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New foundations:
Strengthening ECCE
provisioning in South Africa
after COVID-19

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New foundations: Strengthening ECCE provisioning in South Africa after COVID-19¹

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Abstract

Events surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to undo 20 years of sustained expansion in access to early childhood care and education (ECCE) in South Africa. In this paper, we explore the underlying structural weaknesses in non-grade R ECCE provisioning that were exposed through the pandemic, and the strengths that have surfaced. Through a lens of sustainability, capacity, and accountability, we also review the policy and civil society responses (and in some cases, non-responses) that emerged following the pandemic induced ECCE crisis. We consider what these policy responses and events reveal about how the sector is viewed and prioritised by government. Despite the challenges experienced through the pandemic, the lessons gathered are useful in preparing for structural reforms in the ECCE system.

1. Introduction

There are significant returns to investing in the youngest segment of a population. Future life trajectories are better for children who access early childhood care and education (ECCE) programmes that contribute positively to their cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional development (Naudeau et al., 2011; Richter et al., 2021; Vegas and Santibanez, 2010). Over the longer term, ECCE offers a cost-effective mechanism to produce a well-trained and capable workforce (Lynch, 2005; Schweinhart et al., 2005). As a result, investments in ECCE can lead to improved economic growth and reduced reliance on social assistance programmes. Beyond economic arguments, children's access to quality care and education opportunities is a basic human right. Yet, for all the benefits of ECCE, it receives far less priority than schooling, higher education, or health in national budgets.

In many low-to-middle income countries (LMICs), limited public finance for ECCE and weak supporting systems hamper equitable access to quality ECCE programming (Richter et al., 2017a). On the one hand, South Africa has made significant strides in government provisioning of one year of pre-school in the form of a reception year (grade R) (UNICEF, 2019). On the other hand, public funding to access ECCE (excluding school-based grade R) services for younger children has been limited, with rising access to ECCE among 0 to 4-year-olds largely being supported through informal private sector provision. With limited public financing, children's access to quality non-grade R ECCE programmes ultimately depends on whether parents/caregivers can afford ECCE programme fees (Biersteker et al., 2016; Richter et al., 2012). Consequently, ECCE provisioning has been characterised by structural inequalities in programme access and quality. Programme sustainability for those able to attend ECCE programmes has also been highly susceptible to economic shocks.

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After recurrent calls for reform in the ECCE sector, there have been signals in recent years of increased prioritisation of ECCE for younger children in policy documents and political commitments. More recently, a renewed focus on early childhood was expressed in national plans for a 'function shift' by April 2022, where the oversight of early childhood development will be transferred from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the Department of Basic Education (DBE) (Department of Basic Education, 2021).⁴ Events surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, however, have threatened to almost undo 20 years of growth in access to non-grade R ECCE and compromise sector reform in South Africa.

A series of policy papers were produced to track ECCE attendance trends since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 using the National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (Wills et al., 2020, 2021; Wills and Kika-Mistry, 2021a, 2021b). The longitudinal NIDS-CRAM survey was initiated at the start of the pandemic by academics from various South African universities to track the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, and related lockdowns. In addition to tracking employment, hunger and COVID-19 health related behaviours, a module on ECCE was included from the second data collection period to track ECCE programme attendance. Adult respondents were asked to identify whether any child in the household had attended an ECCE programme in the past 7 days, and in February 2020 before onset of the pandemic.⁵ Using the NIDS-CRAM data we were able to map out how the attendance of children at ECCE programmes changed over the 2020 to 2021 period in relation to pre-pandemic levels. While the results communicated the devastating consequences of the pandemic on children's access to ECCE opportunities, a lot has been learnt about the sector from the pandemic experience. As government continues to prepare for a function shift, COVID-19 has reinforced what needs to be fixed and what needs to be financed in the ECCE system.

In this paper, we explore the underlying structural weaknesses in the provisioning of non-grade R ECCE that were exposed through the pandemic, and the strengths that have surfaced. Through a lens of sustainability, capacity and accountability, we consider what policy and civil society responses (and in some cases non-responses) to the resulting crisis reveal about how ECCE is viewed and prioritised by government, and what can be learnt from the pandemic experience for the purpose of system reform. We then discuss key reforms to promote increased sustainability, to build capacity and improve accountability for a stronger ECCE system for future generations.

As a point of clarification, much of what is discussed in this paper focuses on the provisioning of early childhood care and education (ECCE). This is just one subcomponent of the multisectoral definition of early childhood development (ECD) which also includes antenatal support, health and nutrition interventions, sanitation, child protection, and parent and family-based support programmes (Richter et al., 2017b). Within ECD provisioning, we focus here on ECCE that excludes school-based grade R.⁶

⁴ The Department of Social Development has been responsible for the overall oversight and coordination of ECD until the child enters formal schooling, whereas the Department of Basic Education has been responsible for grades R – 12.

⁵ If young children were not attending ECCE programmes, respondents were also asked to provide reasons for this. Respondents were also asked to report on their current ability to afford ECCE fee payments and whether an open and affordable ECCE programme existed within 5km of where they live.

⁶ It is noted however, that in South African policy, public debate and general discussion, the wider term ECD is typically used in reference to ECCE.

2. Background

ECCE in South Africa before the pandemic

One of the most significant gains made in education service delivery in post-apartheid South Africa has been the expansion of access to ECCE (Department of Basic Education, 2019). Part of the expansion was driven by the introduction of a formal reception class the year before grade 1, known as grade R (UNICEF, 2019), which is predominately delivered through public provisioning in primary schools. However, access to privately provided non-grade R ECCE opportunities also expanded notably. In 1998, 18 per cent of children aged zero to six were attending a pre-school, or some kind of education and care institution outside a school. By 2017, this comparative estimate had reached 43 per cent (Department of Basic Education, 2020). Expansion in ECCE attendance was observed among children aged 0 to 2, 3 to 4 and 5 to 6 years and occurred largely before 2012.

