

Our Story of Change: Driving systems change to ensure an equal start for all children

South Africa is far off its target to offer the full range of early childhood development (ECD) services to every child by 2030. Access to and quality of services depend on income status, and the result of this inequality is clear in the country's child outcome data. The largest survey of pre-school child development, the Thrive by Five Index 2024, found that 58% of 4-5 year-old children attending an early learning programme (ELP) are not on track for cognitive development.

Unequal access to quality ECD services begins in pregnancy. Expectant mothers lack psychosocial support, as well as money to buy nourishing food. This impacts their well-being, as well as the well-being of their unborn child. Limited support and income to pay for necessities puts huge pressure on households in the highly sensitive early baby years. Many of these homes' only form of relief is the R560/month Child Support Grant (CSG), which doesn't fully cover the nutritional needs of children and has low coverage levels for babies under age one. A clear policy framework for early childhood nutrition does not exist yet.

Therefore, too many of South Africa's youngest children are malnourished. There is a shortage of subsidised early childhood care and education programmes catering for the poor which means that caregivers cannot work or seek income-earning opportunities, even if they want to. As children grow and need group ELPs to stimulate their fast-growing brains, caregivers may find they cannot afford to pay ELP fees. These children's early development is compromised – limiting their chance to reach their full potential and hurting their entire education journey, ultimately perpetuating cycles of poverty.

At Ilifa, we improve policies, practices, mindsets and systems that address South Africa's unrealised human potential. Since Ilifa's inception 16 years ago, we have contributed to and strengthened the efforts of the entire ECD sector to enable children, caregivers, and pregnant women to access various components of the Essential Package of ECD services.

The Essential Package of ECD Services



Maternal & child healthcare



Nutritional support



Social services



Support to primary caregivers



Stimulation for early Learning

Our collective efforts have brought about a groundswell in government and civil society thinking around the way ECD services are conceptualised, and this has significantly influenced policy and legislation in SA. The strategic partnerships we have nurtured, our evidence-based programme design, technical expertise, advocacy and deep understanding of government have given us a unique opportunity to effect change at various levels of the ECD ecosystem.

Our whole-system approach means that we take a long-term view and remain agile and adaptive as the operating environment evolves, new collaborators come on board, and opportunities present themselves.

Eighteen years on, our vision is still to ensure access to quality ECD for all children and to put caregivers and women at the forefront of ECD.

We are particularly proud of the major contribution that Ilifa has made towards a sustained increase in resourcing the ECD sector. Our work has contributed to a slow, but steady increase in the ECD subsidy, the first budget allocation for ECD infrastructure, funding for registration support, non-centre-based programmes being eligible for funding, financial support to ECD programmes during the Covid-19 pandemic, public employment funding targeted at ECD, a co-funded government public communications campaign targeted at caregivers and through our coalition work, increased investment from philanthropy in both expanding ECD programmes and developing ECD systems.

Irrespective of the progress over this period, the Covid-19 pandemic magnified the challenges faced by ECD service providers working in the poorest communities and the deficiencies in our systems to support them. Challenges persist around budget allocations, physical infrastructure, health and safety regulations, access to government funding, and poor institutional arrangements, amongst others.

The sector's biggest strength is its mostly women-led workforce. Their resourcefulness and tenacity in the face of seemingly insurmountable daily obstacles is remarkable. They provide safe learning spaces for children guided by one of the most fundamental of human responsibilities: to provide children with the best possible start in life. They support caregivers in their homes with nurturing practices and offer guidance and referrals that connect caregivers with other services. We are committed to helping build an ECD ecosystem where the women-led early childhood workforce is supported, upskilled, and given a fair opportunity to earn a livelihood.

We are ever mindful that to go far, we must go together. We would like to extend our gratitude to all our partners for their continued collaboration and support.

1. From programme design to shifting policy

Philanthropic organisations, ELMA Philanthropies and the DG Murray Trust co-founded Ilifa Labantwana (“children’s inheritance” in Nguni) in 2007 to support the implementation of South Africa’s National Integrated Plan for ECD (2005-2010).

