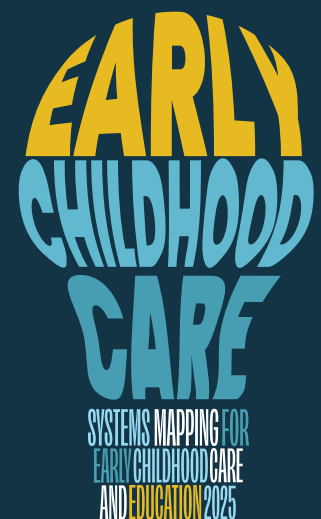


South Africa's Early Childhood Care and Education System

SYSTEMS MAPPING WORKSHOP REPORT 2025



1. Why we gathered together

South Africa has made significant strides in early childhood care and education (ECCE) in recent years, including the development of the 2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development (ECD) Programmes, progress on the Children's Amendment Bill, increased public investment, and the roll-out of a national mass-registration drive. In addition, the newly published Bana Pele Shared Blueprint sets out an ambitious framework for coordinated action to build a sustainable early learning ecosystem that reaches every child — especially those historically excluded — with affordable, quality early learning programmes by 2030, calling for a shift from slow, linear progress toward rapid, exponential transformation.

However, despite this momentum, the ECCE system remains uneven. Structural inequalities persist, regulatory pathways remain difficult to navigate, practitioners are undervalued, and families in low-income communities face the greatest barriers to access. The question is no longer whether progress is possible. It is whether the ECCE ecosystem can act with the coherence and collective purpose that universal access actually demands.

Against this backdrop, SmartStart, the Department of Basic Education (DBE), Ilifa Labantwana, Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, and the Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN) convened a two-day ECCE Systems Mapping Workshop. Practitioners, parents, government officials, civil society organisations, funders, academics, and international partners came together to examine how South Africa's ECCE system functions in practice — and what must shift for universal access to become a reality.

Three insights emerged clearly:

First, progress will depend less on doing more and more on working differently. Across the ecosystem there is considerable activity, innovation and commitment — yet participants repeatedly described it as “resource-rich but coordination-poor.” Fragmented initiatives, weak coordination across spheres of government, and parallel efforts across civil society dilute impact. Unlocking progress will require stronger system leadership, clearer alignment across actors, and more deliberate orchestration of public-private partnerships — bringing government, civil society and the private sector into concert around shared goals.

The workshop demonstrated the value of systems mapping as a tool for collective sense-making — helping diverse actors see how their piece of the system connects to and shapes others and building a shared understanding that collective action requires.

Second, improving quality requires improving the conditions of the workforce that sustains early learning. Participants were unequivocal that programme quality cannot be separated from the economic realities facing practitioners. Low wages, limited career pathways and weak support structures undermine stability and retention. Strengthening ECCE requires greater investment in decent work, mentoring and professional development for the largely women-led workforce that delivers early learning.

Third, sustainable change must be rooted in the realities of families. Access to quality ECCE is shaped not only by policy and funding, but by affordability, trust, safety and social norms. Caregivers, practitioners and local leaders must be central to how solutions are designed and implemented.

Underpinning all of this is a fundamental shift in mindsets and narratives — from seeing ECCE as a welfare issue to recognising it as essential social and economic infrastructure for children, families and South Africa's future.

2. What systems thinking offers

South Africa's ECCE system does not underperform because people are not trying, or because policy intent is absent. Government has introduced important reforms, and many actors across the sector are working hard to expand access and improve quality. Yet outcomes on the ground remain uneven.

The challenge lies in the forces that shape how the system functions — and that are often difficult to see when problems are tackled one at a time. Funding exists at a national level, but regulatory barriers mean many programmes cannot access it. Policies promote quality early learning, yet practitioners work in conditions where training and support are inconsistent. And deeply held beliefs — that care work is women's work, that ECCE is a welfare issue rather than a social and economic development priority — quietly shape decisions across the system, from household level to national policy.

Systems thinking brings these dynamics into view. Working together with the systems map, diverse actors — government officials, practitioners, parents, civil society and funders — begin to see how their piece of the system connects to and shapes others.

Our deepest gratitude to our facilitator, Viliانا Dzhartova (and her wonderful team at Re-Imagined Futures, Paz Constantini and Marcelo Monteverde) for holding the space with such care and clarity. To our colleagues from the Network for Education Systems Transformation (NEST) who travelled from India and Peru to be with us. To our visual harvester, Robert Dersley, for capturing complexity with beauty. But above all, thank you to the people at the heart of this system — the parents, practitioners, academics, civil society partners, government officials, and funders — whose insight, honesty and generosity shaped every conversation over these two days.



