



Centre for Early Childhood Development

Putting young children first

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Opinion Editorial

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The Department of Social Development has Missed the Deadline to Pay Over 80,000 ECD workers from the ECD Employment Stimulus Relief Fund. Where is the outrage?

An on-going crisis is taking place in the early childhood development (ECD) sector in South Africa. Following harsh ECD programme lockdown measures (requiring two High Court judgments against the Department of Social Development), and an exclusionary application process for accessing the Presidency's ECD Employment Stimulus Relief Fund, national DSD has now missed the deadline for payments to over 80 000 ECD principals, managers, teachers, cooks and other staff.

In October 2020 the President announced the ECD Employment Stimulus Relief Fund of R 1.3 billion. Subsequently, the Department of Social Development (DSD) announced on 05 February 2021, that R496 million would be made available to the ECD sector through once off payments direct to ECD programmes. This quates to an amount of R4186 per verified ECD staff member for both centre-based and non-centre based programmes. You are correct if you have noticed a missing R804 million in these calculations. Between the two announcements, these millions of rands have disappeared and are not being explained or accounted for by government.

Notwithstanding the missing millions, it is clear that the ECD sector is in dire need of emergency relief funds, and so the announcement of the once-off relief payments was met with appreciation.

Unfortunately, the application process to access this fund was fraught with complications and complex technical problems. In an open letter to the Minister of Social Development, the Centre for Early Childhood Development (CECD) detailed the challenges experienced by ECD principals, owners and managers in their desperate attempt to access the stimulus relief funds for their staff who are struggling to put food on their tables, and to keep the doors to their ECD programmes open, to care for, educate and feed the young children in their care.

Many of the ECD programmes that needed the relief funds most, gave up because the application process was so flawed. Challenges included:

- The application process was only available online and thus was impossible to complete for people who did not have access to electricity and the internet (arguably those ECD workers who require the relief funds most).
- The application process was highly technical, and virtually impossible to complete for people who were not computer literate (which is a large proportion of the intended beneficiaries for this fund).

- There were significant technical errors on the online application platforms and mobile sites.
- There was minimal communication from DSD (and their project management partners) on how to correctly fill out the application.
- DSD only gave the ECD sector a two-week window in which to apply. The ECD sector had to fight to get an additional week.
- The application process was only available in English for the first two weeks, in the third (additional) week DSD introduced two additional languages to a single part of the process. This was clearly exclusionary.

These challenges were verified through a rapid survey undertaken by the Centre for Early Childhood Development, which asked for feedback from ECD principals and managers on the ground who tried to apply for the relief funds. On 30 March 2021, four days after the survey went live, CECD had received responses from 1085 ECD principals/managers across all nine provinces. 23% of the respondents said they were not able to complete the application process. Of the 77% that did complete the application process, many stated that they were only able to successfully apply due to support they received from the ECD community. The full [survey report](#) is available online.

Against all odds and despite a highly problematic and exclusionary application process to access the ECD Employment Stimulus Relief Fund, the ECD sector came together with an incredible amount of energy and support, showing sheer resilience and determination, in a short three-week timeframe, to ensure that ECD workers across the country could access the funds. Indeed, the ECD community heeded DSD's call to "stand together to 'Leave no ECD Behind'". According to DSD, a total of 28 283 ECD programmes applied for the fund, for a total of 126,125 employees. According to DSD, after a validation process, the total number of employees was reduced to 116 578.

The funds were expected to be paid by the end of the 2020/2021 financial year, 31 March 2021. Since then, the vast majority of the applicants have heard nothing. In fact, in a [press statement](#) released on 16 April, over two weeks since the deadline for payments, DSD acknowledged that whilst they have made some payments, missing their financial year-end deadline "makes it difficult to process any further payments." They stated, "To address this challenge, the Department has been engaging with the National Treasury for guidance on all supporting documents that would be required to secure finalisation of outstanding payments as soon as possible. However, this process will result in some delays in making payments to ECD services but engagements are ongoing to find solutions to address this challenge." Therefore, by their own admission, delays in payment have been caused by DSD's own faulty application process, and are not the fault of the ECD applicants.

ECD workers applied for the ECD stimulus relief funds within the three-week period given, meeting the application deadline of 26 February 2021. Yet, in the press release DSD seemingly shifts blame to the ECD centres for DSD missing the deadline to pay over 80 000 ECD principals, managers, teachers, cooks and other staff by 31 March 2021:

"...there are a number of ECD services that have failed banking verification and captured information incorrectly. This has prevented the Department from being able to process the applications for payment as speedily as planned. The responsibility therefore lies with the ECD service to correct and update their applications accordingly.

