



**national planning  
commission**

Department:  
The Presidency  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



NELSON MANDELA  
FOUNDATION

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# NDP CALL TO ACTION: TOGETHER WE MUST SUPPORT OUR CHILDREN TO THRIVE

“History will judge us by  
the difference we make  
in the everyday lives of  
children”

- Nelson Mandela



This Call to Action accompanies the NPC cabinet advisory on Early Childhood Development<sup>1</sup>

We call on all South Africans to refocus on the goals of the NDP. Government cannot achieve the goals of the NDP alone but needs the whole of society to partner with it. In its role as an independent advisory body and custodian of the NDP, the NPC strives to mobilise society towards the NDP: Vision 2030, encouraging ownership and implementation of the NDP by all key societal stakeholders.

<sup>1</sup>Effective Cross-Departmental And Inter-Governmental Coordination In Early Childhood Development.  
[https://www.nationalplanningcommission.org.za/assets/Documents/NPC\\_ECD%20Advisory\\_v1.pdf](https://www.nationalplanningcommission.org.za/assets/Documents/NPC_ECD%20Advisory_v1.pdf)

## Terminology

**Early childhood:** “early childhood refers to the period of human development from conception to when the child turns 6 years old.” Often early childhood refers from conception to the age of 9. The Focus the advisory is on the years before compulsory education.

**Early Childhood Development (ECD):** Early Childhood Development is ‘the process of emotional, cognitive, sensory, spiritual, moral, physical, social and communication development of children from birth to school-going age’ . It includes, inter alia, nutrition, health, social and education components. Because ECD encompasses a breadth of development beyond education, it is vital that a range of state departments with functions that contribute to the wellbeing of young children, are considered as role-players in early childhood development. Much of the focus of this ‘call to action’ is on the coordination of support for this holistic concept of early childhood development across functions and levels of government.

**Early childhood programme:** “the process of emotional, cognitive, sensory, spiritual, moral, physical, social and communication development of children from birth to school going age<sup>2</sup>. It includes, inter alia, nutrition, health, social and education components.

**Early learning programme:** “a facility that provides an early childhood programme with a learning/ educational focus for children up until the year before they enter Grade R/formal school.”

**Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres:** These are initiated form within the community, registered with the Provincial Departments of Education. After registration, subsidies are provided for the most vulnerable learners.

***Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres are only one component of ECD.***

## Introduction

The National Planning Commission (NPC) has issued an advisory that highlights the importance of early childhood development (ECD) in accelerating South Africa’s progress. ECD is recognised as a cornerstone for development, providing foundations for learning and pathways to economic upliftment. Early Childhood is now recognised as the single most important intervention one can make to another person. No other thing can compare to it in terms of value for money.

The National Development Plan (NDP) is a national plan that belongs to the whole of society and requires a ‘whole of society approach’ to support the optimal development of young children. The advisory recommends a national commitment to prioritise the development of young children, and emphasises that this requires sustained effort from all components of society, government departments, and all levels of government. The advisory recommends urgent interventions to address the challenges in the coordination mechanisms

for early childhood development. Effective coordination is indispensable to building the necessary base for the design, implementation and monitoring of a successful integrated ECD Sectoral Strategy. The NPC intends to use ECD as a case study to explore and surmount coordination challenges more generally.

## Why this Advisory is Urgent

Without clear processes of coordination across key departments, we will not achieve an integrated sectoral strategy for ECD. If the development of an ECD strategy is seen as the responsibility of Basic Education alone, and is not collaboratively developed with the departments with which it shares responsibility for ECD, we will not have a comprehensive and integrated ECD Strategy in South Africa. This is not only urgent, but provides an opportunity for exploring new models for achieving shared responsibility. This is not only urgent, but provides an opportunity for exploring new models for achieving shared responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> This is the definition used in the NPC advisory





## Children's Rights

The primary importance of caring for young children is captured in the Bill of Rights in our Constitution which promises every South African child basic necessities, a right to basic nutrition, shelter, basic health care services, and social services, and that they will be protected from maltreatment, neglect, abuse, degradation and exploitation. Realising the NDP's goals, as well as our international and constitutional child-rights commitments necessitates that the whole of society adopts a rights-based, developmental approach to the nurturing care framework. This approach underpins a vision for South Africa where all children flourish and each societal component acknowledges its role to achieve this.

