Early Years

Bulletin of the Centre for Early Childhood Development

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"One of the essential aspects of work, whether in the world of business or in our non-profit world, is to build and maintain strong networks. Our networks provide considerable support and guidance to us and are also a good "sounding board" for our work in communities.

A strong network is one of the most powerful assets we can have, be it individual or organisational. At the Centre for Early Childhood Development, colleagues are encouraged to build individual, programme and organisation networks. Over the years we have seen the immense benefits of our networks, be it in professional advice, sharing of information or in obtaining funding. Just this morning I wrote a recommendation letter for an ECD NPO whom we have an excellent professional relationship with, at the request of the National Lotteries Commission.

A network is much more than a list of names, addresses and phone numbers. It is relational. When we are short of a suitable venue for training, we look to our network to hire a venue. When we require advice, we look to our network, and when we wish to do joint ECD programmes, we do so within our network.

In its best form, a network is about relationships and sharing expertise, insights and resources and is not about what an individual or an NPO can extract from the relationship. Networks should not simply be transactional but should be about mutual benefit and progress.

The best networks are diverse - it is important not to limit our network to the sector that our organisation operates in. In my case, I have learned more from individuals, organisations and practices outside of the ECD sector than from within the ECD sector.

Networking also does not mean reaching out only when our NPO needs something. It is about how we can add value to sister-NPOs. Connecting with an individual or an NPO must be based on knowing the person or NPO, and on trust.

Our connections within our networks invariably grow stronger over time, which in turn strengthens our relationships as individuals and as organisations. So, the message is, as ECD NPOs we must build, value and maintain our networks.

Enjoy reading this edition of EARLY YEARS.

ERIC ATMORE

Director

UNTANGLING THE RED TAPE OF CRÈCHE REGISTRATIONS

~ Mary-Anne Gontsana

City of Cape Town is trying to make the process easier for Early Childhood Development centres

- The City of Cape Town has taken steps to make it easier for Early Childhood Development centres to get through the red tape of registering so they can apply for the national subsidy.
- The subsidy is currently at R24 a day for each child.
- But many ECD centres do not meet the requirements for registration and cannot get the subsidy.

Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres have to deal with tangles of red tape in order to register and apply for the national R24-a-day subsidy for each child. In the City of Cape Town, the municipality is trying to make the process easier, with promising results, according to the Centre for Early Childhood Development.

According to the City, in just six months, more than 200 ECD centres have been helped towards compliance with the regulations, "a critical step in enabling facilities to operate legally, meet safety standards and ultimately register with the Western Cape Education Department."

Mayco member for community services and health Francine Higham said the City's role "is to help the centres navigate the registration process, remove obstacles where possible, and provide the guidance and support needed to move centres towards compliance."

In August last year, the City hosted an ECD Indaba, at which problems with red tape and the registration process were aired.

"Since the Indaba, there have been some notable developments," said Sarah Atmore, infrastructure manager at the Centre for Early Childhood Development. She pointed to a by-law amendment which came into effect in October. The amendment allows an additional land use right to ECD centres under certain conditions, meaning they do not have to apply for land use approval.

Atmore also welcomed the revision of the criteria for development charge exemptions. A development charge is a once-off charge to cover the cost of municipal services such as water and sanitation, electricity, roads and stormwater management, as a result of the intensification of land use. The City said since July last year it had facilitated compliance for five of the 200 ECD centres by supporting and covering development charges.

An ECD centre owner in Khayelitsha said in her case the development charge was close to R500,000 which she could not afford. She applied for exemption in February and was hopeful after seeing other centres get exemption.

According to the City, there are more than 2,600 ECD centres in Cape Town, and approximately 45% are registered.

Only registered centres can get the government subsidy, currently R24 per child per day. "The subsidy is only paid for qualifying children, and typically covers about 260 days per year," said Yusrah Ehrenreich, the CECD's advocacy and social justice manager.

The City had introduced an online digital system designed to streamline the whole compliance and registration process, but, said Ehrenreich, though well intentioned, the system was actually delaying some critical steps like fire inspections. ECD centres have to go through fire inspections to get clearance certificates. In order to do this, Ehrenreich said:

- The centre must complete an online application form and provide supporting documents;
- The case is directed to the Land Use Management department to confirm that Land Use Management approval is in place. They have 21 days to review it and confirm;
- The case then gets sent to the Building Development Management Department who also has 21 days to confirm that there are approved building plans in place;
- In order for the case to progress on the digital tool and be moved from one department to the next, a Community, Arts and Culture Development Department official must log in to the case and push it to the next stage/department. This is not an automatic process and it relies on the official to move it along. Yet, said Ehrenreich, ECD centres had already submitted proof of land use and building development approvals when they first logged in;
- After the Building Development Management department has confirmed that there are approved building plans in place, the case gets sent to the Fire Department for them to conduct their inspection and if the ECD centre is compliant, to issue the fire clearance certificate; and
- The Fire Department also has 21 days to do an inspection and provide feedback.

"It can easily take two months or longer for an ECD centre to get their fire clearance certificate… When it does not go smoothly it can take substantially longer. We have seen examples taking well over six months," said Ehrenreich.