The provision of non-grade R ECCE in South Africa operates as a quasi-market, with a large composition of informal services provided by private providers such as non-profit organisations (NPOs), subsistence entrepreneurs, or micro-social enterprises (BRIDGE et al., 2020; Richter et al., 2012). Although a small proportion of ECCE operators benefit from state subsidies paid to registered providers on a per-child attending per-day basis, the majority of ECCE operators rely on fee collections from parents/caregivers as their primary source of income (Wills and Kika-Mistry, 2021c). In this respect, South Africa's childcare market bares similarity to low-fee private schooling systems in developing countries. If one excludes grade R and the care of day-mothers, 'gogos' or childminders from definitions of ECCE enrolment, fees were charged for around 90% of children aged 0 to 5 attending ECCE programmes in 2017/18. Pre-pandemic, ECCE access and the quality of programming received was directly related to the ability to pay fees and fee amounts paid. This in turn resulted in inequalities in access (Richter et al., 2012). Major concerns were also regularly raised about the poor quality of ECCE programming. In a functional provincial context, Biersteker et al (2016) observed that on average, ECCE programmes assessed on international quality scales were of minimal quality.

In the years preceding the onset of the pandemic, there were signals of structural reform in the ECCE sector. This was reflected in the increased political will to prioritise ECCE (South African Government News Agency, 2020) and echoed in key policy documents. The National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECDP) approved by Cabinet in 2015, recognised ECD as a universal right, a national priority and public good to which all children are entitled. This was accompanied by the release of the National Curriculum Framework for children from Birth to Four (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2015). To complement new policies, the introduction of a 'conditional ECD grant' in 2017/18 for site infrastructure and maintenance, and some additional funding for subsidies, presented a 'ring-fenced' financial commitment to facilitate alignment with plans for implementation of the NIECDP (South African Government, 2019). These developments should not be overlooked, however, significant shortcomings in ECCE public financing and administrative systems were also evident pre-pandemic. In particular, the reach and depth of public ECCE finance was very limited (Desmond et al., 2019; Wills and Kika-Mistry, 2021c). With regards to the reach of public financing, there is a lack of clarity as to how many children are in unregistered programmes, but what is clear is that the number of children that are not subsidised far outweighs those that are. One figure cites 700,000 children aged 0 to 4 subsidised in 2020. About 1,5 million, more than double the number of children aged 0 to 4 that would be eligible to be subsidised, are estimated as attending ECCE programmes that are not registered, and thus not receiving public subsidies (BRIDGE et al., 2020). The limited reach of subsidies is attributed to bottlenecks in ECCE programme registration, a consequence of the onerous criteria, significant costs of meeting such criteria and administratively burdensome processes (Giese and Budlender, 2011; Ilifa Labantwana, 2014; Kotze, 2015). However, the relatively low ratio of subsidised to non-subsidised children is also

a function of the lack of allocated public finance to support a larger number of registered programmes.

In terms of the depth of financing, at R17 per-child per-day in 2021, the subsidy value has been too low to support decent wages or quality programming (Desmond et al., 2019). Biersteker et al (2016), for example, found no link between subsidy receipt and the quality of ECCE programmes in the Western Cape despite strong linkages between programme quality and user-fees paid. In the main, parents or caregivers are paying fees for children to attending programmes, even in under-resourced contexts. For example, of children aged 0 to 5 attending non-grade R ECCE programmes in 2017/18 living in households whose main source of income is from social grants, over half were paying more than R100 per month and 17% were paying over R200 per month.⁷ Relative to the R17 subsidy, it is further estimated that the state spends roughly about 6 times more per child attending a public school compared to an ECCE programme (Wills et al., 2020).

This current financing model, with low supply-side subsidies and significant parent co-payments, has over-exposed the ECCE sector to demand-side shocks, compromising the sustainability of programme offerings and exacerbating inequalities in access. Before the pandemic, ECCE fee payments were already sporadic and sensitive to downturns in the economy (Carter and Barberton, 2014), presenting a particular challenge for the sustainability of a sizeable proportion of unregistered programmes that are solely reliant on parent fees. In this context, children's access to early childhood care and educational opportunities was extremely vulnerable to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Against this backdrop, we consider policy and civil society responses related to ECCE that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. We also explore the strengths and weaknesses in the ECCE system that were brought to the fore through the pandemic.

3. ECCE attendance trends in South Africa during COVID-19

Following the South African declaration of a state of national disaster to contain the spread of COVID-19, all operators of ECCE programmes (and all schools) were instructed to close on 18 March 2020, nine days before a hard lockdown began. The reopening of ECCE programmes, however, was delayed relative to the phased reopening of the economy from 1 June 2020 – an issue which caused much contestation. Non-profit organisations approached the courts to fight for what they argued was government prejudice against privately owned ECCE programmes. Specifically, it was deemed prejudicial where grade Rs could go back to public schools, but private ECCE operators that also provide grade R were not allowed to open (an issue which pointed to misalignment in legislation). On 6 July 2020, a High Court judgement in Pretoria⁸ ruled that all privately operated programmes could open immediately but required that they follow COVID-19 guidelines and precautions (Skole-Ondersteuningsentrum NPC and Others v Minister of Social Development and Others, 2020). This is just one of a series of court cases, policy developments, and related events that would follow.

Figure 1 presents a timeline depicting some key dates, policy developments and the emergence of support for the ECCE sector from March 2020 to July 2021. We discuss specific events in Figure 1 in more detail throughout this paper. What is useful to note now from the Figure is the extent of developments in the ECCE sector over this period which occurred in addition to variations in lockdown levels and economic activity in South Africa. Over the same period, there were some dramatic changes in child attendance at ECCE programmes. This is seen in Figure 2 which shows

⁷ Own calculations using the General Household Surveys 2017 and 2018.

⁸ Non-profit organisations approaching the courts included Skole-ondersteuningsentrum, Bronkieland kleuterskool and Solidarity.

South African ECCE attendance trends from the start of 2020 to the second quarter of 2021 using NIDS-CRAM data.

It is not possible to attribute changes in ECCE attendance levels in South Africa to any one of the specific events in Figure 1, but stark changes in ECCE attendance levels over the period are reflective of the sensitivity of ECCE access to the regulatory environment, school closures and macro-events.