While government has the responsibility to realise these rights through careful planning and effective action across departments nationally, provincially and at local level, it cannot achieve this alone, but wishes to work TOGETHER with stakeholders in our shared responsibility to the next generation by nurturing, protecting and creating the right conditions for our children to reach their full potential. The NPC's call to action engages all stakeholders, underscoring their individual and collective responsibilities at every level of realising and implementing this vision.

## Early Childhood Development: A critical priority of government

The National Development Plan (NDP) Vision for 2030 is of a society that prioritises Early Childhood Development (ECD) by supporting a comprehensive system which takes into account all the development needs of young children so that they can thrive. To unlock young children's full potential, they need nurturing care across five key areas: nutritional support, primary level maternal and child health interventions, social services, support for primary caregivers, and stimulation for early learning. These forms of care lay an essential foundation for lifelong learning, well-being, and success.

## The first 1000 days

In the developmentally critical first thousand days of their lives, the ECD system must improve access to maternal health services and must reduce maternal and child mortality. It must include addressing the critical challenges of child poverty, hunger, and malnutrition. The crisis of child hunger and stunting of children as a result of malnutrition is of particular concern to the NPC.

## Social Protection

Children are the most vulnerable group in our society as their well-being is closely tied to the economic, educational, and social status of their families and communities. Government and community structures must work together to make sure that all children are protected from violence and exploitation. Community support structures can support families of all eligible children to access the child support grant – and support all families with children with disabilities to access the care dependency grant. No child should slip through the safety net. All children must be supported to thrive.

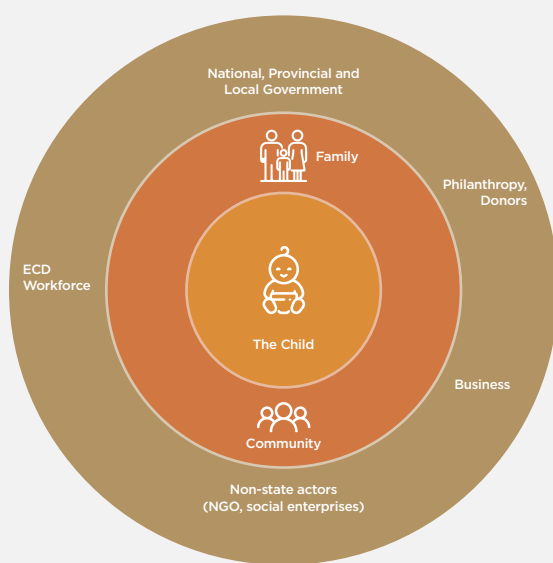
## Early Learning

Early learning is an important part of ECD. Learning starts from birth through interactions within the home environment, language acquisition, social interactions, in listening to and telling stories in their first language, in children gaining increased confidence in the strength and abilities of their bodies – from running and jumping to the delicate and precise use of their hands in play. As young children expand their interactions beyond the home, they should have opportunities to engage in play and learning with peers and participate in early learning programmes before they enter compulsory schooling at Grade R. The NDP indicates that the benefits of intervening early in the learning of children include better school enrolment rates, staying in school longer as well as better learning performance, lower levels of antisocial behaviour, higher earnings later in life and better adult health and length of life.

Prior to the start of compulsory education in the year in which the child turns five and enters Grade R, the initiative to establish early learning programmes is located in communities. Government provides a subsidy to the most vulnerable children in registered early learning development centres.

## A social compact for ECD/ a whole of society approach

Whole of society approach to ECD



The NPC supports the assertions of grassroots ECD practitioners that no young child should be left behind; that the prosperity of our nation depends on the well-being of its youngest citizens; and that investments in holistic, inclusive and quality ECD services for all children will provide returns for generations to come. The NPC is aligned with the key elements of a holistic service for early childhood development identified in the manifesto for 'Real Reform for ECD'<sup>3</sup>: adequate nutrition, early learning, safety and protection, health and caregiving.

