

THE POTENTIAL OF THE SOCIAL EMPLOYMENT FUND AND
SMARTSTART USING A LEAN AND SCALABLE MODEL TO
TRANSFORM ECD IN SOUTH AFRICA

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree

MASTER OF COMMERCE (ECONOMICS)

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ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is widely recognised for its high returns, as reflected in progressive legislation from the South African government. However, the provision of ECD services has encountered significant challenges, with gaps widening over time. Given that wealthier families can access private sector services, lack of access to quality ECD services is incident on low-income households exacerbating inequality.

Models of lean (i.e. least-cost methods of achieving threshold developmental outcomes) ECD delivery to poor communities have been developed, and their impact demonstrated. The main challenge in South Africa is scale: how, given scarce resources and capacity, to move from examples of lean ECD delivery towards achieving universal access, while still meeting ECD quality thresholds and maintaining adequate governance.

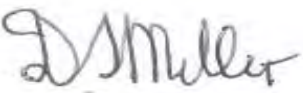
The question of scale involves much more than designing lean models then working out cost-per child and multiplying by the number of children. What is needed is an understanding of the system of delivery, from the policymaker, through the meso-level (funders, systems-designers, managers, etc.) down to ECD delivery to the child. Such a system needs to be flexible to different contexts and responsive to local communities.

The study focuses on two separate, but convergent initiatives at the meso-level in South Africa. These are the government's Social Employment Fund (SEF) and SmartStart, a Civil Society Organisation that positions itself as a platform and coordinator in the sector, rather than as a direct provider. The research aims to investigate whether these initiatives represent an emerging mode of delivery with the potential to significantly transform the ECD sector, particularly because of their focus on partnerships and empowering civil society. This mode of delivery could also provide lessons for how the government can better interact with poor communities in other policy spheres.

The primary research method is thematic analysis based on semi-structured interviews with members of the management teams of the focal organisations (the SEF, SmartStart, and partner organisations) and well-placed individuals outside the focal organisations.

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: February, 2025

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This thesis is the result of years of learning, growth, and the support of those who have stood by me throughout this journey. It is a testament not only to my own efforts but to the belief, guidance, and encouragement of the people who have shaped me along the way. Thank you to the Heavenly Father above.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CBO:	Community Based Organisation
CSD:	Centre for Social Development
CSO:	Civil Society Organisation
CWP:	Community Works Programme
DBE:	Department of Basic Education
DSD:	Department of Social Development
ECD:	Early Childhood Development
ELP:	Early Learning Programme
EPWP:	Expanded Public Works Programme
GADRA:	Grahamstown Area Distress Relief Association
GFA:	Grahamstown Feeding Association
IDC:	Industrial Development Corporation
NAF:	National Arts Foundation
NDA:	National Development Agency
NGO:	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPC:	National Planning Commission
NPO:	Non-Profit Organisation
NQF:	National Qualifications Framework
NIECDP:	National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy
NDP:	National Development Plan
NSNP:	National School Nutrition Programme
PES:	Presidential Employment Stimulus
PIECCE:	Project for Inclusive Early Childhood Care and Education
RUCE:	Rhodes University Centre for Early Childhood Education
SEF:	Social Employment Fund
SIP:	Strategic Implementing Partner
UNICEF:	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO:	World Health Organisation

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Context

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is a vital component of human development with significant economic implications. It encompasses the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth of children from birth to age eight, representing a critical period of rapid development. This stage lays the groundwork for future health, well-being, and success (Irwin et al., 2007). Research consistently shows that experiences during these early years profoundly shape the brain's architecture, influencing cognitive abilities, emotional regulation, and social skills (Galinsky, 2006). Quality early interventions and nurturing care can effectively reduce the negative impacts of stress and low socioeconomic status on brain development (Shung-King et al., 2019).

Given its crucial role in determining an individual's future, ECD has become an essential area for human capital investment. Nobel Prize winner James Heckman argues that investing in ECD is one of the most effective strategies to address broader social and economic challenges (Heckman, 2008). His work highlights that children exposed to quality early learning experiences not only perform better academically but also develop essential cognitive and socio-emotional skills that contribute to long-term success.

Research indicates that early interventions targeting children surpass those of interventions in later life (Heckman et al., 2014). Heckman's arguments align with a broader body of evidence that shows investments in early childhood led to long-term societal benefits (Penn, 2006; Bartik, 2011). Furthermore, ECD interventions create a multiplier effect, enhancing individual prospects while also leading to improved health outcomes, reduced delinquency, and increased workforce participation (Karoly, 2016).

Gøsta Esping-Andersen's welfare state typology helps explain how different welfare regimes structure social policy, including ECD. Social Democratic states, like Sweden, ensure universal ECD access through strong state intervention, while Conservative regimes, such as Germany, emphasise family responsibility. Liberal regimes, like the United States of America, rely on market-based solutions, often leading to inequality (Fernald, 2017).

South Africa does not fit neatly into these categories. Instead, it exhibits a hybrid welfare model characterised by inequality, limited state capacity, and reliance on non-state actors. Unlike Social Democratic states with universal ECD provision, South Africa's approach resembles

elements of both Liberal and Conservative models, where families and civil society bear much of the burden. However, in South Africa, civil society is not just supplementary: it is essential to service delivery.

Within Esping-Andersen's welfare regimes, which traditionally emphasise the role of the state, market, and family in delivering social services, civil society can be seen as a potential fourth pillar. This is particularly pertinent to South Africa, where the state has struggled to deliver quality ECD services (Le Mottee, 2022). The market is inaccessible to many, and the family unit, especially in vulnerable communities, is often unable to fully support early childhood development needs. Here, civil society can function as a transformative force, not only filling gaps in ECD delivery but also contributing to broader societal change.

This study applies Esping-Andersen's framework to assess whether initiatives like SmartStart and the Social Employment Fund (SEF) can bridge ECD gaps and drive systemic change. While Esping-Andersen's model contextualises welfare approaches globally, South Africa's unique context highlights the need for a model where civil society is central to expanding ECD access. By examining SmartStart and SEF, this research explores whether civil society can not only fill gaps but also transform ECD provision toward a more inclusive and effective system.

The reality of ECD provision in many countries, particularly in developing contexts like South Africa, remains fragmented and unequal. While more developed nations have implemented policies to ensure widespread access to ECD, South Africa continues to struggle with the legacy of apartheid, which has created significant disparities in service provision (Atmore et al., 2012). The state's role in providing ECD has often been supplemented or replaced by civil society organisations and non-state actors, leading to an uneven landscape in terms of access.

In South Africa, the government acknowledges the importance of ECD through initiatives like the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECDP) and the National Development Plan (NDP), which aim to ensure that every child has access to comprehensive ECD services by 2030. Despite progress in expanding ECD and Grade R enrolment, the goal of universal enrolment remains unfulfilled (Cavallera et al., 2019). A considerable gap persists between the government's ambitious vision and the reality of limited access to ECD services.

The current state of ECD in South Africa requires urgent attention, especially since many children struggle with basic literacy by the time they reach Grades 4 to 6. For example, 81% of Grade 4 learners in South Africa are unable to read for meaning in any language (Mckay and

Spaull, 2022). This issue is particularly evident in Makhanda, where stark inequalities characterise the education system.

Elite private schools, Model C schools, and Rhodes University exist alongside numerous under-resourced, dysfunctional schools. Many of these no-fee or state-subsidised schools lack the requisite human and material resources needed for quality education, especially during the critical early years of literacy development (Talbot and Barends, 2024). GADRA Education reports that around 80% of children in Makhanda cannot read for meaning by Grade 4 (Talbot and Barends, 2024).

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have increasingly stepped in to provide support. Initiatives like SmartStart and the Social Employment Fund (SEF) represent a shift toward a more community-driven approach (Dawes et al., 2020). This approach empowers communities to build skills and foster development. These models not only address the immediate needs of young children but also tackle broader community challenges, such as employment and sustainable development.

SmartStart and SEF offer models for enhancing collaboration between the state and civil society. SmartStart, a civil society initiative, focuses on delivering quality ECD through a scalable, community-driven approach (McCann, 2022). In contrast, SEF, initiated by the state, aims to empower CSOs by recognising them as genuine partners in job creation and social transformation. Together, these initiatives illustrate a more integrated approach to ECD, positioning civil society as a crucial player in addressing not only educational needs but also broader social issues such as unemployment and poverty alleviation. Civil society can act as a catalyst for broader societal transformation by improving access to early learning opportunities and reshaping the very structure of service provision.

The existing ECD system in South Africa is not only fragmented but also entrenched in bureaucratic embeddedness, a system in which state structures dominate service provision through rigid administrative mechanisms that limit responsiveness to local needs (Mabasa, 2015). This bureaucratic rigidity often results in inefficiencies and exclusion, particularly in under-resourced communities where state-run centres struggle to meet demand. In contrast, democratic embeddedness, as defined by McCann (2022: 41), refers to a model where civil society organisations (CSOs) and poor communities are positioned as co-producers of ECD, rather than passive recipients of state intervention. A shift towards democratic embeddedness

is necessary to foster a more participatory and adaptive ECD system that aligns with the needs of marginalised communities.

This approach acknowledges the assets within these communities and the importance of mobilising them effectively. SmartStart, launched in 2015, exemplifies this model by operating as a social franchise aimed at bridging the early learning gap in underserved areas (Dawes et al., 2020). Rather than imposing a top-down solution, SmartStart leverages local caregivers and informal ECD providers to deliver early learning services in areas where state provision has fallen short. In doing so, it not only enhances ECD outcomes but also fosters employment and skills development for individuals who might otherwise remain excluded from the formal job market (McCann, 2022).

Similarly, the SEF broadens the scope for transformation by employing community members to engage in various social development programmes, including ECD, waste management, and food security. Civil society can thus be seen as a beacon of hope, stepping in where government policies and market-based solutions have fallen short (Katz, 2016). This transformation is multi-layered, focusing on building stronger communities through the provision of both educational and economic opportunities while addressing governmental failures that have increased inequality in South Africa.

This approach should prioritise optimising resources while ensuring quality service delivery. Models implemented by SmartStart and similar non-profit organisations can enhance the cost-effectiveness of individual ECD centres by ensuring optimal resource utilisation and minimising waste. SmartStart and similar organisations face challenges related to sustainability, scalability, and funding. The state could alleviate these challenges by recognising their potential for substantial change (Snelling and Horler, 2020). SmartStart in South Africa provides early learning opportunities, while the SEF supports the holistic development of children by addressing broader community issues such as food insecurity and healthcare. These efforts underscore the importance of collaborative approaches to ECD (McCann, 2022).

1.2 Goals of the Research

This research aims to assess whether SmartStart and the Social Employment Fund (SEF) can transform ECD provision in South Africa by expanding access, improving governance, and ensuring sustainability. Transformation, in this context, refers to shifting from a fragmented and underfunded system to a scalable, community-driven model where civil society plays a central role in service delivery.

The study will examine how SmartStart and SEF address key challenges: funding sustainability and governance efficiency for example. Universal access to ECD remains a critical issue, particularly in underserved communities where state provision is inconsistent. This research will explore how alternative funding mechanisms and improved governance within these initiatives can create a more inclusive ECD system.

This thesis explores three key sub-goals, each contributing to the broader objective of transforming ECD provision from a top-down, bureaucratically embedded system to one rooted in democratic embeddedness, where civil society and communities play an active role in co-producing early learning services.

First, the thesis examines the ECD landscape at the national level, identifying critical gaps in service provision and regulatory oversight. This analysis will highlight the extent to which the current system remains exclusionary and fragmented, reinforcing inequality in early childhood education.

Second, the research proposes a lean and scalable model to address these gaps. This model emphasises the role of civil society organisations and community-based providers in delivering flexible and locally responsive ECD services, rather than relying solely on centralised state-led interventions.

Third, the study assesses the governance structures necessary to support this transformation. Ensuring quality service delivery and sound financial management requires regulatory frameworks that empower, rather than constrain, community-led initiatives. By shifting from rigid compliance measures to supportive oversight, the state can foster an environment where non-state actors contribute meaningfully to expanding access to early learning.

The research has investigated the implications of scaling these models. The study aims to provide a clear framework to inform policy, funding decisions, and governance models for scalable ECD in South Africa. Additionally, it will offer practical insights into aligning national and local governance structures to support these policies.

1.3 Methodology

This study operates within a post-positivist paradigm, as this approach acknowledges multiple realities and recognises that appropriate research techniques may vary depending on the context (Cooper, 1997; Henderson, 2011). This flexibility permits overlapping methods and context-specific generalisations. This study employs a case study approach to examine the ECD

landscape in South Africa, focusing on two key initiatives: SmartStart and the Social Employment Fund (SEF).

SmartStart is a civil society-led platform that partners with well-resourced CSOs ('franchisors') to expand early learning access at scale, making it a strong example of a transformative CSO initiative. The SEF, in contrast, is a state-driven programme that follows a partnership model to create employment while delivering social impact, including in the ECD sector. These cases were selected because they exemplify two different yet complementary approaches to scaling ECD provision through collaboration. A detailed discussion of the existing published and grey literature on SmartStart and SEF is provided in Chapter 3.

The sampling strategy was both purposive and convenient. CSOs were selected based on convenience within a particular town, but this choice was also purposive, as these organisations exhibited characteristics aligned with the research goals. Their established presence within their communities made them suitable subjects for examining lean, scalable models of ECD provision.

For data collection, the study utilised a combination of research methods, including a comprehensive literature review and semi-structured interviews. The literature review (Chapters 2 and 3) identified key provisional themes related to ECD provision, governance structures, and scalability. These themes formed the foundation for the primary research conducted in Chapters 4 and 5, shaping the interview framework and guiding the investigation.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers and stakeholders involved in the system to gather insights into scalable ECD models. These interviews were transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed to identify recurring patterns related to resource requirements, governance structures, and sustainability. A detailed explanation of this process is provided in Chapter 4.

The research adopts a case study approach, focusing on qualitative data from interviews and a literature review, rather than aiming for statistical significance. Given the qualitative nature of the study, the sample size did not allow for broad generalisations. Careful purposive sampling ensured that relevant perspectives were captured. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were knowledgeable about the topic and could provide rich, detailed insights into the issues of governance, cost efficiency, and scalability. To ensure internal validity, the research prioritised confidentiality and objectivity throughout the process. For this, all the interviewees' names were replaced with pseudonyms, and only the two focal institutions,

Industrial Development Corporation and SmartStart, were named. The other four institutions were referred to as A, B, C, and D.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, data triangulation was employed, integrating insights from multiple sources, including interviews and literature. This approach has ensured the validity of the findings, despite the limited sample size. While the sample size is not large enough to achieve statistical significance, an element of saturation will be sought, with similar themes emerging consistently across interviewees and the literature. This will reinforce the robustness of the findings and contribute to the transferability of the insights.

An ethics application was submitted to the Rhodes University Ethics Committee (RUESC) via the Ethical Review Application System (ERAS), with the study classified as low risk. All possible measures have been taken to comply with the university's ethics protocols, including obtaining gate-keeper permissions from participating organisation, an informed consent process with interviewees, maintaining confidentiality, and secure storage of data.

1.4 Organisation of the Thesis

The thesis is structured into six chapters, each addressing distinct aspects of the research. Chapter 1 introduces the study by providing background information, outlining the research objectives, and detailing the methodological approach. Chapter 2 reviews existing literature on ECD and welfare regimes, with a specific focus on the South African context in sections 2.4 and 2.5. Chapter 3 explores the published and 'grey' literature on two significant initiatives, SmartStart and the Social Employment Fund (SEF), assessing their contributions to ECD and evaluating their potential for scalability.

Chapter 4 explains the research methodology, outlining the study's research design, sampling methods, data collection instruments, and analytical techniques. Chapter 5 presents the research findings, drawing on semi-structured interviews to highlight key themes related to governance, cost efficiency, and scalability in ECD provision. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by synthesising the findings and discussing their broader implications. It is divided into three sections: Section 6.1 provides a summary and conclusion, reviewing key findings chapter by chapter and directly answering the main research question. Section 6.2 explores the policy implications of the study, offering recommendations for improving the integration of civil society in ECD service delivery. Finally, Section 6.3 reflects on the study's limitations and identifies avenues for future research to further investigate civil society's role in ECD.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is widely recognised as a crucial investment with significant long-term benefits for individuals and society. Research highlights its potential to improve educational outcomes, economic productivity, and social cohesion. Despite these well-documented advantages, South Africa continues to face persistent gaps in ECD provision, raising critical questions about the systemic barriers and policy inefficiencies that hinder equitable access. To understand these challenges, this chapter employs a theoretical framework that examines how South Africa's welfare regime shapes ECD provision.

Section 2.2 explores the potential benefits of ECD, detailing the extensive evidence supporting early intervention as a high-return social investment. While research strongly advocates for prioritising ECD, South Africa's struggle to implement effective, equitable policies suggests deeper structural issues.

Section 2.3 introduces welfare regime theory as a lens for understanding how different states structure social policy and, by extension, ECD provision. The section is divided into four subsections, each analysing a different welfare regime: Social Democratic (2.3.1), Conservative (2.3.2), Liberal (2.3.3), and Developing Country welfare models (2.3.4). These subsections provide a comparative analysis, illustrating how ECD policy varies across regimes and the implications for South Africa.

Section 2.4 shifts focus to ECD policy in South Africa, tracing its historical evolution and identifying key policy frameworks that have shaped the sector. Section 2.4.1 provides a deeper analysis of the ECD landscape and challenges in service delivery, highlighting issues such as inadequate funding, workforce constraints, and systemic fragmentation.

Finally, Section 2.5 examines South Africa's top-down approach to ECD, specifically the state's reliance on Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) as intermediaries for service delivery. While outsourcing ECD services to civil society organisations can expand access, it also presents challenges related to sustainability, accountability, and service quality.

By establishing this theoretical foundation, Chapter 2 frames the study's core argument: that addressing South Africa's persistent ECD gaps requires both a macro-level understanding of welfare regimes and a meso-level analysis of the role of civil society in service delivery. This

framework informs the subsequent analysis of SmartStart and the Social Employment Fund in Chapter 3.

2.2 Potential Benefits of Early Childhood Development (ECD)

The basis for future success, well-being, and health is laid during the critical time of rapid development and learning that is ECD (Irwin et al., 2007). ECD includes services or programmes that offer a broad range of supports targeted at young children and their families, in addition to academic preparedness (Britto et al., 2011). These services cover topics including health, early learning and education, family assistance, and programmes that deal with child welfare and social protection, including attempts to reduce poverty.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of ECD. Early experiences have a significant and long-lasting influence on a child's developmental trajectory, according to a wealth of research. The brain grows and develops quickly at this crucial time, and neuronal connections are formed at an incredible rate (Galinsky, 2006). The experiences and interactions in these formative years mold the brain's structure, impacting social skills, emotional control, and cognitive capacities. Early loving care reduces the negative effects of stress and low socioeconomic position on brain development, according to neuroscientific data (Shung-King et al., 2019).

According to Nobel Prize laureate James Heckman, investing in ECD represents the most potent investment in human capital for any nation (Heckman, 2008). Heckman's research underscores the critical influence of early nurturing, learning experiences, and physical health during the formative years from 0 to 8 on an individual's success or failure within society. Studies indicate that children provided with quality early learning experiences demonstrate enhanced academic performance (Bakken, 2017).

Heckman highlights the financial advantages of ECD. According to him, underprivileged kids can learn both cognitive and non-cognitive skills if they are given early and high-quality development opportunities. Heckman highlights that low skill and ability levels in society are frequently associated with problems like crime, teen pregnancy, high school dropout rates, and unfavourable health conditions (Heckman, 2008).

Contrary to traditional approaches that primarily focus on cognitive abilities, Heckman advocates for a holistic perspective that acknowledges the diverse range of human capabilities, including socioemotional skills, physical and mental health, perseverance, attention, motivation, and self-confidence (Heckman et al., 2014). He highlights that these noncognitive

factors play a crucial role in determining success in both academic settings and broader societal contexts.

Heckman stresses the early emergence of ability gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children, attributing these differences largely to family environments. He notes a concerning trend of deteriorating family environments over the past few decades, particularly among disadvantaged groups in America. However, he offers optimism by pointing out that early interventions targeting disadvantaged children can significantly improve these shortcomings (Heckman et al., 2014).

Ultimately, Heckman calls for a fundamental shift in policy focus toward recognising the pivotal role of the early years in addressing inequality and equipping individuals with the skills necessary for the workforce (Attanasio et al., 2022). This perspective underscores the immense potential of ECD in shaping a more prosperous and equitable society.

Early learning involves comparing costs resulting from unfulfilled potential and missed opportunities, with economic benefits measured through outcomes such as improved high school performance, higher earnings, or reduced involvement in criminal activities (Karoly, 2016). Studies suggest that early childhood interventions are highly effective, yielding returns of approximately seven dollars for every dollar invested, with the full extent of these savings becoming apparent when the intervened child reaches adulthood (Penn, 2006).

Strategies for successful investment in ECD are pivotal for maximising potential returns. One effective approach is to focus on comprehensive programmes that address all aspects of a child's development, including cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains (Lynch, 2007). Additionally, establishing partnerships with government agencies, non-profit organisations, and local communities can create a supportive ecosystem for ECD initiatives.

This collaborative effort ensures a more sustainable and widespread impact. The evidence presented highlights the importance of investing in ECD as a sound economic strategy with considerable social benefits. Furthermore, the positive returns on investment in ECD are not only beneficial for individuals and families but also for communities and nations (Atmore, 2019). As policymakers and stakeholders, prioritising ECD programmes and services should be a key consideration to ensure sustainable growth and development for generations to come.

2.3 Welfare Regimes

Welfare regimes serve as frameworks for how social policies are structured in various nations. ECD and other social services in a larger context are provided differently under each welfare regime. According to Wood and Gough (2006, p.1696), a welfare regime is a framework for planning and delivering social services and benefits like healthcare, education, and retirement. A nation's ideals and priorities are reflected in the way its welfare system is set up, and these factors ultimately influence the social cohesion and standard of living of its people (Powell and Barrientos, 2004).

ECD provision is impacted by welfare regimes in several ways, leading to differences in equality, quality, and accessibility, especially in poor nations where market failures are prevalent (van den Heuvel et al, 2013). The equity, quality, and accessibility of ECD services are determined by these regimes. Understanding how welfare regimes affect the provision of ECD is essential given its long-term advantages.

Esping-Andersen contends that the tenets of welfare states do not follow a single, consistent pattern. Rather, he distinguishes three different welfare state systems, each with its own logic and social structure (Guler, 2019, p. 117). Esping-Andersen's method considers welfare states in a more comprehensive political and economic framework. They are Liberal, Conservative, and Social Democratic. The Liberal approach depends on market solutions and personal accountability, the Conservative model stresses family and employment-based benefits, and the Social Democratic model emphasises equality and universal access (Guler, 2019).

2.3.1 Social Democratic

Countries like Sweden, Denmark, and Norway are prime examples of social democratic welfare regimes, which are distinguished by a strong emphasis on equality, universalism, and high levels of governmental intervention (Rothstein, 1998). To foster social cohesion and lessen inequality, these regimes place a high priority on social policies that support universal access to services, including ECD (Swank, 2000, p. 85). The state plays a key role in assisting the family and market sectors in delivering all-encompassing welfare services. Because it tackles the shortcomings of market-based and family-based welfare systems, which frequently fall short in coverage and can exacerbate social inequality, this structure is preferred.

ECD is one of the many welfare programmes that the state oversees providing. These services maximise the labour force while enabling women to maintain a work-family balance (Arnesen and Lundahl, 2006). The financial strain that the social democratic model puts on the

government is one of its drawbacks. The middle class may be strained by the large tax burden necessary to pay for these comprehensive welfare programmes (Esping-Andersen, 2002). In nations with a limited middle class or where governments are reluctant to impose high tax burdens, this strategy may be difficult to implement.

ECD services are not seen by the state as a commercial commodity in Social Democratic nations, but rather as a public good. This strategy guarantees that all children have access to high-quality ECD services, irrespective of their socioeconomic status (Esping-Andersen, 2001, p. 23). The ECD system relies heavily on comprehensive services, such as early education, subsidised childcare, and extensive parental leave laws. High participation rates, excellent quality standards, and fair access to ECD services in these nations are clear indications of the advantages of this strategy (Arnesen and Lundahl, 2006, p. 291). Reduced social inequality, better academic achievement, and increased social mobility are long-term results.

2.3.2 Conservative Regimes

By prioritising the conventional family structure, in which the male is the breadwinner, and the female is the homemaker, conservative welfare regimes in continental Europe promote family networks (Pfau-Effinger, 2008, p.190). This paradigm is predicated on the state and family pillars, which comprise family pay for male breadwinners and employment-linked social insurance and guarantees (Seeleib-Kaiser, 2016, p. 222). The idea behind the family wage is that the male head of the household should make enough money to sustain his wife and kids, with the wife doing childcare and household duties.

On the other hand, the family pillar is given priority in conservative welfare regimes. All communities need the family pillar, but conservative governments uphold a particular family structure that limits women to caring for others, thus sustaining a gendered division of labour (Aust and Bonker, 2004). Although this approach could give traditional families a safety net, it can also marginalise families that don't fit into this pattern and impede women's efforts to become economically independent.

This system assumes that society is organised into male-headed families, where the male is the primary earner, and the female is responsible for caregiving and domestic tasks (Gottfried and O'Reilly, 2002). This approach has implications for early learning and childcare provision, as family networks traditionally play a dominant role in providing childcare. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the family pillar in addressing social issues and providing adequate care is

compromised when families lack the capacity for caregiving, especially if women are expected or desire to participate in the workforce (Starke, 2022). This imbalance can limit the family's ability to handle social problems and meet caregiving needs effectively.

This means that in the context of ECD families with non-working or sporadically employed parents face inequities because access to resources is frequently linked to parental employment. It can be difficult to achieve fair access because ECD services are typically less available than under Social Democratic regimes. Since children from lower-income or non-working families would not have as much access to high-quality ECD services, these differences have the potential to reinforce social and economic inequality.

2.3.3 Liberal Regimes

Liberal welfare regimes emphasise market solutions and minimal state intervention (Stiglitz, 2021). In these regimes, social policies prioritise individual responsibility, with social services, including ECD, often provided through the private market. This approach is designed to address welfare and inequality gaps with markets and public regulation stepping in only in cases of acute market failure (Taylor-Gooby and Leruth, 2018). A market-driven approach to services like early learning and care poses the risk of inequalities, particularly when low-income communities cannot afford such services, effectively relegating them to "second-class welfare citizens" (Mitchell, 2012).