Figure 1: Key dates, policy changes and support for ECCE sector in response to COVID-19

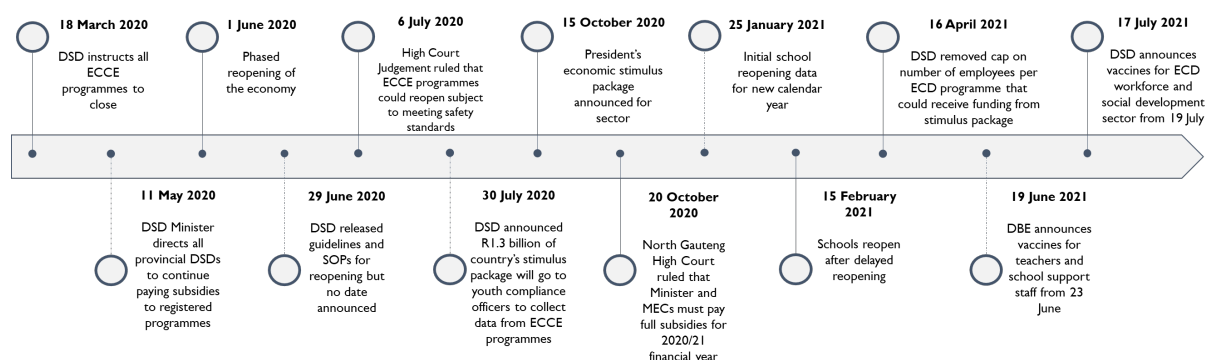
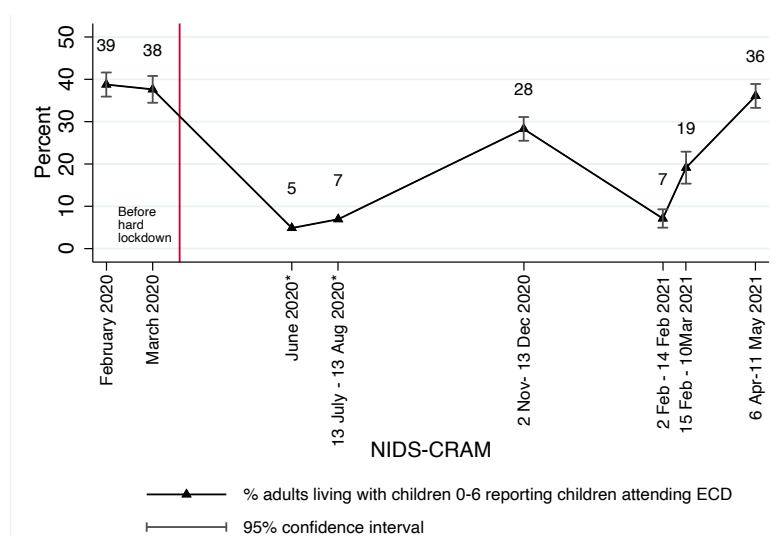


Figure 2: ECCE attendance trends (excluding grade R) from 2020 to 2021. Percentage of adults living with children aged 0-6 indicating that at least one child attended an ECCE programme



Source: Wills and Kika-Mistry (2021b) using NIDS-CRAM waves 2-5. Notes: Weighted, clustered, and stratified estimates. Sample includes respondents living with children aged 0-6 by wave. The 20- to 30-minute NIDS-CRAM telephonic survey is a broadly representative sample of persons 15 years or older in 2017 in South Africa, who were re-interviewed in 2020 for NIDS-CRAM (Kerr et al., 2020). In waves 2 to 5 collected in July-August 2020, November-December 2020, February-March 2021 and April-May 2021 adults were asked whether any child in the household had attended an ECD programme in the past 7 days. Additionally, they were asked whether any child had attended an ECD programme in February 2020 (waves 3-5), in March 2020 (wave 2) and in June 2020 (wave 2).

Figure 2 shows that in February 2020, before the first case of COVID-19 was detected in South Africa, about 39% of NIDS-CRAM adult respondents living with children aged 0-6 indicated that at least one child was attending an ECCE programme. In the weeks after ECCE programmes could reopen, not more than 7% of NIDS-CRAM respondents living with children aged 0-6 and

interviewed between mid-July to mid-August 2020 reported any child attending an ECCE programme in the past 7 days. Towards the end of 2020, a partial recovery in ECCE attendance was observed, albeit nowhere near pre-pandemic levels. In November/December 2020, 28% of respondents living with children aged 0-6 reported at least one child attending an ECCE programme in the past 7 days (Wills and Kika-Mistry, 2021b).

Unfortunately, the recovery in ECCE attendance observed in the fourth quarter of 2020 was short-lived. Even though ECCE programmes were allowed to operate when public schools were shut in early February 2021, and COVID-19 infections had subsided after a second peak in infections, attendance plummeted to 7%. In the weeks following the delayed reopening of schools, more ECCE programmes opened again, and children started returning with about 19% of respondents living with children aged 0-6 (and interviewed between 15 February and 11 March 2021) reporting at least one child attending an ECCE programme in the past 7 days (Wills and Kika-Mistry, 2021b).

The second fall in ECCE attendance was particularly concerning for the sector. After the first plunge in attendance in mid-2020, permanent closure of ECCE programmes and the loss of tens of thousands of ECCE related jobs were already imminent concerns after sustained inactivity and non-payment of user fees. However, by the April/May 2021 interview, ECCE attendance had rebounded again, edging towards pre-pandemic levels. Of respondents living with children aged 0-6 in April/May 2021, 36% reported that at least one child had attended an ECCE programme in the past 7 days.

Given the ever-changing policy environment we find ourselves in, it is important to clarify that our reflections and knowledge of sector trends in a pandemic period is largely limited to the period between February 2020 to April 2021, the duration over which ECCE attendance trends were measured through the NIDS-CRAM surveys. The final (fifth) wave of NIDS-CRAM was unfortunately followed by a severe third peak in COVID-19 infections in June/July 2021, and the reinstatement of stricter lockdown measures. There is no available data to identify how this third wave of infections impacted ECCE attendance trends.⁹

4. COVID-19 and the sustainability, capacity, and accountability of the ECCE system

Table 1 presents a summary of key policy messages and ECCE system strengths and weaknesses that emerged from our analysis of developments in the ECCE sector and attendance trends over the pandemic period. The findings are framed in relation to three system dimensions – sustainability, capacity, and accountability.