Under the Sobambisana Initiative (2008-2011), Ilifa commissioned various NGOs to pilot a range of community-based ECD delivery modalities (reflecting numerous components of the Essential Package) that responded to the different contexts in which SA’s children live. Modalities tested included home-visiting, playgroups, parent education, and centre- and school-based enrichment.

Sobambisana was designed with a system view in mind, examining the interconnectedness and relationships within the ECD sector. The initiative documented and built on existing knowledge, meeting the need for a locally relevant evidence base for policymakers and programmers.

The challenge

At the time, South Africa’s ECD ecosystem suffered from a narrow definition of what constitutes ECD (i.e. creche/preschool) and lacked a holistic approach to age and context-specific provision. The government had improved access to Grade R, however the service delivery modalities for children aged 0-5 were less clear.

Key lessons from the Sobambisana Initiative

Through Sobambisana, we learned that there is no ‘one size fits all’ way to achieve population coverage for ECD. SA needed a range of age- and context-specific, and adaptable, approaches that could support children and caregivers’ needs from pregnancy until formal school-going age.

Sobambisana helped us define the guiding principles for our work; these principles would eventually go on to frame national policy design.

- ECD service provision needs to include pregnancy.
- ECD, rather than being synonymous with ‘group early learning’, is an integrated package of essential services: maternal and child healthcare, nutritional support, social services, support to primary caregivers, and stimulation for early learning.
- Apart from maternal and child health and income support, ECD service provision is fundamentally embedded in communities, therefore support for ECD must fit the various community contexts that exist in SA. Sobambisana demonstrated that expanding community-based provision and improving the quality of centre-based programming are equally important routes to expanding quality coverage.
- Quality, access and equity are all critical to achieving universal access to ECD.
- SA needs fit-for-purpose institutional arrangements to drive access to the essential package similar to those in other successful countries implementing branded national ECD programmes (e.g. Bolsa Familia in Brazil, Chile Crece Contigo, Oportunidades in Mexico). Achieving a ‘quantum leap’ in access to quality ECD would demand intervention not just at the level of ECD programmes, but at the level of the system.

Timeline of activities

2005	• Government launched the National Integrated Plan for ECD. • The Children's Act No. 38 of 2005 was enacted into law.
2007	• ELMA Philanthropies and the DG Murray Trust co-founded Ilifa Labantwana to support the implementation of the National Integration Plan.
2008	• Ilifa established the Sobambisana Initiative to test five community-based integrated ECD delivery models.
2012	• Sobambisana found that ECD requires an integrated Essential Package of services, which starts in pregnancy and encompasses maternal and child health, nutrition, parenting support, social services, and early learning. Sobambisana informed the National Diagnostic Review on ECD.
2013	• Ilifa published The Essential Package: Early childhood services and support to vulnerable children in South Africa. The Essential Package informed the South African National Integrated ECD Policy (ECD Policy).

2015	The ECD Policy was approved by Cabinet.
2017	Ilifa and partners advocated for the expansion of community-based ECD services and their inclusion in policy and financing decisions.
2022	The ECD function moved from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the Department of Basic Education (DBE).
2023	ECD Policy and strategy review was initiated by the DBE
2024	DBE published an ECD strategy to reach universal access.

The big shifts

- The evidence base generated by our work between 2009 and 2012, informed the National Diagnostic Review on ECD 2012, and the National Integrated ECD Policy 2015.
- We became a system-level government technical partner, expanding our role beyond facilitating programme design and demonstration.

Crossing the bridge

Looking ahead, we will continue to advocate for improved access to all the services defined within the Essential Package, codified under the ECD Policy. Ilifa also continues to advocate for a shift in the institutional arrangements that govern ECD.



2. Shaping the regulatory environment so all ECD programmes are recognised and included

A large portion of the early learning sector operates informally because many Early Learning Programmes (ELPs) cannot meet the norms and standards required for formal registration. Informal ELPs are ineligible for much-needed state support and funding, which could help them grow and improve.

Hamstrung by ill-fitting regulatory and support frameworks, SA's ELP sector has reached a perilous equilibrium: registration requirements in ELPs catering to poor children are unachievable and parents are unable to pay more fees meaning that they cannot invest to improve standards in order get state funding. ELPs, who must keep fees low to cater for the poorest children, are ironically least likely to be registered and subsidised.