What is your hope for the next 2 days?



3. Reading the ECCE systems map

The ECCE systems map is a tool for collective sense-making – a common starting point from which diverse actors across the ecosystem can surface different experiences, question what they think they know, and identify leverage points for change. Technically, it takes the form of a qualitative causal-loop diagram: a visual representation of how different factors interact, reinforce one another, and shape how ECCE operates in South Africa.

What the map focuses on:

- Care triangle: child, caregiver and practitioner.
- Geographical boundary: South Africa.
- Children between zero-and-five years old.
- Diverse modalities of ECCE (including home and community-based provision).
- Children's right to development and learning.
- Women empowerment.
- Economics of provision.
- Interface between ECCE and wider socio-economic development.
- Infrastructure and environment affecting ECCE.

What is out of focus:

- Care economy in the wider meaning.
- Migration.
- Greening initiatives/climate adaptability strategies.
- Certain subsystems under ECD, such as nutrition, health and social protection.

Systems thinking matters because it allows us to:

- Make sense of a system that is too complex for any single actor to fully see or navigate alone.
- Identify leverage points where coordinated action could produce out-sized impact.
- Surface the assumptions and beliefs that silently shape the system.
- Illuminate linkages between areas that are often treated separately – for example, practitioner wages and child outcomes, parental demand and gender norms.

4. How the workshop unfolded

The workshop unfolded as a layered journey, from lived experience to structural insight, to strategic possibility. We started by looking at the ECCE system through the eyes of the child, the caregiver, and the practitioner. Using the iceberg model, the group explored not only what is visible in daily life, but the deeper patterns, norms, and structures that shape it.

We then turned to the ECCE systems map, and in small groups discussed what the map captures well, where it diverges from South African realities, and what felt missing or incomplete.

On the second day, the focus shifted from description to dynamics. We considered bright spots, frozen areas and domino effects in the system and then reflected on where the system concentrates its energy and what this reveals about how it currently operates.

A final prompt asked what must change: what new strategies and ways of working could move us more quickly toward universal, quality access?

EARLY
CHILDHOOD
CARE

Burden of child care left to women



5. Seeing beneath the surface: insights from the iceberg exercise

The iceberg lens offered a way to move beyond the visible symptoms of the ECCE system and into the deeper forces that shape daily realities for children, caregivers, and practitioners.

From the practitioner perspective, a story of chronic undervaluation came into focus. Care work continues to be seen as women's work; wages remain low; regulatory demands far exceed available support; and many practitioners operate in the informal economy, juggling multiple roles simply to keep their doors open.

From the caregiver perspective, daily decisions about early learning outside the home are shaped by a mix of economic pressures, safety concerns, transport challenges, and limited access to clear, information about ECCE. Gendered expectations continue to position child-rearing as women's responsibility, limiting men's involvement in children's care.

From the child's perspective, the system mirrors the inequalities of the society around them. Access is uneven, early barriers to learning are often missed, children with disabilities encounter exclusion, and the perception that 'formal learning begins in Grade 1', continues to limit opportunities during the early years.

6. What the map revealed: refining the systems picture for South Africa

The map-review sessions invited participants to sit inside the system and test whether the visual story matched local realities. Conversations surfaced a rich set of insights about how the ECCE system is currently framed, and what would need to shift for the map to speak more accurately to the South African context.



Where the map felt true to South African realities:

- The map made the interdependence of the system unmistakable – illustrating how political will, public awareness, affordability, coordination, workforce conditions and child outcomes shape one another in continuous feedback loops.
- Participants recognised the map's ability to portray ECCE as a multi-layered system, spanning formal and informal provision, with many different routes through which children access care and learning.
- The map resonated in how it reflected South Africa's fragmented but interconnected ecosystem, where weaknesses in one area ripples across the whole.
- Participants emphasised the influence of attitudes, expectations and gender norms, noting that these underlying mindsets shape decisions across the system – yet this dimension is not visible enough in the current map.

Where the map diverged or felt incomplete:

- Participants were of the view that the map's deep structure leans too heavily on law, policy and political priority, with insufficient attention to family practices, social norms, community expectations and access to care. They argued that these realities need to sit more visibly in the map.
- Participants called for clearer representation of how ECCE connects to the formal education system. This includes making the position and implications of compulsory Grade R clearer.
- The map intentionally placed certain subsystems – including nutrition, food security, early health screening, and safety from violence and neglect – out of focus, reflecting its specific scope as an ECCE map rather than a broader ECD map. Across group discussions however, participants raised these as significant gaps, questioning whether this boundary holds in the South African context, where these conditions are so foundational to whether children can access and benefit from early learning at all.