By sustainability, we refer broadly to the resources enabling children's unhindered access to ECCE programmes and that limit fragility of ECCE programmes reflected in the extent to which they close on a temporary or permanent basis (Neuman et al., 2014). By capacity we refer to the systems, knowledge, human resources and institutional structures to support ECCE service delivery (Nores and Fernandez, 2018). We refer to accountability as answerability and the expectation of accounting in the ECCE system. This includes both informal accountability as well as formal methods - that in turn depend on capacities - such as monitoring, programme evaluation and the use of data for continuous quality improvement (Couchenour and Chrisman, 2016).

We now provide a discussion of Table 1, focusing on each dimension in turn.

⁹ Furthermore, mass looting and insurrection attempts in mid-July 2021 in two very populous provinces, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, are likely to have affected access to ECCE as general safety concerns and related economic impacts limit the demand for outsourced childcare.

Table 1: Strengths, weaknesses, and policy messaging in the ECCE sector as highlighted through the COVID-19 pandemic

	Strengths exposed	Weaknesses exposed	Positive policy messaging during the pandemic exhibited in state support	Negative policy messaging during the pandemic exhibited in state support
Sustainability	Entrepreneurial resilience (especially when uncertainty is reduced through a flow of public funding support)	A sector extremely vulnerable to economic shocks due to overreliance on private fee collection and decentralised nature of sector	The sustainability of ECCE programmes does matter to government as reflected in provision of a stimulus package and revised lockdown regulations that enable programmes to remain open	The slower response in allocating stimulus relief for ECCE, relative to other sectors, initially implied a disregard for sustaining jobs in the sector
Capacity	Effective NGOs to engage in crisis support	Weak communication from overseeing government department on regulations pertaining to ECCE exposed current leadership capacity constraints	For the first time, “illegal” unregistered programmes are implicitly viewed as offering valuable services	Slow roll-out of stimulus package weakens perceptions about state capacity to support the sector
	Sector attracts generous philanthropic backing which could be leveraged for innovative financing and experimentation	Absence of information systems to leverage for effective management and support in times of crisis	Appetite and capacity exists to build information systems	Poor messaging about the value of ECCE practitioners relative to teachers through slow prioritisation in the vaccination roll-out
Accountability	Civil accountability: Significant advocacy capacity exists within the sector to lobby for support and engage in legal battles against unjust policies or implementation issues		Accountability for public spending on ECCE matters but government is willing to balance this need (given the informal context) against the need to provide timeous support	

Sustainability

Conditions of fragility exposed through COVID-19

The troughs in ECCE attendance that emerged due to COVID-19 related events, and the patterns of recovery that were observed, highlights how children’s access to quality ECCE programming is highly vulnerable to economic and health shocks. The July/August 2020 plunge in attendance implied that COVID-19 was a major threat to the sustainability of private ECCE provisioning and in turn children’s access to care and educational opportunities. It also brought to the fore two key conditions that lead to such fragility.

The primary condition is the overreliance of ECCE provisioning on private fee collection. As observed in NIDS-CRAM, the ability to pay fees over the pandemic period was the strongest determinant of whether children were attending ECCE programmes when periods of recovery were

observed. For example, in November/December 2021, we found that respondents were four times as likely to report that a child was attending an ECCE programme in the past 7 days if they could afford ECCE fees, even after controlling for individual and home background characteristics (Wills and Kika-Mistry, 2021b). The results also highlighted how households' ability to afford ECCE fees have been closely tied to structural inequalities. For example, compared with respondents who could afford ECCE fees in October 2020, respondents who report that they or someone in their household could not afford ECCE fees were more likely to be black, women, poorer, grant recipients, less likely to be employed and more likely to be unemployed but searching for work (Wills et al., 2021).

The highly decentralised nature of ECCE provisioning created a second condition for sector fragility. Compared to public schooling, where clear operating directives are provided as to when to open and when to close, the private nature of ECCE provisioning means that the operational schedules of ECCE programmes are decided in a highly decentralised manner. Further, in the face of financial constraints to reopening after months of not being able to collect fees, and additional costs of meeting COVID-19 safety protocols including purchasing personal protective equipment, this made it difficult for many programmes to reopen. This very clearly limited access to ECCE opportunities.

Policy messaging about the value of sustaining private ECCE provisioning

The delayed reopening of ECCE programmes relative to other sectors (and public schools with grade R) reflected poorly on government's regard for private provisioning of ECCE. Furthermore, the slower response in allocating sector specific stimulus relief for ECCE, relative to some other sectors, initially implied a disregard from government for the need to protect jobs in private ECCE programmes. Due to the highly informal nature of ECCE provisioning, it was challenging for ECCE workers to access more general social income protection such as Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) pay-outs or Temporary Employment Relief (TERS) payments.

However, government messaging took a turn in mid-October 2020. President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a stimulus package in the form of a "Public investment in a mass employment strategy to build a new economy" on 15 October 2020. This initially included a budget of R380 million to support employees or sole practitioners of eligible ECD programmes by transferring a monthly grant for a maximum of six months (The Presidency, Republic of South Africa 2020). In addition, R116 million was earmarked for the Department of Social Development (DSD) to provide top-up payments to 25,000 employees to meet COVID-19 regulations for sector reopening (The Presidency Republic of South Africa, 2020).

This was arguably one of the most significant and ambitious initiatives that government had ever engaged in to provide financial support to South Africa's ECCE sector. Not only registered but unregistered providers were eligible to receive relief pay-outs. In April 2021, the DSD also removed the cap that was placed on the number of employees per ECCE programme that could receive a payment of R4 186 (Department of Social Development, 2021a). This means that ECCE services that have met all the necessary requirements would receive funding for all the employees that they applied for.

The eventual outcome of ECCE policy developments communicated that sustaining private provisioning of ECCE, even of unregistered programmes that are technically illegal, was now an imperative for government. This message was reinforced by explicitly allowing ECCE operators to remain open even when public schools were instructed to close from the second half of 2020 (Department of Co-operative Governance, 2021).

Entrepreneurial resilience

While the patterns of ECCE attendance pointed to the vulnerability of private ECCE operations to income shocks, it has also highlighted the entrepreneurial resilience of these operators. Even though

most ECCE operators that applied for the Early Childhood Development-Employment Stimulus Relief Fund (ECD-ESRF) had not yet received payments by April-May 2021, a significant recovery in ECCE attendance was observed nonetheless (see Figure 2). A largely informal ECCE sector may have been able to bounce back, buoyed by concurrent recoveries in the labour market over periods when lockdown restrictions were reduced (Bassier et al., 2021; Casale and Shepherd, 2021). Of course, the prospect of receiving relief government funds, which are sizable in relation to monthly ECCE practitioner salaries, is also likely to have encouraged reopening efforts. Relatedly, court cases which provided legal accountability for the payment of subsidies owed to registered programmes, also unlocked some certainty in government funding flows.

