		**29,255,182**	**(261,989)**
Finance and other income	9	7,790,644	5,730,942
Surplus for the year		**37,045,826**	**5,468,953**

Ilifa Labantwana Foundation (RF) NPC

(Registration Number 2019/094849/08)
Extracts of Annual Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2025

Statement of changes in equity

Figures in R	Reserve Fund	Retained income	Total
Balance at 1 January 2024	-	7,933,373	7,933,373
Changes in reserves			
Surplus for the year	-	5,468,953	5,468,953
Total comprehensive surplus for the year	-	5,468,953	5,468,953
Balance at 31 December 2024	-	**13,402,326**	**13,402,326**
Balance at 1 January 2025	-	13,402,326	13,402,326
Changes in reserves			
Surplus for the year	-	37,045,826	37,045,826
Transfer to reserve fund	29,255,182	(29,255,182)	-
Balance at 31 December 2025	**29,255,182**	**21,192,970**	**50,448,152**

Our team

Chief Executive Officer
Zaheera Mohamed

Systems Design and Development

Acting Director: Systems Design and Development
Simone Van Willingh

Law and Policy Specialist
Nobukhosi Zulu

Project Manager: Systems Design and Development
Shakira Maharaj

Systems Design and Development Specialist
Sithembile Dube

Knowledge, Information and Data Systems

KIDS Director
Dr Colin Almeleh

Research Specialist
Dr Elizabeth Biney

Senior Business Analyst
Cate Carroll

Health Systems Strengthening

Director: Health Systems Strengthening
Dr Chantell Witten

Campaign Manager
Buhle Mabaso

Finance and Economics

Chief Economist
Laura Droomer

Acting Director: Economics and Finance
Daniel McLaren

Economist
Jessica Smith

Partnerships for Impact

Director: Partnerships for Impact
Senzo Hlophe

Impact and Learning Specialist
Bokang Mpeta

Head of Partnerships for Development
Elizabeth Hutton-Squire

Head of Strategic Projects
Dr Nicholas Dowdall

Communications Officer
Rorisang Dire

Head of Communications
Svetlana Doneva

Finance and Operations

Finance Director
Saleem Mukuddem

Human Resources Specialist
Abigail Louw

Programme Administrator
Heidi Everts

Reporting and Programme Co-ordinator
Rina Mehlomakulu

Finance and Grants Manager
Boitumelo Boikanyo-Gcasamba*

Our Board

Chairperson of the Board:
Bernadette Moffat

Board Member
Dr David Harrison

Board Member
Michael Sachs

Board Member
Mary-Ann Boakye

Board Member
Julia de Bruyn*

We would like to thank our donor and system partners, and long term consultants, whose invaluable support and collaboration have been instrumental in advancing our mission.

*Joined 2026

Connect with us

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info@ilifalabantwana.co.za