Early Years

Bulletin of the Centre for Early Childhood Development

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"Municipalities are essential partners in early childhood development (ECD) in South Africa and in most parts of the world, playing an important role in health and safety compliance, registration and monitoring of ECD centres at a local government level.

The Centre for Early Childhood Development approached the Executive Mayor of the City of Cape Town, Geordin Hill-Lewis in September 2022. We highlighted to Mayor Hill-Lewis the challenges that ECD centres face at a local government level to get all their municipal compliance requirements in place to be able to register their ECD centres with provincial government. As a result of that engagement, we were able to secure a formal meeting with the Mayor for our ECD Advocacy and Social Justice team to discuss making the ECD centre registration process less complex and bureaucratic for ECD centres.

During this first meeting we set out our case, stressing to him that children must be put first in society, which is our organisation purpose. Since then, we have met with Mayor Hill-Lewis, who brings his full team of municipal officials with him to these meetings, on 15 occasions so far. These meetings have been productive.

To date, this expanded ECD task team has made significant progress in removing or reducing some of the challenges for ECD centres wishing to be compliant with the law and with municipal regulations. Mayor Hill-Lewis has enabled this by leading from the front, backed by the expertise of my colleagues Yusrah Ehrenreich, Amanda Mbali and Sarah Atmore.

From Left to Right: CECD's Eric Atmore, Yusrah Ehrenreich, Amanda Mbali, Ikamva Labantu's Mildred Bopoto, Mayor Geordin Hill-Lewis, Ikamva Labantu's Ntombokhanyo Xhakaliva, and CECD's Sarah Atmore.

Throughout this process we have kept ECD centres informed of our work through the many ECD forums, throughout the City. From our experience and the lessons learned, we have assisted and are able to further assist other municipalities around South Africa, with advice and guidance.

Our wish is that every municipality across South Africa follows the lead of Cape Town and puts young children first.

If any of the 110 non-profit ECD training and development organisations across South Africa wishes to tackle getting local government to enhance ECD in your local areas, please contact me via email (eric@cecd.org.za) and I will ask one of my colleagues to make contact with you.

Enjoy reading this edition of EARLY YEARS.

ERIC ATMORE

Director

SA'S TOTS CAN THRIVE BY FIVE - ECD HOLDS THE KEY

~ Siviwe Gwarube and Velenkosini Hlasisa

Pouring into this critical growth phase is a social responsibility and a strategic national investment that begins and succeeds at the local level.

Photo © Werner Hills

As South Africans reflect on the priorities outlined in President Cyril Ramaphosa's state of the nation address, one message rings clear: the future of our country will be shaped not only by national commitments, but by how effectively those commitments translate into action in communities across the country.

This is particularly evident in early childhood development (ECD), where universal access to quality early learning programmes delivers benefits well beyond the classroom.

The early years, from birth to around five, lay the foundation for learning, health and economic participation across the life course. Supporting young children during this critical period is a social responsibility and a strategic national investment that begins and succeeds at the local level.

When an ECD programme opens its doors, parents and caregivers, particularly women, gain the childcare support needed to seek work or generate income. Programmes create local jobs for practitioners and support staff, while creating demand for goods and services from neighbourhood suppliers. At the same time, children gain access to safe, nurturing spaces to learn and grow. ECD is therefore a two-generation intervention, unlocking opportunity today while building the capable workforce of tomorrow.

Within South Africa's developmental state framework, local government is in a uniquely powerful position in advancing this agenda. As the sphere of government closest to communities, municipalities are where national commitments meet reality. For mayors, municipal managers and ward councillors, this places early childhood development squarely within their leadership mandate. Decisions taken in council chambers on land use, infrastructure investment, by-law enforcement and service delivery, directly shape whether ECD programmes can open, operate safely and access public support.

As leaders, regulators and implementors, they are well positioned to champion ECD as a catalytic priority cutting across education, health, safety, gender equality and local economic development. When municipalities actively support ECD, every child, regardless of geography or circumstance, can access safe and stimulating spaces to thrive.

A central lever in achieving this is ECD programme registration. Without registration, programmes cannot access the ECD subsidy, and without the subsidy, the most vulnerable children are often left out.

Apart from the Child Support Grant, the ECD subsidy is one of government's most pro-poor funding mechanisms. Targeted at children in ECD programmes in low-income communities, it enables programmes to provide nutritious meals sourced locally, employ staff and pay practitioner stipends. It supports improved learning, child health and safety while stimulating local employment and entrepreneurship.

Yet too often, ECD programmes in under-resourced communities are locked out of this support. Regulatory frameworks sometimes assume levels of formality and infrastructure that do not reflect community realities. "One-size-fits-all" approaches to land use, zoning and safety tend to mirror middle-income contexts, creating impossible barriers for programmes in informal or low-income areas and placing unnecessary administrative strain on municipalities.