This system can create substantial disparities in access and quality of ECD services. Wealthier families can afford high-quality private ECD services, whereas lower-income families may struggle to find affordable and adequate care (White, 2009). Government support, when available, is usually limited, further exacerbating these disparities. There are differences in quality based on geographic location and socio-economic status. This can place a considerable financial burden on families, affecting their ability to participate in the labour market and achieve economic stability (Pfau-Effinger, 2008). The disparities in access to quality ECD services can have long-term negative impacts on children's development and future opportunities, perpetuating cycles of inequality (Stiglitz, 2001).

The market does not adequately account for the broad societal benefits of ECD and without sufficient government intervention, these services tend to be underprovided (Myles, 1998, p.342). Private institutions would therefore then only set up quality ECD centres in more affluent areas. Low-income families would then struggle to afford quality ECD services, leading to substantial disparities in access and quality. This liberal welfare results in a

fragmented system where only wealthier families can consistently secure beneficial early childhood education and care, while those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are left with limited options (Heintz and Lund, 2012).

The United States is an example of a liberal welfare regime, where the provision of quality early childhood education and care is predominantly market driven (Barrientos and Powell, 2021, p.139). In this system, access to services is highly dependent on family income and geographic location, resulting in significant inequalities. Wealthier families can afford to send their children to private, quality preschools, while lower-income families often struggle to find affordable and adequate care (Meyers and Gornick, 2003, p.381). Publicly funded programmes, provide some support, but these programmes are often limited in scope and cannot meet the demand. The fragmented nature of funding, which comes from a mix of federal, state, and local sources, strengthens these inequalities.

2.3.4 Welfare Regimes in developing and middle-income countries—the role of the fourth pillar in the welfare diamond?

The provision of ECD services in developing and middle-income countries is shaped by the interaction of four key pillars: the state, the market, families, and civil society (Wood and Gough, 2006). However, both the state and market pillars are insufficient in ensuring universal access to quality ECD, due to state capacity constraints and market failures (Nores and Fernandez, 2018). The state often lacks financial resources and institutional capacity to implement comprehensive ECD programmes at scale. Public expenditure on early childhood services remains limited, with many governments prioritising primary and secondary education over the early years (Britto et al., 2013). Even where policies exist, weak coordination across government departments and fragmented service delivery models lead to inconsistent access to ECD (Hall et al., 2021).

Market-driven approaches have similarly failed to bridge the gap. Private-sector involvement in ECD provision is largely shaped by profit motives, making quality early learning services unaffordable for most low-income households (Barnett & Friedman-Krauss, 2020). The high cost of private provision increases inequality, as children from wealthier families access structured early learning environments while those from poorer backgrounds are left behind.

Market failures are particularly evident in cases where the positive externalities of ECD, such as long-term educational benefits and increased productivity, are not fully internalised by private providers, leading to underinvestment in services (Berlinski & Vera-Hernandez, 2019).

The combination of state limitations and market failures creates a scenario where a significant portion of ECD responsibility falls on families and civil society.

However, these third and fourth pillars, families and civil society, face severe constraints. Many families, particularly in low-income communities, lack the financial means to pay for private ECD services (Perez-Escamilla et al., 2019). Household poverty not only limits access to structured early learning but also affects parental capacity to provide home-based developmental support. Caregivers often juggle multiple economic responsibilities and may lack the time, resources, or knowledge to engage in early learning activities that promote cognitive and social development (Britto et al., 2013).

Civil society organisations attempt to fill these gaps but face significant structural and financial limitations. Organisations, which often operate in informal settlements and rural areas, struggle to access stable funding streams. They rely heavily on donor funding and volunteer support, making their services unpredictable and difficult to scale (Woodhead et al., 2014). Furthermore, these organisations frequently encounter bureaucratic and regulatory hurdles that prevent them from becoming fully institutionalised within national ECD frameworks. Meeting compliance requirements, obtaining registration, and navigating complex funding applications pose additional challenges, limiting their long-term viability (Shai, 2021).

Given these constraints, it is important to examine the role of civil society with large, well-capacitated non-profit organisations (NPOs) such as SmartStart and the Social Employment Fund (SEF). These organisations have the advantage of scale, leveraging professional management, standardised but flexible curricula, and extensive networks to reach a broader segment of underserved communities.

SmartStart, for example, operates as a social franchise, equipping community-based practitioners with training and resources to deliver early learning programmes at scale (Barnett & Friedman-Krauss, 2020). Similarly, SEF integrates ECD into broader social employment initiatives, creating jobs while expanding access to early learning opportunities in disadvantaged areas (Yoshikawa, 2018). These models demonstrate how civil society can function as a critical fourth pillar in the welfare diamond, complementing state and market efforts while addressing gaps that neither can fully resolve.

Despite their potential, the ability of these large NPOs to scale remains constrained by funding and their relationship with the state. Many operate in a financial environment, dependent on short-term donor funding and limited government support. Without long-term, predictable

financing mechanisms, their capacity for sustained impact remains uncertain (Edigheji, 2010). Additionally, while they work alongside the state, these organisations are not always fully integrated into national policy frameworks, creating tensions that limit their effectiveness. Policy misalignment, competition for funding, and bureaucratic inefficiencies hinder the establishment of stable partnerships between the government and NPOs (Shai, 2021).

Nevertheless, the literature suggests that there is significant potential for civil society organisations to drive change in ECD provision (Wangila, 2017). Strengthening collaboration between the state and civil society, ensuring stable funding streams, and reducing bureaucratic barriers can create a more inclusive and effective ECD system. The role of well-structured, large-scale NPOs in bridging gaps left by the state and market would be crucial, particularly in developing and middle-income countries where traditional welfare regimes have struggled to ensure universal access to quality early learning.

2.4 ECD Policy in South Africa

Inequalities in early childhood education were one of the hallmarks of South Africa's apartheid era. Regarding ECD, there was a clear separation between rich and underprivileged populations before 1994. While many Black and coloured children attended underfunded, community-based preschools, wealthy, predominately white families had access to well-funded government preschools (Rudolph et al., 2019).

During this time, apartheid measures intended to preserve social and economic dominance not only restricted but also distorted the educational options available to Black pupils. When they entered the formal education system, many children were at a severe disadvantage because they were unable to access quality ECD programmes. NGOs tried to close this gap, but the restrictive social and legal structure of the era hindered their progress (Rudolph et al., 2019).

The governing elites' racism and national oppression had a significant impact on Black children's access to education (Dennis and Owusu-Bempah, 1999). For disenfranchised young children, this led to discrimination and significant disparities in financing, access, and programme quality. Only after South Africa held its first democratic elections in 1994 did revolutionary shifts in early childhood education start to occur (Atmore, 2019). This moment signalled a break from the discriminating past and a change in thinking. A new educational landscape that sought to meet the needs of all children, regardless of their background or race, was made possible by the introduction of democracy.

To correct historical injustices and create an inclusive society, the recently elected administration pledged to rebuild and develop (Bipath et al., 2021). The implementation of Grade R, a year of pre-primary education for children ages 5–6, as part of the updated national curriculum between 2000 and 2002, was one significant turning point during this period (Chisholm, 2005).

The programme aimed to ensure that every child received pre-primary education for at least a year. Grade R was mostly implemented in wealthy schools and urban regions, it exacerbated already-existing disparities by giving preference to wealthier children. As a result, community-based centres are marginalised, and practitioners move to higher-paying academic jobs (Bantwini, 2010).

Notwithstanding the difficulties, policies began to change in the post-1994 era to take a more inclusive approach to ECD, stressing the value of offering all children, particularly those from underprivileged homes, quality services (Coates & Faulkner, 2017). To provide a comprehensive framework for ECD provision nationwide, the Department of Social Development (DSD) launched a series of guidelines for ECD services in 2006, which the government subsequently implemented (Budlender & Proudlock, 2012).

The Department of Social Development claimed that extensive consultation led to the creation of guidelines outlining what government departments were supposed to do and how they should work together to make ECD programmes successful. These guidelines sought to address the nation's ECD policy, legislative requirements, and service delivery components (Budlender and Proudlock, 2012). However, in practice, responsibilities often remained vague and implementation weak. The DSD monitored how provinces followed national rules and gave them support and training (Turok, 2010). Promoting the importance of ECD, creating integrated plans, registering ECD centres, figuring out subsidies, and assigning funds were all claimed to be under provincial ECD authorities.

These guidelines, which reflected the current state of ECD governance and administration in the nation, not only claimed to make roles and responsibilities clear but also offered a framework for concerted national and provincial efforts to ensure the successful implementation of ECD policies and programmes throughout South Africa (Turok, 2010). However, as discussed in Section 2.5, as of 2024, roles remain unclear, and implementation continues to be slow. The importance of ECD in South Africa's long-term development strategy was highlighted in the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, which was unveiled by the

National Planning Commission (NPC) in 2012 (Mokhomo, 2018). The strategy emphasised the advantages of quality ECD programmes, including better academic results and a decrease in antisocial behaviour. Despite its ambition, the NDP's implementation was hampered by limited coordination and resourcing.

The NPC created the NDP 2030. Part of its mandate was to address South Africa's need for high-quality ECD programmes (Department of Social Development, 2016). The plan recognised that these programmes are not equally distributed, particularly among children who are at risk. Expanded Grade R, tailored interventions for different age groups, and universal access to high-quality ECD programmes that prioritise education, health, and nutrition are necessary because many children under the age of six do not receive ECD (Rudolph et al, 2019).

The plan identified challenges that need to be overcome to achieve these goals, such as funding, infrastructure, teacher preparation, and interdepartmental cooperation. It emphasised the importance of government support and collaboration with the private and nonprofit sectors to ensure widespread ECD service.

With an emphasis on economic growth, job creation, and poverty reduction through focused interventions in areas like education, health, infrastructure, and innovation, the NDP 2030 laid out strategies to address systemic challenges beyond ECD and strives for holistic societal transformation (Mokhomo, 2018). Its objective is to build a more just society where everyone has access to chances for both individual and group growth. To achieve long-term prosperity, the plan also acknowledged the significance of sustainable development, the necessity of reducing environmental degradation, and the promotion of green projects (Labantwana and Ya Bana, 2018).

These policies must be evaluated considering the NDP's larger social and economic objectives to fulfil its goal of offering young children and their families comprehensive services within this larger policy framework (Fourie, 2018). When assessing ECD policy in South Africa, the problem of dualism, the difference in service quality between impoverished and wealthy communities must be considered. Children in underprivileged communities sometimes receive lower-quality care, despite efforts to integrate ECD programmes. Systemic disparities that are intended to be addressed by more comprehensive policies such as the NDP are brought to light by this fragmentation and uneven quality (National Science and Technology Forum, 2018). The National Integrated ECD Policy (NIPECD), which was authorised by the Cabinet in December

2015, sees ECD as a public good, a national priority, and a human right (Department of Social Development, 2016). The goal of the strategy is to provide all South African infants and early children with the best possible development conditions (Desmond et al., 2019). With this policy government claimed to establish a nationwide integrated system that guarantees good quality, widely available, ECD from infancy through the year before formal schooling. The policy outlined the government's responsibilities to provide high-quality early childhood development programmes and the necessary resources to ensure the survival, development, well-being, and protection of children.

The goal of the NIPECD, according to Atmore (2019), was to coordinate government efforts in early childhood development for children ages one to four. The policy aims to provide accessible, quality community services by integrating ECD programmes and resources. It focused on offering a strong foundation in physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development through a holistic approach, supported by comprehensive services and well-trained staff (Mokhomo, 2018).

Public awareness campaigns, capacity building, women's empowerment, parental education, and varied ECD initiatives were important tactics. To guarantee fair access to ECD programmes, the policy establishes challenging objectives for the creation of legislative frameworks, organisational structures, and funding sources. It seeks to ensure that all children and their caregivers may access key elements of comprehensive ECD programmes.

To direct the implementation of policies and track advancement, these objectives are complemented by precise deadlines (Bipath et al., 2021). By 2017, the policy sought to create institutional arrangements, planning tools, financing methods, legal framework, and structures required for equitable and universal access to ECD services. This fundamental objective highlights how crucial it is to establish the framework for an inclusive ECD system that can successfully reach all children and caregivers (Rudolph et al., 2019). However, by 2017, the outcomes of this policy's execution were uneven, with notable advancements in metropolitan regions but ongoing difficulties reaching underprivileged and rural groups (Friedman and Morrow, 2017).

By expanding on earlier efforts, the South African government has been concentrating more on ECD in recent years (Atmore, 2019). The ongoing issues of poverty, injustice, and exclusion that many children encounter are the reason for this emphasis on ECD (Mbarathi et al., 2016).

The state claims to give children the resources they need for survival, development, and growth, such as parental support, food, and medical treatment. Several ministries have acknowledged the value of ECD and concurred that it ought to be a top priority in all areas that influence the lives of young children. Health, Education, Social Development, Home Affairs, Defence, Labour, Correctional Services, and Finance are all included in this.

This acknowledgment is in line with the National Plan of Action for Children in South Africa, which seeks to enhance the welfare of all children in the nation (Martin et al., 2018). Coordination between government agencies and resolving differences in service quality among various communities continue to be difficult tasks. Even though initiatives like the National School Nutrition Programme and the Early Learning Subsidy have increased access to quality nutrition and education, disparities in ECD services still stand in the way of real equity (Vargas-Baron et al., 2022).

We can evaluate the success of the 2017 ECD goals as of 2024. Although the institutional mechanisms and legislative framework have been put in place, different communities and regions have various levels of success in guaranteeing fair and universal access to ECD programmes (Atmore, 2019). According to the state, by 2030, all young children and their caregivers will have complete access to a full suite of ECD services (Atmore, 2019). This long-term objective shows a dedication to giving South African children the tools and assistance they need to succeed from an early age.

Establishing cohesive ECD systems and guaranteeing fair access to programmes for the development of young children depends heavily on effective leadership, planning and funding (Brooks et al., 2022). Offering a full range of programmes, such as birth certification, healthcare, nutrition, parental support, and inclusion of children with impairments, requires a holistic approach to ECD (Atmore, 2019). The government also emphasised the importance of programmes like the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) and the Early Learning Subsidy in increasing access to high-quality nutrition and education in early childhood (Vargas-Baron et al., 2022).

The importance of ECD is widely recognised, but South Africa has struggled to fully achieve its goals due to systemic challenges tied to its welfare regime (Taylor, 2019). The country's welfare model, which relies heavily on market-driven solutions, has led to significant disparities in ECD access and quality. While policies emphasised the need for universal access, they fail to address the underlying structural inequalities, particularly in rural and low-income

areas. These inequalities are increased by limited government funding and poor infrastructure, meaning children in disadvantaged communities continue to receive lower-quality services (Atmore, 2019). As we explore the existing system, it becomes clear that the gap between policy promises, and actual implementation is a key factor in South Africa's failure to achieve equitable ECD for all children.

2.4.1 ECD Landscape and challenges in the sector

The landscape in South Africa is diverse, with a significant presence of non-governmental organisations and private individuals, including sole proprietors and microenterprises. However, this sector remains fragmented and largely informal, posing challenges for both providers and policymakers. The ECD Census, conducted between August 2021 and February 2022, aimed to gather comprehensive data on ECD programmes across South Africa. Partnered with the LEGO Foundation and facilitated by iKapadata (Pty) Ltd., the census enlisted over 360 fieldworkers to visit every ward in the country, excluding Grade R classes, to identify Early Learning Programmes (ELPs) of various sizes and types (Department of Basic Education, 2022). Instruments covered themes such as location, services, fees, registration status, subsidies, facilities, enrolment, staff, teaching practices, infrastructure, and access to resources.

In South Africa, there are over seven million children under the age of six (Peacock, 2022), yet only approximately 1.6 million are enrolled in Early Learning Programmes (ELPs) (Department of Basic Education, 2022). This highlights a significant access gap, with millions of children not receiving formal early childhood development services. A total of 42,420 ELPs were documented, with Gauteng having the highest number, followed by KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. However, site visits revealed that only 1.1 million children were physically present, suggesting inconsistencies in attendance.

Regarding regulation, 40% of ELPs are registered with the Department of Social Development (DSD), 42% remain unregistered, and the status of the remaining 18% is unspecified. In terms of funding, approximately one-third of ELPs receive a government subsidy, though the exact amount varies. The primary funding source for 69% of ELPs is parental fees, which average R509 per child per month. Government subsidies, donations, and fundraising efforts contribute to sustaining ELPs, but the sector remains heavily dependent on parental contributions for daily functioning and service provision (Department of Basic Education, 2022).

Regarding facilities, the majority of ELPs provide meals, with some receiving government support and others relying on parental contributions. Handwashing facilities and flush toilets are available in approximately half of the ELPs. In terms of staff qualifications, over half (56%) hold ECD qualifications at National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level 4-9, while 22% lack relevant credentials; the remaining 22% have some form of training or qualifications that are not explicitly ECD-related (Department of Basic Education, 2022). Free playtime varies, with subsidised ELPs generally offering more play and learning materials. However, access to age-appropriate children's books remains limited, with only 56% of ELPs having them.

Within the ECD landscape, two major types are prevalent: centre-based and non-centre-based models. Centre-based programmes, typically found in formal communities, offer structured curricula designed to prepare children for formal schooling, such as Grade R (Ebrahim, 2012). Centre-based ECD programmes such as preschools, crèches, and daycare centres, are often registered with government authorities and adhere to specific regulatory guidelines. These centres provide structured learning environments with trained educators and standardised early learning programmes aimed at school readiness. Many centre-based programmes receive subsidies or support from the government, allowing them to offer more stable and consistent services compared to non-centre-based models. However, despite their advantages, access to centre-based programmes remains unequal, particularly in rural and low-income areas (Atmore et al., 2012).

Non-centre-based ECD programmes provide early childhood education and care in marginalised communities where formal services are scarce or under-resourced. These programmes, often informal, are integrated into communities and emphasise family and local engagement, fostering culturally familiar learning environments while promoting community empowerment, employment creation, and skills development (Ebrahim, 2012). Outreach programmes and playgroups extend ECD access through home-based education and group learning activities (Atmore et al., 2012).

Non-centre-based ECD models aim to provide subsidised, quality childcare for children aged 0–6 years, often through home-based care, mobile programmes, or informal community initiatives led by parents or community members (Biersteker et al., 2016; Le Mottee, 2022). These initiatives recognise parents as the primary educators of young children and strive to make ECD services accessible and relevant to local needs (Albino and Berry, 2013). However,

parent engagement varies, particularly in township or informal settings where resources and structured support systems are limited.

Despite their potential benefits, non-centre-based approaches face challenges. Many caregivers lack formal qualifications and operate without registration or government support. While some have skills comparable to those in centre-based programmes, the absence of structured training, funding, and oversight often affects quality and sustainability (Ebrahim, 2012).

Infrastructure deficiencies, such as inadequate buildings and essential amenities, further hinder registration and programme viability (Orgill, 2010; The Housing Development Agency, 2014). In South Africa, non-centre-based ECD providers must meet a complex set of criteria including zoning compliance, infrastructure standards (e.g., access to water and toilets), fire safety certificates, and staff qualifications to obtain registration. These requirements often present insurmountable barriers for low-income centres operating in informal settlements or rural areas.

As a significant component of South Africa's ECD landscape, non-centre-based programmes receive government support through grants from the National Development Agency (NDA) (Snelling et al., 2019). Non-profit organisations also play a crucial role, engaging in policy advocacy and working alongside government and private sector stakeholders to expand access to quality services. However, these collaborations remain informal rather than structured as a formal tripartite agreement.

While non-centre-based ECD programmes offer a flexible, community-driven approach to early learning, they remain in the process of being strengthened and scaled. Limited resources, inconsistent implementation, and varying levels of community participation continue to hinder their full potential. Addressing these barriers through greater investment and policy support is essential to ensuring their long-term impact on ECD access in South Africa.

In South Africa, the provision of ECD services is marked by significant fragmentation, resulting in varying quality levels and inconsistent implementation (Atmore et al., 2012). Addressing this issue is crucial, particularly for the most marginalised children, who often lack access to alternative services and are most in need of targeted interventions. However, despite the holistic nature of ECD, the current approach to service delivery in South Africa lacks the necessary synchronisation and coordination (Black et al., 2017).

The fragmented framework currently in place presents formidable obstacles in effectively addressing the needs of the most vulnerable children. It is imperative to recognise that without a synchronised approach, these marginalised individuals are deprived of essential support that could significantly impact their life trajectories (Black et al., 2017). It is crucial to recognise that ECD requires the collaboration of various sectors, including education, health, and social services (Fernald, 2017).

The government's role in ECD provision is primarily focused on regulating and subsidising Early Learning Programmes (ELPs), with a limited number of state-run centres. While these centres contribute to the provision of ECD services, many children are enrolled in non-state ELPs, which are often supported through government subsidies. As mentioned earlier, approximately 1.66 million children are enrolled in ELPs across South Africa (Department of Basic Education, 2022). As of 2023, the government ECD subsidy was approximately R17 per child per day, significantly lower than the per-learner allocation in public primary education, which can exceed R40 per day depending on quintile level. This underfunding limits service quality and reach. The insufficient reach of government-backed programmes, coupled with the fragmented nature of civil society and non-centre-based services, increases gaps in ECD access. This results in significant disparities, particularly affecting marginalised communities (Peacock, 2022; Zaal & Matthias, 2002).

In South Africa, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Nelson Mandela Foundation, and SmartStart play roles in the ECD landscape. These organisations support and enhance ECD programmes through funding, capacity-building, and advocacy efforts (Biersteker et al., 2016). These programmes are particularly impactful in areas where formal ECD centres are scarce, providing a flexible, culturally relevant solution to early childhood education.

Initiatives like the Project for Inclusive Early Childhood Care and Education (PIECCE) advocate for standardised qualifications and training within the ECD sector, which aligns with the emerging vision for a more structured and professional workforce (Urban et al., 2012). However, while such advocacy is a critical step, these standards have not yet been widely implemented across the sector.

The existing system still relies heavily on informal and unregulated care providers, often without consistent training or qualifications. Additionally, empowering children as active participants in their learning requires a paradigm shift in both educational approaches and

policy. This shift is not yet fully realised in the current system and will require sustained support beyond formal training programmes to make meaningful progress (Urban et al., 2012).

Teacher preparation extends to addressing broader educational challenges, including integrating physical movement, music, and art into lessons, and enhancing language skills for effective communication (Visser et al., 2021). Language in education remains a critical issue, with digital tools offering potential despite obstacles like device accessibility and limited training (Maritz, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic's accelerated digitalisation underscores the urgency of addressing these challenges and preparing teachers for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, contingent upon resolving issues like power outages and technology accessibility (Maritz, 2022).

One particularly pressing issue revolves around the provision of quality ECD, especially for children hailing from impoverished communities. This endeavour demands a substantial investment of resources, chiefly in the form of funding. However, a stark reality emerges as only 1% of the education budget is allocated to ECD. This inadequate funding allocation poses a significant barrier to the expansion of early learning programmes nationwide, perpetuating inequalities and limiting opportunities for children in need (Pence and Morrow, 2018). Addressing this funding shortfall is paramount to ensuring equitable access to quality ECD services and fostering the holistic development of all South African children.

Moreover, managing subsidy payments presents challenges due to provincial processes and legal uncertainties, further exacerbating funding issues for ECD centres (Innovation Edge, 2020). Many ECD facilities struggle to operate as viable businesses, with low remuneration for practitioners and difficulties in securing adequate fees. Fragmentation and lack of coordination within the sector, along with distrust between local government and informal practitioners, hinder effective collaboration and service delivery.

There is clear evidence that professionals properly trained in the care and development of children aged 0-4 years are essential for optimal growth and development (Kelly & Allen, 2015). Inadequate qualifications and training leave teachers and caregivers ill-equipped to stimulate and guide young children. Trained professionals understand child development and learning, enabling them to effectively respond to children's needs and create enriching environments (Atmore et al., 2012). Studies show that trained ECD professionals are better at instilling school readiness, critical for future academic success (Pal, 2020). However, studies

report that only 35% of ECD teachers in South Africa have received some form of training, and few hold qualifications in ECD (Feza & Chiphambo, 2022).

Poor communities are faced with daily challenges; limited access to resources is one of the problems faced in the delivery of ECD in rural communities. These communities lack basic resources such as water and electricity. Malcolm et al. (2008) argue that such resources are pre-conditions for ECD centres as they affect the health and sanitation of the environment. This inhibits the overall provision of ECD as it hinders the access of children to ECD centres. This is often quite problematic in rural areas as the land still belongs to the tribal authorities and consent is required to use this land for developmental purposes, such consent may come at a price (Gardiner, 2008).

In informal settlements, children with disabilities face exclusion from ECD services due to a lack of identification, awareness, and appropriate resources (Martin et al., 2018). This exclusion denies them access to early learning opportunities, which are crucial for their development and future potential (Bipath et al., 2021). Ensuring that children with disabilities are included in ECD programmes is essential for their well-being and development, and greater investment is needed to make these services accessible to all children, regardless of their circumstances (Tugli et al., 2014).

Given the resource constraints in South Africa's ECD sector, it is essential to focus on scaling existing programmes and improving their quality to meet basic standards. Addressing the gaps in access to services for children with disabilities and ensuring inclusivity should be a key consideration as we work towards expanding quality ECD opportunities for all children, especially the most marginalised.

2.5 Top-Down Approach to ECD in South Africa

South Africa's ECD sector has historically been governed through a centralised, bureaucratic framework that has shaped its accessibility, quality, and equity. This governance model, characterised by top-down regulation and fragmented responsibilities across government departments, has played a significant role in perpetuating disparities in ECD provision.

Understanding the role of bureaucratic embeddedness—the extent to which government institutions are interconnected with social structures, policies, and administrative systems (as defined on page 3)—is crucial for evaluating how alternative models, such as SmartStart and the Social Employment Fund (SEF), could foster more inclusive and community-driven approaches to ECD. Bureaucratic embeddedness influences how policies are implemented, the

degree of flexibility in service delivery, and the extent to which local stakeholders can meaningfully participate in decision-making processes.

