

IGNITING A REVOLUTION AT POINT ZERO?

EXPLORING THE BARRIERS TO EARLY LEARNING ACCESS IN SOUTH  
AFRICA AND THE POSSIBILITY OF THE SOCIAL ECONOMY: A  
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND STUDY OF SMARTSTART

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree

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*The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second-best time is now.*

## ABSTRACT

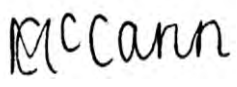
Economic theory suggests that the greatest return to education investment is in the earliest years; early learning and childcare may enhance skill accumulation and mothers' labour market choices. These services may be catalytic, igniting a revolution at point zero that transforms family outcomes and aids development. In South Africa, however, early learning deficits persist. This thesis explores barriers to quality early learning access and the possibility social economy initiatives offer, focusing on social franchises like SmartStart. Document analysis, comparative analysis, and interviews with SmartStart leaders suggest two key barriers. Firstly, where private firms are dominant and ability to pay for services is limited, low-income areas are under-served. For this reason, Polanyi claims that markets should be embedded in institutions. A post-Polanyian approach emphasises the role of social investment states, which focus spending on education and where social protection scaffolds markets, in this regard.

The South African state seems to embrace this approach as ECD policy frames early learning as a public good and social investment. However, a second barrier is that an insulated state enables technocratic over democratic embeddedness, with powerful rights-based discourse but poor implementation. In particular, it seems that the state lacks a framework to progressively realise the right to quality early learning. Attempts to enforce high standards are not accompanied by sufficient resources, capacity or collaboration, resulting in sub-standard services and barriers to entry. Even in better resourced contexts (e.g., Basic Education), top-down, technocratic models (re)produce failing systems, where those with means exit in favour of market alternatives. An exploration of other developing countries suggests that this failure, with variations, prevails, but also that possibility exists. In these contexts, states seem more coordinated and responsive when partnering with civil society.

In South Africa, the SmartStart model is based on partnership. SmartStart frames itself as a delivery platform, building relationships with local NGOs to simultaneously scale and deepen early learning. Partnerships with communities are crucial, to build demand in a sector whose association with social reproduction means that its economic significance may be overlooked. In addition, SmartStart puts forward a child-centred approach based on a prefigurative vision but also responsive to the realities of under-resourced contexts, aiming to progressively realise rights. Though with some limitations, SmartStart's least-cost innovation for scale provides lessons for the state. As the state's ECD mandate shifts to Basic Education, these findings serve to inform a more effective implementation model, leveraging resources that already exist.

## DECLARATION

This thesis has not been submitted to a university other than Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa. The work presented is that of the author and all references have been accurately recorded.

Signed: 

Date: May, 2022

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Alice Walker claims, “It has become a common feeling, I believe, as we have watched our heroes falling over the years, that our own small stone of activism, which might not seem to measure up to the rugged boulders of heroism we have so admired, is a paltry offering toward the building of an edifice of hope. Many who believe this choose to withhold their offerings out of shame. This is the tragedy of our world. For we can do nothing substantial toward changing our course on the planet, a destructive one, without rousing ourselves, individual by individual, and bringing our small, imperfect stones to the pile.”

My thesis is written in recognition of those who refuse to accept South Africa’s current trajectory, and who offer their own small and imperfect stones to building a different path. May your voices grow louder, and may they be heard.

To my brilliant and kind supervisor, Mr. David Fryer, for showing me a version of academia based as much on empathy, courage and humility as it is on academic rigour and conceptual precision. If nine tenths of education is encouragement, I have been exceptionally lucky to find myself under your guidance. In addition, I am grateful for the generous financial support and guidance of the Mandela Rhodes Foundation which made this thesis possible.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANC: African National Congress

ASQ: SE: Ages and Stages Questionnaire for the Socio-Emotional Domain

BSID: Bayley Scales of Infant Development III

CCT: Conditional Cash Transfer

COSATU: Congress of South African Trade Unions

CSA: Swedish National Association of Social Work

CSO: Civil Society Organisation

CSG: Child Support Grant

CSI: Corporate Social Investment

CWP: Community Works Programme

DBE: Department of Basic Education

DSD: Department of Social Development

ECCE: Early Childhood Care and Education

ECD: Early Childhood Development

ELOM: Early Learning Outcomes Measure

EPWP: Expanded Public Works Programme

FLFP: Female Labour Force Participation

FOSATU: Federation of South African Trade Unions

FZTF: From Zero to Forever

GEAR: Growth, Employment and Redistribution

HCB: *Hogares Comunitarios de Bienestar* (Colombian community home)

HDI: Human Development Index

HOME: Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment

ICBF: Colombian Family Welfare Institute

ICDS: Integrated Child Development Services

LETCEE: Little Elephant Training Centre for Early Education

MC: Mobile Crèches

MEC: Minerals Energy Complex

NDR: National Democratic Revolution

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

NIECDP: National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy

NDP: National Development Plan

PIRLS: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study

PPF: Production Possibility Frontier

RDP: Reconstruction and Development Programme

SANCO: South African National Civic Organisation

SACP: South African Communist Party

SAF: Swedish Employers' Federation

SDG: Sustainable Development Goal

TAC: Treatment Action Campaign

UDF: United Democratic Front

WHO: World Health Organisation

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## A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Children's development in the early years as a concept varies from country to country. Some countries, like South Africa, adopt an integrated early childhood development (ECD) framework while in other countries, such as India and Colombia, policies refer specifically to early childhood care and education (ECCE) (UNICEF, 2020a: 7).

For the purposes of this thesis, early childhood development (ECD) and early childhood care and education (ECCE) are used interchangeably to refer to the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs in order to build a solid foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing, from birth up until primary school-going age (Republic of South Africa, 2022). While ECCE/ECD encapsulates a variety of services, including healthcare and nutritional support for children and caregivers, this thesis focuses specifically on two components: **stimulation for early learning** (the education children receive before entering primary school) and **childcare services**.

# CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Research context

Heckman *et al* (2012: 2) argue that the potential rate of return to early learning investment is greater than at any other level of education, and these returns become even higher for investments in children from disadvantaged communities. According to Heckman (2008: 290), these high returns accrue largely because skill formation and human capital generated by early learning programmes, at an influential time in human cognitive development, provides a platform for further skill accumulation, and the skills gained in these initial years reduce the cost of subsequent investments.

Furthermore, when early learning is accessible, growing human capital results in knowledge accumulation (David, 2001: 62). Accumulated knowledge produces a positive externality where others can appropriate an existing knowledge-base and create new innovations (David, 2001: 59). The consequent virtuous cycle of innovations contributes to dynamic and growing economies. The externalities of knowledge accumulation are not just economic: the effect of a better educated population is broader, encompassing aspects such as better public health and enhanced civic participation (Dee, 2004). Therefore, early learning programmes may be significant in ensuring preparedness for twenty-first century *knowledge economies*, but also for moving towards *knowledge democracies* focused not only on building individuals' human capital but on the capabilities to build, transform and apply knowledge for human development for all (Hall, 2013: 6-7).

Access to early childhood care also affects the female labour force. Typically, women bear the burden of care. Women's household labour and care enables the maintenance of human beings; the production done largely by men is impossible without women's unpaid work (Messac, 2018). Though historically overlooked, this social reproduction forms the foundation of economies, leading Federici (1975: 2) to claim that the amount of domestic and care work done by women in the home is what "keeps the world moving". Care work, according to Federici (1975: 2), is the "point zero" that forms one of capitalism's background conditions of possibility. This care burden, however, limits the time women can allocate to paid labour (Becker, 1985: 43). Therefore, childcare available outside the home can enhance women's choices and increase the female workforce (Verick, 2014: 2).

For these reasons, this thesis will argue that investments in early learning and childcare have substantial social benefits and emancipatory potential, especially in terms of alleviating class and gender inequality (Heckman, 2008; Federici, 1975). Several modes of early childhood development (ECD), where learning and care are integral components, provisioning exist, to unlock potential social and economic benefits associated with the sector. Here, Esping-Andersen's (2002: 11) three pillars of welfare, namely family, market and state, are a useful starting point to explore early learning and childcare service delivery. Traditionally, family networks (Esping-Andersen's first pillar) are a dominant childcare form (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 11). Conservative welfare regimes, associated with continental Europe, support households by providing welfare services that emphasise the nuclear family structure (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 16). The conservative regime introduces employment-linked social insurance, guarantees, and a family wage for male breadwinners (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 16). Based on the assumption that society is organised into male-headed nuclear families, the family wage is a recognition that the male household head needs to be paid a wage sufficient to support children and a wife who performs unpaid domestic labour (Fraser, 1994: 591).

While providing a safety net for traditional families, this model hurts women's search for economic independence and families who do not conform to the nuclear model (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 16). Many individuals, notably second-wave feminists, opposed the family wage for prolonging a system where securely employed husbands support unemployed wives, keeping women outside the labour market (Fraser, 2012: 8). Instead, feminists like Federici (1975: 13) coined the slogan "wages for housework" and advocated for alternative childcare arrangements. In opposition to the family wage, which assumed all families included a housewife performing uncompensated household work, second-wave feminists launched a campaign to end the naturalisation of this labour by demanding women be compensated directly for it (Federici, 1975: 9). In South Africa, the unequal family division of labour is incompatible with the Constitution's transformative vision, which strives for gender equality, making this conservative welfare regime inappropriate (Republic of South Africa, 1996: 6)

Labour market patterns have shifted significantly with many women in traditionally conservative welfare regimes currently working in the economy (Lutz, 2017: 363). In practice, where parents/caregivers work for wages, a care gap emerges and needs to be filled. One mechanism for providing care outside the family can be found in liberal welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 11). These regimes reflect Esping-Andersen's second pillar,

prioritising market solutions and minimal state welfare (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 11). Market approaches to providing childcare and early learning services appear well-suited as the externalities are potential economic returns. Where returns are high, one would expect that profit making entities would exploit the opportunity. As a result, global markets in early learning and care have emerged in liberal welfare regimes, supported by liberal institutions, and even in former conservative welfare regimes, where many mothers have entered the labour market (Fraser, 2012: 9). These markets alleviate a care burden for some women, but may also pass it on to poor women and poor countries (via migration).

The liberal regime structure acknowledges that gendered care work is significant and should be paid for. However, market-provided early learning and care may be inaccessible as many women who cannot afford these services are confronted with the simultaneous tasks of performing care work and financially providing for their families (Klasen, 2019: 187). Regardless of how the mixture of liberal and conservative elements play out, the idea of families purchasing market services to replace household labour appears applicable only where there is substantial wealth and equity. Otherwise, poor women are excluded, and their children have limited early learning access. This idea of exclusion is fleshed out more fully in Chapter 3.

Furthermore, Evans and Heller (2015: 707) argue that markets may undersupply certain goods, especially in contexts where social returns are higher than private returns, or where there is incomplete private appropriability of returns, which appears the case for early learning and care. Firms may be more likely to channel investment where total returns are lower but private returns are higher (Evans and Heller, 2015: 707). The positive externalities associated with early learning and care, where investment returns cannot be entirely privately appropriated, may lead to market failure, such as an incentive problem where private firms undersupply goods when returns cannot be completely captured as profit (Cornes and Sandler, 1986: 4).

The liberal welfare system's failure to generate a sustainable and equitable early learning and care regime can be conceptualised as part of a greater capitalist crisis as society reaches the social limits to market expansion. Fundamental market failure in terms of inequality and the inability to provide goods with high social returns indicates that the market economy cannot exist independently but must rely on some nonmarket institution to manage the supply and demand of commodities with externalities (Block, 2003: 282). Polanyi (1944: 71) claims that markets need to be embedded in regulatory institutions to protect against market failure and

other crises. Post-Polanyian thinkers like Block (2003) and Sandbrook (2011) emphasise the constitutive role that the welfare state can play in this regard.

In many ways, Esping-Andersen's third welfare pillar, the state, does seem to represent this Polanyian re-embedding. In social democracies, the state pillar underpins (rather than replaces) the market and family pillars to provide welfare. This preference for this configuration of welfare pillars reflects concerns that the family and market offer inadequate welfare coverage and may exacerbate inequality (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 13). While supporting female labour force participation, this framing serves to underpin both the market and household to strengthen families (by unburdening women of care obligations), enable greater independence, and activate citizens' potential through social investment. It is thus potentially an ideal transformative type (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 14). However, it requires a capable state, fiscal commitment and political will (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 14).

Despite South Africa's substantive policy around ECD, the state is often incapacitated (Neuman and Okeng'o, 2019: 224). Although the government positions ECD as a developmental priority, the 2023/24 budget allocates only R500 annually on the learning of each child up to age five, compared to R22 000 spent on each six- to 17-year-old (Hickman and Matlhape, 2021). This discrepancy raises questions about whether the government has the resources to implement policy, and about deeper constraints in terms of competing ideologies and attitudes related to ECD prioritisation within the ruling party. Ultimately, a gap between policy and practice means solutions to an early learning deficit remain partial and palliative.

Whether barriers are ideological or material, South Africa's reality is that, while the ruling party projects unity, South African policies, ideology and practice are rarely coherent, often leaving many without access to welfare services, and hollowing out Esping-Andersen's third pillar (Pons-Vignon and Segatti, 2013: 509). Therefore, it appears that none of Esping-Andersen's pillars are sufficient. Wood and Gough (2006: 1699) argue that developing countries like South Africa can be characterised not according to welfare regime types but informal security or even insecurity regimes which experience problematic states, constrained families, imperfect markets, and an overall welfare deficit. In these cases, all of Esping-Andersen's welfare pillars appear inadequate and an overall welfare and ECD deficit may emerge. In the absence of a capable state, informal security regimes tend to rely on community organisations and civil society (Wood and Gough, 2006: 1702).

In this context, the role of civil society requires further study. Civil society refers to “the organised expression of various interests and values operating in the triangular space between the family, state, and the market”, including trade unions, churches, non-government organisations (NGOs), Corporate Social Investment (CSI) initiatives, and the social economy (Habib, 2005: 673). These organisations extend beyond Esping-Andersen’s typology, pointing towards a “welfare diamond”, including civil society alongside other pillars (Razavi, 2007: 20). Civil society plays a key role in service delivery as well as advocacy, with many organisations shedding light on the problematic gaps between policy and practice (and ideology and reality) and insisting that the rights-based ethos in South Africa’s Constitution is upheld (Westaway, 2017: 100). Civil society solutions are therefore a source of possibility but may also be associated with a certain danger: these initiatives may potentially fill service delivery gaps or even be transformative of the status quo, but could also be problematic, providing low standard solutions, or allowing the state to escape its responsibility to its citizens.

Within civil society, the social economy refers to organisations that place social goals over profit maximisation, and where private activity is conducted for public gain (Goncalves *et al*, 2016: 1589). Of interest to this study, social franchises are structures emulating commercial franchising strategies, such as building organised networks and economies of scale to maximise social impact (Foulis, 2014: 19). SmartStart, a South African early learning franchise, is a major focus of this thesis. SmartStart positions itself as transformative, seeking to build a network of partners to scale early learning (SmartStart, 2020: 2). This framing represents an exciting possibility, enabling organisations to expand beyond their localities. SmartStart aims to align the capabilities of government, NGOs and funders to make universal access to early learning possible (SmartStart, 2020: 29). Here, civil society appears motivated not by an attempt to replace the state in cases of dismal service delivery, but to catalyse transformative social policy and a more effective systems solution. However, there are concerns around sustainability with respect to financial viability and quality control.

In this emerging research field, there are contributions that need developing. There is a need for country specific analyses of early learning and childcare provisioning strategies coming from governments and civil society in developing contexts (Razavi, 2007). There have been several impact studies focused on the children involved in ECD interventions, with some concentrating on the SmartStart social franchise in particular (Dawes *et al*, 2020; Horler *et al*, 2019). What is missing, however, is research focused specifically on delivery mechanisms and

innovations for scaling ECD coming from civil society in contexts where states, markets and households are constrained. Currently, only limited literature addresses macro-level issues of scalability, sustainability, and the transformative potential as well as drawbacks of social franchise models and civil society in general.

## 1.2. Goals of the research

The main objective of this thesis is to critically analyse the barriers to expanding ECD access in South Africa and the possibility social economy initiatives, such as the SmartStart social franchise, offer in this constrained space.

The sub-goals this research serves to address are:

1. To determine why the South African state has failed to bring about a sustainable, equitable early learning and care regime, given the high returns to ECD and the apparent commitment to ECD in policy documents.
2. To understand differing visions of ECD provisioning and how these have played out, particularly in countries with similar socio-economic statuses as South Africa, with a focus on early learning in particular.
3. To determine whether the SmartStart franchise model can address the early learning deficit in a way that is transformative, and whether it offers insight into key action areas for an effective early learning strategy. To explore what the SmartStart model reveals about the possibility for social economy initiatives to scale operations and build partnerships between civil society, the state and business, as well as their limitations, in relation to ECD.

These objectives frame a study that seeks to gain insight into the *systems* and *attitudes* underpinning South Africa's ECD landscape, in order to conceptualize ways to meaningfully enhance access.

## 1.3. Research design and methodology

This study makes use of a qualitative research approach, geared towards finding context-specific meaning, in an inductive and descriptive process (Sharan *et al*, 2016: 17). It is situated in the interpretive research paradigm, concerned with understanding reality through subjective experiences and as a construction through the interaction between language and aspects of an independent world (Scotland, 2012: 12). An interpretive approach to social reality describes

and interprets issues systematically from the point of view of the individuals studied. This approach suits this research area, which serves to make meaning out of human organisation and social institutions, and which deals with opinions, subtle differences, and complex concepts difficult to separate into concrete categories (Starr, 2014: 254).

The research methodology is three-fold. Firstly, a literature review of relevant policies, peer-reviewed literature, grey literature and government texts characterises the global importance of early childhood education and care, South Africa's ECD landscape and the role of the social economy in ECD. An analysis of South Africa's social, economic and ECD policies is prioritised. This analysis serves to sketch out the government's intentions, and capability, in terms of realising a certain level of access to and quality of ECD. This document analysis involves an initial historical analysis and a contemporary contextualisation to give an account of South African policy and practice. This analysis technique teases out the barriers to an effective ECD rollout in South Africa, with focus on early learning and care, serving to address the first sub-goal.

Secondly, a comparative analysis outlines different countries' approaches to ECD, and of different social franchises responses to inadequate early learning and care coverage in India, Colombia, and South Africa. At this stage, comparison allows me to contrast different forms of ECD implementation as well as the approaches by civil society organisations working at the grassroots level. This comparative analysis is similarly conducted using publicly available documents, namely impact studies, reports, and grey literature on these various cases. No primary research is conducted in this case. Based on the information obtained, the comparative approach is used to explore similarities and differences between different early learning franchises. This data is analysed using an inductive and comparative strategy and outlines the lessons learned from the experiences of other countries (Sharan *et al*, 2016). It serves to address sub-goal 2, and provides background information that comes to inform the next part of analysis.

Finally, following this broad comparison, this study begins to consider the possibility represented by the social economy in South Africa's early learning landscape. Primary research in the form of open-ended and semi-structured interviews with the SmartStart leadership team and innovators are used to gain insight into the potential and limitations of this model's approach to addressing South Africa's early learning and care deficit. Specifically, questions probe key issues, namely SmartStart's key success factors and challenges in achieving scale, its main income sources, its relationship with the state, and how SmartStart leaders envisage

their own position in South Africa's ECD landscape. These interviews do not function as an impact study of programme effectiveness as this research draws on published impact studies that have evaluated this effect. Instead, they frame an exploration of the contributions of scalable social franchises in terms of realising a more comprehensive early learning system, in relation to other pillars of market and state, investigating the possibility that exists in a constrained environment. The interview process therefore seeks to address sub-goal 3. Data generated in interviews is analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method.

Both the comparative analysis and interviews with the SmartStart team make use of purposive sampling. Usually found in qualitative studies, purposive sampling is based on the notion that the researcher wants to gain as much insight into a particular phenomenon as is possible, and must therefore select a sample from which the most information can be obtained (Sharan *et al*, 2016: 95). For the comparative analysis, three early learning franchises namely aeioTU in Colombia, Mobile Crèches in India, and SmartStart in South Africa, were chosen as they were identified in the literature as examples of best practice (Premji, 2014: 87). They also operate in contexts similar enough to South Africa but with enough differences for one to explore varying characteristics and are likely to provide the most relevant information in relation to the South African case. For the interviews with SmartStart members, 11 participants, or the entire SmartStart leadership team, and some identified innovators of the SmartStart model, were chosen. The choice to interview the leadership team instead of employees at different organisational levels is based on the assumption that these individuals are likely to understand the operation, ecosystem and vision of SmartStart best and can provide the most insight.

#### 1.4. Organisation of the thesis

This thesis comprises of seven chapters, including this introduction. Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive outline of the research design and methodology used to address the study's main objectives. This chapter also includes the rationale for methodological choices and outlining the ethical considerations made throughout the study. Chapter 3 provides a brief literature review and describes the conceptual framework underpinning this thesis. It focuses on the economic returns to early learning, Esping-Andersen's welfare regime typology, Polanyian and post-Polanyian conceptions of the economy, and literature on the social economy. The aim of this Chapter is to locate early childhood education and care in a broader understanding of welfare regimes and economic systems.

Chapter 4 turns towards the specificities of the South African case, outlining the evolution of South Africa's welfare regime and early learning landscape, from the early twentieth century up until early 2022. This chapter considers the apartheid economic system and welfare regime as well as the immediate post-apartheid economic and welfare restructuring (or lack thereof). Following this contextualisation, this chapter explores the current state of early learning in South Africa, and the gap between policy and practice. Chapter 5 comprises a comparison of different approaches to early learning in the global South. It closely explores the operation of three different early learning franchises: SmartStart in South Africa, Mobile Crèches in India, and aeioTU in Colombia. This comparison functions as a thematic exploration of the similarities between these organisations and the lessons drawn from their various implementation strategies. This analysis serves to provide a comprehensive outline of early learning franchises that currently exist in the developing world, to better understand the potential and limitations of the social economy in the early childhood care and education space.

From the general analysis of the ECD and early learning trajectory in various countries, Chapter 6 is a deeper investigation of the possibility that may still exist in South Africa, exploring the role of SmartStart. It thematically presents the results of the interviews with various members of the SmartStart leadership team. This analysis focuses on whether the SmartStart social franchise model can address the early learning deficit in a way that is transformative rather than palliative, and whether it offers insight into key action areas for an effective early learning rollout in South Africa. It also serves to highlight the possibility the SmartStart social franchise model offers in a fiscally constrained environment, paying particular attention to its potential to scale operations and build partnerships between civil society, government and business, as well as its limitations, in relation to scaling early learning and care.

Finally, Chapter 7 provides the conclusion for this thesis. It synthesises key findings of this analysis, relating them to the conceptual framework and existing literature. This chapter also serves as a reflection of the research overall, outlining the strengths and limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research in this developing field.

## CHAPTER 2 – RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the research design and methodology undertaken to address the research objectives set out in Chapter 1 (Section 1.2). Section 2.2 describes the qualitative approach utilised. Section 2.3 introduces the interpretive research paradigm and design that informs this research. Thereafter, Section 2.4 outlines the research methods, namely document analysis and interviews, and the sample selection undertaken. Section 2.5 details the data collection process, and Section 2.6 outlines the data analysis techniques employed, specifically the thematic analysis used to make sense of secondary data and primary interview data obtained from SmartStart. Section 2.7 discusses measures put in place to ensure the trustworthiness of data. Finally, Section 2.8 outlines the ethical procedures applied throughout this process.

### 2.2. Qualitative approach

This study makes use of a qualitative research approach which seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings (Golafshani, 2003: 600). This approach focuses on “how” and “why” social phenomena operate in particular contexts (Mohajan, 2018: 24). Qualitative research is therefore geared towards finding context-specific meaning, and is an inductive, descriptive process (Sharan *et al*, 2016: 17). Data collection tends to be open-ended, making use of methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, case studies, literature studies, discourse analysis and ethnography (Starr, 2014: 240). Qualitative research often yields more information than more closed-ended quantitative research frameworks, making it appropriate in cases where researchers seek in-depth and exploratory data analysis (Starr, 2014: 240).

Qualitative approaches are most suitable when there has been a relatively low level of conceptualisation for a given study topic (Starr, 2014: 240). This approach is therefore appropriate for this study which seeks to better understand a topic that has not yet been comprehensively explored in economics literature: the early learning and childcare landscape and social economy in South Africa. The qualitative framework drawn upon in this study is appropriate for an exploratory study of economic institutions and social programmes (Starr, 2014: 254).

Starr (2014: 238) claims that qualitative research in economics has traditionally been regarded as unimportant, but that in recent years there has been a “small explosion” in qualitative approaches in the discipline. The recent proliferation of qualitative research is to some extent

a result of critiques levelled at the economics discipline's reliance on quantitative methods (Nelson, 2001: 94). For example, feminist economists from the mid-1970s onwards criticised mainstream economic methodology for being inadequate for the study of women's issues (Nelson, 2001: 94). Nelson (2001: 94) claims that methodology choice conveys value and the singular focus on quantitative approaches, which emphasise objectivity, detachment, mathematics and a lack of emotion, reflects conventionally masculine characteristics, and reveals a masculinist gender bias in the discipline. Hartsock (2003: 298) claims that both the societies and epistemologies created by men emphasise dichotomies, separation, and opposition, between men and women, and subject and object of research.

The notion, however, that the subject can and should be totally removed from the description of the object is not only dehumanising, creating extractive rather than collaborative forms of knowledge creation, but also inadequate in the pursuit of rich research (Keller, 2003: 195). Often, in-depth research requires trusting relationships with research partners (or participants), recognition that knowledge generated through the involvement of various stakeholders is more likely to lead to meaningful change, and that ordinary people affected by social issues function as knowledge creators, rather than just consumers (Wood and Zuber-Skerritt, 2022: 18).

Furthermore, the assumption that a researcher acting in isolation and following prescribed methods will achieve complete objectivity and detachment is misleading, and the search for reliable knowledge often requires an acknowledgement of the researcher's position and context of investigation (Nelson, 1996: xii). While the general assumption is that quantitative approaches tend to make economic inquiries more objective, often the opposite is the case: historically, the pursuit of objectivity in research has been operationalised in a way that the scientific method has been unable to detect androcentric assumptions, or the "dominant beliefs" of an age (Harding, 1992: 444).

This endeavour, in the hopes of being value-free, impartial and dispassionate, has turned away from the task of critically identifying social values and institutional discrimination that comes to shape lived realities (Harding, 1992: 459). Rather, Nelson (1996: xiii) argues that the introduction of other approaches would make the economics discipline more objective, "freeing it from one-sided, male-centred assumptions that until recently have gone unquestioned" (Nelson, 1996: xii). This approach can be more useful than so-called neutral perspectives or *weak objectivity*, which, in shying from an acknowledgement of values and assumptions, may fail to be rigorous enough (Hartsock, 1998: 80). In contrast, *strong*

*objectivity* occurs when the author recognises her own standpoint and how this may affect the research process and outcomes (Harding in Nelson, 1995: 140).

An overreliance on quantitative methods also reflects what Nelson (1996: 22) refers to as the core and margin of mainstream economics. This core is historically the public (market and government), and individual agents while its margin is the private (the family/household), society, institutions and equity (Nelson, 1996: 22). Quantitative methods, usually best-suited to this core, remain dominant in the discipline, and so is the tendency to focus on the public and individual agent at the expense of economic inquiries about the family, society and other institutions (Nelson, 1996: 22). Feminist economists have reacted against the narrowness of this mainstream core, and the economic aspects it places on the periphery (Nelson, 1996).

While there are many benefits to quantitative approaches in economics, they do not suit all economic inquiries and, in particular, lack a framework to explore the importance of institutions and differentials of power important in analyses that pay attention to structures of exploitation and domination (such as feminist analyses) (Nelson, 2001: 96). The alternative to the pitfalls of an overreliance on quantitative approaches is not a turn to radical subjectivism on the opposite end of the spectrum, but one that encompasses many methodologies (Nelson, 1996: xii). As this research falls under the feminist economics sub-discipline, and has a specific focus on institutions, power relations and domination, a qualitative approach is most suitable (Creswell, 2014: 26). Furthermore, this study deals with opinions, subtle differences, and complex concepts that are difficult to separate into concrete categories. Therefore, a qualitative approach, serving to make meaning out of the messier aspects of human organisation and social institutions, is appropriate.

### 2.3. Interpretive research paradigm and design

A research paradigm and design refer to the “blueprint” of how one intends to conduct research in order to address research goals and sub-goals (Mouton, 2001: 55). An interpretive research paradigm is used in this study. This paradigm is concerned with understanding reality through individuals’ subjective experiences and as a construction through the interaction between language and aspects of an independent world (Scotland, 2012: 12). This approach to social reality describes and interprets issues systematically from the point of view of the individuals being studied. The ontological stance of the interpretive research paradigm is therefore that

aspects of reality are subjective and socially constructed, making the pursuit of complete objectivity and detachment in research impossible (Collis and Hussey, 2014: 49).

Epistemologically, then, researchers cannot “find” a single, objective reality, as reality is socially mediated and context-bound (Sharan *et al*, 2016: 9). The stance here is again not a turn to radical subjectivism, but that subjectivity and specificity are significant and should not be subsumed by the pursuit of generality. Knowledge is constructed from subjective viewpoints, rather than the application of pre-existing general concepts and categorisations. In addition, knowledge is constructed by researchers during the research process in conjunction with the research participants (Sharan *et al*, 2016: 9). Findings are thus created as investigation proceeds (Andrade, 2009: 44). Meaningful reality emerges out of interaction between humans and the world, developed and generated in this social context (Scotland, 2012: 12). Under this research paradigm, human beings are not considered objects of research but are agents who are involved in actively and collaboratively constructing reality (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013: 41). Knowledge of reality is gained through social constructions such as language, consciousness, documents and shared research (Andrade, 2009: 43).

Within the interpretive research paradigm, this study is specifically a phenomenological research design. Creswell (2014: 57) claims that phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for individuals about a concept or phenomenon. Phenomenology explores the meanings assigned to individuals’ lived experiences, in relation to context and other experiences (Creswell 2014: 57). This design therefore examines how a phenomenon is experienced and given meaning by participants. Phenomenology generally translates into gathering deep information through inductive qualitative research methods such as interviews and treating the perspectives of individuals as contribution to knowledge.

### 2.3.1. Positioning the researcher

It is important in qualitative research, and especially under the interpretive research paradigm, for the researcher to reflect on her own personal experiences and background, and how these elements may influence her interpretations and the meaning ascribed to qualitative data (Creswell, 2014: 235). The reflexivity of the researcher is not only significant in indicating the biases and values in research, but also to reveal how the researcher’s background may in turn shape the direction of the study (Creswell, 2014: 235). The interpretive paradigm positions the researcher not as an objective onlooker but as a co-creator and constructor of knowledge during the research process (Sharan *et al*, 2016: 9). This paradigm is based on the assumption that no

reality is fully objectively observable, and that individuals are likely to have biased, partial and value-laden understandings (Scotland, 2012: 12).

In this case, the detached researcher is an impossibility, and the producer of knowledge, and where she is located, is significant (Scotland, 2012: 12). All individuals have biases which impact research. It is therefore important for researchers to be self-aware – the process of research is not only a voyage of discovery but also one of self-discovery and self-development. An acknowledgement of one's own positionality, and awareness of one's biases, may in turn make a researcher's interpretation more rigorous than if these biases go uninterrogated. In the paragraph below, therefore, I position myself as the researcher.

In some ways, this research study is a product of my personal biography. South Africa is my home country. In my university experience, I witnessed and took part in social movements and student protests that focused on issues of structural injustice and exclusion in education. It is in this context that I became conscious of South Africa's highly unequal educational landscape. This realisation drew me towards civil society, and university community engagement, and I have been involved in several projects serving to enhance educational access. For this reason, I am interested in the work of civil society, and believe that its transformative potential has not been adequately explored in the literature. For this reason, I coordinate a research group investigating various aspects of one of Rhodes University's community engagement programmes, the Nine Tenths mentoring programme, and I have also published on my own community engagement experience in academic journals.

The theories and concepts explored in this thesis have provided me with a deeper understanding of my own community engagement practice, while this practice has also provided me with a unique lens through which to evaluate these conceptual ideas (Stierer, 2008: 42). This idea of praxis, or the linking of theory and practice, relates to Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy where theory and practice are integrated to effect social change (Stierer, 2008: 42). Freire (2018: 87) argues that the development of critical consciousness occurs through praxis and, as the creation of space for both action and reflection, and integration of theory and practice, creates a form of learning that inspires and effects social change.

This thesis has a normative component: it is aimed at uncovering the reasons behind unequal access to ECD, and bringing about positive social change in this space to further the emancipation of children and caregivers. My ideological stance, framed by my own

experiences, is that the South African state has a responsibility to provide certain services, such as ECD, to the population, and that reliance on market-led approaches to welfare provision in contexts of wealth and income inequality, are inadequate. I therefore believe that social democratic approaches are likely to be more transformative than neoliberal ones, and this position is reflected in my own writing and research. I acknowledge that my adherence to these ideas and beliefs is a “standpoint” but that I also embrace criticality in my reflectivity. My standpoint is an evolving one throughout the research process.

In the process of acknowledging my own positionality, I have thought deeply about how I position the people I interviewed in this thesis. In data analysis, members of SmartStart’s leadership team are referred to as SmartStart leaders rather than research participants. This is a deliberate terminology approach that serves to position those interviewed not as objects of study but as experts in this field and knowledge collaborators and co-creators (Wood and Zuber-Skerritt, 2022: 18). I have also intentionally chosen to write in the first person throughout this thesis, as a reminder and recognition of my positionality.

## 2.4. Research methodology

Research methodology refers to the tools or procedures used to address one’s research objectives (Mouton, 2001: 56). In this thesis, research methodology is three-fold. Firstly, a literature review of relevant policies, peer-reviewed literature, grey literature and government texts characterises the global importance of ECD, South Africa’s early learning landscape and the role of the social economy in ECD. Secondly, a comparative analysis outlines different countries’ approaches to ECD, and of different social franchises responses to inadequate ECD coverage. Focus is placed on comparing SmartStart to similar early learning franchises namely aeioTU in Colombia and Mobile Crèches (MC) in India, both identified in the literature as successful civil society initiatives in the global South (Premji, 2014: 87). Finally, following this broad comparison, this study begins to consider the possibility represented by the social economy in South Africa’s ECD landscape. Primary research in the form of in-depth interviews with the SmartStart leadership team and innovators are used to gain insight into the potential and limitations of this model’s approach to addressing South Africa’s early learning deficit.

Since this research is situated in the interpretive research paradigm, there are several considerations around the document and comparative analyses that should be noted. These analyses will draw on public policies, government speeches, impact assessments, peer-

reviewed literature and relevant grey literature. All of these documents need to be considered as situated products, rather than fixed and stable (Owen, 2014: 10). Documents are produced in social settings, and one must therefore bear in mind the relationships between their production, consumption and content (Owen, 2014: 10). Qualitative document analysis emphasises description and the search for underlying meaning and patterns rather than quantitative relationships between two or more variables. This approach is interpretive, and aims to find context-specific meaning. When it comes to qualitative document analysis (both in terms of sampling and interpretation of documents), the researcher's positionality is again significant. An awareness of my own potential biases prompted me to take care not to read only one school of thought. In my analysis, I have deliberately considered orthodox economic literature as well as feminist and social democratic literature.

#### 2.4.1. Sampling

Both the comparative analysis and interviews with the SmartStart team make use of purposive sampling. In the sample selection processes, researchers can choose probability sampling, where all observations have an equal, non-zero chance of being selected, or non-probability sampling, where the selection of observations is subjective and not random (Etikan *et al*, 2016: 1). Purposive sampling, usually found in qualitative studies, is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to gain as much insight into a particular phenomenon as is possible, and must select a sample from which the most information can be learned (Sharan *et al*, 2016: 95). In this research, I chose to concentrate on those best able to assist with the research, and selected individuals who would be most proficient and well-informed with the phenomenon of interest (Etikan *et al*, 2016: 2-3).

Firstly, for the comparative analysis, following an analysis of different country approaches to ECD, three examples of early learning franchises have been chosen. These include SmartStart and two social franchises, Mobile Crèches and aeioTU, purposefully selected as they are identified in the literature as examples of best practice social franchises in the global South (Premji, 2014: 87). As a result of this identification as best practice, and their operation in similar contexts to the South African case, these social franchises are likely to provide the most relevant information in relation to the SmartStart case. Since these franchises operate in similar contexts, it will be interesting to see how differences between these cases play out and what they suggest. For examples chosen for comparative analysis, I have purposefully chosen examples deemed successful, because these provide insights that are likely to be more

generalisable and may represent possibility. At the same time, I am careful to outline specificity and possible exceptionalism, so as to not fall into the trap of thinking these (best practice) examples are representative.

Secondly, for interviews with SmartStart members, 11 people, or the entire SmartStart leadership team as well as two innovators of the SmartStart social franchise model, were chosen. This purposive sampling limits participants to those within the leadership team based on the assumption that these individuals are likely to understand the operation, vision and ecosystem of the organisation best, and able to provide the most insight and information to this study. This sampling is purposive as it was decided that interviews will be conducted with individual leaders rather than staff and ECD practitioners. Purposive sampling is typically used in qualitative research to select information-rich cases, or individuals proficient and well-informed with the phenomenon of interest being explored in this study (Etikan *et al*, 2016).

## 2.5. Data collection

### 2.5.1. Document analysis

According to Ritchie and Lewis (2003: 35), document analysis is useful for a study of existing documents in order to understand substantive content or illuminate deeper meanings, and is useful when the history of events or experiences has relevance. Document analysis of South African policy and government speeches specifically as well as peer-reviewed and relevant grey literature highlighting the state of ECD in South Africa and internationally provides insight into the ECD landscape. It allows me to sketch out the government's stated intentions, and capability, in terms of realising a certain level of access to and quality of early learning and care. An analysis of South Africa's social, economic and ECD policies is prioritised, and data analysis specifically probes the barriers to an effective early learning rollout in these documents. These documents, as well as relevant peer-reviewed literature and grey literature, are publicly available for analysis.

Following this literature review, a second element of document analysis is the comparative analysis undertaken which compares SmartStart to the early learning franchises of aeioTU in Colombia and Mobile Crèches (MC) in India. This comparative analysis serves to address the second research objective: to compare SmartStart to social franchises in other countries, to better understand the potential and limitations of the social economy in terms of unlocking returns to early learning. This comparative analysis is conducted using publicly available

documents, namely impact studies, reports, and grey literature on these various cases. I took care to rely primarily on academic journal articles and peer-reviewed reports, to mitigate the risk of biased or unreliable literature. No primary research was conducted in this case.

### 2.5.2. Interviews

In this study, open-ended and semi-structured interviews were undertaken to gain insight into SmartStart's ecosystem, which would highlight its transformative intentions and capability. In semi-structured interviews, an interview schedule containing questions was used as a guide to explore issues in an exploratory rather than systematic manner (Sharan, 2016: 110). Specifically, questions probed key issues, namely SmartStart's key success factors and challenges in achieving scale, its main income sources, its relationship with the state, and how SmartStart leaders envisage their own position in South Africa's welfare landscape as well as in the market economy. The questions guiding these interviews are detailed in Annexure A.

Impact studies about SmartStart already exist, and are discussed in Chapter 5. The focus in the interviews is therefore to explore the contributions of scalable social franchises in terms of realising a more comprehensive early learning and care regime, in relation to other pillars of market, state and family, and the possibility that still exists in a constrained fiscal environment. This interview process seeks to address sub-goal 3, namely to determine whether the SmartStart model can address the early learning deficit in a way that is transformative, and to explore what the model reveals about the possibility for social economy initiatives to scale operations and build partnerships, as well as their limitations, in relation to early learning.

Interviews took place over Zoom, a virtual communication platform, in order to mitigate the risk of exposure to Covid-19. During each interview, the process was explained, which included me introducing myself, explaining why the respondent had been identified, and the purpose of the study. Each person interviewed was required to sign an informed consent form prior to participation which was sent via email, alongside a preamble situating the research (Annexure E). The SmartStart leaders were informed that I would make notes, and I asked whether the interviews could be recorded by an audio device. Permission was granted by all SmartStart leaders to record interviews. Interviews ranged between 45 and 60 minutes long in length. SmartStart leaders were only interviewed once over the course of this research study.

### 2.5.3. Data storage

At the data collection stage, any data obtained through interviews was available to the me and my supervisor only. When I used the data, it was made secure through encryption and password protection of any files containing sensitive data. Translators or transcribers were not used. Measures have been taken to securely store the data for five years, as is legally required.

## 2.6. Data analysis

Data analysis and interpretation involves the breaking up of data into themes, patterns, trends and relationships (Mouton, 2001: 108). It involves the classification and interpretation of collected data in order to make statements about the meaning of the material and what is represented in it (Sharan *et al*, 2016: 195). Data analysis occurs sequentially in three stages: document analysis of government texts, comparative analysis of early learning franchises in the global South, and thematic analysis of the interviews held with the SmartStart leadership team. Each of these procedures are described in turn:

### 2.6.1. Document analysis

Document analysis is a “systematic procedure for reviewing and analysing documents” (Bowen, 2009: 27). According to Bowen (2009: 27), documents act as “social facts” as they are produced, shared and used in socially organised ways. For this reason, they are an interesting data source for research that focuses on different discourses in social context, and can provide insights different to interviews (Raffaelli, 2016: 166). In this research, document analysis is initially used in a literature review to characterise the importance of early learning globally, and in South Africa, as well as the different welfare regimes that exist globally which serve to unlock the potential returns to ECD. An analysis of policies, government speeches, and other literature serves to give a historical account of South African ECD policy and practice up until the present moment and the contemporary state of early learning, and considers the way in which ECD is framed in government texts and policies.

In this analysis, I aim to sketch the contested terrain of South Africa’s ECD landscape, with focus on early learning and care. Where social policy is palliative, gaps in terms of service delivery will persist, which makes an analysis of other agents serving to shift this status quo relevant. Therefore, attention in this analysis is also paid to how government policy and practice has shaped civil society, in order to better characterise its role as either a service delivery or advocacy agent. This analysis serves to be richly descriptive of South Africa’s

context, the ideologies shaping ECD approaches, and the barriers, such as fiscal constraints and lack of political will, that block an effective early learning provisioning system.

### 2.6.2. Comparative analysis using available literature

Thereafter, a comparative analysis considers SmartStart in relation to other early learning social franchises in the global South, namely aeioTU in Colombia and MC in India. Based on the information in published impact studies and reports, the comparative approach explores similarities and differences between these franchises, making use of thematic analysis (unpacked more deeply in the next Section). This data is analysed using an inductive and comparative strategy, as is the norm in qualitative research (Sharan *et al*, 2016). Text data is initially segmented, coded and grouped thematically (Creswell, 2014: 245). In this case, data is grouped into seven different themes, described and linked to the literature. Following this description, data is interpreted, by outlining the lessons learned from the thematic comparison. Meaning in this way is derived from the comparison of findings.

This analysis considers not only the barriers to government implementation in various countries but also the possibility that may still exist in the sector, based on work being done at a grassroots level. In this comparative analysis, focus is placed on the extent to which the social franchises are transformative and effective in their own contexts, the characteristics that may enable social franchises to shift the status quo, and the role of relationships with other sectors who have interest in ECD. This analysis serves to address sub-goal 2, and provides background information that comes to inform the close analysis of the South African government's approach to ECD and the interviews with SmartStart (i.e., the next part of analysis).

### 2.6.3. Thematic analysis of interview data

Finally, a thematic analysis of the primary interview data with SmartStart explores the possibility of civil society in early learning. This thematic analysis follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes in data. According to Braun and Clarke's (2006: 87) method, data is first made familiar through the actions of transcription, immersion, active reading and note-making (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 87). Secondly, transcriptions are segmented and coded (Creswell, 2014: 247). Thirdly, themes are generated from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 89). At this stage, it is important to start exploring the relationship between themes, and how they work together to make meaning out of the data in general (Braun and Clarke, 2012: 65). Fourthly, themes are reviewed, and, fifthly,

named and defined (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 91-92). From these themes, the research report is generated (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 93). Throughout this process, it is important to bear in mind that themes do not “emerge” – rather, they are generated, and the researcher plays an active role in the data generation and in identifying patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 80). At the data analysis stage, this thesis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006: 96) 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis which is detailed in Annexure B.

After data is described, it is interpreted using inductive analysis aiming to capture the complexities of meaning in this context. This inductive analysis of interview responses serves to identify whether SmartStart’s social franchise model offers possibilities within the current fiscal climate, and provides insight into key action areas for an effective early learning rollout. This data analysis also serves to outline what the SmartStart model reveals about the possibility for social economy initiatives to build partnerships between civil society, government and business, as well as their limitations in relation to early learning. It serves to identify key action areas and binding constraints that currently exist within the realm of early learning, in order to determine SmartStart’s transformative capability in the current system.

## 2.7. Trustworthiness of data: Triangulation

In qualitative research, the metrics for trustworthy data are credibility, consistency, and transferability (which compare to internal validity, reliability and external validity used in quantitative research) (Sharan *et al*, 2016: 242). Triangulation is often used as a technique to achieve credibility and consistency in research (Sharan *et al*, 2016: 243-251). It is important that studies are designed in a way that allows for a multidimensional perspective as well as rich and unbiased data (Thurmond, 2001: 253). Triangulation, which involves using two or more aspects of research to improve research design and the ability to interpret findings, makes findings more trustworthy and less likely to be biased (Thurmond, 2001: 253), allowing for the research objectives to be examined from more than one standpoint (Rembe, 2005: 102). Triangulation involves a combination of data sources, researchers, methodological approaches, theoretical perspectives and/or analytical approaches (Thurmond, 2001: 253).

Mixing qualitative methods for example allows for different perspectives that may otherwise be overlooked, to enhance study findings (Carter *et al*, 2014: 546). Similarly, data source triangulation, which involves collecting data from different people, allows the researcher to gain multiple perspectives and validate the data (Carter *et al*, 2014: 545). The benefit of using

any one of these types of triangulation is that it increases confidence in the data, provides innovative ways of understanding the subject of study, and may enable a better understanding of the research area (Thurmond, 2001: 254). Triangulation is especially important in qualitative research, where the subjective nature of research and the subjective position of the researcher are acknowledged (Thurmond, 2001: 255).

In this study, multiple triangulation, which involves more than one type of triangulation, is used. For this research, different sources of data (primary and secondary) and different methods of data collection (document analysis and interviews) serve to enhance the trustworthiness of the data, making use of both method triangulation and data source triangulation (Carter *et al*, 2014: 545). Furthermore, interviews with agents with different subject positions allows for different perspectives (constructions) of reality. Multiple triangulation, and the incorporation of various information sources, is important for this study as a reliance on interviews alone, which involved SmartStart's leadership team and were conducted at only one point in time, would be insufficient.