The NPC supports the key thrust of the DBE's 2030 strategy for early childhood development, which emphasises building a social compact and collaboration with social partners, business and donors, and with families and communities and the thousands of ECD practitioners, workers and programmes that are the backbone of the existing system for Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres.

The NPC emphasises the critical importance of effective collaboration with, and pro-poor targeted support for, non-state providers in early learning if we are to expand access to early learning programmes to reach all children. Government and social partners can, by working together, ensure every child is being reached by the services they need. Non-state providers are integral to this solution. The specificity within of needs within the range of disabilities in particular requires early intervention and support that is appropriate to the needs of children and of families.

In addition, accessible child-care is an important strategy not only for the well-being of children but also for the economic participation of women. The ILO estimates that globally, women spend three times more hours than men on unpaid care work. This fundamental imbalance in the care burden is a key contributor to the gender employment and pay gaps, which directly impacts on a country's economic productivity. Affordable and convenient childcare can enable women to seek work, secure independent income, and become less dependent on social grants. But mothers who cannot access child-care are often caught in a downward spiral of labour market exclusion and low income.

<sup>3</sup> Real Reform for ECD is a broad based movement of early childhood development (ECD) practitioners, activists, parents, NGOs, and advocates for young children. Their 'manifesto' was launched in 2023.

It is the view of the NPC that effective coordination within government is indispensable to building the necessary base for the design, implementation, and monitoring of a successful integrated early childhood development sectoral strategy. Concerted action across national departments, provincial governments and local government is fundamental to ensuring equitable access to quality early childhood development services and to provide a coherent framework for the participation of the whole of society.

Subsequent to the submission of the NPC advisory on Early Childhood Development to the Presidency in January of 2024, The President in May convened the inaugural meeting of a multi-disciplinary grouping of national departments. This structure has committed to collaborate strategically to ensure universal access for citizens to comprehensive early childhood development services, with a focus on prioritising the nation's most vulnerable children. The meeting agreed, as recommended by the NPC:

- On the joint development of an outcomes-based framework to track progress on the key outcomes and services that are likely to drive changes in child outcomes, as measured by the Thrive by Five Index.
- The Department of Basic Education will convene future meetings and is committed to working collaboratively with other relevant departments and stakeholders to ensure that every child in South Africa has access to quality early childhood development services.



## THE NPC THEREFORE CALLS UPON:

### 1. NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

**The Ministers of Basic Education, Social Development, Health, Public Works and Infrastructure, and Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs are called upon to require their departments to:**

- Work collectively to develop an integrated and holistic early childhood development plan for 2024/5 -2029/30 which aims to ensure that all children thrive by five<sup>4</sup>, which 'belongs' to all departments and in which each department is invested with a time-bound and publicly available implementation plan. This should include:
  - support for primary caregivers, family support interventions (social assistance transfer programmes targeted to children; caregiver education about early stimulation, growth, and development; child-care and child protection services), early nutrition interventions (complementary feeding; adequate, nutritious, and safe diet; and micronutrient supplementation and fortification); maternal, newborn, and child health services; early identification of disability; early learning interventions; and accelerating the registration of Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres with an emphasis on targeting poor communities.
  - The integrated plan should include shared goals and outcomes across these areas with department-specific actions and targets in order to accelerate the goal we set in 2010 for NDP30 of strengthening coordination between departments in early childhood development
  - Progress reports should be publicly available on an annual basis.
- Prioritise the development of a cross-department nutrition strategy to address child hunger in children under the age of five (before entering schools and accessing the National Schools Nutrition Programme) with the goal of eliminating the incidence of

<sup>4</sup> The NPC has recommended an indicator be included in the cross-departmental ECD MTSF that looks at the percentage of children in SA who THRIVE BY FIVE - who are on track in physical growth (measured in terms of height for age/ stunting) and for early learning in 5 domains

severe acute malnutrition. This should include work across government which urgently addresses food affordability and the purchasing power for the minimum amount of nutritious food needed to develop and sustain children. Consideration could be given to extending the DBE's national school nutrition programme to all eligible children attending both registered and unregistered early learning programmes.