...Despite the challenges, we were able to process a number of batches to provinces for payment which relates to 8 087 ECD services and 33 533 employees respectively for a total payment value of R140 369 138. Unfortunately, the Department was unable to process any further payments where applications had bank and staff verification

inaccuracies as a result of incorrect information submitted by applicants.”

As detailed in CECD’s open letter, the applicants “failed (*the*) banking verification and captured information incorrectly” for two clear reasons: the application platforms were faulty and DSD did not provide timeous communication on how to fill out the information correctly from a technical perspective. One example speaks volumes: when filling out the name of the ECD programme under “account holder” (i.e. the ECD centre’s name), it turns out that a space should be left instead of inserting an apostrophe because the system did not accept apostrophes (and other special characters) on the banking tab specifically. This is a technicality no one could have known.

The ECD workforce, by applying for the ECD stimulus relief fund, was expecting this money at the end of March. The delay in payments and reasons given by DSD for this delay are not good enough. What’s worse is that few in the ECD sector in a position of influence or power, have said anything. No one said anything when DSD released this press statement placing the blame for the payment delays on the ECD applicants. DSD further stated:

“In order to enable the Department to process the remainder of payments, **we are completely dependent on ECD services** that have received notifications through SMS to update their details by not later than the 07 May 2021.”

It is clear that DSD is shifting the locus of responsibility for the delay onto the ECD applicants. The sector had to fight hard to extend the deadline for the initial two-week window for applications. They received one additional week for applications. The short window period was said to be crucial if payments were to be made within the 2020/2021 financial year. But, DSD missed the payment deadline, and are now, yet again, demanding that the ECD sector stick to their timelines; when they are incapable of sticking to their own deadline.

The original announcement from DSD stated that the fund was set to pay 110,962 beneficiaries a maximum of R4470 each, with ECD centres only able to receive a maximum amount equivalent to supporting 4 staff members per ECD centre, and 1 staff member per non-centre-based programme. In the 16 April press statement DSD declared that they had removed the cap on the number of staff members which would determine the total amount to be paid per centre, and now all verified staff members would receive an amount of R4186. This meant that *every* staff member that an ECD centre applied for, who passed DSD’s verification process, would be paid. Unfortunately, because the initial announcement from DSD stated that the amount paid would be worked out for a maximum amount for 4 staff members, and because the application form was so troublesome, many ECD centres only applied for 4 staff members, even though they had more staff members employed. Moreover, the actual application process had a specific technical glitch that hindered applicants from correctly editing their staff members’ details – which meant that applicants could not actually reflect all their staff members, or fix typos. These staff members would then not be captured and verified. The department has the discretion to alter the amount paid and the cap they placed on applications. (Indeed, the original press announcement stated “If the number of applications are more or fewer than the budget available, the Department of Social Development may review the payment amounts to the ECD services accordingly.”). Unfortunately, in reality, the stated cap (to determine the amount each centre would receive), and the technical glitch means that some ECD centres will not receive payments for all staff, and others will.

The sector is deeply concerned that DSD will not pay ECD workers at this time, 13 months into lockdown, when relief is so greatly needed. A fear is that government and corruption will deny ECD staff what was allocated.

Of those payments that have been made, a significant number of principals are reporting that they are not receiving the full amount they were due, for the total number of verified staff members. Some of the payments do not equate to even half of the due amount, and some are not divisible by R4186. How these payments have been calculated is completely unknown, and DSD has not explained the reasons for these inconsistent and erroneous payments.

Through this process, DSD gave principals, teachers and the rest of the ECD community a glimpse of hope only to leave them with despair. According to our survey, 53% of the survey respondents stated that receiving the ECD relief funds meant that they would now be able to “afford to buy food and basics” as they have not been paid during the Covid-19 pandemic; and 36% stated that receiving the ECD relief funds meant they could “supplement the small income” they received from their employment at an ECD centre/ECD programme.

In response to whether ECD principals/managers spent money applying for the stimulus package, of the 1085 respondents, 51% stated that they spent money on calls to get support with the application, 38% spent money on transport to get support with the application and travel to the bank and 29% spent money on opening a bank account. Only 18% of the survey respondents did not spend money in applying for the ECD stimulus. Many in the ECD sector have spent money to get financial support from the ECD stimulus relief fund, yet have not received anything; no payments, and no communication from DSD.

We reiterate that the ECD workforce, by applying for the ECD stimulus relief fund, is expecting this money, and is in desperate need of payment. DSD cannot be such an uncaring government department to be silent on the matter, and allow this situation to continue indefinitely, thereby trampling on the hopes of our ECD workers. This is unacceptable. Government must be responsive to the people they govern. As a nation, we have to do better for South Africa’s children.

We are therefore calling on Minister Lindiwe Zulu, and DSD to urgently pay ECD workers the currently long overdue ECD employment stimulus relief funds immediately, and pay them in full. It is now four weeks late.

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