The last aspect of trustworthiness of qualitative data, transferability, occurs when findings can be applied to other situations (Sharan *et al*, 2016: 253). In qualitative research, which serves to find meaning in context-specific settings, generalisability is often near impossible (Sharan *et al*, 2016: 254). In this case, if individuals are able to make modest extrapolations from the findings to their own contexts, transferability is believed achieved (Sharan *et al*, 2016: 259). Transferability is enhanced when researchers make use of rich, thick descriptive processes, which provide enough description to contextualise the study and enable readers to determine the extent to which their situations may match the research context (Sharan *et al*, 2016: 259). In this study, the three-fold methodology contributed to a rich and thick description. Ultimately, the positioning of the South African context, the comparative analysis of SmartStart against other early learning franchises, and the in-depth case of SmartStart created a highly contextualised and descriptive picture that aids transferability.

Finally, with respect to transferability, it is important to note that I chose to examine three social franchises, aeioTU, Mobile Crèches, and SmartStart, and then explore SmartStart more deeply, not because I can assume that these are indicative of the rest, but instead so that I can use them to “take the temperature” (Raffaelli, 2016: 26) to characterise the role currently and potentially played by civil society organisations and social franchises. Rather than pretending a piece of research is representative of the whole social economy or civil society in general,

my contribution is to develop and revise economic conceptualisations about the possibility of civil society. While I cannot generalise directly, I can learn valuable, indirectly transferrable lessons by considering the complexity of the context-specific cases. Furthermore, even if these organisations are potentially exceptional, they are still a significant area of study due to their scale and potential catalytic role.

## 2.8. Ethical considerations

In any research study, it is important to ensure that the research does not harm those willing to participate in data generation (Oliver, 2010: 15). Researchers should protect the individuals they engage with within reasonable limits from any form of discomfort that may emerge from the data collection process and overall research study (Oliver, 2010: 15). Having recognised this ethical obligation, I put in place the following measures to protect SmartStart leaders. I assured potential participants that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point in the research process. SmartStart leaders were also assured that their identities and confidentiality would be protected as their insights would be anonymised and, in cases where generalised observations could not be drawn, pseudo-anonymised. SmartStart leaders were also informed about the anticipated means of disseminating the research findings, as well as the potential benefits and risks associated with this particular study.

Before any research took place, a full ethical protocol was served before the Rhodes Ethical Standards Committee. Annexure C shows the ethical approval obtained from the committee. Additionally, I obtained written institutional permission from SmartStart to undertake interviews with SmartStart leaders, the template for which is attached as Annexure D. A template of the consent form and accompanying information letter are attached as Annexure E.

## 2.9. Conclusion

This chapter presented a detailed description of research design and methodology. The qualitative approach and research paradigm was discussed, and justified as most appropriate. Thereafter, I described the research methods and sample selection process. I outlined the data collection process for the document analysis, comparative analysis and interviews. After this outline, I explained the data analysis process, namely thematic and systematic document analysis. Thereafter, I outlined the measures put in place to ensure that data analysis was trustworthy. Finally, this chapter included a discussion about the ethical procedures undertaken in this research. The following chapter turns to the conceptual framework for this thesis.

## CHAPTER 3 – CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1. Introduction

The 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) revealed that 78 percent of South African Grade 4 children could not read for meaning in any language (Howie *et al*, 2016). This upsetting statistic indicates that, while our focus on education (under)performance tends to be on the Grade 12 (final year) pass rate, more attention needs to be paid to the educational preparation children receive before Grade 4, and even before entering primary school. Economic attention has recently turned to the early years, largely as a result of Heckman's (2008) theory that investments in early learning yield greater returns than at any other level of education. Heckman (2008) argues that early learning specifically plays a key role in the development of human capital and knowledge generation. Furthermore, in contexts where women are expected be caregivers, childcare arrangements taking place outside the household may free up women's time, and enhance their labour market choices (Verick, 2014: 2). These services may boast social as well as economic returns: investments in early childhood education and care appear to have substantial social benefits and emancipatory potential, especially in terms of alleviating class and gender inequality (Heckman, 2008; Federici, 1975).

The potentially high rate of return associated with these services implies that market-led early learning and care provisioning strategies may be effective. Positive externalities, however, may lead to cases of market failure as profits cannot be entirely privately appropriated, especially in contexts where communities cannot pay for services rendered (Cornes and Sandler, 1986: 4). Firms may choose to direct their attention where private returns are higher, despite lower total returns, potentially worsening inequality (Evans and Heller, 2015: 707). Instead, Polanyi (1944) argues that markets need to be embedded in institutions to protect against market failure. In a context where market-led strategies may reproduce other forms of inequality (Lutz, 2017: 363), a post-Polanyian approach emphasises the role of social investment states, which focus spending on education and where social protection scaffolds markets, in this regard.

However, and in developing countries especially, problematic governments, constrained households and imperfect markets result in an overall welfare deficit (Wood and Gough, 2006: 1699). These countries face various barriers to achieving equitable early learning and care access. In the absence of a capable state, civil society organisations may be significant. Where states, markets and households are constrained, civil society, and the social economy therein,

may be able to innovate replicable and scalable models for early childhood education and care, potentially catalysing effective provisioning strategies by other actors (Pearce, 2006: 37). In contrast, other authors warn of a danger that this sector may be framed as a replacement to state service delivery, ultimately furthering the hollowing out of the public sector (Smith, 2010).

In this chapter, I outline the conceptual framework and literature review underpinning this thesis. Section 3.2 explores potential returns and externalities associated with early learning and care, paying attention to their impact on human capital generation and female labour force participation. Section 3.3 outlines ECD provisioning strategies, drawing on Esping Andersen's welfare regime typology. While high returns to early learning and care imply that markets may be sufficient providers, Section 3.4 considers the impact of market failures in this sector. This Section explores ways markets can be embedded in institutions to protect against market deficits. Thereafter, Section 3.5 details the ways social democratic states may underpin markets and households to provide comprehensive early learning and care. Section 3.6 turns to the international experience, considering empirical studies of ECD service delivery in various countries. In contexts where markets, states and households are constrained, and with all of Esping-Andersen's welfare pillars seemingly inadequate, Section 3.7 outlines what options may exist beyond this typology, with focus on civil society and the social economy.

## 3.2. The economic significance of early learning and care

### 3.2.1. Early learning

Chicago school economist Becker (2009: 13) demonstrates that education and training produce a rate of return to the individual, in a similar fashion as investments in physical capital. Some of this return is quantifiable: these investments enhance future job prospects and income (Becker, 2009: 13). For this reason, the contributors to human skills, notably education and healthcare, can be framed as a source of capital, termed human capital (Conley, 2010: 175).

Furthermore, returns to human capital are only partially excludable, meaning that there is incomplete appropriability of profit generated from human capital investment. David (2001: 62) emphasises that, when quality education is accessible, human capital grows, resulting not only in enhanced income prospects to the individual but also knowledge accumulation in society (David, 2001: 62). He argues that accumulated knowledge produces a positive externality where others can appropriate and build on an existing knowledge-base, creating

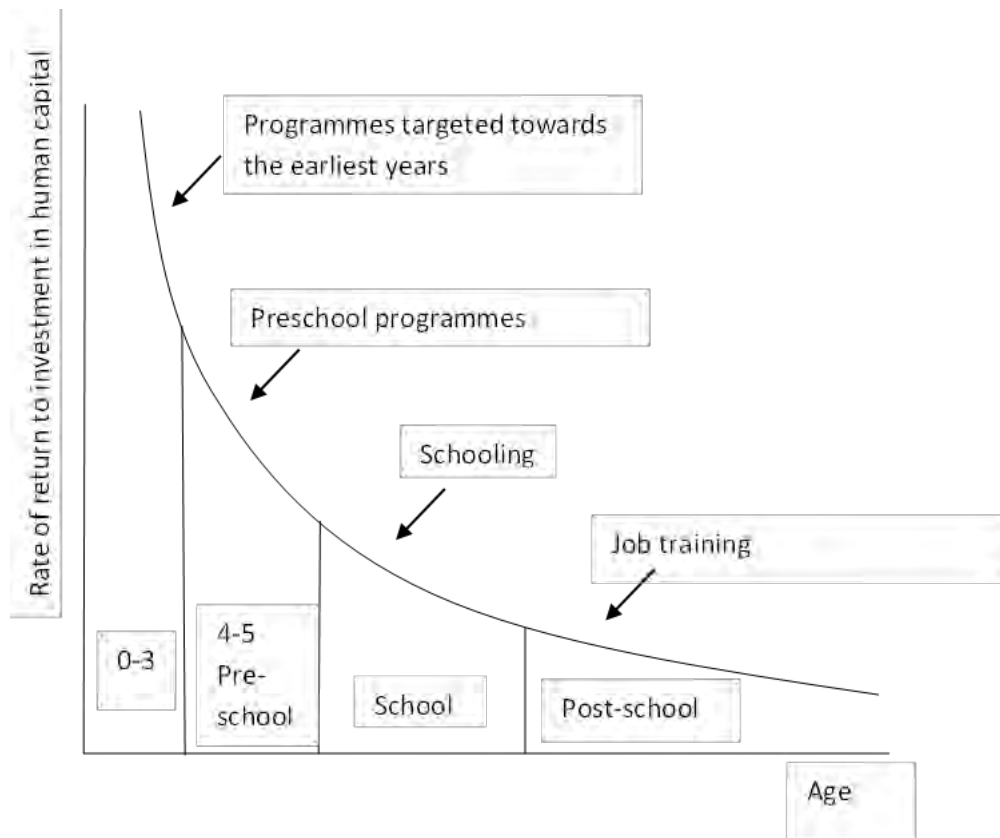
new innovations (David, 2001: 59). A consequent virtuous cycle of innovations contributes to dynamic, growing economies, to the benefit of society.

The externalities of knowledge accumulation are not just economic: the effect of a better educated population is broader, encompassing aspects like better public health and civic participation (Dee, 2004). Therefore, early learning programmes are significant in ensuring preparedness for twenty-first century knowledge economies, but also for moving towards knowledge democracies focused not only on building individuals' human capital but on the capabilities to build, transform and apply knowledge for human development for all (Hall, 2013: 6-7).

Heckman (2008) claims that the greatest return to investment in education and training is in the early years, or for children under six-years-old. According to Heckman (2008: 298), early investments in cognitive and non-cognitive (e.g., socioemotional) skills play an important role in determining future socioeconomic outcomes. Heckman *et al's* (2012: 2) longitudinal study, tracking individuals who previously participated in the Perry Preschool Program in the United States in comparison to a control group, found that those exposed to early learning environments experienced significant returns (Heckman *et al*, 2012: 2). The estimated social return to this programme, or return accrued to the individual (in terms of later advancement and income) as well as society at large (including the impact of the programme on crime, participation in welfare, and the resulting savings in social costs) is conservatively estimated at 10 percent (Heckman *et al*, 2012: 2).

This return that accrues to the children themselves, taxpayers, and the community, is greater than at other levels of education (Rea and Burton, 2020). This observation supports a theory of human capital intervention that is cumulative. Heckman (2008: 298) argues that early skill formation provides a platform for further skill accumulation because childhood is a highly influential time for human development, and the skills gained reduce the cost of subsequent investments as a result of dynamic complementarities.

Figure 2. 1 Total (social and private) return to a unit dollar invested at different ages, assuming one dollar initially invested at each age



Source: Heckman (2008: 312).

It appears that interventions targeted at the early years are also significant in reducing inequality (Heckman, 2008: 290). In addition, Heckman’s longitudinal study indicates that returns to early learning are greater when these interventions target children from disadvantaged communities (Heckman, 2011: 34). Where gaps in ability appear early, interventions that target the earliest years can be effective in reducing inequality overall, provided that interventions are of sufficient quality (Heckman, 2008: 312).

In economics, the goals of equity and efficiency in society are often positioned as a trade-off (i.e., mutually exclusive), where society needs to give up some of one goal to achieve more of the other (Heckman, 2011: 31). In this case, however, it appears that investment in early education may promote both fairness and efficiency (Heckman, 2011: 31). It is more costly to do nothing, and remediate children later in primary or high school, than it is to invest early (Heckman, 2008: 313). Therefore, Heckman *et al* (2012: 34) conclude that investment in early education is economically efficient *and* equitable. This analysis points toward significant positive externalities.

Authors have begun to empirically test the Heckman curve. Rea and Burton (2020) used data from the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, about the costs and benefits of interventions at various ages, to determine whether the return to human capital investment declines with age. Their analysis shows wide variation with no clear relationship between the age of the treatment group and the cost effectiveness of the intervention (Rea and Burton, 2020: 251). The authors conclude that the average benefit/cost ratio for children under five-years-old was not higher than older age groups (Rea and Burton, 2020: 254). These findings could be a result of more effective targeting, i.e., targeting vulnerable groups or individuals where there is risk proximity (such as targeting teenagers about issues like teenage pregnancy or substance abuse) (Rea and Burton, 2020: 256). Rea and Burton (2020: 256) however clearly state that results “do not imply that there should be less investment in early childhood programs” as many early learning interventions have positive rates of return and are a powerful equaliser. It is also important to note that benefit/cost ratios represent average rates of return, rather than the marginal rates of return depicted in the Heckman curve (Rea and Burton, 2020: 252).

Rosholm *et al* (2020) also tested for evidence of the Heckman curve in Denmark using a similar methodology to Rea and Burton (2020). These authors did find support for the Heckman curve: interventions in the early years had a positive impact and the benefit/cost ratio of interventions declined rapidly with age (Rosholm *et al*, 2020: 132). These findings are consistent with Heckman’s model of skill formation and contrast with the findings of Rea and Burton (2020) (Rosholm *et al*, 2020: 132). Based on the variance in empirical findings in the literature, Rosholm *et al* (2020: 134) hypothesise that the Heckman curve may act as a kind of production possibility frontier (PPF) showing the maximum attainable effect when interventions combine the “most effective ingredients”. High potential returns require quality interventions. Interventions of poor quality may do even more damage and further exacerbate inequality. Half-measures in the sector, which do not produce quality early learning outcomes, are likely to lead to failures, and may do more harm than good.

### 3.2.2. Childcare

Spending on early childhood education and care also has implications for female labour force participation, in turn affecting both economic efficiency and gender equality (another example where the efficiency-equity trade-off may not apply). Even the most advanced countries grapple with the issue of gender inequality in the labour market (Mosomi, 2019: 29). Although women’s participation in labour markets has risen globally, men continue to make up the larger

proportion of the labour force and are dominant in top managerial positions (Kimmel and Connelly, 2007: 643). In South Africa, this form of inequality remains pervasive: for virtually every age group, men spend more time in market work than women (Oosthuizen, 2018: 17).

Low female labour force participation (FLFP) rates are not adequately explained by models that assume labour market choices are a trade-off between paid labour and leisure. These models do not acknowledge the labour taking place within the household, or social reproduction that occurs before individuals are able to enter into the labour market in the first place (Messac, 2018). The reproduction, in addition to production, done by individuals is economically significant. Unpaid household production and care for children, the elderly or otherwise vulnerable are important contributors to welfare and economic output in all societies (Smith, 2019). Therefore, instead of a binary choice between leisure and labour, women often allocate time between home production, caregiving, leisure and paid work.

Both orthodox and heterodox economists have recognised the failure of previous models to account for this work and have replaced them with better frameworks. Becker's (1985: 33) time allocation model, often considered the centrepiece of the neoclassical model of the family (Berber, 2008: 9) indicates that women's disproportionate responsibility for effort- and time-intensive social reproduction means that they tend to spend less time in market work. According to this choice theoretic framework, if the products of social reproduction<sup>1</sup> are readily available on the market, once wage rates have reached a certain threshold, the substitution effect dictates that women will shift away from time-intensive social reproduction and towards paid labour (Verick, 2014: 2). In terms of opportunity cost, it becomes cheaper to obtain products of household production on the market (Verick, 2014: 2). Becker's (1985: 52) framework suggests that, due to changing opportunity cost, one would expect that women would substitute away from household labour and towards paid labour.

This substitution effect positively impacts female labour force participation (FLFP) (Önder and Alkan, 2019: 16). Conversely, the income effect dictates that women will work less in response to an increase in wage rate as they can obtain the same income for fewer hours worked (Önder and Alkan, 2019: 16). Empirical studies suggest that the substitution effect is usually dominant, indicating that higher wages, combined with the provision of the products of household production on the market, will result in higher FLFP (Önder and Alkan, 2019: 16). According

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<sup>1</sup> I.e., goods and services that limit the time women need to spend performing household labour, such as washing machines, ready-made food, and day care services

to this choice theoretic framework, changes in prices and income therefore come to explain women's labour market choices (Stigler and Becker, 1977: 89). Based on this model, Becker (1985: 43) concludes that the potential earnings of women are adversely affected by disproportionate household responsibilities. Furthermore, this framework is supported by the fact that countries enjoying higher levels of development (and, likely, higher wages) tend to also have high FLFP rates, likely illustrating the substitution effect occurring at a micro-level (Lechman and Kaur, 2015: 247).

Under this framework, markets may hold potential to expand women's economic choices. For orthodox economists, though open to the idea of market failures and the need for some public service provision, the market holds primacy in enhancing women's choices. When the products of social reproduction are made available on the market, women are able to choose whether to engage in time-intensive household production or enter into the labour market and pay for the products of social reproduction. In this scenario, markets are choice enhancers and price and wage changes lead to emancipatory demographic changes (Bernstein, 1999).

Becker's choice theoretic is powerful, as it conceptualises the evolution of the family as an economic institution (Berber, 2008: 9) and introduces the household as a site for economic analysis, making visible the important *economic* role of social reproduction (Doss, 2021: 2). This model, however, is based on the assumption that families are freely choosing, and that markets provide meaningful choices. This approach implicitly adopts a liberal view of markets and welfare provisioning. It assumes that, in the course of economic development, families will respond to market forces (most notably higher women's wages) and will be able to replace household production. This assumption indicates that the combination of markets and households offering the products of social reproduction is an adequate welfare (and care) source. However, this approach fails to consider the *political* and *social* factors at play, or the issues arising in cases of market failures and power differentials within households. These issues are explored more deeply in Section 3.4.

### 3.3. Esping-Andersen's welfare regimes

Overall, it appears that investments in early learning and care can act as significant economic and social enhancers, increasing human capital formation as well as FLFP. Both orthodox and heterodox economic analyses point towards positive externalities in this realm which, if internalised, can bring about economic returns. It is therefore worthwhile to consider various

early learning and care provisioning strategies that exist to unlock these returns. Becker's choice theoretic framework has already highlighted two early learning and care providers: households and markets. Esping-Andersen's (2002) welfare regime typology expands this framework. As outlined in the introduction, Esping-Andersen (2002) identifies three pillars, the family, market and *state*, which inform three welfare regime types. All welfare states are made up of a combination of these pillars, where each pillar is utilised to different extents.

Traditional family roles form the basis for the first regime type, the conservative welfare regime (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 11). Conservative welfare regimes, associated with continental Europe, support family networks by providing welfare services, emphasising the nuclear family structure of male breadwinner and female housewife (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 16). The state and family pillars are integral to this model which introduces employment-linked social insurances, guarantees, and a family wage for male breadwinners (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 16). Based on the assumption that society is organised into male-headed nuclear families, the family wage is a recognition that the male household head ought to be paid a wage sufficient to support children and a wife, who performs household labour, including childcare, without pay (Fraser, 1994: 591). The conservative welfare regime is especially relevant to a study of early learning and childcare provision as, traditionally, family networks are a dominant childcare form.

While conservative welfare regimes place primacy on the family pillar, it is important not to equate these two concepts. The family pillar is crucial in all societies. Conservative welfare regimes assume a certain kind of family confining women to a caregiving role and reinforcing a gender division of labour. This model may provide a safety net for traditional families, but may also hurt women's search for economic independence, families who do not conform to the nuclear model, and comes at a significant cost to the fiscus (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 16). Furthermore, the ability of the family pillar to absorb social problems and provide sufficient care is impaired when families themselves lack available caring capacity, especially if women want or are expected to participate in the economy (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 12).

A second regime type, the liberal welfare model reflects Esping-Andersen's market pillar, prioritising market solutions and minimal state welfare (where the state is residual) (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 11). Here, private provision of services is the norm to protect against welfare and care gaps emerging from family deficits, while public regulation exists in cases of acute market failure (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 15). Typical liberal welfare regimes are the United States and United Kingdom (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 15), but, as more middle-class women in

developed countries especially have joined the female labour force, many historically conservative welfare regimes have started outsourcing care from migrant workers (usually women) from developing countries (Fraser, 2012: 9). These welfare regimes have in turn morphed into hybrid ones that rely on migrant workers to underpin a *de facto* liberal regime. Both these intended and *de facto* liberal regimes tend to enjoy balanced public budgets (or at least allocate a smaller budget to welfare), but this regime structure may have second-order consequences (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 15). A market-led approach to services like early learning and care carries the danger of inequality emerging when low-income communities are unable to afford services and appear relegated to the status of “second-class welfare citizens” (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 16) This concern is more deeply explored in Section 3.4 below.

Finally, social democratic welfare regimes associated with Scandinavian countries reflect Esping-Andersen’s third welfare pillar, the state. In social democracies, the state pillar underpins market and family pillars to provide welfare. The preference for this configuration of welfare pillars reflects concern that the family and market offer inadequate welfare coverage and may exacerbate inequality (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 13). While supporting FLFP, this framing serves to strengthen families (by unburdening women of care obligations), enable greater independence, and activate citizens’ potential through social investment in human capital enablers like education. These states also invest in highly developed services for children, people with disabilities and the elderly (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 14). The state takes on primary responsibility to provide various forms of welfare, including ECD as these services are associated with a “double bonus”, enabling women to have children and employment, while maximising the labour force (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 14).

A concern with the social democratic model, however, is that it places significant pressure on the fiscus, and heavy tax requirements may put pressure on the middle classes (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 14). It may therefore be difficult to implement in contexts where the middle-class is relatively small, or where governments are committed to maintaining balanced budgets.

### 3.4. Correcting for market failures: Polanyian and post-Polanyian conceptions of the economy and embeddedness

Given the economic returns associated with early learning and care outlined in Section 3.2, Esping-Andersen’s second welfare pillar, the market, appears significant. Market-based approaches to early learning and care acknowledge gendered care work as paid work, which, to a certain extent, emancipates (wealthy) women from the oppression of gender roles and

enhances their labour market choices. For many liberal feminists, the market therefore holds promise as a platform for the emancipation of women from traditional family structures (Fraser, 2013: 221). Furthermore, market-based approaches appear well-suited as the externalities associated with early learning are potential economic returns.

There is, however, cause for concern. Early childhood education and care appears to act as a kind of public good, as it benefits children directly involved in these programmes but can simultaneously affect other groups, positively influencing women's labour market choices, and communities, and national development. Early learning and care therefore appear to have significant positive externalities, where returns cannot be entirely privately appropriated (Cornes and Sandler, 1986: 3). The nature of these services can lead to market failure, most notably an incentive problem where private suppliers undersupply the service when returns cannot be completely captured as profit (Cornes and Sandler, 1986: 4). Furthermore, market solutions presuppose that consumers have the ability to pay for substitutes for household production. This assumption is unlikely to prevail in poor families (whose children appear to benefit the most from ECD), where inequality, unemployment, and gender relations impact parents' ability to pay for services rendered.

Orthodox theory acknowledges market failures but also sees these as opportunities, provided businesses can find ways to internalise externalities (Graafland and Smid, 2004: 1). Supporters of market-based strategies, often falling under the term Corporate Social Investment (CSI), argue that firms benefit by operating with a long-term perspective, where sustainable social and ecological development provides an environment conducive to profit maximisation (Campbell, 2012: 139). In cases where positive externalities exist (e.g., ECD), market-based strategies may provide a "win-win" scenario – profit-maximising markets should, in the long run, not only maximise shareholder value but also bring about other important development outcomes (Austin, 2019: 47).

This focus, however, ignores the fact that the ultimate role of firms is often to maximise profit in the short term, to enhance shareholder value (Campbell, 2012: 139). Markets may undersupply public goods, especially in contexts where social returns are higher than private returns (such as ECD) as firms are more likely to channel investment where total returns may be lower but private returns are higher (Evans and Heller, 2015: 707). The prioritisation of profit-maximisation where businesses seek the greatest possible returns for investors in the short run, as well as the incompleteness of profit calculations – which often fail to capture both

positive and negative externalities – indicates that markets, while valuable, are limited in bringing about social outcomes (Austin, 2019: 53). There are many things of immense human value that markets fail to conceptualise, and the market encompasses only a portion of the productive activity undertaken by individuals and families (Austin, 2019: 53).

One must also be wary of claims that markets providing childcare in isolation act as choice enhancers for women. Becker’s choice theoretic model outlined in Section 3.2 faces pitfalls as a result of its underlying assumptions. Becker models individuals in the family as rational actors who make choices based on income and utility maximisation (Berber, 2008: 10). The assumption is that individuals in households are sufficiently independent, enabling them to make decisions, with the market acting as a choice enabler. Furthermore, the family assumed in Becker’s model is nuclear, excluding alternative family arrangements (Doss, 2021: 5). Finally, this choice theoretic, with its focus on the individual, neglects to account for the social context of families, the power relations and inequality embedded therein, and the complex web of relationships in communities that ultimately lead to interdependent, rather than independent, decision making (Doss, 2021: 10). In South Africa, where nuclear family structure are not necessarily the norm or where the variety of household arrangements in various social contexts is “especially striking”, these considerations are significant (Rabe and Naidoo, 2015: 2).

While the substitution effect does account for the general increase in FLFP rates, it does not explain why these rates have not risen to equal men’s participation in the economy. Furthermore, it cannot explain the variation in FLFP for countries with the same level of economic development and similar wage rates: low-income countries in East Asia have a large female labour force compared to low-income countries in South Asia (Klasen, 2019: 170). In middle-income developing countries in East Asia and Central Europe, FLFP has actually started to fall at the same time as fertility declines and education expands (Klasen, 2019: 171). A World Economic Forum report considering the gender equality index of 149 countries found that six of the 49 countries in the highest income group exhibited lower levels of gender equity than seven of the 19 countries classified as lowest income countries (Kabeer, 2016: 38).

Rather, women’s low (and varying) participation rates are also a reflection of inequality manifesting from within traditional family structures, where women bear the disproportionate burden of social reproduction and care (Kimmel and Connelly, 2007: 643). Social reproduction has historically been characterised as a natural attribute of the female character or as an “act of love”, meaning that it has not been valued as labour (Federici, 1975: 11). Indeed, care for

children (and others in society) cannot simply be described as motivated and coordinated by a supply-demand-price mechanism: care is often undertaken out of love, a sense of reciprocity, or as a result of societal (and gendered) expectations, norms and beliefs (Donath, 2000: 117).

For this reason, Doss (2021: 1) argues that it is important to move away from the focus on the narrow definition of the household and towards a conception that highlights how communities, social norms and structural constraints may influence the nature of labour market participation. Often, women's engagement in the labour force is not a choice between domestic and paid labour but is a result of being pinched at both ends – women are faced with the simultaneous tasks of engaging in social reproduction and paid work to provide for their families (Klasen, 2019: 187). This form of labour is not a reflection of women's economic empowerment, representing a dilemma and a case of market failure rather than a choice. The nature of female labour force participation may be harmful rather than empowering, and represents a dilemma imposed by various structural constraints and power relations rather than rational choice.

In this case, markets by themselves function not as a mechanism for the expansion of choice but reinforce unequal power systems. In light of this conception, increasing FLFP in a gender equitable way requires more than better wages and market-provided childcare. In attempts to enhance women's labour market choices, it seems that policy makers and interested groups cannot ignore traditional family structures and the sexual division of labour. Social policy may work to enhance choices, by making individuals more resilient and independent. Often, these kinds of policy reforms are not only a result of the evolution of government thinking, but also a result of the voices of civil society organisations and advocacy groups.

In addition, as conservative regimes have morphed into *de facto* liberal ones, many migrant women from developing countries leave their children behind to perform care work in developed countries, creating a "care gap" (Lutz, 2017: 363). Care gaps are not limited to this case: in South Africa, many poor women leave their children behind and travel long distances from rural areas or townships on city outskirts to suburbs to perform domestic work in the homes of middle- and upper-class families (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 8). Furthermore, for many women and children, especially those in developing countries but also for those coming from disadvantaged communities in developed countries, early learning and care services provided by the market remain largely inaccessible and inadequate. The resulting inequality is cause for concern, especially given Heckman's (2008) observation that early learning programmes tend to benefit disadvantaged communities the most.

The prevalence of market failures, lack of sufficient supply of public goods, and corresponding class and gender inequality, calls into question the ability of markets operating in isolation to bring about universal ECD access and highlights the danger of shifting collective responsibility for social wellbeing onto markets (Mendell, 1989: 474). Instead of a singular focus on markets, Polanyi (1977: 10) defines a human or substantive economy as the way in which humans meet their needs and an essential component of any society. Polanyi (1944: 57) observed that, throughout history, economic systems were organised according to three principles which reflect Esping-Andersen's regime typology: reciprocity (represented by the family), redistribution (represented by the state) and exchange (represented by the market). Study of the economy should therefore include both market and nonmarket activities; economic life is the totality of relations and institutions that goes beyond market transactions.

This definition echoes feminist institutionalist perspectives describing the economy as a means of social provisioning, organised through social relationships, history and institutions (Waller and Wren, 2021: 59). Feminist institutionalists<sup>1</sup> put forward a version of the economy not as an amalgamation of rational maximisers but a means of provisioning organised through relationships, history and institutions, and embedded in social norms and power structures (Waller and Wren, 2021: 59). This definition embraces the interdependence of institutions and agents, where individuals exist not as atoms but in relationships and connections. In contrast, Polanyi claims that the market, or supply-demand-price mechanism, is a comparatively modern mechanism of exchange (Polanyi, 1977: 10). This distinction prompts Polanyi's (1977: 10) warning of the danger of an economistic fallacy. The economistic fallacy refers to the conflation of the entire economy with the market, which sidelines the human relations of production, and the political and social aspects of resource distribution in societies (Polanyi, 1977: 10-16). Indeed, markets themselves are not naturally occurring but are institutions socially constructed by humans (Polanyi, 1977: 10).

Polanyi (1977: 13) claims that an exclusive focus on the market requires that land, labour and money are made into fictitious commodities. He claims that land, labour and money are *fictitious* commodities because they were not originally produced for the market: labour is human activity that goes with life, land refers to one's environment and is not produced by

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<sup>1</sup> Here, it is important to acknowledge that feminist scholarship is not monolithic. As stated earlier in this Chapter, liberal feminists generally work within the neoliberal paradigm, perceiving the market as a significant tool for women's liberation. In contrast, feminist institutionalists tend to be wary of *laissez-faire* approaches and critical of neoliberalism.

humans, and money is a token of purchasing power not produced at all (Polanyi, 1944: 72). Yet markets for these fictitious commodities have come into being, in a similar fashion to those of actual commodities produced with the input of capital, land and money (Polanyi, 1977: 13). A theory of market self-regulation rests on the pretence of a supply-demand-price mechanism for these fictitious commodities (Block, 2003: 281).

Writing in the 1930s, a time of social, environmental and economic turmoil, Polanyi (1944: 71) pinpoints fictitious commodification as the site of contradiction between the capitalist economy with its surroundings. Polanyi (1944: 71) argues that complete economic commodification of fictitious commodities, which neglects their social and ecological character, may destroy them or make them unusable. By treating these items as mere factors of production, we open them up to overexploitation and encroach on their natural limits, degrading them and jeopardising their operations (Fraser, 2014: 543). Polanyi therefore identifies the over-commodification of these items as the way in which capitalism destabilises its own conditions of possibility.

This argument marks the point where Polanyi diverges from liberal economists and Marxists, who both assume that there exists an autonomous economy with its own internal logic (Block, 2003: 282). Polanyi instead indicates that the idea of the self-regulating market appears as a utopia or impossibility as subordinating fictitious commodities to the market in this way “destroys society” or leads to economic collapse (Block, 2003: 282). Polanyi’s argument indicates that the market economy cannot exist independently but must rely on some nonmarket institution to manage the supply and demand of fictitious commodities, or any commodity with high social returns that cannot be entirely privately appropriated (Block, 2003: 282). Without this regulation, capitalism undermines its own conditions of possibility. To protect against market failures, Polanyi (1944: 71) claims that markets need to be embedded in regulatory institutions. Polanyi (1944: 70) argues that markets are part of society and cannot work without structures and protections from various crises. It seems that Polanyi’s initial conceptualisation of this social protection was a socialist alternative to marketisation (Holmes, 2012: 481).

Polanyi’s framework of embeddedness, highlighting the important role of institutions like the state in protecting against market failure, is useful for this thesis. There are, however, blind spots emerging from this conceptualisation that require revision. Two significant issues arise from Polanyi’s positioning of “bad economy” (the unfettered market) in opposition to “good society” (the Marxist alternative), and the dualism thus created (Fraser, 2012: 5). Firstly, this

dualism of “bad economy” and “good society” neglects forms of domination within societal structures (Fraser, 2012: 5). By focusing specifically on the market, Polanyi fails to account for the structures of domination within society responsible for the gender division of labour (Fraser, 2012: 8). Polanyi’s uncritical conception of this good society unwittingly reflects conservative ideas which romanticise traditional family values, while failing to interrogate unjust hierarchies embedded in societal structures.

Fraser (2012) serves to remedy this blind spot. She argues that the construction of labour as a commodity in capitalist society is dependent on the simultaneous construction of care work as a non-commodity (Fraser, 2012: 9). Social reproduction in terms of childcare has not been depicted as a form of labour but has instead been conceived of as an infinite resource to be exploited for economic gain, often going unrecognised and unpaid (Bauhardt, 2014: 61). This care work, including childcare and early learning, enables the protection and reproduction of the supply of monetised labour. Fraser (2016: 101) argues that social reproduction historically externalised by economies has formed one of the background conditions of possibility for capitalism (Fraser, 2016: 101). Care or affective labour, often depicted as a non-commodity, has sustained capitalism’s human subjects, and enabled the continuation of its inputs (Fraser, 2016: 101). In this case, the commodification of care is not altogether bad, as it pays recognition to the economic value that this activity brings. A focus on *embedding* rather than *decommodifying* care may therefore be more appropriate for this thesis.

A second issue with Polanyi’s framework is his initial championing of a Marxist alternative, which, according to Holmes (2012: 473), is positioned uncritically as a form of “ideal” society. These anti-market and pro-society sentiments are, however, simplistic, ignoring the benefits that markets have provided to people which Polanyi did later acknowledge in his writing (Holmes, 2012: 477). Furthermore, top-down, authoritarian socialist approaches mean that markets are never benignly re-embedded—rather, labour and land often continue to be treated as market commodities and continue to be overexploited (Sandbrook, 2011: 417).

A post-Polanyian approach aims to move beyond this misconception (Holmes, 2012: 479). This approach is optimistic about the state, but does not see the state as taking the place of the market or the family. Often Polanyi appears to assume that movements advocating for social protection and for market efficiency act as two opposing forces (Block, 2003: 295). However, social protection need not exist in opposition to market efficiency, but could act to support markets and protect against market failure. This idea is reflected in Polanyi’s later writing as

he recognises that those advocating for social protection were not necessarily opponents of market society but could be its “strongest adherents” (Block, 2003: 296). Rather, a post-Polanyian framework may exhibit a sense of Keynesian optimism in a mixed market economy, where markets, states and other structures complement one another (Holmes, 2012: 481). Even Polanyi, disillusioned with modernity, began to explore pre-modern forms of embeddedness, or the potential for other social groupings to re-embed markets in society (Holmes, 2012: 481).

While the degree of state intervention may differ from one thinker to the next, an embedded economic system can be conceived of as one where the state mediates between the national and international economy, where there is social and political regulation of the market, through social legislation, and collective bargaining over the remuneration of labour (Dale, 2010: 371-372). This model represents a systems approach, recognising that our lives exist amid a complex web of interactions beyond first-order market exchanges (Austin, 2019: 61). In particular, it seems that social democratic models hold potential to resolve the contradiction between market efficiency and social equity (Sandbrook, 2011: 417). Under this framework, social protection is not pitted against markets but is in place to “rescue the market from itself” or protect against market failure (Estevez-Abe *et al*, 2001: 145). State intervention becomes about more than correcting for externalities but about maintaining the functioning of the market economy itself (Mendell, 1989: 473). A mix of state and market is key to achieving societal goals as states may be able to allocate resources where the private sector fails to bring about sufficient supply (Cornes and Sandler, 1986: 10).

### 3.5. Social democracy and its challenges

#### 3.5.1 Social democracy and social investment

Social democratic states appear suited to bring about this kind of embeddedness where markets and states are complementary in driving development. This idea relates to Section 3.2 which indicates that, with respect to early learning, there may not be a trade-off between efficiency and equity – social spending on early learning is an investment with high returns. Burger (2014: 3) describes Scandinavian social democracies as social investment states. In these states, governments take responsibility for care, education, training and life-long learning (Burger, 2014: 4). These states focus spending not on transfers (or merely correcting for acute market failures) but on investment in education, health, and freeing up time to work, to enhance productivity and economic growth (Burger, 2014: 4). This strategy seeks to integrate the social and economic, to bring about efficient *and* equitable outcomes (Conley, 2010: 175). According

to Burger (2014: 4), high levels of fiscal spending are justified on the grounds that social investment in citizens should increase the tax base to bring about fiscal sustainability.

Amartya Sen's capabilities approach (1999 or earlier work with Nussbaum) which expands the definition of development beyond economic wellbeing, resonates with social investment state theory. Sen claims that GDP and economic growth should not be the primary indicator of development, and instead conceptualises development as freedom (Sen, 2017: 357). Freedom, according to Sen, can only be achieved through the extension of human capabilities, or the combinations of functionings that an individual can achieve (Sen, 2017: 357). This expansion of capabilities is not only the end of development, enabling individuals the freedom to pursue what they find most valuable, but is also a means towards development as increasing capabilities brings about higher levels of human capital that can drive growth in society (Engle, 2010: 18). Freedom is thus both instrumental and constitutive (Engle, 2010: 18). The capabilities approach complements the recognition in developmental state literature that countries now need to compete in a globalised knowledge economy, and so need an adaptable and educated labour force (Perkins *et al*, 2004: 2). Economists have theorised that ideas may be the new driver of growth, or increasing returns sector, making human capital more significant than physical capital (Evans and Heller, 2015: 695).

Under the social investment state approach, the state is framed not as a lender of last resort in the case of acute market failure, but as an entrepreneur and investor of first resort, to bring about meaningful economic outcomes (Mazzucato, 2011: 50). While the market is conceived of as useful, it is no longer framed as the most effective tool for organising society (Perkins *et al*, 2004: 2). Rather, there is a need for state economic intervention and social programmes (Perkins *et al*, 2004: 2). The government still relies on the market but seeks to modify inequitable or inefficient market outcomes (Perkins *et al*, 2004: 4-6). Social policy is no longer framed as consumption but as the most significant investment in capabilities, and welfare and development become intertwined (Perkins *et al*, 2004: 3). Childcare is no longer merely welfare for mothers, but is a means of investing in economic development. Economic development and equity become intertwined, rather than being framed as opposites.

It is not only the state that has a larger role under this model. The social investment approach calls for a widening and deepening of democracy, and broad-based embeddedness (Giddens, 1998: 69). Embeddedness is not imposed by states from the top-down but requires multiple stakeholders such as an active civil society that can work in partnership with the state (Giddens,

1998: 79). Democratisation can therefore connect with local community development in a way that makes citizens feel connected to their governments (Giddens, 1998: 85). Evans and Heller (2015) argue that state-society ties are integral to twenty-first century developmental states, and that there is a need for civil society, especially in sectors with high social returns. Polanyi conceived of society (and social protection) as a countervailing force to the market, but it may also act as a countervailing force to the deficits of democracy, in contexts of government failure (Evans and Heller, 2015: 697). Indeed, a broad-based and democratic embeddedness allows for the coordination of various groups and may translate into capability enhancement, and protect against policy drift (Evans and Heller, 2015: 708). Evans and Heller (2015: 698) claim that there is a significant link between an active civil society and national development.

The emphasis of the social investment state is therefore not only on human capital but also on social capital found in community groups (Giddens, 1998: 110). Social capital refers to the organisational features of social and economic life, and wealth-producing potential that comes from collective association (Skidmore, 2001: 57). Features of social organisation, such as trust, norms, networks and reciprocity, improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordination (Putnam, 2002: 8). Social capital can therefore be used to incentivise and coordinate collective action (Skidmore, 2001: 71). These features indicate that community problems may be solved by strengthening networks of solidarity among citizens (Putnam, 2002: 4).

Sweden in particular is known for its productivist and preventative social policy that enables human capital growth (Perkins *et al*, 2004: 2). Many of Sweden's policies were not initially informed by ideology but by pragmatism. Esping-Andersen (2013) claims that the twentieth century evolution of the Swedish regime was based on an emphasis on reform rather than revolution or redistribution. This reform, which came about through broad coalitions, compromise with imperfect partners and collective action, did not impact those at the top very much but served to raise those from the bottom to the middle (Esping-Andersen, 2013).

Reform from the bottom up is related to the idea of making the personal political, and can be framed as another kind of revolution at point zero focused on transforming family trajectories. Traditional Marxian theory of power and oppression starts at the general (history and economy) and the object (capitalism), which in turn comes to produce the historical subject, the working class (male). Feminist scholars instead start at the subject level, indicating that power hierarchies and political change starts at the level of the self (Hartsock, 1998). Change of the self and social relations is integral for any liberation, and emancipation must pervade aspects

of life not considered politically important in the past (Hartsock, 1998). This pragmatic approach may have radical consequences: it attacks one of the largest forms of inequality arising from the unequal household burden and differential early learning access (Esping-Andersen, 2013). These pragmatic measures have restructured social relations in Sweden, where class distinctions and the gender binaries are less relevant in dictating individuals' roles.

### 3.5.2. The challenge of neoliberalism

Many developed and developing countries, however, face challenges when it comes to implementing the social investment state approach, in terms of material constraints but also in terms of *competing ideologies*. From the 1970s, it appears that there has been another attempt to embed markets from the top-down using a different conceptual framework: neoliberalism (Best, 2003: 373). This framework, what Chang (2002: 540) refers to as an “unholy alliance” between neoclassical economics and the Austrian-libertarian tradition, separates societies into economic and political spheres (Williams and Taylor, 2000: 22).

Williams and Taylor (2000:22) argue that this separation is not neutral: based on neoclassical assumptions, economic activity is expected to conform to a certain rationality, and made autonomous from the state. While there is recognition that some market failures exist and hence the need for a residual state, state failures, such as regulatory capture and corruption, are portrayed as more dangerous (Chang, 2002: 540). From this perspective, many problems can be solved by experts who apply technical and socially-neutral solutions to societal issues (Williams and Taylor, 2000: 22). The economy is depoliticised, and the scope of the state restricted (Chang, 2002: 549).

Just as Polanyi's bad market/good society binary is simplistic and potentially dangerous, the artificial separation of market and state under neoliberalism represents another kind of treacherous dualism. Neoliberal thinking is based on a distinction between state and family, established by 17<sup>th</sup> century liberal political thought – with the former conceptualised as public and the latter as private (Waller and Wren, 2021: 55). Secondly, it is based on the separation of the sphere of production and the sphere of reproduction, or the separation of the economy and the family as a result of 19<sup>th</sup> century economic thought (Waller and Wren, 2021: 55). The establishment of these dualisms laid the groundwork for *laissez-faire* thought, and the isolation of the economic sphere from both the state and family (Waller and Wren, 2021: 56).

While Polanyi's economistic fallacy and utopia of the self-regulating market described the industrial economies of early twentieth century Europe, this conception appears applicable again when considering neoliberalism (Crouch, 2011). Based on the assumption that the market is an efficient allocator, neoliberal policy prescriptions entail rolling back the state in favour of market solutions to service delivery, with emphasis placed on creating an environment conducive to market activity and reducing state spending (Williams and Taylor, 2000: 23). Williams and Taylor (2000: 23) argue that the consequence of the imposition of market solutions to fundamentally political problems of resource distribution is the maintenance of unequal status quos. Furthermore, in many ways the project of neoliberal embedding was contradictory: dismantling welfare regimes often meant that many hybrid systems had to emerge to protect a supposedly self-regulating market from its own destructive tendencies (Best, 2003: 364).

Though often incomplete and contradictory, neoliberal frameworks have implications for public investment in early learning and care, and capturing of positive externalities associated with this sector. Chang (2002: 541) argues that in the neoliberal view, significant government expenditure and budget deficits are inefficient, creating inflationary pressures and crowding out private investment spending. Fiscal restraint is therefore regarded as important. However, patterns of expenditure reduction may damage living standards and compromise long term economic activity (Chang, 2002: 542). According to Chang (2002: 543), expenditure cuts usually take the form of health and education spending, including spending on early learning, meaning that the returns to these human capital investments are not likely to be realised.

### 3.5.3. Challenges for developing countries: Transfer welfare states, informal security regimes, insecurity regimes

In addition to the global influence of neoliberalism, developing countries face other barriers to adopting social investment approaches. Burger (2014: 6) claims that social investment states like Sweden exist in contrast to less desirable transfer welfare states which have a larger component of passive social transfers over human capability generating investment (Burger, 2014: 6). Burger (2014: 6) argues that this expenditure is not as effective in improving productivity, as it fails to build human capabilities (Burger, 2014: 6). Rather, these social protections are primarily *ad hoc* benefits to citizens, subject to means-testing and limited by budget constraints (Lavinias, 2013: 5-6). A key example of these protections is Conditional Transfer Programmes (CCTs) which are state provided and means-tested monetary benefits (Lavinias, 2013: 5). Lavinias (2013: 32) argues that these programmes are a way of sidestepping

a shift towards a more committed welfare state, directing social spending to transfers rather than providing public goods and human capital enhancing services. According to Lavinas (2013: 38-40), this downsized mode of social protection, though with some benefits, is less impactful than universal social protection systems, such as those found in Scandinavian states.

Many developing countries, where lack of state capacity or lack of political will limits effective state-led human capital generation, tend to fall under this less desirable transfer welfare state category. Municipal governments in particular face limitations, including fiscal challenges, inadequate institutional capacity and corruption, and the persisting influence of neoliberalism, which impact service delivery (Linnay, 2013: 27). As discussed in Chapter 1, Wood and Gough (2006) argue that, if we turn our attention away from Esping-Andersen's welfare regimes of the global North, we find different structures in the global South, which experience problematic governments, imperfect markets and constrained households. In these scenarios, we often do not find coherent welfare regimes but informal security regimes with a heavy reliance on community networks to mitigate a welfare deficit, or, even worse, insecurity regimes where an acute welfare failure exists (Wood and Gough, 2006: 1699).