- Implement a deliberate strategy to identify challenges, and then to build state capacity and institutional capability to plan and execute key functions of early childhood development in the work of each department.
- Collectively explore innovative funding models for the provision of ECD infrastructure including nationally provided state grants given on the basis of clear legal agreements at municipal level regarding the use of this infrastructure including targeting poor communities.
- Implement the recommendations made by the Presidential Red Tape Reduction ECD focus area team within a specified timeframe in relation to Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres. This must include COGTA producing the necessary frameworks, including regulatory frameworks, to expedite streamlined processes for the registration of early learning programmes at municipal level.
- Plan for early nutrition interventions such as: micronutrient supplementation (folic acid, iron, vitamins) for pregnant women; breastfeeding promotion and support (other than standard post-natal visit); growth monitoring and micronutrient supplementation for young children; and nutrition information/training as these are crucial for strengthen data collection and reporting mechanisms so that progress can be tracked to inform responsive programming.
- Ensure cross-department systems are put in place to identify children with various forms of disability as soon as possible after birth.

- Produce consolidated guidelines drafted by all four departments to provide guidance to municipal officials, and community activists and service providers with an interest in ECD so that the inclusion of early childhood development in the Integrated Development Planning process is facilitated<sup>5</sup>.
- Amend COGTA's IDP regulations to make it clear that the IDP must include ECD planning by incorporating: A municipality's integrated development plan and developmental strategies, which "seek to address gender equality, youth development, early childhood development, protection of children, social cohesion, and the rights of persons with disabilities". This inclusion would assist in the prioritisation of ECD in the IDP process, and where possible, in making existing infrastructure available for ECD facilities and Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres.
- Set clear and appropriate targets for Early Childhood Education (ECE) and in municipalities (COGTA).
- Reach children living in informal settlements outside of the IDP spatial planning process<sup>6</sup>.
- Ensure the inclusion of key indicators which would assist in monitoring progress in ECD in the 'Joint Reporting Forum for Local Government' (co-chaired by Treasury and COGTA).
- Support the provincial Members of the Executive Council (MEC's) in each function to respond to the call for action below.
- Draw on the capabilities and learning that resides within social partners, academic institutions, and the philanthropy sector as a resource to the development of the sector.

## 2. PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS

**MECs for Education, Social Development, Health, Public Works and Infrastructure, and Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs are called upon to:**

- Present the provincial integrated and holistic early childhood development strategy and the plan to implement the strategy to the Premier-in-Executive-Council for adoption, and to the provincial Inter-Governmental Forum for information, noting that this

<sup>5</sup> SmartStart which is a non-profit social franchise supporting individual to establish early learning centres has produced an excellent advocacy toolkit for ECD practitioners and parents of young children which could be used as is

<sup>6</sup> The best available current data is that in 2018, nearly 1.7 million children (9%) in South Africa lived in backyard dwellings or shacks in informal settlements. This figure includes backyard dwellings in formal townships – and these may be within the spatial reach of the IDP.

strategy should be a holistic and cross-departmental provincial strategy for ECD, including Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres.