As South Africa moves forward to secure ECCE opportunities for young children, it is necessary to address conditions in this quasi-market that leave it vulnerable to shocks. What we have learnt from the COVID-19 crisis is that this requires increased government oversight and more public financing. We observe, for example, that the April/May 2021 recovery in ECCE attendance trends is in part attributable to the prospect of public stimulus relief, which created conditions of more financial certainty for ECCE entrepreneurs (and would have encouraged the reopening of lower fee ECD programmes). The risk of suppressed ECCE access through individualised decisions of ECCE operators to reopen, was also directly mitigated by government attaching a condition to receiving relief funds, namely that ECCE programmes that were not yet fully operational due to COVID-19 had to be open within 60 days of receipt of relief funds (Department of Social Development, 2021b).

Capacity

Weak leadership, weak communication and lack of information systems hindered sector recovery

It is in times of crisis that one becomes aware of the critical need for strong leadership, effective and clear communication and efficient systems in government. The COVID-19 crisis exposed weakness on all three fronts in the ECCE sector.

In the absence of clear operating directives and communication from the DSD, significant confusion initially marred the reopening of ECCE programmes. This may have also contributed to slow recovery in the sector. Relative to the phased reopening of the South African economy from 1 June 2020 and the clear communication from the Department of Basic Education on when primary and secondary schools could reopen, the directives on when ECCE programmes could reopen were delayed. As a result, NGOs had to approach the courts to deal with the matter. In later periods when schools were again directed to close due to new COVID-19 surges, government gazettes made provision for ECCE programmes to remain open regardless (Department of Co-operative Governance, 2021). Again, this was also not well understood or communicated. Consequently a strong association between ECCE attendance and school reopening is observed in NIDS-CRAM data collected over February/March 2021 (Wills and Kika-Mistry, 2021a). Where there was a lack of awareness among ECCE programmes as to when they could operate, ECCE programmes may have taken their guide from the DBE. For parents, they may have also taken comfort in the safety of DBE notices which are well communicated and informed by close deliberations between the DBE and COVID-19 related national command councils.

A factor augmenting weak communication was that the DSD did not have an information system, with clear records on ECCE operators, where they are situated and up-to-date contact details. The systems were simply not in place to communicate effectively to providers or to provide rapid transfer of funds to support the sector. Poor communication, and limited dialogue with larger umbrella NGOs may have also fueled virulent advocacy campaigns.

Policy messaging through COVID-19 response initiatives

Despite administrative weaknesses which were exposed through the COVID-19 crisis, policy actions eventually communicated a willingness and capacity to address glaring gaps in information systems. This has been demonstrated through the DSD and Nelson Mandela Foundation's Vangasali Campaign, which seeks to collect information related to ECCE facilities, where they are and whether they are registered or not. The resulting database is also proving to be useful in recent initiatives by the DBE to run a Census of ECCE programmes across the country, identifying where ECCE programmes are, the number of children enrolled and the nature of programming at ECCE sites.

In the medium term, the Vangasali campaign was also intended to facilitate the roll-out of support to identified unregistered ECCE programmes to help them meet necessary registration requirements (South African Government, 2020). In addition to the inclusion of unregistered programmes in the provision of relief funding, this has communicated that government acknowledges the value and potential of unregistered ECCE providers.

Despite the many encouraging responses from government, policy messaging in two key areas has not been positive. First, the roll-out of the ECD-ESRF has been much slower than initially intended, largely due to the lack of existing information systems and the informal nature in which programmes operate. After applications closed for the ECD-ESRF, the DSD identified and validated applications for about 116 600 employees from ECCE operator submissions. After indicating that payments would start from 31 March 2021, by mid-May 2021, delays in pay-outs were still being experienced where DSD payments to ECCE operators only covered about 20% of ECCE workers expecting a pay-out (Daniels, 2021; Dano, 2021).¹⁰

ECCE practitioners were also not prioritised in the phased roll-out of vaccines (Motshekga, 2021), despite teachers in public and private institutions having been prioritised in June 2021. Vaccinating ECCE practitioners provides an important barrier to the spread of the virus and keeping ECCE sites open. It also allays parent/caregiver fears of children contracting the virus at ECCE programmes – these fears have been a significant contributing factor to children not returning to ECCE programmes (Wills and Kika-Mistry, 2021b). However, the social development sector, which includes the ECCE workforce, was eventually prioritised a month later in July 2021.

A system strengthened through effective NGOs and philanthropic support

The COVID-19 crisis also demonstrated the effectiveness of large or umbrella NGOs in the ECCE sector to engage in crisis support, and to broadly advocate for sector reform. Varied and ongoing efforts by NGOs to provide ECCE programmes with practical support to facilitate reopening were initiated (Brooks and Hartnack, 2021; DGMT, 2020; SmartStart, 2021, p. 22). This included providing coaching and financial support to ECCE programmes in meeting necessary COVID-19 safety protocols, salary support through vouchers and the provision of food and food vouchers to feed children at programmes, which is a significant cost component of operating. NGO support was swift, and quite widespread. This was enabled through generous philanthropic giving. Evidently, a strength of this sector is its ability to attract private donations.

¹⁰ Processing of the applications for payment, however, has proved challenging, for reasons including failed banking verification and capturing information incorrectly (Department of Social Development, 2021a).

Accountability

Civil accountability as a strength of the ECCE sector

The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the significant capacity for advocacy and self-organisation that exists within a largely informal ECCE sector. NGOs representing thousands of ECCE providers, were able to campaign for relief support and engage in legal battles against unjust policies or implementation issues that were unnecessarily deepening the ECCE crisis.

In the first 6 to 8 months of the pandemic, strong advocacy efforts lobbied for government support for the sector. Together with ECCE practitioners, advocacy groups strongly voiced their grievances and concerns about ECCE being overlooked in wider income protection packages that were proposed for different sectors. Concerns were backed by evidence of the devastating impacts on the ECCE sector, and the 'plight' of its workforce (BRIDGE et al., 2020).