In informal security regimes, community organisations are often the only available source of welfare (Wood and Gough, 2006: 1702). Many low-income communities struggling to access early learning and care rely on uncoordinated NGOs or extended family networks (de Henau *et al*, 2019: 4). Therefore, there is a lack of coordinated childcare provision across many countries, constraining developmental potential and failing to resolve the dilemma faced by many primary caregivers (Neuman and Okeng'o, 2019: 224).

### 3.6. Lessons from the international experience

Given these various manifestations entailing different modes of ECD service delivery – conservative, liberal and social democratic regimes, social investment and social transfer states, and informal security and insecurity regimes – lessons can be drawn from the international experience. A first example comes from Scandinavia, the classic social democracies and social investment states (Burger, 2014: 6). Here, the focus placed on ECD is not just a result of potential economic returns but is also because of a framework prioritising children's rights, gender equality and the inclusion of marginalised groups (White and Friendly, 2012: 293). Both social protection and social investment are significant, and the emphasis is on rights, citizenship and social cohesion, as much as it is on productivity and investment.

Sweden is the world's leader in terms of access to early childhood education and care (Nilsson *et al*, 2015). ECD centres are state sponsored, and expanded in the 1980s on the grounds that preschools hold potential to enhance social, economic and national development (Nilsson *et al*, 2015). In 1996, the ECD mandate was moved to the Ministry of Education and, in the following years, an integrated model made early learning compulsory and publicly funded (White and Friendly, 2012: 296). In Sweden, all children have the right to ECD from age one and free early learning services of 15 hours per week from age three (UNESCO, 2021: 4). Almost 100 percent of three- to six-year-olds are in preschool (Nilsson *et al*, 2015). Generally, studies indicate that Swedish ECD provision has been met with positive learning outcomes in children (Del Boca, 2015: 21; Naumann, 2011: 50). In addition, in an estimation of the effect of childcare on health outcomes in Sweden in particular, Aalto *et al* (2019: 36) indicate that childcare provision to disadvantaged groups leads to the positive externality of improved health outcomes in children. As early as 2008, Sweden had met all ten of UNICEF's benchmarks or standards for ECCE for advanced countries: paid parental leave, a national plan prioritising disadvantaged children, childcare, education access for four-year-olds, staff training, higher level education for practitioners, minimum staff-to-children ratio, *public funding (at least 1 percent of GDP)*, a low level of child poverty, and outreach to disadvantaged communities (UNICEF, 2008: 15).

Scandinavian countries have implemented care policies: maternity- and paternity-leave, childcare services and homecare allowances, where those engaging in household production are paid for their services, assigning a monetary value to this production (Borchorst, 2009: 33). These states have provided funding for childcare for a number of years (Borchorst, 2009: 35). Likely in part due to these policies, Scandinavian countries have one of the largest female workforces the world, with a FLFP rate of up to 70 percent (Del Boca, 2015: 3).

ECD also attracts policy attention in liberal welfare regimes, although the ECD budget allocations of these states are nowhere near those of their Nordic counterparts (White and Friendly, 2012: 293). The focus on ECD from liberal welfare states appears primarily a result of the desire to improve human capital development, and the economic returns associated with this investment (White and Friendly, 2012: 2012: 293). White and Friendly (2012) analyse ECD service delivery in a variety of liberal welfare states, such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States and the province of Quebec in Canada. This analysis indicates that there has been an expansion of ECD programmes in these countries, and that they experience high enrolment rates. While these countries have started allocating more public funding to these programmes,

their ECD landscapes tend to be dominated by the (sometimes subsidised) private sector (White and Friendly, 2012: 294). An issue with this approach is the fact that a vast range of actors operate in this space, making it difficult to regulate quality, or ensure that children from low-income backgrounds experience sufficient access and value (White and Friendly, 2012).

This issue could account for the fact that, in the developed world, liberal welfare states tend to perform poorly on quality and access benchmarks compared to other OECD countries (White and Friendly, 2012: 296). A UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre report (2008) scored OECD countries according to ten quantifiable benchmarks for ECD quality and access (see: page 45) (White and Friendly, 2012: 296). The Nordic states and France scored the highest (with Sweden meeting all 10 benchmarks). In contrast, with the exception of New Zealand and the United Kingdom, the liberal welfare states sampled by White and Friendly (2012: 296) scored at the bottom of 25 OECD countries.

Like social democratic and liberal welfare regimes, countries in continental Europe or the historically conservative welfare regimes have seen an increase in ECD enrolment. In Germany, for example, family policies have been reformed as a result of a recognition of the role ECD can play in improving human capital formation and providing mothers with more and better opportunities to re-enter the workforce (Seeleib-Kaiser, 2016: 233). Germany allocates significant resources to ECD, and annual expenditure per child in early learning and childcare is above the OECD average (OECD, 2016). This positioning and budget allocation appears the likely reason Germany enjoys extensive access to early learning services with participation for three- to five-year-olds at 97 percent (above the OECD average of 84 percent) (OECD, 2016).

However, access in many conservative regimes remains constrained by societal attitudes. Szabó-Morvai and Lovász (2019: 1158) note that negative societal attitudes towards ECD and the childcare element in particular persist in conservative regimes, indicating that concerns around the effect of public childcare on children and families remains an impediment to its implementation (Szabó-Morvai and Lovász, 2019: 1158). These concerns appear primarily a conservative reaction to the supposed erosion of traditional family values rather than a reflection of the quality of ECD services themselves (Szabó-Morvai and Lovász, 2019: 1158).

In the global South, ECD deficits become more apparent. There has been a small increase in ECD policy legislation and interest, likely as a result of the establishment of the United

Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. Target 4.2 under SDG 4 calls for all children to have access to ECD, care and pre-primary education (United Nations, 2015). However, many countries continue to overlook ECD as a developmental issue: only about 70 countries globally have some form of national ECD/ECCE policy or implementation plan (UNICEF, 2020a: 11). Among low- and middle-income countries, fewer than two in three children attend any form of organised learning prior to primary school (UNESCO, 2021: 3). Furthermore, the effectiveness of ensuring access outside of high-income countries is weak (McCoy *et al*, 2017: 482). In middle- and low-income countries, the ECD landscape tends to be marked by inequity, uneven access and variation (McCoy *et al*, 2017: 483). Furthermore, the average participation gap between the richest and poorest quintiles is 48 percentage points (UNESCO, 2021: 3).

There are some success stories in the developing world. Many South American countries have high ECD participation rates and were among the first to introduce ECD policy (UNESCO, 2021: 3). In terms of population-level access, however, there is huge variation between countries, with certain countries, such as Chile, Brazil, and Mexico, boasting over 90 percent enrolment rates in ECCE for children aged three to five, while others have enrolment rates below 60 percent (Mello and Pinazza, 2020: 373). Another problem associated with ECCE policy in South America is the issue of segmentation (Guevara and Cardini, 2021). There is a need for a systematic and integrated approach to ECCE, and a holistic integration of both education and care components to support development, wellbeing and learning (Guevara and Cardini, 2021: 3). However, governance of ECCE is often split between education and social development departments (Guevara and Cardini, 2021: 7). Service fragmentation may mean that children access care but not early learning or vice versa, and the integral relationship between care and learning is dichotomised (Guevara and Cardini, 2021: 8).

There is growing recognition of the positive impact of early learning and care in South American developing countries. Attanasio *et al* (2017: ii) used a randomised control trial study to investigate the impact of freely available childcare on child development and FLFP of those living in slums in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2017: ii). Rio de Janeiro does have a public day care programme for children aged younger than three-years-old available to those in low-income neighbourhoods, including not only supervision of children but also health services, food and the provision of instructional materials for children (Attanasio *et al*, 2017: ii). The study found that access to day care increased FLFP not only of mothers but also of grandparents who often

bear childcare responsibilities (Attanasio *et al*, 2017: ii). This study found evidence that children's attendance at the day care had a strong positive impact on their health outcomes (Attanasio *et al*, 2017: ii). The results of the study also indicate that access to childcare was met with higher household income and expenditure on children (Attanasio *et al*, 2017: ii).

Other developing countries have made inroads with respect to ECD. Bangladesh and China, for example, have seen large increases in the number of children enrolled in ECD over the past few years, although these countries are still far from universal coverage (Rao *et al*, 2021a: 3). However, other countries, such as India and Myanmar, have experienced a slow pace of change in terms of ECD access (Rao *et al*, 2021a: 4). Even where enrolments increase, many developing countries experience variations in access as a result of income and wealth disparities as well as rural/urban divides (Rao *et al*, 2021a: 4). Where governments are unable to provide public services, private services proliferate, which raise concerns around service standardisation and inequality if poor children are unable to afford fees (Rao *et al*, 2021a: 4).

In Zambia, there is variation with respect to ECD access across regions, from two percent to 50 percent enrolment rates (McCoy *et al*, 2017: 485). A study by McCoy *et al* (2017: 493), which considers a representative sample of 1686 six-year-old children across Zambia found that approximately only 32 percent of children were attending some form of ECD or preschool. Of that percentage, 55 percent of services were run by private firms while NGOs and local government each accounted for approximately 20 percent of services provided (McCoy *et al*, 2017: 493). In a context where government services are free but NGOs and the private sector charge fees, this portfolio, where state provisioning represents a minority of services reaching children (let alone those excluded) depicts an inequitable landscape (McCoy *et al*, 2017: 493).

### 3.7. Civil society and the social economy

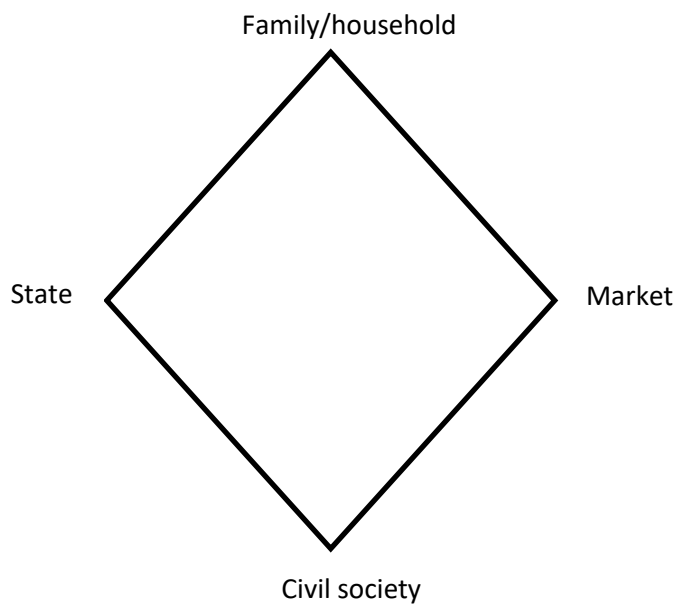
#### 3.7.1. Civil society as a fourth pillar of welfare/development

In developing country contexts, a *coordinated* approach by civil society may hold potential. Civil society refers to “the organised expression of various interests and values operating in the triangular space between the family, state, and the market” (Habib, 2005: 673). These organisations lie between the individual, the market and the state (Skidmore, 2001: 55). For this reason, civil society appears to exist along the boundary between the private and public, and separate from the family although sharing norms of reciprocity and cooperation (van Til, 2000: 4). For both Gramsci and Polanyi, this notion of “society” exists in a specific institutional

space between the economy and the state, which is able to influence and establish relationships with both the public and private sectors (Burawoy, 2003: 199). Civil society organisations are wide-ranging, including trade unions, churches, non-government organisations, corporate CSI-initiatives, social enterprises and social franchises (Skidmore, 2001: 56).

The emphasis on civil society in social investment state literature indicates its role in paving a democratic, grassroots pathway towards economic development. This potential leads Razavi (2007) to claim that Esping-Andersen's three welfare pillars need to be expanded into a "welfare diamond" including voluntary provision (Razavi, 2007: 20). For those countries wishing to bring about social investment states, which are child-centred and human capability enhancing, there is a need for more systemic analyses of this diamond and its outcomes in various countries, so that this space can be properly utilised (Razavi, 2007: 33).

*Figure 2. 2 Razavi's care/welfare diamond*



*Source: Razavi (2007: 21).*

Certain civil society organisations may offer insights especially in the realm of ECD. Where the state and markets are constrained, civil society may inform a more effective response through innovating replicable and scalable models for early learning delivery (Pearce, 2006: 37). Proponents of civil society have pointed to the ways in which these organisations, and NGOs in particular, are valuable as alternative sources of development discourse and practice in post-colonies, as well as for their ability to facilitate participation and empowerment

politically and economically (Leonard, 2014: 377). The recognition of the potential of civil society in development is not a new concept. In the twentieth century, both Polanyi and Gramsci explored the value of this space (Burawoy, 2003: 198). For Gramsci, civil society is the growth of trade unions, mass education and voluntary associations autonomous from but in discourse with state structures (Burawoy, 2003: 198). Polanyi conceived of an active society that would react to defend itself when threatened by market structures (Burawoy, 2003: 198).

Detractors, however, indicate that there are harms to romanticising civil society as a solution to the many problems in post-colonial countries, as their survivalist response, or need to secure funding in the short term to maintain operations, may cause organisations to work in ways that undermine long term goals of transformation (Hearn, 2001: 49). In order to understand the role they may play, these organisations require further interrogation.

### 3.7.2. The social economy

Within civil society, successful provisioning strategies may come from the social economy which includes social enterprises and franchises (van Til, 2000: 12). The social economy refers to the sector engaging in market activities to achieve social objectives, according to principles of reciprocity and cooperation (Raffaelli, 2016: 35). The social economy has grown in many countries as a popular response to the failure of other welfare pillars (Raffaelli, 2016: 36).

Within the social economy, social enterprises are business structures whose primary purpose is not profit maximisation but the attainment of certain social or environmental outcomes, where private activity is conducted for public gain (Goncalves *et al*, 2016: 1589). Just as civil society exists along the boundary between public and private sectors, social enterprises exist in the space between for-profit and non-profit worlds (Vickers and Lyon, 2014: 449). Where possible, the business-model of social enterprises means that income generated from enterprise activities can cover operating costs, and these enterprises theoretically need not rely on external funding (Goncalves *et al*, 2016: 1605). These characteristics allow social enterprises to, at the very least, contribute towards reducing early learning deficits. In partnership with funders like the state and philanthropy, the reach of social enterprises could be greater. These partnerships could potentially catalyse better coordination and collective action between state and market, indicating that the state and civil society interface may be critical in development.

Similarly, social franchises, a social economy sub-set, hold potential to scale early learning services. Social franchises draw from commercial strategies in order to maximise social impact

rather than profit (Foulis, 2014: 19). They emulate commercial franchising approaches, like building organised networks of providers, economies of scale, and mechanisms of monitoring progress (Foulis, 2014: 19). In this way, they serve to enhance scalability to maximise social value creation through replication. A social franchising approach may be well-suited as a scaling strategy for early learning where a deficit currently exists (Foulis, 2014: 19).

Social enterprises and franchises do, however, have drawbacks limiting their impact. Social enterprises may represent a means of internalising externalities but, often, this mechanism does not take place, especially in contexts where social entrepreneurs are focused on the provision of public goods to poor communities. Many social enterprises serve low-income communities, constraining their ability to charge fees, or become financially viable (Sud *et al*, 2009: 208). Social franchises may alleviate this problem by employing cross-subsidisation: providing services to high income groups and using the profit from this activity to fund similar services in poorer communities allowing for some redistribution (Sud *et al*, 2009: 208). However, it seems more likely that, in the absence of solidarity, high-income consumers would defect to suppliers who are able to undercut these producers and provide cheaper services (Dacin *et al*, 2011: 1208). It is difficult for social enterprises to ensure long-term feasibility as they compete in a market environment where the ultimate bottom line is the maximisation of profits rather than of social outcomes (Sud *et al*, 2009: 208). Many organisations operating in the social economy will therefore aim to diversify revenue sources. Income can be generated through own operations but also obtained from donors or social “investors”: philanthropic organisations who fund social enterprises so that social returns can be realised (Reiser, 2012: 706).

These drawbacks, while significant, do not mean that the social economy is incapable of bringing about transformative outcomes. Instead, the shortcomings of social enterprises acting in isolation show that civil society is not a silver bullet solution to societal ills, and indicate the importance of institutions like the state in the support of these initiatives. A study by Mukesh Sud *et al* (2009: 201) found that some of the most successful social enterprises globally were those that partnered with the state and other institutions, in ways that increased funding and coordination. This study concluded that the social economy can be a powerful force targeting large-scale social problems, if it exists in collaboration and partnership with other institutions (Sud *et al*, 2009: 214). Based on this insight, it is important that the focus of this thesis is on the role civil society can play in partnership with the state in the South African ECD context.

### 3.7.3. Partnership with the state and the market: Potentialities and pitfalls

Civil society organisations, and the social economy in particular, cannot be conceptualised as a panacea for development on their own. These organisations are not a replacement to the state as in isolation they likely do not have the capacity to provide public goods at scale (Pearce, 2006: 37). Furthermore, civil society, in the form of corporations, lobby groups, conservative organisations and religious associations, may exercise an anti-democratic and reactionary influence, rather than driving developmental outcomes (Robin, 2017: 4). To conceive of civil society as a replacement to the state is just as damaging as neoliberal approaches that delegate social development to market forces – both strategies diminish state accountability, and provide technical solutions to political problems of resource distribution (Campbell, 2012: 140).

In terms of the social economy, there appears a real danger that this sector may be framed as a replacement to state service delivery. Several authors have explored how the social economy may be co-opted as a service delivery alternative to the welfare state, ultimately furthering the hollowing out of the public sector. Smith (2010) explores how conservatives in the United Kingdom (UK) have utilised the social economy. After the 2008 recession, when Keynesian responses to the economic crisis were being considered, conservatives were able to shift the debate from “big government” to “big society” (Smith, 2010: 827). Conservatives emphasised the role of community social responsibility and social enterprises in the voluntary sector as a mechanism for improving service delivery and welfare (Smith, 2010: 830). This framework delegated state functions to the voluntary sector, legitimating the lack of state welfare spending (Smith, 2010: 830). McMurty (2004: 868) argues that there is cause to be wary of the role of civil society, and the social economy in particular, as a solution to welfare issues as this framing may justify public service delivery dismantling. Here, the social economy is manoeuvred into a technocratic function of aiding underserved groups, filling gaps rather than changing the system itself – detracting from a more transformative role (Parkinson and Howorth, 2008: 292).

One must also be careful to consider the nature of the partnership between the state and civil society. Evans and Heller (2015) claim that one of the reasons South Africa has not enjoyed success as a developmental state is related to the relationship between the state and civil society. Evans and Heller (2015: 706) argue that South Africa has a vibrant civil society, but it has been sidelined from political choices as the state has become increasingly technocratic, and insulated from broader society. While the South African state has aimed to build ties to capital, Evans and Heller (2015: 707) argue that it has failed to meaningfully engage civil society as a partner.

Without this meaningful partnership, it appears that the state is caught between trying to do everything itself and neoliberal outsourcing.

In other ways, the social economy holds potential to challenge neoliberal conditions. The term social economy itself is not only descriptive but prescriptive, implying its role in enabling a kind of social transformation (McMurty, 2004: 870). The social economy represents at least a partial rejection of neoliberal thinking as it brings together society and the economy, emphasising that the separation between the two, or Polanyi's economistic fallacy, is unnatural (Roy and Hackett, 2017: 92). Rather, social economy structures serve to bring together mechanisms of exchange, reciprocity and redistribution, portraying a more substantive economy (Roy and Grant, 2020: 181). The social economy gives way to a politics rooted in practical alternative solutions making transformative change from within existing conditions (McMurty, 2004: 874). Further study is required to better understand this role, and determine whether this challenge to neoliberalism has impetus, or is merely incidental.

Ultimately it appears that within the social economy is tension between the transformative and palliative (Raffaelli, 2016). The social economy can act as an alternative to current conditions (transformative) or can merely be a way to "mitigate the ravages of capitalism" (palliative) (McMurty, 2004: 868). It may represent a permanent solution to change the status quo but may also be co-opted as a solution to temporary market failures, diminishing the state's responsibility to provide services (Roy and Hackett, 2017: 102-103). Therefore, the social economy holds potential to support Polanyian re-embedding, but may face the pitfall of being co-opted as a justification for diminishing the role of the state (Roy and Hackett, 2017: 104).

Perhaps, then, it is important to consider the social economy and civil society in general not as a *substitute* to state service delivery but as a *complement* to both the state and the market in the pursuit of developmental outcomes, where the state is vital in providing direction and democratic accountability (Skidmore, 2001: 54). In partnership, civil society can draw on strengths and resources currently not available to the public or private sectors. If the government can be conceived of as an investor of first resort, perhaps civil society, during times of uncertainty, can act as an innovator of first resort (Harrison, 2020: 7).

Harrison (2020) claims that, if a nation is a body, civil society can be conceived of as its neuro-electric system, able to "sense and signal changes in every cell", and respond quickly (Harrison, 2020: 7). Since much of the work of civil society takes place on the ground, in terms of

engagement with local communities, these organisations are well-equipped to understand a community's needs, as well as the resources within communities that can be leveraged to find innovative solutions with few delays. Without civil society in this role, governments are likely to be less responsive to people's needs and more removed from the communities they aim to serve (Harrison, 2020: 7). Just as the neuro-electric system is a key component of a body's overall functioning, civil society plays an important role in welfare systems. This role is amplified when civil society acts in partnership with other sectors as part of a systems approach. This observation suggests an interesting possibility: instead of three distinct pillars of "family", "state" and "market", the social economy or civil society more generally may act as a kind of catalyst that modifies and potentially enhances all three.

This role of civil society as a complementary force is again best illustrated by the Scandinavian welfare regimes. A hallmark of the twentieth century Scandinavian model is the interaction between the public, private and civil society in a corporatist system (Loga, 2018: 575). The corporatist development model was primarily a partnership between the state, industry and labour (Loga, 2018: 576). In contrast to developmentalist models where partnership is limited to the state and industry, this model allowed for the participation of voluntary organisations in decision-making processes (Loga, 2018: 576). This incorporation of civil society brought the needs and demands of the grassroots to the forefront of policy decisions, creating an effective governance system (Loga, 2018: 577).

Furthermore, civil society played an integral role in the development of the welfare state itself in Sweden (Hort, 2015: 61). The CSA (National Association of Social Work), a civil society organisation formed in 1903, promoted social progress and work in the absence of a state coordinator (Hort, 2015: 61). In time the ideas and collective organisation strategies of the CSA influenced Swedish policy and the organisation found itself at the "nucleus of welfare bureaucracy" (Hort, 2015: 64). Similarly, the labour movement in Sweden had influence in the construction of its active labour market policy (Hort, 2015: 77). In these ways, civil society in Sweden was effective in initiating reform and bringing about public programmes and institutions (Hort, 2015: 77). Integral to this approach was the positive view of the relationship between economic development, state intervention and civil society (Hort, 2015: 84). In this context, civil society played a formative role in the re-embedding of markets in institutions.

Swedish capitalists, in addition to civil society, also played a role in the development of the welfare state. In contrast to popular belief, it appears that the Swedish employers' federation

(SAF) favoured the solidaristic wage policy put forward by the welfare state in the 1950s and 1960s (Swenson, 2002: 122). Welfare policies were not forced on employers but were in many cases supported or even formulated by business as employers strived for a larger system of labour market governance to better coordinate labour markets and lead to efficient outcomes (Swenson, 2002: 122). Therefore, while markets in isolation may face limitations in their ability to drive social progress, this example illustrates that business, in coordination with the state and civil society, may play a formative role in the development of social investment states.

In spite of some drawbacks, there is cause to be optimistic about the role of civil society and social economy approaches, in collaboration with the state and market. Civil society, and social franchises in particular, may hold potential in bringing about successful ECD provision in contexts where the state is incapacitated, although a lack of economic research in this area makes it difficult to gauge exactly what role this sector can play. This optimism should open up further study around what needs to be done to unlock civil society's potential, and what barriers need to be dismantled in the South African case.

### 3.8. Conclusion

This chapter explored the returns associated with early learning and care, and various provisioning strategies, informed by Esping-Andersen's welfare regime typology. This analysis indicated that, in developing countries, none of the pillars of family, market and state appeared fit for purpose. Where states, markets and households are constrained, civil society, and the social economy therein, may hold potential to act as a care and early learning enabler, as well as a bridge between public and private sectors and developmental catalyst. However, there is also danger that these initiatives are framed as replacements to state service delivery. These organisations deserve scholarly attention in contexts where individuals may face an acute welfare deficit, or where all of Esping-Andersen's welfare pillars function imperfectly.

This conceptual framework indicates that further research may aid us in understanding the role of civil society and the social economy in ECD more deeply. Therefore, the following chapters turn to the South African context, with focus on the barriers to state-led early learning provisioning strategies, and a deeper analysis of the role of SmartStart, a South African social franchise for early learning. Since this chapter has given some international context, the following Chapter turns towards the South African case, outlining the evolution of South Africa's welfare regime and early learning landscape. Thereafter, Chapter 5 provides a

comparison of different approaches to early learning in the global South. From the general analysis of the ECD and early learning trajectory in various countries, Chapter 6 is a deeper investigation of the possibility that may exist in South Africa, exploring the role of SmartStart.

## CHAPTER 4 – SOUTH AFRICA’S ECD LANDSCAPE IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

### 4.1. Introduction

The provision of early learning and care in South Africa relies on a complex mix of state, market, kin and civil society organisations. In many respects, the South African welfare regime is distinct from Esping-Andersen’s Western regime types, as, following the end of apartheid, the state was faced not only with the task of socio-economic development but also had to transform a racially segregated society (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 4). This task becomes more difficult as the post-apartheid ruling party shifts between discourses of socio-economic transformation and neoliberalism, as well as between discourses of top-down developmentalism and democratic embeddedness (Noyoo, 2017; van Niekerk, 2013). As a result, access to quality ECD did not expand significantly after 1994. In recent years, however, it appears that the state has positioned itself as an enabler of welfare, development and inclusion. Latest policy recognises the developmental impetus of early learning and care (Department of Social Development, 2016: 13; National Planning Commission, 2012: 30). It therefore seems inconsistent that the 2023/24 budget allocates only R500 per year on the education of every child up to age five, compared to R22 000 spent on every six-to-17-year-old (Hickman and Matlhabe, 2021). A gap between policy and practice undermines attempts to transform ECD access.

Using Esping-Andersen’s (2002) typology and Wood and Gough’s (2006) conception of informal security/insecurity regimes of the global South, this chapter characterises South Africa’s welfare regime over time to explore the state of early learning and care provision. Sections 4.2 and 4.3 outline the evolution of South Africa’s welfare regime and ECD landscape, from the early twentieth century up until the end of apartheid, and approximately two decades thereafter, taking cognisance of the roles civil society has played in shaping and challenging the status quo. Thereafter, Section 4.4 explores the state of ECD in contemporary South Africa, outlining the relevant ECD policies, namely the National Development Plan (NDP) and National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECDP). Section 4.5 considers what impact these policies have on the ground by evaluating the current access to and quality of ECD programmes.

## 4.2. The apartheid welfare regime

### 4.2.1. Characterising the South African economy in the twentieth century

In the twentieth century, South Africa comprised of a dual economy and welfare regime, shaped by racial division (Seeking and Moore, 2013: 2) and underpinned by the ethos of colonialism and apartheid (Noyoo, 2017: 3). At its core, the apartheid economy functioned as a minerals energy complex (MEC) (Baker, 2015: 248). As defined by Fine and Rustomjee (1997: 91), the MEC was a “core set of industrial sectors which exhibit very strong linkages with each other and relatively weaker linkages with other sectors”. The MEC bound the mining and energy sectors, the financial system and economic role of the state (Mohamed, 2009: 6).

The MEC was not merely an interlinking set of industries and institutions but functioned as a system of accumulation, as a small number of large, resource-based companies held wealth and influence over economic policy (Baker, 2015: 249). Since the discovery of diamonds and gold in the country, a small number of corporations have held substantial power over South Africa’s mineral wealth (Sharife and Bond, 2011: 279). Notably, the Oppenheimer family and Anglo American have at points controlled nearly half of South Africa’s gold and platinum, and almost all diamonds (Sharife and Bond, 2011: 279). During apartheid, this influence meant that these conglomerates became directly involved with the state in promoting policies advancing the interests of the capitalist class (Sharife and Bond, 2011: 280).

Key to this process of accumulation was the migrant labour system, which enabled cheap labour. Bundy in Ramphela (1993: 15) argues that the need for cheap labour “was the seed that spawned the systems of segregation and apartheid”. A steady supply of labour was enabled through the creation of Bantustans, or areas where the South African black majority were forced to relocate, in order to prevent them from living in urban areas (Vosloo, 2020: 4). Often in underdeveloped areas – and where the black majority was forced onto only 13 percent of the land – those in the Bantustans experienced poverty as a result of conquest, land dispossession, and increasing taxes (Vosloo, 2020: 4). Consequently, many in the Bantustans, predominantly men (at first), were coerced into a cheap labour system where they frequently migrated to and from cities (Vosloo, 2020: 4). An integral aspect of the migrant labour system was the pass laws, controlling the movement of black people under apartheid (Vosloo, 2020: 4).

Arising out of this system of capital accumulation was a dual South African economy (Noyoo, 2017: 5) consisting of a white-dominated modern sector in urban spaces and an underdeveloped

and marginalised subsistence economy in the Bantustans (Madavo, 1971: 19). During the apartheid regime, the first economy enjoyed prosperity while the second economy endured poverty and inequality (Madavo, 1971: 19). In 1994, at the end of apartheid, this duality was made visible by the different Human Development Index (HDI) scores for black and white South Africans: the HDI of “white South Africa” was 0.878 (ranking 24th in the world) while the HDI of “black South Africa” was 0.462 (ranking 123rd globally) (Noyoo, 2017: 4).

#### 4.2.2. Dual economies and dual welfare regimes: Welfare for white South Africans

South Africa’s welfare regime reflected this dual economy, both before and during the official apartheid period. From the 1920s, the South African state constructed a welfare state for white people, who enjoyed political and social citizenship (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 3). This was largely a liberal welfare regime with a conservative bias as the state provided social assistance on a means-tested basis, and the private sector became an important source of welfare services (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 4).

Labour market policies were designed to insulate the position of white male workers, or “poor whites”, who were in some respects guaranteed employment (Noyoo, 2017: 6). This welfare regime, based on social insurance for white workers, was designed to ensure that these workers enjoyed a “civilised” standard of living (Seekings, 2008: 531). Reflecting the conservative welfare regime, white male workers were paid a family wage. Their labour was remunerated with the expectation that their wages would support not only themselves but their families as well (Arrighi *et al*, 2010: 424-425). In many ways, this regime served to uphold the racist ideology upon which colonialism and apartheid were built: the state needed to ensure a certain standard of living for white South Africans, as white citizens living in a similar state of deprivation to black South Africans would visibly undermine the racial hierarchy of civilisation that the ruling party had carefully constructed (Noyoo, 2017: 6).

Historically, care services were made available on the market, through the state ensuring a supply of cheap domestic labour. In the 1930s, the state’s construction of a living wage for working class male breadwinners accounted for the cost of white families hiring domestic workers, black women who would engage in household production and care for white employers’ children (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 8). Black domestic workers were (and still are) a feature in many white households, raising generations of white children (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 8). This system enhanced white women’s labour market choices, as they were, to a certain degree, able to pursue employment (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 8). As more white

women entered the labour market, families were in a better position to afford welfare on the market, as is evident by the increase in children attending day care and early learning centres, including those from less affluent families (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 8).

#### 4.2.3. A diswelfare state for the black majority

For the black South African majority, by virtue of being excluded from citizenship rights, the benefits of this welfare regime remained out of reach (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 3). While white South Africans were able to access a welfare regime that bore resemblance to Esping-Andersen's regime typology, black workers were excluded from citizenship and unable to enjoy the same social security, finding themselves in a "diswelfare" state (van Niekerk, 2013: 120). Instead, using Wood and Gough's typology for nations from the global South, an informal security regime, where individuals rely on community for informal welfare services, or even insecurity regime, where there is gross insecurity and welfare deficit, appeared to characterise black South African life.

Denied state welfare and largely excluded from markets, many in this majority relied on kinship networks for welfare (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 4). Historically, African households have had different kinship forms to white, Western households (Russell, 2004: 7). Many social protection systems have historically assumed a conjugal household model – namely an independent nuclear family where fathers are breadwinners and mothers take on a caregiving role (Russell, 2004: 7). However, this assumption neglects the descent-based, patrilineal (agnatic) structures historically found in many African communities (Russell, 2004: 10). These lineage-based kinship links and villages cannot easily be separated into separate households and, instead of care being the sole responsibility of mothers, often grandmothers and other older women shared the burden of care (although here, care still remained the burden of women only and women are still subject to patriarchal control within families) (Budlender and Lund, 2011: 926). Even today, only approximately one third of South African households conform to the nuclear model (Budlender and Lund, 2011: 926).

Over time, a pronounced gendered division of labour was entrenched by colonial and apartheid era labour market structure patterns, making the provision of care for black children particularly precarious (Hatch and Posel, 2018: 268). The economy relied heavily on the migrant labour provided by black male mineworkers (Hatch and Posel, 2018: 268). This system saw the deterioration of family structures as many women were left behind in the Bantustans as caregivers (Russell, 2004: 65). Women were left to fend for themselves and their children,

and were thus left with the responsibility for care and sustenance of the family (Kaufman, 2000: 107). This system entrenched the role of black women as caregivers of children and men in the realm of financial support (Hatch and Posel, 2018: 267). In practice, sometimes men would start new families in urban areas, and offer little to no financial support for their children in the rural homelands (Budlender and Lund, 2011: 930). Women left behind in homelands often bore both burdens of caring and financially providing for their children (Budlender and Lund, 2011: 931), often doing subsistence labour on overworked soil, and in overpopulated areas (Kaufman, 2000: 108).

Therefore, women performed both reproductive and productive functions (Kaufman, 2000: 107). In many ways, black women formed a background condition of possibility not only for capitalism but for the apartheid state: the work they did in the household in turn subsidised and reproduced the labour force of migrant male workers, enabling the cheap labour system to continue (Kaufman, 2000: 107). Since black women were expected to perform subsistence as well as reproductive work, the state assumed that the cost of social reproduction was offset by subsistence agriculture and that there was therefore no need to extend the family wage to black male workers (Arrighi *et al*, 2010: 414). Apartheid's development depended on black women's economic supplement to the wages of male migrant workers, as well as on the role black women played in the maintenance of families in homelands (Arrighi *et al*, 2010: 423).

Faced with overpopulation in the homelands, and the possibility that their husbands may not return from the mines, many black women also migrated to cities in pursuit of a more promising life (Kaufman, 2000: 108). From the 1940s (before the introduction of pass laws), cities' economies started absorbing more black women, performing work as washers, domestic workers and beer brewers (Bozzoli, 1983: 163). This migration continued to take place illegally after the formal introduction of apartheid rand pass laws (Kaufman, 2000: 108).

As a result of the migrant labour system, many working adults left their children behind in Bantustans to be raised by grandparents, who they supported financially by sending a share of earnings home (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 4). Today, many rural homesteads are made up of skip generation families, namely grandparents and grandchildren (Russell, 2004: 28). Unlike white women who were to some extent able to choose to enter the labour market, black domestic workers worked often not out of meaningful choice between household and paid labour but as a result of having to simultaneously financially provide for and physically care for their own children (Nash and Fernandez-Kelly, 1983: 70). Over time, the apartheid state

undermined parental care for children and relied heavily on extended family networks (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 4). Black children were excluded from the state's welfare regime, and faced an acute welfare deficit.

#### 4.2.4. Alternative imaginings: The liberation movement's welfare regime aspirations

In the context of a welfare deficit and bifurcated economy, resistance movements emerged to counter the apartheid state, notably the African National Congress (ANC) which today governs post-apartheid South Africa (Noyoo, 2017: 6). This resistance organisation was underpinned by an alternative, and often social democratic, policy discourse (Peet, 2002: 66). For example, the African's Claims document adopted by the Annual Conference of the ANC (1943) emphasised the importance of political citizenship but also social rights, such as the right to health and education (van Niekerk, 2013: 122).

In 1955, the ANC adopted the Freedom Charter as a statement of opposition to the apartheid government, outlining the organisation's views of the necessary social and economic transformation to take place after the fall of apartheid (Peet, 2002: 67). Peet (2002: 67) describes this statement, developed in consultation with hundreds of ordinary people on the ground in South Africa, as a "beautifully phrased counter-hegemonic document". Socialist or social democratic in content and outlook (Noyoo, 2017: 7), the Freedom Charter served as a guide for the making of a democratic post-apartheid society (Peet, 2002: 68). Its guidelines explicitly considered redistribution of wealth and land, and a mixed economy, consisting of a public, private and small-scale family sector (Peet, 2002: 68).

While focused more on political objectives than social policy, the Freedom Charter implicitly drew upon Esping-Andersen's third pillar of welfare, the state, as the primary mechanism for transforming apartheid's bifurcated economy and welfare regime (van Niekerk, 2013: 125). This framing reflects social democracy's preference for the state, as a complement to market and family, out of concern that the family and its market alternative offer inadequate protection and may contribute to inequality (Esping-Andersen, 2002: 13).

Over this historical period, while the ANC does seem to dominate resistance narratives, it was not the only actor exploring alternative pathways. Civil society was significant during this period. During the 1980s, when the ANC and other opposition movements were banned, civil society organisations (CSOs) became a site of apartheid resistance (Habib, 2005: 675). United by the United Democratic Front (UDF), several civil society actors mobilised to make the

apartheid state “ungovernable” and usher in a new democratic order (Sinwell, 2011: 63). Thereafter, the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) launched in 1992 became an umbrella for many CSOs that played a vital role in apartheid resistance (Sinwell, 2011: 64). NGOs and churches were also important, acting as a voice and coordinator for the grassroots, and often the only legal voice of opposition (Leonard, 2014: 380). CSOs did not only fill gaps in welfare and service delivery provision but mobilised for political change and were important actors in the negotiations leading up to democratic transition (Mercer, 2002: 7).

A significant engagement was between the ANC, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and the South African Communist Party (SACP) (Friedman, 2012: 86). In 1990, these groups formed a tripartite alliance aiming to usher in a new democratic era (Friedman, 2012: 87). Trade unions, represented by COSATU, were the largest and most organised vehicle for collective action towards the end of apartheid, and became the “voice of redistribution” in the tripartite alliance (Friedman, 2012: 87). The voice of COSATU, and the tripartite alliance in general, however, was not supported by all of South African civil society at the time and represents competing discourses and ideologies in this space. The tripartite alliance adopted a Marxist-Leninist two-stage revolution theory of national democratic revolution (NDR). The first phase of NDR is democratic capitalism, where deracialised capitalism is supposed to develop the means of production (Plaut and Holden, 2012: 8). Once this is achieved, a second stage (the transition to socialism or social democracy) would begin (Plaut and Holden, 2012: 8). The first stage implies top-down control by a vanguard party and discipline and subordination by revolutionary elements – in particular, organised labour is expected to cleave this line.

For certain CSOs emerging at the time, the NDR lens, which depicts a subdued civil society and centralised top-down control in the first stage of liberation, did not align with bottom-up and community-orientated values. For example, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), which Bryne *et al* (2017: 254) claim was the strongest working-class organisation in the 1980s, rejected the two-stage Marxist-Leninist NDR. This rejection was on the basis that FOSATU’s bottom-up and self-organised values and structures could not coexist with a strategy where labour movements are expected to subordinate to nationalist ANC vanguard party control (Bryne *et al*, 2017: 260). In the 1980s, there was therefore an emergence of discursive contestation within liberation movements and CSOs: between a top-down and centralised developmental discourse and democratically rooted, bottom-up form of

embeddedness. As COSATU became dominant in the 1990s, this critical lens offered by FOSATU with respect to the two-stage NDR became more subdued, and generally unions gradually accepted to be led by the ANC (Plaut and Holden, 2012: 25).

### 4.3. The development of a post-apartheid welfare and early learning regime

#### 4.3.1. From socioeconomic transformation to neoliberal restructuring

In 1994, the apartheid regime formally ended, and the ANC was elected as democratic South Africa's first ruling party (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 4). The ANC-led government faced a country in need of transformation on many fronts. South Africa's world-renowned Constitution adopted in 1996 provided an explicitly transformative framework, enshrining rights to housing, healthcare and education for all, and a mandate for the progressive realisation of rights (Republic of South Africa, 1996: 11-12). These socioeconomic rights set out a role for the government to provide these services, implying a new socially democratic South Africa based on bottom-up development and community responsiveness.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), adopted in 1994, became the economic framework for realising this constitutional imperative (Noyoo, 2017: 7). It set out major goals of eliminating poverty and inequality, raising the overall standard of living, addressing structural economic problems (such as South Africa's dual economy), ending racial discrimination, establishing a living wage and working towards a prosperous regional economy (ANC, 1994: 8). The RDP put forward a transformative and generally social democratic agenda (Cheru, 2001: 507). It rejected many neoliberal assumptions, such as the idea that a singular focus on economic growth would enable sustainable development (Williams and Taylor, 2000: 25). Instead, the RDP saw a dynamic role of the state in restructuring the economy, where economic growth would occur as a result of a redistribution of wealth and resources, and the creation of a more equitable society (Williams and Taylor, 2000: 25). Here, the role of the state appears to be social democratic, and based on partnerships with communities and civil society.

In this regard, the RDP seemed to reflect the concerns of the Freedom Charter. However, the emphasis of the RDP, and the discourse utilised, did diverge from the Freedom Charter's key tenets. The Freedom Charter was explicitly framed in terms of freedom and capability, and the state's purpose was therefore depicted as empowerment and activation of citizens' potential (Peet, 2002: 69). Peet (2002: 69) argues that, in the RDP, the discourse seems to change to one of delivery, where the focus is around bringing services to people over empowering

communities. The ANC moved from a discourse of resistance, embodied by the Freedom Charter (Peet, 2002: 67) to a discourse of development and service delivery, illustrated by the RDP (Peet, 2002: 69). This shift in discourses seem in some ways to represent the tensions between the social democratic vision of the Constitution and the Marxist-Leninist vision of the NDR (Glaser, 2017: 274).

Even though there does appear to be underlying ideological tension, the RDP's framework does seem consistent as it outlines a transformative economic policy, drawing on Esping-Andersen's third welfare pillar, the state. However, in what seemed like a "sudden" shift, in 1996, the government replaced the RDP with the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) plan (Noyoo, 2017: 8). Here, the government appeared to take up an entirely different stance, aiming to eliminate poverty through market-led solutions, fiscal discipline and "sound" monetary policy (Cheru, 2001: 508). GEAR outlined an export-led growth plan with a reduced state role (Williams and Taylor, 2000: 30). Furthermore, GEAR focused on deficit reduction, controlling inflation, restructuring state assets and "reform" to a progressive tax system (Cheru, 2001: 509). Where the RDP focused on growth through redistribution, GEAR shifted to the stance that redistribution would take place through growth, or that wealth would trickle down to the poorest in society over time (Cheru, 2001: 508).

The shift towards GEAR seems to reflect neoliberal restructuring taking place globally from the 1980s onwards (Cheru, 2001: 508). Based on this global context, to some extent it does seem that the South African state had little choice and that the shift to GEAR, and the discarding of many of the RDP's principles around the dynamic role of the state, was inevitable (Faulkner *et al*, 2013: 6). In the 1990s, as globalisation and neoliberal policy prescriptions weakened the power of state institutions (Webster and Alder, 1999: 350), it appeared that South Africa was in a precarious condition. Serious public debt from the apartheid era constrained the new state and the speculative attack causing the Rand crisis in 1996 put South Africa's economy in a more perilous position (Segatti and Pons-Vignon, 2013: 544). These circumstances increased the risk of debt default and the imposition of structural adjustment programmes by international financial institutions (Segatti and Pons-Vignon, 2013: 544). For some, South Africa's shift towards an orthodox macroeconomic framework appeared inevitable.

However, Segatti and Pons-Vignon (2013: 546) argue that, while public debt did constrain the government in 1994, the risks in this case were not as high as elsewhere in the world and alternative policy frameworks were available. Segatti and Pons-Vignon (2013: 546) as well as

Williams and Taylor (2000: 22) argue that this shift in South Africa was not natural or inevitable but took place in a context where the state regarded inequality as permissible and acted voluntarily to preserve the interests of capital over labour (as was the case under apartheid). Key here was an ideological shift on the part of certain elites in the ruling party, from one of social democracy or of socialism to one reflecting tenets of neoliberalism. Contrary to the perspective that the shift to GEAR was inevitable, Segatti and Pons-Vignon (2013: 542) see GEAR as a reflection of the conversion of the ANC to a hegemonic neoliberal discourse.

The ANC moved from a discourse of resistance, embodied by the Freedom Charter, socioeconomic rights, and opposition to the apartheid state (Peet, 2002: 67) to a discourse of development, illustrated by the RDP's framework and focus on economic restructuring (Peet, 2002: 69) and then to neoliberal deepening following the implementation of GEAR (Peet, 2002: 71). Segatti and Pons-Vignon (2013: 542) argue that this shift in discourse was largely a result of the conversion and co-option of elite ANC members long before the seemingly sudden transition to GEAR.

While the move to GEAR appeared a “momentous shift” for the ANC, a party with substantial working-class support, Segatti and Pons-Vignon (2013: 542) point out that orthodox economic thinking gained traction within the ANC from the mid-1980s onwards. Williams and Taylor (2000: 35) argue that prominent intellectuals like Tito Mboweni, Thabo Mbeki, and Trevor Manuel were “converted” to economic orthodoxy during this time period. These individuals represent the growing professional middle-class emerging from the liberation movement who were “courted” by South African and international business (Webster and Alder, 1999: 370). In addition, another dimension of this shift had to do with the tension between social democratic embeddedness and the top-down developmentalism of the NDR. In some ways, the NDR represents the ideological legitimisation of the shift towards neoliberalism (and away from bottom-up development), as it envisages the ANC as the vanguard party leading South Africa through its first phase, i.e., capitalist development (Glaser, 2017: 292).

Therefore, GEAR did not represent a sudden change to the economic thinking of the ANC as a result of formidable economic circumstances, but rather the conversion of a few elite party members to neoliberal ideology and legitimisation of top-down control by the NDR. Indeed, this shift can be seen even before the adoption of GEAR. The RDP, representing Keynesian economic principles, was not initially a plan made in isolation by the ANC, but came out of a deliberation where it appeared that civil society had a genuine seat at the table. The RDP came

out of talks with COSATU, with many NGOs and other CSOs contributing (Webster and Alder, 1999: 364). The original RDP document was largely a product of an alliance between labour, academics and activists (Mungwashu, 2011: 76). SANCO for example played a significant role in shaping transition policy frameworks and the RDP chapter related to housing provision (Sinwell, 2011: 64). In the transition from apartheid to democracy, the role of civil society shifted from resistance to development and collaboration with the ruling party (ANC) (Habib, 2005: 678).