Recognising this, government has started shifting towards more developmental approaches to regulation. The ECD Registration Framework, now expanding through the Bana Pele Mass Registration Drive, acknowledges diverse starting points and supports programmes to progressively meet standards rather than excluding them outright. Over the past year, the department of basic education (DBE) has registered more than 13,000 programmes, bringing the total number of ECD programmes known to the government to over 33,000 nationwide. This expanded visibility enables the DBE to plan more effectively and target support where it is needed most.

Forward-thinking mayors and municipal managers have introduced similar flexibilities in their municipalities, leading to improved engagement with ECD providers and more efficient compliance processes. These local leaders demonstrate that developmental regulation is both achievable and effective. However, progress remains uneven, often because municipalities lack clear information on permissible approaches.

In response, the DBE, together with the department of cooperative governance and traditional affairs, the department of health and the South African Local Government Association, has designed a targeted local government campaign to share practical solutions for more equitable and consistent approaches to ECD regulation.

This work is strengthened by the District Development Model and the One Plan approach, which enable coordinated planning, budgeting and implementation across sectors and all levels of government. By embedding ECD into municipal governance, local government can move beyond fragmented service delivery towards integrated whole-of-government approaches.

Success depends on strong collaboration between municipal officials responsible for land use, health, safety and community development, and ECD officials within provincial education departments. This would resolve challenges quickly, support programmes effectively and accelerate registration and subsidy access. Introducing ECD as a standing priority within inter-governmental relations forums would ensure sustained coordination and accountability.

By working together across all spheres of government and alongside communities, we can unlock the full potential of quality ECD programmes at scale. This is how we ensure children thrive by five, while strengthening local economies, advancing gender equality and laying the foundations for a more inclusive and prosperous South Africa.

Gwarube is basic education minister and Hlabisa is minister of cooperative governance and traditional affairs.

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www.sundaytimes.timeslive.co.za/opinion-and-analysis/opinion/2026-03-09-siviwe-gwarube-velenkosini-hlabisa-sas-tots-can-thrive-by-5-ecd-holds-the-key

CHILDREN GO HUNGRY WHILE R336 MILLION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD NUTRITION REMAINS UNSPENT

~ Tamsin Metelerkamp

In 2024, R197m was budgeted for the Department of Basic Education's implementation of a pilot nutrition programme for early childhood development centres, going up to R336m the following financial year. However, stakeholders in the ECD sector report 'little to nothing' has been done with the money.

The Department of Basic Education's ring-fenced budget for a pilot nutrition programme for early childhood development (ECD) centres appears to have gone largely unused over a two-year period, despite an urgent need for food-based support in the sector.

The concerns around the implementation of the ECD nutrition pilot programme come at a time when the problem of hunger among young children is in the spotlight. At the South African Human Rights Commission's national inquiry into South Africa's food systems in March 2026, advocacy organisations made presentations about the urgent need for interventions aimed at addressing malnutrition and stunting in the early years.

This follows the Cabinet's approval of the National Strategy to Accelerate Action for Children at the end of 2025, a framework that aims to intensify efforts to advance the welfare and development of children and adolescents across South Africa. Among the national priorities under the strategy are the improvement of child nutrition and the boosting of early learning and brain power.

Funding for the pilot programme was first set aside in the 2024/25 budget, standing at R197-million. This was increased to R336-million in 2025/26, with the most recent allocation in the 2026/27 budget going up to R772-million, for use over the medium-term expenditure framework, according to Tshepo Mantjé, who is the early childhood development (ECD) coordinator with the Equality Collective and Real Reform for ECD.

"We have had this budget since 2024, and little to nothing has been done with that money since then," he said.

"The time for talking about it is long gone, because young children are continuing to be stunted and malnourished, and, quite frankly, experiencing deaths from hunger and malnutrition due to the extreme poverty that is in this country…

We have to mark the success of the DBE [Department of Basic Education] by what they do and not what they say. And money that is allocated to young children means nothing unless it reaches the young child."

Theodora Lutuli, owner and principal of Khanyisa Nursery and Inkwenkwezi Educare in Nyanga, Cape Town, said that while she had been aware of the high-level talks around an ECD nutrition programme, practitioners had yet to see any kind of practical implementation on the ground.

"It would make a vast difference, because remember that if a child is not fed properly... it will impact that child for their entire schooling [career]... Nutrition is critical, because you are making sure that you are not going to have challenges that could cause severe damage to this child, not only cognitively but developmentally," she said.