- The layered responsibilities of national, provincial and local government are not clearly visible in the map, despite profound influence on regulation, funding, implementation and accountability across the system. Participants also noted that the map assumes levels of state capacity, budget, and formality that do not reflect reality – obscuring the extent to which informal provision and non-state actors currently close these gaps in the system.
- Participants emphasised that patriarchal norms and safety concerns shape who is seen as an acceptable caregiver and who accesses ECCE. They also argued that broad references to "vulnerable children" are inadequate and that the map should explicitly name groups facing intersecting barriers to ECCE access, including children with disabilities, undocumented and migrant children, and children in diverse family forms.

7. Map insights: bright spots, frozen points, and domino effects

This session enabled participants to identify where the system is stuck, where positive momentum exists, and where shifts could create wider impact.

Frozen points:

- Inequality drives uneven access to ECCE programmes.
- Gender norms place responsibility for care work primarily on women and limit men's participation.
- Red tape and compliance barriers stall progress in expanding affordable quality ECCE.
- Weak state capacity and poor coordination keep the system stagnant.

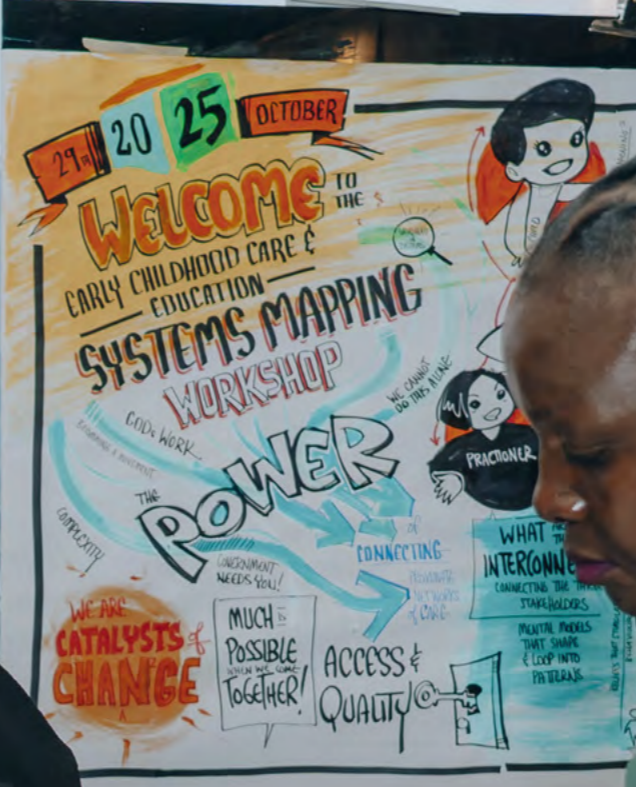
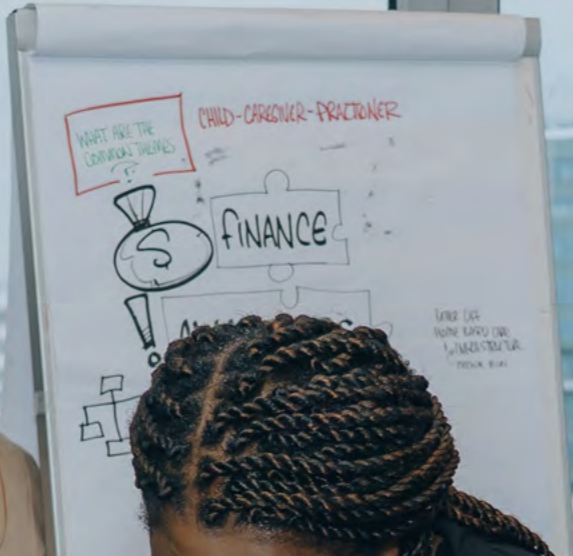
- Care work is undervalued and underpaid.
- Children with disabilities are still excluded.
- System fragmentation creates silos and confusion.
- Child development outcomes remain inconsistent.

Bright spots:

- ECCE is rising as a political priority as reflected in recent policy shifts.
- Rising public awareness about the importance of ECCE.
- Strengthened data systems are improving visibility and planning.
- The mass registration drive is bringing programmes into the regulatory net.
- Active advocacy coalitions are aligning around key priorities.
- Strong home and community-based models continue to reach children who are excluded.

Catalytic domino effects:

- Unlocking sustainable public funding.
- Shifting societal narratives about ECCE.
- Regulatory reform that supports diverse modalities.
- Empowering caregivers and decision-makers.
- Strengthening practitioner pathways and remuneration.
- Integrating ECCE more clearly within the basic education system.
- Enabling more coherent intergovernmental coordination.