A key issue within this centralised governance structure is the division of ECD responsibilities across multiple government entities. Historically, the Department of Social Development (DSD) oversaw ECD centres, while the Department of Basic Education (DBE) managed curriculum development and early learning programmes. This system created inefficiencies, with centres navigating complex registration processes, inconsistent funding mechanisms, and regulatory bottlenecks (Hall, 2021). The 2022 shift of ECD oversight from DSD to DBE was intended to streamline governance, but early indications suggest continued challenges in implementation and service delivery (Government of South Africa, 2020).

Despite policy commitments to universal access to quality ECD, bureaucratic constraints have reinforced systemic inequalities. Licensing and registration requirements remain prohibitively complex for many community-based ECD centres, disproportionately affecting providers in low-income and rural areas (Marais & Meyer, 2020). These centres often lack the financial and administrative capacity to meet compliance standards, resulting in exclusion from state funding opportunities and training programmes (Atmore, 2019). Consequently, children in marginalised communities continue to rely on informal and under-resourced ECD providers, exacerbating the quality gap in early learning.

Additionally, state funding for ECD remains inconsistent and insufficient. The per-child subsidy model prioritises formal, registered centres, leaving informal providers without critical financial support (Hall & Sambu, 2018). Bureaucratic inefficiencies in fund disbursement further delay crucial resources, hampering the operational sustainability of ECD programmes, particularly in underprivileged areas.

Bureaucratic embeddedness in South Africa's ECD governance is a complex and deeply entrenched issue, shaped by institutional, and political factors. The effectiveness of state-led ECD provision is significantly constrained by bureaucratic inefficiencies, fragmented policy implementation, and weak coordination. The state's bureaucratic structures often lack the necessary autonomy to drive meaningful ECD reforms while simultaneously failing to be sufficiently embedded in communities to ensure responsive and adaptive service delivery. This results in a governance model where decision-making is centralised, yet implementation remains inconsistent and ineffective.

A critical issue arising from weak bureaucratic embeddedness is the persistent fragmentation in ECD policy implementation. Despite significant legislative progress, including the move of ECD oversight from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the Department of Basic Education (DBE), challenges remain in ensuring a cohesive, well-integrated system (Richter et al., 2019). The lack of coordination between national, provincial, and municipal levels of government has led to inefficiencies in resource allocation, monitoring, and evaluation.

South Africa's bureaucratic landscape is marked by a top-down approach that often marginalises civil society actors, despite their critical role in ECD service provision. Research by Hall et al. (2021) indicates that while the government officially recognises non-state actors as essential partners, in practice, bureaucratic rigidity and cumbersome regulatory frameworks often limit their ability to innovate and scale sustainable models of ECD provision.

The example of SmartStart, a social franchise for early learning, illustrates these tensions. Although SmartStart has made significant progress in expanding access to ECD, its growth is often hampered by slow government accreditation processes and inconsistent regulatory enforcement (SmartStart, 2020). These challenges underscore how bureaucratic structures, rather than facilitating partnerships, can become obstacles to effective ECD service delivery.

Furthermore, the inefficiencies are increased by a lack of political will to address structural barriers to ECD expansion. Social policy in South Africa is often shaped by political considerations that prioritise short-term gains over long-term developmental outcomes. This has resulted in an ECD governance framework that is more focused on compliance and administrative control than on fostering innovation and responsiveness.

The Social Employment Fund (SEF) provides a pertinent example of how bureaucratic constraints limit the potential impact of social policy interventions. While SEF aims to integrate employment generation with social service provision, the bureaucratic challenges associated with fund disbursement, monitoring, and evaluation have hindered its effectiveness in strengthening ECD initiatives.

To overcome these governance challenges, there is a need for a more adaptive and networked bureaucratic model that fosters collaboration between the state, civil society, and private sector actors. South Africa's ECD governance could benefit from policies that enhance bureaucratic efficiency while ensuring deeper engagement with non-state actors.

This includes streamlining regulatory frameworks, decentralising decision-making to local governments, and fostering multi-stakeholder platforms that encourage innovation in early learning provision. Without such reforms, the current system is likely to remain characterised by inefficiencies, exclusionary practices, and suboptimal developmental outcomes for young children in South Africa.

Civil society initiatives like SmartStart and SEF present alternative governance models that emphasise community-led provision, flexibility, and embedded local engagement. SmartStart operates as a social franchise, circumventing bureaucratic hurdles by equipping community-based practitioners with training and resources outside the formal registration process (SmartStart, 2024). Similarly, SEF integrates ECD provision within a broader social employment framework, leveraging public funding to create localised early learning opportunities.

These models signal a potential transition from bureaucratic embeddedness to democratic embeddedness. While bureaucratic embeddedness refers to governance systems that are primarily hierarchical and centred around bureaucratic control, democratic embeddedness involves more participatory, decentralised forms of governance that are responsive to local needs and foster community involvement in decision-making (as defined on page 3). In this model, local stakeholders are not just implementers of top-down policies but are active participants in shaping the direction of social programmes. This shift is significant for initiatives like SmartStart and the Social Employment Fund (SEF), which seek to empower communities and create more inclusive early childhood development systems (McCann, 2022).

By decentralising decision-making and embedding ECD provision within community structures, these initiatives address the gaps left by bureaucratic inefficiencies while promoting equity in early childhood education. However, the success of these models depends on greater policy alignment and sustained support from the state, particularly in recognising and funding alternative ECD delivery mechanisms.

CHAPTER 3: SMARTSTART AND SOCIAL EMPLOYMENT FUND (SEF)

3.1 Introduction

In the evolving landscape of Early Childhood Development (ECD) in South Africa, models like SmartStart and broad-based initiatives such as the Social Employment Fund (SEF) are becoming increasingly relevant. These initiatives reflect a shift towards more community-driven approaches to ECD, seeking to address the systemic challenges and disparities that have long plagued the sector (Dawes et al., 2020, p.28). While government efforts have aimed to improve ECD provision, children and caregivers often face ‘distance’ from ECD services not just geographically, but also in terms of affordability, infrastructure, and cultural fit. For example, poor road access in rural areas, high transport costs, or lack of awareness all contribute to barriers. SEF and SmartStart attempt to bridge this distance by bringing services into communities via local practitioners and flexible models.

This chapter examines the existing literature on the role of SmartStart and the SEF in transforming South Africa’s ECD landscape. Section 3.2 explores SmartStart as a model for expanding early learning access, analysing its origins, implementation strategy, and impact on ECD provision. Section 3.3 focuses on the strategies within SmartStart’s ECD model, delving into the specific methods and approaches that drive its effectiveness. Section 3.4 shifts focus to the Social Employment Fund, assessing its broader approach to community development and its potential to contribute to ECD services through employment generation and localised service delivery.

Section 3.5 examines the role of civil society organisations in promoting ECD and community development in Makhanda, highlighting their contributions and challenges. Section 3.6 evaluates how these two initiatives collectively enhance ECD provision in South Africa, considering their scalability, sustainability, and long-term implications for inclusive development. This discussion sets the stage for Chapters 4 and 5, where the methodology for exploring these models in depth will be outlined, followed by the presentation of the results from the research conducted on their impact and effectiveness.

3.2 The Role of SmartStart in ECD Provision

SmartStart, a social franchise launched in 2015, aims to address the lack of early education for nearly one million children aged three to five in South Africa. Their mission is to ensure that every child in the country has access to quality early learning experiences and contribute to the

government's goal of universal ECD access by 2030 (National Treasury, 2023). Their vision is to empower every child with the tools to succeed in life.

With its impressive expansion, SmartStart is now a major player in extending early learning opportunities across South Africa. Its objective as a nationwide delivery platform is to reach 40,000 locations throughout both urban and rural areas, as well as 100,000 practitioners (SmartStart, 2020). 10,000 children were enrolled in SmartStart in its first year alone; since then, the programme has expanded to 106,207 children, with an average of 15,172 students annually (SmartStart, 2022). Notably, SmartStart reached 36,795 children in the 2019–2020 fiscal year, indicating a sharp rise in reach and proving the organisation's capacity to take advantage of economies of scale and breadth (SmartStart, 2020). With its current scale, SmartStart is the largest non-profit early learning provider in South Africa, and it continues to strive towards its goal of serving one million children yearly.

SmartStart is designed to be lean, meaning it meets the minimum critical specifications necessary to deliver quality services at scale, without unnecessary overhead costs. This approach is particularly important given South Africa's funding constraints in early childhood education. SmartStart ensures that its programmes meet necessary standards through comprehensive training and continuous monitoring. SmartStart reports that franchisees consistently adhere to essential standards of child development, early literacy, numeracy, and business management, with ongoing support from coaches (Dawes et al., 2020).

The SmartStart model focuses on three core objectives: enhancing the quality of ECD within a lean, cost-effective model, expanding access at scale, to reach 1 million children annually by 2030 and advancing advocacy efforts to promote early learning, including parental engagement, policy influence, and broader public awareness (Snelling and Horler, 2020). To achieve these goals, SmartStart uses a unique social franchising model that applies commercial franchising principles to drive social outcomes.

Instead of focusing on profit, the model trains and licenses early learning practitioners, known as "SmartStarters," who then operate as micro entrepreneurs running non-centre-based ECD programmes within their communities (Penny & Doherty, 2020). This approach not only expands access to early learning but also supports local economic development by equipping these practitioners with the resources, training, and business skills needed to sustain their ECD services.

The model is built on a three-tiered structure that brings together various actors to ensure effective delivery and community engagement. At the core of this structure are the franchisees (i.e. SmartStarters), who provide early learning directly to children within their local communities. These franchisees are supported by a network of franchisors, which are large, well-resourced non-profit organisations (NPOs). A good example is the Siyakholwa Development Foundation, which operates primarily in the Eastern Cape. Siyakholwa is a locally embedded civil society organisation (CSO) that engages in a wide range of community development activities, not solely limited to ECD (Siyakholwa Development Foundation, 2024). In addition to supporting ECD initiatives, the foundation focuses on economic empowerment, health promotion, and youth development, helping to address broader social challenges.

The franchisor network plays a crucial intermediary role by connecting the local efforts of franchisees to a larger, national strategy while offering guidance, training, and support (SmartStart, 2020). Additionally, the central hub of SmartStart coordinates the overall programme and ensures alignment with its mission. This tiered system allows SmartStart to effectively scale its operations while tailoring its approach to the unique needs of different communities. By leveraging the local knowledge of the franchisors, SmartStart ensures that each franchisee can operate in a contextually appropriate way, addressing the specific challenges of their area while remaining connected to a broader national framework (McCann, 2022).

The franchisees are local, independent operators who are responsible for the day-to-day delivery of early learning services. They are typically individuals or community organisations that are passionate about improving early childhood education within their own communities. SmartStart provides these franchisees with the necessary tools and support to run early learning centres that offer children, nurturing, and stimulating environment to grow and develop (van Der Berg, 2016).

The franchisors, which are established NPOs with existing ECD service experience, play a pivotal role in supporting the franchisees. These NPOs, such as Siyakholwa, bring a wealth of knowledge and resources that help franchisees build sustainable and high-quality services (SmartStart, 2020). The franchisors are responsible for training franchisees, offering ongoing coaching and professional development, and ensuring the franchisees' adherence to the

SmartStart model. This partnership strengthens the overall delivery of early learning services and helps maintain consistency across the programme.

The central hub of SmartStart acts as the coordinating body that oversees the implementation of the programme and ensures that all franchisees and franchisors are aligned with the broader mission and strategy. The hub facilitates communication, monitoring, and support to ensure the success of the network, and connects local initiatives with national policy objectives.

SmartStart recruits individuals and organisations from communities that are committed to early childhood development. Franchisees are selected based on their motivation and capacity to deliver quality ECD services in their areas. Once selected, franchisees undergo a rigorous training programme that equips them with the knowledge and skills needed to provide effective early learning experiences. This training covers a range of topics, including child development, early literacy, numeracy, and managing a small business.

Franchisees are supported by coaches, who are experienced professionals from the franchisor organisations (McCann, 2022). These coaches provide on-the-job training, mentorship, and guidance to help franchisees establish and maintain quality learning environments. The coaching model ensures that franchisees are not only equipped with the right knowledge but also receive continuous feedback and support to improve their practice.

SmartStart's funding model is designed to support the initial establishment of early learning programmes while ensuring long-term sustainability (Hall, 2021). The organisation primarily relies on a combination of philanthropic funding, corporate social investment, and partnerships with development agencies to finance its operations. This external funding supports the recruitment, training, and initial setup costs of franchisees, allowing them to establish early learning programmes without facing significant financial barriers. These funds are also used to develop learning materials, maintain operational support structures, and provide ongoing mentorship and quality assurance for franchisees.

To ensure long-term sustainability, SmartStart follows a phased funding approach that gradually transitions franchisees toward self-sufficiency. In the early stages, franchisees receive financial and material support, including training, startup kits, and ongoing coaching, enabling them to run effective early learning programmes. As they become operational, franchisees are expected to generate income through a combination of government subsidies such as the early learning subsidy provided to qualifying ECD providers and fees paid by parents (Penny and Doherty, 2020).

While some parents can afford to contribute, many families in underprivileged communities cannot (Hall and Sambu, 2018). In these cases, SmartStart works to secure additional funding sources to subsidise participation and ensure equitable access to early learning. However, a major challenge remains: the limited availability of government subsidies for non-centre-based ECD programmes. Unlike formal ECD centres that receive state support, many SmartStart practitioners do not yet qualify for direct government funding, creating financial uncertainty for some franchisees.

The government's role in SmartStart's funding model is currently limited, but the organisation aligns with national ECD policy objectives and presents a scalable model for public-private collaboration (Department of Basic Education, 2020). There is potential for the government to integrate SmartStart more directly into its ECD strategy by expanding subsidy eligibility, providing infrastructure support, or formalising partnerships with organisations implementing scalable, cost-effective early learning solutions. By doing so, the state could leverage SmartStart's extensive reach and low-cost model to advance its goal of universal access to early learning by 2030.

Despite its successes, SmartStart faces several constraints that could impact its future growth and sustainability. One of the main challenges identified by both SmartStart and external stakeholders is the limited availability of qualified early childhood education practitioners, which is compounded by the programme's reliance on non-centre-based models in some areas (Atmore, 2019). Although the training and ongoing coaching for franchisees help address this issue, the need for a larger pool of qualified educators remains a significant challenge.

Another constraint is the dependence on government subsidies and parent fees, which can be inconsistent and difficult to predict, especially in low-income areas (Richter, 2017). This can affect the financial stability of franchisees in the short term, though the phased funding model helps mitigate this challenge to some extent.

Additionally, SmartStart's ability to maintain high standards across a growing network of franchisees is a potential constraint. Ensuring quality control and providing adequate support as the programme scales up will require continued investment in training and monitoring (Mitchell, 2018). Finally, the programme's reach to more remote and rural areas, where there may be cultural or logistical barriers to entry, presents ongoing challenges in terms of accessibility and community engagement (Nordin, 2020)

SmartStart provides a viable pathway for the South African government to scale up ECD services, particularly in a context where public investment in early learning is limited (Shai, 2021). The programme complements government efforts by offering a cost-effective approach that expands access to quality early childhood education without placing a heavy burden on the state. The SmartStart model is lean, designed to meet the minimum critical specifications necessary to reach as many children as possible, thus maximising the impact of limited resources.

By partnering with local, well-established franchisors, SmartStart can leverage their existing infrastructure and resources. By tapping into the expertise and reach of these local NPOs, SmartStart can adapt its model to fit the unique needs of different communities, particularly in underserved areas. This partnership approach facilitates the replication of SmartStart programmes across various settings, particularly in underserved areas, therefore increasing the potential for long-term sustainability and impact (Smartstart, 2024).

SmartStart not only addresses the shortage of formal ECD centres but also adopts an asset-based approach to development, empowering local entrepreneurs to establish and sustain their own early learning centres. Rather than relying on top-down interventions, this model builds on existing community resources, skills, and social networks to create a cost-effective and scalable ECD system (McCann, 2022). This aligns with the concept of “democratic embeddedness”, where civil society initiatives integrate with local capacities to drive sustainable development. By leveraging community assets and mobilising local entrepreneurship, SmartStart fosters a decentralised approach to ECD provision that is both adaptable and responsive to local needs.

Instead of simply providing financial aid to the poor, SmartStart taps into the capabilities of local actors to co-create sustainable early learning systems. This concept of “asset-based” development, often explored within the literature on community-driven approaches (McCann, 2022), highlights how local actors can be empowered to play a crucial role in addressing systemic challenges, such as the lack of quality ECD provision.

This, in turn, supports broader community development, creating local economic opportunities and improving the overall quality of life in underserved areas. Through this partnership between SmartStart and local entrepreneurs, the government can leverage SmartStart’s reach and local knowledge to achieve its broader educational and developmental goals, particularly in the face of funding constraints.

In a landscape where government efforts to create a comprehensive model for early learning have yet to succeed, SmartStart demonstrates potential for impact in underserved communities. However, long-term outcomes and sustainability require further evaluation. Practitioners report several challenges including delayed payments, lack of infrastructure support, and limited career progression pathways. These operational constraints suggest that while the model is innovative and scalable, sustained impact will require greater systemic support, particularly in aligning with national ECD priorities.

3.3 Strategies in SmartStart's ECD Model

SmartStart franchisees operate under tight financial constraints, which impact their ability to sustain their programmes effectively (SmartStart, 2024). While SmartStart provides initial financial and material support to franchisees for the first two years, covering training, startup kits, and ongoing coaching, this support is designed to phase out as franchisees establish their operations. During this period, franchisees are expected to build financial sustainability by generating income through government subsidies and parental fees. However, challenges such as inconsistent fee recovery from parents and limited access to government funding for non-centre-based ECD providers create financial strain.

Although SmartStart's core model does not require nutrition provision, many franchisees voluntarily provide food for the children in their care, recognising the critical link between nutrition and early development. This additional responsibility further stretches their limited resources, exacerbating financial pressures (Penny and Doherty, 2020). Without consistent external funding beyond the initial support period, franchisees often struggle to cover operational costs, which raises concerns about long-term sustainability. Strengthening access to government subsidies and securing additional funding sources remain crucial.

SmartStart's funding model relies on a combination of government support and other funding sources, but it faces several challenges in ensuring financial sustainability. Approximately 40% of SmartStart's income comes from government funding, primarily through the Community Works Programme (CWP) and the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) (Helen Suzman Foundation, 2024). These programmes provide stipends to SmartStart practitioners, effectively subsidising the cost-of-service delivery and enabling more individuals to enter the ECD sector. However, these stipends are often low and inconsistent, limiting their effectiveness in sustaining franchisees.

In addition to EPWP and CWP support, SmartStart franchisees are eligible to apply for the ECD subsidy provided by the Department of Basic Education (DBE). This subsidy is intended to help cover operational costs, including practitioner stipends, materials, and food for children. However, many SmartStart practitioners struggle to access this funding due to administrative barriers, such as compliance requirements and delays in approval. Compliance requirements include health and safety regulations, access to clean running water and flushing toilets, employment of qualified staff, and adherence to formal registration procedures (Sello et al, 2024). These conditions are often extremely difficult to meet for community-based and non-centre-based ECD programmes operating in informal or under-resourced environments. Many practitioners lack secure premises, operate without basic infrastructure, or face bureaucratic delays when engaging with local government. As a result, these barriers disproportionately exclude SmartStart franchisees from accessing crucial subsidies and formal recognition.

Unlike formal ECD centres, which are more integrated into government funding structures, SmartStart's decentralised, non-centre-based model does not always align neatly with existing subsidy frameworks. As a result, franchisees must rely heavily on parental fees, which are often difficult to collect consistently in low-income communities.

This financial situation reflects a broader issue faced by organisations like SmartStart that serve low-income communities. Limited fees hinder their ability to achieve financial sustainability (McCann, 2022). They cannot improve early learning outcomes without support from other sectors. Therefore, collaborations and pooling of resources, expertise, and support within civil society become crucial for meaningful transformation and ensuring equal access to quality early learning opportunities for all children, especially those from low-income communities.

Building solid linkages with the government, civil society, long-term funders, and communities is the main goal of SmartStart's strategy (SmartStart, 2020). These stakeholders can have a bigger influence when they collaborate rather than when they act alone (SmartStart, 2024). To create an integrated system where government investment in early learning generates significant returns, SmartStart's mission is to support government initiatives rather than undermine them (Hickman, 2020). SmartStart provides structured support to help practitioners meet compliance demands, including assistance with registration and delivery of standardised curriculum training. Yet despite this support, many franchisees still encounter regulatory barriers beyond the organisation's capacity to address such as municipal zoning issues and unclear departmental feedback loops (SmartStart, 2020).

SmartStart understands the importance of involving parents and caregivers and has launched campaigns to raise awareness among parents and create demand for high-quality early learning programmes (SmartStart, 2024). One notable initiative was a national outdoor media campaign, one of the largest in South Africa, which aimed to highlight the transformative power of early childhood development. These efforts demonstrate that SmartStart recognises that achieving widespread impact involves not only expanding services but also fostering community demand for quality early learning.

Another key aspect of SmartStart's model is its focus on community- and home-based programmes, which improve accessibility. By locating programmes within communities, the need for children to travel long distances to centres is reduced (Dawes et al, 2020). SmartStart recognises the gendered impact of its work and its potential role in promoting women's participation in the labour market. However, while the organisation creates jobs for women, its ability to reduce their childcare responsibilities and enable them to enter the workforce may be limited (McCann, 2022).

3.4 The Social Employment Fund: A Broader Approach to Community Development

The Social Employment Fund (SEF) was introduced as part of the Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES), which was launched by the government in response to the economic fallout caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The PES, introduced in 2020, was initially conceived as a short-term intervention aimed at mitigating the immediate impact of the pandemic. It focused on creating temporary employment opportunities and supporting economic recovery. A critical aspect of the PES was its focus on urgent job creation to address the immediate aftermath of the crisis.

However, it quickly became evident that the scale and depth of South Africa's social and economic challenges required a more comprehensive, long-term solution. The short-term measures, although necessary, were insufficient to address the structural issues such as unemployment and inequality that were deeply embedded in the economy. While the PES had been primarily a short-term crisis response, the SEF aimed to establish a more sustainable model of social employment, addressing social challenges through work for the common good.

A defining characteristic of the SEF is its management and delivery through the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC), a state-owned entity traditionally focused on economic development rather than social welfare. The decision to involve the IDC in the administration

of the SEF, instead of a traditional government ministry such as the Department of Public Works, marked a departure from previous public employment programmes, such as the EPWP and the CWP (National Treasury, 2024).

These programmes, which were traditionally run by government departments, were primarily focused on short-term employment in the public sector. By positioning the SEF within the IDC, the government signalled a shift towards a new model of public employment that integrates social employment into a broader developmental framework.

This shift also reflects an acknowledgment of the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in delivering social services. The SEF seeks to leverage the expertise and reach of CSOs through its Social Implementation Partner (SIP) model. Unlike previous public employment initiatives, which relied primarily on government-run agencies, the SIP model involves large non-profit organisations (NPOs) and civil society groups as the primary implementers of SEF projects. This arrangement allows partner organisations the flexibility to design initiatives that are tailored to the specific needs of the communities they serve, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all solution.

While the SEF is often associated with initiatives such as Early Childhood Development (ECD), it is important to note that the SEF does not focus exclusively on ECD. The SEF funds a broad category of social employment, defined as work for the common good. This flexible funding approach allows the SEF to address a variety of social needs across different sectors. ECD is one of the key areas that the SEF can support, but it is only one of many. The flexibility built into the SEF model means that partner NPOs (SIPs) are empowered to identify and address the most pressing social needs in their specific contexts, whether they relate to ECD, healthcare, community development, or other areas.

For instance, while some ECD centres may struggle with a shortage of qualified practitioners, others may face challenges such as insufficient infrastructure or a lack of helpers. The SEF's funding mechanisms allow for the addressing of these varied challenges, providing a holistic, needs-based approach to social employment (Industrial Development Corporation, 2024). This adaptability makes the SEF a dynamic tool for tackling a wide range of social issues.

Instead of direct government-led implementation, the SEF relies on Strategic Implementing Partners (SIPs), which are primarily large non-profit organisations (NPOs) and civil society groups. These organisations are tasked with implementing SEF programmes and creating meaningful employment opportunities in response to local social and economic needs.

The rationale behind this approach is that large CSOs, due to their established networks and experience, are better positioned to identify and address the specific needs of the communities they serve (Industrial Development Corporation, 2024). However, this approach raises important questions about the role of the state versus civil society in addressing systemic issues such as unemployment and poverty. By entrusting large civil society organisations with the implementation of these programmes rather than relying on government departments or smaller grassroots organisations, the SEF shifts responsibility away from traditional public-sector institutions.

Good examples of SIPs include Siyakholwa, a key organisation within the SEF framework, which, as discussed earlier, is also a SmartStart franchisor. Siyakholwa was able to create over 1,000 employment opportunities—a key criterion for SEF SIPs, ensuring that these partners are large enough to make a significant impact. Other notable SIPs include organisations like the National Arts Festival, which also play a substantial role in SEF’s broader employment creation and social development goals.



Figure 1: Overview of SEF Strategic Implementing Partners (SIPs)

Source: Industrial Development Corporation (IDC), 2024. Available at: <https://www-idc-co-za.b-cdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/SIPS-2024.jpg> [Accessed 10 January 2025].

This model underscores that the SEF is not only prioritising civil society organisations (CSOs) over government mechanisms but specifically focusing on large CSOs that can scale projects

and creating substantial employment opportunities, rather than relying on smaller, grassroots organisations with limited capacity.

The SEF's model is rooted in the principle of "social employment," which recognises that while there is a vast amount of socially beneficial work that needs to be done, the market fails to create enough employment opportunities. The fund supports work that serves the common good, funding part-time employment (16 hours per week) at a minimum wage across various (National Treasury, 2023). Although ECD is a significant area of investment for the SEF, it is not the fund's primary focus. Instead, SEF funding is directed toward a wide range of initiatives, including healthcare, education, environmental conservation, and food security (Stuart, 2022). This flexibility epitomises democratic embeddedness, where rather than a 'top-down' approach to setting priorities, the SIPs have the autonomy to design projects tailored to meet local needs. During its initial pilot phase from July 2022 to July 2023, the SEF successfully created 65,000 work opportunities, surpassing its original target of 50,000. This achievement was facilitated through collaboration with 27 SIPs, each responsible for creating a minimum of 1,000 jobs. The funding structure mandates that 80% of the budget is allocated to wages, ensuring that the primary beneficiaries are the workers themselves, while the remaining 20% covers non-wage costs, including training and administrative expenses. This model not only provides immediate economic relief to participants but also fosters community development by addressing critical local needs through the services rendered by these workers.