- Report on the operationalisation, and progress and challenges in implementation to the Premier-in-Executive-Council and to the provincial IGF on a regular basis.
- Work with the MEC's for COGTA to streamline communication with municipalities in respect of ECD.
- Ensure the participation of the relevant departments in the representative forums of the IDP processes as stakeholders. SALGA has stressed the importance of the platforms provided in the District Development Model (DDM). COGTA guidelines for the development of IDP are clear that Departments must participate in the IDP process to ensure that national priorities are reflected in local IDP. This provides an opportunity for the provincial departments of Basic Education, Social Development, Health, and Public Works and Infrastructure to work with stakeholders in the IDP development and review processes to argue for the inclusion of early childhood development.
- Ensure that Education District Directors lead the processes of municipal engagement in their districts in respect of inserting provision for Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres into IDP processes. This would include ensuring that ECD generally and ECE Centres in particular are agenda items in the DDM or District IDP Representative Forum meetings, and in ensuring participation in sectoral forums and in quarterly IDP Mayors forums.
- Ensure that District Directors and Circuit Managers seek to establish working relationships with the IDP managers in the municipalities within the district, and in actively developing a supportive environment for the participation of social partners in these processes.
  - Receive Reports from district officials on their participation in and contributions to municipal early childhood Multi Stakeholder Steering Committees and Early Childhood Development Stakeholder Forums (see Section 3 below) and act on any problems identified or recommendations made.
  - Draw on the capabilities and learning that resides within social partners, academic institutions, and the philanthropy sector as a resource to the development of the sector.

### 3. LOCAL GOVERNMENT AT ALL LEVELS (SUPPORTED BY SALGA) to:

- Include early childhood development services in all Integrated Development Plans (IDPs)
  - drawing on COGTA's provincial IDP Management Units where necessary and
  - based on reliable data including population-based planning
  - planning for the improvement of existing ECD infrastructure
  - preparing infrastructure pipelines for basic services
- Adopt five-year plans on early childhood development services within their boundaries
- Respond to community requests for the establishment of Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres and other early childhood infrastructure as part of integrated development planning, and to include provision of these sites in their IDP planning
- Review regulation, compliance, and registration frameworks (e.g., environmental health/child-care by-laws and land-use arrangements) so that the municipal Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centre registration framework is simple, efficient, effective, and affordable in order to facilitate registration of Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres and child-minders. This will benefit from implementation of the recommendations of the Presidential Reduction of Red-Tape working group on ECD.
- Establish early childhood Multi Stakeholder Steering Committees with representatives from relevant municipal units and from district education, health and social development departments to plan and oversee the implementation of early childhood programmes within the municipal area (supporting the One Plan concept required by the District Development Model).
- Establish Early Childhood Development Stakeholder Forums with the participation of Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres, NGOs, state departments, and municipal officials. These fora can provide a platform where the needs and challenges of the ECE centres can be raised, where government can communicate new policies, or disseminate information and where challenges can be channelled to the relevant authorities (for example, land use



matters, fire certificates, building plan issues, environmental health inspections, childminding registrations, municipal services related matters, and primary health care and nutritional matters). They can also refer matters such as educational programmes, registration, and subsidies to the Municipal ECD Multi Stakeholder Steering Committee for discussion.

## 4. TRADITIONAL LEADERS

Traditional Leaders play a central role in many communities. They are respected, and have considerable influence.

### Traditional Leaders are called upon to

- Partner with local Government in promoting the inclusion of early childhood development services in all Integrated Development Plans (IDPs).
- Mobilise communities to participate in IDP processes and actively promote planning for ECD and early childhood development services in all IDPs.
- Encourage participation in local Early Childhood Development Stakeholder Forums.
- Work with leaders in community and in faith structures to advocate for a social and physical environment in which children thrive.
- Assist parents, where necessary, to seek information, support, and the services which will enable them to fulfil their responsibilities'

## 5. CALL TO PARENTS AND FAMILIES TO:

Parents are called upon to provide a nurturing and caring environment for the development and well-being of children in their care - especially in the important early years. This includes making sure that young children:

- Have strong, protective, and stimulating relationships with their parents and other primary caregivers
- Enjoy care-giving which is language-rich, nurturing and responsive, and safe

Parents that need support are called upon, where this is necessary, to seek information, support, and the services necessary to enable them to fulfil their responsibilities.