Atmore said: "We commend the City for the commitment it has shown in working to assist ECD centres in overcoming the various challenges they face. A considerable amount has already been achieved, but there is still a long way to go, particularly in supporting the most vulnerable ECD centres, which serve the city's most vulnerable children."

Article first published and is available at:
www.groundup.org.za/article/untangling-the-red-tape-of-creche-registration/

SOUTH AFRICA'S STRATEGY TO END CHILD STUNTING BY 2030 FACES CRITICAL CHALLENGES

~ Yaeesh Collins

South Africa's commitment to phase out childhood stunting by 2030 is facing persistent structural and implementation challenges, according to new research released by Stellenbosch University.

The findings follow President Cyril Ramaphosa's State of the Nation Address, where he reaffirmed the government's focus on the first 1,000 days of life and targeted nutrition support for pregnant women with stunted infants.

Despite this commitment, researchers from Stellenbosch University say progress has been limited.

"South Africa has one of the highest rates of stunting among upper-middle-income countries globally, with little change in the last three decades despite the government's efforts to tackle poverty and expand access to social grants," the report states.

In South Africa, more than a quarter of children under five experience stunted growth, largely due to chronic malnutrition that often begins before birth.

Professor Ronelle Burger of Stellenbosch University said the economic argument for action is clear.

Burger added: "Without addressing stunting first, beginning in utero and when children are very young, we dilute the impact of the money spent downstream on early childhood development centres, schools, and clinics because we reach children too late."

The findings are published in a special issue of Development Southern Africa, bringing together 10 peer-reviewed papers on causes, interventions, and governance failures linked to stunting.

"South Africa's nationally representative surveys have produced stunting estimates ranging from around 20% to over 30% for the same period," the report notes, adding that "it makes it difficult to know whether the problem is getting better or worse."

On governance, the research is equally direct.

"Responsibility for reducing stunting is spread across government departments of health, social development and education, meaning no single department is clearly accountable," it states.

Liezel Engelbrecht, Nutrition Lead for the Hold My Hand Accelerator, said coordination remains a major gap.

On Ramaphosa's stated goals, she said "this requires political commitment, which we are now seeing, but it also needs a clear national plan with targets. This is especially important considering that the National Food and Nutrition Security Plan has lapsed".

Researchers are calling for a dedicated government stunting strategy with clear accountability, district-level targets, and regular public reporting.

They also recommend the establishment of a Food and Nutrition Security Council to oversee implementation.

Although regulations on infant formula marketing have been in place since 2012, researchers say enforcement remains weak and "industry self-regulation has not been sufficient".

The findings were released with support from the DG Murray Trust.

Article first published and is available at:
www.iol.co.za/lifestyle/health/2026-04-22-south-africas-strategy-to-end-child-stunting-by-2030-faces-critical-challenges/

KZN EDUCATION DEPARTMENT'S FAILURE TO PAY ECD SUBSIDIES ON TIME IS EXACERBATING NUTRITION CHALLENGES

~ Tamsin Metelerkamp

An ongoing case in the KwaZulu-Natal Division of the High Court in Pietermaritzburg is drawing attention to the long-standing failure of the province's Department of Education to pay early childhood development subsidies on time, affecting nutrition and staffing in centres across the region.

As questions around combatting child malnutrition take centre stage in South African discourse, a court case unfolding in KwaZulu-Natal is revealing how deficiencies in the province's subsidisation system for early childhood development (ECD) centres may be contributing to the crisis.

The Legal Resources Centre, representing the Friends of South Africa Early Childhood Development Forum and the KwaZulu-Natal Early Childhood Development Alliance (KZN ECD Alliance), has taken the KZN Department of Education to court over an alleged widespread failure to pay subsidies to registered early learning centres on time.

The applicants report that in some cases, centres are facing up to a year of unpaid subsidies.

This comes at a time when food security among children is in the spotlight, due to President Cyril Ramaphosa's commitment to ending child stunting by 2030 in his State of the Nation Address, as well as the recent South African Human Rights Commission's food system inquiry, which saw a number of organisations red flag the problem of childhood malnutrition.

"For nutrition, from the get go, we've been informed by our clients that with an unreliable budget, they cannot stick to the Department of Health… nutrition guidelines for the meals that should be provided at ECD centres. It's just too unaffordable to do that because they can't commit to paying service providers," said Kiara Govender, an attorney at the Legal Resources Centre in Durban.

"Some centres started closing early to get them out of that requirement of providing lunch, or some have asked parents to send a packed lunch. But then, for many of those children in marginalised communities, parents are sending them to these centres specifically for meals, because it could be the only meal that they're getting in the day. And when this is also being withdrawn, it often results in parents no longer sending them."

Hunger for change

Lawrence Mngomezulu, the deputy chairperson of Friends of South Africa Early Childhood Development Forum and principal of Umusa Uyasilandela ECD Centre, told Daily Maverick that his programme was still waiting on outstanding subsidy payments for April, May, June and September of 2024.