Based on the success of the pilot phase, the SEF transitioned into its second phase from August 2023 to April 2024, with a focus on scaling up its impact and broadening the scope of work opportunities (Grocott's Mail, 2024). During this expansion phase, SIPs placed a stronger emphasis on creating employment opportunities for young people, while continuing to address critical social and environmental challenges.

Through SEF-funded SIP initiatives, communities saw increased activity in waste management, infrastructure repair, and the establishment of food gardens, contributing to improved local services and environmental sustainability. The flexibility inherent in the SEF model exemplifies democratic embeddedness, enabling SIPs to design and implement projects according to local needs. Rather than a top-down approach, this decentralised method fosters coproduction and agency, as communities play an active role in shaping interventions that reflect their unique priorities.

By strengthening its partnerships with SIPs and increasing funding allocations, the SEF's second phase demonstrated how public employment initiatives can support sustainable community development while addressing unemployment. This phase also reinforced the value of a collaborative model in which government funding enables civil society organisations to drive localised, high-impact interventions.

The third phase of the SEF, which began in July 2024 and continues to the present, focuses on enhancing sustainability and long-term impact by deepening partnerships and refining project implementation strategies. One of the key developments in this phase has been the integration of innovative and environmentally sustainable practices. For example, some SIPs have introduced projects that produce building materials from recycled plastics and glass, which are then utilised in community improvement initiatives (National Treasury, 2024). This not only creates employment but also contributes to waste reduction and infrastructure development.

Throughout its implementation, the SEF has achieved milestones in promoting community well-being and indirectly benefiting ECD. Projects focusing on creating environments that are conducive to children's learning and development (Grocott's Mail, 2024). The involvement of arts organisations like the NAF has showcased the impact of creative industries in driving social change, employment, and community development.

3.5 The Role of Civil Society Organisations in Promoting ECD and Community Development in Makhanda

An important aspect of 'democratic embeddedness' is locality and community. Empowering communities necessitates a deep understanding of local contexts. In this section, the focus is on the small city of Makhanda. Although Makhanda was chosen for convenience, it serves as an insightful case study due to its strong civil society organisation (CSO) presence and the prominent role of the SEF in the area.

Education is a key aspect of Makhanda, with the Rhodes University, a campus of EastCape Midlands TVET College, private schools, and significant activity at the basic education level. Notably, GADRA is a significant player, contributing to community development and education initiatives (GADRA Education, 2024). GADRA, a Makhanda based non profit organisation founded in 1958, operates educational outreach programmes across Foundation and Intermediate Phases, provides second-chance matric support through the GADRA Matric School, and advocates for transformation in local public education. GADRA advances access, nurturing learner potential in under resourced schools through school partnerships and system

reform. The Rhodes University Centre for Social Development (CSD) is another important actor involved in ECD in the region. These organisations, along with others in the SEF framework, provide a rich network of community-driven development and social employment efforts in Makhanda.

This section focuses on how local organisations in Makhanda/Makana, such as the National Arts Festival (NAF), Awarenet, and the Grahamstown Feeding Association (GFA), play a crucial role in supporting ECD through the Social Employment Fund (SEF) while contributing to wider social and economic improvements.

The National Arts Festival (NAF) is one of South Africa's most prominent cultural festivals and a significant player in the local economy and community development. Beyond its role in promoting arts and culture, the NAF has partnered with the SEF to manage a substantial number of SEF workers. The NAF's connection to the SEF lies in its role as a Service Implementation Partner (SIP), which means it is responsible for managing and executing various community-driven projects in the region. The NAF employs hundreds of SEF participants, providing them with opportunities in diverse areas such as event coordination, public arts, and cultural initiatives. Importantly, NAF's work supports the local community, creating a direct link between arts and education, as it provides a platform for local artists and community members to engage in educational projects (Grocott's Mail, 2024).

Awarenet, an ICT-focused non-profit organisation based at the Joza Youth Hub in Makhanda, plays a pivotal role in implementing SEF initiatives through its collaboration with The Learning Trust, a designated SIP. Awarenet focuses on promoting digital literacy and skills development in the community. Through its leadership of a consortium of 19 NPOs, Awarenet employs 200 SEF participants in a variety of educational roles. These include after-school tutoring, coding and robotics training, classroom assistance, and facilitating educational playgroups. The work done by Awarenet and its partner organisations directly supports the early learning and developmental needs of children, offering skills training for young people that can later be applied in the ECD context (Grocott's Mail, 2024). By integrating technology and educational support, Awarenet helps bridge gaps in access to quality ECD services, particularly in underserved communities.

The Grahamstown Feeding Association (GFA), founded in 1999, is another vital organisation in the Makhanda area. Initially focused on addressing food insecurity, the GFA now provides a range of food items to thousands of residents, which include essential staples such as samp,

rice, and maize meal (Grocott's Mail, 2024). The association's contribution to ECD, while indirect, is critical: by ensuring that children have access to nutritious meals, the GFA helps foster an environment conducive to early learning.

Nutrition is a key determinant of cognitive development, and by addressing food insecurity, the Grahamstown Feeding Association (GFA) supports the foundation for healthy, effective early childhood education. Similarly, the Centre for Social Development (CSD) plays a crucial role in supporting young children's nutritional needs through its various ECD initiatives. While the GFA focuses primarily on food provision, the CSD integrates nutrition into its broader early learning and caregiver support programmes. The CSD's initiatives align with the SEF's broader objectives by enhancing community-based support for ECD, though it does not operate as a direct SIP under the SEF. This further demonstrates how multiple civil society organisations contribute to strengthening early learning environments in Makhanda.

These organisations, NAF, CSD, Awarenet, and GFA, work synergistically within the SEF framework to improve the lives of children in Makhanda, directly and indirectly supporting ECD outcomes. The SEF's model allows for community-driven projects that focus on local needs, with the SIPs ensuring that the programmes are tailored to the specific context of the community. The collaborative efforts of the NAF, Awarenet, and the GFA show that ECD models in South Africa need not be limited to traditional education systems; they can extend into other sectors such as the arts, ICT, and community welfare, creating holistic and sustainable approaches to early childhood development.

The integration of these civil society organisations into the SEF's framework highlights the importance of a community-based approach to ECD. Rather than focusing solely on institution-based early education, these organisations demonstrate that ECD is inherently linked to broader community development, including cultural enrichment, nutrition, and skills training. This model shows the potential for scalable and sustainable ECD interventions that can address multiple systemic challenges (National Development Agency, 2016).

3.6 Concluding Thoughts on SmartStart and SEF in Enhancing ECD

While SmartStart and the SEF are distinct initiatives in South Africa, they both aim to improve ECD services through community involvement and local job creation. However, there remains significant potential for synergy between the two. Both share common goals of promoting sustainable development and addressing the fragmented nature of South Africa's ECD system. The following section will briefly explore the possibilities for integrating these initiatives,

while the subsequent chapter (Chapter 5) will focus on the themes to evaluate how such integration could work in practice.

SmartStart's model of empowering local entrepreneurs to deliver early learning services aligns with SEF's broader goal of creating socially valuable jobs. By theoretically integrating SmartStart's training programmes with SEF's funding and employment structures, it is possible to envision a system where the reach of SmartStart is expanded, and families benefit from a broader spectrum of services, including health, nutrition, and education. However, the practical application of such integration will require significant coordination among various stakeholders and overcoming logistical and funding challenges.

In practice, the integration of SmartStart and SEF must address the challenges of fragmented ECD services, foster stronger partnerships with civil society organisations, and ensure the sustainability of these community-driven models. Coordination among stakeholders, including government departments, local NGOs, and other community-based organisations, is critical to avoid duplication of efforts and ensure that resources are effectively utilised.

As we delve deeper into the themes of funding challenges, regulatory barriers, and state-community relationships in Chapter 5, the potential for this democratic SmartStart and SEF model will be explored through interviews with key stakeholders. These themes will provide a foundation for understanding the possibilities and limitations of such integration, offering a clearer path forward for policy recommendations and practical implementation.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the research strategy and technique used in this chapter to accomplish the goals outlined in Chapter 1 (Section 1.2). The main research focus is evaluating the potential of the Social Employment Fund (SEF) and SmartStart to transform Early Childhood Development (ECD) provision in South Africa, where under-provision and low employment levels are major challenges. Based on the idea of democratic embeddedness, the study investigates whether collaboration with civil society organisations can improve ECD outcomes, regardless of whether services are delivered by the state, civil society, or the private sector. The research seeks to address a critical gap in understanding how such partnerships can enhance service delivery, improve outcomes, and address the challenges of access and quality in ECD.

The chosen methodology adopts a qualitative approach, as this is best suited to exploring the complexities of state-CS partnerships. This involves collecting primary data through interviews with key stakeholders and analysing secondary sources such as policy documents and reports. These methods allow for a detailed examination of the mechanisms, challenges, and successes, thereby offering insights into their transformative potential.

Section 4.2 explains the research design, including the rationale for using qualitative methods and the selection of case studies. It also explains why the main method of gathering data was decided to be in-depth, semi-structured interviews with management-level stakeholders. The application of the study design is covered in Section 4.3, which includes information on the interviewing process, sample methods, and the use of thematic analysis. Section 4.4 concludes the chapter by summarising the methodological approach and its alignment with the study's objectives.

4.2 Research Design

The research started with a general interest in ECD and the question of why there are still large gaps in ECD provision despite a lot of government attention. A thorough review of published and grey literature was conducted to target the specific research topics and close the research gap. This procedure demonstrated that although there is data on enrolment rates and the effects of ECD programmes, the scalability of these programmes is a crucial obstacle (Starr, 2014). Therefore, the goal of the study was to determine why scaling has not reached the expected level.

The more complicated problem of scalability cannot be adequately explained by quantitative approaches, even though they offer insights into programme impacts and enrolment figures. Regarding this challenge, qualitative methods were deemed necessary because they allow for an in-depth exploration of the systemic barriers hindering the expansion of ECD programmes (McCann, 2022; Tracy, 2019). Qualitative research helps uncover the underlying reasons behind economic behaviours and allows for a richer context that numerical data alone cannot provide (Starr, 2014).

A case study approach was chosen to provide a focused, in-depth analysis of the factors influencing ECD scalability. Unlike broad, representative sampling, this approach allows for purposive sampling, where participants are selected based on their expertise and ability to provide rich, contextual insights. The study primarily focuses on the Eastern Cape, particularly Makana, due to its distinct socio-economic challenges and the presence of key ECD interventions such as SmartStart and the Social Employment Fund (SEF). This regional focus enables a detailed examination of how policy and civil society interact in a specific local context, offering insights that may be applicable to broader national discussions.

The study adopts a meso-level focus, concentrating on management-level stakeholders rather than frontline practitioners. This decision was driven by the need to understand structural and systemic barriers to scalability. While practitioners can provide valuable insights into daily operations, those in management positions are better positioned to comment on funding mechanisms, policy constraints, and strategic challenges at an organisational level (McCann, 2022). Their perspectives offer a broader view of the institutional dynamics shaping ECD expansion efforts.

To collect data, semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method, rather than structured surveys or open-ended questionnaires. Interviews provide the flexibility needed to explore complex themes in depth while allowing participants to elaborate on key issues. This approach ensures that critical nuances, such as informal partnerships, regulatory hurdles, and funding constraints, are captured more effectively than would be possible through written responses (Milena et al., 2008).

The primary data collection in this study generated insights not readily available in existing literature. By interviewing managers from SEF and SmartStart, along with representatives from their partner organisations, the research captured meso-level perspectives on implementation challenges, governance dynamics, and the interface between civil society and the state in ECD

provision. These findings complement and extend the existing secondary literature by providing an organisational vantage point that highlights system-level limitations and innovations from the perspective of actors who support and structure ECD delivery.

A range of analytical techniques was considered, including framework analysis, content analysis, and narrative analysis. However, thematic analysis, as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was ultimately chosen due to its balance between analytical rigor and exploratory flexibility. Unlike framework analysis, which applies predefined categories that may constrain emergent findings (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), thematic analysis allows themes to develop naturally from the data. Similarly, content analysis, which focuses on word frequency, was deemed too reductionist to capture the systemic complexities of ECD (Krippendorff, 2018). Narrative analysis, while valuable for examining individual participant trajectories, was not prioritised, as the study sought to uncover thematic patterns rather than personal storytelling.

To ensure the credibility and dependability of the findings, several measures were taken. Triangulation was used by gathering data from multiple sources—including SmartStart franchisors, SEF SIPs, and an outsider perspective from a prominent Makhanda NPO, heavily involved in basic education but not directly engaged in ECD or the focal institutions, plays a significant role in the local education landscape. While its work does not focus on early childhood development, to cross-validate insights and reduce biases. The study prioritises rich, thick descriptions from experienced stakeholders, ensuring that findings reflect nuanced realities rather than abstract theoretical assumptions.

Researcher positionality was considered throughout the research process, with interview transcripts and emerging themes being reviewed to enhance reliability. While the study is context-specific, its transferability is strengthened by identifying broader structural challenges and enablers of ECD scalability that may be relevant beyond the Eastern Cape. These measures collectively enhance the validity of the case study approach, ensuring that findings are both rigorous and applicable to discussions on ECD scalability in South Africa.

4.3 Implementing the research design

Purposive sampling was used in this study to ensure that selected organisations and individuals were directly relevant to the research objectives. This approach allowed for the intentional selection of participants with substantial expertise and experience in ECD service provision at the meso level. Saturation sampling was also applied, ensuring that interviews continued until no new themes emerged, strengthening the validity of the findings (Klas & Leeper, 2019).

The SEF and SmartStart were chosen due to their distinctive roles in addressing ECD challenges and scalability within South Africa's socio-political landscape. Within these ecosystems, SmartStart franchisors and SEF Strategic Implementing Partners (SIPs) were prioritised, as they offer crucial insights into the operational, financial, and policy-related factors shaping ECD service delivery.

An outsider organisation as discussed above, was included to provide an informed outsider perspective from a well-placed civil society organisation (CSO) operating within the broader basic education space. This inclusion helps contextualise ECD within the wider educational pipeline, highlighting systemic challenges and opportunities for integration.

Candidates were selected based on their leadership positions, professional expertise, and involvement in the administration of ECD programmes, ensuring access to valuable insights on funding mechanisms, regulatory frameworks, and implementation challenges. The sampling process followed a structured approach. Initial contact was made with a well-placed individual within each organisation, who then identified the relevant gatekeeper responsible for granting research approval.

Once approval was obtained, potential interviewees were identified based on their roles and expertise, and they were contacted in accordance with Rhodes University's ethical protocols. To ensure sample validity, a diverse range of perspectives was included, encompassing programme administrators, civil society leaders, and key decision-makers in the ECD sector. Saturation sampling was employed, meaning interviews continued until no new themes emerged, ensuring the data was comprehensive and reflective of systemic constraints and opportunities for scaling ECD initiatives (Kallio et al., 2016). This approach strengthened the credibility and reliability of the findings, providing a well-rounded understanding of the ECD landscape.

4.3.1 Interview Approach and Technique

Since the semi-structured interview style allowed for flexibility while keeping a focus on predetermined research aims, it was selected to complement the exploratory nature of the study (Kallio et al., 2016). Provisional themes found during the literature review phase, such as the scalability of ECD programmes, funding sources, the responsibilities of government and civil society in the sector and challenges in a potential mode of delivery where government works with civil society, guided the interview schedule (see Appendix 3). However, the semi-

structured framework allowed themes to develop naturally during the interviews, acknowledging that qualitative research frequently yields unexpected insights (Noor, 2008).

Obtaining authorisation from gatekeepers, like administrators or organisational leaders, to access participants was the first step in organising the interviews. This required open and honest communication regarding the goals of the study as well as ethical issues, such as informed consent protocols. To guarantee transparency and give them time to prepare, prospective respondents were given comprehensive information about the study, including the interview themes (questions). By providing confidentiality, outlining the rationale behind interview recording, and restating the voluntary nature of participation prior to each interview, ethical considerations were given top priority (Snyder, 2019).

To build rapport and get background information about the participant's work and experience in the ECD sector, the interviews started with an introductory chat. This functioned as an icebreaker and allowed the conversation to flow naturally into the core topics. Open-ended questions were used to explore participants' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities for scaling ECD programmes, with follow-up questions probing deeper into specific issues as they arose (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021). The idea was to allow interviewees to talk, rather than to ask them pre-determined questions which might influence their answers unduly while ensuring the interview did cover the main provisional themes.

4.3.2 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following a structured and systematic approach to ensure rigor in identifying key themes. The process began with manually transcribing all interviews, allowing for close engagement with the data and an initial understanding of emerging patterns (Ruslin et al., 2022). Each interview was then summarised according to provisional themes, which were developed based on the research questions and initial insights from early interviews (Barriball and While, 1994). Given the open-ended nature of the interviews, this summarisation required significant effort, as participants often spoke broadly rather than adhering strictly to predefined themes.

To organise and systematically compare responses, the summarised material was arranged in tabular form, categorising data by interviewee and provisional themes (see Appendix 4). This allowed for a clearer assessment of patterns across different stakeholders and facilitated cross-referencing of perspectives. The final stage involved a comprehensive analysis, where provisional themes were assessed for consistency across interviews. This included evaluating

the extent to which themes were supported and identifying areas of unanimity or divergence among participants. Themes that were weakly supported or did not capture the complexity of the findings were modified or discarded, while new themes that emerged from the data were incorporated.

This process ensured that the analysis was both flexible and systematic, allowing the research to capture nuanced insights into the scalability of ECD programmes, particularly in relation to the roles of government and civil society. The structured thematic coding process not only provided clarity in presenting the findings but also strengthened the validity and reliability of the study's conclusions.

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study, focusing on the key themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the interviews. The analysis draws exclusively from the interviews conducted with representatives from the two focal institutions (SEF and SmartStart) as well as other relevant organisations involved in ECD in South Africa. While Chapter 3 presents the background and structural aspects of SmartStart and SEF, this chapter focuses on empirical insights drawn from stakeholder interviews.

To preserve confidentiality, the real names of interviewees are replaced with pseudonyms. Only the two focal institutions, SEF and SmartStart, are named explicitly. Other institutions discussed in the study are referred to as Institution A, B, C, and D. Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix 4 provide detailed descriptions of these institutions, as well as the roles of the interviewees within their respective organisations. This ensures that while the identities of the participants are kept anonymous, the context of their contributions remains clear and relevant to the study.

The chapter is organised around the main themes that emerged from the literature review and informed the questionnaire (Appendix 3), modified by the thematic analysis (Appendix 4). The findings are structured according to these themes, which were derived from the interviews conducted with stakeholders involved in ECD initiatives in South Africa.

Section 5.2 examines the existing system of Early Childhood Development (ECD) delivery in South Africa, providing a baseline understanding of its state before the interventions by the SEF and SmartStart. This section outlines the challenges and gaps within the system as identified by interviewees, offering insight into the historical and operational context.

Section 5.3 then focuses on the interventions introduced by SEF and SmartStart, analysing their effectiveness in addressing the gaps identified in the existing system. This section highlights both the successes and limitations of these initiatives as they attempt to improve the accessibility and quality of ECD services.

Section 5.4 explores the potential of a democratically embedded model of delivery, drawing on the thematic analysis of interviews with key stakeholders. This section emphasises the opportunities and challenges associated with a decentralised, community-driven approach to ECD, as identified by the interviewees.

Through this discussion, the chapter provides a critical assessment of the gaps in ECD service provision, the role of alternative delivery models, and the broader implications for social policy. The findings inform the concluding chapter, where recommendations for strengthening ECD policy and practice are proposed.

5.2 State of ECD delivery in South Africa: existing system before SEF and SmartStart interventions

The South African ECD landscape remains marked by deep inequalities, reflecting broader societal challenges. Despite various policy initiatives, such as the National Development Plan (NDP) and targeted ECD frameworks, persistent gaps in service delivery undermine efforts to achieve universal, quality ECD. Although ECD is acknowledged within the social policy framework, it often lacks the comprehensive support required to make a tangible difference. Fragmentation across departments and levels of government perpetuates inefficiencies, resulting in large numbers of children missing out on adequate ECD services.

Implementation of policies often falls short due to a range of factors, including limited resources and administrative challenges. Resource allocation is disproportionately skewed toward urban areas, leaving rural and low-income communities without sufficient support. Rural ECD centres face significant challenges, including poor infrastructure, a lack of educational materials, and inadequate access to trained practitioners. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive training for ECD practitioners, particularly in underserved areas, exacerbates the inequities within the system.

The need for consistent, reliable funding to sustain ECD initiatives is a central theme voiced by several stakeholders. Chris emphasised the critical role of funding in ensuring continuity, stating, "Without steady funding, it's difficult to keep these programmes running. Civil society can only do so much without resources." A reliable stream of state support would help bridge the gap in low-income communities, providing better access to ECD services.

However, funding is often inconsistent, and civil society organisations are left to fill the void, despite limited resources. Chipso stressed that, rather than focusing solely on infrastructure expansion, funding should also prioritise community-based solutions that leverage local resources. This shift would enable more sustainable models for ECD, where communities, especially those in rural areas, can take active roles in their own development. By recognising homes and local environments as integral parts of the ECD system, communities would not be seen as passive recipients of services but as active contributors.

Regulatory challenges further complicate the situation. Chris noted that many community-based organisations face unclear and unrealistic regulations, particularly in terms of licensing requirements. For example, the infrastructural standards demanded of ECD centres are often unattainable for community-based initiatives operating in informal or resource-poor settings. Similarly, Chipso critiqued the state's focus on infrastructure development, which fails to acknowledge the potential of local agents, like parents and caregivers, in the ECD process. Instead of filling gaps in infrastructure, she argued, the state should focus on empowering communities and transforming the relationship between the state and citizens, viewing them as partners rather than passive beneficiaries. By doing so, the state could enhance collaboration with local communities and support more tailored and flexible ECD solutions.

Chris and other participants, including Jordan and Thabo, highlighted the bureaucratic hurdles that prevent smaller, community-based ECD programmes from meeting state requirements. The process for registering centres is often long and cumbersome, and when local programmes do meet regulatory standards, it is typically done through an emphasis on paperwork rather than a focus on the actual quality of education or care. This mismatch between the regulatory framework and the reality on the ground makes it difficult for small, local initiatives to thrive. In contrast, larger, state-run centres tend to be more compliant with bureaucratic standards but often lack the flexibility and community-specific insights necessary to address the unique needs of underserved areas.

The relationship between the state and community-based organisations (CBOs) is frequently described as distant and transactional. While some progress has been made in recognising the role of civil society, this engagement is often shallow, with CBOs viewed primarily as service providers rather than genuine partners in policy development. The tension between the top-down approach of the state and the local, bottom-up initiatives of civil society organisations was echoed by multiple participants, including Taylor, who emphasised the need for the state to recognise communities not as burdens but as vital stakeholders in the development process. By linking social employment to broader industrial policy, Taylor suggested, the state could foster more sustainable funding structures for initiatives like ECD that are less reliant on short-term funding sources and more aligned with long-term development goals.

While the state has made strides in recognising the importance of civil society, the relationship remains fraught with challenges. Morgan pointed out that civil society organisations often face insufficient support from the state, despite their critical role in addressing gaps left by formal

ECD programmes. This disconnect is evident in the difficulty CSOs experience in accessing stable funding, navigating complex regulatory frameworks, and securing long-term sustainability. However, the agency of civil society cannot be underestimated. Despite these challenges, organisations like those represented in the interviews demonstrate an impressive ability to adapt to local contexts, mobilise resources, and fill in the gaps left by the formal state system.

The interviews revealed that civil society organisations offer alternative funding pathways and innovative solutions. These organisations are crucial in bridging the gaps in the current system, but there are still doubts about their ability to scale and address systemic issues without substantial changes in government policies. The existing approach to regulation, while well-intentioned, often proves to be an obstacle rather than a support mechanism for local organisations. A shift toward more flexible, community-driven models could transform the ECD landscape in South Africa, enabling a more sustainable, equitable, and locally tailored approach to early childhood education.

Many emphasised how the current system is marked by gaps in both coverage and quality, particularly in underserved communities. Interviewees pointed to the reliance on non-state actors, such as civil society organisations, to fill the void left by the state, especially in rural or informal settings. However, the broader picture of the state's role remains one of limited support, with civil society often stepping in due to the state's inability to consistently deliver services. While there is a recognition that the state has made efforts to address some of these issues, such as through policy frameworks, these are often seen as insufficient when compared to the scale of the need on the ground.

5.3 SmartStart and SEF: Platforms and Funding Levels

5.3.1 SmartStart

A key theme emerging from the literature review (Chapters 2 and 3) is the role of social franchise models in expanding early childhood development (ECD) access in South Africa. SmartStart exemplifies this approach. This theme directly relates to Question 3 in Appendix 3, which explores the effectiveness and limitations of SmartStart in ECD provision.

Interviewees consistently referenced SmartStart's social franchise structure and decentralised design as key enablers of scale. This approach prioritises rapid scalability, allowing SmartStart to reach children who might otherwise lack access to structured early learning environments.

The model aligns with government ECD priorities but remains operationally independent, enabling adaptability to local needs (Dawes et al., 2020).

Interviews with key stakeholders reinforced SmartStart's role in filling gaps left by the government's fragmented ECD system. Chris, a member of the SmartStart management team emphasised the initiative's asset-based approach, leveraging community resources rather than costly infrastructure. Chipso, another team member, highlighted the programme's reliance on civil society partnerships to expand access. Meanwhile, Jordan, a third member, noted that SmartStart has helped formalise informal ECD settings by assisting with registration and compliance with national standards. Chipso and Morgan from an education background raised concerns about the uncertainty of donor-dependent funding and the need for long-term government support. Similarly, Taylor from the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) discussed bureaucratic hurdles in accessing public funding, limiting SmartStart's ability to scale sustainably.

Another recurring concern in both literature and interviews are the adequacy of training for SmartStart practitioners. The programme's rapid scalability relies on a streamlined training model, raising questions about quality assurance (Snelling & Horler, 2020). Kate, Coordinator for Community-Centred Programme at organisation C, acknowledged that while SmartStart lowers barriers to entry into the ECD sector, its training may not be sufficient for ensuring long-term educational impact. George from IDC's Social Employment Fund (SEF) suggested that SmartStart's approach aligns with broader community-driven ECD strategies but requires additional support structures to maintain quality.