Before the formal adoption of the RDP, however, many elite ANC thinkers revised the original RDP document to reflect commitments to fiscal discipline and maintaining macroeconomic balance (Webster and Alder, 1999: 365). What resulted was a “muddle” of Keynesianism and macroeconomic conservatism, in turn undermining the impact of the RDP (Webster and Alder, 1999: 366). In this context, the closure of the RDP offices, merely two years after the RDP’s adoption, and the shift to GEAR do not appear all that surprising (Plaut and Holden, 2012: 44). Where there was previously a democratic culture of engagement between the ANC and civil society allies, over time, many ideas, especially around economic policy, became insulated: ruling party technocrats drafted GEAR in isolation (Padayachee, 2019). The final version of the RDP, internally negotiated, was less redistributive than the earlier, more collaborative version (Friedman, 2012: 88). The adoption and implementation of GEAR, which was criticised deeply by other members of the tripartite alliance, confirmed that, in the tripartite alliance, the representatives of labour (such as COSATU) were subordinated and the influence of capital grew (Southall and Webster, 2010: 142). This exclusion feels in many ways a result of an NDR lens where the ANC takes the lead in the first phase.

With respect to the alliance, it would be a misrepresentation to cast COSATU as an innocent party in terms of this economic policy shift. COSATU’s capacity to critique ANC direction was undermined largely because COSATU incumbents tend to be beneficiaries of ANC rule, with many taking up roles in the public sector (Southall and Webster, 2010: 143). The alliance, which tends to operate in private and away from public scrutiny (Plaut and Holden, 2012: 5), has been based on the NDR lens, where COSATU is expected to be subordinate to the ANC in the first stage (Plaut and Holden, 2012: 4). COSATU has served this end, diminishing its capacity for critique (Plaut and Holden, 2012: 40). The absence of a coherent left and social democratic tradition, capable of challenging economic orthodoxy is also to blame for the lack of progressive policy (Webster and Alder, 1999: 370).

It is significant that the shift towards economic orthodoxy was not decisive or entirely coherent on the part of the ANC, or the other alliance members. Plaut and Holden (2012: 6) argue that the alliance has become more dysfunctional over time, as the divergent interests of its constituents, and need to tightrope between operating within and fighting against the state, manifests as stresses and strains in society. It is also important not to conceptualise the ANC as monolithic, as it is often caught between competing ideas, the outcome of which is often contradictory policy and practice. Von Holdt (2010: 4) claims that sections of the state are ineffective and dysfunctional because of a contradictory set of rationales shaping the state bureaucracy. Ideological tension exists between various actors in the government, which often manifests as contradictory and incomplete developmental strategies (van Holdt, 2010: 5). These contradictions can be seen in shifts between social democratic and neoliberal discourse, as well as between bottom-up development strategies, where communities are genuine implementing partners (depicted by the Constitution) and top-down developmentalism (depicted by the NDR).

#### 4.3.2. The consequences of this conversion: Rising inequality under neoliberalism

The above analysis shows how the ANC, in the immediate post-apartheid era, shifted gradually from a social democratic stance to the ideology of neoliberalism, reflected by the change in policy from the RDP to GEAR. GEAR has been criticised as it failed to meet many of its targets, especially those related to poverty and inequality (Cheru, 2001: 509). Its formation came under fire as, in contrast to the Freedom Charter, which was informed by the voices of ordinary people, GEAR was, in an undemocratic fashion, “produced in secrecy by technical experts” (Williams and Taylor, 2000: 33). It also appeared “anti-poor” (Noyoo, 2017: 8), made compatible with liberal business opinion (or the interests of capital) over the interests of labour or the unemployed (Peet, 2002: 74).

According to Segatti and Pons-Vignon (2013: 538), the consequences of this adoption of neoliberalism, and commitment to orthodoxy, is that the state becomes a “cost-controlling” rather than a “developmental engine” in the twenty-first century. For this reason, Segatti and Pons-Vignon (2013: 537) argue that South Africa is “stuck in stabilisation”, as orthodox macroeconomic policy focuses on market liberalisation and stabilisation over socioeconomic transformation, ultimately preserving an unequal status quo. The resulting environment appears to be one where a rising share of income is appropriated by the rich while labour receives a declining share of GDP, contributing towards inequality (Pons-Vignon and Segatti, 2013:

509). Kaseeram and Mahadea (2015: 372) support this claim. They find that the GDP share of capital increased from 3.1 percent in 1980 to 12 percent in 2013, while that of labour decreased from 91 percent to 83 percent over the same time period (Kaseeram and Mahadea, 2015: 372). Therefore, these authors claim that, over this period, South Africa experienced rising income inequality and wealth concentration (Kaseeram and Mahadea, 2015).

The resilience of neoliberalism in South Africa is astounding given the Freedom Charter's liberation ideology about socioeconomic transformation and the Constitution's transformative vision (Segatti and Pons-Vignon, 2013: 538). It appears only somewhat ideologically reconciled by the NDR narrative, which seems to legitimate GEAR as the first phase of liberation, according to a two-stage revolutionary theory. As this orthodoxy is implemented, however, the South African state has shifted away from the Freedom Charter and closer towards apartheid policy (Pons-Vignon and Segatti, 2013: 514). Here, the state's social purpose appears to support capital accumulation. As the interests of capital, and especially finance, are preserved, the MEC continues to be part of South Africa's economic landscape (Fine, 2008).

#### 4.3.3. Characterising the post-apartheid welfare regime: The first 20 years (1994-2014)

During this period, South Africa's welfare regime expanded through means-tested social assistance (Noyoo, 2017: 7). Social grants, targeted at categories of people vulnerable to poverty, are an important part of South Africa's welfare system, and large sums of the government budget are allocated to provide these cash transfers (Cheru, 2001: 517). In a context where a large portion of the population are excluded from the economic mainstream, social assistance in the form of cash transfers, a form of income support to the vulnerable, is significant (Mungwashu, 2011: 65). Welfare in this form in South Africa is political and economic: decisions made by the state are not just technical but political, related to redistribution, citizen reach, electoral support, and taxpayer cost (Mungwashu, 2011: 74).

As of 2013, the South African grant system was "exceptional" as it was the highest government expenditure on cash transfers in proportion to GDP in the global South (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 16).<sup>1</sup> The number of households receiving welfare in the form of at least one social grant also increased over the first 20 years of ANC rule: from 29.9 percent in 2003 to approximately 45 percent in 2014 (Stats SA, 2016a). In addition to government institutions, the welfare sector

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<sup>1</sup> The South African state still spends a high proportion of its budget on social grants: 11 percent of the budget in the 2019/2020 financial year went to *social benefits* to citizens, a category dominated by the social grants (Stats SA, 2020).

in South Africa has large institutional infrastructure rooted in civil society, a significant provider of social services (Cheru, 2001: 517).

The child support grant (CSG) is important as children are the largest category of people in need of care in South Africa (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 6). In addition, approximately 40 percent of South African households are headed by single women, so access to child support is vital (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 7). In 2014, approximately 40 percent of the government's social grant spending was allocated to support families and children (Stats SA, 2016a). Furthermore, Budlender and Lund (2011: 939) argue that the publicly provided Old Age Pension has the effect of "crowding in" care of children by grandparents, as there is less pressure for older people to be in full-time employment, and they can allocate more time towards childcare.

In addition to these cash transfers, state spending on education significantly increased during this period. Furthermore, the government has introduced a compulsory Grade R year for six-year-olds, falling under the mandate of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 9). For this schooling year to be accessible, the state provided means-tested subsidies for registered preschools (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 9). However, there remained little support for the early learning of children under six-years-old, and care for these children was primarily provided by the market or kin (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 9).

In many ways, this welfare regime might seem to straddle the Scandinavian model (and the ideals of the Freedom Charter) and the liberal welfare regime of the previous era (Noyoo, 2017: 14). The compulsory preschool year might appear to embody the capacity-building of the social investment state, but many characteristics reflect the previous predominantly liberal welfare regime. The state assists the poor financially, through social grants, on a means-tested basis (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 1). This system shares many features with the Esping-Andersen's liberal welfare regimes in the West or global North, such as private provisioning for those with means, limited state involvement, contributory social insurance and means-tested social assistance, to provide for those unable to access welfare on the market (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 17). Furthermore, the state did go through a phase of outsourcing grant provisioning to the private sector for cash pay outs and there remains considerable outsourcing of functions to NGOs.

However, unlike the liberal regimes in the global North, the reach of social grants means that many more people receive means-tested assistance (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 17). It often feels like South Africa is a failed liberal welfare regime: in liberal welfare regimes, social transfers exist to assist a minority of people living in extreme poverty but in South Africa transfers are pervasive because so many people are in this position.

#### 4.3.4. Failures of the South African welfare regime

It is, however, difficult to characterise South Africa's early post-apartheid welfare system solely according to Esping-Andersen's typology. Esping-Andersen's theory tends to assume a nuclear or conjugal, rather than agnatic or other alternative household arrangement, and so may not be easily transposed to the South African context where a variety of household forms exist (Budlender and Lund, 2011: 925). In addition, often, the state has failed to provide adequate welfare, and many face a welfare deficit. In spite of democratic South Africa's early attempts to provide welfare through the grant system, the country remains characterised by pervasive poverty, the highest levels of inequality and unemployment for any middle-income country, as well as racial discrimination (Francis and Webster, 2019: 791-793).

Furthermore, the emphasis placed on the CSG as a means of aiding children (and, by extension, their caregivers) appears to be a form of treating the effects rather than the cause of children's deprivation and mothers' disenfranchisement (Lavinias, 2013: 5). While the ruling ANC party tends to present itself as social democratic (Pons-Vignon and Segatti, 2013: 511), this welfare, which is primarily based on grants, has not brought about significant social transformation (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 16). It appears that, in this emphasis, the South African state may more closely resemble a transfer welfare rather than social investment state.

Khan (2013: 573) argues that the social grant system is inadequate in addressing inequity and is instead placatory, focused on securing the votes of the poor and softening pro-market policy, while doing little to address South Africa's structural economic problems. Rather, social grants are merely a partial political solution to a deep-seat structural issue, where the majority of South Africans are unable to access care, welfare and quality education (Khan, 2013: 578). These grants, occurring alongside market liberalisation, and down-sizing of the redistributive role of the state, are unlikely to shift the poverty and inequality in the country, but rather treat the political dimension of inequality (e.g., protest and potential loss of ANC support) (Khan, 2013: 579). Grants in many ways appear to be a palliative reaction to rising poverty and expressions of discontent.

In addition, while the state's attempts at capacity building, through the compulsory preschool year, are important, this shift towards a more desirable social investment state is undermined by educational underperformance at all levels (Nomsenge, 2019: 3). The significant policy and fiscal commitments by the state in education have failed to translate into meaningful learning outputs (Nomsenge, 2019: 3). There are many reasons behind this underperformance, including dilapidated school infrastructure, the non-delivery of textbooks, teacher shortages and poorly equipped teachers, and the misuse of government funds (Nomsenge, 2019: 3). These quality problems mean that, with some exceptions, it is predominantly people of high-income status who are able to access quality education on the market, leaving many South Africans reliant on a failing education system. Access to substandard schooling and ECD services hardly embodies the social investment state, as the distinction between policy and practice limits the capability-building potential of schooling.

In terms of childcare, while the state provides some financial support to the poor, it offers very little quality care, leading many wealthier people to seek welfare services on the market (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 1). In this context, poorer households often rely on kin for care services, especially maternal kin, indicating that there has not been a fundamental transformation of the apartheid welfare regime (Seekings and Moore, 2013: 1). With the fragmentation of many families, there remains reliance on community organisations and NGOs, reminiscent not of a welfare regime but an informal security regime.

Ultimately, the success of direct transfers over welfare measures aimed at enhancing human capabilities – such as healthcare and education – point towards an approach, where only the wealthy can afford quality care (Pons-Vignon and Segatti, 2013: 511). This residual approach does little to mitigate South Africa's "dual economy" and bring marginalised people into South Africa's economic system (Pons-Vignon and Segatti, 2013: 505). What instead emerges is the deracialisation of the "first world" economy while the other "third world" economy, to which the majority have access, remains the same (Cheru, 2001: 505). Many citizens remain locked in poverty, with the transformative intentions of the Freedom Charter out of reach (Noyoo, 2017: 9). The failure of South Africa's welfare system is a reflection of, and response to, post-apartheid state economic failure, as opposed to one of Esping-Andersen's welfare regime types with an internal logic.

#### 4.3.5. The role of civil society from 1994 to 2014

In this context, the role of civil society again deserves consideration. With the declining power of trade unions (elaborated on earlier in this chapter), it seems that civil society became less powerful over this period. One potential limitation is civil society's survivalist response, as many organisations need to secure funding to continue operations (Anheier *et al*, 2019: 23). After the end of apartheid, more international funding for South African NGOs was directed through the new government, which caused many CSOs to shift their stance and retreat from criticism of the state's macroeconomic policy to secure funding (a kind of strategic drift) (Leonard, 2014: 381). Furthermore, many donors came from the global North, in liberal democracies themselves, who favoured South Africa's shift away from social democracy and towards procedural democracy (although donors from Northern Europe have remained significant) (Hearn, 2001: 49).

Sinwell (2011: 65) argues that CSOs' ability to critique South Africa's macroeconomic policy became more limited, and many organisations moved towards being service delivery agents, providing welfare in the short term, which is still valuable to the communities being served, but does not aid transformation towards a more sustainable welfare regime in the long term. For this reason, Hearn (2001: 49) claims that CSOs were no longer restructuring the social order but were acting as "effective system maintenance", allowing the state to preside over an insufficient economic system in the absence of a mobilised opposition. When considering these critiques, however, it is important to remember that civil society in South Africa is not homogenous. The reforms and transformation brought about by post-apartheid civil society are not meaningless. Many community structures continue to challenge the status quo, hovering between adversarial and collaborative engagement with the state (Westaway, 2017: 100).

Some CSOs aim to provide welfare and service delivery to South Africa's marginalised, taking on a palliative role in the current system, while others push for structural change (Westaway, 2017: 100). Both of these approaches are valuable to the communities being served, and the collaborative and adversarial relationships with the state that they respectively represent are important, symbolising the "push and pull" of democratic society (Habib, 2005: 104). The potential of civil society thus evolves over time. Many civil society structures have begun to seek transformation through reform (Anheier *et al*, 2019: 23). This approach preserves aspects of the status quo that have value, while transforming that which does not, and shifting power relations (Friedman, 2012: 91). In order to achieve this aim, CSOs do not merely work with or

against the state, but take on multiple positions for strategic engagement to bring about social change (Sinwell, 2011: 67). This engagement appears to be a pragmatic approach, rather than one working “for” or “against” the state.

For example, in the context of government dissidence around HIV/AIDS treatment, the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), an HIV/AIDS activist organisation, took this approach, with many of its leaders expressing their support for the ANC, while at the same time pushing for changes to HIV/AIDS policy and South African healthcare (Friedman, 2012: 88). The TAC won significant gains, in the form of a comprehensive AIDS policy (Friedman, 2012: 88). However, the TAC did face limitations as its goal of the creation of a public health system accessible to the marginalised never emerged (Friedman, 2012: 90). Civil society navigates a dual role of service delivery and advocacy in South Africa, to improve on the status quo.

#### 4.4. A more promising outlook? Shifting policy towards social investment

This next Section of analysis moves away from a historical contextualisation of South Africa’s welfare state and economy and towards a present-day depiction of South Africa’s early learning and care landscape. The previous Section outlined the initial post-apartheid context, with focus not only on the government but also civil society. This Section therefore picks up approximately 20 years after the end of apartheid, during a period of interesting new policy developments.

##### 4.4.1. The National Development Plan (NDP)

The South African government has introduced legislation aimed at developing human capital in the country, indicating that it could potentially be shifting away from the transfer state and towards the social investment state model. The National Development Plan (NDP), drafted in 2012, outlines the government’s vision to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality by 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2012: 24). The NDP is based on growing an inclusive economy, building capabilities, enhancing state capacity and promoting partnerships between different sectors (National Planning Commission, 2012: 24).

In the NDP, the South African government recognises that ECD is integral to expanding capabilities (Atmore, 2019: 124). The NDP links the provision of ECD to increased school enrolment and completion rates, higher earnings in the labour market, better health outcomes and decreased antisocial behaviour in children (Atmore, 2019: 124). Based on these benefits, the NDP sets out a state mandate to provide universal access to two years of high quality ECD

to all children aged three to five (National Planning Commission, 2012: 30). This mandate is based on the acknowledgement that ECD should be a key priority in ensuring the long-term prospects of future generations (National Planning Commission, 2012: 69) whilst simultaneously liberating women from unpaid care work and enhancing FLFP (National Planning Commission, 2012: 43). The NDP positions the government explicitly as responsible for the rollout of quality and accessible ECD packages, which requires more collaboration between service providers and increased state funding (Atmore, 2019: 125).

While this positioning may represent a potential shift towards a more transformative policy, especially in the realm of early learning and care, tensions between social and economic policy in the document point towards the different, often competing ideologies that underpin South Africa's welfare regime (Plagerson *et al*, 2019: 1). While the emphasis on growing human capabilities through the universal provision of ECD reflects the concerns of the Constitution, the macroeconomic framework of the NDP reflects some of the concerns of GEAR: with emphasis on economic stability, sound monetary policy, and cost control (National Planning Commission, 2012: 137). COSATU in particular criticised the NDP because of its dependence on trickle-down economics, which reflected GEAR's "redistribution through growth" stance (Segatti and Pons-Vignon, 2013: 550).

The tension between competing ideologies in social and economic policy is at least in part responsible for the lack of coherent strategy in the NDP, and the consequent failures of implementation of many key goals (Plagerson *et al*, 2019: 3). Ideological contestation within South Africa's ruling party ultimately creates compromised and hybrid policies that often do not fit together neatly, resulting in many challenges to implementation (Plagerson *et al*, 2019: 8). It therefore appears that there is not entirely a concerted shift on behalf of the ANC towards a social investment state, as pressures from different ideological positions undermine the formation of a coherent strategy aimed at building the capabilities of the country.

#### 4.4.2. The National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (2015)

At the time the NDP was legislated, access to ECD, and early learning and care in particular, was highly unequal and inadequate. With little government support, many early learning practitioners relied on donor funding or charging fees to provide services (Barberton, 2014: 25). A context where ECD services were primarily provided by the private sector for the wealthy and limited NGOs for those from marginalised backgrounds, and where these user fees were a norm, meant that the poorest children were left without access (Department of Social

Development, 2016: 44). Furthermore, many rural areas had no access to early learning services at all (Department of Social Development, 2016: 40). In addition, the quality of services provided by the sector lacked regulation, funding and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation (Department of Social Development, 2016: 43). This observation suggests that what was missing was not only funding of ECD but also a model that would enable a coordinated scale up of quality services.

In response to this ECD coverage gap, in 2015, the government introduced the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECDP), setting out a state mandate to provide quality ECD programmes accessible to all young children by 2030 (Department of Social Development, 2016: 8). Although ANC conferences since 2007 signalled that the party was becoming more interested in ECD policy-making, by and large, it appears that the emergence of the NIECDP had to do with global policy discourses which had shifted towards comprehensive and integrated ECD services (see: page 47) (Atmore, 2019: 138).

This policy positions ECD not only as a universal right, but also as a public good (Department of Social Development, 2016: 21) as it does not only contribute to the development of individual children but also to the growth and development of society as a whole (Department of Social Development, 2016: 13). This positioning reflects the state's recognition that South Africa's development depends on unlocking the human capital of its youngest population (Department of Social Development, 2016: 18). Furthermore, in the NIECDP, the government recognises that the expansion of ECD is central to the realisation of national development goals, and may alleviate poverty and inequality in the long term (Department of Social Development, 2016: 22). For this reason, ECD services ought to be publicly provided by the government (Department of Social Development, 2016: 23). The government's role, according to the NIECDP, is to lead and coordinate the delivery of ECD in South Africa, alongside other partners (Department of Social Development, 2016: 9). This strategy suggests that the government should engage with civil society and should supply the leadership, resources and strategic vision for the implementation of universal ECD.

Based on this strategy, the state sets out to realise a comprehensive ECD package accessible to all children (Department of Social Development, 2016: 24). This package is made up of five components: maternal and child health services, nutritional support, support for primary caregivers, social services (with specific reference to social grants) and stimulation for early learning (Department of Social Development, 2016: 25). All of these elements are important

but this study specifically focuses on one component: stimulation for early learning. Early learning and care tends to receive the smallest fiscal allocation, while healthcare for mothers and children, and the CSG tend to receive the most funding (Ilifa Labantwana and Kago Ya Bana, 2018: 4).

The NIECDP sets out a clear timeline to realise the policy goal of ensuring that all young children and their caregivers have access to this ECD package (Department of Social Development, 2016: 8).

- The long-term goal of the NIECDP is to have a comprehensive quality ECD programme available and accessible to all young children and their caregivers by 2030.
- The medium-term goal of the policy is that the essential components of this ECD package are available and accessible to all young children and their caregivers by 2024.
- The short-term goal of the policy is for the state to have established the necessary legal framework(s), organisational structures and institutional arrangements for the rollout of this package, and to put in place the financing mechanisms necessary to realise its commitment to ensuring the universal availability of ECD services by 2017. 2018 was therefore marked as the target year for beginning the implementation of policy (Hall *et al*, 2017: 5). It seems that the government has not met this short-term target, and is not on track to meet the NIECDP's medium-term goal (see: page 80).

In order to ensure the universal availability of ECD provision, the NIECDP commits to focus on the poorest families facing financial constraints (Desmond *et al*, 2019: 277). This commitment is based on the fact that a sustained focus on the most vulnerable children ensures a more equitable scaling of ECD, and because, in the literature, the returns to early learning are greatest for children coming from low-income families (Department of Social Development, 2016: 68). The NIECDP also emphasises the importance of safe and affordable day care services for children, acknowledging the importance of these services for social welfare, especially in contexts where parents cannot offer care for children during working hours (Department of Social Development, 2016: 26). Day care and early learning are not conceived of as separate under the NIECDP: rather, day care sites can play the dual role of providing early learning as well as care and protection in order to “promote children’s holistic development” (Department of Social Development, 2016: 26). This policy is informed by the recognition that children and their parents require assistance in the form of quality, publicly provided childcare facilities (Department of Social Development, 2016: 26).

The strategy for scaling ECD and developing a comprehensive coordination, monitoring and evaluation mechanism for existing programmes remains somewhat unclear in the NIECDP (Stats SA, 2016b: 1). It appears that the government aims to expand ECD infrastructure and training so as to scale ECD across the country. At the same time, the government seeks to contract out ECD services to existing centres, providing these organisations with the funding to survive and scale (Department of Social Development, 2016: 81). It seems that the state hopes to build on existing services to scale ECD (Stats SA, 2016b: x).

Various government departments have roles under the NIECDP, with the Department of Social Development (DSD) initially allocated main responsibility for ensuring the availability, quality and access to learning and care opportunities for young children (although this mandate has now shifted, see: page 83) (Department of Social Development, 2016: 76). Provinces are responsible for implementation and funding of health and social services, and local municipalities are responsible for coordinating ECD programmes, monitoring standards, registering programmes, and infrastructure development (Department of Social Development, 2016: 81). The Department of Health is responsible for health and nutrition programmes for pregnant women and children and parent support (Department of Social Development, 2016: 76). At the time of legislation, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) is responsible for developing the early learning curriculum and procurement of training for ECD practitioners (Department of Social Development, 2016: 77). The Presidency has an oversight role, to ensure smooth functioning, cooperation and coherence between various departments (Department of Social Development, 2016: 80). Since the ECD components of early learning and childcare are of interest to this study, focus is placed on the roles of DSD and DBE.

Municipalities are to provide per capita programme support for ECD programmes, where practitioners apply for a subsidy per child in early learning (R17 per child per day) (Department of Social Development, 2016: 96). Centres eligible for funding are identified in two ways: if they are providing services in under-served geographic areas and/or if they are providing services to children eligible for the CSG (i.e., children from low-income backgrounds) (Department of Social Development, 2016: 97). To register for the subsidy, ECD programmes also need to meet minimum infrastructure and practitioner qualification requirements (Ilifa Labantwana and Kago Ya Bana, 2018: 1). Funding priority is given to target populations, namely children in poverty and children with disabilities (Department of Social Development, 2016: 97). Targeting the poorest communities does seem a practical approach in South Africa,

considering that inequality is often spatially defined. However, for this approach to be effective, there needs to be a clear commitment and realistic plan to achieving the goals of the NIECDP. Otherwise, poor communities may continue to experience poor access to and quality of programmes, while wealthier communities, who tend to exist outside the government system, may enjoy higher quality programmes on the market.

The current model outlined by the NIECDP holds another risk. This policy outlines the importance of partnerships, especially with civil society, which is an exciting prospect (Department of Social Development, 2015: 74). It also suggests that the government is responsible for leading the policy's implementation, supplying the leadership, resources and strategic vision. However, there is a danger that the emphasis on partnerships could be used to legitimise outsourcing on the part of the government. Furthermore, "partnership" remains a vague and ill-defined term – the reader is left uncertain about the nature of these partnerships and the agency of the players involved. Even within government departments, the emphasis on partnership may point to certain weaknesses in terms of implementation.

The NIECDP mandates roles for both the DSD and DBE, amongst others, in early learning and care (Department of Social Development, 2015: 76-77). Historically, these departments have worked "in silos with little coordination, collaboration and coherence" (Atmore, 2019: 209). Ultimately, lack of collaboration has resulted in fractured responsibility and poor implementation (Atmore, 2019: 209). The successful implementation of the NIECDP requires that the state address lack of cohesion. Furthermore, responsibility for the ECD mandate, though primarily allocated to DSD at the time of policy-making, is dispersed among a wide group of departments and agencies, raising concerns about accountability and intergovernmental cooperation. This dispersion of responsibility is concerning in a context where local government structures face severe constraints such as fiscal challenges, inadequate institutional capacity, corruption, and service delivery failures (Linnay, 2013: 27).

Furthermore, it appears that the NIECDP falls into the pitfall of gender-blindness, failing to engage with the impact that the expansion of ECD services can have on female labour force participation. South African social and economic policy has often been criticised for gender-blindness, or the problem of insufficiently addressing or recognising structural inequalities beyond income or race alone (Plagerson *et al*, 2019: 5). This gender-blindness pitfall also seems a result of NDR logic, or the idea that a first phase of deracialised capitalism would

generate sufficient wealth so that the second phase (emancipation from all structural inequalities) can be implemented.

While the Constitution commits to the realisation of a gender equitable society, often policies do not take into account the interdependence of women's productive and reproductive roles, as many women in South Africa are expected to play the double role of active labour market participants and unpaid caregivers (Plagerson *et al*, 2019: 5). For example, the CSG has been especially important for South African women, as the vast majority of beneficiaries are female, enabling greater financial independence for women (Plagerson *et al*, 2019: 5). However, the CSG does not challenge the disproportionate role women play in giving care to children, meaning the gendered burden of social reproduction remains uncontested in policy (Plagerson *et al*, 2019: 5).

In late 2019, the government introduced legislation for paternity leave, promoting the idea that child rearing should be a shared parental duty (Omarjee, 2019). Combined with universal access to ECD, this legislation could be a powerful lever in terms of realising gender equality, or the revolution at point zero. It therefore appears a huge oversight that the only mention of this effect in the NIECDP (a 140-page document) is the general statement that the "availability of ECD services is a major contributing factor to women's empowerment" (Department of Social Development, 2016: 80).

#### 4.5. ECD on the ground: The gap between policy and practice

As ECD policy has developed in recent years, there has been some progress in expanding these services to the South African population. By 2017, ECD practitioners were for the first time able to register for the conditional ECD subsidy (Hall *et al*, 2017: 37), and the government has established some state-run ECD centres (although the number of children served by these centres is negligible) (Hickman, 2020: 16). Besides these gains for the sector, however, there has been little progress in expanding early learning services to the South African population. The government does not appear to have met its target of beginning the implementation of a plan to universalise ECD in South Africa in 2018, and has so far been unable to scale early learning services to the country's most vulnerable communities (Hall *et al*, 2019: 7).

Over one million three- to five-year-olds still do not have access to *any* form of early learning outside the home (Hall *et al*, 2019: 37), and three quarters of these children come from low-income families (Hickman and Matlhape, 2021). South Africa's early learning sector is marked

by inequality, with only 58 percent of children in the poorest income quintile attending early learning programmes in comparison to the 83 percent in attendance from the wealthiest quintile (Ashley-Cooper *et al*, 2019: 93). This lack of access is largely a result of the fact that the early learning services are generally provided by the private sector which charges user fees that many low-income communities cannot afford (Stats SA, 2016b: 7). NGOs and other civil society initiatives do fill some gaps in the current system, but these services may be of poorer quality due to funding constraints (Stats SA, 2016b: 7). In predominantly rural under-served areas, there are an estimated 4 000 children to every ECD centre (Hickman, 2020: 10).

Despite the government's intentions to transform South Africa's ECD trajectory, the (failed) liberal welfare regime type, and its corresponding inequality, persists in this sector. In a context of limited state support and reach, despite robust policy, ECD services are inaccessible for many South Africans. There are several reasons behind this failure to bring about an equitable and sustainable early learning regime, notably the fiscal constraints, poor coordination, quality issues and barriers to entry caused by regulations (Hall *et al*, 2019: 7). Various reasons behind the lack of access to quality early learning and care are explored below:

#### 4.5.1. Coordination challenges

The government has not yet created or put in place a centralised planning, coordination, or quality assurance mechanism that would enable the scaling up of early learning centres and progress towards equitable early learning access (Hickman, 2020: 16). Currently, there is no mechanism for delivery at scale or population-level planning for ECD (Hickman, 2020: 5). Instead, it appears that the state is simply attempting to extend the currently existing approaches by subsidising existing programmes, which is unlikely to transform the status quo (Hickman, 2020: 5).

This approach has several drawbacks: it creates a fragmented landscape, and builds on approaches that have not been designed for scale (Hickman, 2020: 5). Furthermore, these initiatives are not linked up (i.e., they operate in isolation from one another), meaning that there is no overall coordination and regulation for the sector (Hickman, 2020: 6). Ultimately this approach is not only inequitable, as many areas remain underserved, but costly for the government, as fragmented and localised projects cannot reap the benefits and cost reductions of economies of scale (Hickman, 2020: 6). This approach is also unlikely to fulfil the goal of the NIECDP to reach all children by the year 2030. Faced with the need to reach over one million more children, South Africa's early learning ecosystem needs to grow by

approximately 100 000 more practitioners and 40 000 new venues (Hickman, 2020: 6). It seems unlikely that the government's current approach will enable this growth.

As a result of this failure to coordinate and scale early learning, there remains huge inequality in terms of childcare provision, and so far, there are very few official early learning centres serving a small proportion of the population (Solution Space, 2017). The early learning landscape remains predominantly market-led, as primary providers are small businesses who charge fees for their services (Hickman, 2020: 2). These centres are only accessible to those from high- and middle-income backgrounds in South Africa, who can pay for childcare and early learning services. In contrast, many low-income communities do not have access to early learning services or continue to rely on non-profit organisations and micro-enterprises where quality may be inadequate (de Henau *et al*, 2019: 4). Non-profit organisations and micro-enterprises do have several benefits as this localised service delivery builds on local social capital and creates jobs, but these initiatives are not scalable unless they are nationally organised and supported (Ilifa Labantwana and Kago Ya Bana, 2018: 4).

Without a central coordinating mechanism, these initiatives may suffer from strategic drift and those operating in isolation have little capacity to grow the supply of early learning and use new funding efficiently, while there is no mechanism for ensuring quality control (for more detail, see: page 85) among different service providers (Ilifa Labantwana and Kago Ya Bana, 2018: 4). Localised NGOs are not based on population planning, meaning they are not designed for scale (Hickman, 2020: 17). The NIECDP (2015) therefore has thus far been poorly implemented and coordinated (Richter, 2018: 104). Countries that have made good progress with scaling up early learning have almost all had a central coordinating agency, and clear national leadership regarding child development goals (Nores and Fernandez, 2018: 60, Ilifa Labantwana and Kago Ya Bana, 2018: 4). Without this agency, it is unlikely that ECD outcomes will significantly improve (Ilifa Labantwana and Kago Ya Bana, 2018: 4).

#### 4.5.2. Funding challenges

Early learning services also remain under-resourced. ECD is a multi-faceted concept in South Africa, comprising five components: maternal and child health services, nutritional support, support for primary caregivers, social services (with specific reference to social grants) and stimulation for early learning (Department of Social Development, 2016: 25). The early learning component of ECD, however, makes up a very small proportion of South Africa's budget, and spending on early learning is less than 0.025 percent of GDP in 2021 (see: Table

5. 1 on page 93). This small budget allocation is inconsistent given the fact that the South African government has acknowledged the developmental potential of this investment, perhaps reflecting conflicting priorities of those who wrote the NIECDP and those responsible for its implementation (Ilifa Labantwana and Kago Ya Bana, 2018: 4). Lack of sufficient funding may be traced back to the fact that ECD services are part of the care economy, which, in South Africa and many other parts of the world, is predominantly provided by women (England, 2005: 382). In many cases, care work, and other feminised occupations, are devalued, offering less remuneration than other jobs requiring similar skills and education levels (England, 2005: 382). The devaluation of work typically done by women, such as ECD, may provide one explanation for the insufficient financing of ECD in South Africa. This instance again reflects the conservative welfare regime elements in South Africa.

Ultimately, it seems that financing for early learning will continue to lag behind that for primary and secondary education: the 2023/24 budget allocates R500 annually on the learning of each child up to age five, compared to R22 000 on each six- to 17-year-old (Hickman and Matlhape, 2021). This failure to invest properly in early learning ultimately means that unequal patterns of employment and education are unlikely to shift (Ilifa Labantwana and Kago Ya Bana, 2018: 3).

The issue of lack of funding (and coordination) for ECD has been recognised by the South African government. In order to combat this problem, in 2019, President Cyril Ramaphosa shifted the mandate of ECD provision from the DSD to the DBE, and announced that an additional year of school (Grade RR) is to be made compulsory (Hall *et al*, 2019: 7). DBE therefore takes over the main responsibility for ECD from DSD. This announcement is significant as it signals that the government recognises that early learning is a critical component of education, and closer alignment with the DBE would hopefully result in an increased budget, improved workforce training, and closer alignment of the early learning curricula with the needs of foundation phase learning (Hall *et al*, 2019: 7). Education spending in South Africa is the largest single item in the budget, so the shift of the ECD mandate towards the DBE is significant in terms of funding access (Meier *et al*, 2017: 447).

The shift in mandate also positions early learning as a developmental strategy, rather than just a form of welfare (Hall *et al*, 2019: 7). At this stage, however, it remains too early to tell what the impact of this positioning will be. The challenge now is about how to ensure that early learning services provided by the DBE are of sufficient quality, considering that South Africa

faces an education quality crisis also at primary and secondary education levels (Spaull, 2013: 7-9). The subsidised South African basic education system as a whole is in many ways palliative, and the upscaling of a low-quality system will not be transformative. Furthermore, this shift in mandate needs to also include the voices of organisations that currently provide ECD across the country – otherwise the government is again turning towards an insulated and technocratic process that may not be responsive to the realities of the communities it aims to serve. The beginning of this migration took place in April 2022 (Banda, 2022).

As of early 2022, there is reason to believe that this shift in mandate is unlikely to cause more financial inflows to early learning. Since 2016, the South African state has pursued several cuts to expenditure on welfare (and development) enhancing services, with a focus on reducing the budget deficit (Bond, 2016: 37). This reduction points towards austerity which occurs when, in efforts to “balance the budget” and curtail government debt, the state cuts spending, makes tax structures more regressive or both (Sibeko, 2019: 3). From 2017 to 2019, South Africa’s average non-interest expenditure growth (i.e., spending on government goods, services and salaries) of 0.9 percent has not kept up with population growth (Sibeko, 2019: 4). In addition, there have been cuts to education and health spending in real terms (Bond, 2016: 37). Despite the challenges South Africa faces in health and education, spending per person on meeting these needs has decreased (Sibeko, 2019: 4). Therefore, changes to the budget have undermined the realisation of these constitutionally protected socio-economic rights (Sibeko 2019: 4).

After the 2021 budget speech, this shift to a fiscally austere environment became clearer. Despite (previous) Finance Minister Tito Mboweni’s claims that the 2021 budget was not an austerity budget (National Treasury, 2021), the budget analysis included several cuts to social expenditure, especially in the realm of education (including ECD) (Petherbridge *et al*, 2021). 2021 marked the first year since the adoption of the Constitution that the budget has clearly proposed a substantial reduction in the real value of allocations to public services and welfare (Petherbridge *et al*, 2021). Even worse, the budget has not set time frames for when these austerity measures would be lifted or eased (Petherbridge *et al*, 2021). Consequently, the level of funding is too low, and the funds that the state allocates to practitioners, especially those operating in low-income contexts where parents cannot necessarily pay for services rendered, means that the sector does not offer minimum wage.

South Africa’s commitment to a fiscally austere budget, in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, is striking. Many other countries, including those where policies tend to be

dominated by neoliberal ideology, faced with shrinking economies after Covid-19 related lockdowns instead expanded fiscal spending in order to stimulate growth, pushing aside concerns of government debt for the moment (Casado *et al*, 2021: 2). In contrast, the South African government has maintained a focus on balancing the budget, even in the midst of a crisis of such magnitude. Severe fiscal constraints continue to undermine access to ECD, meaning that the sector remains highly inequitable (Hall *et al*, 2019: 7).

#### 4.5.3. Regulation, registration and quality issues

Another issue related to funding at the micro-level is the difficulty many early learning sites face when registering for the government ECD subsidy. While the schooling sector from Grade R onwards is highly subsidised, with three quarters of school-goers paying no fees at all, ECD practitioner subsidies are limited, meaning that many practitioners need to act as small businesses, with three quarters of the sector surviving by charging fees (Wills *et al*, 2020: 1). The reported rate of fee payment in the sector remains high, even among low-income groups (Hall *et al*, 2019: 38).

Early learning sites operating in home- or community-based settings are eligible to register for this government subsidy (DGMT, 2021a: 1). However, the entry-level standards for conditional registration for the subsidy are generally set so high that many of these programmes do not qualify – practitioners often do not meet infrastructure and higher education qualification requirements (DGMT, 2021a: 1). Usually it is these programmes, rather than centre-based programmes, that serve the poorest children, so it is problematic that they are often unable to access funding (Hickman and Matlhape, 2021). Furthermore, this failure to access funding creates a circular problem where programmes in under-served areas do not have financing to improve their infrastructure or formal qualifications, but the state will not provide funding until these improvements have been made (DGMT, 2021a: 1).

In 2018, 42 percent of children under five lived in non-urban areas (Hickman, 2020: 12). The low population density of these areas often means that building new facilities for ECD is not viable and early learning programmes are often run out of existing premises (Hickman, 2020: 12). Vulnerable families rely on these programmes for childcare and early learning access (Hickman and Matlhape, 2021: 56). Home-based programmes are therefore important in serving these communities (Hickman, 2020: 12). However, these programmes face barriers to registration, meaning that the most under-resourced programmes are often the ones with the least state assistance (Hickman, 2020: 12). The issue does not seem to be so much about

funding as the funding model itself where sites serving the most vulnerable continue to struggle to finance operations. The state expects high standards and norms but is in effect forcing practitioners in low-income communities to earn below minimum wage. It therefore does not appear that the state has taken into account the realities of the sector in these communities resulting in an inappropriate funding model. The NIECDP illustrates that the state has a prefigurative vision of what ECD should look like in South Africa, but does not have an appropriate theory of change to make that vision a reality.

State regulation does seem to be in place to ensure some level of quality in the sector – it is ineffective to scale poor quality systems. In under-resourced contexts, it seems that there may be an access-quality trade-off, and the government regulations appear to favour quality over access. Despite this emphasis, it has been difficult to understand what “quality” early learning means in the South African context as for some time there was no standardised measure to evaluate the impact of early learning programmes on children (Snelling *et al*, 2019: 259). (Snelling *et al*, 2019: 259). A solution to this in fact came out of civil society as Innovation Edge, an investor in ECD social enterprises in South Africa, commissioned the development of South Africa’s first population level preschool child assessment tool (Snelling *et al*, 2019: 259). The result of this commission is the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM), a population-level instrument and scoring tool which measures the developmental status of children aged between 50 and 69 months (Dawes *et al*, 2020: 68).

ELOM scores, derived from 23 assessments in five domains, are used to categorise children as *at risk*, *falling behind*, or *achieving the ELOM standard* (Horler *et al*, 2019: 47). These categories assess children against the early learning standards they are expected to reach prior to Grade R (the compulsory preschool year in South Africa), to determine the impact of early learning programmes (Horler *et al*, 2019: 47). The expected ELOM standards are benchmarked at the standard score achieved by the top 40 percent of children in a sample of randomly selected preschool children in each of the five school quintiles (Snelling *et al*, 2019: 265). Following the establishment of this baseline, however, ELOM data collected on 506 children enrolled in ten different early learning programmes across quintiles in 2018 indicated that only 29 percent of South African children were found to achieve the ELOM standard (Hall *et al*, 2019: 39). It therefore appears that many if not most South African children enrolled in early learning programmes are not achieving the expected standards prior to Grade R.

Furthermore, results of the Thrive by Five Index, the first measure of the population-level impact of ECD programmes in South Africa, were recently released (Giese *et al*, 2022: 4). The index assessed more than 5 000 children between the ages of four and five, attending 1 247 early learning programmes, making it the largest South African survey of child outcomes (Giese *et al*, 2022: 4). The study tracked early learning outcomes alongside other child development measures (Giese *et al*, 2022: 4). Data on early learning was collected using the ELOM (Giese *et al*, 2022: 4). Findings indicate that 65 percent of South African children enrolled in ECD programmes fail to “thrive by five” (Giese *et al*, 2022: 4). For early learning specifically, 55 percent of all children in these programmes are not on track developmentally for their age, and 28 percent of all children are falling far behind the expected standard, in need of intensive intervention (Giese *et al*, 2022: 4). Children from higher income backgrounds (likely accessing more expensive, market-based solutions) clearly outperformed the rest (Giese *et al*, 2022: 4).

The Thrive by Five index indicates that the state, whose regulation seems to favour quality over access, has in fact compromised both, especially for poor communities. The state tries to control the sector and sets high standards but does not provide the resources or develop the capacity for implementation, resulting in fragmented service delivery and substantial barriers to entry that practitioners in under-served communities struggle to cope with.

Quality issues and the denial of access to subsidies to these programmes continues to marginalise poor children, who are in need of early learning, and mothers, who rely on these programmes in order to alleviate the burden of care (Hickman and Matlhape, 2021: 56). Furthermore, the government’s emphasis on building facilities specifically for ECD diverts already limited funding to expensive infrastructure, and slows the pace of the early learning rollout in South Africa, making it difficult for the government to reach its target of universal access to ECD by 2030 (Hickman, 2020: 21). The state of early learning in South Africa remains highly inequitable, with women and children in low-income communities worst off.

#### 4.5.4. Unpacking coordination, regulation and funding failures: Lack of political will?

ECD in South Africa therefore remains uncoordinated and underfunded. Atmore (2019: 207) identifies the state’s failure to coordinate and fund ECD as a signal of lack of political will, where ECD is in reality often not a political priority. Furthermore, Atmore (2019: 207) claims that the departments responsible for implementing ECD policy (the DSD and DBE) suffer from limited leadership and government capacity. There is therefore a disjunct between the

intentions and priorities of those who wrote South Africa's ECD policy, where inputs came from researchers, practitioners, academics, government officials, parents and the public, and the departments responsible for its implementation. If ECD is not a political priority, it will not be adequately financed and implemented.

Some key government speeches provide insight into the idea that early learning and care, and their role in unburdening women of care obligations especially, may not in reality be political priorities. Former Finance Minister Trevor Manuel's NDP launch speech (Republic of South Africa, 2012) places emphasis on the importance of investment in ECD as a developmental strategy. This positioning is significant as it marks the first point at which the government explicitly brings ECD to the forefront as a priority. However, as is the case in the earlier analysis of the actual NDP document, one aspect of an analysis of the role of ECD appears missing in this speech: there is no analysis of the intersection between childcare, gender and labour market inequality. This absence is especially conspicuous given that this speech foregrounds inequality as a major issue (Republic of South Africa, 2012). This failure in turn shows a lack of prioritisation to unburdening women of care obligations, and reproduces a context where the unpaid economic activity done by women continues to be made invisible.

Furthermore, despite this positioning of ECD as a developmental priority, budget speeches (which allocate the funding to various departments) following the launch of the adoption of the NDP neglect to make mention of funding allocated to learning in the earliest years. An exception to this trend is former Finance Minister Mboweni's 2021 budget speech which marks the first mention of ECD (National Treasury, 2021). Following this 2021 speech, Finance Minister Enoch Godongwana's 2022 budget speech again fails to mention ECD as an economic priority (National Treasury, 2022).

In Minister Mboweni's 2021 budget speech, as well as Minister Sisulu's 2021 DSD budget vote following the budget speech, lack of coordination of different actors working in the ECD sector also seems related to the way in which the state frames its relationship with civil society. Minister Mboweni makes several references to partnership between sectors in his speech, but never explicitly mentions civil society. Minister Mboweni emphasises that there is a need to partner with "the private sector and other players" as well as "encourage collaboration and partnerships between municipal councils, labour, communities and the private sector" but never mentions civil society directly (National Treasury, 2021).

Minister Sisulu's speech pays more attention to the role of civil society in social development. In this speech, she positions civil society as "an extension of the delivery arm of social development services" (Republic of South Africa, 2021). Here, however, the role of civil society is relegated to a service provider on behalf of the state rather than a genuine partner. These speeches provide insight into the actual priorities of the South African state, where ECD (and especially its role in unburdening women of care obligations) appears an afterthought and where civil society is often framed as a service delivery agent rather than equal partner. The nature of this relationship also seems to point towards a technocratic and top-down form of embeddedness where the state controls the sector from the top, but tends to remain less responsive to communities and civil societies, a logic that often feels at odds with the government's rhetoric of partnership and community empowerment.

#### 4.5.5. The impact of Covid-19 on South Africa's ECD sector

This picture has become even more dismal as it appears that access to early learning has been contracting rather than expanding. The proportion of children enrolled in some form of early learning dropped from 2018 to 2019, with approximately 190 000 fewer children in early learning (in a country with a large and growing young population) (Hickman and Matlhape, 2021). A diminishing number of young children accessing early learning has been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown in South Africa, starting in April 2020, during which the sector was closed for several months (Wills *et al*, 2020: 1).

COVID-19 unsurprisingly had an adverse effect on the sector, but the key point is that it revealed underlying weakness, and how imagining, policy making, and implementation of ECD and social policy more generally in South Africa falls short. It highlighted the vulnerability of the ECD sector in South Africa and the minimal nature of South Africa's welfare regime, demonstrating the lack of structural support to poorer families in South Africa outside of the childcare grant.