The challenge

The requirements and processes to register ELPs are onerous. The registration standards are not context-specific and are set and enforced by different government departments and levels of government. This creates a complex regulatory environment that prevents SA's poorest children from accessing quality early learning.

Timeline of activities

2015	• Our partners Innovation Edge and Network Action Group (now Impande) developed a new approach to ELP registration that addresses the pain points for both government officials and ECD programmes, called Bhalisa Inkulisa. Using workflow tools designed for manufacturing, the registration process was made simpler, faster and data-driven. The approach was tested with the KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape Departments of Social Development between 2015 and 2018. • Between 2015 and 2019, Ilifa demonstrated how ELPs in the poorest communities cannot register and receive subsidies because they are unable to meet the prerequisite norms and standards. Through the Strategic ECD Infrastructure Support (SEIS) Programme with Project Preparation Trust (PPT) and Impande, we identified the most common physical infrastructure improvements that needed to be addressed to solve registration blockages. The SEIS programme tested innovative approaches to upgrading and maintaining the infrastructure of ELPs so that they achieve registration.
2015	• In partnership with the government; Ilifa, SmartStart and Cotlands demonstrated bulk registration of playgroups.
2017	• While Ilifa's focus has consistently been on how to support existing ELP sites, we also recognised that there are communities without any ELP infrastructure at all. To address the issue, we worked with PPT, Lima Rural Development and Assupol Community Trust to design and pilot low-cost new builds. • SEIS informed SA's first nationally funded ELP infrastructure maintenance programme, the ECD Maintenance Grant.
2018	• Bhalisa Inkulisa informed a tiered ELP registration framework, which allows ELPs to meet registration requirements progressively, which would go on to be adopted by government with time.
2020	• Ilifa's motivation resulted in the Maintenance Grant extending to unregistered ELPs. • The Children's Amendment Bill was tabled before Parliament without any significant changes to make the ECD operating environment more enabling. In response, Ilifa co-founded the Real Reform for ECD Campaign with the Equality Collective, a first-of-its-kind advocacy effort supported by over 200 organisations. The campaign resulted in 1,270 submissions to Parliament citing problems with the ECD amendments. • As part of our legal analysis, we clarified that the law allowed the government to fund ELPs to support them in meeting registration requirements.

2021

- Ilifa developed an Infrastructure Procurement Strategy assisting government operationalise the Maintenance Grant.
- Parliament rejected the Children's Amendment Bill, a win for Real Reform 4 ECD.

2022

- Ilifa assisted with redrafting the Children's Amendment Bill.

The big shifts

- Lessons from designing and implementing Bhalisa Inkulisa informed a tiered ELP registration framework, which has since been adopted by the Department of Basic Education (DBE). The framework applies a developmental approach to registration and allows for the "conditional registration" of ELPs by giving them an opportunity to meet norms and standards over time.
- Bhalisa Inkulisa's lessons now form the backbone of the government's Vangasali initiative, which targets unregistered ECD centres with the view to assisting them in registering.
- Lessons from SEIS allowed us to advise the Department of Social Development on the design of an ECD infrastructure maintenance programme in 2017. The first of its kind, the programme pays for the renovation and maintenance of ELP sites. This means ELPs have an opportunity to meet norms and standards by improving their physical infrastructure. Improving registration outcomes through this programme proved to be a good intervention, however, managing the actual infrastructure work was challenging.
- The Ilifa low-cost ECD infrastructure designs cost up to 80% less than the government's original blueprints for new ELPs and are now the state's recommended design. Funding for new builds has been included in the ECD Conditional Grant.
- In March 2021, Parliament rejected all ECD provisions and instructed the government to prepare a second Children's Amendment Bill dealing with ECD. After its rejection from Parliament, we supported the redrafting of the Bill to ensure a fairer and simpler regulatory environment for ELPs.
- In 2017, the North West Department of Social Development allocated funding to playgroups, signalling the critical role of non-centre-based programmes in closing the ECD access gap.

Crossing the bridge

The work on legislative reform will continue so that ELPs can meet appropriate norms and standards designed for the realities of diverse operating environments. ELP providers should be enabled to deliver early learning services to children without tripping up on unnecessary red tape, provided they operate within reasonable and realistic regulations set up by the state. Ilifa continues to support the Real Reform for ECD as a necessary component of the ECD ecosystem, growing the voices of ELPs.