## 6. CALL TO COMMUNITY STRUCTURES TO:

- Create a society in which children thrive
  - Recognise that children are raised within neighbourhoods and communities, bringing to life the African proverb that "it takes a village to raise a child". Communities have a profound impact on a child's learning and development.
  - Acknowledge the essential role the whole community plays in the growth and development of children. A strong community can provide a supportive and inclusive environment that helps children develop social-emotional skills and feel a strong sense of belonging. A sense of belonging in community, and support from the community results in long-term benefits for children, shaping their lives positively. As individuals and collectively, there is much we can do to support and protect young children, and it starts with holding their well-being as a core priority.
- Ensure safe and nurturing environments for children
  - Emphasise the role individuals and communities play in creating safe, nurturing and child-friendly spaces.
  - Ensure that community spaces are child-friendly and secure.
  - Advocate for proactive community participation in safeguarding young children. Check for potential dangers to children and ensure that safety precautions are implemented. Our streets must be safe for children.
  - Encourage community initiatives for young children that signal a strong sense of belonging, importance and love. Provide opportunities for children to be in safe spaces where they can play and learn, belong, tackle challenges, grow in their self-esteem and confidence, and as a consequence thrive and succeed. By fostering a sense of belonging and encouraging responsibility, we will nurture the next generation of compassionate and engaged citizens. These initiatives can include: ensuring community spaces can be used as playgroups; developing neighbourhood watch programmes that focus on safety for young children; organising workshops for parents and caregivers on topics related to early

childhood development; setting up community gardens; organising book drives and reading programmes; organising art and cultural activities; setting up support networks for families who need it; and collaborating with local businesses to secure resources for community initiatives.

- Create learning opportunities for young children
  - Emphasise the importance of early learning environments before children go to schools. These can be formal and informal play groups, and as children get closer to Grade R, well organised community-based Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres. Research has shown that early literacy activities and reading performance – reading books, telling stories, singing songs – has a positive impact on learning to read. These learning environments can stimulate curiosity and build children's confidence in learning, and build social skills.
  - Highlight the government's role in registering early learning centres. This is important because there is monitoring and oversight of quality, and for the poorest and most vulnerable children a per-child subsidy is provided to registered early learning centres.
- Promote and support access to early learning centres
  - Urge community participation in Local Government Integrated Development Planning (IDP) processes and motivate for local planning to include provision for early childhood development. This includes advocating for underutilised infrastructure to be used for early childhood development; the investment in recreation and play facilities in our communities; supporting registration of early learning programmes and building new and upgrading existing centres.
  - Support entrepreneurial women to establish Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres. These need to be sustained through the contributions of parents, and if they are registered can access subsidies for the poorest children. Those who take this initiative can learn about how to run these centres through networks such as SmartStart.

## 7. CALL TO FAITH COMMUNITIES

- Make care for children a central part of your mission
  - Faith communities are deeply embedded in communities and in the challenges these communities face. They are organised, have an ethic of care, and have structures which can play a leading role in all of the community actions outlined above marshal volunteers committed to the goal of ensuring that all our children thrive.
- Make available infrastructure and volunteers available to ensure that all children thrive
  - Faith communities often have buildings which can be used for play groups in which young children are given opportunities to learn through interaction with each other, listen to stories, and tell stories. Many faith communities have the capacity to organise people who can provide these opportunities.
  - Faith communities have the networks to identify children who are 'hard-to-reach', who are disabled, who are hungry, or whose families are most in need of support

## 8. CALL TO RESEARCHERS AND NGO'S SUPPORTING ECD

- Build and Share a Repository of Knowledge from your learning

There is considerable innovation from non-state actors and learning from these experiences can optimise ECD reach and effectiveness, particularly for the most vulnerable. This will enrich the work of government at national, provincial and local levels. In particular: share what works in achieving positive outcomes for children; what needs to, and can be done to improve informal and formal skilling opportunities for those working in the sector; what you are learning about early learning and caregiver support services gap, and how best to provide support

## 9. CALL TO THE PHILANTHROPY SECTOR

- Embrace the New Social Compact envisaged by the DBE
  - If all of our children are to thrive, new forms of public-private partnership are needed with appropriate institutional arrangements and systems for robust governance, effective implementation, and proper monitoring which are a coherent part of the overall coordinating and accountability framework.
  - Continue to support the work of researchers and NGOs who contribute so much to our knowledge about what is needed, and what works.