SmartStart's decentralised structure reduces the need for costly infrastructure while allowing for flexible implementation in underserved communities (Feza & Chiphambo, 2022). Interviews confirmed this adaptability, with Alex, a SmartStart programme leader, emphasising how the model creates employment for caregivers while providing crucial early learning access in marginalised areas. However, there remains debate over whether such models should complement or replace state-led ECD provision in the long term.

Ultimately, the insights from stakeholders highlight the transformative potential of SmartStart's model. By integrating employment creation with community-based early learning, it offers an alternative approach to scaling ECD in South Africa. However, there are sustainability concerns, particularly around funding and training quality must be addressed to ensure long-term impact (see Appendix 4).

Interviewees highlighted how the programme empowers local practitioners, fosters community engagement, and formalises informal ECD settings. These insights reinforce findings from the literature (Hickman, 2014; Dawes et al., 2020) on the potential of social franchise models to enhance early learning opportunities.

Chipo emphasised the model's ability to empower local communities, particularly through partnerships with civil society organisations. She explained, "SmartStart fills critical gaps in the system by providing resources and training to practitioners who may not have formal qualifications. This builds capacity where it is needed most." By equipping local practitioners with practical tools and support, SmartStart has become a sustainable model for ECD delivery. Chipo also noted its potential to extend beyond formal ECD centres, particularly in informal settings that often lack early learning opportunities.

Jordan highlighted the transformative potential of SmartStart in elevating the quality of ECD provision across underserved areas. She observed, "SmartStart formalises informal settings, helping centres register and comply with national standards. This not only improves the quality of education but also creates a framework for broader systemic change." Jordan emphasised that SmartStart's scalable, community-based model offers an example of how civil society can drive systemic transformation by integrating with government initiatives.

Alex described the initiative's impact on rural and low-income communities, stating, "SmartStart provides jobs for mothers while simultaneously addressing the developmental needs of children in these areas." He stressed that by bypassing the need for traditional infrastructure, the programme has made early learning accessible to children who would otherwise be excluded due to geographic or socio-economic barriers.

The community-centred nature of SmartStart was another recurring theme. George emphasised the importance of local engagement, observing, "By employing community members as caregivers and educators, SmartStart fosters local ownership and provides job opportunities.

This approach addresses both ECD gaps and unemployment." He also noted the initiative's success in reaching rural areas where public services are limited, suggesting that its partnerships with civil society organisations could further scale access to quality early learning.

Participants viewed that at the core of SmartStart's model is its asset-based approach, which leverages existing community resources to provide scalable solutions for early learning. This approach not only emphasises the potential of local assets but also fosters greater community

involvement in ECD delivery. However, despite its potential, several concerns were raised. Issues related to funding, regulatory barriers, and practitioner readiness were highlighted as challenges that may hinder the full implementation of SmartStart's model. These challenges underscore the need for ongoing support and structural adjustments to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of the initiative.

This asset-based approach is central to the broader community mobilisation in South Africa. As discussed earlier (Chapter 3, p.37), SmartStart's model aligns with the concept of 'democratic embeddedness,' where local actors are empowered to contribute meaningfully to public goods such as ECD. The asset-based model used by SmartStart builds on existing resources, from community halls to informal networks, which were underutilised but recognised by participants as crucial assets.

Similarly, other interviewees, like Kate, noted how community assets, such as local halls, are often not fully utilised. These resources can be mobilised through initiatives, which helps to engage local labour and provide the necessary support to ensure these resources are used effectively. This process of mobilising existing community assets aligns with SmartStart's approach and reinforces the importance of community-driven solutions to the ECD crisis.

As Chris aptly summarised, "SmartStart could redefine what quality ECD looks like, aligning it with the realities of South African communities." As Table 3 in Appendix 4 shows, this idea emerged as a prominent theme across multiple interviews. It was particularly emphasised by the SmartStart interviewee, who highlighted how the initiative's flexibility allows it to tailor ECD solutions to local needs, thus reshaping the conventional understanding of quality early childhood education in South Africa.

5.3.2 Social Employment Fund (SEF)

The SEF, a central part of South Africa's broader employment stimulus initiative, has played a crucial role in addressing unemployment while fostering community development, particularly within the ECD sector. This initiative employs community members in a range of roles, such as classroom assistants, nutritional aides, and infrastructure maintenance personnel, thereby directly impacting ECD services, especially in underserved regions (Industrial Development Corporation, 2024). While the SEF's broader mandate allows it to address multiple social needs simultaneously, including food security and youth employment, its specific impact on ECD provision is evident in how it empowers local communities and creates a sustainable workforce for early learning initiatives.

The SEF's integration with CSOs, such as SmartStart, has shown considerable promise in addressing the barriers to ECD service delivery. Participants in SEF-supported programmes emphasised that this collaboration has been pivotal in reaching underserved communities and providing critical support to informal ECD centres. As Chris noted, the SEF has helped highlight the often-overlooked importance of supporting women's labour in South Africa, especially in the ECD space. This focus on equitable support aligns with addressing systemic inequities and indirectly enhances the quality of early learning through increased practitioner support (Social Employment Fund, 2023).

The interviews presented here are from Table 4 in Appendix 4 and Question 4 in Appendix 3, was the theme which offer detailed insights into SEF practices and community engagement. Chris proposed that SEF could leverage CSOs as intermediaries, such as SmartStart, to distribute subsidies more effectively to practitioners, particularly in informal settings. This suggestion highlights an ongoing challenge: while the SEF does provide employment-focused stipends, government systems have often struggled with direct payouts, particularly in rural areas. Chipso, in turn, highlighted how SEF has empowered previously unemployed individuals by providing not only financial stability but also the skills and confidence to lead ECD sessions. This transformation reinforces the value of community-based human resources and suggests that with further support, SEF could foster more sustainable and locally driven ECD models.

Jordan's response emphasised the SEF's potential to expand ECD access in rural and underserved areas, where traditional centres are scarce. He envisioned the SEF as a scalable model for aligning national policy goals with community-driven implementation. This vision is reflected in SEF's decentralised approach, which Alex described as a means of fostering local collaboration while mitigating bureaucratic hurdles. By involving local organisations and practitioners, SEF has the flexibility to adapt to specific community needs, improving both reach and effectiveness.

One of the most significant potential benefits of SEF, as indicated by participants like Thabo and George, is its ability to support informal ECD practitioners, particularly in areas where government infrastructure is limited. Thabo observed that SEF's funding has stabilised informal ECD centres by ensuring that practitioners, who often face inconsistent parental payments, can continue delivering early learning services.

This stability is crucial for sustaining ECD provision in resource-constrained environments, particularly in rural areas like Makhanda, as Kate highlighted. The funding provided by SEF,

which allowed the addition of 50 participants per phase, has notably improved service delivery, contributing to the success of programmes such as toy libraries and play-based learning initiatives.

However, the SEF's short-term engagement model—typically lasting 10 months—poses challenges for long-term sustainability. Samantha noted that while participants were generally aware of the temporary nature of their contracts, there was concern over the potential attrition in the workforce due to the lack of job security. To address these challenges, Samantha suggested that SEF could benefit from expanding its partnerships with larger organisations and integrating more robust systems for programme continuation. She also highlighted the government's increasing recognition of the role of CSOs, which could enable more comprehensive collaboration, potentially leading to a more sustainable long-term model.

Ethan's perspective reinforced the SEF's transformative potential, especially for marginalised communities. With over 55,000 participants employed monthly, SEF has created significant social impact by providing reliable income and skill development, thereby helping to reduce unemployment in sectors that have historically been neglected by the government. However, as George and Taylor pointed out, for SEF to scale effectively, it must continue to navigate the regulatory frameworks set by the government while ensuring that local needs are adequately met. This balance between regulatory alignment and local flexibility is crucial for maximising the programme's impact on ECD and community development.

The SEF has demonstrated significant promise in addressing gaps in South Africa's ECD landscape by empowering local practitioners and enhancing community-driven solutions. Its ability to leverage partnerships, improve access to early learning, and provide sustainable employment opportunities has been highlighted in the feedback from interview participants. Nonetheless, for SEF to realise its full potential, it must overcome challenges such as regulatory constraints and short-term funding cycles and strengthen its collaborations with CSOs and government agencies. If these hurdles can be addressed, the SEF could serve as a scalable model for integrating social employment with ECD provision, ensuring that more children across South Africa have access to quality early learning opportunities.

5.4 Collaboration with Civil Society, Policy Advocacy and challenges in ECD provision

The integration of civil society organisations (CSOs) into the delivery of ECD services is becoming increasingly recognised as a vital mechanism for expanding access to quality

education, especially in marginalised areas. This approach, however, involves a nuanced understanding of collaboration, advocacy, and the challenges faced by both state and non-state actors in improving the ECD landscape in South Africa. The data from Table 5 in Appendix 4 highlights the potential for innovative delivery models, particularly through partnerships between the state and civil society, alongside a growing emphasis on advocacy efforts that aim to reshape policies and secure sustainable support for ECD. The theme of the questions is from Question 5 and 6 from Appendix 3.

A significant theme across the responses was the recognition of the value of partnerships between the state and civil society organisations in providing ECD services. As Chris notes, these collaborations are especially important in sectors like ECD and social employment. He emphasises that even modest investments can yield substantial returns when properly allocated.

However, he stresses that developing effective systems requires time, testing, and flexibility, particularly in addressing issues related to infrastructure and system design. Similarly, Chipso sees community-driven models, like SmartStart and SEF, to fill critical gaps in ECD provision, particularly in underserved areas. She underscores the importance of local ownership and community involvement to ensure these models' sustainability and impact.

Jordan highlights the franchise model of SmartStart as an effective method for scaling ECD services in South Africa, especially in neglected communities. She views the SEF as instrumental not only for addressing early learning needs but also for generating employment opportunities. These local investments create positive economic ripples, further enhancing community capacity. Alex notes that empowering communities, rather than solely depending on infrastructure development or grants, offers long-term, sustainable solutions. However, he also emphasises that the variability in government policy implementation presents challenges in creating uniform, effective partnerships at the local level.

George and Thabo both draw attention to the advantages that CSOs bring to the table, including innovation, flexibility, and proximity to the communities they serve. However, they acknowledge that these benefits are often stifled by fragmented coordination and insufficient funding. For CSOs to thrive in these collaborative roles, they need stable and predictable funding, which can be achieved through strong advocacy efforts aimed at ensuring sustainable support from both the government and private sectors.

The advocacy efforts mentioned by participants in the study focus on shifting policy priorities towards more sustainable and inclusive ECD practices. Chris advocates for framing ECD not

merely as an educational issue but as part of broader community well-being. He suggests using relatable themes like “childhood” and “community development” to help build demand for ECD services in ways that resonate with parents and local communities. This approach would also serve to highlight the economic and social benefits of investing in early childhood education, making it more compelling for policymakers.

Chipo emphasises the need for policy changes that recognise the importance of non-centre-based ECD models. She points out that current policy focuses too much on centre-based models, which are often inaccessible to children in rural and underserved areas. She also advocates for greater investment in marginalised communities to reduce systemic inequalities and create more equitable opportunities for young children. This sentiment is echoed by Jordan, who calls for more targeted funding to scale community-driven ECD models like SmartStart and SEF. Her advocacy includes aligning ECD policy with broader national development goals, which would strengthen the integration of ECD into larger socio-economic strategies.

In line with this, George emphasises that advocacy should not only focus on funding but also on ensuring the right policy frameworks to assess and sustain the impact of civil society partnerships. Effective policy advocacy can ensure that civil society organisations have the necessary training and resources to collaborate with the state, maximising the reach and effectiveness of their programmes. He suggests focusing on long-term goals, such as reducing unemployment through social employment and improving community outcomes by integrating CSOs into development strategies.

Thabo adds that advocacy efforts should address the specific needs of informal ECD providers, who face unique challenges such as lack of infrastructure, qualified personnel, and regulatory clarity. He recommends engaging communities directly to change perceptions about the importance of ECD, fostering greater awareness and involvement in local programmes.

Similarly, Kate advocates for the development of enforceable quality standards for ECD programmes led by CSOs, ensuring that all programmes, regardless of their operational model, maintain a high level of service.

Samantha emphasises that although the state is becoming more receptive to civil society's role in ECD, there is still a significant gap in policy support. She advocates for long-term, stable funding and the creation of policies that ensure the retention of skilled ECD workers. Currently, the sector's reliance on short-term contracts undermines sustainability, and without long-term commitments, scaling efforts are likely to fall short.

Despite the potential for collaboration and advocacy, several challenges persist. Participants pointed to issues such as insufficient funding, lack of infrastructure, and the challenges of working with non-qualified workers in informal settings. George and Larry both stressed that bureaucratic hurdles and fragmented governance structures impede the efficient delivery of services and the scaling of innovative models. Thabo and Ethan highlighted the difficulty in integrating ECD services with broader community development initiatives, often due to the siloed nature of programmes and lack of cross-sector coordination.

Ethan further discusses how SEF's use of non-specialised workers, such as helpers rather than fully qualified teachers, could be a game-changer for ECD delivery. However, he stresses that policy support is needed to validate these models as sustainable long-term solutions rather than temporary fixes. Similarly, Taylor mentions that research is needed to showcase the social and economic benefits of prioritising early childhood education, as policymakers often require simplified and actionable insights to drive change.

The mode of delivery and policy advocacy themes discussed by the participants in this study emphasise the potential for civil society to play a pivotal role in improving ECD outcomes. However, for these initiatives to thrive, significant challenges need to be addressed, including funding shortages, fragmented policy implementation, and the lack of support for community-driven models. Advocacy efforts must focus on creating policy frameworks that support these models, ensuring the sustainability of ECD initiatives, and fostering collaboration between government and civil society to build a more inclusive and effective early childhood education system.

5.5 Summary of Main Themes

5.5.1 Funding Challenges

Funding emerged as a critical theme across participant interviews, highlighting its pivotal role in sustaining Early Childhood Development (ECD) initiatives. Chris emphasised the importance of consistent state funding, stating that CSOs cannot maintain programmes effectively without stable financial support. He underscored how steady funding would enhance access for low-income communities, a sentiment echoed by Chipso, who warned against "stop-start approaches" that undermine both practitioners and the communities they serve. Chipso noted the reliance on programmes like the Jobs Fund, which, while helpful, are often insufficient for scaling ECD efforts.

As seen in Appendix 4, the data indicates a significant reliance on these intermittent funding sources, which can create instability in service provision. This issue of financial insecurity is compounded by the gaps in long-term planning and capacity building for civil society organisations. These points are further reinforced by the thematic analysis from Appendix 3, particularly Questions 2, where funding consistency and its role in supporting both infrastructure and human resources are outlined as critical to the success of ECD models like SmartStart and the Social Employment Fund (SEF).

Jordan and Alex further elaborated on these challenges, noting the stark disparities in funding between state-run and community-based ECD centres. Alex highlighted how this results in differences in quality and access. Jordan observed that despite these constraints, some practitioners efficiently scale services in low-income communities, highlighting a strong ability to maximise limited resources. This efficiency points to the potential of leveraging existing capacity.

Kate and Morgan pointed out that rural and smaller centres are affected, often struggling to stay operational due to limited subsidies. Larry drew attention to the disparity between ECD funding and government support for primary and secondary education, with the minimal per-child subsidy for ECD being insufficient to address community needs. As noted by Larry, the disparity in funding is stark: ECD receives approximately R17 per child per day, while primary education receives more than double this amount. This discrepancy signals the state's underinvestment in early learning. Samantha and George also noted the heavy reliance on external donor funding, which, while vital, is neither sustainable nor guaranteed.

While many participants critiqued the inadequacies of the existing funding systems, Ethan and others provided examples of innovation within these constraints. Ethan highlighted how consistent support from certain funding sources has been transformative for CSOs, enabling them to maintain operations in resource-scarce environments. Some organisations are exploring accessible funding models that could cater to a broader range of providers. Examples include blended finance models combining donor and state funding, as used by Ilifa Labantwana; cross-subsidisation schemes where higher-income areas support poorer ones; and voucher systems piloted by some NGOs to give parents direct purchasing power (Labantwana & Ya Bana (2018)). This adaptive approach challenges the notion that increased funding alone is the key to scalable ECD solutions, underscoring the importance of community-driven strategies alongside state support.

The interviews confirmed the expectation that insufficient state funding is a significant barrier to the scaling and sustainability of Early Childhood Development (ECD) initiatives. However, they also revealed the remarkable resilience and adaptability of civil society organisations (CSOs), which often operate under tight financial constraints. Despite their resourcefulness, doubts persist about whether these approaches can achieve lasting systemic transformation without more substantial and consistent government investment. Given the severe limitations of state funding and the likelihood that the government is not poised to significantly increase its expenditure on ECD, one must question whether a fundamental shift toward a more democratic, embedded model of ECD provision is achievable.

As discussed in the Jordan interview and reinforced across other conversations, there is a real concern that the lack of adequate funding will continue to undermine efforts to scale ECD services effectively. In this context, the Social Employment Fund (SEF) and SmartStart may only succeed in filling gaps, rather than catalysing a broader system shift. This raises a critical question: Can civil society-driven initiatives, such as SEF and SS, truly achieve a transformative impact on the ECD system if they remain reliant on inconsistent and limited funding, or will they simply serve as stopgap measures, unable to bring about the systemic change needed for long-term improvements?

5.5.2 Regulatory Barriers

To approach the discussion on regulation, it is essential to first understand the existing regulatory framework governing ECD in South Africa. This system, largely driven by the state, is characterised by rigid bureaucratic processes that often fail to accommodate the unique needs of community-based or informal ECD programmes. The state's emphasis on uniform standards, particularly around infrastructure and practitioner qualifications, has created a "one-size-fits-all" approach that does not consider the contextual realities of low-income and rural communities. As highlighted by several participants, there is a significant concern about the dilution of the regulatory role of the state. The challenge is not whether quality should be regulated, but how it can be regulated effectively, given the diversity of ECD models across the country.

Building upon this, we can then introduce the concept of 'bureaucratic embeddedness' (as defined on page 3), where the state's centralisation and detailed control over ECD delivery have led to inefficiencies and bottlenecks. The state's capacity to enforce these regulations in such a rigid manner often limits the potential for local actors and smaller organisations to innovate or

operate effectively. The result is a regulatory environment that stifles flexibility and hinders the scalability of ECD initiatives in informal or low-resourced settings.

In contrast to this bureaucratic embeddedness, a potential solution lies in what could be termed "democratic embeddedness"—a model where the state provides overarching guidance and standards, but local actors, such as SmartStart and the Social Employment Fund (SEF), are empowered to manage the specifics. By decentralising responsibility in this way, the burden on the state is reduced, while still maintaining a system of oversight that ensures quality and inclusivity.

Regulation plays a crucial role in the ECD sector, and the state's role in ensuring quality is essential. Several interviewees strongly emphasised the importance of maintaining a robust regulatory framework to uphold quality standards in ECD services. For example, Thabo highlighted concerns about the risks of diluting the state's regulatory role, stressing that quality cannot be compromised. However, a recurring theme emerged regarding the unrealistic regulatory framework governing ECD in South Africa.

Chris observed that licensing requirements often include infrastructural standards that are unattainable for community-based programmes, especially those operating in informal settings. He also pointed out that training requirements for practitioners can be prohibitively expensive or inaccessible. State regulations around ECD, while crucial for maintaining standards, were viewed by many participants as a significant obstacle for community-based organisations.

Municipal requirements do not always align with the needs of home-based ECD programmes, which do not require the same infrastructure as larger centres. This reflects a broader call for regulatory flexibility that accommodates a range of ECD delivery models, without compromising quality. The challenge, therefore, is not whether quality can be regulated, but how regulations can evolve to support diverse and effective ECD models. Participants described government oversight as bureaucratic, creating barriers that affect small, community-run initiatives. George pointed out that the current framework relies on standards disconnected from the realities of underserved areas. The emphasis on infrastructure and paperwork, rather than quality of care or learning outcomes, further alienates organisations.

Chipo elaborated on the issue of regulatory challenges, stating, "Informal practitioners need to fill out all these forms or meet municipal requirements, it's unrealistic." There needs to be recognition that different ECD models are appropriate for different contexts. For example, a home-based ECD service does not require the same infrastructure as a larger centre. This

perspective was echoed by Morgan, who criticised the state's "one-size-fits-all" approach, which fails to account for the unique needs of low-income communities. Larry also pointed out the bureaucratic hurdles involved in registering ECD sites, which often lead to delays and non-compliance. This highlights a broader concern: the focus of regulations is often more on infrastructure standards than on ensuring quality of care or learning outcomes.

However, the issue is not simply about regulation. It reflects a deeper misunderstanding by the government about the diversity of the ECD sector in South Africa. ECD centres must "look" different in poor and remote areas to accommodate local realities. As Chipo shared, when she took Job Funds representatives to an informal settlement, they were shocked by the conditions and questioned whether anyone would want to send their child there.

This attitude underscores a lack of recognition of the realities of poverty in South Africa. Officials often advocate for children's "full rights," but they fail to realise that the alternative to a "lean" model is often nothing at all. Chipo also mentioned a story from a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal, where, despite having a well-organised ECD programme, officials refused to deliver edutainment resources due to the poor road conditions. This highlights the government's tendency to overlook the existing resources and potential in these communities.

The real challenge lies in understanding how communities in poor areas, when provided with the right support, can create value in ECD delivery. It's crucial to recognise that the government can't fund everything. Instead, leveraging local resources and empowering communities to take ownership of ECD provision is key to a more sustainable and effective model.

The interviews confirmed initial expectations that state regulations are overly rigid and poorly suited to the needs of community-based ECD programmes. Participants highlighted how bureaucratic barriers hinder compliance, particularly in low-income or informal settings. However, a key theme that emerged was the adaptability of local actors, who are not simply innovating, but pushing the boundaries of a system that is overly bureaucratic. This adaptability is most evident in initiatives like SmartStart (SS) and the Social Employment Fund (SEF), which allow for a move away from what can be described as "bureaucratic embeddedness".

SEF, for instance, provides overarching regulation, focusing on the "big stuff," such as the core principles of ECD delivery, but leaves the finer details to be managed by the implementing Social Investment Programme (SIPs). SmartStart, similarly, provides training, guidelines, and monitoring through coaches, which reduces the regulatory burden on the state while still

ensuring quality control. This decentralised model offers a potential solution to the regulatory inflexibility that has hampered many ECD initiatives.

Interestingly, some participants, including those from SEF (IDC), expressed concerns about the risks of self-regulation and decentralisation, emphasising the need for the state to set standards. Morgan, too, voiced scepticism about this shift. However, these concerns appear to stem from a misunderstanding, where participants were worried about the dangers of an unregulated system. We are advocating for a different form of regulation—one that maintains state oversight but allows for more localised and flexible implementation.

5.5.3 State-Community Relationships

The interviews revealed a complex and often strained relationship between the state and low-income communities, particularly in how partnerships play a critical role in the sustainability and scalability of ECD initiatives. Chris highlighted the state's focus on centralised, state-run models, which often fail to address the specific needs of marginalised communities. He pointed to a significant disconnect between the government's priorities and the realities on the ground, where civil society organisations (CSOs) step in to fill gaps but are often left to operate in isolation without adequate state support.

However, a crucial theme that emerged from the interviews, which was previously underappreciated, was the importance of partnerships. Several participants, including SmartStart representatives, emphasised that they cannot do everything on their own and heavily rely on partners to fill critical gaps. For example, SmartStart depends on partnerships for essential resources, such as play equipment, which underscores the limitations of their model. They acknowledged that without collaboration with other organisations, scaling their initiatives would not be feasible.

This recognition of the importance of partnership reflects a deeper understanding of the need for collective effort. When organisations like SmartStart grow too large and attempt to operate in a more “hands-off” manner, the quality of their impact diminishes, as seen in their challenges with digitalisation, as discussed by Chipso. She noted, “We need to be more ‘high touch’ than we anticipated,” pointing to the necessity of more direct engagement in the South African context. This sentiment was echoed by other participants, including those from Ethan and Kate, who shared similar insights about the challenges of scaling systems without a strong foundation of partnerships.

The Social Employment Fund (SEF) stands out as a key enabler of these vital partnerships. It provides a platform for collaborative action by linking various stakeholders, which is essential for addressing the multifaceted challenges in ECD provision. The catalytic effect of SEF lies in its ability to facilitate these partnerships, creating a space where civil society, government, and other stakeholders can come together to contribute to a more effective, adaptable, and scalable ECD system.

Kate highlighted the transactional nature of the government's engagement with CSOs. Rather than fostering true partnerships, the state often views CSOs as service providers tasked with implementing predetermined policies. Although there is some recognition of the need for collaboration, these efforts are still in their infancy, with limited progress in developing dedicated support structures. Morgan elaborated on this strained relationship, noting that while civil society organisations are deeply embedded in communities and work to address local needs, they often face insufficient collaboration and support from the state.

A recurring theme was the lack of mutual understanding and effective communication between the state and local organisations. The gap in communication makes it difficult to align objectives, with many participants observing that the state imposes policies and regulations without adequately considering the realities of low-income communities. This disconnect leaves these communities feeling neglected, despite the state's claims of prioritising their needs. One participant noted, "The state says it's supporting poor communities, but in practice, these communities often get left out."

The interviews affirmed the anticipated tension between the state and low-income communities but added nuance by highlighting varying degrees of trust and cooperation. While Chris and Taylor acknowledged emerging efforts to engage civil society, others, such as Chipo, pointed to persistent gaps in communication, alignment, and mutual understanding. This underscores the importance of fostering collaborative partnerships where the state, civil society, and local organisations work together to address systemic challenges in ECD provision.

Notably, geography plays a critical role in these dynamics. Several interviewees, including Thabo and Morgan, highlighted that Makhanda, with its strong presence of civil society organisations (CSOs), including the National Arts Festival (NAF), provides a unique environment for collaboration between the state and community-driven initiatives. This contrasts with other regions where CSOs face greater challenges in establishing similar partnerships. The differences between provinces, such as the more accommodating and

cooperative attitude towards CSOs in the Western Cape, further illustrate the significance of local context. By building trust and improving communication, the state could better support the needs of marginalised communities, especially in areas with less established civil society infrastructure.