3. Increasing funding for ECD

Several studies have demonstrated the potential returns South Africa stands to gain from investment in quality ECD services. A 2017 study estimated that if all children were on track in terms of physical growth, South Africa could add R62 bn/year to its Gross Domestic Product.

Another study found that, if universal access to ELPs resulted in a fully literate working population, South Africa's GDP could grow by about a quarter as a result. A properly equipped national home visiting programme could save the health sector about R30 bn over 10 years according to a 2018 study; it would also add R427 bn to the country's GDP through the multiplier effect of increased employment and the added productivity of a healthier population.

The challenge

About 5% of South Africa's public budget is spent on ECD service delivery each year. Most of the funds are allocated towards maternal and child healthcare and the Child Support Grant (CSG), only 6.5% of ECD spending goes towards early learning, nutrition support and support for primary caregivers. No funds are directed towards supporting women who want to set up new ELPs.

Restricted access to the state early learning subsidy, along with its limitations in meeting the full cost of provision, force parents to be the primary source of funding for ELPs, even though more than half (55.5%) of all South Africans live below the poverty line.

Reliance on parent fees threatens the sustainability of ELP operations, limiting their ability to plan for quality provision or grow their services. It is also an impediment to scale as it discourages potential practitioners from entering the sector. The consequence of this is a highly unequal ELP terrain, in which the quality of programmes varies significantly.

Timeline of activities

2017	• We supported the National Treasury and the Department of Social Development (DSD) with the establishment, motivation, design, costing and planning for the administration of the landmark ECD Conditional Grant. The Grant, introduced at R813mn for 2017/2018 and 2018/2019, is divided into two components: a subsidy component and an infrastructure component. • Under the infrastructure component of the ECD Conditional Grant, the Maintenance Grant (MG) is the first – and only – national fund earmarked for upgrading and maintaining the infrastructure of ELPs. SEIS informed the design of the MG. • We supported the National Treasury and the DSD with estimating the cost of universal access to ECD to inform long-term resource planning. • Bulk registration of playgroups unlocked R6mn in government funding, subsidising 1,365 children.
2018	• We spent time mapping and understanding the subsidy process and used this knowledge to develop ECD subsidy guidelines with the DSD to simplify administration of the subsidy for government officials and ELPs alike.
2019	• Under the subsidy component of the ECD Conditional Grant, we lobbied and supported the government to enable non-centre-based programmes to access the subsidy. • The low-cost new-build ECD centre pilot resulted in the infrastructure component of the ECD Conditional Grant being extended to new builds.
2021	• We completed a high-level public funding mapping exercise, which identified potential public funding sources for ELPs at various stages of their development. We followed up with a three-year financing roadmap for ECD which estimated the costs to reach universal access to ELPs and showed how different pots of public funds can be unlocked for the expansion of ECD services.
2023	• NPO registration was dropped as a requirement for ELPs to receive the ECD subsidy. • ECD subsidy guidelines were approved by Department of Basic Education (DBE).
2024	• We historically supported DSD, and subsequently the DBE, with annual budget bids to National Treasury, resulting in the value of the ECD Conditional Grant increasing four-fold since its inception, reaching R1.6 bn in 2024.

The big shifts

The rigorous and evidence-based technical support we provide to the government has resulted in a slow but steady increase in the number of poor children accessing subsidised ELPs. Our financing work has contributed to the number of subsidised children in ELPs increasing by almost 25% from about 507,000 in 2016/17 to some 634,000 in 2023. Ilifa's work contributed to the infrastructure component of the conditional grant growing to R157 mn in 2024/25, and equally important, the grant is now also targeted at unregistered ECD programmes. The ECD subsidy guidelines have been approved by the DBE and we are supporting provinces with their rollout. Our efforts to reduce the administrative burden linked to accessing the subsidy led to the removal of NPO registration as an eligibility requirement for the ECD subsidy.