The pandemic has laid bare the dependence economies have on the invisible and unpaid care work of women. The closure of early learning centres has had a devastating impact on female labour force participation. Based on the input of respondents in the National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile (NIDS-CRAM) Survey (2020), in cases where ECD attendance did not resume, the burden of childcare was often borne by mothers, impacting their ability to take on work outside the household (Wills *et al*, 2020: 3). More than twice the number of women than men reported that looking after children in June 2020 prevented them from

working or job-seeking (Giese, 2020). This is in a context where women appear already disadvantaged in the South African workforce as the slowest employment recovery in 2020 was for women (Nwosu, 2021: 2): two million out of the three million jobs lost during the period February to April in 2020 belonged to women (Hickman and Matlhape, 2020).

In this context, decisive intervention from the government is necessary to rescue a sector “hanging in the balance” (Wills *et al*, 2020: 1). However, government interventions in 2020 related to economic stimulus continuously overlooked the ECD sector (Hickman and Matlhape, 2020). This oversight has impacted the ability of early learning to resume after the initial harsh Covid-19 lockdown. When ECD centres were allowed to reopen in July 2020, almost 70 percent of sites remained closed, mostly due to financial reasons and the inability to afford personal and protective equipment (Giese, 2020). The lack of planning illustrated in these cases calls into question whether ECD really is a priority for the South African government.

In the absence of state intervention, many South Africans turned to kin, especially grandparents and, more disturbingly, elder daughters as providers of childcare support, reinforcing gendered caring patterns (Cantillon *et al*, 2021: 190). Due to lack of access to care, many South Africans were relying on these family networks beforehand, and this pattern was reinforced by the effects of the pandemic. Some relief by the government was offered in the form of a once-off grant for ECD practitioners in October 2020 (Hickman and Matlhape, 2021), but the rescue of this sector from collapse still requires more action on the part of the state and, given the commitment to fiscal austerity, it remains unlikely that this timely action will emerge.

#### 4.6. Conclusion

ECD policy in South Africa has been developed in recent years, and the relevant legislation positions the expansion of early learning in particular, and ECD in general, as a national priority. The NIECDP and NDP recognise the value of ECD as an enabler of children’s growth, women’s independence, and national development. Based on this recognition, both documents position the state as the leading partner in attempts to rollout universal ECD services. It therefore appears that there is a rhetorical commitment by government to ECD and some legislative developments. However, since the NIECDP was passed in December 2015, South Africa’s ECD landscape remains largely unchanged. In a market-led sector, with significant variation in quality, over one million three-to-five-year-olds do not have access to any form of early learning outside the home. The fact that policy is not coherently implemented raising

interesting points – while policies like the NIECDP may signal a commitment to ECD and gender issues in a way that may positively impact the national consciousness and provide a prefigurative vision, there is a simultaneous sense that these legislative changes may be a way of deflecting pressure about lack of action in this space.

The state's current approach does not seem fit for purpose. Overregulation of ECD practitioner subsidies and underfunding of the sector as a whole reflects a state lacking responsiveness, seeming to choose top-down strategies of control over bottom-up, democratic forms of embeddedness. Resources are a significant constraint, and, in the foreseeable future, it seems that ECD policy will remain underfunded. With limited resources, it appears that there is a trade-off between access to and quality of early learning. Here, it seems that the government has actually compromised both – the state tries to control the sector and sets high standards but does not provide the resources or develop capacity for implementation, resulting in poor service delivery and substantial barriers to entry. It appears the state is caught between aiming for first world standards for all children and not having the resources, will or capacity to realise this aspiration. Even in contexts where there is better resourcing (such as Basic Education), top-down, technocratic models produce poor quality systems, where those with financial means exit in favour of market alternatives. In this context, and early learning and care deficit persists.

Moving away from this dismal picture, the following chapter begins to explore the possibility that may still exist in constrained environments. It comprises a comparison of different approaches to early learning in the global South. It closely explores the operation of three different early learning franchises, highlighting the lessons and insights that can be drawn from these organisations.

## CHAPTER 5 – A COMPARISON OF EARLY LEARNING SOCIAL FRANCHISES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

### 5.1. Introduction

The previous chapter explored South Africa's ECD policy and practice, portraying a fractured and unequal early learning and care regime where significant barriers limit the expansion of ECD access. In this constrained context, it is important to consider the possibility that may still exist and how returns to ECD may be unlocked in second-best scenarios. Attention should be paid to the value of the actors attempting to shift a currently poor early learning trajectory and contribute to a more transformative ECD landscape. Beyond the market, family and state, civil society organisations may hold potential to transform this status quo, not only in South Africa, but in several developing countries (Razavi, 2007).

This chapter comprises a comparison between three civil society organisations (CSOs) aiming to enhance access to early learning in developing countries: SmartStart in South Africa, aeioTU in Colombia, and Mobile Crèches (MC) in India. These three organisations were chosen as the basis for this comparative analysis as they have been identified in the literature as successful examples of civil society innovations capable of operating at scale, and from which other countries can learn (Premji, 2014: 86-87; Samman and Lombardi, 2019: 5). The purpose of this comparison is twofold. Firstly, it serves to highlight the lessons and insights the experience of global civil society offers South Africa in its attempts to universalise early learning and care. Secondly, it acts as an expansion beyond the state-market-family nexus, and the boundaries of the nation state, to explore the possibility that exists in constrained contexts. This analysis sheds light on alternative avenues that hold promise in unlocking the returns associated with early learning and care.

In this chapter, I consider the experiences of the developing countries from which aeioTU, MC and SmartStart originate and operate, respectively Colombia, India and South Africa. Following this country characterisation is a thematic comparison exploring the similarities and differences between SmartStart, aeioTU and MC, and the lessons that can be learned from their varying strategies. This comparison focuses on the vision of each programme; modality and business model; funding sources; partnerships with other sectors, scale achieved; impact on individual children; and the scope and gender responsiveness of these organisations. This analysis serves to provide a comprehensive outline of these three early learning organisations in the developing world, and the lessons learned from their experiences.

## 5.2. Exploring the experiences of case study countries: Colombia and India

Earlier in this thesis, a comparison of various countries revealed that unequal and inadequate access to ECD appears to be an issue in both the developing and developed world (see: page 44). Chapter 4 sketches the state of ECD in South Africa, pointing toward a fractured and highly unequal sector. It appears that the South African case is not unique, and similar circumstances can be found in other parts of the world. While South Africans have a tendency to suffer from exceptionalism, believing the country's problems to be exceptional as a result of a specific colonial and apartheid history (Magaziner and Jacobs, 2012), there are lessons that can be drawn from other countries, including India and Colombia.

Below is a quantitative comparison of state of early learning and care in Colombia, India and South Africa, with focus placed on access, the proportion of public and private provision of services, and budget allocations.

*Table 5. 1 ECCE enrolment rates and government budget allocations in the three case study countries using latest available data (percentages)*

Country	3- to 5/6-year-olds accessing early learning and care	Public provision	Private and NGO provision	3- to 5/6-year-olds without access to early learning and care	Government early learning and care budget allocation (% of GDP)
Colombia	78 <sup>a</sup>	No data	No data	22 <sup>a</sup>	0.4 <sup>a</sup>
India	72.9 <sup>b 1</sup>	38.7 <sup>b</sup>	30.7 <sup>b</sup>	27.1 <sup>b</sup>	<0.1 <sup>d</sup>
South Africa	69 <sup>c</sup>	0 <sup>c</sup>	69 <sup>c 2</sup>	31 <sup>c</sup>	<0.025 <sup>e</sup>

Sources: a) OECD (2021: 170-172); b) Rao *et al* (2021b: 9); c) Hall *et al*, (2019: 37); d) Own calculations, using figures drawn from Ministry of Women and Child Development (2022: 350); e) Own calculations, using figures drawn from National Treasury (2021: 12)

Notes: 1) The sum of public and private provision does not equal total provision as India is lacking data about the reach of NGOs in the sector (Rao *et al*, 2021b: 8).

2) ECD in South Africa is privately provided but 12 percent of low-income children under six years do have access to government subsidised early learning programmes (Hall *et al*, 2019: 37).

### 5.2.1. Colombia

Colombia is similar to South Africa in many ways: it is also an upper middle-income country whose problem of socioeconomic inequality means that, often, children from low-income communities cannot access early learning and care services (Mesa *et al*, 2021: 1). To realise a comprehensive system of ECCE for all children, particularly those who are poor and

vulnerable, in 2010, the Colombian government developed the *De Cero a Siempre* (meaning “From Zero to Forever”, and hereinafter referred to as FZTF) strategy (World Bank, 2013: 2). The policies associated with this strategy are in place to increase access to ECCE in Colombia (World Bank, 2013: 2).

There are key similarities between the FZTF strategy and South Africa’s NIECDP: both approaches forge an explicit government mandate to ensure universal ECD or ECCE coverage (depending on either country’s terminology), and both emphasise the importance of partnerships between the state, markets and civil society to ensure this vision is realised (Arriagada, 2014: 1). Under FZTF, the Colombian government created the Inter-sectoral Commission for the Comprehensive Care of Early Childhood, which brings in key national actors, including the market and civil society, as part of a coordinated strategy (Government of Colombia, 2014). Unlike South Africa, Colombia’s ECCE policy has been accompanied by the creation of a dedicated ECCE agency, the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF), which coordinates implementation and financing (UNICEF, 2020a: 64).

The FZTF strategy comprises two central components: early learning centres and community homes or *Hogares Comunitarios de Bienestar* (HCBs) (World Bank, 2013: 17). Early learning centres for children below six-years-old provide education, health and care services, and are managed by the Colombian Ministry of Education (Bernal and Ramirez, 2019: 94). HCBs are community-based childcare programmes run by ICBF based in the homes of local mothers, and provide high levels of coverage for children under six (World Bank, 2013: 17). Echoing the Swedish history, HCBs actually originated over 45 years ago, in 1972, as a strategy to promote female labour force participation rather than children’s learning (Bernal and Fernández, 2013: 242). It was later found that these care programmes not only had an effect on the female labour force but also had positive effects on the learning readiness of children (Bernal and Fernández, 2013: 247). Children’s participation in this programme has in fact been linked to higher salary benefits later in life than those associated with an additional year in tertiary education (Bernal, 2015).

Overall, the FZTF strategy has seen an increase in ECCE access. This policy has been accompanied by fiscal commitment, of approximately 0.4 percent of GDP (see: Table 5. 1 on page 93) (OECD, 2021). This percentage is high for developing countries but still lower than UNICEF’s benchmark of one percent of GDP (see: page 45) (OECD, 2021). The Colombian government has also established several public ECCE centres based on the recognition that,

although there are high returns to ECCE, these services tend to be undersupplied in the absence of sufficient public investment (World Bank, 2013: 10). While many low-income families still need to pay a certain amount to access early learning programmes, the government's establishment and subsidisation of many early learning centres does seem to have enhanced access. Approximately 78 percent of children aged three to five in Colombia have access to ECCE (OECD, 2021). This is an increase from the 51 percent enrolment rate in 2009, prior to the introduction of FZTF (World Bank, 2013).

However, segmentation remains an issue in Colombia, despite the existence of an ECD agency responsible for coordination. Early learning centres and HCBs are under the auspices of different departments, although they are orientated towards the same outcome. While ECCE centres place more focus on early stimulation and learning, HCBs are ultimately more focused on enabling parents to work than on child development. This is potentially a consequence of misunderstanding the integrated and complementary relationship between care and education (Mello and Pinazza, 2020: 373). The ECCE sector in Colombia remains fractured, and quality is uneven. Just as in South Africa, many families lack the capacity to pay for market services, and there is little evaluation of the quality of care and early learning programmes, or even a nationally accepted definition of what "quality" constitutes (Mesa *et al*, 2021: 2). Inequity remains an issue in Colombia's early learning landscape, as there remain disparities in access along the lines of income and geographical location, where many low-income and rural areas remain under-served (World Bank, 2013: 21). These disparities are not necessarily a result of a lack of government commitment at a national level, but the failure of service delivery at a municipal level, in a segmented and decentralised system (World Bank, 2013: 22).

### 5.2.2. India

India also shares similarities with South Africa, as this unequal lower middle-income country faces an early learning deficit, and insufficient fiscal commitment to improve access (Mobile Crèches, 2020: xxix). India has policies in place setting out a state mandate to provide care and early learning services. In 1974, the National Policy for Children explicitly indicated that the state had a duty to provide care and other services to children (Chigateri, 2017: 6). Childcare was foregrounded as a benefit to both children and mothers. As a result of this policy, the state set up the Scheme of Assistance to Working/Ailing Mothers (Chigateri, 2017: 7). This scheme, however, led to the setup of only 10 000 creches, which barely made a dent in terms of meeting the childcare needs of India's young and growing population (Chigateri, 2017; 8). In 2009,

primary education was made free and compulsory by the state (Chigateri, 2017: 13). At this time, however, the care and education of children under six was not sufficiently addressed and the government “quietly left the care of the young child to the family” (Chigateri, 2017: 13).

Recent policy developments and legislative changes serve to address a consequent ECCE deficit, and task the state to bring about an equitable and gender responsive early learning and care regime (Chigateri, 2017: 14). In 2013, the government legislated National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy, which committed the state to providing universal access to early learning and care (UNICEF, 2020b: 8). The emergence of this policy is partly a result of the advocacy efforts of children’s and women’s rights activists, as well as the global environment (echoing the South African case) (UNICEF, 2020b: 8). Furthermore, this policy recognises that ECCE services are provided by the state, market and civil society, and that efforts should be made to coordinate various sectors for a harmonised approach (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2013: 5.) Focus on the significance of ECCE is reinforced in the recent National Educational Policy which recognises ECCE as the foundation stage of learning and which puts forward a policy goal that every child aged three to six should have access to safe, high quality and developmentally appropriate care and education by 2025 (Rao *et al*, 2021b: 17).

Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) are one of the Indian government’s largest early learning and care programmes, provided through a network of centres known as *anganwadis* (Manhas and Qadiri, 2010: 443). *Anganwadis* are tasked with the delivery of a comprehensive ECD package consisting of nutrition, immunisation, health check-ups, nutrition and health education, referral services and preschool education and care (Chigateri, 2017: 7). These centres have expanded rapidly, reaching over 82 million children under six years old in 2015 (Chigateri, 2017: 16). When one takes into account state and market provision, approximately 72.9 percent of three- to six-year-olds in India have access to ECCE – with government programmes accounting for just over half of all early learning services (see: Table 5. 1 on page 93) (Rao *et al*, 2021b: 9).

This percentage, however, does not depict universal coverage (Chigateri, 2017: 16). In a context where the majority of Indian children are in financially insecure households, if the state is unable to provide services, many cannot access market-based solutions (Mobile Crèches, 2020: xxix). The Indian early learning landscape is marked by unequal access. In addition to access issues, quality concerns arise as a result of differential implementation of ICDS across Indian states, as some states invest more than others in ECD and there is lack of standardisation

and quality control (Chigateri, 2017: 16). A study by Manhas and Qadiri (2010: 443) found that *anganwadi* centres provided few opportunities for stimulation and learning. Lack of training and resources have been persistent problems even after recent policy developments, as there is little funding for resources and employees at *anganwadis*, with workers often receiving less than the minimum wage, echoing the South African case (Mobile Crèches, 2020: xxix). This is no surprise given that the Indian state allocates less than 0.1 percent of GDP to funding *anganwadis* (see: Table 5. 1 on page 93). Therefore, the policy changes put in place to bring about an equitable early learning regime have not manifested as a reality in India, owing to poor coverage and service quality (Chigateri, 2017: 14).

A key reason behind differential access to and inadequate quality of early learning is the fact that these services remain underfunded by the government (Mobile Crèches, 2020: xxvi). A major funding gap means that the state is unable to provide quality services to its citizens (Mobile Crèches, 2020: xxix). While there has been some effort and financial allocation in terms of developing appropriate policy frameworks, there is little investment when it comes to implementation of early learning programmes (Mobile Crèches, 2020: xxvii). This context does appear to reflect the South African system where the state wants aims to expand access and set quality standards, but fails to allocate resources and capacity, and seems unresponsive to realities on the ground. Again, there appears to be a prefigurative vision but no theory of change as to how to achieve the goal of universal access to quality early learning.

Similarly echoing the South African case, several NGOs in India fill gaps in the system, but, while these innovations on the ground are valuable, they are limited in terms of their reach and impact (Mobile Crèches, 2020: xxvii). Furthermore, the proliferation of private and NGO services further complicates the issue of quality standardisation. According to Rao *et al* (2021b: 6) a minimalist approach to public programme governance and a “*laissez-faire* attitude to monitoring private sector programmes” that are developmentally inappropriate is “evident”. For this reason, Rao *et al* (2021b: 16) argue that there needs to be an increase in public funding to improve infrastructure and resources. Without this increase, universal early education in India appears to be a “distant dream” (Mobile Crèches, 2020: xxvii).

Unequal access to quality of early learning and care programmes also hurts women’s empowerment and employment opportunities. FLFP in India is low, at a rate lower than 35 percent (Bhattacharyya and Haldar, 2020: 143; World Bank, 2022). Furthermore, women in the labour market tend to be engaged in low-paid and often exploitative jobs (Bhattacharyya

and Haldar, 2020: 143). At the same time, a gender bias means that many working women are also expected to take on the role of caregiver in families (Mobile Crèches, 2020: xxvi). In this context, where poor women may struggle to access care and ECCE, legislative changes have done little to alleviate the double burden women face (Mobile Crèches, 2020: xxvi).

### 5.2.3. Colombia, India and South Africa compared

Across the three cases of India, Colombia and South Africa, a comparison of state action can be drawn. All three countries at a policy level have embraced a universal and rights-based approach to ECD, placing emphasis on Esping-Andersen's third welfare pillar: the state. At the level of implementation, however, not one of these countries is yet successful in ensuring universal access. It appears that the extent to which these countries make advances in terms of implementation is largely dependent on political will, fiscal commitment and coordination. In Colombia, where there has been a substantial budget reallocation towards ECD and national coordination, there have been substantial improvements in access to early learning and female labour force participation, although segmentation issues are significant. In India and South Africa, while there have been some improvements in access to ECD, inadequate fiscal allocations undermine the government's capacity to reach under-served groups.

A significant similarity in the policies of all three countries is about the role of NGOs and market providers. All three countries point to the importance of partnership between civil society, the private sector and state to bring about access to quality early learning and care. However, to different extents, all of these countries are not fully leveraging the complementary role of civil society (Mobile Crèches, 2020: xxvi). In response to an ECD coverage gap, there are many NGOs who aim to reach under-served areas these countries. However, these organisations are often uncoordinated and their impact is localised. This appears to be an opportunity missed, as greater coordination of these actors on the ground, and a government commitment to working with community organisations in practice as well as policy, would be a useful means of leveraging the resources that currently exist to enhance access to early learning in resource-constrained countries.

### 5.3. Beyond (or between) the state and the market: The vision and mission of social franchises for early learning

In Colombia, India and South Africa, other actors have emerged to counteract consequent ECD deficits. There have been civil society responses to lack of access to early learning in particular,

notably from the social economy. In the face of a national deficit, some initiatives have developed population-level solutions. Organisations explored further in this chapter include aeioTU in Colombia, SmartStart in South Africa, and Mobile Crèches (MC) in India.

aeioTU is a social franchise established in Colombia in 2008, just as the government was paying more attention to ECCE (Arriagada, 2014: 1). aeioTU aims to provide high quality and comprehensive ECCE, especially to those from low-income communities (Arriagada, 2014: 1). aeioTU's long term vision is to build a financially sustainable network of ECCE centres in order to address the country's ECCE service gap, by operating an innovative and scalable business model (Arriagada, 2014: 1). Its mission statement is to develop a high quality and standardised model that could be replicated across Colombia, with the vision to transform Colombia's ECCE trajectory and by extension Colombian society (Arriagada, 2014: 1).

In South Africa, the not-for-profit social franchise, SmartStart, formed in 2015 as a response to the approximately one million three- to five-year-old children without access to any form of early learning (SmartStart, 2020). In the face of an early learning deficit, SmartStart aims to universalise early learning through a population-level solution that brings these services to all of those currently without access (SmartStart, 2020: 2). SmartStart's vision, therefore, is to ensure that all South Africa's children can benefit from early learning opportunities, or to "give every child the power to succeed" (SmartStart, 2021e). The organisation's mission is to provide quality early learning services to all children without access each year (SmartStart, 2021e). SmartStart is organised around three main goals: improving the quality of ECD; increasing access to early learning opportunities; and building awareness among parents about the significance of early learning (SmartStart, 2021a).

In India, Mobile Crèches (MC) is a pioneer in the field of ECCE, originating over 50 years ago in 1969 (Mobile Crèches, 2021b). MC is an NGO aiming to provide age-appropriate and holistic learning to marginalised groups, serving to catalyse change in terms of childcare practices and women's labour market access (Mobile Crèches, 2021a). MC focuses on health, nutrition, education and communication with local children and communities, to bring about holistic child and community development (Mobile Crèches, 2021a). Its vision is to bring about a just and caring world for children from marginalised populations to enable them to develop into confident, competent adults (Mobile Crèches, 2021a). Its mission is to influence multiple stakeholders to promote ECCE (Mobile Crèches, 2021a).

While there is some variation in terms of the approaches of these three organisations, all of their visions point towards a desire to achieve population-level change in their countries, and reach *all* children rather than only those in specific localities.

#### 5.4. Programme modalities and business models

aeioTU has been recognised by the World Economic Forum and United Nations as a success story, and an example of an innovative approach in the care economy (World Economic Forum, 2017: 27). This innovation includes a series of holistic child development centres with integrated services – education, nutrition, and care – for children under the age of five (World Economic Forum, 2017: 28), with a specific focus on providing these services to low-income communities (Arriagada, 2014: 1). aeioTU serves to aid vulnerable children in fulfilling their potential, and is based on a recognition that education and nutrition interventions have a greater developmental impact than cash transfers (Nores *et al*, 2018b: 202).

aeioTU is a social franchise structured so that a central hub connects different franchises for economies of scale (Arriagada, 2014: 3). aeioTU serves to link up and consolidate several early learning NGOs in a strategic alliance and aims to develop a quality standardised model for early learning provision that can easily be replicated (Arriagada, 2014: 1-3). aeioTU also plays a role in certifying teachers in line with government regulation, and has established internal mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and quality control, including the establishment of a longitudinal long-term impact study to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme in general (not yet published) (Arriagada, 2014: 2).

aeioTU is a centre-based approach to early learning, where standardised centres operate for nine hours daily during the course of the week (Arriagada, 2014: 2). aeioTU centres have low child-to-teacher ratios, with two adults assigned to 20 children (Arriagada, 2014: 2). Its programme is inspired by Reggio Emilia’s pedagogical philosophy which serves to develop the potential of children through play, exploration, and reciprocal relationships between teachers and children, and where children drive their own educational experiences (Mesa *et al*, 2021: 3). Children’s nutrition is similarly essential in this experience, and aeioTU centres provide attendees with 70 percent of their daily nutritional intake (Nores *et al*: 2018b: 204).

Like aeioTU, SmartStart is a social franchise. It aims to serve as a solution to the South African government’s goal to achieve universal access to ECD by 2030 (SmartStart, 2020: 28). This social franchise approach uses commercial franchising concepts to achieve socially beneficial

ends ahead of profit (DGMT, 2021b). This model is based on a network of franchisees or “SmartStarters” trained and licensed by SmartStart to implement the ECD programme in their own communities (Horler *et al*, 2019: 1). Franchisees are not SmartStart employees but are independent micro-entrepreneurs who set up sites, recruit children and run their own programmes according to a standardised model (Horler *et al*, 2019: 2).

Franchisees form part of community clubs managed by club coaches who oversee support and monitoring of franchises (Horler *et al*, 2019: 2). The overall programme, including club coaches, is managed by and coordinated under the SmartStart hub (SmartStart, 2021a). This social franchising model is designed to be easily replicable, affordable and responsive to differing contexts. SmartStart’s social franchise model is unique as it includes an additional tier between the franchisee and the hub: the franchisor network. Franchisors are existing NGOs that already provide ECD services (SmartStart, 2020: 28). SmartStart aims to link up these contributions, so that local NGOs facilitate the implementation of the SmartStart model in local contexts. Therefore, SmartStart focuses not only on localised contexts but aims to achieve population-level change, so that all South African children have equitable access to early learning (SmartStart, 2020: 28).

In a context where current approaches to early learning are not designed for scale, or where the government has not yet devised a sufficient model, SmartStart aims to expand system capacity by acting as a national delivery platform (SmartStart, 2020: 28). A national delivery platform is one that links up and standardises the contributions of existing services to ensure quality control, and expands services to reach those currently without access (SmartStart, 2020: 28). It is about creating a strategy for scale, which involves coordinating the contributions of NGOs for maximum reach (SmartStart, 2020: 28). This platform is an attempt to create a model for scaling ECD where one currently does not exist, and a strategy that the government can adopt. Like aeioTU, SmartStart aims to align the interests and capabilities of government, NGOs and funders to make universal access possible (SmartStart, 2020: 29). Therefore, SmartStart does not aim to act as a bigger NGO than those currently existing but is an approach designed at the outset for scale, in order to transform a currently fragmented early learning model (Hickman, 2020: 72). This platform seeks to unlock the returns to early learning in South Africa.

Key to the platform are the franchisees, or women (and men) who implement the SmartStart programme. SmartStart early learning sessions are designed to provide nurturing and playful learning opportunities (SmartStart, 2021d). This stance is based on research that identifies five

features of successful early learning programmes: nurture, talk, play, stories and parent partnership (SmartStart, 2021d). These five pillars form the basis for the SmartStart learning and teaching philosophy (SmartStart, 2021d). This approach is therefore similar to aeioTU's Reggio Emilia philosophy, but also aims to blend these philosophies with local knowledge and practices (SmartStart; 2021d). To facilitate this learning style, learner-to-teacher ratios are low: one teacher takes on groups of five to 12 children (Horler *et al*, 2019: 104).

SmartStart aims to provide a feasible pathway for the South African government to follow in scaling up ECD services (Dawes *et al*, 2020: 18). In the South African case, where public investment into and resources for early learning are constrained (see: Table 5. 1 on page 93), the SmartStart programme is deliberately designed to be lean – it is about the “minimum critical specification for the maximum number of children possible” (Dawes *et al*, 2020: 26). Based on this logic, SmartStart services are both centre-based, where facilities do exist, and home-based, in communities where no early learning services were previously provided, as home-based approaches are inexpensive to set up, flexible and able to grow according to community needs (SmartStart, 2021c). Home-based programmes also make it easier for SmartStart to reach rural areas without access, which both aeioTU and MC do not really impact.

While the most inexpensive approach is appropriate in terms of scalability, it does create concern around the service quality of franchises. A leaner programme means that children meet at franchises meet for three-hour early learning sessions twice a week (Horler *et al*, 2019: iii). An issue, therefore, is whether this six hour per week model is sufficient – especially considering that 15 hours per week is the international minimum recommended participation of children in early learning (Horler *et al*, 2019: iii). Another potential concern relates to nutrition. At some sites, children are incentivised to attend because they receive fortified porridge during the day (Dawes *et al*, 2020: 2). Feeding schemes, however, are not guaranteed at all sites (Horler *et al*, 2019: xxii).

Unlike aeioTU and SmartStart, MC defines itself as an NGO rather than explicitly as a social franchise, originating during a time where the term “social franchise” was not widely used or understood. However, MC's goals are to a large extent aligned with the other social franchises: it aims to create a model that is scalable and that is cost-effective (Mobile Crèches, 2021b). In a similar fashion to aeioTU and SmartStart, MC made the decision in 1979 not to act merely as a service provider, but instead defines itself as trainer, advocate and pusher for better government policy and practice in terms of realising universal ECCE (Chigateri, 2017: 19).

MC recognises that the magnitude of an early learning deficit in India is too big for one NGO acting in isolation to solve and that there is a need to adopt a systems-based approach that coordinates various players (Chigateri, 2017: 19). MC therefore sees itself not as a service delivery intervention but as a project aiming to make visible the ECCE sector, demonstrate a mechanism by which the early learning deficit can be addressed, and provide an evidence-base for the state to adopt this model (Venkateswaran, 2013: 24). Since MC believes that ECCE is primarily a state responsibility, a key pillar of MC's approach is advocacy, with focus on pushing for legislative changes; as an advocate, MC played a significant role in the establishment of the National ECCE Policy in India (Venkateswaran, 2013: 25).

In contrast to aeioTU and SmartStart, MC does not focus on low-income communities in general, but instead works with specific groups who face exclusion from government services (Chigateri, 2017: 25). In particular, MC works with migrants who have moved from rural India into urban areas (usually in a nuclear family unit), in search of work opportunities (Venkateswaran, 2013: 6). Many of these migrants are absorbed as informal workers in the construction industry, the largest sector in India in terms of absorption of displaced people (Pispati *et al*, 2017: 7). Often, construction sites become temporary homes for working migrants, and the informal nature of this work means that workers receive few benefits in terms of housing, sanitation, and childcare and education for children (Venkateswaran, 2013: 7).

The Indian state has mandated that any person employing 50 or more women has an obligation to provide some form of childcare, but this obligation is very rarely enforced, leaving many working women, especially those on these temporary construction sites, without care (Murphy, 2013: 13). This example is another interesting case of the gap between the stated rights and lived experience. In a context where both parents/caregivers work in construction, children are left without care, or eldest siblings (generally girl children) have to take on a caregiving role, often at the expense of their education (Venkateswaran, 2013: 8). For this reason, MC deliberately aims to work with these specific communities, and are "mobile" crèches as a result of the temporary nature of construction sites.

Another group facing a care and early education deficit is the urban slum community in Indian cities (Venkateswaran, 2013: 9). Migrants found in urban slums and on construction sites generally do not have any identification documents which excludes them from accessing state-provided early learning or childcare (Pispati *et al*, 2017: 7). MC therefore targets these groups specifically, and has set up ECCE centres in slums and near construction sites, based on the

recognition that these services should be a universal right (Chigateri, 2017: 19). These sites are rigorously managed by MC appointed supervisors, and caregivers and teachers at these centres are provided with extensive pre-work and in-training so that they can implement an effective ECD programme (Venkateswaran, 2013: 16; Charturvedi, 2019: 33).

Like SmartStart and aeioTU, MC has adopted a play and child-centred teaching philosophy (Mobile Crèches, 2021d). MC centres operate a flexible programme for eight hours daily, six days per week (Mobile Crèches, 2021a). MC is centre-based, where centres for ECD are built specifically near construction sites, according to government specified minimum conditions (Mobile Crèches, 2021c). MC addresses three groups of children: they provide care and early learning of children aged zero to three, they provide preschool for children aged three to six, and they provide non-formal schooling for children aged six to 12, who are currently not in school and excluded from the formal system (despite the fact that the Indian state has made primary school compulsory) (Chigateri, 2017: 3). MC has low child to teacher ratios at all sites of around 10: 1 to ensure meaningful engagement with teachers can take place (Chigateri, 2017: 24). Nutrition is provided at these centres: each child receives supplementary nutrition of 700 kilocalories and 30 grams of protein and malnourished children are given a special diet as per a doctor's recommendation (Pispati *et al*, 2017: 8).

The following table summarises the key aspects of these three early learning approaches:

Table 5. 2 Key characteristics of aeioTU, SmartStart and MC

	<b>aeioTU</b>	<b>SmartStart</b>	<b>MC</b>
<b>Areas found</b>	Urban and peri-urban	Rural and urban	Urban and peri-urban
<b>Set up</b>	Centre-based	Centre-based and home-based	(Mobile) centre-based
<b>Time spent in early learning</b>	9 hours per day, 5 days a week	3 hours per day, 2 days a week	8 hours per day, 6 days a week
<b>Age group targeted</b>	0-3 years old	3-5 years old	0-12 years old
<b>Teacher to learner ratio</b>	1: 10	1: 5-12	1: 10-12
<b>Nutrition provided</b>	Yes	Sometimes	Yes
<b>Groups served</b>	Predominantly low-income communities, but high-income communities are also targeted in a cross-subsidisation model (see next Section 5.5)	Low-income communities	Migrant communities on construction sites and in urban slums
<b>Pedagogical philosophy</b>	Reggio Emilia’s philosophy: play, exploration, and reciprocal relationships, in an approach where children can drive their own educational experience	Five pillars – nurture, talk, play, stories and parent partnership – blended with local knowledge and practices	Play-based and child-centred

Source: Own compilation

## 5.5. Financing transformation

All three organisations make use of various funding channels. aeioTU was initially set up with the aid of a grant of 33 million US dollars from the Carulla Foundation (philanthropic funding) (World Economic Forum, 2017: 3). This initial grant enabled the social franchise to set up a cross-subsidisation financing method (Arriagada, 2014: 4). aeioTU centres come in three forms: for-profit centres, which tend to serve high income communities, sustainable centres for middle-income communities, and subsidised centres for poor and vulnerable communities (Arriagada, 2014: 4). While the Colombian government pays a substantial amount towards the basic costs for each of these centres, the income generated from the more expensive for-profit centres is used to sustain the same quality of operations for poorer families, who pay fees of a substantially smaller amount, and diversify financing (Arriagada, 2014: 4). This cross-subsidisation model also serves to improve the sustainability of the organisation as some profit is funnelled back into aeioTU as a whole (World Economic Forum, 2017: 29). A certain portion

of aeioTU's budget is specifically allocated to the growth and start-up of new centres (Arriagada, 2014: 3).

A key financing issue faced by aeioTU is the fact that there are many more established subsidised centres than for-profit centres (Mesa *et al*, 2021: 4). As of 2021, there are two for-profit centres, two sustainable centres, and over 20 subsidised centres (Mesa *et al*, 2021: 4). The for-profit centres therefore have limited capability to support subsidised centres (Mesa *et al*, 2021). aeioTU has recognised that the cross-subsidisation model by itself is too narrow for the organisation to achieve its goal of transforming Colombian society and that it is important to work with government and private sector partners to fund this venture (Mesa *et al*, 2021: 7). This partnership represents a potential way to increase enrolment and enjoy the returns associated with early learning. For this reason, partnerships between government and other funders are important in ensuring the aeioTU's impact (Mesa *et al*, 2021: 7).

Similarly, as a social franchise, SmartStart secures consistent funding from both the public and philanthropic sector, relying on philanthropic investors and trusts, and government (SmartStart, 2021e). SmartStarters, or the franchisees of the SmartStart model, act as micro-enterprises. These franchisees receive income in their first year from an initial "start-up grant" from SmartStart, and small fees from parents of enrolled children (though many franchisees opt not to charge fees) (DGMT, 2021b). Ideally, in the second year of operation (once the start-up grant terminates), SmartStarters should be able to register for the ECD subsidy so that the subsidy (R17 per child per day), small fees, incubator support and some corporate support can comprise the total income for franchisees (DGMT, 2021b). Currently, SmartStart tends not to focus on providing services in middle- and high-income areas where there generally is already access. Unlike aeioTU, it does not employ a cross-subsidisation approach.

SmartStart has attempted to increase the number of practitioners able to enrol for the ECD subsidy, especially for those who operate in community-based settings rather than official centres (DGMT, 2021b). The government has allowed those who may not meet requirements to register for the subsidy on condition that the funding is used to reach minimum standards (DGMT, 2021b). However, only a miniscule number of SmartStarters have been able to secure the subsidy as many franchisees were still turned away for failing to meet registration requirements, especially those operating in under-resourced environments (see: page 85) (DGMT, 2021b). SmartStart has had to find alternative routes to access government funding: this involves work with the Community Works Programme (CWP), Jobs Fund and Expanded

Public Works Programme (EPWP) to provide work opportunities for participants in underprivileged wards (DGMT, 2021b). Accessing these alternative routes has shifted SmartStart's income composition from 100 percent philanthropy to 60 percent philanthropy and 40 percent state funding (an insight emerging from interviews detailed in the next Chapter).

Like SmartStart and aeioTU, MC has diversified sources of funding. The majority of funding comes from philanthropic donors, corporate sponsors and client-user-fees (Chaturvedi, 2019: 32). Beyond this, MC makes use of three distinct model types, each with different funding requirements. At construction sites, the first model, known as the direct delivery or demonstration model, is an operation entirely managed and run by MC (Chigateri, 2017: 22). MC directly delivers ECCE to the children of construction workers through making use of external funding (Chigateri, 2017: 22).

A second model, the facilitation model, was established in 2010, as part of an aim for builders to take on responsibility for early learning service delivery (Chigateri, 2017: 22). The responsibility of setting up and managing mobile crèches is shared by the builders (who pay 90 to 100 percent of running cost) while MC provides human resources and support, in terms of training, monitoring and supervision (Chigateri, 2017: 22). This model substantially alleviates the financial burden on MC, and, as of 2017, there are 23 centres that have shifted from the delivery model to the facilitation model (Chigateri, 2017: 22). However, an issue with this approach is that, while MC supervisors are integral to ensure that these centres retain the quality standards of the MC model, some builders are not willing to pay supervisor salaries, creating a gap in terms of supervision (Chigateri, 2017: 23). A significant hurdle to this approach is also that it requires the buy-in of builders – while MC has demonstrated that there are benefits that builders receive, in terms of better labour relations and productivity, not many builders are willing to finance MCs for their employees as this commitment ultimately increases costs of production (Chigateri, 2017: 36). This instance represents a classic negative externality where collective action issues undermine the provision of this service.

A third model, termed the upscale or tripartite model, involves the direct provision of childcare by other NGOs, and community women, with MC's supervision (Chigateri, 2017: 23). MC provides training to other NGOs to set up programmes specifically in slum communities (Chigateri, 2017: 23). In this instance, like in SmartStart, where local NGOs (franchisors) are responsible for implementation, the focus is on local responsiveness and community ownership of ECCE centres with financial support from MC, government (as these centres can sometimes

be linked with ICDS), community organisations and fee-paying parents (Chigateri, 2017: 23). While the pay for use strategy has been criticised for excluding the poorest in urban slums, many people in the slums have reported that they are capable of paying the fees, and centres usually waive the fees of those not in a position to pay (Chigateri, 2017: 23).

Most of MC's income comes from philanthropic donors, with 60 percent coming from organisations such as Tata Trusts, UBS Optimus Foundation, and Grand Challenges Canada (Chaturvedi, 2019: 47). Around 17 percent of MC's income comes from the private sector (corporate sponsorship as opposed to philanthropic) (Chaturvedi, 2019: 47). While the majority of funding therefore comes from donations and private funding, the use of different models ensures some income from builders (about 10 percent) and a negligible amount of support from the Indian government (<1 percent) (Chaturvedi, 2019: 47). Unlike SmartStart and aeioTU, MC appears to operate almost entirely separately from India's government.

All three organisations have diversified streams of income to enhance their financial sustainability and capacity for transformation. Ensuring that revenue is obtained from several sources allows for greater impact in all cases, especially for MC whose different models allow it to expand into locales beyond its own financial limitations. For aeioTU, the funds from government and donors are essential in terms of addressing an early learning deficit, as income generated from cross-subsidisation is not enough to cover the children from low-income communities attending subsidised centres. This limitation of cross-subsidisation reflects the literature (Sud *et al*, 2009: 208). It seems likely that, in the absence of solidarity, high-income consumers would defect to suppliers who are able to undercut these producers who cross-subsidise and provide cheaper services, which can explain why there aeioTU has only been able to establish two for-profit centres (Dacin *et al*, 2011: 1208). It is difficult for social enterprises to ensure long-term feasibility while scaling up, as they compete in a market environment where the ultimate bottom line is the maximisation of profits, rather than social outcomes (Sud *et al*, 2009: 208).

An issue that all three organisations face is around obtaining sufficient financing to ensure sustainability of practitioners operating at the grassroots level. For MC, funding remains one of the key challenges for the implementation and sustainability of centres (Venkateswaran, 2013: 22). For SmartStart, in the case where franchisees enrol in the programme as an employment opportunity, drop out is a significant concern if sufficient funding cannot be obtained – especially given that the SmartStart start-up grant exists for a limited time period

(Horler *et al*, 2019: xviii). For this reason, many franchisees do need to charge small fees, and irregular fee recovery in low-income communities may threaten enterprise sustainability.

Furthermore, many SmartStart franchisees report trying to provide food for children from their own earnings and resources, even though nutrition is not a compulsory aspect of the programme's implementation (Horler *et al*, 2019: xxii). Horler *et al* (2019: 105) argue that franchisees who attempt to contribute to nutrition while also dealing with irregular fee recovery are especially vulnerable and appear more likely to drop out of the programme due to lack of sufficient income to make participation financially viable. Furthermore, in a context where many SmartStarters are unable to access the ECD subsidy, although they may be able to access other government funding pots (such as Jobs Fund, CWP and EPWP) for a limited time, financial sustainability is a key issue.

Like aeioTU and MC, SmartStart aims to serve low-income communities, constraining its ability to charge fees, or become financially viable in the market economy (Sud *et al*, 2009: 208). For this reason, it appears that all of these organisations will not be able to meaningfully enhance early learning outcomes in isolation, and require support from other sectors. Meaningful transformation therefore requires multiple sources of investment, and points towards the importance of partnerships in civil society.

The following table illustrates the various sources of income received by each organisation:

Table 5. 3 A comparison of the aeioTU's, SmartStart's and MC's income sources

	<b>aeioTU</b>	<b>SmartStart</b>	<b>MC</b>
<b>Government funding</b>	Yes - to a large extent. Public and philanthropic funding makes up most of aeioTU's income base.	Yes. Government funding accounts for approximately 40% of SmartStart's income. Most of this income comes from initiatives like the CWP and the EPWP.	Yes, but this is negligible.
<b>Philanthropic and private funding/donations</b>	Yes. Philanthropic and public funding make up most of aeioTU's income base.	Yes. Philanthropic funding makes up approximately 60% of SmartStart's income, and at one point made up 100% of its income. Some corporate funding.	Yes. Substantial philanthropic funding (60%) and some corporate funding and donations (17%).
<b>Cross-subsidisation</b>	Yes.	No.	No.
<b>Fees</b>	Yes.	Yes.	Yes.

Source: Own compilation

## 5.6. Partnerships

### 5.6.1. Bringing together the private, public and voluntary sectors

As is illustrated in the above Section, partnerships are integral for aeioTU, MC and SmartStart. Networks based on social capital may hold potential to overcome or at least alleviate fragmentation and weak states in developing countries. SmartStart aims to build and hold meaningful relationships with government, civil society, long-term funders and communities (SmartStart, 2020: 13). This engagement is part of a systems approach where SmartStart aims to establish a network of actors with the common goal of expanding early learning access, with the knowledge that a network is more than the sum of its parts: it is through collective action by several actors that meaningful early learning outcomes can be achieved (SmartStart, 2020: 15). Collaboration and systems thinking is thus at the heart of the SmartStart approach

(Hickman, 2020: 26). SmartStart aims to work with rather than crowd out the government to create a system where the return to government investment in early learning can be high, in contrast to a highly fragmented status quo whose returns are poor (Hickman, 2020: 22). For this reason, SmartStart does not aim to replace or compete with existing services but instead seeks to link up and coordinate their contributions (SmartStart, 2020: 2018).

aeioTU has similarly made an effort to consolidate NGOs operating in the sectors as part of a strategic alliance (Arriagada, 2014: 4). aeioTU partnered with the Colombian government since its inception (Nores *et al*, 2018b: 204). Just prior to the emergence of aeioTU, in 2007, aeioTU's primary funder, the Fundacion Carulla, met with Colombia's National Secretary of Education to devise a plan to bring early learning to Colombia's under-served children (Mesa *et al*, 2021: 2). At this meeting, the Fundacion Carulla committed to making an effort to achieve system-wide change, in conjunction with the government's goals, and aeioTU emerged (Mesa *et al*, 2021: 2).

Furthermore, when the government launched the FZTF strategy, aeioTU was framed as part of this strategy, and the government allocated a stipend to the programme (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 32). aeioTU recognises that scale can only be achieved through partnership with government to work with existing centres, and with other NGOs and funders to reach areas currently without access (Mesa *et al*, 2021: 5). Partnership, however, is challenging in a context of a highly segmented government in Colombia, as aeioTU needs to work with multiple government stakeholders in communities, mirroring the South African context (Mesa *et al*, 2021: 5). aeioTU has also partnered with the NGO Corpoayapel and the Lego Foundation to expand access (Mesa *et al*: 2021: 5). This engagement is based on aeioTU's belief that comprehensive care is only possible with partnership, and that civil society can play a role in bringing together public and private sectors to work towards equal early learning access (Mesa *et al*, 2021: 6).

Similarly, the three models of MC are partnership-based, so that MC, businesses and other NGOs can share costs to bring early learning and care to under-served communities in India (Murphy, 2013: 16). In contrast, MC's relationship with the state remains a contested space, rather than a reciprocal partnership, as MC advocates for greater state coverage and improved ECCE policy, while the state, in turn, has offered negligible support to MC. There has, however, been some other partnership with the state that is important to note: although limited, MC has been able to facilitate some linkages with government that provides a pathway for those excluded from government healthcare systems (i.e., migrants and their children) to be

immunised at government clinics (Venkateswaran, 2013: 20). Overall, however, government support for MCs remains negligible, especially in comparison to the relationship aeioTU in particular and SmartStart have been able to cultivate with their national governments.

#### 5.6.2. Partnerships with parents and caregivers: Stimulating demand for early learning

Another significant partner for these organisations is parents/caregivers. MC's partnership model is primarily based on stimulating demand for early learning (see: page 32). In contexts where early learning services are not normalised, and where many people may be unaware of the benefits they provide, demand is likely to be low (Mobile Crèches, 2021a). Community education is therefore an important pillar for MC, as a mechanism of building demand for ECCE services (Pispati *et al*, 2017: 10). MC has made significant inroads in terms of creating a broader understanding of child development in under-served communities, which in turn stimulates demand (Venkateswaran, 2013: 20). Parent engagement by MC staff has been especially important in this regard, and points to the particular strength of civil society actors in terms of reaching and building meaningful relationships within communities as a result of social capital (Chaturvedi, 2019: 46).

SmartStart and aeioTU also recognise the importance of partnerships with parents and caregivers. To achieve its goal of reaching one million children, SmartStart recognises that it needs to “build awareness among parents, and drive demand for quality early learning programmes” (SmartStart, 2021b). SmartStart has been involved in several strategies to stimulate demand, including one of South Africa's largest national outdoor media campaigns focused on demonstrating the power of ECD (DGMT, 2018). aeioTU similarly recognises the need to stimulate demand. When aeioTU was first implemented, many centres struggled to get parents or caregivers to bring their children as the value of ECD was not widely known at that point (Arriagada, 2014: 5). As a result, government and media campaigns promoting the work of aeioTU have been integral in stimulating demand for ECD and ensuring confidence in aeioTU centres (Arriagada, 2014: 5). The stimulation of demand through partnerships with caregivers/parents is therefore significant for all three organisations.