5.5.4 Agency and Empowerment

The interviews highlighted the critical role of CSOs in fostering agency within the ECD system by empowering community leaders and practitioners. Chris emphasised the importance of providing local practitioners with tools, training, and support that align with national standards while remaining responsive to local contexts. This approach equips practitioners to navigate systemic challenges and gradually improve quality, starting from what is realistic given the socio-economic struggles many communities face. He remarked, “You can’t demand quality overnight in environments where people are still struggling to make ends meet. We start with what’s realistic and build from there.”

George further underscored the role of community workers, noting that while they may not be fully qualified teachers, they play an indispensable role in delivering ECD services. However, the lack of adequate training and systemic support limits the potential impact of this agency. Despite these constraints, community-based organisations demonstrate a remarkable capacity to adapt, often filling the gaps left by the state and creating localised solutions to address ECD needs.

Morgan described how CSOs empower local practitioners to take on leadership roles within their communities. By equipping them with the skills and support necessary to make meaningful contributions, these organisations foster increased autonomy and enable practitioners to implement innovative solutions tailored to local needs. This empowerment not only enhances access to education but also shifts the dynamic from dependency on external aid to community-driven problem-solving. As one participant noted, “Communities are no longer just waiting for help; they’re creating their own solutions.”

The role of CSOs extends beyond direct service delivery to fostering agency, empowerment, and co-production in ECD provision. By working closely with communities, these organisations enable local actors to take ownership of ECD initiatives, shaping models that are responsive to children’s needs rather than rigid, standardised frameworks. This collaborative approach allows communities to play an active role in shaping service delivery, leveraging local knowledge and resources.

However, participants highlighted the challenges of sustaining this empowerment without addressing broader systemic barriers such as funding shortages, inadequate infrastructure, and regulatory constraints. Strengthening support for CSOs as co-producers in ECD could enhance sustainability and effectiveness, ensuring that local initiatives are not undermined by structural limitations. The findings affirmed the anticipated role of CSOs in empowering community leaders and practitioners, displaying how localised agency can drive ECD improvements. However, the interviews revealed the limitations of this agency in the absence of systemic support. While civil society organisations play a pivotal role in building local capacity and fostering innovation, achieving long-term sustainability requires addressing structural barriers and strengthening the partnership between communities, civil society, and the state. This balance of community-led efforts and broader support systems is essential for creating a transformative and inclusive ECD framework.

5.5.5 Challenges and Potential for Growth

The potential of new models for ECD provision, such as those implemented by SmartStart and supported by the SEF, lies not merely in filling gaps but in driving a fundamental transformation of the system. Chris emphasised that collaborative models between the state and civil society have the potential to shift how ECD is conceptualised and delivered, moving beyond a deficit-based approach to one that recognises assets within communities.

This perspective was echoed by several interviewees, particularly from SmartStart, who stressed that if the focus remains solely on addressing problems, the scale of need will always exceed available resources. Instead, sustainable change requires viewing communities as co-producers of ECD services, leveraging local knowledge, fostering adaptability, and embedding ownership within the system. As Chipso noted, these models empower communities to take charge of ECD, creating sustainable solutions that are responsive to local needs rather than dependent on external interventions.

However, these new models also face significant challenges. Chris highlighted systemic barriers such as infrastructure deficits, geographic limitations, and cultural complexities that complicate standardisation and quality assurance. Cultural complexities include language mismatches between facilitators and children, traditional norms around caregiving that prefer home care, and resistance to institutionalised early learning in some rural communities. Chipso pointed out that achieving quality in lean, community-based models require substantial

investment in training and local buy-in, factors often constrained by limited resources and government recognition.

Jordan and Morgan emphasised funding constraints as a pervasive challenge, directly affecting training quality, practitioner retention, and programme sustainability. The minimal training required for practitioners in models like SmartStart raises concerns about long-term effectiveness, as echoed by Morgan. Additionally, Alex identified policy fragmentation and resistance to change within traditional structures as key obstacles to scaling these innovative models. This inconsistency often leads to inefficiencies in reaching the intended communities.

Ethan and Samantha noted the struggle to integrate ECD with broader community development efforts, with many programmes operating in silos. Ethan suggested that digital literacy and technology access could enhance scalability, but infrastructure and affordability remain barriers. Furthermore, Kate and George highlighted the need for more flexible policies that accommodate diverse operational contexts while ensuring minimum quality standards.

The interviews reinforced the interconnected nature of these challenges, highlighting how constraints in one area often exacerbate others. For instance, Larry pointed out that limited funding affects the quality of training, which in turn makes it harder for providers to meet the state's rigid regulatory requirements. He emphasised that even well-organised ECD centres struggle due to logistical barriers, such as poor infrastructure and limited government support in rural areas. Participants also stressed that sustainable models depend on community engagement and buy-in—without trust and active participation, even well-intentioned initiatives struggle to take root.

However, the discussions revealed that the most pressing constraint is not simply funding but the underlying structure of ECD regulation itself. As several SmartStart interviewees noted, no amount of funding will be sufficient unless the system shifts toward a model of democratic embeddedness—one that balances oversight with community-led solutions. This shift requires not just investment but a fundamental rethinking of the state's role, moving away from centralised control toward partnerships that enable local actors to co-produce sustainable ECD services. Despite its successes, SEF faces challenges in sustaining its long-term impact. Samantha pointed to the short-term nature of SEF contracts, which typically last 10 months. However, she noted that this is mitigated by transparent communication with participants, explaining, "We manage expectations by being upfront about the duration and uncertainty of

contract renewals." The reliance on government funding and the need for clearer policy alignment were identified as critical barriers to scaling SEF's initiatives effectively.

Participants also saw significant potential for SEF to expand its impact through deeper collaborations with CSOs. Chris suggested leveraging entities like SmartStart as intermediaries to "distribute subsidies more effectively to practitioners, especially in informal settings." This, Chris argued, could address the inefficiencies of government systems in managing direct payouts and significantly enhance practitioner support.

5.5.6 Policy Advocacy

Policy advocacy is a critical tool for transforming ECD provision and addressing the systemic gaps within the sector. The interviews revealed a strong consensus on the need for a shift in how ECD and social employment are framed, funded, and integrated into national policy. Chris highlighted the importance of reframing technical language like "ECD" or "social employment" into more relatable themes such as "childhood" or "community well-being." He argued that such narratives resonate better with parents and communities, fostering demand for ECD services.

Several participants emphasised the limitations of the government's focus on centre-based ECD models. Jordan called for a national policy shift to better recognise and integrate non-centre-based and community-driven models like those championed by SmartStart. She argued that these initiatives are crucial for reaching marginalised communities in rural and underserved urban areas.

Samantha and Morgan stressed the need for stable, long-term funding mechanisms for ECD initiatives, particularly those led by civil society organisations (CSOs). They noted that the current reliance on donor funding and short-term contracts undermines the sustainability and quality of ECD provision. Policy advocacy should focus on securing predictable funding streams and creating frameworks for sustainable job creation within the sector.

The interviews highlighted the need for greater recognition of CSOs in shaping and implementing ECD policy. Kate advocated for policies that establish enforceable quality standards for ECD initiatives led by CSOs and provide resources for effective state-CSO partnerships. Samantha and Ethan suggested embedding CSO-led models, such as the SEF, into national service delivery frameworks to ensure their longevity and scalability.

Jordan advocated for framing ECD as a foundational component of national development, with broad societal benefits such as reducing inequalities and addressing challenges like crime and educational disparities. By linking ECD to broader developmental goals, advocacy efforts could garner stronger support from policymakers and the public.

There is a need for policy frameworks that legitimise and strengthen the role of non-qualified workers in the ECD sector. Ethan and George highlighted the potential of SEF's model to create sustainable employment while improving early learning outcomes. Advocacy should focus on ensuring that such models are integrated into mainstream educational and welfare systems as long-term solutions.

The role of civil society in local education systems, particularly in places like Makhanda, was underscored by several participants. They advocated for policies that foster collaboration between the government and local actors, recognising the positive impact of initiatives like GADRA, local universities, and SEF.

The interviews reaffirmed the critical role of policy advocacy in addressing gaps in ECD provision. They also underscored the challenges of influencing policy in a top-down system. By reframing narratives, leveraging evidence, and advocating for sustainable funding and inclusive frameworks, civil society can drive meaningful policy change and ensure that ECD becomes a national priority.

5.6 Conclusion

Chapter 5 highlights the transformative potential of Early Childhood Development (ECD) when supported by effective civil society interventions, sustainable funding models, and robust policy advocacy. The interviews reveal that addressing systemic challenges in ECD requires reframing societal narratives, recognising diverse models of provision, and fostering collaborative partnerships between the state and civil society organisations (CSOs).

A recurring theme was the need to shift from a predominantly centre-based ECD approach to one that also values non-centre-based and community-driven models. Initiatives like SmartStart and the Social Employment Fund (SEF) illustrate how large-scale civil society organisations (CSOs) can act as intermediaries, supporting smaller organisations while ensuring quality and accountability. George highlighted that the IDC deliberately partners with

established SIPs to avoid the inefficiencies of dealing with numerous small organisations that often lack reporting capacity. This structured approach allows for both scalability and financial propriety while maintaining project oversight.

The chapter also underscores the importance of leveraging data and success stories to strengthen policy advocacy, enabling CSOs to build a compelling case for systemic change. Advocacy efforts must prioritise predictable funding mechanisms, the recognition of non-qualified workers, and scalable, collaborative frameworks that align with national development priorities.

Ultimately, civil society plays a pivotal role in filling gaps left by the state, especially in underserved communities. By fostering partnerships, shaping policy, and driving innovative approaches, CSOs can significantly enhance ECD provision and contribute to broader societal goals like reducing inequality and improving education outcomes. The insights from this chapter set the stage for exploring how these lessons can inform practical recommendations for scaling and sustaining ECD initiatives in the South African context.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter synthesises the key findings of the research on ECD in South Africa, with a particular focus on the role of CSOs such as SmartStart and the SEF. It reflects on the major challenges identified in the study, including funding constraints, regulatory barriers, and the fragmented nature of ECD service provision. Additionally, it explores how civil society can play a transformative role in improving accessibility, quality, and sustainability within the sector.

Building on these findings, the chapter presents policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the scalability and long-term sustainability of ECD programmes. These recommendations emphasise the need for stronger partnerships between the state and CSOs, improved funding mechanisms, and more adaptive regulatory frameworks that allow for innovative community-driven solutions. Furthermore, the chapter identifies key areas for future research that could contribute to a deeper understanding of how civil society and government collaboration can be optimised to address systemic gaps in ECD provision.

The study underscores the importance of an integrated approach to ECD, where government policies, community-based initiatives, and civil society interventions are aligned to create a more inclusive and effective system. By fostering greater collaboration and policy flexibility, there is significant potential for sustainable and transformative change in South Africa's ECD landscape.

6.2 Summary of Findings

The findings of this research largely confirm the theoretical framework set out in the literature review, while also highlighting areas where the dynamics of the South African ECD sector have evolved or remain entrenched. The review pointed to the fragmented nature of ECD delivery in South Africa, a system that, while exhibiting some characteristics of a Social Democratic welfare regime, such as a strong focus on public service provision, falls short in its ability to effectively integrate civil society initiatives into mainstream policy and funding structures.

This fragmentation and lack of coordination between state and non-state actors have created significant barriers to scaling and improving the quality of ECD services across the country. A key theme identified in the literature review was the dependence on civil society organisations (CSOs) like SmartStart and the Social Employment Fund (SEF) to fill gaps left by the state,

particularly in underserved areas where state-run centres are absent or insufficient. However, despite these CSOs' successes in extending access to ECD, they face significant challenges, particularly in terms of funding and regulatory compliance.

This theme of fragmentation and the reliance on civil society to address gaps in the system is strongly supported by the findings from the interviews and data collected for this research. Both SmartStart and SEF were found to be operating in environments where they often lack adequate support from the government, which limits their impact and hinders their ability to scale. For example, while SmartStart has made significant strides in reaching many children, the model still struggles with issues related to practitioner training and the quality of education provided, particularly in non-centre-based settings.

The lack of standardised training and professional development in the civil society sector often leads to inconsistency in service delivery, which directly impacts the quality of education and care provided to children. This finding aligns with the literature, which highlighted that despite the rapid expansion of these CSOs, the sustainability of their efforts remains fragile without adequate state backing or more robust financial and regulatory support (World Bank, 2022; Government of South Africa, 2020; Data Drive, 2022).

The interviews with key stakeholders, including representatives from SmartStart and SEF, provided deeper insights into how the fragmented system affects the effectiveness of these organisations. It was evident from the discussions that while both SmartStart and SEF are doing significant work to fill the gaps in state provision, their efforts are constrained by a lack of consistent funding, policy integration, and government recognition.

For example, the reliance on donor funding and the inconsistent support from government initiatives were cited as major challenges by several interviewees. These challenges emphasised the need for more sustainable and equitable funding mechanisms to ensure the long-term viability of civil society-led ECD programmes (Institute for Economic Justice, 2021). Interview insights also revealed that many organisations are forced to rely on community contributions and partnerships to sustain their work, but this model of funding is not sustainable in the long term, and there is a pressing need for the state to create more reliable and consistent funding channels for ECD initiatives.

The research also identified the restrictive regulatory environment as a significant barrier to the scalability of ECD programmes. Many of the civil society initiatives, including those operated by SmartStart and SEF, are constrained by infrastructure compliance requirements that exclude

them from formal recognition and access to government funding. This issue of compliance was highlighted in interview findings, where participants expressed frustration at the rigid regulatory framework that fails to accommodate the diversity of ECD delivery models in South Africa. A more flexible and inclusive regulatory environment that recognises the value of informal community-based centres and allows for diverse ECD models to thrive is needed. Shifting the focus from compliance metrics to quality of care and education could enable these organisations to flourish and expand their reach, ultimately improving the overall quality of ECD services (Skelton, 2023).

These findings underscore a central theme from the literature review: that while civil society organisations like SmartStart and SEF have the potential to drive transformative change in ECD, their success and sustainability ultimately depend on stronger state support. The research findings show that while these CSOs have made significant strides, their impact remains constrained by the lack of a national strategy that fully integrates civil society efforts into the broader policy and funding frameworks of the state.

This aligns with the literature's critique of the South African welfare regime, which, while having strengths, fails to fully capitalise on the potential of civil society partnerships in the ECD sector (Real Reform, 2024; Institute for Economic Justice, 2021). The research suggests that for these transformative models to reach their full potential, there must be greater alignment between civil society and government, with the state playing a more active role in creating a supportive environment for these initiatives.

The research confirms that South Africa's ECD system remains fragmented and bureaucratically embedded, with poor coordination between state and non-state providers. Despite government policies aimed at supporting ECD, these are poorly integrated and often fail to address gaps in service delivery. CSOs like SmartStart and SEF have had some success in filling these gaps, but their efforts are limited by bureaucratic structures that hinder large-scale improvements.

However, the research highlights the potential for a shift towards a more "democratically embedded" model, where community-driven, decentralised solutions can address the unique needs of underserved areas. This approach could foster more responsive, locally tailored services and empower communities to take charge of their own development. But this shift requires robust state support, including favourable policies, flexible funding, and a rethinking

of state-civil society relationships. Without these, the potential of these models remains constrained by the system's fragmentation (Skelton, 2023; Data Drive, 2022).

6.3 Implications for Policy and Practice

Inconsistent state funding remains a significant barrier, leaving programmes financially vulnerable and limiting their scalability. Our research found that CSOs like SmartStart and SEF, while effective in filling gaps in ECD provision, struggle with irregular and insufficient funding. To address this, policymakers should prioritise co-funding mechanisms that combine public and private sector contributions (Skoll Centre, 2024). By ensuring predictable and equitable state funding allocations, alongside strategic donor support, this approach would signal the government's commitment to ECD and encourage private sector investment.

Regulatory frameworks are another critical barrier, particularly for smaller, community-driven ECD providers. Many of these organisations face challenges in meeting rigid compliance requirements designed for more formalised, large-scale organisations. The research highlighted how this limits their ability to adapt to local needs. Policymakers should focus on more flexible regulatory frameworks that prioritise child development and educational quality rather than enforcing standardised formal criteria. Simplifying compliance requirements and enabling community-driven programmes to implement localised solutions without the fear of noncompliance would make a significant difference.

A key finding from the research is the need to strengthen the partnership between civil society and the state. Our interviews revealed that CSOs, like SmartStart and SEF, are uniquely positioned to leverage local knowledge and resources, while the state holds the authority and capacity to fund scaling. This suggests a shift from treating CSOs as mere "implementing agencies" to viewing them as active partners in policy development and implementation. Policymakers should create formalised partnerships with well-capacitated CSOs, providing consistent funding, regulatory support, and additional resources to enable them to scale and reach more communities.

In addition, targeted investment in empowering local practitioners is critical. Our findings showed how programmes like SmartStart and SEF have successfully decentralised ECD provision by training and supporting community-based practitioners. This approach not only bridges gaps left by the state but also fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility within the community. Policymakers should enhance this model by providing ongoing support and resources for community-based practitioners.

Finally, policies should focus on equitable resource distribution and recognise diverse ECD models, such as home-based and community programmes. Our research suggests that state policies must engage directly with CSOs in co-designing regulations, rather than imposing top-down, one-size-fits-all standards. By involving well-established, locally knowledgeable CSOs in policy development, the state can ensure that regulations are both effective and adaptable to regional contexts. This approach will help balance national standards with the realities of localised needs.

6.4 Recommendations for Future Research

Further studies are needed to examine the impact of more inclusive regulatory frameworks on the effectiveness of ECD programmes. Research should focus on how flexibility in regulations can enable smaller, community-driven organisations to innovate and deliver quality education without the constraints of excessive regulations. This could include evaluating the outcomes of regulatory reforms in other sectors and their relevance to the ECD context.

By addressing these research gaps, policymakers and practitioners will be better equipped to create an environment where civil society-driven ECD programmes can thrive, contributing to the development of a more effective early childhood education system.

The relationship between the state and civil society warrants closer examination. Comparative studies across regions or countries could shed light on best practices for effective collaborations in ECD. Additionally, longitudinal studies on the outcomes of community-led ECD initiatives would provide a deeper understanding of their sustainability and scalability. Finally, research should address gaps in practitioner training and support, assessing innovative approaches to build capacity and enhance the quality of ECD services.

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of CSOs in ECD provision, it also opens several avenues for future research. One key area for further investigation is the pedagogical aspects of ECD programmes, particularly those implemented by SmartStart and SEF. While this study focused on the immediate outcomes of these programmes, there is a need for deeper research into the curricular frameworks and teaching practices used by these programmes.

There are crucial questions regarding the fit between foundation-level education (preschool) and the broader goals of early childhood interventions. Future studies could explore what ECD centres should focus on in terms of pedagogy, what should be prioritised in the early years and

what is best left out. This would help assess the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches in improving educational outcomes, cognitive development, and social integration.

Additionally, future research could focus on the education ecosystem in specific locales, with a particular emphasis on how CSOs and other non-state actors support ECD. This study primarily focused on SmartStart and SEF, but numerous other organisations play key roles in shaping early childhood education across different communities.

Research that explores the local education pipeline, particularly in Makhanda, could provide important insights into how the system operates in practice. A more in-depth investigation could examine how CSOs have contributed to the ECD landscape in Makhanda and how initiatives like the Social Employment Fund (SEF) have influenced the broader education ecosystem. This research would help reveal the dynamics between state and civil society actors and how these interactions shape educational outcomes in the local context. While Makhanda offers a compelling case study, its strong presence of civil society organisations, particularly in the education and arts sectors, may limit the generalisability of findings to other towns with weaker community infrastructure.

6.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has shown that while South Africa faces significant challenges in providing access to quality ECD services, civil society organisations such as SmartStart and SEF have played a crucial role in transforming the sector. These organisations have made important strides in improving access particularly in underserved areas. However, the scalability and sustainability of these efforts depend on a more coordinated approach that involves both the state and civil society.

A reformed welfare system that integrates civil society actors into mainstream policy and funding frameworks is essential. Strengthening government-CSO partnerships, improving practitioner training, and investing in long-term research on the impacts of ECD, South Africa can build a more effective and equitable early childhood education system.

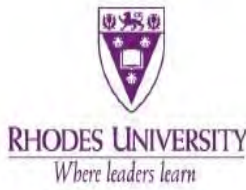
While SmartStart excels in empowering local communities through training and community-driven initiatives, SEF's focus on social employment has helped increase the number of practitioners and facilitated partnerships with civil society (SmartStart, 2024). The two initiatives complement each other in their goal of increasing access to quality early learning, filling gaps left by the state. The scalability of these models, particularly with increased collaboration offers a promising pathway for improving ECD provision.

These initiatives reveal an emerging mode of delivery that has the potential to significantly transform the ECD sector in South Africa. By focusing on partnerships, decentralisation, and empowerment, they suggest a pathway for scaling ECD provision while maintaining quality thresholds and governance standards. Furthermore, the lessons from these initiatives could inform broader government approaches to interacting with and serving poor communities in other policy areas.

The findings suggest that while challenges remain both initiatives have demonstrated the potential to scale and drive transformative change in South Africa's ECD sector. Their success lies in their adaptability and ability to provide sustainable solutions without the need for extensive infrastructure investment.

Effective scaling requires more than cost-per-child calculations it requires an approach that integrates policymakers, meso-level actors, and community-based delivery mechanisms. Achieving universal ECD provision in South Africa requires reimagining the relationship between the state, civil society, and local communities.

APPENDIX 1- ETHICAL APPROVAL



Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee
Main Admin Building, Drostdy Road, Makhanda, 6139, South Africa
PO Box 94, Makhanda, 6140, South Africa
t: +27 (0) 46 603 7314
e: ethics-committee@ru.ac.za
<https://www.ru.ac.za/researchgateway/ethics/>
NHREC Registration number: RC-241114-045

30 October 2024

Mr Danick Muller

Email: mullerdanick3@gmail.com

Review Reference: 2024-7535-8959

Dear Mr Muller,

Re: The potential of the Social Employment Fund and Smartstart using a lean and scalable model to transform Early Childhood Development in SA.

Researcher: Mr Danick Muller

Supervisor(s): Mr David Fryer

This letter confirms that the above research proposal has been reviewed and APPROVED by the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (RU-

HREC). Your Approval number is: 2024-7535-8959

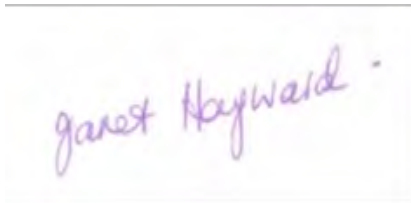
Approval has been granted for 1 year. An annual progress report will be required to renew approval for an additional period. You will receive an email notifying you when the annual report is due.

Please apply for a protocol amendment should any substantive change(s) be made, for whatever reason, during the research process. This includes changes in investigators. Email your request to ethics-committee@ru.ac.za.

Please submit a brief report 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 cataloguing number allocated.

Sincerely,

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in purple ink that reads "Janet Hayward".

Dr Janet Hayward

Chair: Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (RU-HREC)

APPENDIX 2- INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Rhodes University

Drostdy Road

Grahamstown

6139

[Date]

Dear [insert title and name]

Re: Invitation to participate in research

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled “The potential of the Social Employment Fund and SmartStart using a lean and scalable model to transform Early Childhood Development in South Africa.” The aim of this research is to investigate whether initiatives such as the Social Employment Fund (SEF) and SmartStart exemplify a promising mode of service delivery with the potential to significantly transform the ECD sector. They could also provide a blueprint for how the government can better interact with communities that are currently not receiving enough support.

The participation and cooperation of your institution is important so that the results of the research are accurately portrayed. The interview will be semi-structured, based on the research questions (attached), and should take no more than an hour of your time. 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 interview 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 any negative consequences. The consent form is attached.

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

Yours sincerely,

Danick Muller (principal researcher)

David Fryer (supervisor)

Rhodes University, Research Office, Ethics ethics-committee@ru.ac.za +27 (0) 46 603 7727 f:
+27 (0) 86 616 7707 Room 220, Main Admin Building, Drostdy Road, Grahamstown, 6139

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT DECLARATION

(To be signed by research participant/s)

Project Title: The potential of the Social Employment Fund and SmartStart using a lean and scalable model to transform Early Childhood Development in South Africa

Danick Muller 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 analyse the barriers to an effective early learning rollout in South Africa and the possibility the social economy offers in the space.
2. Rhodes University has given ethical clearance to this research project (Ethics Approval Number), and I have seen/may request to see the clearance certificate by contacting the Ethics Coordinator (ethics-committee@ru.ac.za)
3. By participating in this research project, I will have an opportunity to give my insights into the question of whether the Social Employment Fund (SEF) and SmartStart initiatives exemplify a promising mode of service delivery with the potential to significantly transform the ECD sector.
4. I will participate in the project by partaking in an interview which will ask questions related to the existing ECD ecosystem, the transformative potential of the SmartStart and SEF initiatives, and the likely constraints that such initiatives will face. 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.
6. 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.
7. I will not be compensated for participating in the research.
8. The following risks are associated with my participation: Although the researcher will put in place provisions to keep me anonymous (and will never identify me by name unless I indicate to the contrary), there is a small risk that someone may be able to identify me.
9. The principal investigator intends to publish the research results in the form of academic journal and conference papers. 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. Research records of this study will be kept in password protected computer files.
10. I agree to the Researcher's use of voice recording of my comments and opinions during interviews, the purpose of which is to ensure the accurate recording of my views/responses. Furthermore, I have the right to request a copy of the interview transcriptions to confirm that my opinions are accurately recorded.
11. Any further questions that I might have regarding the nature of the research and/or my participation in it will be answered by:

x David Fryer: 074 646 1215 or d.fryer@ru.ac.za (Supervisor)

x Danick Muller: 079 534 4716 or mullerdanick3@gmail.com (Researcher)
12. 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 abovementioned project.

.....

Participant's signature

.....