Crossing the bridge

To further enhance our financing work, we will work on designing innovative approaches that bring together and increase both public and private sector investment in ECD and advocate for ECD as a key driver of human capital development. We will also continue exploring appropriate payment mechanisms to enable these funds to reach their intended beneficiaries. We will also boost our budget advocacy efforts, including through the Real Reform for ECD Coalition and the Budget Justice Coalition, to create a groundswell of public pressure for improved ECD budgeting and expenditure.



14. Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic

All ELPs in South Africa were instructed to close on 18 March 2020 to prevent the spread and acceleration of Covid-19 infections. These included ECD centres, playgroups, and day mothers – the majority of which are non-profit organisations and micro-social enterprises run by black women in poor communities with limited cash flow. ELPs re-opened in August 2020 following a court order issued the previous month.

The challenge

A rapid survey of over 8,500 ELPs formed the basis of The Plight of the ECD Workforce report, published by Ilifa and partners in April 2020. The report found that 20,000-30,000 ECD operators ran the risk of permanent closure and that 118,000-175,000 people employed in these programmes stood to lose their jobs in the absence of financial relief. The report also found that ELPs serving the most vulnerable children would struggle the most to meet Covid-19 compliance requirements once there was a plan to reopen. In addition, many were ineligible to access the financial relief measures the government was putting in place.

Timeline of activities

April 2019	Ilifa and partners published The Plight of the ECD Workforce Survey as the pandemic wreaked havoc on the sector.
Sep 2016	Following a massive sector-wide effort in mobilising partnerships and fund-raising, the advocacy surrounding the report formed the basis of the R36mn ECD Covid-19 Response Project. There were three main objectives: (1) to help unregistered ECD programmes survive the pandemic and reopen; (2) to provide nutrition to children; and (3) to test various systemic approaches for supporting unregistered ECD sites. Specifically, we tested the use of digital vouchers delivered via SMS that could be redeemed at spaza shops for food items.
Oct 2020	Site assessment surveys indicated that most ELPs lacked the necessary compliance materials to re-open within Covid-19 regulations, and these ELPs also did not have the money to purchase these items themselves. We supported the Department of Social Development in ensuring that R90mn of Maintenance Grant (MG) funds were reallocated to provide resources for ECD programmes to help them reopen safely during the pandemic.
Nov 2020	Evidence generated from The Plight of the ECD Workforce report also directly contributed to the establishment of the R500mn ECD Stimulus Fund (~R180mn paid) for the ECD sector. Together with the DG Murray Trust through their participation in the ECD Stimulus Project Management Office, we supported the government in the fund's design and administration, ensuring that unregistered programmes and non-centre-based programmes were eligible to receive support. However, the implementation of the ECD Stimulus Fund confirmed the endemic challenges thousands of ECD providers face in accessing government funding support. The bureaucracy around verifying programmes, staff, and banking details excluded many applicants from accessing the funds.

The big shifts

- The ECD Covid-19 Response Project resulted in over 1,700 unregistered ELPs reopening by March 2021, more than 30,000 children receiving regular healthy meals over 18 weeks, and almost 3,500 ELP workers receiving vouchers to help sustain their livelihoods while fee income was constrained.
- Meanwhile, the lessons from the project's implementation demonstrated the potential for early learning programmes to act as nutrition hubs, irrespective of their registration status; the role of digital vouchers in delivering nutrition support to early learning programmes; and the various roles that ECD NGOs can play in facilitating support to ELPs. Project findings confirmed that the vouchers were spent on the types of foods that are recommended for the nutritional needs of young children

Crossing the bridge

Both Ilifa's Covid-19 Response Project and the ECD Stimulus Fund provided lessons on how to support informal ECD providers. These have been useful beyond the pandemic, as Ilifa assists the Department of Basic Education in the design of financing models for ECD.

5. Harnessing strategic communications to promote caregiver behavioural change

Ilifa's partnership with the National Department of Health (DoH) to deliver and expand the Side-by-Side communications campaign is a critical mechanism to provide relevant ECD information to primary caregivers and support caregiver agency. Given its extraordinary reach and unique access to primary caregivers across the country, Side-by-Side is both a pathway to improving access to information and demand for services, as well as a platform for dialogue through which ECD services are evaluated and bottom-up accountability is bolstered.