#### 5.6.3. Civil society: Part of an early learning ecosystem

As outlined in the literature review, some theorists are wary of the role of civil society, and the social economy in particular, as a solution to welfare issues as this positioning may be a form of crowding out the state and justifying public service delivery dismantling (McMurty, 2004:

868). In this role, the social economy is manoeuvred into a technocratic function of aiding supposedly underserved groups, filling gaps rather than changing the system itself – detracting from a political, more transformative role (Parkinson and Howorth, 2008: 292). Here, the issue of resource distribution becomes depoliticised, diminishing the accountability of the state.

The worry that the government abdicates its responsibility and never develops capacity itself when NGOs come into this space, however, does not seem applicable in the cases explored in this chapter. For these organisations, it appears that the hope is that the population-level orientated models envisaged and implemented can draw in government action. In the case of SmartStart, the franchise system is in place to provide a degree of quality certainty and to explore how the government can scale up its own early learning service delivery in the near future, as there is currently no government early learning provision model.

SmartStart aims to operate in conversation with state structures in order to create an ECD approach that can be adopted by government departments. Similarly, aeioTU aims to work in direct partnership with the state, and innovates replicable ways of expanding access to early learning. While one cannot certainly conclude that these relationships are indicative of meaningful collaboration with the state – the governments in these cases could be trying to outsource responsibility – it does appear that these organisations position themselves as partners of the state rather than service delivery agents. Perhaps then, these organisations can be conceived of as pushing the state towards a more social democratic direction.

Finally, while MC has not managed to cultivate a meaningful and reciprocal relationship with the Indian state, it has been significant in holding the state accountable through advocacy. MC consistently pushes for greater change, based on the realisation that an effective national ECCE rollout depends on greater commitment by the Indian government. In all three cases, these civil society organisations act in ways that link the public sector, private sector and other NGOs. This linking role is indicative of the potential of civil society as a bridge between the private and public, coordinating collective action by both the market and state.

These relationships highlight the role civil society may play as a genuine partner. As Harrison (2020) claims, CSOs may act as innovators of first resort as these organisations are best equipped to understand a community's needs, as well as the resources within communities that can be leveraged to find innovative solutions with few delays (Harrison, 2020: 7). Without civil society in this role, governments are likely to be less responsive to people's needs and more

removed from the communities they aim to serve (Harrison, 2020: 7). In partnership, therefore, civil society may act as a catalyst for social change.

## 5.7. Scale

In terms of scale, aeioTU, SmartStart and MC have had varying degrees of success. In the case of aeioTU, the social franchise model has enabled the reach of 394 000 children in total (aeioTU 2022) and establishment of 17 238 teachers/practitioners over a decade (Mesa *et al*, 2021: 2). This amounts to an average of 28 143 children reached per year. In its first two years, aeioTU managed to reach only 1 598 children (aeioTU, 2021), so a rapid increase in the number of children reached per year indicates that the organisation is starting to enjoy the economies of scope and scale that come from expansion. For this reason, Mesa *et al* (2021: 2) claim that aeioTU is on its way to becoming sustainable and impactful in Colombian society. aeioTU has also had an impact beyond Colombia's borders: it arrived in Mexico as a service provider for new educational centres in 2011, and established professional development programmes for early learning educators in Mexico and Panama in 2019 (aeioTU, 2021).

In contrast, SmartStart is the youngest organisation out of the three social franchises. While not yet having an impact beyond South Africa's borders, SmartStart has achieved scale in its five years of operation. SmartStart aims to serve as a national delivery platform, to facilitate the required expansion of early learning to 100 000 practitioners and 40 000 venues across urban and rural South Africa (SmartStart, 2020: 28). SmartStart has so far been successful in scaling up its model in a short space of time. In the first year of operation, the franchise was able to reach 10 000 children (SmartStart, 2021e). Since its inception, SmartStart has now reached just 106 207 children which amounts to an average of 15 172 children per year (SmartStart, 2021a). In the 2019/2020 financial year alone, SmartStart reached 36 795 children, indicating that the number of children reached each year is exponentially increasing, potentially as a result of the organisation benefiting from economies of scale and scope (SmartStart, 2020: 44).<sup>1</sup> While this number is far off the goal of one million children per year, this is impressive scale coming from a civil society organisation in South Africa, and seems unmatched by any other not-for-profit early learning provider.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, one must also bear in mind that this number may also reflect the NGOs that have come under the SmartStart umbrella, who were likely reaching a certain number of children before joining SmartStart. The same could be true for aeioTU and MC.

MC, the oldest organisation out of the three, is interested in scalability and sustainability, which is why it has actively pursued an agenda of policy change to transform the national early learning landscape (Chigateri, 2017: 4). Over time, MC, which originated in New Delhi, has expanded. At the same time as the programme for MC expanded to include various health interventions, its geography expanded to other Indian cities of Mumbai and Pune, and more slum settlements in New Delhi (Mobile Crèches, 2021b). In 2006, MC split into Mumbai Mobile Crèches, Mobile Crèches (Delhi) and Tara Mobile Crèches (Pune) (Mobile Crèches, 2021b). In over 50 years of operation, MC has reached approximately 750 000 children in total (Mobile Crèches, 2021b). It has trained over 65 000 teachers and set up over 1 000 centres (Mobile Crèches, 2021c). However, as Chigateri (2017: 35) notes, this scale is only “one small drop” in India’s ocean of children. In comparison to what SmartStart and aeioTU have achieved in a shorter period of time, the gains MC has made in terms of scale are smaller, although it is significant that one organisation has reached almost one million children. MC has on average, reached approximately 14 423 children per year (Mobile Crèches, 2021a) which is less than the average number aeioTU has managed to reach in just over a decade, and also a little less than how many children SmartStart have been able to reach in just over half a decade.

Perhaps a factor enabling aeioTU’s successes in terms of scaling up over a much shorter time period is the partnership that have been secured with the government which has allowed for greater support, while in contrast the Indian government has offered only negligible support to MC, despite its political presence. For SmartStart, the leaner programme may also play a role in enabling the scale it has achieved as this programme may require fewer resources than programmes implemented by aeioTU and MC. Overall, it appears that the scale each organisation has achieved is positively correlated with the level of government support.

*Table 5. 4 A comparison of the scale achieved by aeioTU, MC and SmartStart*

	<b>Number of children reached over organisation’s lifetime</b>	<b>Average number of children reached per year</b>
<b>aeioTU</b>	394 000	28 143
<b>SmartStart</b>	106 207	15 172
<b>MC</b>	750 000	14 423

Source: Own compilation

## 5.8. The effect of aeioTU, SmartStart and MC on children: Evidence from peer-reviewed impact studies

Impact, however, cannot be measured only in terms of scale or access. It is also important to consider the quality of the programmes implemented by SmartStart, aeioTU and MC respectively, or the cognitive impact these organisations have had on participating children.

### 5.8.1. The impact of SmartStart on children's learning

Peer-reviewed impact studies, detailing the impact of SmartStart on children's cognitive and developmental outcomes, are available. Two peer-reviewed academic reports have investigated the impact of SmartStart programmes on those involved in the various franchises – namely the *Early Learning Programme Outcomes Study Technical Report* by Dawes *et al* (2020) and the *SmartStart Programme Evaluation Report* by Horler *et al* (2019). Both studies make use of the ELOM (see: page 86). In both studies, children in the samples were assessed on the ELOM at a baseline in March 2018 and again at an endline in October and November 2018 (Dawes *et al*, 2020: 1). The authors compared and statistically tested the differences between baseline and endline scores to determine whether these early learning programmes had significant effects on children's development and primary school readiness (Dawes *et al*, 2020: 1).

The report undertaken by Dawes *et al* (2020) evaluated the quality and outcomes of several early learning programmes coming from civil society in South Africa. One of these programmes was the Little Elephant Training Centre for Early Education (LETCEE), one of SmartStart's franchisors (Dawes *et al*, 2020: 2). Of all children in programmes analysed in this study, those attending LETCEE were among the most disadvantaged, coming from families in South Africa's lowest income quintile (Dawes *et al*, 2020: 72). This demographic composition was due to the fact that many children are able to attend LETCEE free of charge (Dawes *et al*, 2020: 72). Those attending LETCEE had one of the lowest baseline scores with an average of 33.9, in the *at risk* category (Dawes *et al*, 2020: 91). This score improved by 13.8 points over the study period, and the average child moved up a category from *at risk* to *falling behind* (Dawes *et al*, 2020: 91). The authors concluded that these findings were promising as the SmartStart programme was a significant contributing factor to this score increase (Dawes *et al*, 2020: 105). Of all early learning programmes evaluated, SmartStart's ELOM shift from baseline to endline was one of the highest (Dawes *et al*, 2020: 105). The programme therefore was impactful, although it had not yet managed to elevate the average child to the ELOM standard (Dawes *et al*, 2020: 106).

The second study by Horler *et al* (2019) evaluated the SmartStart programme across different franchises around South Africa (Horler *et al*, 2019: 22). Applying a similar methodology as the aforementioned study, this report found that the average baseline ELOM score for children in this sample was 39.9, meaning that the average child was in the *falling behind* category (Horler *et al*, 2019: 57). This score increased over the study period, making the average endline ELOM score 61.4, fitting into the *achieving the ELOM standard* category (Horler *et al*, 2019: 57). Furthermore, there was a 29 percent increase in the number of children *achieving the ELOM standard* and a 29 percent decrease in children *at risk* between the baseline and endline measures (Horler *et al*, 2019: 69). Both reports found significant improvement in children's outcomes. In a context where it appears that the majority of South African children enrolled in early learning programmes do not achieve the ELOM standard (see: page 86) this achievement is significant.

### 5.8.2. The impact of aeioTU on children's outcomes

A peer-reviewed impact study by Nores *et al* (2018a) investigated the impact of aeioTU, as an intensive and comprehensive centre-based early learning initiative, on disadvantaged children in Colombia with focus on the effect on health and education outcomes as well as home environment. In order to gauge aeioTU's effectiveness, this study used a randomised control trial for two centres (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 31). 848 children under the age of three were assessed (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 31). Children were assessed in late 2010 and then again 8 months later (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 32). Their progress in those months was compared to a group of children not yet enrolled in early learning programmes (as a control group, which involves denying children access to early learning for 8 months, was deemed unethical) (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 32).

Several instruments, based on recommendations for child development research in low-income contexts, were used to determine the impact of aeioTU on children (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 34). Children's health status was measured using information collected on height and weight, BMI and arm circumference, in line with World Health Organisation (WHO) standards (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 34). Cognitive development was measured using the Bayley Scales of Infant Development III (BSID), which predicts later cognitive ability and is the most common assessment for development of children younger than 36 months of age in Colombia (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 34). Children who were older than 36 months in the follow-up assessment were administered another test, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (in Spanish) to measure receptive vocabulary (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 34). An overall development score was devised from

the sum of cognitive, motor and language scales acquired from these tests (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 34).

Socio-emotional development of children at the baseline and endline was tested using the Ages and Stages Questionnaire for the Socio-Emotional Domain (ASQ: SE) which is a parent-completed assessment measuring aspects like self-regulation, compliance, communication, autonomy and interactions of children (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 34). Children's home environment was tested using the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME) which investigates the quality and extent of support for child development in the home, specifically considering responsiveness to parent(s), avoidance of restriction and punishment, organisation of the environment, appropriate play materials, parental involvement, and variety in daily stimulation (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 35). Finally, socioeconomic information around families' schooling attainment, maternal age at birth of child, income, expenditures, employment, assets, medical aid, number of children in the household, and childcare experiences were collected (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 35). Following this collection, data was subject to statistical analysis to determine the impact of aeioTU on these measures (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 36).

The results of this study found that children enrolled in aeioTU were nutritionally vulnerable at the baseline and that there was no difference in the nutritional outcomes of children from baseline to endline (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 25). Lack of nutritional impact could reflect that there was a reallocation by parents/caregivers of food provision at home, as the nutritional offering at aeioTU eased the burden of feeding children (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 31). Large positive effects on language, motor, cognitive and overall development were found from baseline to endline for children enrolled in the aeioTU programme (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 40), with the impact for girls more pronounced (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 41). No significant differences were found in home environment and socio-emotional development over the study period (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 41).

These initial results, showing improved language, motor and cognitive development in girls over a short time period, are significant as other similar programmes in Colombia have demonstrated small or null effects over this eight-month period, or take a much longer time period to show the same effects (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 42). Given that aeioTU and other public centres cost the same for low-income families, these results are important as they show aeioTU to be of a high-quality standard in the country (Nores *et al*, 2018a: 42). Nores *et al* (2018a: 42) attribute aeioTU's better performance to pre- and in-service training strategies, curricular guidelines, professional development initiatives for teachers and effective monitoring.

Based on these results, Nores *et al* (2018a: 42) conclude that the aeioTU randomised trial shows that high quality centre-based interventions are possible in low-income countries, based on the assumption that home-based settings are less expensive but also of poorer quality (implying an access-quality trade-off). Nores *et al* (2018a: 42) also claim that curriculum is an important determinant of quality as aeioTU performs better than other similarly resourced centres with less rigorous or deliberate curriculum guidelines. This conclusion appears at odds with the evaluation of SmartStart in the previous Section which indicated that effective early learning could take place in home- and community-based settings. SmartStart may therefore potentially illustrate a way of avoiding an access-quality trade-off if it is able to provide a quality curriculum in an inexpensive home-based setting, but further evidence is required to confidently reach this conclusion.

### 5.8.3. The impact of MC on children's outcomes

In terms of MC, there are currently no available impact assessments by third party evaluators, which means it is difficult to reliably ascertain its impact (Chaturvedi, 2019: 3). However, certain peer-reviewed academic articles give an overall sense of what the organisation has achieved thus far. A study by Pispati *et al* (2019) used a psychosocial developmental screening test to screen children attending Mumbai MC for developmental delays (Pispati *et al*, 2019: 111). This psychosocial test is a standardised test used in India, that measures abilities in five developmental areas: gross motor skills; vision and fine motor skills; hearing, language and concept development; social skills; and personal skills (Pispati *et al*, 2019: 111). Overall, Pispati *et al* (2019) found that 91 percent of children attending Mumbai MC were not developmentally delayed, while nine percent needed further intervention (Pispati *et al*, 2019: 113). Over time, the percentage of children with likely developmental delays declined with increased exposure to the MC programme (Pispati *et al*, 2019: 113). The authors attribute this decline as a likely result of the care children received in the ECCE programme, as well as natural developmental growth (Pispati *et al*, 2019: 113).

Another analysis by Murphy (2013: 14) indicates that MC has been able to reduce the practice of sibling care in construction sites, a burden that generally falls on young girls at the expense of their own education. Furthermore, studies tracking the growth and development of migrant children conducted by MC indicate that 71 percent of children improved their nutritional status or remained at a normal nutritional grade after six months at an MC site (Murphy, 2013: 14). 94 percent of children received age-appropriate immunisations, children and families had greater

access to government health services, and parents report improved cognitive, social and motor skills of children that participated in the programme, compared to those on other sites who do not have access to ECCE (Murphy, 2013: 14).

#### 5.8.4. Overall impact of these programmes

Overall, studies indicate that these programmes have a positive effect on the cognitive development of children. In the case of aeioTU, studies also suggest that these sites have a greater impact on children than other programmes currently in place, and can therefore come to inform government strategies to improve the efficacy of their own programmes in low resource contexts. It therefore appears that these programmes bring about quality outcomes, in contexts where there is often quality uncertainty surrounding NGO early programmes.

Limitations of these studies require mention. For MC, no rigorous impact study was available. For the impact studies for aeioTU and SmartStart, no impact study was able to make use of a control group of children with no exposure to ECD, which is unfeasible based on both ethical and logistical grounds, making them quasi-experimental by design (Dawes *et al*, 2020: 109; Nores *et al*, 2018a: 32). Another limitation of these reports lies in the data collection process. For the SmartStart case, data related to the programme is inconsistent, with some observations missing (Horler *et al*, 2019: 103). These limitations do not undermine the study results but point to areas of improvement and the need for more reliable data capturing on the part of SmartStart so that better evaluation results can be obtained in the future.

#### 5.9. Scope of these programmes: Gender responsiveness

The scope of early learning and care is greater than the impact on children's development – it also encompasses an element of women's empowerment. A last comparison that is important to undertake is the gender responsiveness of these different civil society organisations. SmartStart positions its mission as one that not only aids child development but also women's empowerment. It frames ECD as a triple impact investment in terms of developing children's cognitive abilities, enabling greater female labour force participation, and opportunities for entrepreneurs and early learning micro-enterprises (SmartStart, 2020: 28). Furthermore, the SmartStart team has engaged in advocacy around the gendered implications of childcare provisioning, having written in the popular press about the fact that gender equality in the labour market depends on access to quality childcare (Hickman and Matlhape, 2020).

The emphasis SmartStart places on community- and home-based programmes may also make these services more accessible to women in these communities. The proximity of community-based sites (as opposed to children travelling to centres) additionally appears significant given the spatial legacy of apartheid and lack of public transport. SmartStart is cognisant of the gendered dimension to their work, and its role in advancing women's labour market choices. In a context of high unemployment, SmartStart also focuses on creating employment opportunities for women, who are often most marginalised in the labour market. However, it seems less likely that SmartStart has a meaningful impact in easing women's childcare burden, and freeing up mothers to enter into the labour market. Given that SmartStarters are only required to provide a six-hour week, the programme's role in enabling the economic empowerment of women and other primary caregivers may not be significant. While this model does allow for the shared responsibility for childcare and early development, at this stage, its impact in terms of freeing up mothers to enter into paid work is likely limited.

MC, like SmartStart, serves to enhance the visibility of the double burden women face, in terms of both engaging in paid work and unpaid household labour (including childcare). For many women in the slums and construction sites of India, this issue in fact becomes a triple burden as poor access to water and sanitation means that household work becomes more time-consuming and labour-intensive, in addition to the care and labour women perform (Murphy, 2013: 13). MC's advocacy around policy and legislative changes has a specific focus on the multiple responsibilities women face in the home and how to alleviate this undue burden (Venkateswaran, 2013: 25). MC recognises that the achievement of gender equality goes beyond enabling access to its ECCE programmes. Instead, MC argues that this achievement involves challenging dominant ideologies in India, where women are expected to be primary caregivers, so that the burden of care can be shared between men and women (Chigateri, 2017: 6). Herein is a recognition that transformation requires challenging ideologies as well as material barriers. This recognition is one of the reasons that MC engages in advocacy, aiming to make visible women's issues so that policies cognisant of gender issues can be generated.

MC's ECCE model is based on a recognition of the challenges women face. Centres are very close to workplaces so that it is easy for women to drop off children, and this aspect makes it accessible for mothers to breastfeed during breaks (Venkateswaran, 2013: 13). Centre times are also flexible, based on women's work schedules, so that facilities can be readily accessed (Chigateri, 2017: 37). Despite these characteristics, and the cognisance of women's needs,

many women using MC still report that balancing this double (or triple) burden proves very difficult, indicating that true gender equality can only be achieved once this burden is shared (Chigateri, 2017: 2016). Another issue is that the women who tend to use MC are those who have no other options, or those who do not have any other women in their extended families available to provide care (Venkateswaran, 2013: 13). When MC is only used by mothers who have no other female caregivers to pass this burden on, the gendered nature of care continues to go unchallenged. In this scenario, it appears that MC is palliative, easing the burden but not necessarily transforming gender roles.

In contrast to SmartStart and MC, the literature around aeioTU does not indicate an explicit gender focus, and emphasis is instead placed on children's outcomes. This is likely due to the fact that HCBs put in place by the Colombian government are already cognisant of the effects of childcare on female labour force participation. The home-based care provided by HCBs has wide coverage, and has had significant positive effects on women's labour market participation (Rauls and Simon, 2020). It therefore makes sense that aeioTU places more focus on early learning instead of female labour force participation where the Colombian government has been comparatively more successful in providing care.

The cases of SmartStart and MC provide interesting insights into the pathways available for the provision of quality care that is not only equitable but is also gender responsive (Chigateri, 2017: 35). In both cases these organisations have worked to make the state, and, in the case of MC, employers, accountable, for the provision of quality childcare services (Chigateri, 2017: 35). SmartStart and MC have attempted to put in place systems of care that alleviate the undue burden women face, while at the same time, have sought to make this burden visible through engagements with government and the media. These organisations therefore provide an example of bringing a gendered lens to national discussions of the impact of care and early learning, making visible the gendered nature of care, and the need for gender cognisant solutions.

#### 5.10. Conclusion: Lessons from CSOs in developing countries

The case studies explored in this chapter point towards the potential of civil society in general, and social enterprises in particular, in enhancing early learning and addressing a care deficit. Six important lessons can be drawn from this comparative analysis, in conjunction with the Lessons from the international experience explored in Chapter 3 (page 44):

1. The South African social welfare and early learning provisioning landscape is not exceptional, and lessons therefore emerge from the experiences of other developing countries who aim to achieve universal access to ECD. A comparative analysis of South Africa, India and Colombia illustrates that policy changes alone will be insufficient in bringing about this reality. Fiscal commitment, in the form of public investment in early learning, is essential for the effective implementation of policy. The Colombian state seems to have reached more children largely because it has allocated more resources to ECCE compared to India and South Africa. This idea is also reflected in advanced economies: Sweden exceeds the UNICEF's recommended fiscal allocation on early learning and care, and boasts extremely high access and quality, while liberal welfare regimes which tend to spend less have comparatively lower enrolment rates (White and Friendly, 2012).
2. Partnerships with CSOs can enhance the responsiveness of states. The CSOs explored in this chapter cannot be simply critiqued as a tool for the government to reduce its own obligations or a crowding out of the state. Rather, in these cases, the push and pull of engagement with the state (and, to a lesser extent, the private sector), may enable civil society to act as a catalyst for social change, and a bridge between different sectors, linking up different contributions and enabling more responsive states. Greater responsiveness may enhance state effectiveness even in contexts of lack of resources and capacity. In fact, it does seem that many of the countries explored in this chapter and elsewhere began to position ECD as a developmental priority around the same time, likely as a result of the simultaneous efforts of global organisations like the United Nations (see: SDGs 47) and local advocacy efforts. In the global North, the Swedish experience was not a top-down developmental process, but depicts a different model of embedding, based on drawing in communities as social partners to enhance state responsiveness and efficiency.
3. Many are wary of the solutions coming from civil society, as, generally, CSOs, while valuable, are only able to achieve a limited impact in their own localities, rather than in the national welfare landscape. The case studies explored in this chapter, however, describe CSOs that are self-reflective and aware of the limitations, and who have explored innovative solutions to scaling up, or moving beyond their own localities. These organisations give important insight to others that seek to bring about population-level change, both in civil society, and in other spaces.

4. The organisations explored in this chapter exhibit various programme modalities. According to Nores *et al* (2018a: 42) aeioTU illustrates that high quality centre-based interventions are possible in low-income countries, based on the assumption that home-based settings are less expensive but also of poorer quality. In contrast the mobile centres of MC and home-based early learning sites of SmartStart put forward learning settings that can operate from within the communities being served. If high quality programmes and curricula can be implemented in inexpensive settings (i.e., home-based), one can potentially avoid an access-quality trade-off, but further evidence is required to confidently reach this conclusion. Home- and community-based settings may also be more suitable in contexts where it is not feasible or safe for children to travel to the nearest early learning centre.
5. Diversified streams of revenue are key for CSOs operating in the early learning sector. Cross-subsidisation on its own, though an innovative redistributive tool, is unlikely to be transformative, but the leveraging of different funding sources enables greater impact. Government financial support can be mutually beneficial: this support to a large extent allows CSOs to scale, and, as an innovator of first resort, civil society can in turn demonstrate how public investment may be harnessed to bring about greater returns to early learning than under the status quo.
6. In the cases where policy related to early learning is gender-blind, CSOs can bring a gendered lens to national discussions, make visible the gendered nature of care (hopefully at a policy level and within communities as these organisations seek to stimulate demand). CSOs can advocate for gender responsive solutions to an early learning deficit.

These lessons are significant. They provide insights for South Africa, as it attempts to universalise early learning access, and show the possibility that exists in constrained contexts, where the state, family and market are limited. This analysis therefore sheds light on alternative avenues that hold promise in unlocking the returns to early learning, in South Africa and elsewhere. This possibility is explored more in the next chapter, which investigates the SmartStart model in relation to South Africa's current fiscal climate, and the key action areas for an effective early learning rollout.

## CHAPTER 6 – INSIGHTS FROM THE SMARTSTART LEADERSHIP TEAM

### 6.1. Introduction

So far, this thesis has explored the barriers to unlocking returns associated with early learning and care. The previous chapter shifted this focus, opening up dialogue about the possibility that may exist in constrained settings, and the lessons that can be drawn from the experiences of social franchises in developing countries. This chapter begins to explore this possibility more deeply in South Africa by investigating the SmartStart model in relation to South Africa's current fiscal climate, and the key action areas for an effective early learning rollout. Interviews with SmartStart's leadership team and innovators serve to shed light on the role the organisation is playing in South Africa, and provides a platform to give voice to the experiences of those operating in the social economy and civil society more generally.

The aim of this chapter is to make sense of the qualitative data generated by the interviews with 11 SmartStart leaders and innovators. Initially, nine interviews were conducted with SmartStart's executive team. Based on these interviews a further two people involved in SmartStart's conception, or "innovators" were identified as key knowledge sources and interviewed. In this chapter, all of the people interviewed are referred to as "SmartStart leaders". The data generated from my conversations with the individuals is coded and analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework (a detailed description thereof can be found in Section 2.6.3). Four themes emerged from my engagement with the interview data, namely: the framing of early learning as a developmental priority and human right; the (dys)function of the early learning provisioning system; the early learning and care delivery diamond; and the possibility in South Africa's early learning landscape.

The findings made sense of in this chapter are discussed in relation to the conceptual framework outlined earlier in this study. The themes explored serve to realise the main objective of this thesis: to determine the barriers to an effective ECD rollout in South Africa and the possibility the social economy offers in this constrained space. These findings are also specifically linked to research sub-goal 3: to determine whether the SmartStart model can address the early learning deficit in a transformative way, and to explore what SmartStart reveals about the possibility for social economy initiatives to scale operations and build partnerships.

This chapter is comprised of four Sections. Section 6.2 explores how SmartStart frames early learning as a catalytic sector, important in ensuring both economic development and equity. Section 6.3 depicts the current early learning landscape through the lens of the SmartStart team. Sub-themes explored in this Section include market failure and government failure. Section 6.4 considers South Africa's early learning and care delivery diamond, or the current role of the market, family, state and civil society. Section 6.5 considers the possibility in South Africa's early learning landscape and deeply interrogates the SmartStart model. Sub-themes explored in this Section include the significance of partnerships, the evolution of SmartStart's national early learning delivery platform, SmartStart's funding model and limitations of the SmartStart approach.

## 6.2. Framing ECD as a developmental priority and human right

### 6.2.1. A catalytic sector

The first theme emerging from the interviews is the framing of ECD as a catalytic sector in terms of the generation of social and private returns as well as a fundamental human right. Many of those interviewed depicted the emergence of ECD, and early learning therein<sup>1</sup>, as a focal issue in South Africa, and gave recognition to the high potential returns associated with the sector. A few of those interviewed framed early childhood care and education as a triple impact investment. Primarily, early learning grows the human capital of children and provides developmental impetus. Secondly, the sector can function as an entrepreneurship opportunity for individuals to set up their own early learning micro-enterprises. Finally, early learning and ECD more generally holds the potential to expand FLFP, freeing up women's time to seek paid employment. SmartStart leader 2 explained that:

For us, the impact is really three-fold. First, it is enabling children to access early learning where they otherwise wouldn't. Then, men and women who would otherwise be unemployed or underemployed have the opportunity to set up programmes and build a livelihood for themselves [...]. That circular support structure [...] allows fathers and mothers, particularly mothers, to be able to go to work and find work in ways that they wouldn't necessarily be able to if they were not with family or had a support structure.

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<sup>1</sup> SmartStart focuses on the early learning component of ECD, although the interviews broadly discussed the significance of all components of ECD to enjoy the returns associated with the sector.

The idea of the high economic returns associated with the sector also came out in the personal stories of SmartStart's leadership team. Prior to joining SmartStart, SmartStart leader 1 had worked with young people at risk. From this experience, she realised that interventions targeting young people in South Africa often only reached them when it was too late. SmartStart leader 5 claimed that her choice to move to SmartStart and the early years was deliberate, based on the recognition that "we are losing people much earlier than we think". She went on to explain that, when investment is centred on the early years, it is more effective and economical than later remedial action. These stories evoke a sense that ECD can act as a catalytic sector or lever that can be pulled to achieve transformative change. By targeting children at point zero, we can potentially shift the problems associated with South African youth, and contribute to national development. For example, SmartStart leader 10 claimed that ECD is the "great equaliser" as it has the most powerful effects for children from disadvantaged communities, helping to ensure they are able to participate equally in society as they grow up.

This framing relates to the Heckman (2008) literature which indicates that the greatest return to investment in education can be found in the realm of early learning and care, and that this return is highest for children from low-income communities. This idea of ECD as a catalytic or transformative sector also connects to developmental theory in general. Authors such as Evans and Heller (2015: 693) have suggested that human capabilities and ideas have replaced manufacturing as the new driver for growth and that social provisioning, which grows human capabilities, may be the new increasing returns sector. The social returns associated with expanding human capabilities may be the new engine to unlock development. This idea also links to social investment state theory which frames social policy as investment in capabilities, rather than consumption spending (Perkins *et al*, 2004: 3).

### 6.2.2. A human right

The expansion of access to early learning is not only justified by the economic returns associated with the sector, but also by the pursuit of socially just ends. Many SmartStart leaders framed early learning not solely in terms of economic returns but also as a fundamental human right significant in the pursuit of a more just and equal South Africa. Three individuals mentioned the importance of "put[ting] the child at the centre" when devising and implementing just and equitable early learning programmes. What was fascinating about this rights-based discourse is that it was linked to a sense of pragmatism about how to realise these rights, and specifically avoided a utopian mindset that prevents action. Conversations about

rights were perhaps not just prefigurative statements but reflected deep thought about how these rights are going to be realised. This theme about the pragmatic interpretation of realising rights in a transformative way will be explored and developed throughout this chapter, especially in Sections 6.3.2 and 6.5.3.

Many SmartStart leaders expressed a desire to focus on policy that is relevant to the lived experience of South African children, to start where children are currently and build from what already exists. This idea of a child-centred approach reflected even in the background noise of the interviews. Interspersed with the voices of SmartStart's team were the voices of their children: one individual spoke to me while picking up her four-year-old from an early learning centre, a young girl who often gave her own (indecipherable) input to the conversation. Another interview was temporarily stalled as a teenager said goodbye before going to write a Grade 12 final examination.

This focus reflects social democratic thinking. In social democracies, the focus placed on ECD is not just a result of potential economic returns but also of a framework prioritising children's rights, gender equality and the inclusion of marginalised groups (White and Friendly, 2012: 293). This rights-based approach recognises the implication of ECD in terms of justice and equity rather than just in terms of returns and efficiency. Finally, this human rights framework lends itself to the argument that ECD should be universal. There was explicit recognition from almost all of those interviewed that early learning and care should be a public good.

### 6.3. How the system currently (dys)functions

The above analysis illustrates that both the economic theory related to ECD and themes emerging in the interviews point to the presence of high returns. These returns continue to remain unrealised in South Africa. Many of the interviews seemed to suggest that the presence of high but unexploited returns is indicative of system failure which appears to manifest as both market failure and government failure. Each of these failures are explored in turn.

#### 6.3.1. Market utopia

In order to understand market failure, it is important to consider how the supply-demand-price mechanism currently works for early learning and care in South Africa. From the interviews, it appears that the fundamental market failure in the sector is the mode of regulation of demand. For the wealthy and, to a large extent (though with some exceptions), middle classes who can afford private provision, the market for early learning tends to function. However, one

encounters a market failure when it comes to the socioeconomic realities of ECD provision in Quintile one and Quintile two communities, largely as a result of demand-side factors.

Demand is made up of two components: willingness to pay and ability to pay. From the interviews, some interesting points about the willingness to pay component arose. Several SmartStart leaders indicated that, especially but not exclusively in Quintile one and Quintile two communities (i.e., the poorest 40 percent of South Africans), the willingness to pay for early learning is hampered by a misconception that early learning is merely “babysitting” or “safety” for children. Similarly, often practitioners are conceived of merely as “nannies”. As SmartStart leader 3 noted, when couched in these terms, these services are depicted not as essential for individual and community development, but instead as “nice to have”.

Many SmartStart leaders stipulated that the parents and/or caregivers do understand the importance of education in general, but that a significant hurdle for early learning practitioners is the idea that education only starts when children are six-years-old. These attitudes have the effect of subduing demand in the sector. Muted demand is further exacerbated by the fact that willingness to pay is often endogenous or based on seeing returns to the investment, or benefits of the service. SmartStart leader 2 claimed that, for early learning, it is difficult to see the milestones in the same way as for primary or secondary education. For example, it is easier to see the returns to primary school education as children demonstrate evidence of literacy or numeracy. With respect to early learning, the evidence of reaching milestones reached is less clear, unless one knows exactly what to look out for.

Consequently, many members of the SmartStart team expressed recognition of a need to raise awareness of the value of early learning and stimulate demand, where currently little awareness raising exists. SmartStart leader 3 remarked that, in back-to-school campaigns in the mainstream media, early learning tends to be left out – one only sees depictions of children going to primary or high school. SmartStart has therefore implemented a national awareness campaign and aims to build a social movement advocating for the importance of early learning.

Based on previous analysis, the need to stimulate demand and build a social movement does not appear unique to the South African case. In the previous chapter, both aeioTU and MC struggled with low initial demand for early learning. Community education is an important pillar for MC, as a mechanism of building demand for early learning (Pispati *et al*, 2017: 10). Similarly, when aeioTU was implemented, many centres struggled to get parents or caregivers

to bring their children as the value of early learning was not widely known (Arriagada, 2014: 5). As a result, state and media campaigns promoting the work of aeioTU have been integral in stimulating demand for early learning and ensuring confidence in aeioTU centres.

The failure to recognise the value of early learning appears integrally related to Fraser's (2012) argument that care work has been constructed as a non-commodity and thus economically unimportant (Fraser, 2012: 9). Social reproduction in terms of childcare and learning for young children has often not been depicted as a form of labour even though it enables the reproduction of the supply of labour (Fraser, 2016: 101). Fraser (2016: 101) argues that social reproduction historically externalised by economies has formed one of the background conditions of possibility for capitalism, and that its value continues to be made invisible. SmartStart and other early learning providers and activists are faced with the task of making visible what has historically been framed as a non-commodity.

For SmartStart, it appears that this focus on stimulating demand has yielded returns: several people interviewed did claim that parents and caregivers often do come to understand the significance of early learning and express willingness to pay. Even in cases where parents/caregivers cannot afford to pay fees, they may pay in kind. Some SmartStart leaders recounted stories of parents/caregivers opting to provide other payments such as food, or time cleaning the early learning spaces. Many have contributed the money that they could, even if the amount was not enough to cover the fees for the service. SmartStart leader 1 remarked that:

We have a lot of stories in our network of parents putting in a large portion of their child support grant towards ECD, who don't have work but want their child to have a better future than them.

However, in cases where parents and caregivers are willing to pay (in money or in kind) and where SmartStart and others have been successful in stimulating demand, the sector remains under threat. Demand is made up of another component: ability to pay. Overall demand remains constrained in poor communities by individuals' ability to pay. As several SmartStart leaders concurred, for many parents and caregivers, "money is the biggest barrier" when it comes to accessing early learning services. Even when caregivers and parents do express willingness to pay, and try to pay in other ways, parent payment from low-income communities is simply not enough. This payment on its own does not appear able to sustain practitioners' livelihoods, and the sustainability of the sector is constantly under threat. SmartStart leader 2 noted that:

There is a huge dependence on social grants and, even where somebody is very enterprising, the community itself doesn't allow for that enterprising element to come into life and to work. What happens is there is nobody to pay for the service.

In this case, the lack of demand represents a dilemma rather than a choice as parents and caregivers need to prioritise spending on issues that can immediately sustain the family, rather than those that only reap long-term rewards. In this case, one is not witnessing rational, independent choice. The early learning landscape is made up of families embedded in their own contexts, facing the task of needing to address many competing needs with constrained means. This lack of ability to pay has in turn been exacerbated by Covid-19 and consequent lockdowns, during which many parents/caregivers lost their jobs. These caregivers often did not have the choice to return their children to ECD, even if they did express willingness to pay.

As a result of constrained demand, many practitioners cannot sustain themselves. SmartStart leader 3 remarked that, in comparison to Quintile three communities also served by SmartStart, practitioners in Quintiles one and two are more limited in terms of their ability to grow and create a conducive environment for learning. These practitioners often have to negotiate with parents about pricing, and many alternative forms of payment (i.e., paying in kind) stopped during the Covid-19 pandemic. For comparison, this individual claimed that SmartStarters in more resourced environments have had more success in making profit and sustaining themselves. The supply of early learning services in Quintile one and two is therefore constrained, largely as a result of demand-side factors.

### 6.3.2. Government utopia

Overall, therefore, it appears that early learning in South Africa is fundamentally demand constrained, which points to an instance of market failure. Many SmartStart leaders agreed that the sector needs to be funded, at least initially, to mitigate inequality caused by suppressed demand. Funding by government could increase the ability of parents/caregivers to pay, and enable a more sustainable sector where practitioners are better able to receive a decent wage.

Based on an acknowledgement of this market failure (and its contribution to inequality in low-income communities), the government subsidy is in place for Quintile one and two communities. This subsidy is based on the recognition that there needs to be funding for early learning in these communities to stimulate supply in a context of demand constraints. The NIECDP (2015) focuses on the most vulnerable communities from both an equity and

efficiency point of view for this very reason. The role for government does appear to be more than just funding the sector appropriately and otherwise leaving it to the market: the quality of early learning requires appropriate regulation. *A priori*, the sector cannot be left unregulated. Children are vulnerable, and apart from this, there are the usual issues with asymmetric information. As SmartStart leader 11 noted, in South Africa, we still struggle with lack of a national definition of what quality is, making the sector difficult to regulate appropriately. SmartStart leader 10 argued that what is missing in the landscape is a structured process of support, training and quality control, especially for those operating in low-income segments, pointing to an important regulatory and quality assurance role for the state.

This idea aligns with Polanyi's (1944) notion of embeddedness. Market failure in the form of inequality, and the inability to sufficiently supply goods with high social returns and positive externalities, indicates that the market economy cannot exist independently but must rely on some nonmarket institution to manage the supply and demand of public goods (Block, 2003: 282). Instead, in these contexts, the idea of a self-regulating market appears as a kind of utopia (Block, 2003: 282). Polanyi (1944: 71) claims that markets need to be embedded in regulatory institutions, like the state, to correct market failure and protect against other crises.

However, many people interviewed mentioned fundamental government failure – an underfunding of the sector in general (see: Table 5. 1 on page 93), and overregulation of the subsidy which often means that those who the subsidy targets are unable to access it. From the interviews, it became apparent that there are huge barriers to entry with respect to registration for the ECD subsidy, in terms of infrastructure requirements as well as the qualifications practitioners are expected to possess, even though the government has made provisions for conditional registration. SmartStart leader 1 commented that there are approximately 17 steps to get approval for the subsidy every month, requiring an enormous amount of state manpower. Just as the idea of a self-regulating market for early learning appears utopian, it also seems that the standards and norms of the subsidy reflect an out of touch approach that ignores the lived experience of many South Africans. SmartStart leader 3 claimed that:

We cannot wait for schools to be built. We have to use what we have.

As SmartStart leader 5 indicated, when it comes to government regulation, “you have to stand on your head” for the state. The idea that the standards of the subsidy are not cognisant of the lived reality of many South Africans is illustrated by two examples brought up by SmartStart

leaders. SmartStart leader 4 commented that, under the subsidy regulations, one cannot build on unproclaimed land. However, approximately 50 percent of South Africans live on unproclaimed land and these people also need access to a nearby early learning service.

SmartStart leader 6 highlighted that these standards are not context-specific within provinces, meaning that there is a blanket application of these standards to areas like Sandton (where the wealthiest South Africans reside) and Alexandra (an under-resourced township) in Gauteng. Sometimes, a requirement is that early learning sites need to have a functioning parking lot. However, in Alexandra, “people don’t drive, people don’t have cars, and there is not enough space”. This statement highlights the absurdity of the situation and points towards the fundamental issue associated with the state. Often, as SmartStart leader 11 observed, we tend to quote legislation and regulations instead of looking at the realities of South African children. The state’s lack of capacity to consider the realities of the households may be a symptom of a lack of responsiveness and grassroots democracy.

Furthermore, many of those interviewed were concerned about an enforced requirement for a tertiary qualification for practitioners in a sector that “does not pay enough” to induce people to work towards tertiary qualifications. Very few people would be likely to invest in tertiary qualifications for a sector where the subsidy and parent fees are currently not able to sustain minimum wage. The expectation that well-qualified practitioners will emerge in the absence of decent wage prospects appears a symptom of the utopian nature of the state in South Africa.

This apparent oversight, where wage rates are not high enough to induce investment in higher education, is not just a feature of ECD but of caring work in general which tends to be undervalued. According to Federici (1975), often care (and work, and education) in the home is framed as an “act of love” and those in the caring professions, such as teaching and nursing, are supposed to be motivated by their vocation rather than the prospect of high earnings. While this de-commodification is not altogether bad, a problem emerges as a sense of vocation or service can only emerge or persist if practitioners are able to make a decent living. One cannot expect practitioners to invest in tertiary qualifications if the sector does not pay minimum wage. As SmartStart leader 1 noted, without minimum wage:

People cannot afford to stay, no matter their love of children.

With this regulation, many SmartStart leaders claimed that government intervention is a slow process, leaving many practitioners unable to reach the subsidy and many children without

access. SmartStart leader 2 remarked that practitioners serving low-income children operate in a largely informal sector, and come from communities typically unable to access large savings or credit necessary to invest in meeting these standards. What results is a cumbersome application process where time-constrained individuals interact with a bureaucratic and often distant state process, and where most people who the subsidy aims to target cannot meet the norms and standards. In turn, the failure to access funding creates a circular problem where programmes do not have the funding to improve their infrastructure, but the government in practice seems unwilling to provide funding until these improvements are made, another kind of vicious cycle. Just as the idea that the market will come to serve under-resourced communities appears nearly impossible, this system, based on a sort of rights fundamentalism, rather than the lived experience of the children targeted, also seems to reflect utopianism.

This approach, which significantly slows the state's rollout of early learning services, ultimately hurts the children it aims to serve. SmartStart leader 4 noted that "by then [i.e., the time the government has set up ECD centres for those children], the kids are in Matric". SmartStart leader 11 noted, that if you actually look at the evolution of legislation, learning in the early years was first framed as the foundation for education in the RDP – yet it took close to three decades for the state to focus deliberately on ECD in the NIECDP (2015) and recently in the DBE. It therefore appears that this utopian approach is not going to realise the returns associated with ECD. Instead, many SmartStart leaders advocated for the state to take a more pragmatic approach towards the realisation of this fundamental human right, reaching the children who need it now, before they are in Matric. SmartStart leader 9 claimed that:

Imperfect is better than nothing. There is no way you are going to go from having nothing in place to all of a sudden having a world class purposeful centre for every single one of those children within the gap.

This approach advocates for a progressive realisation of rights, based on a prefigurative vision of all children accessing high quality programmes and a theory of change to make that vision a reality. SmartStart leader 9 claimed that the state, in instead aiming for "100 percent perfect" (i.e., a utopia) lacked understanding of the context of the operation of Quintile one and Quintile two ECD sites. This focus also reflects a rigid, unpragmatic reading of the Constitution which fails to consider its mandate for the progressive realisation of rights. Rather, there should be a focus on "doing something which still does the job, maybe at a little bit less than perfection

rate” to assist in getting more registrations, and thereafter quality can be built into what already exists.

The government and SmartStart seem to both frame ECD as a fundamental human right and public good. Where they differ is in their imagination of how this right is going to be realised. From the interviews and the literature, the state’s approach does not appear to be centred around the lived experience of children in low-income communities, and also does not seem to make its way into economic strategies. SmartStart leader 10 commented that, while, in the immediate post-1994 period and later in the NDP, putting children first was at the centre of the country’s pathway to economic growth, this idea seems to have been “tossed [...] out the window”.

While the NDP and NIECDP do signal the economic significance of ECD, early learning has not really factored into economic development frameworks and strategies. SmartStart leader 10 recounted that ECD was one of the first chapters in the Chinese economic plan but does not really feature in South African economic strategies. This person attributed this oversight to the fact that ECD is perceived as a “soft” thing and as “care”, and that there is a need to reposition it in terms of the economic benefit to children and society at large.

Indeed, as SmartStart leader 10 noted, it seems that the idea of putting children first or at the centre is only weakly realised through the social safety net – through the child support grant. This observation is deeply related to developmental state literature. Less desirable transfer welfare states have a larger component of passive social transfers or grants (Burger, 2014: 6). Expenditure of this kind does not improve productivity or competitiveness, as it fails to build human capability, therefore having only limited developmental effects (Burger, 2014: 6). Rather, these social protections are primarily *ad hoc* benefits to citizens, subject to means-testing and limited by the budget constraint (Lavinias, 2013: 5-6). The ECD sector in South Africa does seem to demonstrate the ways in which South Africa may act more as a transfer welfare state rather than a social investment state. SmartStart leader 10 claimed that:

Covid demonstrated the paucity of any sort of structural support to poorer families in South Africa outside of the grant system. There was virtually no ability for the state to start to engage with household in terms of the collapse of household security, except through the social grant system.

Based on this observation, SmartStart leader 10 argues that there is a need to “scaffold” families far better, in order to build resilience to crises but also to nurture more developmental

engagement focused on growing capabilities rather than relying on income transfers. More deliberate funding and realistic regulation of capability enhancing services like ECD and early learning therein may provide a way forward.

It therefore appears that the government's response to funding the sector has been negligible while its response to regulating the ECD landscape and subsidy has been context-inappropriate. It is interesting that this kind of regulation appears to undermine both access and quality. If an access-quality trade-off exists, it seems that both are compromised. Under this system, the idea that ECD will be **accessible** does appear out of touch with the reality of people who come from low-income communities and cannot afford to pay fees in a sector where government funding is not the norm. In a context where primary education is state funded, if early learning is not initially funded for these groups (signalling its significance), the importance of this stage of education continues to be overlooked.

While the NIECDP emphasises the importance of safe and affordable early learning, acknowledging the importance of these services especially in contexts where parents cannot care for their children during working hours, so far it appears that the focus has been on safety rather than affordability (Department of Social Development, 2016: 26). This emphasis on safety, however, also illustrates the quality issue associated with government regulation. SmartStart leader 4 noted that, for early learning practitioners, "if I had a clean environment with a fire extinguisher and they [the children] were sitting there rolling all over the floor, that is okay." Focus on safety, while important, at the expense of other metrics, such as learning outcomes, means that the educational **quality** control of the sector often feels overlooked.