Two years of uncertainty

The existing ECD subsidy for registered centres was increased to R24 per child per day in 2025/26, with 40% of this amount earmarked for nutrition. This means practitioners have about R9.60 per child per day with which to provide two meals and a snack, said Mantjé.

"Anyone who is living in the South African economy will know that it is virtually impossible to feed anything meaningful for R9.60, but even more than the food, [this money] also goes into buying the pots and pans that prepares the food, so… the subsidy is grossly inadequate within the economic landscape that we are in South Africa, in terms of buying power," he explained.

The reach of the subsidy is also limited. Data from 2022/23 showed that only 40% of centres in South Africa were registered, and of that 40%, only 33% were reported to be receiving the subsidy, said Mantjé.

"This is an opportunity for DBE to create a nutrition programme for ECD centres that can go beyond the subsidy and ensure adequate nutrition," he said.

In August 2024, the Real Reform for ECD movement flagged an effort by the DBE to subsume the funds for the pilot nutrition programme under a ten-year, R10-billion-a-year National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) "modernisation" tender.

"Real Reform for ECD and other civil society organisations raised concerns about this being a copy-paste of the NSNP model to the ECD sector. This would have been inappropriate, since the ECD sector landscape is fundamentally different from formal schooling… There's different sizes of kitchens, infrastructure and capacities, so more direct support would have been needed," said Mantjé.

The plan to merge the ECD pilot programme with the NSNP tender ultimately fell by the wayside, he continued, and since then, there has been no publicly released plan of action for the implementation of the funding.

Nutrition in early childhood development

In 2024, the Department of Basic Education was allocated R197-million for the implementation of a pilot nutrition programme for early childhood development centres. By 2026, this had increased to R772-million.

21 February 2024

Finance Minister Enoch Godongwana tables the 2024/25 budget, which includes a R197-million allocation for a pilot nutrition programme for early childhood development centres, administered under the Department of Basic Education (DBE).

30 August 2024

Real Reform for Early Childhood Development and other civil society groups push back against an effort by the DBE to subsume the funds for the pilot nutrition programme under a ten-year, R10-billion-a-year National School Nutrition Programme "modernisation" tender.

21 May 2025

Godongwana tables the 2025/26 budget, which increases the DBE's allocation for implementing a pilot nutrition programme for early childhood development centres to R336-million.

12 February 2026

President Cyril Ramaphosa delivers his State of the Nation Address, in which he commits to ending child stunting in South Africa by 2030, and tackling malnutrition.

25 February 2026

Godongwana tables the 2026/27 budget, which increases the DBE's allocation for implementing a pilot nutrition programme for early childhood development centres to R772-million.

13 March 2026

The South African Human Rights Commission's inquiry into South Africa's food systems kicks off, revealing the alarming normalisation of malnutrition in the country.

One of the possible barriers to progress has been a "siloism" of operations between departments within the DBE performing different functions related to early childhood development, said Mantjé.

"There is the early learning unit of the DBE, and another [internal] department focused on nutrition… We have had quite a lot of civil society engagement, collaboration and input within the early learning part of the DBE," he said, adding that a limited amount of information seemed to be shared with that unit by the directorate focused on nutrition.

Real Reform for ECD had some engagements with the DBE's nutrition unit in 2024, after the budget for the pilot programme was first set aside, to discuss research the organisation had produced around approaches to nutrition in ECD centres.

However, opportunities for these consultations petered out in 2025, said Mantjé.

Concerns around the unused funds for the pilot programme are not new. In October 2025, the Union Against Hunger released a statement questioning the absence of an implementation plan, saying, “Children are hungry right now, while bureaucracy delays their right to eat. The money is there.”

In February 2026, when President Cyril Ramaphosa committed to ending stunting by 2030 in his State of the Nation Address, Zero2Five CEO, Julika Falconer, told Daily Maverick that the organisation had long worked with its partners to position ECD centres as “nutrition hubs” within their communities, and argued that early learning sites should be leveraged in the fight against stunting.

“The Department of Basic Education’s ECD nutrition programme – one of the most powerful tools available to improve the nutritional status of thousands of young children – has yet to be implemented after a two-year delay. If the commitment to ending child stunting is to be credible, this programme must finally reach the children who need it most,” she said.

Daily Maverick reached out to the Department of Basic Education with questions around the implementation of its pilot nutrition programme in the lead up to publishing, but did not receive a response. Since publishing, a response from the DBE has been provided, and is included at the end of the article.

ECD practitioners have about R9.60 per child per day with which to provide two meals and a snack. (Photo © Gallo Images / Alet Pretorius)

Picking a model

Ntuli’s ECD centres are conditionally registered, which means she has access to the early learning subsidy. She also receives some additional support from donor organisations that assist with food. However, she noted that not all centres had access to this kind of assistance.