Date

Rhodes University, Research Office, Ethics ethics-committee@ru.ac.za +27 (0) 46 603 7727 f: +27 (0) 86 616 7707 Room 220, Main Admin Building, Drostdy Road, Grahamstown, 6139

APPENDIX 3- INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Rhodes University

Drostdy Road

Grahamstown

6139

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

I am Danick Muller, a Master of Commerce in Economics student at Rhodes University. Thank you very much for your interest and willingness to contribute your knowledge to our project! As indicated in the invitation letter, we would like to make an audio recording of the interview. I trust you still consent to this. Before we start, we would like to reiterate that the research is being conducted ethically, and in particular, that your confidentiality will be protected and that your participation is voluntary (you have the right to withdraw at any time, or to decline to answer any question).

I am part of a team that is investigating whether initiatives like the Social Employment Fund (SEF) and SmartStart represent an emerging mode of delivery with the potential to transform the South African welfare regime, particularly the relationship between the state and poor communities.

Our main focus is Early Childhood Development (ECD). However, we are also interested in the broader sphere of ‘social employment’ (of which ECD is a part), and in understanding the broader ‘welfare regime’ in South Africa.

We are certainly interested in the ‘macro-level’ question of government policy, and the ‘microlevel’ questions (practitioners at the ‘coalface’ of delivering services). However, these two levels are relatively well-documented (for example, there is good evidence of the impact of various ECD initiatives on children’s development outcomes). Our main focus in this interview, therefore, is the ‘meso-level’ connecting the macro and micro (including systems design and management, coordination, monitoring and quality control, funding, governance, etc.). It is at this level that initiatives like SmartStart and the Social Employment Fund (SEF) operate.

Questions/themes:

Some of these questions/themes may probe areas outside your expertise. We have included the full set of questions here so that you can see the scope of our research. Please do let us know if you would rather not discuss certain of the questions, and where you feel less confident about your answers.

1. Positionality and Perspectives: Firstly, we would like to ask about your own journey. Can you tell us about your background and experience, and how your ideas about ECD and/or ‘social employment’ (defined by the SEF as ‘work for the common good’) have evolved?

2. The ‘existing system’: Our aim is to understand the impact of initiatives like SmartStart and the SEF. To assess impact, we need first to get a sense of a ‘baseline’: i.e. the ‘existing system’ excluding SmartStart and the SEF (i.e. the system that existed before and continues to exist alongside these initiatives), and why the ‘existing system’ has struggled to meet ECD and employment targets.

a) In terms of outcomes, what are the failings and gaps? How does this play out in different kinds of communities (rural, informal urban, etc.)?

b) How would you characterise the ‘existing system’ at the ‘meso’ level in terms of:

i. Levels of funding and funding model(s)?

ii. The system of regulation (application and qualification processes, monitoring and quality control, governance) and how appropriate this is to the realities of poor communities (and different settings, such as informal settlements, rural areas, etc.)?

iii. The relationship between the state and poor communities? i.e. the extent to which the state operates in a ‘top-down’ bureaucratic manner, as opposed to a democratic manner that responds to needs and fosters genuine partnerships with and between other key stakeholders (local communities, practitioners, grass-roots organisations, and larger civil society organisations like SmartStart the SEF strategic implementation partners).

iv. Engaging the agency of these stakeholders as ‘co-producers’ and fostering their ability to create sustainable assets in poor communities, as opposed to merely acting as a conduit for the state to deliver to passive recipients?

3. SmartStart is designed as a ‘hub’ that coordinates and capacitates a social franchisor-franchisee network in the ECD space. It aims to create lean, flexible, collaborative, and scalable systems that will eventually reach one million children.

a) What is your understanding of how the SmartStart ‘model’ seeks to address the challenges with the ‘existing system’ (2b above) such as funding, quality control, partnerships, agency, and sustainability of assets?

b) Current activities: please outline your organisation's role in the SmartStart initiative, if any.

c) Current impact: could you elaborate on the impact of the initiative so far, both in terms of the numbers of children reached and the other goals (quality, partnerships, agency, sustainability)?

d) Potential: what do you think the initiative could achieve for children and communities in South Africa and what role will other stakeholders (notably the state) need to play if this potential is to be achieved?

e) Although it has had a large impact, SmartStart is still well short of achieving its goals, and gaps remain very large. Could you outline what you think are the factors hindering SmartStart’s progress?

4. The SEF:

a) Although it was part of the COVID crisis response, the thinking behind the SEF has deeper roots. Please could you elaborate on the ‘pre-history’ of the SEF. Please also explain its institutional location (especially, how it came to be run by the Industrial Development Corporation rather than by the state’s normal public employment agencies).

b) Please elaborate on how the SEF itself is funded, and the mechanisms of governance. Given its positioning as part of the crisis response, how well-anchored is this funding?

c) Please elaborate on the various elements of the SEF model, including ‘social employment’, partnerships, the funding model, and regulation (how SIPs are selected and monitored, etc.)

d) Focussing on the SIPs (but also considering other well-capacitated civil society organisations—like SmartStart—that are currently not SIPs but potentially could be): how does the SEF model help these organisations overcome the constraints they face in the ‘existing system’?

e) Although the SEF has had a large impact, there is still a vast unmet potential for social employment, in terms of both needs and the untapped capabilities of people and organisations in poor communities. Could you outline what you think are the factors hindering progress?

5. An emerging ‘democratically embedded’ mode of delivery. i.e. one where the state, instead of trying to run things itself in a top-down way, engages the agency of well-capacitated civil society organisation (CSOs), who in turn partner with smaller local CSOs and practitioners:

a) What is the potential of such a mode of delivery?

b) What do you see as the biggest challenges to achieving this potential?

i. within the initiatives themselves (in other words, are there internal limits and problems with the model?)

ii. external to the initiatives: in particular, policy and budget priority, lack of coordination with other programme, problems with other stakeholders, etc).

6. Politics, advocacy, and ideation: ECD and social employment receive relatively low funding and policy priority (compared to basic education and social grants for example). How well understood amongst various stakeholders (low-income families and community leaders, civil society, government officials, advocacy groups, academia, etc.) is the importance of these spheres, and the potential of such initiatives as the SEF and SmartStart? What can be done to improve the profile?

7. Is there anything else you want to share that we have not covered so far?

Thank you again. We deeply appreciate your contribution!

APPENDIX 4- THEMATIC SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS

Table of Organisations

Organisation	Locale	Activities	Relationship with SEF	Relationship with SmartStart	Scale of ECD network
A	Eastern Part of Eastern Cape (East London, Mthatha, Gqeberha, Keiskammahoek) and Johannesburg	ECD training, mentorship, support, and advocacy.	SIP	Franchisor	'> 1000 ECD franchisees
B	National, including Makhandla	Arts education Supports ECD centers as part of a much broader programme	SIP	None	Approximately two hundred ECDs supported
C	Makhandla	ECD teacher training, supports ECD centres	In partnership with an SIP	None	Actively supports approximately 80+ ECD centres in the Makana region
D	Makhandla	Basic education NPO with strong footprint in Makhandla	None	None	None

Table 1 Background and Position in Organisation (pseudonyms used, as discussed in Section 5.1)

Participants	Background	Position
Chris	He emphasised that while he does not have direct experience in Early Childhood Development (ECD), his expertise is rooted in education. Before joining SmartStart, he had a career in public schooling improvement, where they played a significant role in co-founding an NGO that focused on large-scale education reform.	Chief Innovation and Learning Officer at SmartStart
Chipo	Chipo comes from a business background, initially working outside the non-profit sector. Her journey into ECD began during her time at Yellowwoods, where she gained exposure to the ECD sector.	Operations Lead at SmartStart
Jordan	Jordan has a professional history that includes working with education budgets and strategic development initiatives. Her interest in ECD was sparked during her earlier engagements in developmental sectors, particularly where challenges became apparent.	Advocacy Lead for SmartStart

	She has since found herself in the ECD space, focusing on addressing issues such as inadequate funding, inequality, and regulatory issues.	
Alex	Alex has a background rooted in ECD through experience with practitioners in low-income communities. He worked as a Coach, supporting fifty-two franchisees (practitioners) in the SmartStart programme. Later he progressed to the position of Programme Leader, overseeing nine coaches operating across various sites in the Eastern Cape and the Western Cape, including Port Elizabeth, East London, Mthatha, and Khayelitsha.	Programme Leader in organisation A. Responsible for organisation A's SEF and SmartStart Projects
George	A Chartered Accountant with finance experience, he moved from commercial finance to development finance. His career has been shaped by a deep involvement in community and social issues, particularly through volunteer work with a local NGO.	Project Lead at SEF
Thabo	Has been involved in development finance since 1993, working with institutions such as the Small Business Development Corporation, DBSA, Jobs Fund, and provincial ECDCs. Joined IDC in July 2022 as a Senior Account Manager, focusing on the Social Employment Fund (SEF) and township economy projects.	Senior Account Manager at IDC
Taylor	Taylor is the Head of Research and Information at the IDC. She joined in January 2023 and moved to her current role in April 2024. Previously, she worked in the IDC's Industry Planning Unit, the Competition Commission, and the University of Johannesburg's Centre for Competition Regulation and Economic Development. She focuses on using industrial development to drive socio-economic growth.	Head of Research and Information IDC
Kate	an Occupational Therapist (OT) by profession, with an area of focus is community development, specifically literacy and ECD.	Coordinator for Community-Centred Programmes at Makhanda NPO, organisation C, focused on supporting ECD centres and training ECD teachers. Indirect beneficiary of SEF through its relationship with one of the SEF SIPs which has facilitated the use of SEF workers in support roles
Samantha	She has a strong foundation in development work, specifically focusing on franchising models. Her background reflects an interest	Chief Executive Officer of organisation A, Eastern Cape NPO engaging in a wide range of community projects, including ECD. Both

	in creating sustainable opportunities and supporting low-income communities. She engages with ECD initiatives in the Eastern Cape.	an SEF SIP and a SmartStart partner (franchisor)
Ethan	Ethan is a theatre maker, actor, director, and producer. He transitioned into arts administration and was approached by ASSITEJ's director to manage their involvement in the Social Employment Fund (SEF) initiative.	Project Manager of organisation B, a South African NPO engaging in arts-based initiatives that support community development, including ECD. This organisation is both a SEF SIP and a SmartStart partner, emphasising creative and holistic approaches to ECD
Larry	Larry's background is centred on broader educational responsibilities, with limited direct engagement in ECD. His organisational and collaborative efforts indirectly contribute to ECD development, especially through partnerships with universities and strategic programmes like the Vice Chancellor's Initiative.	Manager at a South African NPO, organisation D, known for its strategic leadership in education and community projects. The organisation bridges educational inequities and strengthens access to quality learning opportunities across age groups.
Morgan	Morgan's professional background is deeply rooted in education and community development, with a focus on bridging critical gaps in ECD and its transition to formal schooling. At organisation D, Morgan holds a position that involves working closely with schools, communities, and civil society organisations.	Programme Manager at South African NPO specialising in educational initiatives and community development.

Table 2 The existing system

Participants	2bi Funding	2bii Regulation	2biii Relationship state and community	2biv Agency
Chris	Chris emphasised the role that consistent funding plays in sustaining ECD initiatives. He said, "Without steady funding, it's difficult to keep these programmes running. Civil society can only do so much without resources." A steady supply from the state would be very beneficial as this would allow for greater access to low-income communities.	Chris pointed out that regulations around ECD are often unclear for community-based organisations. For instance, he noted that licensing requirements for ECD centers often include infrastructural standards that are unrealistic for community-based programmes operating in informal or resource-poor settings. Furthermore, the training	Chris discussed the distant relationship between the state and low-income communities, especially in the realm of ECD provision. He said that the government tends to focus on centralised, state-run models.	Chris highlighted the importance of agency within the existing ECD system by empowering communities through initiatives. He noted initiatives provide local practitioners with the tools, training, and support needed to operate within their contexts while remaining aligned with national standards. This approach builds their capacity to navigate systemic challenges.

		requirements for practitioners can be expensive or difficult to access.		
Chipo	The issue of funding is deeply tied to the current system's limitations. Chipo pointed out that the state continues to focus on building infrastructure, but this approach will always face financial constraints. Instead of solely trying to increase funding for infrastructure, the focus should be on investing in people and community-based solutions. This way, the funding can be leveraged to empower local resources, like people's homes, as integral parts of the ECD system, fostering long-term sustainability.	Chipo emphasised that the government's approach to regulation is fundamentally flawed because it focuses too much on what is scarce, particularly infrastructure, and not enough on what is abundant—people and their homes. The state's attempt to build more ECD centers will never fully address the needs because it is working within a bureaucratic system that views poor people as passive recipients of services. To truly transform the system, the focus should shift from trying to fill gaps in infrastructure to empowering communities as active participants in ECD provision.	Chipo stressed the importance of transforming the relationship between the state and communities. Rather than seeing poor people as problems, they should be viewed as partners and co-producers in the delivery of ECD services. This shift would ensure that the communities are not only recipients but also active contributors, with the state acting as a facilitator of this partnership. Building a system based on collaboration rather than a top-down approach would strengthen the overall delivery of ECD services.	Chipo highlighted the role of agency in the ECD system. While the government often focuses on scarcity—such as the lack of resources or infrastructure—the true potential lies in the abundant resources of people, particularly within communities. By shifting the focus to local agents of change, like parents and caregivers in their homes, the state can unlock the full potential of civil society in providing ECD. Communities should not be seen as passive beneficiaries but as essential agents in the co-production of early childhood development.
Jordan	Funding remains a challenge for scaling ECD efforts in low-income communities. Despite limited funding some practitioners manage to scale rapidly in these communities, indicating their efficiency in resource utilisation.	Registration is highlighted as a significant challenge. The government struggles to provide adequate ECD regulation and oversight in low-income communities.	The state operates in a bureaucratic, top-down manner, often sidelining civil society as a partner. There is recognition of the need for collaborative efforts between government, civil society, and local NGOs.	The role of civil society in driving ECD efforts is evident, but it faces obstacles when dealing with government structures.
Alex	Some challenges in funding disparities are highlighted as a major factor influencing the difference in quality between state-run	Government creates bureaucratic barriers to entry for smaller community run programmes.	The gap in communication between the state and smaller community organisations makes it harder to align	Community-based organisations exhibit a strong sense of agency, often adapting to their local contexts and filling gaps in

	centers and those operated by non-profits or community-based organisations.	Many community-based organisations feel marginalised by the state, which often prefers to work with large-scale, institutional providers rather than small community initiatives.	objectives, particularly when there is a lack of mutual understanding of the challenges each faces. ecosystem.	the state-provided ECD services. The role of civil society actors in creating sustainable models of ECD delivery is highlighted, with a focus on advocacy for policy change and provision.
George	He discussed the challenges in securing sustainable funding for programmes, noting that while there is some government support, reliance on external funding sources is still significant. George explained that while the state has a role in providing funding, it often fails to reach the most underserved communities	George noted that the existing ECD system is heavily reliant on a rigid framework that often fails to account for local realities. He emphasised that this lack of flexibility makes it difficult for local organisations to operate effectively, particularly in underserved areas.	NGOs work aims to bridge this gap, offering direct support to these communities. "The state says it's supporting poor communities, but in practice, these communities often get left out."	George spoke about the agency of workers in communities, explaining that while they are not fully qualified teachers, they play a critical role in ECD provision. However, without proper training and support, the impact of this agency can be limited.
Thabo	He emphasised that financial viability is a major constraint in the ECD sector. He noted that many parents struggle to afford fees, making it difficult for ECD centres to sustain operations	Thabo pointed out that informal ECD centers face significant regulatory challenges, particularly around infrastructure and staff qualifications. While safety and quality standards are necessary, excessive bureaucracy can hinder operations. He suggested reframing this issue as the need for more structured support to help ECD providers meet required standards	Thabo argued that the state must take a more active role in funding and regulating ECD provision, but he pushed back against the idea of "democratic embeddedness," cautioning that excessive decentralisation can lead to inefficiencies. Instead, he emphasised the need for clear state-led enforcement of standards.	Thabo highlighted the role of civil society in supporting informal ECD providers. He noted that decentralised monitoring through SIPS allows for more tailored support at the local level. However, he stressed that the government must allocate more funding to sustain these support structures.
Taylor	Taylor believes that linking social employment to industrial policy	Taylor reflects on the challenges caused by bureaucratic	Taylor recognises that the state's current approach to social employment	Taylor emphasises the importance of community-based organisations

	would create more sustainable systems for funding, particularly in sectors like ECD. She mentions that when funding is linked to long-term industrial activities, it avoids the temporary nature of infrastructure-based social programmes. This would create more stable funding for programmes that provide consistent benefits, like ECD.	burdens on small businesses and nonprofits that receive funding from the state, particularly in poor areas. She believes these challenges hinder the scaling of social programmes like ECD. Regulations, especially around compliance and paperwork, prevent many community-based initiatives from functioning effectively.	and community engagement tends to see communities as burdens, which creates a disconnect. She also mentions the importance of integrating community needs into industrial policy, especially in rural and township areas, to ensure that social services like early learning are aligned with long-term industrial development goals.	having the capacity to evolve over time. She highlights the potential for small businesses and community organisations to scale up if they are empowered with the necessary funding and support, particularly if these organisations are seen as partners rather than burdens.
Kate	The funding for ECD is often insufficient, especially for smaller or rural centres. The funding for ECD is deeply inadequate, and we see many centres struggling, especially in rural areas.	The regulatory environment is a challenge for smaller organisations. There is a gap between what regulations demand and what local centers can realistically comply with. The regulation is often more about infrastructure standards than ensuring quality of care or learning outcomes.	Kate discussed how while the state engages with civil society to some extent, this relationship is often transactional, with CSOs viewed as service providers rather than true partners in policy development.	CSOs help local communities and practitioners by providing them with the skills and support needed to make a meaningful impact. There is recognition that while an agency exists, it is constrained by the lack of resources and infrastructure.
Samantha	Samantha mentions that funding is always tight, and it is hard for centers to sustain operations. They rely heavily on donor support, but long-term funding remains a challenge.	The government has rigid regulations, and often, smaller organisations cannot meet these requirements. She says that ECD regulations are evolving, but the compliance burden is still a barrier for many community-based centers.	There is a noticeable shift toward working together rather than the government dictating everything. "The government sees communities as stakeholders now, but the support structure is still in its infancy."	Communities are no longer just waiting for help they are creating their own solutions.
Ethan	Funding has been a meaningful change for civil society organisations (CSOs), providing them with consistent and stable financial support.	The regulatory framework for CSOs in South Africa is complex, with various layers of governance and oversight. While there are	There is a growing recognition of the need for stronger partnerships between the state and community organisations, however,	Increased autonomy allows for more innovative solutions to social challenges. By empowering them to design and

	There is a push for more accessible funding models that cater to a wider variety of organisations.	opportunities for funding and development, the regulatory environment can create barriers to entry for some organisations.	The relationship between the state and CSOs is sometimes characterised by mutual suspicion.	implement projects that align with local community needs
Larry	There is an observation that the funding for ECD is not comparable to the resources allocated for primary and secondary education. ECD sites receive a minimal subsidy per child, but this is not enough compared to government support for primary school children.	The process to get ECD sites registered is challenging and may take a long time. This results in centers, such as the Rhodes Daycare Centre, being unregistered, which leads to concerns about their future. The requirements often focus more on paperwork and ticking boxes, rather than addressing the quality of education and care.	There is a perception that the state does not adequately listen to the needs of poor communities. The state operates in a top-down manner, imposing policies, and regulations without considering the realities on the ground. There is a limited but emerging effort to engage civil society organisations (CSOs) in education, although it is still emerging	Civil society organisations play a significant role in education delivery by offering direct services in schools and supporting public schools. There is a recognition of the importance of being responsive to the needs of the children in front of them rather than simply following a set curriculum.
Morgan	Morgan talked about the inadequacy of state funding for ECD. The current level of funding might be insufficient to address the needs of the communities, leading to challenges in delivering quality ECD services.	Morgan highlighted the state's tendency to impose rules and regulations that are not tailored to the actual needs of low-income communities. These regulations may be seen as inflexible, with the state offering "one-size-fits-all" approaches that do not take local conditions into account.	Morgan discussed the strained relationship between the state and civil society. While civil society organisations are working on the ground, they often face challenges in terms of insufficient collaboration and limited support from the state.	Morgan spoke on the role of NGOs in bridging gaps left by formal ECD programmes. Civil Society is stepping in to support communities, enhance access to education, and empower local practitioners to play a more active role in ECD provision.
Conclusion	Before the interviews, we expected insufficient state funding to be a major constraint on ECD, requiring significant increases to support growth. The interviews affirmed this but highlighted how civil	We initially expected state regulations to be overly rigid and unsuited to community-based ECD programmes. The interviews confirmed this perception. Participants noted	We anticipated tension between the state and civil society, with collaboration being key to improving ECD outcomes. The interviews supported this expectation but nuanced it by illustrating the	We initially viewed the agency as a straightforward empowerment of local practitioners through training and tools. The interviews confirmed this but also introduced doubts about its

	society organisations offer alternative funding pathways. While this demonstrates potential to fill gaps, doubts remain about its sustainability and capacity to address broader systemic needs. Fresh insights emerged about the creative ways organisations leverage limited resources, such as integrating community contributions challenging the notion that funding alone is the key to scalable solutions.	not only the inflexibility but also contradictions within the regulatory framework, which sometimes hinder compliance. What stood out was how local actors adapt regulations to their context, often innovating in ways that challenge traditional norms. This highlights the need for regulations to be locally responsive.	varying levels of trust and cooperation across contexts. While some noted improved partnerships with government agencies, others pointed to persistent gaps in communication and alignment. A fresh insight was the importance of civil society's role as a mediator, balancing community needs with state requirements.	depth and scope. While initiatives empower individuals, questions arose about whether this empowerment is sustainable without addressing systemic barriers such as funding and regulations. This underscores the potential for community-led efforts to transform ECD while highlighting the need for broader structural support.
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Table 3 SmartStart Model

Participants	Impact of Initiative	Potential
Chris	Chris highlighted that SmartStart has a strong partnership with the Department of Basic Education (DBE), which has led to the co-production of South Africa's ECD. A major aspect of SmartStart's success lies in its asset-based approach to community development. Rather than focusing on deficits, SmartStart emphasises the assets already present in low-income communities, such as relationships, social capital, and local knowledge. SmartStart started with a commitment to scale, realising that the infrastructure required for traditional models would take decades to achieve. The initiative has reached thousands of practitioners and children, contributing significantly to early learning without relying on purpose-built infrastructure or highly formal qualifications.	Chris emphasised by tapping into social capital and the dedication of local practitioners, SmartStart has the potential to create lasting change in ECD without the heavy financial and logistical burdens of traditional models. The model aligns well with the realities of South African communities, where many children are cared for outside formal education settings. Chris suggested that SmartStart's approach could redefine what quality ECD looks like. This could allow the programme to grow and make a broader impact, especially in underfunded areas.
Chipo	Chipo highlighted that SmartStart's model empowers local communities by working through existing civil society organisations. This helps expand the reach of ECD services in underserved areas. Chipo discussed how SmartStart's approach fills gaps in the existing	Chipo believes that SmartStart's collaboration with both government bodies and large civil society organisations provides a unique opportunity for the initiative to have greater impact. Chipo is optimistic about SmartStart's potential to not only focus on formal ECD centers but also extend its services to out-of-school children and other informal settings.