In a context of government failure to improve ECD quality and access, ultimately what results is a dualized system where the wealthy and middle classes are served by private provision while gaps at Quintile one and two are filled by the informal market or NGO sector (often with minimal government support) or are not filled at all. The nature of provisioning in low-income segments tends to be informal and survivalist, undermining sustainability. In contexts where it remains under-resourced, ECD tends to be *de facto* commodified in both wealthy and low-income segments, at a cost to access for those in adverse circumstances. As a result, those who stand to experience the greatest returns to ECD, from both an efficiency and equity perspective, are often those without quality access. As SmartStart leader 11 noted,

Grade R is free in the country but ECD is paid for. Is that how we believe that it is an equaliser? Because if it is an equaliser, it should be free so that children start equally from day one.

The fact that primary and secondary schooling in South Africa is fully funded, yet ECD is only partially (and poorly) subsidised points to government failure in this realm, and indicates that the state sees early learning as different to education. It is not forced to take responsibility for it as a public good, as it is with basic education. In the face of increasing austerity measures and budget cuts, it also appears unlikely that more funding will be allocated to early learning, at least in the short- and medium-term. This idea is reflected in the interviews with the SmartStart team, where there seemed to be a resignation to the fact that National Treasury will not allocate a large sum to ECD and early learning soon, and that there is a need to “mobilise the funding that is currently available for early childhood development in South Africa”.

Even if the state increases funding for ECD, more funding may not translate into meaningful outcomes. Despite the fact that government funding of basic education in South Africa is substantial, the quality of education is far from ideal. The interviews and literature (Nomsenge, 2019) indicate that South Africa faces an education quality crisis at all levels of education. While the state allocates significant funding to education, poor service quality means that the government provides minimalist support and those with means tend to prefer private alternatives on the market. Therefore, the failure of basic education in South Africa manifests as a state and market dualism under what appears to be a failed liberal welfare regime.

In a context where many South Africans cannot access private schools, a learning deficit and welfare regime failure persists and the fundamental inequality issue remains unresolved. This reality reinforces a vicious cycle where poor children continue to suffer from poor public provisioning while those who can exit will generally choose to go to more resourced private schools (or former Model C schools) with better outcomes. The subsidised South African basic education system as a whole is in many ways palliative and the upscaling of a low-quality system will not be transformative. There is inequality in education where Grade R is done poorly. Therefore, the social investment framing is only weakly realised at both levels. It appears that we are stuck between the idea of rights and a lack of resources or capacity to realise these rights, and a deeply unequal system along the lines of public and private provision.

## 6.4. Making space for early learning: Interrogating each corner of the welfare diamond

In a context of market and government failure (or utopianism), it is important to consider the role of all suppliers of early learning in order to improve access, as a kind of broad-based embeddedness. Here, one can group the comments of the individuals interviewed according to the four corners of Razavi's (2007) welfare diamond: the family, market, state, and voluntary provision or civil society. Razavi argues that, for those countries wishing to bring about social investment states, that are child-centred and human capability enhancing, there is a need for more systemic analyses of this diamond and its outcomes in various countries, so that this space can be properly utilised when it comes to policy design (Razavi, 2007: 33). Based on the insights coming from the interviews, each element of this diamond is explored in turn:

### 6.4.1. The family: Household and neighbourhood as the first site of learning

The interviews shed light on the significance of families in early learning. Conversations with SmartStart leaders pointed towards individual and institutional attitudes that reflected a home/classroom dualism, or the idea that work or learning happens in a classroom setting while leisure and care happens at home. Learning is generally framed as taking place outside of rather than within families and communities, which, as SmartStart leader 11 noted, “devalues the role of parents” and effectively disembeds them from the practice of teaching children. This framing segments learning and care into two spheres, while the literature supports a holistic integration of both components to support development, wellbeing and learning (Guevara and Cardini, 2021: 3). Furthermore, it depicts the home as a space where production does not take place. Many SmartStart leaders lamented the devaluation of the household as a site of production and learning, which relegates early learning in these spaces to “babysitting” rather than the foundation for later success. What was surprising in the interviews is how it is not only care but also education that becomes invisible when taking place in the home. The literature primarily focuses on how care tends to be made invisible despite its economic significance. Here, it appears that learning, which is recognised as important in driving human capital formation, when placed in a home environment, also begins to be conceived as trivial.

Several SmartStart leaders not only identified this home/classroom dualism but also deliberately disrupted it by positioning the home as a significant site of learning. SmartStart leader 3 claimed that “it starts with the family. It starts at home.” This individual claimed that early learning should not be confined to the walls of a classroom but should happen “in

general”. SmartStart leader 1 claimed that the Covid-19 pandemic emphasised the importance of the family as many children could no longer go to early learning sites and caregivers became the sole source of care and learning. This period also highlighted that, even before the pandemic, children spent most of their time at home. The significance of the family in children’s development indicates the importance of enabling learning environments in the home and community spaces. SmartStart leader 5 argued that a child-centred approach requires framing the parent/caregiver as the most important partner. SmartStart leader 2 similarly positioned the home as a space of production in the claim that:

Early learning does not have to happen within a brick-and-mortar ECD centre. It can happen in informal locations, it can happen in homes, it can happen in community spaces. [...]. The framework needs to [...] recognise that there is value in those practitioners as well *and in those spaces too* [own emphasis added].

The image of a wall invoked by the “brick-and-mortar” centre is powerful, pointing towards the separation of education and household/community instead of continuous flow. In many ways, as the above quote suggests, the household does appear a significant site for learning for the early years. This idea of a continuous flow also allows for an expansion of how we conceive of the family/household. It is not suitable to use Western nuclear family models to characterise South African households, where the family, neighbourhood and community are less distinct from one another. Neighbourhoods and communities are significant providers of welfare and development. The recognition of this significance points towards a particular kind of regulation that allows for democratic engagement, rather than a state centralised and top-down process. Learning happens in households as well as schools, indicating the importance of re-embedding education in families and neighbourhoods.

Evidence (see: page 117) suggests that SmartStart’s home- or community-based programmes, where programmes operate out of practitioners’ homes, could be just as effective as centre-based ECD interventions, an idea that is reflected in both the NIECDP (2015) (which allocates significance to day mothers and home-based settings) and in the insights of the individuals interviewed. Home-based settings do appear suited to learning in the early years. Many SmartStart leaders expressed concern about the potential “schoolification” of ECD and what this may mean both for home-based practitioners as well as young children, who learn best through play. SmartStart leader 11 noted that early learning should not just be positioned as “getting [children] ready for schooling”. Rather, it is about growing, nurturing and

strengthening children so that they can thrive in all aspects of life. Schoolification holds the danger of undermining this holistic approach, where communities are early learning enablers.

As a few of the SmartStart leadership team noted, home-based early learning is also significant when one takes into account the lived experiences of the children currently without access. Apartheid's spatial legacy, which continues to leave many of the country's poorest in rural areas, or in townships on city outskirts, means that many young children would need to travel significant distances to attend formal early learning centres. This approach does not appear feasible or safe for these young children – indicating that home-based early learning programmes closer to these children's own households may be more appropriate. It seems that early learning programmes, which serve society's most vulnerable population, needs to be physically embedded in neighbourhoods, rather than removed from these communities. The assumption that centre-based learning will be of higher quality than home-based learning, coming through even in the Nores *et al* (2018a) impact evaluation of aeioTU, does not seem to always hold true, and in cases like low-income communities in South Africa, centre-based programmes, which remove children from their communities, may also be problematic.

The idea of the significance of the home space that emerged from the interviews echoes the principles of feminist institutionalism. Feminist institutionalism disrupts the dualisms associated with conventional economics. Historically, the economics discipline has been based on the separation of the sphere of production and the sphere of reproduction, or the separation of the economy and the family as a result of 19th century economic thought (Waller and Wren, 2021: 55). The establishment of this dichotomy laid the groundwork for *laissez-faire* thought, and the isolation of the economic sphere from both the state and family (Waller and Wren, 2021: 56). This framework narrowed down the focus of economics to the individual exercising agency through the free market and the economy is framed an amalgamation of individuals making rational choices (Waller and Wren, 2021: 58). Instead, feminist institutionalists disrupted this binary, beginning with the second-wave feminists of the 1960s who claimed that the personal was political (and economic) (Nicholson, 1981: 85). Just as the SmartStart leadership team has located the home as one of if not the most significant space for early learning and human capital formation, feminist institutionalists position this same space as an important site of economic production and reproduction. Both attempts serve to make visible the contributions of the household to the economy.

The engagement of the family and community in early learning is thus significant. Often, however, as SmartStart leader 4 noted, our conception of parental engagement often ignores the importance of learning and teaching in the household, but focuses on parent teacher associations (PTAs), “class moms” and “tuck shop moms” where schooling is assumed again to take place on school premises and in the school’s time. This depiction appears to shift the burden of social reproduction back on to parents, especially women who (hopefully) have careers and do not necessarily want to be involved in all that happens at the school (or early learning site). The problem is that this framework serves to reinforce traditional nuclear family structures, which not only unduly burden women with social reproduction, but also do not reflect the realities of many South African families who fail to conform to this model. Instead, parents/caregivers should be equally responsible for child-raising, and this important work should be scaffolded by other institutions.

Barriers to quality early learning (and learning in general) manifest when not all family members are equally responsible for the learning process and a gender division of labour in relation to early learning persists. SmartStart leader 2 provided insight into this gendered division, noting that, when faced with the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, SmartStart made their early learning resources available data free on their website. Monitoring on the website revealed that it was mostly women clicking on these resources (although men/fathers could have been playing a background role in educating children not visible in this observation). Finally, while several people interviewed noted that “mentrepreneurs” or male practitioners were part of the network of people providing ECD services to children across South Africa, the vast majority of franchisees who provide care and early learning to children are women. This gender division relates to the feminist economics literature around childcare and social reproduction (Federici, 1975) and indicates that the burden of early learning in the home/family remains inequitable.

From the interviews, there was also a sense that we need to rethink parental engagement when it comes to early learning and learning in general. Ultimately, it is also unrealistic or utopian to expect full-time parental engagement from working class parents, based on the idea of nuclear families distinct from neighbourhoods and communities. A fundamental family failure occurs when parents and caregivers need to seek employment and cannot care for children full time. SmartStart leader 1 commented that, often, what results is that other children, particularly

girl children, become sources of sibling care. The burden placed on women (and girl children) is a significant constraint associated with the family pillar in the provisioning of ECD.

#### 6.4.2. CSI and the private sector's ability to internalise externalities

Another key player identified both in the interviews and in Esping-Andersen's welfare regime typology is the private or corporate sector. Currently, this sector does play an important role: where ECD is not publicly available, it is the sole provider for the wealthy and middle classes who can afford to obtain early learning and care services on the market. Through the framework of Corporate Social Investment (CSI), it can also act as a provider of ECD to low-income communities. However, in a context where the ability to pay is more constrained in low-income communities (and where the private returns are lower, though the social returns may be higher), the private sector leaves many children in under-resourced environments without access, and cannot guarantee universal provision.

Furthermore, the interviews pointed to constraints associated with CSI. Many SmartStart leaders noted that the fundamental issue with CSI initiatives is that they tend to be orientated towards short-term outcomes whereas early learning is a long-term investment in need of long-term funding. SmartStart leader 3 remarked that corporates will often be willing to fund for three months. However, there needs to be two or three years of funding to get a cohort of children through early learning programmes to begin to see returns. For example, one firm was interested in offering scholarships to some children, but was not necessarily committed to funding children for the full three years of learning. Without a three-year commitment, it would be difficult to ensure that children stay in the SmartStart system, especially if parents/caregivers are not able to afford consecutive years of learning. Another issue pointed out by SmartStart leadership is that these investments tend to be once-off and not sustainable, which limits their ability to contribute towards long-term change. SmartStart leader 10 claimed that:

Corporate social investors that are subject to the vicissitudes of the boards that come and go, the CEOs that come and go – they are far ficker. It is much harder to get them to walk the journey.

SmartStart leader 4 remarked that CSI is associated with “giving your donation and going off” and that the short-termism of CSI does not fit with the nature of what SmartStart wants to do, as it ultimately hurts long-run sustainability. For similar reasons, SmartStart leader 9 claimed that these kinds of initiatives are “limited” as they do not necessarily represent firms buying

into the idea of investing in ECD and committing on a long-term basis. Often, then, as SmartStart leader 8 pointed out, it appears that the “cost [...] outweighs the benefit”. SmartStart leader 5 mentioned an inferiority perception related to NGOs by the corporate sector, and the need to show returns almost immediately in order to attract funding.

These comments relate to the developmental literature. Evans and Heller (2015: 696) argue that social returns to expanding capabilities are often higher than the private returns. Firms are more likely to channel investment where private returns appear higher, although total returns may in fact be lower. CSI may not be suited towards sectors with high social returns, such as ECD (Evans and Heller, 2015: 696). Similarly, Campbell (2012: 139) argues that the ultimate role of firms is often to maximise profit in the short term to enhance shareholder value. Furthermore, incomplete profit calculations – which often omit externalities – indicates that markets, while valuable, are limited in bringing about social outcomes (Austin, 2019: 53).

Philanthropic funding which is also private in nature, however, may be a promising avenue to explore. Without necessarily being tied to the boards of profit-maximising firms, philanthropic funders have more agency to act as investors in projects. These investors tend to be focused on innovation and long-term impact. SmartStart leader 5 noted that these investors’ involvement is based on “respect for the social innovator” and a willingness to fund in the long-term and at risk. Funding models in these cases can be framed as investment generating returns rather than donations to improve welfare. This idea is explored more deeply in Section 6.5.4 below.

#### 6.4.3. Developments in the state’s approach and the transition to DBE

Given the framing of ECD as a public good with positive externalities and social returns, it seems that the state should be responsible for ensuring that South Africans have access to ECD as part of a broad-based embeddedness where the state coordinates the responsibility of several actors. SmartStart leader 2 remarked that the state had positioned ECD as an “apex priority” This prioritisation is reflected in the policy documents, namely the NDP (2012) and NIECDP (2015). In the NDP, ECD is framed as a key priority in ensuring the long-term prospects of future generations (National Planning Commission, 2012: 69). The NIECDP (2015) reflects the government’s recognition that South Africa’s development depends on unlocking the human capital of its youngest population (Department of Social Development, 2015: 18).

Several people interviewed remarked that there is possibility for innovation in this space as the state is curious about finding an affordable way to reach children. Although several constraints

are associated with the state's current approach (see Section 6.3.2 above), several SmartStart leaders indicated that the recent migration of the ECD mandate from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the Department of Basic Education (DBE) holds a "huge amount of possibility and promise". The most often cited positive of this shift is the idea that ECD is moving from a department associated with the social/family/community to one associated with education. This shift is an important signal that early learning is education, not just babysitting. Furthermore, as SmartStart leader 1 observed, this migration makes a case on the demand side of human capital development opportunity in the early years.

The NIECDP also emphasises the importance of safe and affordable day care and early learning services for children, acknowledging the importance of these services for social welfare, especially in contexts where parents cannot offer care for their children during working hours (Department of Social Development, 2016: 26). So far, it seems that the focus has been on safety (as illustrated in Section 6.3.2) rather than affordable learning. With the migration of the ECD mandate to DBE, one would assume the emphasis would move towards learning. The shift to education signals that ECD is not merely about nannies, babysitters and safety.

The SmartStart leaders identified a few other reasons to be hopeful about this shift. Primarily, DBE has a greater budget than DSD, which implies that more government funding could potentially be allocated to ECD, or at least it would make visible (and therefore problematise) that only one percent of the DBE budget is currently allocated to early learning. DBE also has a model for scale and subsidy and is well-staffed in comparison to DSD. So far, it seems that DBE has expressed a willingness to consult with other players in the ECD landscape.

However, there are also concerns associated with the shift, and the state's capacity to ensure universal ECD. Many of these, namely the utopian approach taken by the state and issues associated with the provision of basic education, are outlined in Section 6.3.2. Another issue is the fragmentation of the South African state. Often different departments are not in harmony, in a context where ECD (and its components) needs a holistic approach. The NIECDP mandates roles for both the DBE and DSD (Department of Social Development, 2015: 76-77).

The literature, however, indicates that these departments have often worked "in silos with little coordination, collaboration and coherence" (Atmore, 2019: 209). Ultimately, this lack of collaboration has resulted in fractured responsibility and poor policy implementation (Atmore, 2019: 209). This fragmentation manifests most clearly in the way ECD is funded. ECD is

supposed to be the preserve of DSD and DBE (where the subsidy should be the primary source of funding) but other departments' funding mechanisms, such as EPWP, CWP and National Treasury's Jobs Fund, are often involved in *ad hoc* and often uncoordinated ways. A lack of coordination and distinction around the roles of various government players seems to undermine efficiency in the sector.

These silos are also reflected in the discrepancy between national, provincial and municipal governments, with several interviewees expressing frustration that information often does not filter down the different levels of government, and SmartStart leader 2 noting that even the registration requirements for the subsidy can differ by province. At a departmental level, SmartStart leader 5 noted that different government departments often act in isolation from one another, but that there is a role for many departments – from economic development clusters to social development – in the provisioning of quality ECD. This issue of silos points to the issue of lack of coordination and national vision by the South African government. SmartStart leader 10 claimed that the realisation of comprehensive ECD requires a national vision, strategy and agency, otherwise there will be a lack of coordinated effort, and a much smaller impact:

Unless you've got both the vision and the means of implementing that vision through a coordinated programme and a coordinating structure, it is very, very hard to get traction. So, everything is piece meal. Everything is just in silos.

The lack of harmonised approach reflects the segmentation issue in some South American countries, where the governance of ECCE is split between different departments and where education and care continue to be conceived of as separate undertakings (Guevara and Cardini, 2021: 7). Even in South Africa, there appears to be a sense that welfare (care) and social investment (education) are separate, although effective early childhood development calls for their integration.

Overall, there is a sense that South Africans deal with a reactive, rather than a deliberate, state. As opposed to social investment state literature, where the state guides development, it seems that many of the people interviewed have witnessed and worked with a government that is lacking purpose (or that is caught between several competing purposes). SmartStart leader 2 commented that, faced with many competing and pressing issues, the South African government goes "where the voice is loudest". One example cited by several people interviewed was that of tertiary education: it was only after nation-wide student protests and

organised student movements that the government started funding higher education, an instance where the government went towards the loudest voice.

In contrast, the subdued demand related to ECD services means that the sector makes a much smaller noise, and advocacy around ECD is only recently gaining traction. Attitudes that ECD is “babysitting” or “nice to have” are not limited to the communities that SmartStart serves but are pervasive and appear to sometimes exist within the government itself. These perceptions put forward one explanation for the underfunding of the system as a whole, indicating a willingness to pay issue that permeates various institutions as well as individuals. In a context where there is little “noise” about ECD, there is a sense that government, in SmartStart leader 3’s words, would rather “let sleeping dogs lie” than interrogate how to accelerate ECD access. SmartStart leader 9 made the insightful comment that:

Sometimes I question – sorry, I don’t question, I know that there are a number of people within DBE, DSD, who realise the importance of early learning and they champion for it – but I still doubt as to whether the whole Cabinet realises the significance of it and whether there has been enough championing done. So that when it comes to the decision-making of splitting the budget it becomes about, where can we take from, from which section? Which section is going to make the least noise?

SmartStart leader 11 made the claim that:

We are just not able to be bold enough to take the necessary steps in the beginning [...] We always want to look at, when everything else is fine, then we will go to ECD. That is a bad start. So, we always wanted to do everything else, and then if we have got enough money, or enough of that, then we are going to go for ECD.

This observation provides insight into the contradiction in South Africa’s ECD sector: where ECD positioned as “apex priority” but continues to be overlooked in terms of resourcing. Many people interviewed lamented the fact that the ECD sector was left out of government Covid-19 stimulus packages and vaccination drives. Even when the government extended a Covid relief package to ECD at the start of 2021, many people remarked that many of their implementing partners had not received the promised relief almost at the end of the 2021 year. The result from the government is recognition that ECD is a public good but few resources availed to

make it accessible. Even in principle the sector is only partially funded, and government funding is not a norm for many sites.

A last and significant concern around the role of the state is around how civil society fits in. SmartStart leader 1 noted that the DBE is not used to a mix of private and public provision (where private actors are subsidised by public structures) in education. As is discussed earlier in this chapter, the basic education model appears to be one fully embedded in the state and disembedded from the household and community. In contrast, ECD is different to the liberal basic education model of separately functioning public and private schools. As a result, this person expressed fear about the in-sourcing of early education into government structures, to the detriment of those who are already providing these services on the ground.

This issue points to a pivotal broader constraint associated with the government: the nature of its partnership/relationship with civil society. In some of the interviews, there was a sense that the relationship with the state has been more like an “employee” relationship instead of a “real collaboration”. In this case, it appears that the government sees its relationship with NGOs and civil society more generally as a service delivery agent rather than as a partner. This perception reflects some of the social economy literature which indicates that there is a danger that the social economy may be framed as a replacement to state service delivery; or that the social economy may be co-opted as a service delivery alternative to welfare state and not a partner in ensuring access for all (Smith, 2010).

This idea also related to developmental literature. Evans and Heller (2015) claim that one of the reasons South Africa has not enjoyed success as a developmental state is related to the relationship between the state and civil society. South Africa has a vibrant civil society, but it has been sidelined from political choices as the state has become increasingly technocratic, and insulated from broader society (Evans and Heller, 2015: 706). Without a meaningful partnership between the state and civil society, it appears that we have a state caught between trying to do everything itself and neoliberal outsourcing.

#### 6.4.4. Civil society

From the interviews, in terms of the provisioning of ECD, there is a sense that the family, market and state are constrained. Here, the role of civil society deserves further attention. Wood and Gough (2006: 1699) argue that, in developing countries especially, countries are often characterised not according to welfare regime types based on a mixture of market, family and

state, but by informal security or insecurity regimes which experience problematic states, imperfect markets, and an overall welfare deficit. In the absence of a capable state, informal security regimes tend to rely on community organisations, especially those in the realm of civil society, as a welfare source (Wood and Gough, 2006: 1702). While often overlooked in economics literature, civil society organisations may therefore be significant.

Several of the interviews indicated that the strength of civil society is that, unlike government, which may be removed from citizens' circumstances, these organisations are generally grounded in context and therefore more responsive to people's needs. This idea may also apply to philanthropic funders who may in some ways be better positioned than the state to channel funds, at least in the early stages of an innovation or intervention. Networks based on social capital are especially significant in bringing about coordination within and between communities. Furthermore, civil society organisations are not just service delivery agents but also play an advocacy role. Many people in the interviews commented on the role the SmartStart system, as well as early learning NGOs in general, play in advocating for changes in policy, and putting political pressures on the state. SmartStart leader 11 made the comment that civil society organisations can exert "upward pressure" on the fiscus, pushing the government to be more allocatively efficient when it comes to spending on education

The importance of advocacy and putting political pressure on the state noted by the people interviewed is a surprising finding, challenging some of the literature. Evans and Heller (2015) argue that, in state-society relations, civil society in South Africa has been pushed aside while the state has become increasingly insulated since 1994. The interviews seem to confirm the idea that the government has often framed civil society as a service delivery agent. This framing is a neoliberal trope, whereby the state acknowledges that there are market failures and public goods, but uses outsourced private (or NGO) sector agents to supply these. However, the conversations with SmartStart's team also provide a sense that civil society is pushing back and challenging the state. The engagement in advocacy, and pushing for more from the state, signals the agency and potential of civil society to effect more large-scale transformation.

Several constraints, however, impede the efficacy of these organisations. Many ECD programmes do quality work but generally only at a localised level – SmartStart leader 1 remarked that small-scale initiatives tend to be expensive, and less able to unlock the increasing returns associated with the sector. These approaches are not effective models of scale. SmartStart leader 6 commented that, prior to the SmartStart's emergence, one of SmartStart's

major funders was funding a number of ECD organisations who were doing important work, but that there was no noticeable shift in terms of the number of children reached.

SmartStart leader 1 remarked that, while there were lots of NGOs currently operating in the sector, there was not much sharing and not an effective scale model, which in turn undermines efficiency. Ultimately this approach is not only inequitable, as many areas remain underserved, but costly, as many fragmented localised projects cannot reap the benefits and cost reductions of economies of scale (Hickman, 2020: 6). Localised NGOs operating in isolation from one another are not based on population planning, meaning they are not designed for scale and their reach is generally limited (Hickman, 2020: 17). NGOs are meaningful but when their work happens in isolation, they are unlikely to shift the status quo in South Africa. Furthermore, when it comes to advocacy from several uncoordinated groups, there is a danger that competing demands and interests may do little to bring about significant change to the sector as a whole.

## 6.5. Unlocking possibility in the early learning landscape

### 6.5.1. The importance of partnerships

It therefore appears that all four corners of Razavi's (2007) welfare diamond function imperfectly in the realm of ECD in South Africa. Not one of the corners by itself seems capable of meeting South Africa's ECD needs. Instead, the interviews indicate the need for pragmatic partnerships to realise the returns associated with the sector. Comments by SmartStart's leadership team reflect that each of the four corners of the welfare diamond should be considered part of a complementary, rather than separated approach, where all contributions can be coordinated. Across almost all interviews, there was a firm idea that partnership is essential in reaching the children without early learning access while many people highlighted the danger of different actors existing in silos and hence the need for a holistic and coordinated approach. SmartStart leader 3 remarked that:

Government can't do it alone. No one company can do it. It starts with everyone.

SmartStart leader 10 claimed that:

There is a place for everybody. And there is enough room for partnership.

The nature of the interviews also reflects the idea of the importance of relationships. With a few exceptions, most SmartStart leaders exhibited a reluctance to criticise their partners

directly, although they did recognise that certain partners could be “difficult”. This shows the value SmartStart’s leadership team places on maintaining these relationships, and the significance allocated to long term relationships, as well as the need (and willingness) to work with imperfect partners. From the interviews, there was also a sense of optimism that ECD, as a sector with many players (as opposed to basic education, where government is the leading provider), could be a space to imagine new forms of collaboration. SmartStart leader 10 noted that this platform could potentially be a prototype for a new form of collaboration that is more plural and that recognises the respective roles that players outside government can play.

This positioning reminds one of the social democratic principle of compromise. Evans and Heller (2015: 698) argue that the developmental capacity of social democracy was founded on multiclass alliances between imperfect partners. These solidaristic class politics were not spontaneous but formed through these kinds of associations and partnerships, where all collaborators were valuable (Evans and Heller, 2015: 698). Overall, there is a strong connection between SmartStart’s pragmatic and democratic approach and social democracy, which emphasises evolutionary change, cooperation beyond class, and rights culture.

This connection links up the economic (market failure, unexploited gains) and political themes. It also invites one to think of the “market economy” organically: not as a “free market” with imposed institutions but as a system of evolving embeddedness. Politics here is not ideological but pragmatic. Institutions evolve, but the evolution cannot be blind and must be guided. This kind of embeddedness is not technocratic but political and implies a particular state-society relation (Evans and Heller, 2015: 696). Just as Polanyi (1977) claims that the idea of a self-regulating market is a utopia, the idea that the state, insulated from other partners and sectors, will be able to embed markets in institutions by itself, also appears a kind of impossibility. ECD is not just a public good. It is inherently a social good, as families and communities play a pivotal role in child raising. This role therefore implies a particular kind of embeddedness: not top-down, state centralised regulation but a democratic embeddedness where neighbourhoods and local communities are not merely ECD recipients but co-creators.

The need to work in imperfect relationships to achieve economic and political transformation is again a reflection of feminist institutionalist literature. Feminist institutionalists put forward a version of the economy not as an amalgamation of rational maximisers but a means of provisioning organised through relationships and embedded in social norms and power structures (Waller and Wren, 2021: 59). This definition embraces the interdependence of

institutions and agents, where individuals exist not as atoms but in relationships and connections (Waller and Wren, 2021: 60-61). This approach is also self-reflective, interrogating the ways power relations effect the choices of individuals.

A framework for partnership highlights the key, political role that civil society can play. Civil society is not just a service delivery agent but also engages in advocacy with respect to issues of distribution. Ultimately, it appears that civil society can act as a catalyst for government by applying political pressure, not just in an adversarial sense but also through dialogue, setting examples and partnership. The failures of the market, state, family and civil society implies that neither the market nor the state nor the family nor existing civil society are fit for purpose. There is therefore a need for collective action to transform South Africa's ECD trajectory. Here, the politics are critical: in particular, within modern democracies, there is a potential leadership role for civil society to push the state, market and families to realise the mandate of universal ECD. This kind of politics highlights the idea that we need to think about the social economy and civil society differently than in our previous conceptualisations.

This idea also relates to developmental literature. Evans and Heller (2015: 695) emphasise the importance of a civil society with shared and coherent goals, co-produced by public and communities (Evans and Heller, 2015: 696). Just as Polanyi claims that civil society may be the countervailing force to market, Evans and Heller (2015: 697) indicate that it may also be the countervailing force to deficits of democracy. Indeed, the developmental capacity of social democracy is founded on multi-class alliance, and associations that make way for a broad-based embeddedness (Evans and Heller, 2015: 708).

The importance of these relationships and partnerships reflects Polanyi's definition of the substantive economy: as the way in which human's meet their needs, including both market and nonmarket activities (Polanyi, 1977: 10). The emphasis on partnerships in an embedded economic (and political) system indicates that what is "missing" is to connect and coordinate what already exists. This implies that the gap in ECD is at the platform level. All of these actors working in isolation points to the importance of the platform and the need for solutioning at the population-level. The idea of connecting the contributions that already exist came through strongly in the interviews. SmartStart leader 5 noted that:

The asset is already there. Assets at all levels. The asset at the level of these NGO networks. The asset in communities, in these amazing women I keep meeting

everywhere, with what might be seen as not good enough education, but exactly what we see being important, in profile, in human capacity, in interest and altruism and nurturing and all kinds of great things. Those were the things that [weren't] necessary to reinvent. But what was missing was to connect what already exists.

#### 6.5.2. Every child deserves a smart start: The evolution of SmartStart's thinking and praxis

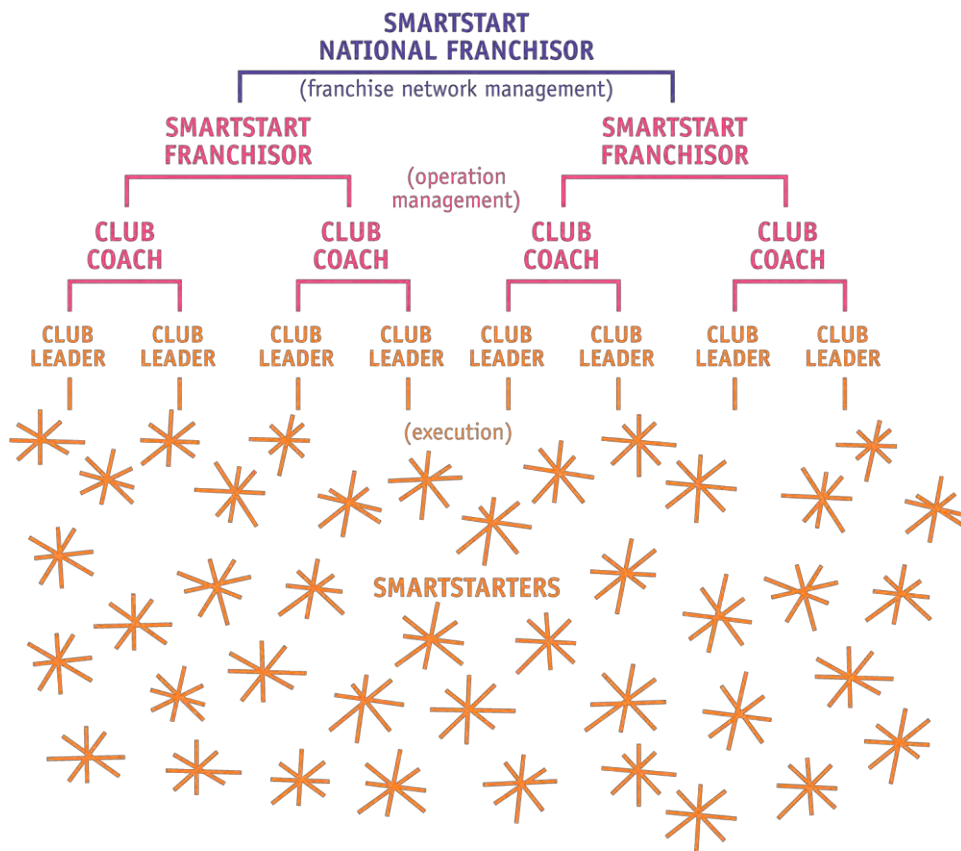
It is therefore important to consider the work being done to solution at a platform level, especially in terms of addressing the government and market failure characterising South Africa's ECD landscape. The literature depicting civil society in this way, however, neglects to account for larger players in civil society, such as SmartStart. SmartStart leader 4 remarked:

I did not realise that something like this existed [...], that there was this world of organisations out there, big organisations driving change.

SmartStart is not a small-scale venture or one NGO acting in isolation. Instead, the organisation aims to solution at the population level. According to SmartStart leader 4, SmartStart has an “audacious goal”, to reach the one million children between the ages of three and five that currently do not have any kind of access to early learning. This audacious goal needs partnership, and network, which forms the basis for the SmartStart social franchise model.

SmartStart aims to use some of the systems and principles of commercial franchising as a way of scaling up a successful social programme. SmartStart leader 1 claimed that SmartStart was kind of like a “Nando's” for early learning – but its goal is explicitly to maximise social impact. Unlike Nando's, SmartStart is made up of three rather than two tiers: the hub (the executive team), franchisors (implementing partners, generally NGOs) and franchisees (SmartStarters). SmartStart franchisors recruit, license and support franchisees in particular areas and employ club coaches who run a network of SmartStart clubs. Many SmartStart leaders emphasised the significance of the localised franchisors as SmartStart hopes to build on their existing knowledge and footprint. SmartStarters (or franchisees) are “the heart” of the programme, operating as independent micro-enterprises or community-based services. The hub (executive team) is responsible for the SmartStart routine content, programme design and materials, and training for franchisees. It also defines the licensing and quality assurance systems for the efficient management of the franchise.

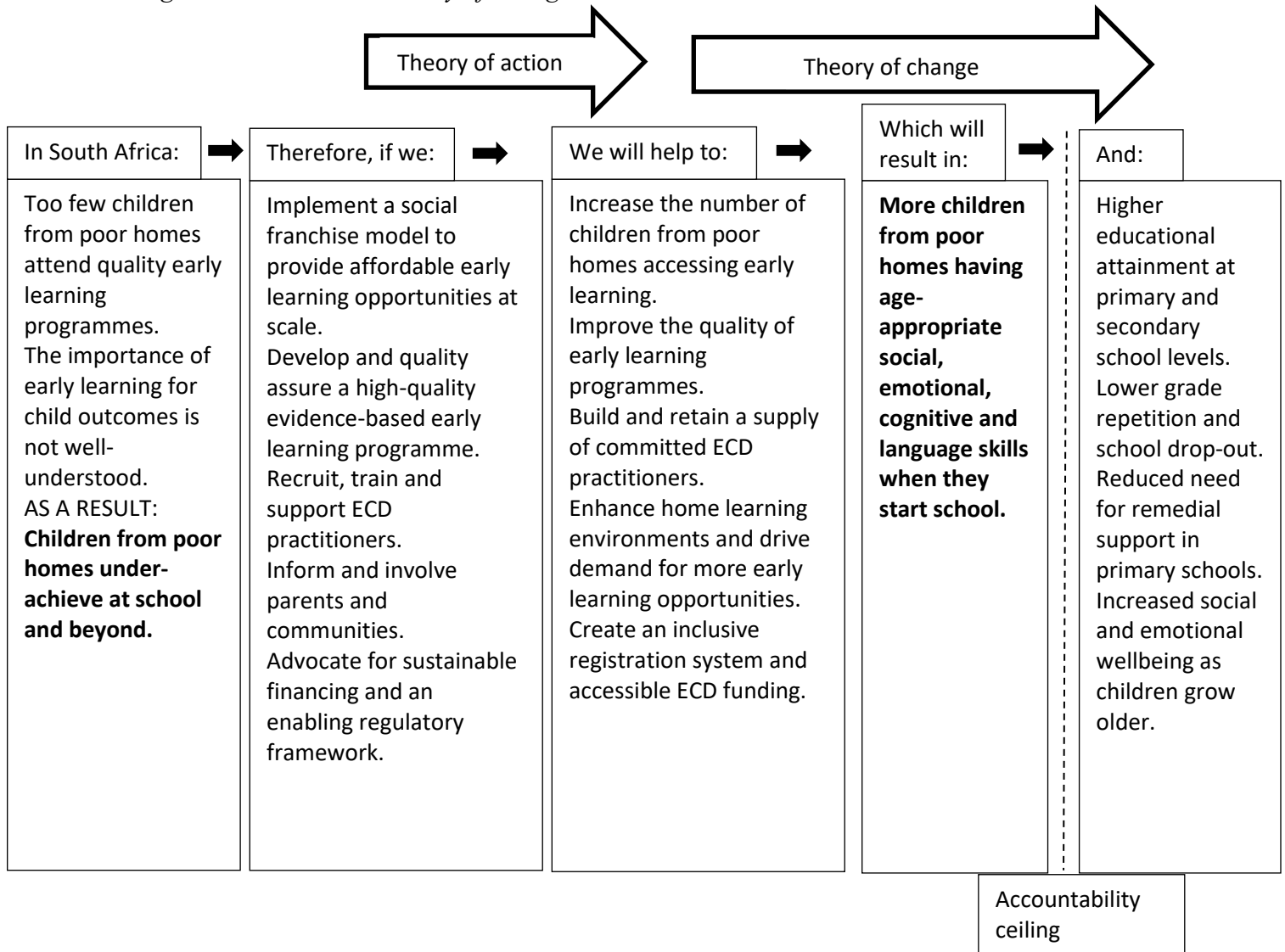
Figure 6. 1 The SmartStart social franchise model



Source: DGMT (2021b).

Several of the individuals interviewed indicated that, ultimately, the social franchise model is about unlocking economies of scale, and getting multiplier effects by creating service delivery platforms. Moreover, as SmartStart leader 10 noted, this model is not just about enjoying economies of scale when things are going well but is also about creating resilience, where the network acts as a fabric for social development and economic development. Many SmartStart leaders commented that costing is important in this model and SmartStart hopes to create an approach with minimal cost – to show the government that the one million children can still be reached even while the country is facing fiscal constraints. This approach is not just about costs but also about minimum reasonable standards to build quality assurance into the model. SmartStart’s operations are guided by its theory of action and change, illustrated below:

Figure 6. 2 SmartStart theory of change



Source: Horler et al (2019: 7).

In the diagram above, the accountability ceiling (dashed line) separates the outcomes that SmartStart will monitor and aim for from higher-order outcomes to which the SmartStart vision contributes, but also requires various other actors and institutions. The SmartStart theory of change is significant as it illustrates a way of progressively realising the goal of reaching all children without access to early learning, rather than being caught in a kind of utopianism, while at the same time ensuring that one's actions are tied to a guiding prefigurative vision. Key to a successful model of change is adaptation. SmartStart aims to be a learning organisation and its thinking and framework have shifted over time. SmartStart's first five years were focused on developing and testing the social franchise model and putting necessary systems in place, based on a recognition of the importance of ECD as well as the importance of scale and leanness. SmartStart's thinking has evolved over this period, based on a new recognition: the

need to shift to a platform, or what SmartStart leader 4 referred to as a “plug in” model. SmartStart leader 2 noted the importance of SmartStart’s ability to learn and evolve over time, responsive to the people it aims to serve.

The recognition of the need for a platform has informed SmartStart’s strategy for its next five years of implementation, which focuses explicitly on accelerating the number of franchises and population-level change. SmartStart has shifted to describing its work as a national early learning delivery platform that aims to link up existing contributions of NGOs for maximum reach. It is based on the idea that we need to scale and deepen early learning in South Africa, and, in doing so, it is important to avoid a one-size-fits all approaches, and instead cultivate a platform where there is flexibility and customisation based on context. The idea of simultaneous scaling and localisation is significant in SmartStart’s next phase.

SmartStart leaders explained that the platform is a space for others to be able to plug things in, where some can deliver and others can take out. There is a sense that SmartStart is careful not to crowd out contributions that already exist. SmartStart leader 2 claimed that it is important to “recognise that we are coming into a space where there are many others who are [...] doing meaningful work”. SmartStart leader 5 claimed that SmartStart does not want to “reinvent the wheel” but aims to leverage the assets that are already there and connect the contributions that already exist. SmartStart leader 10 commented that it is “not necessary to have SmartStart as the only kid on the block” and that the capacity of other NGOs can act as a “springboard” and means that SmartStart doesn’t “have to start from scratch”. SmartStart wants an efficient and cost-effective outcome, by bringing together and coordinating what already exists.

The national early learning platform is based on problem-solving, and extending the reach of civil society beyond the local. SmartStart leader 4 noted that, when there is a barrier or blockage, SmartStart does not indicate that “this is where my scope ends”, but instead looks for a partner to overcome that barrier. She claimed that “in SmartStart’s world, if we can’t do it, who can we partner with who can do it?” This idea points to an attitude of problem solving (or finding a partner to plug in) when and if the problem starts to become a constraint. This attitude is opposed to one of dissipating effort by trying to do everything at once. SmartStart is therefore positioned as a problem-solving and evolving organisation.

A key strength of the national delivery platform is its capacity to leverage social capital to create a network of players. This network can act as a cushion in times of crisis. For example,

some SmartStart leaders remarked that SmartStart was able to offer a Covid-19 relief grant to those in the network to try and retain franchisees during a global health and economic crisis. A few people claimed that SmartStart is now back to and even surpassing pre-pandemic enrolment levels, which they largely attribute to the support received over the initial lockdown period as well as the home delivery space, which parents/caregivers may regard as more Covid-safe than crowded classrooms. The same recovery rate cannot be said for others in the sector who received little if any support from the government.

From the interviews, it became clear that SmartStart had no ambitions to crowd out existing contributions but instead aimed to coordinate these contributions for a more effective, scalable model. Several SmartStart leaders claimed that SmartStart targets under-served spaces, such as rural areas and Quintiles one and two, where it is not a competitor. SmartStart leader 5 noted:

I feel a deep commitment to all of South Africa's children and I feel a deeper commitment to solving the big challenges for the poorest children.

SmartStart leader 6 claimed that SmartStart hoped other NGOs and contributors would come into these communities and (for lack of a better term) “compete” with SmartStart in order to accelerate scaling up. This approach appears to be an extension of the idea of others coming into plug their offerings into a national platform. SmartStart therefore hopes to crowd in other players. This approach is not always perfect, with SmartStart leader 1 noting that sometimes the SmartStart hub is more managerial and less collaborative than it would like, but, overall, it seeks to provide a platform or space that various contributors can claim as their own. SmartStart leader 6 remarked that:

Hopefully there will be other players who come into the market and then accelerate even further the ambition to close this gap.

In a similar fashion, there is hope that SmartStart can crowd in government ECD initiatives. The early learning delivery platform has been designed as something that the state can take over, rather than a way for government to outsource (and absolve its responsibility for) ECD. This orientation makes an interesting contribution to social economy literature. Within the literature, contention exists around whether the social economy may represent a permanent solution to change the status quo or whether it may also be co-opted as a solution to temporary market failures, and a way of diminishing the government's responsibility to provide services (Roy and Hackett, 102-103). Authors such as Smith (2010) have expressed concern about how

the social economy may be co-opted as a service delivery alternative to the state, ultimately furthering the hollowing out of the public sector. In the case of SmartStart, the organisation has explicitly positioned itself not as a substitute to state service delivery but as a complement, requiring the state to take over the model. SmartStart acts as an innovator, which can hopefully bring the state closer to the lived realities of the people who require access to ECD.

### 6.5.3. Putting the child at the centre: A pragmatic approach with vision

This approach, based on lived realities, informs SmartStart's "lean" model. It is based on the need to find a pragmatic and appropriate solution, rather than a utopian framework. From the interviews, it appears that SmartStart aims to work in a step-wise manner through layers of formality to achieve progressive change. It plans to start lean and build quality into the model. Here is an interesting dialectic with human rights discourse and around how to balance access and quality in a fiscally constrained environment.

SmartStart's framework provides a contrast to the state's approach. Both the state and SmartStart start from a rights-based vision. This vision often leads to inertia on the part of the state (described earlier) as focus is singularly placed on ensuring practitioners meet certain norms and standards which are nearly impossible to implement in low-income communities. SmartStart has instead chosen to put the child, rather than the practitioner, at the centre of their conceptualisation. When we start by focusing on the reality of South African children, we connect policy and implementation to lived experience, enabling a progressive realisation of rights as envisioned in the Constitution.

This approach aims to create an enabling framework which will more likely reach children and practitioners in marginalised communities. This stance, starting from the lived experience of children, does not mean that SmartStart forgoes quality and essential safety standards but allows SmartStart to build quality into communities where there it is currently impossible to meet required standards. It is also important that the SmartStart's approach is not *merely* pragmatism. SmartStart leaders 5 and 7 noted that SmartStart wants to effect change at a policy level, aiming at national transformation. Pragmatism is based on a vision of change (and theory of change) where all children, especially those from marginalised communities, can access quality early learning. This prefigurative vision guides SmartStart's actions and is significant in ensuring that this pragmatism is a means towards meaningful transformation rather than an ends in itself.

This framework provides insight as to how to address the fundamental market and government failures in this landscape. SmartStart focuses on low-income areas currently left out, as a result of constrained ability to pay on the market and overregulation of the government subsidy. In this way, it serves to mitigate the inequality arising out of the current system, and crowd in interventions by other CSOs and by government in often overlooked communities.

SmartStart's model also represents a different kind of embeddedness that can build quality into the sector. It is based on learning from the experiences of several actors, rather than imposing top-down solutions that may be less responsive to people's lived experiences. This approach reflects a broad-based embeddedness where all corners of Razavi's (2007) diamond are genuine implementing partners. Key to this pragmatic and collaborative approach is SmartStart's learning model. It appears that SmartStart's conceptualisation and implementation does not start with the assumption that the organisation knows what is best but learns from the experiences of others. Many SmartStart leaders brought in lessons from the international experience, and especially from developing countries: SmartStart leaders 1 and 10 mentioned aeioTU, Bridge in Kenya, and the Bolsa Familia programme in Brazil. These lessons appear to inform SmartStart's evolution over time, and represents a thinking process important in establishing a broad-based and democratic, rather than top-down authoritarian embeddedness.

#### 6.5.4. Funding transformation

These lessons informed the emergence of the SmartStart social franchise. Also key to SmartStart's emergence was a particular kind of funding model, coming from philanthropy. These philanthropic funders are framed as investors. Investors are heavily involved, and collaborators in SmartStart. Several people remarked that the relationship with these core investors was meaningful and collaborative. SmartStart leader 1 noted that these core investors have offered support on strategy development and implementation.

