

Towards a better investment in the rights of the child Cotlands review on early childhood education in South Africa

In this review Cotlands takes a look at the mobilization, allocation and spending of resources towards **early learning** in South Africa. The review has taken into account the following documents:

- a) South African Integrated Programme of Action for Early Childhood Development – Moving ahead (2013-2018).
- b) Diagnostic review of early childhood development – April 2012.
- c) Sobambisana initiative – Learning brief 4 – Playgroups
- d) The Essential Package
- e) National Development Plan 2011

Allocation of resources

Over the past 5 years there has been significant growth in government's spending in the early childhood development (ECD) space. In 2010 the Minister of Finance announced that social development spending, which provides welfare services and early childhood development programmes, was set to grow from R9.3 billion in 2009/10 to R12.2 billion by 2012/13 – a significant stride for early childhood development in South Africa. Even more encouraging was government's growing realisation of the importance of early childhood education, which has been clearly prioritised in the National Development Plan released in 2011. That same year further financial provision was given to the Department of Basic Education to formalise early childhood education by introducing Grade R and incorporating ECD centres into all newly built primary schools – an important step as it legitimizes the importance of early childhood education.

The challenge though with allocating additional resources lies in how to ensure that the end recipient – poor and vulnerable children – benefit from these resources. For many years, our society has been trapped in a centre based model – a building with 1.5m² for every child, a toilet and hand basin for every 20 children and so on. While this is the ideal, it is not practical in a country where an estimated 70% of children have no access to early learning opportunities, and where poor infrastructure and transport – especially in rural areas - are major barriers to a centre based model.

To resolve this, in 2012, government started to look around for examples of non-centre based services which were delivering a quality programme. One of the models identified was Cotlands early learning playgroup model where groups of up to 20 children can access a high impact programme twice a week, within walking distance of where they live. This model is useful in that it does not require a large cadre of trained personnel, it can be relatively easily taken to scale, it can be implemented anywhere where there is a group of children – community or church halls, homesteads, converted containers, even outside in good weather. As the programme draws its resources from toy libraries, it is also cost-effective.

So here we had a model and an agreement with the department of social development (DSD) to fund it on a “per child per play session” basis, which presented the next challenge. DSD cannot fund a service that is not registered, and the ECD sub-directorate requires that both the facility and the programme

meets prescribed requirements. At provincial level an agreement was reached to just register the programme, but the DSD representatives on the ground still insisted that each site had to meet the facility standards, even though this was a non-centre based model. The end result was a six month delay in signing the service level agreements, with the corresponding delay in funding. Cotlands fortunately has the resources to cover the operational costs outside of government funding, but if the model is taken to scale, new implementing partners would probably need to have the funding available from the offset.

A third challenge is to get people to accept that two four-hour sessions a week can significantly improve children's cognitive, social and physical development, and that play is the way that children learn. While there is substantial research that confirms the developmental benefits of playgroups, there has been little 'marketing' of this research, especially at grassroots level. As a result communities as well as individuals working in this sector have little understanding of the positive impact a model such as this could have.

Monitoring and evaluation:

Monitoring and evaluation procedures are vital to assessing the impact of any programme. In order to accurately determine the success of early learning programmes measures must be put in place to showcase the outcome of these programmes.

Cotlands has developed an effective electronic monitoring and evaluation system that measures the progress of each child, and tracks the performance of the early learning facilitator. To ensure quality and the resulting return on investment, this is a critical component of any model and yet no provision is made for this expense by DSD. If we are going to be truly accountable, greater provision has to be made for these costs.

Capacity at local government level:

"It is very difficult to make accurate estimates of allocations and expenditure on ECD. This is because ECD cuts across several sectors and departments do not budget according to a common ECD framework. There is thus no identifiable ECD line item running across departmental budgets. Similarly, local government budgets do not identify ECD spending and, in the main, do not fund ECD services" – ECD Diagnostic Review 2012.

Local municipalities do not adequately plan for ECD in their integrated development plans and the only way to mobilise resources at local level is through these plans. In areas where there are civil society advocates for young children there is greater success but this should be part of municipal service delivery regardless of ECD champions in these communities. While local municipalities have a clear constitutional and legislative mandate towards service provision of early childhood development services, this extends mainly to the registering of facilities and building regulations. There are no other obligations by local municipalities to fund or initiate ECD programmes. In order for ECD services to reach those who need it most, line items that relate specifically to ECD programme implementation need to be added to local municipal budgets. In addition ECD programme funding criteria needs to be legislated to guide local governments.

Parents and the private sector

In contrast to governments efforts, parents and caregivers are yet to fully understand how important foundation phase learning is to the child's holistic development and to later learning. As a result we have found that parents are reluctant to take advantage of our free early learning programme. Parental

apathy is of great concern and it is our recommendation that more should be done to educate parents and caregivers on the importance of accessing early learning programmes for their children.

We have also found that corporate social investment (CSI) programmes are yet to catch up with early childhood education trends as some CSI programmes that fund education do not see early childhood education as falling within their focus area. Similarly, CSI programmes that fund early childhood development are more likely to fund feeding schemes and health programmes than ones that focus purely on education. Fortunately, government incentives have boosted corporate social involvement and are influencing CSI policies. In addition, ongoing collaborations between civil society, government and the corporate sector have spurred on ECD efforts.

Enterprise development programmes that have been initiated by the business sector to empower day mothers and ECD practitioners have helped improve overall support to ECD programmes on a more sustainable level.

It is also encouraging to see emerging opportunities such as DG Murray Trust's social franchising initiative that paves the way for the scaling up of non-centre based ECD programmes. Financial support from government and the corporate sector have enhanced civil society campaigns and improve ECD service delivery.

Conclusion and recommendations:

- Financial constraints prohibit Cotlands from reaching more children. It is our recommendation that more financial resources are invested in innovative non-centre based models that are adapted to the South African landscape.
- Financial provision should be made for early learning programmes or programmes that focus on cognitive development.
- Non-centre based models should display strong monitoring and evaluation procedures for an accurate account of programme implementation and impact. These procedures should be subsidised in part by government.
- In order to procure sufficient funds for our programmes, guidelines for non-centre based models need to be drawn up.
- Programmes that target improved child care need to include funding for parent education particularly in the importance of early childhood development.