"It makes life difficult. Remember, you need to buy food and then pay [staff] stipends. If you haven't been paid [subsidies], you must now go and borrow from someone to pay, and when you borrow the money, it comes with interest," he said.

Mngomezulu's centre, like many others, operates in an area where caregivers often struggle to pay fees for early learning programmes. He charges a monthly amount of R100 per child. Despite having 46 children at the centre, he says he is lucky to collect about R1,200 in total fees each month.

"In our case, it's a rural area with no kind of employment… You can't force them to pay," he said.

"In my centre, you would find that… [the caregivers of some children] aren't employed, and the only meal the children can get is from the ECD centre. Now, if that doesn't come, it really affects the development of the child. It's really a sad story when the subsidy doesn't come, because where are they going to get the meal? Sometimes… one has to fork out from one's own pocket to pay this."

In 2025, the ECD subsidy was increased from R17 to R24 per child per day. Mngomezulu said that in some cases, centres had been paid an amount below R24 per child over the past year, resulting in further confusion.

Unpaid subsidies had caused delays in the payment of staff at centres, he added.

"That is why, in the ECD space, we end up losing practitioners almost every day. They'd rather go and work in a supermarket somewhere than to work in the ECD space," he said.

Battle in court

The problem of unpaid ECD subsidies in KZN was originally flagged as early as 2024, when Friends of South Africa Early Childhood Development Forum and the KZN ECD Alliance raised concerns about unfair subsidy practices with the provincial Department of Education.

However, it was in May 2025 that the Legal Resource Centre formally initiated a case in the KZN Division of the High Court in Pietermaritzburg, representing the two ECD forums, as well as three centres: Zenzeleni Crèche, Phumelela Crèche and Sakhokwethu Crèche.

The applicants sought relief from the court in two parts. The first part of the litigation, heard on 26 May 2025, resulted in an order compelling the KZN Department of Education to pay all outstanding subsidy amounts owed to the three named ECD centres.

The second part seeks a structural interdict from the court ordering the department to file a comprehensive report listing all subsidised ECD centres in the province, detailing the total subsidy amounts owed to each centre, and directing that all outstanding subsidies be paid within one week of the report being filed. These proceedings are still ongoing, with a hearing date set down for 18 May 2026, when the Centre for Child Law will be making an amicus curiae application.

Govender noted that while there was an improved turnaround time for the payment of subsidies to the Zenzeleni, Phumelela and Sakhokwethu crèches in the wake of the 2025 court proceedings, all three centres had instalments outstanding in 2026.

“We’ve also been informed by our clients, the KZN ECD Alliance and Friends of South Africa Early Childhood Development Forum, that the issue is still widespread throughout the province… That’s why we’re really pushing for this next hearing, because our aim is to secure relief throughout KZN,” she said.

Mandulo Khuzwayo, chairperson of the KZN ECD Alliance, said that the delayed payments created challenges in the development and maintenance of proper infrastructure at centres, as well as shortages of essential teaching equipment.

“We would like to see strict adherence to payment timelines, with districts being held accountable to ensure that claims are submitted on time and that unnecessary delays are eliminated,” he said on the forum’s hopes for the outcomes of the court case.

In March 2026, the KZN Department of Education reportedly made renewed promises to backpay outstanding subsidies in tranches for ECD centres falling under the KZN ECD Alliance and Friends of South Africa Early Childhood Development Forum, according to Govender. However, it was unclear how many affected centres had received payment.

Daily Maverick reached out to the KZN Department of Education for comment on the issue of unpaid subsidies in the province, but had not received a response by the time of publication.

Financial intervention

In August 2025, the KZN provincial treasury announced that it was intervening in the province’s Department of Education, using powers legislated under section 18 of the Public Finance Management Act. This came after the education department had overspent its budget by March of that year.

Citing the education department’s “inability to remedy its financial situation”, the KZN treasury stated that it was withholding all funding, excluding that related to the compensation of employees, conditional grants and transfer payments to schools.

“Any orders that are required to be issued must be approved by the provincial treasury,” it said.

“The provincial treasury requested the provincial Department of Education to provide a detailed analysis of all unpaid creditors and the repayment plan in order to ensure that the department repays existing creditors before incurring new debt.”

Govender told Daily Maverick that until the KZN treasury’s announcement, the Legal Resource Centre had been unsure of the factors behind the delayed subsidy payments.

“At that time, we wrote to the treasury, and eventually we met with [KZN MEC for Finance Francois Rodgers] in January [2026]. He explained how the implementation of section 18 of the Public Finance Management Act… was intended as a corrective mechanism to ensure that education would remain prioritised, and that the department would be more effective in fulfilling its obligations,” she said.

“What necessitated it was that they were persistently overspending, and they had poor cash-flow management internally. So, every year they would go into the new financial year owing money for the previous one.”

While there had been issues with the payment of ECD subsidies in other provinces, Govender noted that the problem was particularly dire in KZN, prompting the Legal Resource Centre’s involvement.”

Article first published and is available at:
www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-04-08-kzn-education-departments-failure-to-pay-ecd-subsidies-on-time-is-exacerbating-nutrition-challenges