SmartStart distinguishes between funders and investors. Investors – philanthropic organisations or arms like the DG Murray Trust, Hollard Foundation, ELMA Foundation, Yellowwoods, and the Hollard Foundation – invest in the strategy and impact of the SmartStart project, and are key to SmartStart's financial sustainability (SmartStart, 2022). Many of these organisations played pivotal roles in SmartStart's conceptualisation, and continue to offer insights to the model. They therefore tend to be focused on innovation and impact and, significantly, are willing to “walk the journey” with SmartStart, funding in the long-term and at risk. This funding model is framed as investment that generates returns rather than donations

to improve welfare. In contrast, funders, who may work with SmartStart in the longer term or short term, focus on specific projects. For example, if a funder is interested in micro-enterprise development, they may choose to fund business skills courses for practitioners. Aside from philanthropic funding, there are some corporates on SmartStart's board, and some of the large investors are corporate. However, several individuals did note that they are careful when it comes to CSI-type funding, and deliberately measure the benefits against the costs.

What is striking in the interviews is the clear sense of agency and clarity with respect to funding. SmartStart leadership recognises the harms of CSI and weighs up the benefit and cost of funding opportunities. When SmartStart initially came into being, funders had to invest for a long-term period and at risk. SmartStart leader 1 claimed that "you need to meet us with this ambitious goal and you need to also be prepared to take the risk". This finding is surprising as it counteracts the literature about "survivalist response" of NGOs. The survivalist response, or need to secure funding in the short term to maintain operations, may cause organisations to work in ways that undermine long term goals of transformation (Hearn, 2001: 49). Because SmartStart has the support of philanthropic investors that leave the organisation relatively independent, they have space to consider what funding best suits their own interests and goals. SmartStart leader 10 made the insightful observation that:

When I think about investment in some of the most wicked problems in South Africa – nutrition, and early learning, and binge drinking and all the rest of it – we have to get people who are willing to think returns on long-term investments. That is the reality. You are going to be looking at funders who can start to think strategically with 20-year agendas. That is where it needs to start.

There has also been a significant shift in terms of government funding. Previously, as SmartStart leader 9 noted, government support of SmartStart had been "notoriously small" largely because the vast majority of SmartStarters are unable to meet the subsidy registration requirements. Here, there is a clear sense that there is too much government in terms of red tape but not enough government in terms of funding, collaboration, and support. This observation relates to the utopian approach of the South African government. However, there has recently been a significant shift in SmartStart's funding portfolio. It used to be 100 percent philanthropy funding but government is now about 60 percent philanthropy and 40 percent government funding. Key to this shift is the leveraging of alternative forms of funding aside

from the subsidy: such as Jobs Fund, (housed by National Treasury), the CWP, EPWP and other public employment schemes in marginalised areas.

### 6.5.5. Factors limiting SmartStart's audacious goal

#### 6.5.4.1. Funding

SmartStart's funding model, however, also points towards one of the organisation's biggest risks. Almost all the people interviewed identified that SmartStart's biggest risk or limitation related to government buy-in. The SmartStart platform is based on the idea that the government should ultimately take on and pay for such a model. The main dependency is therefore around government funding and there is a sense that the state needs to come to the table if SmartStart hopes to reach its audacious goal. SmartStart leader 2 remarked that "our solution [...] relies heavily on government funding" and SmartStart leader 5 claimed that all the work that has been put in will be "undone" if the state does not take this model on board. SmartStart leader 5 claimed that, without this significant partner, the platform will hang together with "Sellotape" or "chewing gum". These comments point to the idea that SmartStart can build a national delivery platform but needs the state to step in at some point for it to remain sustainable.

SmartStart leader 8 noted that the government challenge was the biggest problem to solve because the risk is that if the government does not get on board soon enough, SmartStart may start losing funders. The risk around ensuring sustainable funding ultimately manifests at the SmartStarter level, and how franchisees make ends meet (or not). Several people pinpointed the danger of the attrition of franchisees, although SmartStart's retention rate has been quite high. As the sector does not offer minimum wage, SmartStart leader 4 commented that it is "always at the mercy of other opportunities" and other, more lucrative jobs and micro-enterprises. The model therefore relies on "external enablement" and government which means that, without uptake from government structures, sustainability challenges arise.

Furthermore, the fact that most of SmartStart's government funding comes from initiatives that are only indirectly linked to early learning is problematic. This sort of funding is likely to be project-based, and uncoordinated with the strategies of other government departments, like DBE. This funding is also unlikely to be informed by an investment philosophy. *Ad hoc* and largely uncoordinated funding from various state departments, with little actually coming from those tasked with ECD implementation, seems unsustainable.

#### 6.5.4.2. A lean model

Another potential limitation is around the leanness of the SmartStart model which may have implications about the quality of the programme. Heckman (2008) claims that early learning interventions need to be of sufficient quality, or they may do further damage. Furthermore, there is even contestation in the literature about whether the Heckman curve (2008) does actually manifest, with Rea and Burton's (2020) study finding no evidence that interventions in the early years yield higher returns than other targeted interventions. Rosholm *et al* (2020) hypothesise that these findings do not diminish the explanatory power of the Heckman curve but indicate that it may act as a kind of production possibility frontier showing the maximum attainable effect when interventions combine the "most effective ingredients". The quality of interventions is therefore highly significant.

SmartStart is the leanest model out of the three social franchises studies in the previous chapter which may cause concern. However, impact evaluations do indicate that, despite the lean model, intervention quality is sufficient. The evaluation by Dawes *et al* (2020) indicated that the SmartStart programme was a significant contributing factor to ELOM score increases at the LETCEE. Of all early learning programmes evaluated, SmartStart's ELOM from baseline to endline was one of the highest (Dawes *et al*, 2020: 105). The programme therefore was impactful, although it had not yet managed to elevate the average child to the ELOM standard. Similarly, the study by Horler *et al* (2019) found that the ELOM score for children in SmartStart increased significantly over the study period, fitting into the *achieving the ELOM standard* category. Both reports found significant improvement for children, and reflect favourably when one considers the state of quality of early learning in South Africa in general (see: page 85).

As the SmartStart leaders concurred, leanness in this case does not mean compromise on learning standards, but rather a focus on prioritising quality of learning instead of placing undue emphasis on utopian infrastructure and qualification standards. SmartStart leader 5 clarified that leanness does not mean "cut[ting] quality to the bone and just sort of stay[ing] with as little as you can get away with". Rather, it means cutting through red tape to ensure effective early learning is brought to children in communities where government standards cannot realistically be met. There seems to be recognition from SmartStart leaders that a lean model is effective, especially in comparison to a *de facto* skeletal model imposed by government, where practitioners in low-income communities struggle to access support. Instead, the SmartStart

model aims to embed quality learning outcomes through in-service training and through the social franchise model, which standardises the learning programme that franchisees implement.

A final concern about the leanness of the model has to do with its impact on female labour force participation. Although SmartStart frames ECD as a triple impact investment, it remains uncertain as to whether the mandated six-hour week can meaningfully free up women's time so that they are able to enter into fulltime employment. There is also cause to be uncertain about the capacity of ECD programmes in general to meaningfully impact FLFP in South Africa. In a context of a 34.9 percent unemployment rate, and where women are less likely to be employed than men, even women who not limited by care obligations may be unable to enter the labour market (Stats SA, 2021). Perhaps the time children spend in SmartStart programmes may free up some time for women to spend job-seeking, but it appears that a meaningful shift in employment, and women's employment in particular, requires other structural interventions.

#### *6.5.4.3 A focus on early learning at the expense of other interventions?*

Related to this observation, another potential critique is that SmartStart, in focusing specifically on early learning, neglects other aspects of ECD and human development in general. One must certainly be careful not to present ECD as a magic bullet solution to South Africa's multitude of societal ills.

Early learning programmes should not be considered silver bullets in isolation, but there is a sense that this space, if appropriately coordinated and managed, is catalytic or transformative. It represents an alternative vision of transformation, which starts at the subject level and works its way towards the general, following the feminist institutionalist perspective that power hierarchies and political change starts at the level of the self and social relations (Hartsock, 1998). The focus on point zero, or the household/family level, models an emancipatory movement that pervades all aspects of life not considered politically (or economically) important in the past. Furthermore, this approach centres the importance of ECD not only in terms of the returns associated with early learning and care but also in terms of the progressive realisation of social justice and human rights (Hartsock, 1998). Herein is an approach that can connect the visions of the state, market, household and civil society, not only in the pursuit of universal ECD, but which can be emulated in a variety of developmental arenas.

## 6.5. Conclusion

Interviews with SmartStart’s leadership team and pioneers provide a lens through which to conceptualise the transformative potential of the social economy in early learning, as well as better understand the barriers and possibility associated with early learning in South Africa. Themes generated from the interviews and related to the literature point towards is an early learning regime constrained by imperfect and incomplete actors: namely, the family, market, state *and* civil society. Though imperfect, all of these actors can make valuable contributions to shifting South Africa’s ECD trajectory. It is through partnership and linking up contributions that we begin to reach those without access to quality programmes – and the SmartStart early learning delivery platform might provide a glimmer of hope and way forward. CSOs like SmartStart can play a significant political and economic role in pushing the state, families, communities, and businesses to work more meaningfully towards reaching the children currently without early learning access.

These findings indicate that we need to think about the social economy and civil society differently than in our previous conceptualisations, as capable of macro-level transformation. In a context of market failure, government failure, and imperfect players, partnership and network can coordinate a more valuable contribution to shifting South Africa’s early learning trajectory. This potential, however, cannot be realised in isolation: while CSOs like SmartStart can catalyse and coordinate developmental strategies, and bring the four corners of the welfare diamond closer together, government buy-in is crucial to unlock meaningful change in South Africa’s ECD landscape.

The following conclusion chapter synthesises the main findings of the entire thesis and considers the implications thereof. It considers the lessons emerging from the comparative analysis of three social franchises and the deeper exploration of the SmartStart social franchise to inform recommendations for expanding access to quality early learning and care.

## CHAPTER 7 – CONCLUDING REMARKS

### 7.1. Introduction

The potential returns associated with early learning and care indicate the economic significance of South Africa's ECD landscape. For this reason, this thesis seeks to characterise this landscape, with specific focus on the role of the social economy and the SmartStart social franchise. This exploration makes use of several lenses: a document analysis of government policies and texts, a comparative analysis of social franchises in various developing countries, and a thematic analysis of the insights coming from interviews with SmartStart's leadership team. In this chapter, I pull together the arguments and findings of this research to explore how the aspects outlined in the previous three chapters can help conceptualise the perils and possibility in South Africa's ECD landscape. From this conceptualisation, I draw important insights and recommendations as to how to improve access to quality early learning and care. Finally, I reflect on the contributions of this thesis to the literature, potential limitations of this study, and opportunities for further research in this field.

### 7.2. Synthesis of findings

Three research sub-goals framed my analysis:

1. To determine why the South African state has failed to bring about a sustainable, equitable early learning and care regime, given the high returns to ECD and the apparent commitment to ECD in policy documents.
2. To understand differing visions of ECD provisioning and how these have played out, particularly in countries with similar socio-economic statuses as South Africa, with a focus on early learning in particular.
3. To determine whether the SmartStart franchise model can address the early learning deficit in a way that is transformative, and whether it offers insight into key action areas for an effective early learning strategy. To explore what the SmartStart model reveals about the possibility for social economy initiatives to scale operations and build partnerships between civil society, the state and business, as well as their limitations, in relation to ECD.

These questions guided my research, operating as areas of knowledge that allowed me to depict the perils and possibility in South Africa's ECD landscape, and the role of the social economy. The findings of each sub-goal, and their relation to the overall objective of this study, are synthesised in turn:

### 7.2.1. Accounting for the state's failure to bring about a sustainable and equitable ECD regime

In spite of the high returns to ECD, and comprehensive ECD policy since 2015, there are still over one million three- to five-year-olds without access to any form of early learning and many more without access to quality early learning programmes. The document analysis of South African ECD policy and implementation thereof, comparative analysis of social franchises in South Africa, Colombia and India, and thematic analysis of the interviews with SmartStart highlight two explanations behind this failure: a lack of resourcing and lack of coordinated state delivery system.

Firstly, a lack of financing limits the government's ability to ensure universal access. The comparative analysis of both developed and developing countries indicates that fiscal commitment, in the form of public investment in early learning, is essential for the effective implementation of policy. However, in the comparative analysis of India, Colombia and South Africa, South Africa spends the least on early education and care as a percentage of GDP in 2021 – much less than what India spends, and less than one-sixteenth of what Colombia spends.

Limited funding does seem to be a binding constraint, as South Africa faces several competing developmental priorities requiring government resources. The lack of financing, however, also appears to reflect an ideological barrier associated with early learning. The interviews highlighted that the early learning landscape is fundamentally demand constrained. The construction of early childhood care and education as a non-commodity, and lack of visibility of social reproduction (especially, but not only, that which takes place in the household), means that, in reality, the significance of these services as human capital enablers does continue to be neglected at some level. Despite a recent increase in ECD advocacy, this oversight means that the ECD sector is generally not where the voice is loudest, and other issues are prioritised. The lack of political will to allocate substantial budgets to ECD is also reflected in government speeches and policies where the care economy, and the role of women therein, is overlooked. As a result, even in principle, government funding of the sector is not a norm.

Despite the lack of financing, there is still possibility that meaningful work can be done with limited resources. The second major barrier to the state's universalising ECD, however, is a lack of coordinated delivery system. There is currently no mechanism linking up the contributions of organisations in the sector, resulting in a fragmented approach. The document analysis of government policies and speeches reveals that often the role of other partners like

civil society is overlooked or misrepresented. Sometimes, civil society is framed merely as a mechanism for improving service delivery and welfare. This idea is also reflected in the interviews with SmartStart, where there is a sense that the relationship between SmartStart and the state has been more like an “employee” relationship instead of genuine collaboration. South Africa has a vibrant civil society, but it has often been sidelined from political choices as the state has become increasingly technocratic, and insulated from broader society. Instead, a coordinated approach requires meaningful partnership with all players in the ECD landscape to enhance access. Here, it seems that civil society organisations may hold potential: these organisations are in a unique position, acting both outside and within the state, and may play a leading role in creating partnerships and building a coordinated delivery platform.

However, the failure to bring about a coordinated delivery system is also related to segmentation within government itself. The interviews highlighted that the South African government tends to think in silos, and a lack of collaboration ultimately results in poor policy implementation. At a departmental level, one individual noted that different government departments often act in isolation from one another, but that there is a role for many departments – from economic development clusters to social development – in quality ECD provisioning. A lack of harmonised approach reflects the segmentation issue in South America, where governance of ECCE continues to be split between different departments and where education and care continue to be conceived of as separate undertakings. In South Africa, there also appears to be a sense that welfare (care) and social investment (education) are separate, although effective ECD calls for their integration. Although in certain respects the integration between care and education, and the realisation of the importance of framing these as social investment, is reflected in government documents, there is a lingering tendency to treat these services as separate and to imagine welfare merely as transfers or “handouts”.

The lack of financing and coordination at a macro-level also plays itself out in early learning microenterprises. The state’s requirements for the ECD conditional subsidy reflect a government out of the touch with the reality of South Africans in low-income settings. Tertiary qualification and infrastructure requirements for an informal sector that does not currently offer minimum wage indicates the utopian nature of state funding requirements in the early learning landscape. This mindset, which leaves little room for innovation and a pragmatic approach to progressively realising rights, leaves the sector stuck at the level of legislation instead of moving towards recognising and improving upon the realities of South African children.

Financing and capacity issues also illustrate problems with the *model* the state has chosen to employ to expand early learning programmes. In an under-resourced context, it appears that there is a trade-off between quality and access, but the model that the state has chosen actually compromises both. It appears the state aims for first world, high quality standards for all children, with powerful rights-based discourse but poor implementation, or understanding of how exactly rights will be progressively realised. The state tends to underfund the sector but still attempts to control it from the top down, and consequently demobilises other actors in this space. It seems that we need a coordinated national vision and framework, and implementable model, to realise this vision in order to meaningfully expand access. This requires a purposeful social investment state. So far, the state seems more reactive and ultimately a better representation of a transfer welfare state, generally succeeding at income transfer (children in South Africa are most effectively reached through the CSG), but failing to grow capabilities from the early years.

As the migration of the ECD mandate from DSD to DBE begins, there is cause to be optimistic that the government can move closer towards the social investment state model. DBE has a much greater budget than DSD, which implies that more government funding could potentially be allocated to ECD, or at least it would make visible (and therefore problematise) that so little funding is allocated to early learning in comparison to other education levels. Furthermore, the idea that ECD is moving from a department associated with the social/family/community to one associated with education indicates an important ideological shift. This shift is a signal that early learning is education and production, rather than safety and babysitting. The risks associated with this departmental migration, however, are that nothing ultimately changes or that the government will turn to a centralised top-down model of provisioning, which worried some SmartStart leaders. Without national, long-term vision and agency, the risk is that the opportunity to use this departmental shift to enhance early learning access and explore a model that brings in new forms of collaboration will be wasted.

### 7.2.2. Lessons from the international experience

There is hope that pressure and the example from civil society will have some effect on the state. Even if this effect does not take place, the international experience, explored in Chapters 3 and 5, can provide lessons as to how to leverage possibility in constrained contexts. The coherent welfare regimes of developed countries provide prefigurative lessons for South Africa's vision to ensure ECD access for all. Although it does not appear that South Africa

can match the current levels of fiscal spending and state coordination of many of these states, the experience of Scandinavian social democratic welfare regimes can represent South Africa's end goal, and their histories shed light on how to achieve this vision. These states also provide evidence of how powerful and transformative effective ECD can be,

Nordic countries boast near universal access to early learning and care, and seem to demonstrate strong evidence of the Heckman curve (Rosholm *et al*, 2020). Of particular interest to this study is Sweden's welfare regime. Esping-Andersen (2013) indicates that the evolution of the Swedish state was based on pragmatism, focused on reform through broad coalitions, compromise with imperfect partners and collective action. This reform from the bottom up is a means of making the personal political, and can be framed as a revolution at point zero (focusing specifically on transforming family trajectories), and provides an example of a distinctly pragmatic approach towards the progressive realisation of rights. Rather than a top-down process, this experience depicts a different model of embedding, based on drawing in communities as social partners.

The Swedish model also provides a reconceptualization of the idea of embeddedness and implies particular state-society relations. For Evans and Heller (2015: 696), a Polanyian-style of embeddedness implies a certain kind of politics where state-society ties are integral. These relationships are essential especially in contexts where markets undersupply public goods (Evans and Heller, 2015: 707). Just as Polanyi claims that civil society may be the countervailing force to market, Evans and Heller (2015: 697) indicate that it may also be the countervailing force to deficits of democracy. The developmental capacity of social democracy in Sweden was founded on multi-class alliances, and associations that make way for a broad-based embeddedness (Evans and Heller, 2015: 708). For South Africa to expand ECD access, the pursuit of this kind of embeddedness, and genuine political partnership, is crucial.

In contrast, liberal welfare regimes as well as conservative regimes, which champion "family values" while turning a blind eye to the immigration of care workers and further marketization of care, provide lessons around potential risks for South Africa. Liberal regime types, where the private sector often has primacy, can exacerbate inequality and uneven quality of services (White and Friendly, 2012). South Africa's ECD sector often feels like a failed liberal regime type as private sector players dominate in the absence of state coordination and fiscal commitment. The failure of the liberal welfare regime tends to reinforce conservative values. In the absence of coherent family policies (including adequate provisioning of daycare) women

are *de facto* the caregivers in society, even if men are no longer the breadwinners. This status quo has negative implications for an already highly unequal landscape, and demonstrates the urgency of shifting South Africa's current ECD trajectory.

Developing countries provide another set of perhaps even more enlightening lessons about what is possible in twenty-first century second-best conditions. Several SmartStart leaders made reference to insights from civil society and state action in other developing countries, such as Bridge in Kenya, aeioTU in Colombia, Bolsa Familia in Brazil, and the Chinese economic plan. Aiming to be a learning organisation guided by a theory of change, SmartStart does seem to draw lessons from the experiences of other developing countries. This perspective reflects the finding in the comparative analysis that South Africa is not exceptional, and can learn from the experiences of other developing countries, such as India and Colombia. All of these countries have introduced substantial policy to increase ECD enrolment but to different extents struggle to move beyond legislation, or towards the progressive realisation of rights.

At a policy level, these countries have embraced a universal and rights-based approach to early learning, placing emphasis on Esping-Andersen's third welfare pillar: the state. At the level of implementation, however, while the countries enjoy varying degrees of success, they have all been unable to ensure universal access to all. Therefore, the three social franchises in these respective countries reveal the possibility of civil society in these constrained contexts, and how we can pragmatically move towards the realisation of these rights. These organisations, which problem-solve at the population-level, reveal how civil society could act as an innovator of first resort (Harrison, 2020: 7). Since much of the work of civil society takes place on the ground, in terms of engagement with communities, these organisations are best equipped to understand a community's needs, as well as the resources within communities that can be leveraged to find innovative solutions. Without civil society in this role, governments are likely to be less responsive to people's lived experiences and more removed from the communities they aim to serve (Harrison, 2020: 7).

Therefore, when civil society works in partnership with other sectors as part of a systems approach, developing countries may move towards a more responsive and effective approach to scaling early learning. Civil society can in turn demonstrate how public investment may be harnessed to bring about greater returns to ECD than under the status quo. This potential again implies a fundamentally political role for civil society and a particular state-society relation.

The ability of civil society to affect transformation, however, becomes more subdued as states often have competing logics and may not be amenable to change.

When civil society is conceptualised only as a service delivery replacement (taking on a palliative role to government failure) or as an antagonist to the state (through advocacy), there appears to be an opportunity missed. Civil society partnership and network with other imperfect actors, such as the state, can coordinate more valuable contributions to universalising ECD in developing countries, indicating the potential of the social economy to catalyse national transformation. The state cannot be insulated from civil society, or purely technocratic, but needs to be guided and responsive to these actors. While it is unreasonable to expect the state's attitude to change overnight, civil society organisations can illustrate to governments how small and pragmatic approaches may contribute to positive change.

The lessons drawn from other countries are significant. The experience of various social franchises in developing countries illustrates pragmatic ways to expand access to ECD in constrained contexts, allowing countries to move beyond the policy-level and towards the pragmatic realisation of rights. In addition, developed countries, particularly Nordic states, represent the end-goal of this approach. Combined, these experiences demonstrate a vision for change guided by recognition that we need to start at the level of the lived experience of those in developing countries and work towards a vision of population-level change, and ECD for all, rather than mere pragmatism.

### 7.2.3. The possibility revealed by the SmartStart model in South Africa

Further insight is obtained through the exploration of the SmartStart social franchise, in the comparative analysis and more deeply in the thematic analysis of interview data. This focus reveals more specifically the possibility and latent opportunity in South Africa's ECD landscape. My conversations with SmartStart's leadership team highlight that all four corners of Razavi's (2007) diamond are significant if we want to unlock the returns associated with ECD in South Africa, and provide a more nuanced account of the role of the family, market, state and civil society. Comments by several of SmartStart's leadership team indicate that each of these four corners should be considered part of a complementary, rather than segmented approach, where all contributions can be coordinated. Across almost all interviews, there is a firm idea that pragmatic partnerships are key to reaching children.

The interviews with SmartStart demonstrate a way of linking rights-based discourse to pragmatism, avoiding a utopian mindset that prevents action. This approach brings policy closer to the lived experiences of ordinary South Africans, and links vision to reality, showing a way forward for the progressive realisation of the rights enshrined in the Constitution. This analysis also brings forward the potential of the SmartStart social franchise at a macro-level. SmartStart, alongside other social franchises explored in the comparative analysis, aims to solution at a platform level. SmartStart is not a small-scale venture but aims to reach all of the children in South Africa (rather than on a local scale) without access to early learning as soon as possible. To achieve its audacious goal, SmartStart leverages its network, and social capital, linking up the contributions that already exist. For this reason, SmartStart describes its work as a national early learning delivery platform. The platform is a space for others contributions, and to coordinate existing services for maximum reach, to leverage the resources that already exist and accelerate access.

This positioning reveals an important finding, of crowding in other players. SmartStart is careful not to crowd out valuable contributions but instead aims to bring together and coordinate what already exists. In a similar fashion, there is hope in the interviews that SmartStart can crowd in government ECD initiatives. The national early learning delivery platform has been designed as something that the government can take over, rather than a way for government to outsource ECD. SmartStart has deliberately positioned itself not as a substitute to state service delivery but as a complement, requiring the state to come on board and take over the model. SmartStart acts as an innovator, which can hopefully bring the state closer to the lived realities of the people who require access to ECD.

These kinds of partnerships illustrate that civil society does not merely have to function as a service delivery agent but plays a political role, engaging in advocacy with respect to issues of distribution. Ultimately, it appears that civil society can act as a catalyst for other agents to contribute to early learning. The failures of the market, state, family and civil society implies that neither the market nor the state nor the family nor existing civil society are fit for purpose. There is therefore a need for some sort of collective action to transform South Africa's ECD trajectory. Here, the politics are critical: in particular, within modern democracies, there is a potential leadership role for civil society to push the state and business and families to realise the mandate of universal ECD.

This potential role for social franchises like SmartStart is enhanced by the financial agency enjoyed by the organisation. A surprising finding generated from the interviews is the deliberate nature of the choices SmartStart made with respect to its funders. Because SmartStart has secured long-term funding from philanthropic investors, the organisation enjoys funding “space” which enables it to weigh up the benefit and cost of various CSI opportunities. SmartStart can therefore opt for financiers that suit its own interests and goal of transformation, disrupting the power relation where NGOs often have to compromise their own visions and goals to keep corporate (or other) funders happy.

While one must be careful to note that findings may not be completely generalisable, this kind of politics and financial agency implies that we need to think about the social economy and civil society differently than in our previous conceptualisations, as capable of transformation on a macro-level. This transformative potential, however, cannot be realised in isolation. While organisations like SmartStart can catalyse and coordinate developmental strategies, and bring the four corners of the welfare diamond closer together, government buy-in is crucial to unlock meaningful change in South Africa’s ECD landscape. While it does appear that SmartStart has the capacity to innovate a coordinated, pragmatic approach to scaling ECD, problem-solve for the current failures associated with the sector, and engage partners, to be sustainable, this model needs to be taken up and financed by the South African government. Here, the nature of state involvement would need to be genuine partnership (based on a recognition that there are many players in the sector doing meaningful work) rather than an attempt to take over and demobilise other agency.

Finally, the interviews provide important insights for feminist economics. At this stage, there is not enough evidence to draw conclusions about the impact of the SmartStart social franchise on mothers’ female labour force participation, especially considering the high levels of unemployment in the communities SmartStart targets. Interviews with the SmartStart team, however, revealed other insights that are significant to the field of feminist economics. It appears that the growth of ECD in South Africa is undermined as a result of misconceptions about the impact of ECD on children. ECD in South Africa continues to be considered a “nice to have” and therefore is not prioritised, despite evidence of the long run benefits of both care and early learning. These attitudes towards the care economy and household production are not only found “from below” in communities, but also “from above” in government structures:

these perceptions put forward one explanation for the underfunding of the system as a whole, indicating a willingness to pay issue that permeates various institutions as well as individuals.

### 7.3. Implications of this study and recommendations to unlock the returns associated with ECD

These findings point towards an overall system diagnosis of South Africa's ECD landscape characterised by two fundamental problems: the issue of inequality under a failed liberal welfare regime type, and a failure of democratic embeddedness. Firstly, the issue of inequality arises in a sector that is *de facto* commodified, as, in the absence of a coordinated government strategy and willingness to allocate funds, the private sector is the dominant supplier of early learning programmes and ECD generally. Markets, however, tend to undersupply public goods. This characterisation fits the case of ECD in South Africa, especially for those from low-income communities whose ability to pay for these services is constrained. As a result, early learning and care tend to be undersupplied in these communities. Instead of acting as the great equaliser, South Africa's fractured early learning landscape entrenches already alarming inequality in the country. Continued austerity and fiscal conservatism indicates that the private sector will remain the dominant supplier for some time, and inequality in this space is likely to persist.

Market provision is also associated with uncertain and uneven quality of services (White and Friendly, 2012). In these contexts, Polanyi argues that embedding markets in government structures and protections can act as the offsetting force to market deficits. However, exacerbating the flaws in the current system, is the issue of the failure of democratic embeddedness. Government failure is more complex than an overregulation of the ECD subsidy; it reflects a failure of broad-based embeddedness in the economy. Despite the existence of a vibrant civil society in South Africa, and government rhetoric about the significance of partnerships, the state remains largely insulated from civil society. What has resulted is technocratic rather than democratic state embeddedness, with powerful rights-based discourse but little implementation that meaningfully affects the lived experience of South Africa's children and mothers. The government overregulation of the subsidy, which most practitioners in low-income communities cannot access, in many ways reflects this failure of embeddedness, as the state becomes less responsive to the realities of the people it aims to serve.

Stemming from this system diagnosis, I put forward five recommendations to shift the trajectory of South Africa's ECD landscape:

1. We need to put the child at the centre of ECD strategies. When we start by focusing on the reality of South African children, we connect policy and implementation to lived experience, enabling a progressive realisation of rights. This approach aims to create an enabling framework where state support will more likely reach children and practitioners in marginalised communities. It contrasts current approaches that aim to bring in high quality ECD to disadvantaged communities but tend to suffer from inertia and utopian thinking. It is important to note that this approach, starting from the lived experiences of children, does not mean that we forgo quality and essential safety standards but allows us to build quality into communities where it is difficult to meet required norms and standards.
2. If our aim is to bring access and quality into underserved communities, we require a national agency with the mandate to bring various players together. There are many valuable players working in these communities, and the SmartStart social franchise has illustrated the power of linking up these contributions. A state central agency can provide a coordinated programme of action and all stakeholders can buy into the sense of collective vision. It brings into existence a national framework and has the potential not only to enhance inter-sectoral collaboration but also coordination and coherence between government departments. If ECD really is a developmental priority, as depicted by the South African state, it cannot only feature in the DSD and DBE – it needs to be a fundamental part of economic strategies that aim to drive growth and mitigate inequality.
3. This agency needs to be accompanied by long-term fiscal commitment. It seems unlikely that, in the current fiscal climate, further funds for ECD will be availed in the short- to medium-term. It is therefore important to leverage the kinds of funding that exist in the short-term (infrastructure pots, Jobs Fund), while at the same time committing to unlocking substantial, coordinated and sector-specific financing in the long-term.
4. A national agency that brings various players together requires a specific conceptualisation of the role of civil society. The in-depth exploration of SmartStart indicates that certain CSOs are capable of transformation on a macro-level if working in conjunction and dialogue with government structures. This potential, however, requires true partnership with the state (and other actors) in an attempt to move towards a broad-based form of embeddedness. The notion of partnership and collaboration needs to exist as more than just

rhetoric, if we want to move from a technocratic state to democratic embeddedness. Relationships with CSOs should be formalised, and based on equal partnership.

5. Finally, we need to incorporate a gendered lens informing our ECD policy and implementation thereof, positioning of the care economy and the household as an important site of production. The absence of the element of gender, and the way ECD and childcare access affects mothers, in turn reproduces unequal power relations where the economic activity done by women in the unpaid care economy continues to be overlooked. An alternative positioning, taking cognisance of the economic significance of social reproduction, signals that investment into ECD is important, stimulating demand in and funding of the sector.

#### 7.4. This thesis' contribution to literature

The contributions of this thesis to the literature can be grouped into two categories: theoretical and empirical. Firstly, this thesis makes a theoretical contribution in the form of the enlargement of this area of study, by revising the conceptualisation and potential economic role of civil society (and the social economy and social franchises therein). The analysis of the ECD landscape provided a vehicle to explore the impact of these organisations in terms of the cultivation of capabilities.

Secondly, this research makes an empirical contribution in the form of a comparative analysis of three social franchises and a close analysis of one social economy organisation: SmartStart. Upon embarking on this thesis, I noted a gap in the literature: a lack of country specific analyses of early learning provisioning strategies and research focused specifically on delivery mechanisms for scaling ECD coming from civil society in constrained contexts (Razavi, 2007). This thesis forms one of the first of these analyses, especially in the field of economics. While there are impact studies examining SmartStart's effect on children (Dawes *et al*, 2020), limited literature addresses macro-level issues of scalability, and sustainability. Little research explores the transformative potential of, as well as drawbacks and concerns relating to, social franchise models.

This research is important because it sheds light on civil society's potential as a significant system level actor, while also revealing the pitfalls of uncritically representing social economy initiatives as silver bullet solutions to societal ills. In a context where the returns to early

learning and care are not being realised, and in what seems to be a pivotal moment, owing to the migration of the ECD mandate to the DBE, these findings serve to timeously inform a more effective model for implementation that leverages the resources that already exist.

### 7.5. Limitations of this study and opportunities for future research

While I believe that this thesis makes a significant contribution to understanding the perils and possibility in South Africa's ECD landscape, it is important to be aware of its limitations. Upon reflection, I understand that my choice to focus deeply on a small number of civil society organisations, with particular focus on SmartStart, could raise concerns about the representativeness of my research. However, considering the initial low level of conceptualisation of social franchises in early learning in the literature, the aim of this research was not to come up with a set of fully generalisable results, but to begin the exploration of the economic and developmental possibility of these organisations. The validity of my research is grounded on the significant amount of data collected via a range of methods which serve to complement one another and fill the gaps that I have identified in the literature. I have tried to generate a highly contextualised and descriptive picture through the positioning of the South African context, the comparative analysis of SmartStart against other early learning franchises, and the in-depth case of SmartStart so that other researchers are able to make modest extrapolations from the findings to their own contexts.

Another limitation relates to the fact that the data collected, generated and analysed came from those in leadership positions i.e., from SmartStart's leaders. This focus has allowed for an in-depth and rich analysis of data from those who likely know the vision of the organisation best, but the voices of these individuals may not reflect the perspectives of the people in the organisations that they represent. Discourses, ideologies and perspectives can be imposed from the top-down but are also bottom-up productive processes, and a more complete analysis would require additional voices from those at various levels of the SmartStart organisation, as well as beyond SmartStart. There are various areas of future research that could incorporate these voices, as well as add more depth to this study, such as:

- Research probing the voices of other SmartStart employees, including SmartStart franchisors and franchisees.
- Research that looks beyond SmartStart and explores the role that other NGOs and social economy initiatives play in South Africa and elsewhere.

- Research focusing specifically on the role of parents and community organisations (especially those not directly involved in SmartStart who may be well-positioned to assess its impact), as well as the role of philanthropic investors and other funders.
- An analysis tracking the impact of interventions like SmartStart on mothers of attending children. This thesis was unable to properly measure the impact of organisations like SmartStart on FLFP or the sustainability of microenterprises set up. There is therefore scope for further qualitative and quantitative research aimed at determining this impact.
- Research that probes the voices of policymakers. Here, attention can be paid to the ideologies that underpin policies and policymakers' attitudes, the (lack of) recognition of the role of women and civil society in the realms of early learning and care, and how these may impact South Africa's social context and ECD approach. In turn, this research may serve as the catalyst to ignite a committed governmental focus on ECD.

Many economists have theorised and empirically tested the benefits of early childhood care and education. I embarked on this thesis to open up a discussion about how to reap these benefits in under-resourced communities and countries. It is my hope that this dialogue continues beyond this study, and that more voices of those typically on the periphery of economic analyses are brought into this conversation. In doing so, like the ECD activists, innovators and practitioners highlighted in preceding chapters, we contribute not only to growing a knowledge economy but to nurturing a vibrant knowledge democracy and igniting a revolution at point zero.

## ANNEXURE A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interviews will be semi-structured. The following areas will be probed in the interviews:

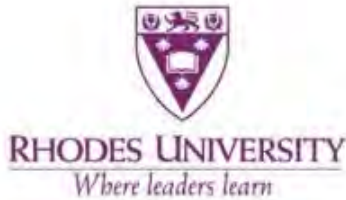
1. Vision and goals: *SmartStart*'s understanding of how its activities ideally contribute to national transformation. This discussion will be open-ended and will probe *SmartStart*'s vision, how *SmartStart* sees itself in relations to other stakeholders in the sector, and what the balance between public and private should be.
2. Current modalities: How *SmartStart* currently operates:
  - i. *SmartStart*'s activities and social franchise structure, and what informed this model;
  - ii. *SmartStart*'s main sources of income, whether there this income allows for growth and innovation, and whether there is scope to fund some of *SmartStart*'s own operations from profit;
  - iii. *SmartStart*'s key collaborators and stakeholders: any partnership between *SmartStart* and government, or *SmartStart* and business, and the nature of these partnerships;
  - iv. The current role of *SmartStart* in South Africa's economy and welfare regime; how *SmartStart* leaders envisage their position in South Africa's early learning landscape.
3. The factors that impede the implementation of an effective early learning rollout in South Africa:
  - i. Factors related specifically to the *SmartStart* social franchise model and its capacity to scale, the issue of the financial sustainability of the early learning social economy when faced with competition with for-profit early learning enterprises;
  - ii. Factors outside of *SmartStart*'s control (the impact of Covid-19 lockdown on early learning, constraints faced by government, the impact of fiscal austerity and on access to the ECD subsidy, and government attitudes and ideologies related to early learning provisioning).
  - iii. Women's work and the impact on female labour force participation
4. The possibilities to scale early learning and reduce the early learning deficit in a constrained environment:
  - i. Key action areas for an effective early learning rollout given the constraints faced in this sector;
  - ii. The significance of the shift in government mandate of ECD provision from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to Department of Basic Education (DBE), and the likely impact this will have on *SmartStart*'s operations and the ECD sector in general.

## ANNEXURE B: 15-POINT CHECKLIST OF CRITERIA FOR GOOD THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Process	Number	Criteria
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
	4	All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
Analysis	7	Data have been analysed/ interpreted, made sense of/ rather than just paraphrased or described.
	8	Analysis and data match each other/ the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organized story about the data and topic.
	10	A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
Overall	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.
Written report	12	The assumptions about and specific approach to thematic analysis are clearly explicated.
	13	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done/ i.e., described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
	15	The researcher is positioned as active in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.

Source: Braun and Clarke (2006: 96).

## ANNEXURE C: FINAL ETHICAL APPROVAL LETTER FROM RHODES UNIVERSITY



**Rhodes University Human Ethics Committee**  
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<https://www.ru.ac.za/researchgateway/ethics/>

05/10/2021

Claire MCCANN

Email: [g16m2637@campus.ru.ac.za](mailto:g16m2637@campus.ru.ac.za)

Review Reference: 2021-4942-6203

Dear Mr David Fryer

**Title:** An analysis of the barriers to an effective early learning rollout in South Africa, and the possibility that the social economy offers in this space

Principal Investigator: Mr David Fryer

Collaborators: Ms Claire McCann

This letter confirms that the above research proposal has been reviewed and **APPROVED** by the Rhodes University Human Ethics Committee (RU-HEC). Your Approval number is: 2021-4942-6203

Approval has been granted for 1 year. An annual progress report will be required in order to renew approval for an additional period. You will receive an email notifying you when the annual report is due.

Please ensure that the ethical standards committee is notified should any substantive change(s) be made, for whatever reason, during the research process. This includes changes in investigators. Please also ensure that a brief report is submitted to the ethics committee on the completion of the research. The purpose of this report is to indicate whether the research was conducted successfully, if any aspects could not be completed, or if any problems arose that the ethical standards committee should be aware of. If a thesis or dissertation arising from this research is submitted to the library's electronic theses and dissertations (ETD) repository, please notify the committee of the date of submission and/or any reference or cataloging number allocated.

Sincerely,

## ANNEXURE D: INSTITUTION PARTICIPATION COVER LETTER AND INFORMED CONSENT

### ACCESS LETTER REQUESTING PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Rhodes University  
Drostdy Road,  
Grahamstown,  
6139

27 September 2021

[Gatekeeper's name]

[Gatekeeper's title]

Dear [gatekeeper's name]

#### REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

I am a registered Master's student in the Department of Economics at the Rhodes University. My supervisor is Mr. David Fryer.

The proposed topic of my research is *A critical analysis of the barriers to an effective early learning rollout in South Africa and the possibility the social economy offers in this space*. The objectives of the study are:

1. To determine why the South African state has failed to bring about a sustainable, equitable early learning regime, given the high returns to ECD.
2. To compare *SmartStart* to early learning franchises in other countries, to better understand the potential and limitations of the social economy to unlock the returns to early learning.
3. To determine whether the *SmartStart* franchise model can address the early learning deficit in a way that is transformative, and whether it offers insight into key action areas for an effective early learning strategy. To explore what the *SmartStart* model reveals about the possibility for social economy initiatives to scale operations and build partnerships between civil society, the state and business, as well as their limitations, in relation to early learning.

I am hereby seeking your consent to interview members of the *SmartStart* leadership team, and assistance in recruiting potential interview participants. In this letter, I kindly request that you provide the names of the rest of the *SmartStart* leadership team so that I can contact them personally to ask if they are willing to be interviewed for this research project.

Interview questions will center around *SmartStart*'s capacity to scale, its main income sources, its relationship with the state and business, and how *SmartStart* leaders envisage their position in South Africa's welfare landscape and market economy. These interviews will be recorded using an audio recording device. Prior to any audio recording device being used, I will ensure that I obtain explicit permission to do so from each individual participant, both verbally and in the form of a written consent form. To assist you in reaching a decision, I have attached to this letter:

- (a) A copy of an ethical clearance certificate issued by the University
- (b) A copy of the research instruments which I intend using in my research

Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor. Our contact details are as follows:

- Claire McCann: [cmccann9@gmail.com](mailto:cmccann9@gmail.com) or 079 777 8181
- David Fryer: [d.fryer@ru.ac.za](mailto:d.fryer@ru.ac.za) or 074 153 0218

Upon completion of the study, I undertake to provide you with a feedback report. Your permission to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

**Claire McCann**

**David Fryer**

**I have read this gatekeeper permission letter and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give permission for the researcher in this study to interview the relevant *SmartStart* staff.**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

# ANNEXURE E: INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPATION COVER LETTER AND INFORMED CONSENT

## INFORMATION LETTER

Rhodes University  
Drostdy Road,  
Grahamstown,  
6139

10 November 2021

Dear Sir or Madam

### **Re: Invitation to participate in research study**

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled “*A critical analysis of the barriers to an effective early learning rollout in South Africa and the possibility the social economy offers in this space*”. The aim of this research is to determine the material and ideological barriers to an effective early learning rollout by the South African government and what insights the *SmartStart* social franchise model provides around the possibility to transform South Africa’s early learning landscape given the constraints faced by the state.

The participation and cooperation of your institution is important so that the results of the research are accurately portrayed. The research will be undertaken by conducting interviews and the data to be collected from this research will be recorded by an audio recording device and transcribed. Your identity will be treated with complete confidentiality. The collection of this data will require about one hour of your time to complete.

We will provide you with all the necessary information to assist you to understand the study and explain what would be expected of you. These guidelines would include the risks, benefits, and your rights as a study subject. Furthermore, it is important that you are aware that this study has been approved by a Research Ethics Committee of the university.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary and this letter of invitation does not obligate you to take part in this research study. To participate, you will be required to provide written consent that will include your signature, date and initials to verify that you understand

and agree to the conditions. Please note that you have the right to withdraw at any given time during the study without penalty.

Thank you for your time and I hope that you will find our request favourable.

Yours sincerely,

Claire McCann (principal researcher)

David Fryer (supervisor)

## PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

### INFORMED CONSENT DECLARATION

Project Title: *A critical analysis of the barriers to an effective early learning rollout in South Africa and the possibility the social economy offers in this space*

Claire McCann from the Department of Economics, Rhodes University has requested my permission to participate in the above-mentioned research project.

The nature and the purpose of the research project and of this informed consent declaration have been explained to me in a language that I understand.

I am aware that:

1. The purpose of the research project is to critically analyze the barriers to an effective early learning rollout in South Africa and the possibility the social economy offers in this space.
2. The Rhodes University has given ethical clearance to this research project (2021-4942-6203) and I have seen/may request to see the clearance certificate by contacting Mr. Siyanda Manqele ([s.manqele@ru.ac.za](mailto:s.manqele@ru.ac.za)). Siyanda Manqele is the Ethics Manager and is tasked with receiving any reports or concerns about the research from participants (ethics, process, etc.), in his role as ombudsperson.
3. By participating in this research project, I will have an opportunity to speak about my experiences as part of *SmartStart*. The inputs from interviews will be used in this research to highlight the transformative potential of the *SmartStart* social franchise and national delivery platform model in a context where innovative and replicable solutions to an early learning deficit are needed.
4. I will participate in the project by partaking in an interview which will ask questions related to *SmartStart*'s capacity to scale, its main income sources, its relationship with the state and business, and how *SmartStart* leaders envisage their position in South Africa's welfare landscape and market economy. I consent to my answers to these questions being recorded by an audio recording device.
5. My participation is entirely voluntary and should I at any stage wish to withdraw from participating further, I may do so without any negative consequences. I may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* without affecting my relationship with the investigators of this study or Rhodes University. I have the right not to answer any single question, as well as

to withdraw completely from the study at any point during the process; additionally, I have the right to request that the researcher not use any of the data I have already provided.

6. I will not be compensated for participating in the research.

7. The following risks are associated with my participation:

- The researcher will put in place provisions keep me anonymous (and will never identify me by name unless I indicate to the contrary). However, as a key member of *SmartStart*'s relatively small leadership team, there is a small risk that someone may be able to identify me as an interview participant in any published research.

8. The Principal Investigator intends on publishing the research results in the form of academic journals and conferences. However, confidentiality and anonymity of records will be maintained and that my name and identity will not be revealed to anyone who has not been involved in the conducting of the research, unless I indicate to the contrary/recognize that as a public figure my identity will inevitably be/become known. (Agree/Accept loss of confidentiality). Research records of this study will be kept in a locked cabinet and all electronic information will be secured using password coded computers.

9. Any further questions that I might have concerning the research, or my participation will be answered by:

- David Fryer: 074 153 0218 or d.fryer@ru.ac.za
- Claire McCann: 079 777 8181 or cmccann9@gmail.com

10. By signing this informed consent declaration, I am not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

I, ....., have read the above information / confirm that the above information has been explained to me in a language that I understand and I am aware of this document's contents. I have asked all questions that I wished to ask and these have been answered to my satisfaction. I fully understand what is expected of me during the research.

I have not been pressurised in any way and I voluntarily agree to participate in the above-mentioned project.

.....

.....

**Participant's signature**

**Date**

Rhodes University, Research Office, Ethics

Ethics Coordinator: [ethics-committee@ru.ac.za](mailto:ethics-committee@ru.ac.za)

t: +27 (0) 46 603 7727 f: +27 (0) 86 616 7707

Room 220, Main Admin Building, Drosty Road, Grahamstown, 6139

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