The challenge

Very young children (0-2 years), pregnant women, new mothers and caregivers— 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 1,000 days of life), families receive little support in these early years. Yet this period is critical for the well-being of both mother and child, as well as for children's future development. Our early research showed that children's home environments could moderate the impact of even the best-designed programming; children who 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. Caregivers in poor households also suffer a huge information imbalance; lacking access to critical ECD information and resources when compared to their wealthier counterparts.

Timeline of activities

2015	• Ilifa initiated a national campaign called #LovePlayTalk that communicated the importance of the caregiver in ECD, and encouraged simple practical actions: love, play, and talk.
2017	• Drawing on lessons from #LovePlayTalk, Ilifa led the development and launch of SA's first ECD-focused national communication campaign, Side-by-Side. Aimed at pregnant women and caregivers, Side-by-Side is championed by the DoH. The campaign represents a significant readjustment in the government's approach to maternal and child health services: a shift from survive to survive and thrive.
2018	• Side-by-Side relaunched the Road to Health Book - a physical health record issued to all newborns. The content scope of the revised edition extends beyond a health record to act as a valuable knowledge source for caregivers. • Side-by-Side launched its radio drama shows broadcasting weekly on 11 radio stations.

The big shifts

- 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. The campaign's central message to caregivers is: 'You are central to your child's nurturing, care, and protection – and their lifelong health outcomes. Your health worker is there to support you.'
- The campaign is recognised globally as a best practice for country approaches to rolling out the World Health Organisation's Nurturing Care Framework.
- 1.3mn copies of the Road to Health Book are distributed annually.
- By December 2023, Side-by-Side radio shows reach over 5.4mn South African listeners weekly.
- Due to the success of the first two seasons, the DoH invested an additional R4.5mn for the 2022/2023 period.
- Side-by-Side developed a caregiver support pamphlet available in 11 African languages (1 million copies printed and distributed nationally) and manuals and training packages on the Road to Health Book for healthcare workers and ECD practitioners.

Crossing the bridge

Ilifa will continue to engage with the government and Grow Great amongst other partners to provide caregiver support during pregnancy and the first 1,000 days through the Side-by-Side campaign.

6. Data-driven decision making and knowledge

Accurate and easily accessible data and information on ECD are necessary for improved outcomes for children. Apart from data required for planning and decision-making, knowledge and information are crucial tools to galvanise the whole of society behind ECD.

The challenge

Digitised administrative data on ELPs and home-visiting programmes is almost non-existent in SA. Until 2021, when the Department of Basic Education (DBE) introduced the national ECD Census, the Baseline Audit, and the Thrive by Five Index, the size, scope, and quality of the ELPs remained largely unknown and undocumented. There have always been fragmented and limited ECD management information system (MIS) capabilities in SA.

The lack of credible and timely data on ECD services has resulted in the absence of reliable evidence, which would assist greatly in the improvement of ECD quality, support, and advocacy for more funds. While ECD is understood as central to children's development outcomes, the knowledge, information, and evidence of its economic benefits and recognition of it as an enabler of women's ability to earn an income is underdeveloped in SA.

Timeline of activities

2015	Ilifa funded and contributed to the development of the Early Learning Outcomes Measurements (ELOM) tools through our partner, Innovation Edge. The ELOM tools measure a range of developmental outcomes in young children and are designed specifically for the local context.
2016	Ilifa launched the South African Early Childhood Review (SA ECR), in partnership with the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town, the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation in The Presidency, Innovation Edge and the Grow Great Campaign. The SA ECR presents data and commentary on over 40 carefully selected indicators on the status of children under the age of six. Three editions have been published to date: 2016, 2017, and 2019.
2019	Ilifa collated a database of over 18,600 ELPs across all nine provinces that included details such as subsidy access, registration status, child numbers, and staffing numbers. This database formed the basis of the government's Vangasali Campaign.
2021	- The ELOM tools were the backbone for SA's first nationally representative survey of preschool children, the Thrive by Five Index. - In partnership with Stellenbosch University's Research on Socioeconomic Policy (RESEP) Unit, Ilifa initiated the ILIFA Resep ECD Working Paper Series that is adding to a local evidence base from which to better understand the sector and improving decision-making.
2022	- Ilifa supported DBE to design a management information systems for ECD to monitor, plan and allocate resources towards ELP's. - Ilifa began support to the government in designing a Quality Assurance and Support System (QASS), which will both assess and support ELPs to improve the quality of their service.