“We operate in [ECD] forums. When I do have access [to donated food], what I do is I will call my forum members and I will say, ‘Come and get’. I have access to food, and then we share what is available. But it is not everybody who has access to that,” she said.

“Now, let's look at the percentage of children who are at facilities that are unfunded. Those children eat whatever is available. Is it nutritional? That’s questionable. If I only have this much [money], whatever I’m going to be buying will have to be cost-effective… because I’m looking at my rent, and I’m just wanting to stretch and make sure that I’m able to finish the month.”

Mantjé noted that a successful model for an ECD pilot nutrition programme could draw lessons from the National Schools Nutrition Programme, but could not be a “one-size-fits-all” solution.

“What our research recommends is a flexible, context-specific approach, because early learning programmes differ in size, infrastructure, capacity, registration status and location,” he noted.

The Department of Basic Education’s Bana Pele mass registration of ECD centres divides them into silver- and gold-level programmes, which meet the standards set by the department and receive the subsidy, and bronze-level ones, which are listed by the department but do not yet meet the standards required for access to funding.

“The research proposes a dual-model [nutrition programme]… that sees a direct transfer to registered centres, particularly those at silver and gold level, because these centres are already within the registration system, are able to receive the money and would have infrastructure to roll out the food,” said Mantjé.

“Then, parallel to that will be provincial procurement or delivery models to unregistered programmes. This would require partnerships with civil society [and] community-based organisations that are already doing deliveries… within communities.”

Reaching bronze-level centres was critically important, said Mantjé, as these were the programmes that primarily operated in under-resourced communities, where children had a greater need for nutrition support.

“We have created a system where we keep centres in poor communities outside of the support that they would get through the subsidy, because of their inability to meet the standards of registration, meaning that the children get caught in a cycle where they are unable to access holistic, quality, inclusive Early Childhood Development services," he said.

Access to an ECD nutrition programme at the bronze level would also give unregistered centres an additional incentive to enter the registration process, continued Mantjé.

Reflecting on the state's commitment to ending stunting by 2030, Mantjé said that the ECD pilot nutrition programme should be seen as a tool to support the achievement of that promise.

"For the President to recognise his goal of ending stunting by 2030, he must personally see to it that the right to nutrition is supported at ECD centres in an adequate and sustainable way, while ensuring that poor and vulnerable children are not excluded from that programme," he said.

Rollout to begin in 2026, says DBE

When asked how much of the money allocated to the pilot nutrition support programme since 2024 has been spent, spokesperson for the department, Terence Khala, said, "There is no publicly verified consolidated expenditure figure to date. However, the evidence from planning documents and the tender timeline suggests that funding has been allocated since 2024, but implementation has only now reached procurement stage (March 2026).

"This is supported by the fact that the tender for service providers was only published on 13 March 2026, with a closing date of 09 April 2026, indicating that material rollout expenditure is likely still limited."

Responding to the claim that "little to nothing" had been done with the pilot programme budget over the past two years, Khala said that the period since 2024 had been used for "programme design, institutional alignment and procurement preparation".

"The programme required national-level coordination and restructuring, rather than immediate rollout. The current tender marks the transition from planning to implementation. However, it is also accurate to say that visible service delivery has not yet occurred at scale, which explains stakeholder concerns," he said.

Drawing from the tender document issued in relation to the project, Khala said the DBE would be implementing a three-year pilot nutrition programme in the Eastern Cape that would target 1,035 bronze-status ECD centres.

"The document also links delivery volumes to identified children at ECD centres, reinforcing that the programme is targeted and structured," he said.

"The rollout is clearly scheduled to begin in 2026."

The implementation plan in the tender document states that distribution for the pilot nutrition programme will begin between April and June 2026, according to Khala.

"The tender confirms a clear delivery model: a centralised, DBE-led programme, implemented via an appointed service provider or consortium responsible for procurement of food (including local sourcing), warehousing and logistics, packaging of nutrition packs, distribution to ECD centres, and monitoring, reporting, and financial management," he said.

While the tender did not reflect a strong formalised role for civil society in the programme design, Khala noted that it did mandate local participation, including integration into local economic development structures, and the inclusion of women, youth and people with disabilities.

"The bid document itself highlights that 42% of children in ECD programmes come from the poorest quintiles [and that] poor nutrition contributes to long-term developmental and economic losses," said Khala.

"This positions the pilot as a core intervention aligned with the national goal of reducing stunting by 2030."

Photo © John Moore/Getty Images

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www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-03-19-children-go-hungry-while-r336-million-for-early-childhood-nutrition-remains-unspent/