The accountability 'muscle' of civil society was shown to be particularly effective in securing financial flows from government. During the mandatory closure of programmes from March to June 2020, over 50% of the ECD subsidy was withheld from registered programmes on the basis that children were not attending and would have no need for the nutrition and stimulation components of the subsidy. On 11 May 2020, Minister Zulu directed that provincial DSDs would "continue to pay subsidies in order to fulfil their administrative responsibilities and payment of stipends" (South African Government 2020) regardless of attendance. But there were several reports of non-payment of owed subsidies during the lockdown, furthering the plight of some registered ECCE programmes (Vorster 2020). On 20 October 2020, a North Gauteng High Court Judgement against the Minister of Social Development and all MECs (except the MEC in the Western Cape) ruled that the Minister and MECs must pay full subsidies to registered ECCE programmes for the duration of all lockdown alert levels, whether they are operational or not, for the entire 2020/21 financial year (SA Childcare (Pty) Ltd and 7 others v Minister of Social Development and Others 2020). This was a significant win for advocacy groups and the sector, as the payment of owed subsidies would significantly improve the financial position of registered programmes. However, these legal battles would not have been necessary if provincial DSDs demonstrated capacity and transparency in executing their function to pay subsidies as was demonstrated by exception by the Western Cape DSD.

The efforts of NPOs and advocacy groups also shaped the nature of ECCE relief that would eventually be provided. Rather than providing short-term relief, government initially proposed a medium-term solution to support unregistered programmes in accessing subsidies by expediting the ECCE registration process. COVID-19 relief funds were initially going to be used to employ "youth compliance officers" – unemployed youth that are not currently part of the ECCE workforce – to accelerate the registration of programmes (Nkgweng, 2020).¹¹ Historically, however, registration has been a slow process and limited in reach. Through the outcry of advocacy and ECD groups, this proposal was overturned on the logic that the ECCE workforce needed immediate income support.

Financial accountability displayed in government's relief response

The structures for civil accountability in ECCE were evidenced in the advocacy efforts of 2020/2021. It is important to recognise, however, that in the relief response, government institutions have also demonstrated their commitment to be accountable for public spending on ECCE. Conflicts emerged between the legitimate requests of advocacy groups for quick government relief and the need to uphold accountable financial processes. Due to the informal nature of the sector, and the absence of existing information systems, there was initially no clear platform or approaches to transparently distribute relief funds to ECCE providers and practitioners. National Treasury, working with the

¹¹ The reason for this approach is largely due to public relief finance for ECCE having been redistributed from a public fund earmarked to support youth employment.

DSD, however, reached a compromise in the design of an application process for relief funds that balanced the need for financial accountability against providing relief support to ECCE operators and their employees. The delayed provision of support, while frustrating, demonstrated a commitment to transparent funding flows.

5. Reforming South Africa's ECCE sector

Through a review of studies on systems and capacity in ECCE, Nores and Fernandez (2018) identify eight critical aspects for enabling systemic strength and support for early childhood services. These include strong collaboration arrangements and centralised leadership, vertical alignment, horizontal alignment, evidence-based programmes and policies, linking programmes to programme outputs and outcomes, investing in the early childhood workforce, implementing continuous improvement cycles and partnerships. The scope of our paper limits us from a detailed discussion of reforms in each of these eight areas, but the conceptual framework provides a tool to articulate key priority areas for increased sustainability, capacity, and accountability in South African ECCE provisioning.

Addressing financial sustainability through registration, increased subsidy amounts and increased public spending on ECCE

Nores and Fernandez (2018) identify collaborative arrangements and centralised leadership as the first critical aspect of strong ECCE systems. The ECCE 'function shift' may serve to address the leadership vacuums in the current ECCE environment. Yet strong collaboration and centralised leadership requires the political prioritisation of ECCE, a national ECCE policy of co-responsibility and financing to match this (Neuman and Devercelli, 2013; Richter et al., 2017b).

South Africa has made significant strides in developing ECCE policies and political prioritisation has been demonstrated. However, without funding and appropriate systems aligned to these, ECCE policy has often been viewed as a symbolic commitment rather than something that was ever intended to be implemented. As Jansen and Sayed (2001, p196) reflect "... a consistent feature of educational policy is that symbolic commitments to overcome the legacy of apartheid inequities are not always realised in the crucible of practice."

Funding

Effective finance strategies resulting in higher-performing ECCE systems are characterised by an appropriate balance of three dimensions: sustainability, equity in access and administrative simplicity (Valerio and Garcia, 2013). However, the current financing system in South Africa has not been able to strike this balance.

The bulk of ECCE related budget allocations in South Africa are made at the provincial level through the 'equitable share formula'. The equitable share is strongly weighted to education, but non-school based ECCE currently falls under social services and welfare, which is accounted for under a broader poverty variable in the formula. Once provincial budget amounts are allocated, provinces are not obliged to follow the formula, resulting in inequalities in how funds are allocated across provinces. With medium-term plans for more ECCE programmes to be registered, it will be important for the DSD to safeguard budgets to accommodate newly registered ECCE programmes. Increasing the earmarked conditional grant for ECCE as determined by national government could be one way of doing this.

There is also an inherent need to reconsider the value of the daily subsidy to ensure that ECCE programmes receive adequate and sustainable financing. Replicating a middle-income country programme of adequate quality, similar to Chilean pre-school programmes, the cost is estimated to be around R42 per-child-per-day, or 2.5 times the current subsidy amount (Desmond et al., 2019). Extrapolating these costs, the Chilean model provides a coverage level of 80% of the targeted 65% of

children between the ages of 3 and 4.5 years. This is estimated at R6.7 billion per year (USD 450 million). If fully funded, rather than partially subsidised, R13 billion annually would be required. By comparison, the planned national budget in 2023/24 allocated for subsidies of children of a much wider aged group (0 to 5) is estimated at just R3.3 billion¹² (National Treasury, 2021, p. 328). There is also very little evidence to suggest that current budgets are being set with population growth planning in mind or in terms of the demand for services (Neuman and Devercelli, 2013) despite this being required in policy (Republic of South Africa, 2015).