	ECD system, particularly in terms of providing crucial resources, training, and support for ECD practitioners who may not have formal qualifications. This helps build capacity in local ECD centers. According to Chipso, SmartStart is creating a sustainable model for ECD delivery by ensuring that local practitioners are equipped with the tools and training necessary.	
Jordan	Jordan emphasised the significant strides SmartStart has made in expanding access to quality ECD opportunities in underserved communities. SmartStart emphasises high-quality training for practitioners and the creation of scalable models that can be easily replicated across various contexts. SmartStart has formalised informal ECD settings, assisting in registration and ensuring compliance with national standards, thus elevating the overall quality of ECD.	Regarding the potential of SmartStart, Jordan focuses on the programme's ability to drive transformative change within the ECD landscape in South Africa and beyond. She highlights SmartStart's role in setting an example for how civil society can play a crucial part in driving systemic change, advocating for better integration of community-based models with government-led initiatives.
Alex	SmartStart has made progress in reaching children who otherwise would not have access to early learning opportunities. The initiative targets children in underserved communities, specifically those who have no early learning stimulation, often due to geographical or socio-economic barriers. One of the key impacts of SmartStart is the creation of employment opportunities for mothers, especially those in rural or low-income communities. Through SmartStart, children in these communities experience significant developmental improvements. Unlike traditional ECD centers, SmartStart does not require establishing large physical infrastructures.	As more communities recognise the value, there is growing interest in adopting the SmartStart model, which is flexible and adaptable to different community settings. As SmartStart operates in more regions, there is potential to strengthen collaborations, further enhancing the programme's reach and effectiveness. This would also help attract more financial and resource support.
George	George mentioned he is not an expert on SmartStart; however, he highlights that SmartStart's ability to engage local communities is crucial to its impact. By employing community members as caregivers and educators, SmartStart fosters local ownership and provides job opportunities. This community-based approach helps address both ECD gaps and unemployment,	The SmartStart model's rapid expansion through partnerships with civil society organisations can significantly scale access to quality early learning. By targeting communities that lack proper ECD services. This could help address the stark disparities in ECD provision across the country, particularly in rural areas.

	aligning with his work in promoting social employment. George acknowledges that SmartStart has made significant strides in filling gaps in ECD access, especially in rural areas where public services are limited.	
Thabo	Thabo noted that SmartStart's work in informal ECD aligns with SEF's broader goal of addressing social ills through employment opportunities. By providing work to ECD practitioners, the initiative not only sustains livelihoods but also strengthens early learning in underserved areas. He highlighted that SmartStart's model ensures that informal ECD providers receive some level of support, which improves both the quality and stability of early learning provision.	Thabo emphasised that SmartStart has the potential to bridge critical gaps in informal ECD provision, particularly if it can secure stable and long-term funding. He suggested that greater government investment would allow SmartStart to expand its reach and deepen its impact. Additionally, he noted that SmartStart could play a key role in shaping policy discussions on how informal ECD can be supported at scale while maintaining quality and accessibility.
Taylor	Taylor discussed the challenges related to accessing government funding for small businesses, particularly the complexity of the processes involved, which can result in individuals needing to hire consultants. These consultants often charge a percentage of the grant, meaning applicants may not receive the full amount they need. She also pointed out the systemic issues within funding structures that disadvantage small businesses. Taylor emphasised the need for more holistic approaches to funding and business support, especially in township economies.	Taylor sees the potential for more tailored funding models that address these challenges, especially for small businesses in townships. She suggested a broader and more inclusive approach to funding and business development, including improving the accessibility of business support services and reducing reliance on consultants. She also emphasised the importance of a balanced approach to industrial policy and social funding, noting the role that government policy plays in fostering inclusive growth. By aligning the goals of DFIs with the realities of local economies, there is potential to support broader economic development and reduce the risks associated with financing businesses in disadvantaged areas.
Kate	She mentioned that SmartStart helps with coordinating and managing partnerships, easing bureaucratic challenges, and empowering existing local structures. Kate highlighted how SmartStart provides a clear curriculum and offers training for individuals without formal qualifications. This training enables them to start working in ECD settings after a few weeks, making it a practical solution for scaling up early learning opportunities.	Kate emphasises the critical role civil society organisations like SmartStart can play as catalysts in ECD development. Given the challenges within state-run systems, such organisations can step in to provide the necessary support that the state alone cannot fully offer. SmartStart can continue its role in bridging the gap between ECD centers and the broader education system.
Samantha	Samantha highlighted that SmartStart has reached a considerable number of children, with 15,000 children being directly impacted through their initiatives. However, she did not have an exact figure for the total children reached	Samantha acknowledged that the SmartStart model has immense potential, especially in terms of scalability. She highlighted that funding insecurity and uncertainty around the permanence of financial resources have been some of the key challenges in scaling up, but

	by SmartStart as a whole. Despite this, the initiative's current impact is seen in the practical training and resources provided to practitioners and centers.	she also clarified that scalability itself is not necessarily a constraint.
Ethan	SmartStart has been able to scale at a remarkable pace. This has allowed SmartStart to reach more communities and impact more children than ever before, addressing gaps left by the state in ECD. The programme's emphasis on providing agency and training to marginalised communities has made a significant difference in the lives of people who would otherwise be left out of the education system.	SmartStart has the potential to radically transform ECD provision across South Africa by filling in the gaps where traditional government programmes have been lacking. SmartStart can offer scalable, sustainable solutions that support ECD centers. Its model could serve as a blueprint for other countries to scale ECD in a meaningful way, especially in resource-constrained settings.
Larry	SmartStart has made strides in expanding access to quality early childhood education, especially in underserved communities. It allows local entrepreneurs to run early learning programmes, which increase accessibility without the need for large-scale government infrastructure investment. Although there are challenges regarding the consistency and quality of education across different SmartStart centers, the model is designed to bridge gaps in the traditional ECD system.	The potential for SmartStart to scale further across South Africa and into other developing countries lies in its franchise model. SmartStart could help reduce the pressure on state-run centers while improving the quality of early childhood education.
Morgan	Morgan says that SmartStart plays a crucial role in addressing the significant gaps in ECD, especially for children in marginalised or underserved areas. SmartStart creates meaningful employment while also contributing to the community's long-term resilience. SmartStart has a direct impact on preparing children for formal schooling by providing clear curriculums for practitioners to follow.	The potential for SmartStart to expand its reach, particularly into areas where access to early education remains limited. SmartStart could serve as a solution to the overwhelming demand for quality ECD services in rural or township areas.
Conclusion	Before the interviews, we understood that SmartStart was designed to address gaps in ECD provision by equipping practitioners with tools, training, and a standardised model. The interviews confirmed its significant reach and impact, particularly in underserved areas. Participants highlighted improvements in early learning outcomes and local capacity-building but raised concerns about the adequacy of support and training, especially for practitioners	We initially saw SmartStart as a scalable model for ECD that could bridge systemic gaps, especially in areas underserved by the state. The interviews reinforced this potential but also cast doubt on its ability to operate on a scale without significant structural adjustments. While SmartStart offers a lean, replicable framework, practitioners noted that funding limitations, regulatory barriers, and disparities in practitioner readiness could hinder long-term sustainability. This suggests that its scalability hinges not only on external support.

	with limited prior experience. A fresh insight was the dual role SmartStart plays not just as a service provider but also as a catalyst for community engagement.	
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Table 4 Social Employment Fund

Participant	Impact of Initiative	Potential
Chris	SEF has helped highlight the importance of supporting women's labor, which often goes unrecognised in South African society. This focus aligns with addressing systemic inequities in the labor force and early learning. SEF has facilitated stipends for employment opportunities, with funds often sourced from programmes like the Jobs Fund. While these stipends are employment-focused, they indirectly contribute to improving early learning by empowering practitioners financially.	SEF could leverage CSOs like SmartStart as intermediaries to distribute subsidies more effectively to practitioners, especially in informal settings. This could address the challenge of government systems being unable to manage direct payouts efficiently. If SEF can resolve regulatory and budgetary hurdles, it could significantly scale up practitioner support. This includes leveraging existing social grant systems (e.g., SASA) for efficient fund transfers.
Chipo	SEF is helping individuals, especially in underserved communities, to become more confident and capable. For example, practitioners who were once unemployed are now gaining skills and confidence, allowing them to lead ECD sessions. This transformation is empowering people who previously had limited opportunities. This approach highlights the value of human resources and community capabilities, suggesting that with the right support.	SEF's focus on empowering communities aligns with the broader mission of SmartStart. SEF can complement SmartStart's approach by fostering sustainability and reducing dependency on external funding. Involving diverse stakeholders ensures a more scalable solution to South Africa's ECD challenges
Jordan	SEF has played a role in creating job opportunities; by employing individuals as early childhood practitioners or community helpers, it has provided not only income but also skills development in ECD. SEF has significantly expanded access to early childhood education in rural and underserved areas. SEF ensures that more children can access quality early learning, especially where traditional centers are scarce.	SEF's model holds immense potential to reach a greater number of children, particularly in underdeveloped regions. The success of SEF could serve as a model for aligning national policy goals with community implementation. The future of SEF could involve deeper collaboration between civil society organisations, the government, and the private sector.
Alex	SEF helps bridge gaps by reaching areas where government	There is significant potential if the government opens more to working with local organisations.

	infrastructure is lacking, such as transportation and resources for officials to get to rural locations. SEF enables collaboration rather than taking over government functions. SEF contributes to job creation by supporting local practitioners, empowering them to provide services.	With the right support and funding, initiatives like SEF could be scaled up to cover even more communities, allowing for a broader reach and more impactful delivery. SEF's decentralised approach allows for more flexibility in implementation and reduces bureaucratic hurdles.
George	SEF supports over 50,000 workers monthly, providing not just jobs but roles contributing to the "common good" in communities. By partnering with CSOs, the SEF empowers local people who have a deeper understanding of community needs. This decentralisation enhances the effectiveness of public employment programmes. The IDC's strong governance structures make SEF funds more transparent and efficient, potentially rebuilding trust in public employment programmes. George highlighted that SEF operates within a regulatory framework set by the government. SEF must navigate this carefully to align with national policies while being locally effective.	If sustained, the SEF can shift public employment programmes from infrastructure-focused efforts to broader, socially impactful initiatives. This includes addressing systemic issues like ECD gaps, environmental concerns, and food security. SEF could enhance the capacity and influence of CSOs, enabling them to become long-term partners. Its "distance" from traditional government institutions like ensures better oversight and less corruption.
Thabo	Thabo highlighted that SEF has been instrumental in addressing unemployment while simultaneously supporting key sectors like informal ECD. By funding wages, SEF ensures that practitioners in under-resourced areas can continue providing early learning services. He noted that this approach helps stabilise informal ECD centers, which often struggle due to inconsistent parental payments. Additionally, SEF's focus on social ills and employment opportunities has created 50,000 jobs, demonstrating its potential as a scalable intervention.	Thabo emphasised that SEF could further enhance its impact by strengthening support for informal ECD providers. He suggested that SEF should work more closely with CSOs to ensure that funds reach practitioners efficiently, reducing administrative burdens. He also noted that resolving regulatory constraints and securing long-term government commitment could allow SEF to become a sustainable mechanism for funding early learning, particularly in low-income communities.
Taylor	SEF is viewed as a useful model for creating development impact, particularly in providing grants that pay workers' wages instead of loans that need to be repaid. SEF supports large partners (e.g., National Arts Festival) to scale impact, avoiding complications in dealing with small organisations directly.	SEF could leverage development finance institutions (DFIs) to expand its reach and access additional funding, avoiding tax-related constraints faced by the IDC. SEF could mobilise private sector funds more effectively through corporate social investment (CSI), encouraging businesses to channel their funds into meaningful social impact projects like small businesses or early learning initiatives.

	The initiative emphasises financial oversight and accountability, ensuring that funds are used appropriately, with a banking-like approach that avoids direct government intervention. The SEF could be a catalyst for linking development finance to small businesses in local communities, helping to create an ecosystem that supports social employment.	Strengthening the SEF model could allow for further scaling of social employment, especially through DFIs and larger partners, providing more efficient access to social grants and direct support to practitioners.
Kate	SEF funding enabled the addition of fifty participants per phase, improving service delivery and the impact of programmes such as toy libraries and play-based learning initiatives. SEF participants have been instrumental in providing literacy support (e.g., through the WordWorks Little Stars programme). SEF participants are trained in essential skills and provided with opportunities to contribute to their communities, enhancing their employability and sense of purpose.	SEF addresses critical shortages in ECD capacity where the Department of Education is overstretched, especially in areas with limited resources like Makanda. The SEF model, with its focus on partnerships has the potential to be replicated across other regions, providing targeted interventions for gaps in underserved areas.
Samantha	Samantha emphasised that SEF has been instrumental in funding and employing people, thereby creating socially beneficial and meaningful projects. SEF helped tackle the issue of attrition within the workforce. People who might otherwise leave for more stable, higher-paying jobs (e.g., at Pick n Pay) are now able to stay within the sector due to the security offered by SEF funding, thus reducing turnover. Despite the challenge of short-term contracts (10 months), Samantha stated that this was not perceived as a major issue because they manage participants' expectations by being transparent about the duration and the uncertainty regarding contract renewals.	There is a belief in the potential for expanding SEF-funded initiatives to reach even more communities, with a goal of serving a million children. Samantha spoke about how the government's increasing recognition of the role of civil society has created more room for collaboration. There is potential for the SEF to be more fully integrated into government initiatives.
Ethan	Ethan describes the impact of SEF as transformative, especially for organisations which had previously struggled with limited interaction and support from government. SEF has enabled mass employment and community empowerment, providing jobs to individuals in marginalised communities and	From Ethan's perspective, the potential of the SEF is vast, and he sees it as a potential model for employment programmes in South Africa and even globally. Ethan envisions the SEF's model as a sustainable and adaptable approach that can cater to the needs of local communities through civil society's direct involvement. By providing real-time employment opportunities.

	sectors. The 55,000 participants currently employed under the SEF are paid reliably every month, and their training programmes ensure skill development.	
Larry	His view on the impact of SEF focuses on its potential to empower civil society organisations and smaller NGOs by providing financial support while allowing them flexibility in how the funds are used. This decentralised approach is seen as crucial for addressing gaps in service provision. Through SEF, organisations like the National Arts Festival and smaller NGOs gain the resources needed to reach local communities and have a tangible impact without being overly constrained by bureaucracy.	He sees it as a more progressive approach to development and service delivery. SEF creates an opportunity for localised responses to community needs. He highlights the potential of SEF to decentralise decision-making, like how SmartStart operates. This flexibility, he argues, is key to addressing the complexities of informal sectors.
Morgan	SEF has been beneficial in terms of providing financial resources to civil society organisations that are often the primary actors in community development. For organisations, SEF funding helps to sustain and expand programmes that otherwise might not be possible due to the lack of consistent government funding.	She is optimistic about the potential of SEF, particularly in terms of building local capacity and decentralising power from the state to civil society. Long-term potential of SEF to not only strengthen ECD provision but also to encourage more holistic development within communities.
Conclusion	Before the interviews, it was understood that the Social Employment Fund (SEF) plays a vital role in addressing unemployment and creating social value, particularly in ECD. The interviews confirmed its positive impact on providing meaningful employment opportunities while filling critical service gaps in underserved communities. However, they nuanced this understanding by highlighting challenges such as inconsistent training, the temporary nature of employment, and the pressure to demonstrate measurable outcomes within limited timeframes. A fresh insight from the interviews was the indirect impact of SEF on broader community development by employing individuals in ECD roles, it not only enhances early learning provision but fosters local economic resilience.	Initially, SEF was viewed as a promising model for integrating social employment with community development goals, including ECD. The interviews reinforced their potential but raised doubts. While SEF provides a flexible framework for engaging diverse participants, its long-term viability was questioned due to reliance on government funding and the need for clearer policy alignment. An insight emerged around SEF's potential to foster innovative partnerships between the state and civil society, enabling co-created solutions for ECD provision. This suggests that while SEF has transformative potential, its success will depend on sustained investment, policy coherence, and the strengthening of its workforce capacity.

Table 5 Mode of delivery and advocacy

Participants	Potential new mode of delivery collaboration with CS	Policy Advocacy	Challenges/ Limitations
Chris	Chris highlights the potential of collaborative models where the state partners with civil society, especially in sectors like ECD and social employment. He recognises that even small investments can make significant differences, provided they are allocated effectively. However, he also stresses that building these systems demands significant effort, testing, and adaptability to address failures in supply, demand, and systems infrastructure.	Chris underscores the importance of shifting societal narratives around ECD and social employment, noting that technical language like "ECD" or "social employment" may not resonate with broader audiences, including parents and community members. He suggests leveraging broader and relatable themes like "childhood" or community well-being to foster demand. He advocates for understanding demand-side failures in ECD as nuanced, tied to economic and political factors, and influenced by systemic issues. Effective advocacy should address these latent demands.	Chris highlighted the difficulty of scaling ECD services due to geographic and infrastructure challenges, particularly in rural areas. He emphasised the lack of training and consistent support for practitioners, which limits the effectiveness of existing programmes. Additionally, he pointed out that cultural and language barriers often complicate standardisation and quality control efforts.
Chipo	Chipo sees enormous potential in models like SmartStart and community-driven initiatives, particularly those supported by SEF. Given her experience, she emphasises that these models have a promising capacity to address gaps in ECD provision. The success of these models hinges on ensuring that community members are not just participants, but also deeply invested in the success of the programmes.	She advocates more sustainable funding for ECD initiatives, with a focus on marginalised communities. ECD is not just a social responsibility but a way to reduce inequalities in the long term. She supports a shift in policy to better recognise and integrate non-center-based ECD models. The government's current focus on center-based models limits access for many children in rural or underserved urban areas.	Chipo pointed to the challenge of ensuring quality in lean, community-based ECD models, particularly when resources are spread thin. She discussed the importance of local buy-in and community ownership in scaling efforts but acknowledged that such approaches require considerable time and effort to establish. Chipo also stressed that without stronger government recognition and support, initiatives like SEF are limited in their ability to scale impact effectively.
Jordan	Jordan highlights the potential of SmartStart's franchise model to scale across South Africa, particularly in underserved communities. She views SEF as a critical mechanism for driving	She advocates for a shift in national policy to recognise the value of community-based ECD initiatives and the role of civil society organisations like SmartStart in providing quality early learning. Given SmartStart's	Jordan highlighted the persistent funding constraints as a major challenge to scaling ECD provision, particularly in maintaining quality and sustainability in rural and underserved areas. She emphasised the need for more robust public-private partnerships to bridge funding gaps and build capacity. Jordan also noted the difficulty of retaining skilled practitioners in the sector due to

	positive change, especially in communities that have long been neglected in terms of early childhood services. SEF not only addresses ECD needs but also creates job opportunities and contributes to local economies.	community-based model, Jordan calls for more targeted investment in ECD, particularly funding that supports the scaling of effective models. She advocates for ECD policy change to broader national development goals.	low wages and limited career progression opportunities, which impacts programme consistency and quality.
Alex	Alex recognises a growing shift in how some government officials view collaboration with civil society. He notes that there is an emerging realisation that empowering people, rather than simply providing grants, or building infrastructure, can lead to more effective service delivery. This shift is especially noticeable when officials see the long-term benefits not just for the people, but for their own political success as well. This varies depending on the municipality or district.	Policy advocates should emphasise the need for equal opportunities for all children in their early years. Providing quality ECD to every child, particularly from 0 to 5 years old, will set a solid foundation for lifelong success and contribute to reducing societal challenges like crime and educational disparities. He also points out that children who receive proper early development, as demonstrated by a boy interested in engineering, will grow up knowing their strengths and aspirations, thus having a clearer sense of direction.	Alex pointed out that the main challenge in scaling ECD lies in the inconsistency and lack of alignment in policy implementation at various levels of government. This fragmented approach makes it difficult for ECD programmes to reach the intended communities efficiently. He emphasised that while some areas have robust policies, others experience delays or lack the necessary follow-through to ensure quality provision. Additionally, Alex mentioned that there is often a disconnect between local governments and implementing partners, leading to missed opportunities for more coordinated and impactful programmes. Another challenge he identified was the resistance to change within traditional educational structures, which hinders the adoption of innovative models like SmartStart or SEF.
George	George highlighted that CSOs often have flexibility, proximity to communities, and innovation that state institutions lack. This creates potential for effective partnerships where the state sets broad frameworks and CSOs operationalise them. Current coordination between the state and CSOs is fragmented. SEF highlights how involving CSOs as intermediaries can deliver broader community benefits beyond direct ECD services. George emphasised the	Advocacy should focus on ensuring stable, long-term funding streams for CSOs involved in state-partnered programmes like SEF. Policies should include provisions for training and resources to enable CSOs to effectively partner with the state. George stressed the need for robust frameworks to assess the impact of state-CSO collaborations, ensuring accountability and continuous improvement. The role of CSOs in achieving broader developmental goals, such as reducing	George focused on the constraints posed by insufficient funding and the bureaucratic hurdles that civil society organisations face when engaging with government programmes. He also noted the lack of integration across various levels of government, which leads to inefficiencies in resource allocation. Furthermore, George emphasised the importance of creating sustainable funding models and fostering partnerships to address systemic gaps.

	importance of the state remaining accountable for core services while leveraging CSOs to enhance delivery.	unemployment through SEF, should be highlighted in advocacy efforts	
Thabo	Thabo highlighted the importance of government and civil society working together to deliver services, particularly through initiatives like SEF. This collaborative approach allows for the distribution of stipends and creates job opportunities, with the state facilitating funds while CSOs can ensure they are reaching practitioners in informal settings. This model can address gaps in the formal sector by reaching those in underserved areas, ensuring wider access to early learning programmes.	Thabo emphasised the need for targeted advocacy to address the unique barriers faced by informal ECD providers. He suggested that advocacy efforts should focus on the importance of ECD within broader societal goals, like improving community well-being and creating economic opportunities. He also noted the importance of engaging with communities on a local level to change perceptions and raise awareness about the value of early childhood education.	Thabo pointed out several challenges in the current model of delivery, particularly related to the informal nature of many ECD programmes. He mentioned that informal providers struggle with a lack of infrastructure, qualified personnel, and regulatory clarity. Another limitation is the challenge of securing consistent, long-term funding to maintain and scale the programme. He stressed that resolving bureaucratic hurdles and improving coordination between stakeholders could help address these challenges.
Taylor	SEF helps to maximise local potential by employing people to utilise underused spaces, like community halls in Grahamstown, transforming them into libraries or spaces for play-based learning. It strengthens existing efforts within townships, often revitalising them in a more structured and productive way. The fund's value lies in identifying and enhancing what is already happening in marginalised areas, maximising community assets for developmental purposes.	Early learning in South Africa has long been neglected in comparison to other sectors of education. Research is needed to demonstrate the potential social and economic benefits of prioritising early childhood education. However, there is a challenge in how government consumes research, with policymakers often needing simplified, actionable insights rather than detailed reports. Policy briefs and direct advocacy through channels like the Presidential Economic Advisory Council, which includes prominent economists and development experts, could help fast-track discussions and policy integration.	Key issues in South Africa are the often top-down relationship between the state and civil society, where NGOs are expected to fill gaps but are not treated as true partners. SmartStart's partnership with civil society is seen as a more horizontal and empowering model, promoting decentralisation, and utilising local, well-capacitated social partners. The shift toward collaborating with large-scale social partners has been essential for scaling operations, allowing for effective execution without overwhelming government systems.
Kate	Kate emphasised that CSOs like the Centre	Kate advocated for policies that establish	Kate Green pointed out significant resource constraints at the community

	for Social Development (CSD) have intimate knowledge of community needs, making them critical for bridging gaps left by state systems. CSOs can adopt holistic strategies, addressing not just ECD but related challenges like food security and parental support, which the state often overlook. Kate noted that the state has increasingly relied on CSOs to fill service gaps.	clear, enforceable quality standards for ECD initiatives, particularly those led by CSOs. Kate emphasised the need for CSOs to have a seat at the table in policy formulation, ensuring their on-the-ground expertise shapes effective strategies. She highlighted the importance of advocating for predictable and sustainable funding mechanisms for CSOs involved in ECD, reducing dependency on donor funding.	level, which hinder scalability and limit the reach of ECD programmes. She also emphasised the challenges posed by inadequate infrastructure and the varying levels of support from local governments. Moreover, Kate stressed the importance of flexible policies that accommodate diverse operational models while ensuring minimum quality thresholds.
Samantha	Samantha is optimistic about the evolving relationship between the state and civil society in the delivery of ECD services. She sees this as a positive shift towards more collaborative, democratic, and embedded modes of service delivery. In this model, civil society is seen as a key partner that complements the state's efforts in delivering ECD. Samantha highlights that the state is becoming more receptive to the role of civil society in helping address the challenges within ECD.	In terms of policy advocacy, Samantha emphasises the need for a more comprehensive understanding and prioritisation of ECD, particularly within government policy. She notes that while the state is beginning to acknowledge the importance of ECD, more work is needed to translate this recognition into practical support. One of the major policy gaps she identifies is the need for better funding, long-term commitment, and stable job creation within the ECD sector. She points out that the current model of short-term contracts undermines long-term sustainability and the retention of skilled workers.	Samantha emphasised the importance of community engagement in scaling ECD but noted that grassroots initiatives often struggle with resource shortages and limited government support. She pointed out that while innovative models exist, they require significant investment in training and support to ensure quality. Samantha also highlighted the issue of fragmented communication between stakeholders, which hinders cohesive and sustainable scaling efforts.
Ethan	SEF's reliance on non-specialised workers (e.g., helpers rather than fully qualified teachers) is a potentially groundbreaking approach to overcoming resource shortages in ECD,	Ethan suggests that policy should support these models more effectively, potentially by embedding them into national frameworks for service delivery, education, and welfare. Advocacy is needed to ensure that SEF's model	Ethan discussed the challenges of integrating ECD with broader community development initiatives, noting that many programmes operate in silos, reducing their overall impact. He identified digital literacy and access to technology as potential solutions for scaling but acknowledged the constraints of infrastructure and affordability in many areas. Ethan also stressed the need

	especially in underserved areas. This model presents a shift from the traditional qualification-based delivery towards more accessible, community-driven solutions that leverage the skills of local workers. SEF's broader social employment mandate allows for a flexible model where ECD is just one aspect of the service provider sectors.	is not seen as a temporary or short-term solution. Instead, it should be viewed as a sustainable, long-term approach that could be integrated into mainstream educational and welfare systems. There is a need for policy frameworks that legitimise and strengthen the role of non-qualified workers in the ECD space.	for more flexible policies that adapt to the diversity of contexts across South Africa, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all approach.
Larry	Larry highlights the importance of reliable and standardised assessment data in making informed decisions about educational improvements. By assessing Grade 4 learners using tools comparable to the PEARLS instruments, community initiatives are now able to collect valid data on students' reading for meaning, which can then be used to track performance, identify gaps, and intervene more effectively.	There is a need for policy to recognise the growing importance of civil society involvement in education, especially in places like Makanda, where civil society initiatives like GADRA, local universities, and SEF have had a positive impact on the education system. Policy should foster environments that support collaboration between government and these non-governmental actors, recognising their role in improving educational outcomes at the local level.	Larry highlighted funding limitations as a major constraint to scaling ECD provision, along with the challenge of training and retaining skilled practitioners. She emphasised disparities in access to resources across communities and the need for stronger collaboration between the government and civil society organisations to address these gaps effectively.
Morgan	Morgan discussed the importance of partnership, rather than competition, between the state and civil society, especially in terms of aligning goals and ensuring that both sectors are working toward the same outcomes. Morgan stressed that the relationship between CSOs and the government should be seen as complementary, rather than antagonistic, with each playing a role in	Looking ahead, Morgan is optimistic about the potential for civil society to continue its efforts to support ECD, especially in communities where there is already strong collaboration, like Makhanda. However, she highlights the need for more sustainable funding, greater recognition of the importance of early education. Morgan argues that civil society can act as a support system.	Morgan raised concerns about the quality of ECD provision, particularly with the minimal training required for practitioners in models like SmartStart. She also discussed the difficulty of implementing uniform standards while addressing diverse community needs, fragmentation in policy implementation, and the lack of public awareness in underserved areas. Additionally, Morgan noted that long-term sustainability depends on balancing cost-effectiveness with quality assurance.

	strengthening the broader education system.		
Conclusion	Before the interviews, it was assumed that collaboration between the government and civil society could create innovative delivery models for ECD. The interviews confirmed this potential, with examples such as SmartStart and SEF displaying effective partnerships that leverage local knowledge and networks. However, the interviews emphasised the importance of equitable collaboration, where civil society organisations are not merely seen as service delivery mechanisms but as partners in co-creating solutions.	Before the interviews, it was clear that civil society has a role in shaping policy for better ECD provision. The interviews validated this view, with participants stressing the need for civil society organisations advocating for more flexible policies. However, they also highlighted challenges such as limited access to policymakers and the dominance of top-down approaches. A new perspective emerged around the role of data and evidence generated by civil society initiatives in influencing policy. This suggests that advocacy efforts could be strengthened by leveraging impact assessments and success stories to build a compelling case for policy change.	It was known that scaling ECD initiatives faces challenges such as funding, training, and regulatory barriers. The interviews reinforced these challenges but provided understanding of their interconnected nature. For instance, participants noted how funding constraints directly impact the quality of training and the ability to comply with rigid regulations. Additionally, the interviews introduced fresh insights, such as the need for greater adaptability in models to suit diverse contexts and the persistent challenge of ensuring community buy-in. These findings underscore that while the potential for scaling exists, overcoming these barriers will require systemic changes, including better policy alignment and sustained investment.

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