The big shifts

- Ilifa is working with the DBE and other partners to design and build the DBE's early childhood administration and reporting system. This will improve the government's ability to monitor the extent to which South Africa is closing the access gap in early learning and plan for increased resources.
- The Thrive by Five Index is derived from ELOM and is South Africa's first nationally representative survey of preschool children. The Index provides authoritative data that will be used to galvanise action and drive change, to ensure that all children can thrive by five.
- Ilifa is working with the DBE and Education Outcomes Fund to test the QASS at a large scale as part of a broader effort to drive child outcomes. This will support the institutionalisation of QASS.

Crossing the bridge

Ilifa will continue to support efforts to improve the quality of data and generate knowledge as key mechanisms to both track progress and facilitate accountability. The only way to know which ECD programmes are on course, and which have fallen behind is through consistently monitoring and collecting data. The data can then be presented in ways that the government can use to plan and introduce appropriate support. Civil society can use the data to better coordinate and target advocacy efforts. This will be presented against a country-wide ECD outcomes framework.



7. Strengthening the ECD ecosystem

Given the complexity of systems work and understanding our limitations, Ilifa has forged strong allegiances with trusted partners. They allow Ilifa to focus on parts of the ECD ecosystem, understanding what their partners are more adept at, and learning from this. Ilifa plays a convening role amongst its core collaborators, which include civil society, funders and some government departments.

The challenge

Through Sobambisana, we learnt three key lessons: the importance of effective systems, the need for large-scale community-based programmes to ensure population-level coverage and that close collaboration with government departments is crucial. All these components were missing from the ECD ecosystem. Ilifa could not undertake all these roles. During this phase, certain funders were also looking at funding system-wide strategies for ECD.

Timeline of activities

2007	• ELMA Philanthropies and the DG Murray Trust co-founded Ilifa Labantwana to support the implementation of the National Integration Plan.
2014	• As part of our previous strategy to drive innovation in the early years, Ilifa incubated early years investor, Innovation Edge.
2015	• Ilifa supported the funding of SmartStart, South Africa's first ECD social franchise with a bold ambition to expand access to quality early learning for all children through community-based early learning sites.
2018	• Ilifa's research and learning briefs on the first 1,000 days highlighted the gap in ECD provisioning for this cohort and contributed to the establishment of the Grow Great Campaign. Grow Great seeks to galvanise South Africa towards achieving zero-stunting by 2030.
2020	• Ilifa's role as a strong technical advisor to the government was cemented, demonstrating how government and social partners can collaborate.
2021	• Ilifa led the convening of social partners committed to ensuring universal access to the Essential Package of ECD services.
2022	• Ilifa supported the Department of Basic Education as it took up responsibility for ECD.



The big shifts

- Strengthened partnerships led to a formalised agreement, in 2018, between a core set of partners and the Department of Social Development called the Conditional Grant Consortium. Ilifa played a leading role in driving the partnership, which enabled many of the successes described in this document.
- Over the past few years, we harnessed a coalition of partners towards a joint vision and resource mobilisation for ECD. We continued this collaboration with SmartStart, DGMT, ELMA Philanthropies, the Hollard Foundation Trust, Kago Ya Bana, Yellowwoods, Innovation Edge, DataDrive2030 and Grow Great.
- We are a strong technical advisor to government, demonstrating how government and civil society can collaborate. For example, Side-by-Side demonstrates a co-financing arrangement between the Department of Health and Ilifa.
- SmartStart demonstrated what scalable delivery systems look like and how the system needs to shift to enable all these programmes to grow and be accessible to South Africa's poorest children.
- Innovation Edge invested in the development of the ELOM tools that later set the foundation for South Africa's first Thrive by Five Index in 2021.

Crossing the bridge

Government and partners must strengthen the institutions that govern ECD and establish new ones that promote the inter-disciplinary and inter-sectoral nature of ECD. Strong public-private arrangements for service provision between government and non-state stakeholders must be established.



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