Simplify registration criteria and streamline the registration process

Reports have been commissioned over the years to review practices related to ECCE programme registration and funding (Ilifa Labantwana, 2014). A recurring theme is the need to reduce onerous requirements for registration and to simplify and streamline complex and administratively burdensome processes (Giese and Budlender, 2011; Ilifa Labantwana, 2014). For example, to register as an ECCE provider, each service provider must submit multiple applications. Due to poorly aligned processes, duplication of effort and documentation occurs. Despite calls for over a decade to address registration inefficiencies through more efficient information and work-flow management systems, reform has been slow. A possible reason for this is that with insufficient budgets allocated to ECCE to expand subsidies through new programme registrations, the DSD was not actively identifying ECD programmes requiring registration (despite it being illegal for unregistered programmes with more than six children to operate). By maintaining low volumes of registration requests, the system was able to cope and thus there was little pressure on the DSD to address system inefficiencies (Ilifa Labantwana, 2014). However, increasing children's access to ECD programmes and the active identification of ECD programmes in need of registration (for example through the Vangasali campaign) will require more efficient systems to handle higher application volumes.

Streamlining the registration process and reducing administrative complexity in the regulatory system through improved standard operating procedures and data systems, could also free up capacity among existing ECD government officials and social workers to focus on programme improvement rather than merely monitoring compliance.

Building capacity through training ECCE practitioners and expanding the ECCE workforce of government officials

A key component of ECCE capacity building, that is strongly linked to effective ECCE programming, is developing “pedagogical leadership” (Fukkink and Lont, 2007; Nutbrown, 2019). This requires upskilling, training and continuous professional development of ECCE practitioners (Cavallera et al., 2019). With a poorly trained ECCE workforce (Kotze, 2015), it will be incumbent upon the DBE to establish a core skills programme to upgrade qualifications while creating expectations for minimum qualifications of new entrants. In preparation for the function shift it is also critical that attention is given to increasing human resources for oversight and administrative roles. A 2016 audit of human resource capacity in the ECD sector highlighted the enormous gaps in the number of government officials responsible for overseeing the management and implementation of ECCE programmes from birth to four years (Biersteker and Picken, 2016). Across national government and 9 provincial governments, there were just 119 fulltime equivalent DBE staff and 729 DSD staff dedicated to

¹² After accounting for the ECD conditional grant, it is stated that a subsidy value of R17.50 for 717 767 children is anticipated in 2023/24 (National Treasury, 2021, p. 328). Subsidies are typically provided for 264 days in a year.

ECCE. This implies ratios of government officials to children in all ECCE facilities¹³ at 1:2350 in 2015. At this ratio, one cannot expect to implement a system of quality assurance in the sector, or a programme for upskilling ECCE practitioners.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic which squeezed government budgets, unfilled and frozen posts for ECCE oversight roles had already been identified across national and provincial departments. Dedicated social workers appointed through the DSD already faced large caseloads, which impacted on being able to provide sufficient support for the quality implementation of programmes (Biersteker and Picken, 2016). Clarifying the role of social workers in the DSD, who are the dominant 'boots on the ground' in overseeing ECCE programmes, will be vital. The DBE will also need to engage in a significant drive to appoint and train individuals to evaluate and guide ECCE programmes on how to implement effective ECCE learning programmes. Biersteker and Picken (2016) clearly articulate the areas of training required, and warn against shifting current DBE staff (with typically primary teaching qualifications) into ECCE positions without ensuring they have the content knowledge that fosters learning through play appropriate for 0-4 year olds. It is also necessary to budget for resources to support the effective utilization of personnel, such as ensuring access to vehicles to conduct ECCE site visits, and the presence of data systems, computers and internet access at DBE/DSD offices (Ilifa Labantwana, 2014).

However, human resource capacity development in the context of a function shift presents a political challenge if the bargaining power of private ECCE practitioners aligns more closely to that of teachers on the civil service payroll. If ECCE practitioners are challenged to upskill or are subject to increased accountability processes under the DBE, the influence of teacher unions, and particularly, the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), may become more prevalent in the ECCE landscape. This presents a concern for managing expectations around pay, working conditions, and sustaining a system of private provisioning of ECCE. As observed in schooling, the potential for undue union interest flourishes when there are leadership vacuums and expectations are not clearly defined through policy and legal frameworks (Taylor and Draper, 2014). The need for strong leadership at national, provincial and district levels will become particularly important for limiting unnecessary disruption. Furthermore, vertical alignment with leadership structures that already exist in a well-organised system of informal ECCE forums will be necessary.

Data systems to support accountability for integrated service delivery and continuous improvement cycles

In most countries, including South Africa, the multi-faceted nature of early childhood development requires an integrated and cross-sectoral approach to service delivery (Richter et al., 2017b). In addition to health, social development and education departments, public works programmes and municipalities play key roles in the registration of ECCE programmes and the provision of related infrastructure. Even with the proposed function shift, "horizontal alignment" will be necessary to address fragmentation in service delivery across departments (Nores and Fernandez, 2018). This necessitates proper planning, the establishment of structures for integrated ECCE leadership and coordination, and clearly articulated roles and responsibilities as expressed in policy and legal frameworks.¹⁴ However, data systems are also necessary to support sustained and effective intersectoral coordination and collaboration. For example, under Rwanda's National Early

¹³ As reflected in GHS estimates.

¹⁴ See Montecinos, Gonzalez and Ehren (2021) for a discussion on systems established in Chile to establish more horizontal and vertical accountability in a quasi-market for schooling and early childhood development.

Development Program (NECDP) seven ministries or agencies contribute data to an ECCE dashboard that tracks indicators aligned to sectoral priorities (Raikes et al., 2021, p. 4). With visibility of real-time indicators of performance against agreed goals or actions, this promotes accountability across different departments responsible for ECCE sectoral progress.

The availability of comprehensive data systems can also strengthen monitoring, support continuous quality improvement and promote timely interventions (Neuman and Devercelli, 2013). For example, in Chile, an electronic database of all pregnant women and children entering the health system can be accessed by health, education, and social development authorities to update information about a child's development and activate necessary interventions (Milman et al., 2018).