8. Key shifts needed to unlock progress in ECCE

The workshop made one point unmistakably clear: progress toward universal access will not come from doing more of the same. It will come from shifting how the ECCE system works — how actors coordinate, how resources are aligned, and how the workforce that sustains early learning is supported.

The following shifts emerged as essential:

From fragmented effort to coordinated system leadership:

The ECCE system lacks strong coordinating mechanisms. Clearer system leadership, stronger alignment across national, provincial and local government, and more deliberate collaboration between state and non-state actors are essential to unlocking progress. Coordinated support for registration, compliance and quality delivery — particularly for programmes serving low-income communities — requires shared responsibility across government, civil society and the wider ECCE ecosystem.

Improving quality means improving practitioners' conditions:

Quality will not shift without addressing the realities of the ECCE workforce. Better funding to support living wages and greater stability, clearer career pathways, and sustained mentoring and professional support are essential to strengthening programme quality and retention in the sector. Existing mechanisms — including JobsFund, the Social Employment Fund (SEF), SETAs and other funding streams — remain underused levers that could be mobilised more intentionally to support decent work and professional development for practitioners.

Connecting data, learning and decision making:

Significant investments are being made in data and evidence (including Thrive by Five and eCares), yet these efforts are not yet connected into a coherent system. Stronger two-way information flows are needed between policymakers and practitioners so that decisions are informed by lived experience. For data to support learning and improvement across the sector, it must be accessible, usable and trusted.

Aligning resources around shared goals:

Too much of the ecosystem's energy is spent working in silos rather than in concert. The sector must get better at seeing itself as a whole — mapping who is doing what and where, to reduce duplication, identify gaps and create opportunities for genuine collaboration. Shared assets — curriculum, training materials, digital tools — are most powerful when used collectively across the ecosystem. Alignment around shared goals is what turns individual effort into collective impact.

Centering communities, caregivers and local leadership:

Solutions designed without communities rarely last. Parent engagement, caregiver advocacy and local leadership ensure that ECCE programmes reflect the realities of the people they serve and are trusted by those closest to children. This matters because trust, safety and social norms shape whether families access ECCE at all — dynamics that can only shift from within, not be imposed from outside.

Shifting the national narrative on ECCE:

ECCE is not a single sector's responsibility — it is a national priority for children, families, women and South Africa's future. What remains is to make that case consistently and together. Building broader public and political will is how the investment, coordination and long-term commitment the system requires actually gets unlocked. The Bana Pele Shared Blueprint is an expression of exactly this — an ecosystem-wide commitment to a common agenda. This workshop, and the evidence and stories it generated, is a contribution to that effort.





PART FERNS

9. Building on this moment

South Africa's 2030 Strategy for ECD calls for a Social Compact – an all-of-society response built around a shared ambition: universal access to quality ECCE for every child, especially those historically excluded. This workshop was itself an expression of that compact. The shifts outlined in the section above make clear what comes next: the ecosystem must act with greater coordination, shared understanding and collective intent. The systems map provides a practical tool for that work.

Building on the momentum of the workshop, several priorities emerged for taking this work forward:

Refining and strengthening the systems map:

The map can continue to evolve as new insights emerge, ensuring that it reflects the realities of policy, funding, implementation and community dynamics across South Africa.

Deepening the evidence base:

The workshop also highlighted areas where further analysis would strengthen collective understanding of how the ECCE system operates in practice. These include the impact of regulatory requirements on programme viability, the flow of funding across the ecosystem, the economic realities facing the practitioner workforce, and the social norms that shape family demand for ECCE in under-resourced communities.

Using the map to support ecosystem learning and alignment:

Convening stakeholders around the map periodically can support collective learning, help actors understand how their efforts interact, and create space to align action across government, civil society, funders and communities.

Using the map to track system shifts over time:

The six shifts identified in Section 8 point to areas where the system itself must begin to move. Revisiting the map over time offers a way to ask an important question together: where is progress beginning to emerge, and where are further shifts still needed?


In this way, the systems map can evolve from a diagnostic tool into a shared reference point for the ECCE ecosystem – supporting ongoing learning, stronger coordination and sustained progress toward universal access to quality ECCE.

Key resources:

The workshop discussions drew from the following resources, which readers may find useful for further exploration:

1. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Systems Map – South Africa
2. South Africa's 2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programmes
3. ECDAN Childcare Systems Map
4. Bana Pele Shared Blueprint to Achieve Universal Access to Quality Early Learning





EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE

SYSTEMS MAPPING FOR
EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE
AND EDUCATION 2025

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION (ECCE) SYSTEMS MAPPING WORKSHOP REPORT 2025