In South Africa there is currently no comprehensive management information system with up-to-date information on ECCE service providers. Household survey data to effectively track ECCE access is also limited.¹⁵ In the context of the function shift, however, the DBE is undertaking a Census of ECD programmes in 2021/2022 to track the geographical spread of, and access to ECCE programmes, and to collect basic information relating to registration status, materials, infrastructure, and human resource capacity. This imminent ECD Census in addition to proposed efforts to obtain better programme quality measures¹⁶ are important developments. But moving beyond these “static” snapshots of the system will require planning for a measurement system that supports continuous quality improvements (i.e. learning about what is working and what is not). This supports course corrections in processes and procedures with the goal of better child development outcomes (Cavallera et al., 2019). Continuous improvement will also require a culture shift from compliance monitoring towards to ongoing quality improvement, reflection and shared learning (Nores and Fernandez, 2018).

While there appears to be a chasm between the lack of current information systems in ECCE in South Africa and what would be required for effective management, the roll-out of a COVID-19 related support package, and the large application system that was established, implies that systems can be implemented. The Census of ECD programmes will also help create the substance for an ECD management information system (ECD-MIS) and tools have been developed to help monitor early learning programme outcomes and guide programme improvement (see Snelling et al. (2019) for the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM)).¹⁷ Pockets of IT excellence also exist in the ECD NPO sector. Raikes, Sayre and Davis (2021) cite a case study from “Grow ECD” - a franchise of South African ECCE centres - which have been using a data-driven approach to ensure ECCE facilities meet service delivery standards. Stakeholders interact with real-time data on quality indicators reported by ECCE programmes using app-based technology.

Partnerships to strengthen the delivery of ECCE services

Over the COVID-19 pandemic period, NGO networks working for systemic change in the ECCE system have accomplished remarkable efforts with the support of private philanthropy. Much has been learned about the type of capacity required to implement innovative support projects in the sector, and other learnings have been invaluable. Even before the pandemic, NPOs have also had a

¹⁵ While the General Household Survey in South Africa is useful in providing insights into ECD access, additional questions are required to track vital developments in the sector.

¹⁶ In addition, the DBE also plans to undertake a ‘baseline assessment’ or ECD audit and the measurement of an Early Years Index to assess the extent to which programmes have maintained and can strengthen quality outcomes in the early years while providing context on ECD finances to inform strategies and planning in the system.

¹⁷ Ensuring that these systems are effective necessitates considerable financial and human resources. Raikes, Sayre and Davis (2021) highlight the need for tight linkages and relationships between the producers and users of research and the organizations they represent, and this requires substantial capacity to produce reliable and relevant results such that the data can be used to influence policies and practice.

history of trialling new systems and engaging in capacity building initiatives to support improved efficiencies in ECCE programming (Ilifa Labantwana, 2014).

In building towards a stronger ECCE system, partnership and dialogue between private players and government must be strengthened. Philanthropic support and NGOs in the sector are a significant resource to tap into in experimenting with new operating models, developing innovative financing models, and unlocking capacity building opportunities as private sector excellence is imparted to public systems (Nores and Fernandez, 2018). Biersteker and Picken (2016, p. 3) also point out that where ECD human resource shortages are evident in government, integrated service departmental teams could be augmented by ECD NPOs.¹⁸

There are two key approaches to strengthening partnerships. The first is through longer-term financial commitments and the second is through measurement (and more broadly documentation of experiences). In a review of ECCE projects in low-to-middle-income countries, it is evident that where donors and funding agencies commit longer-term resources (at least 5 years) this leads to improved continuity of activities and enables higher impacts (Cavallera et al., 2019; Hartmann and Linn, 2008).¹⁹ With increasing trends towards results-based financing in ECCE, longer-term investment from philanthropy and international donors is also more likely where progress measures can be shown, including the impacts of programmes on child developmental outcomes. “On the ground” experiences of NPOs and private sector partners also need to be more clearly documented and made more widely available to feed into broader debates about ECCE programme development (Cavallera et al., 2019). Fostering collaborations with researchers would help to facilitate improved documentation and enhance development of a policy-relevant research repository from which policymakers can draw (Raikes et al., 2021).

6. Conclusion

As the ECCE sector in South Africa rebuilds and recovers from COVID-19, it is imperative that the focus is not simply on replicating the ECCE system that was already in place prior to the pandemic, but to build back better to ensure that the system is stronger, more comprehensive, and more sustainable.

The troughs in ECCE attendance observed over the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need to address conditions in this quasi-market that leave it vulnerable to economic and health shocks. The COVID-19 crisis has clearly revealed that this requires increased government oversight and more public financing to support a largely private ECCE sector. Addressing financial sustainability will require increased registration of ECCE programmes, increased subsidy amounts and increased public spending on ECCE. However, finance alone is a necessary but insufficient condition for ensuring sustained access to quality ECCE. Government will need to build capacity through training ECCE practitioners and expanding the ECCE workforce of government officials. There is also an immediate need to develop information systems to support increased accountability

¹⁸ For example, Ilifa Labantwana and partners engaged in improving district-based information and workflow management systems as well as developing improved and simplified measures for registration and standard operating procedures (Ilifa Labantwana, 2014).

¹⁹ In Bangladesh, Child Development Centres were established as public-private partnerships, focused on the assessment, diagnosis, and management of a range of neurodevelopmental disorders in children (Khan et al., 2018). The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) - an NGO, and donors formed a consortium which pooled funds and had common reporting requirements. An important aspect of the consortium has been to improve the predictability of resource flows – securing financing for longer periods (Hartmann and Linn, 2008).

for integrated service delivery in early childhood development and to establish a structure to support continuous improvement cycles.

Finally, the significant efforts of NPOs and philanthropy to address fragility in ECCE operations and encourage quality improvements over the COVID-19 pandemic period, further demonstrates the importance of partnerships to strengthen the delivery of ECCE services in South Africa. Key to improved partnerships will be the transparent and effective leadership of government in shaping a cohesive vision and path forward. While advocacy and civil society groups demonstrated a capacity to fight for just and fair support for the ECCE system over the pandemic period, the legal battles and associated costs that ensued could have been avoided through improved stakeholder consultation and transparent leadership from government. As the oversight function for ECCE shifts to the Department of Basic Education in 2022, there is an opportunity for new leadership to chart a course of collaboration and trust with private providers and key NPO stakeholders. This will provide the first layer of the foundation for a more sustainable, capable, and accountable ECCE system.

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