

# Learning from Birth

Early Childhood Development

## Revved up, but too many speed bumps

The early childhood development agenda can be accelerated if it heeds findings of new research, writes Shirin Motala

**R**ecent research on early childhood development (ECD) suggests that the quality of young children's lives can be significantly enhanced by increasing access to training for practitioners, improving the service conditions of practitioners and expanding the range and quality of ECD programmes that are supported by government.

In 2007 the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) initiated an in-depth analysis of the state of ECD service delivery in South Africa called "Scaling Up ECD 0 to 4 years" – the scope of which was from birth to a child's fifth birthday.

The research emanated from HSRC work in 2004 on employment scenarios, which showed that 350 000 jobs could be created if the target of reaching the estimated 2.6-million poor and vulnerable children in South Africa aged 0 to four years could be met.

The context for this project was the significant shift reflected in government's *National Integrated Plan for ECD in South Africa 2005-2010*. This plan called for an integrated response beyond centre-based provisioning and established targets for expanding access to ECD to reach 2.6-million children from zero to four years old, while at the same time improving the quality of service delivery.

Given that more than half of South Africa's 5.16-million children in the 0 to four age cohort live in extreme situations of vulnerability owing to poverty, disability or the HIV/Aids pandemic, the imperative to reach the plan's target and beyond is even more pressing.

Timely ECD interventions can significantly improve the survival, growth and development potential of these children and contribute to enabling the realisation of their rights. However, at the current rate of scaling up it would take probably two decades or more to reach the national plan's target of 2.6-million children, clearly not a tenable response.

The HSRC research project therefore aimed to improve the evidence base supporting the implementation of government's vision of mass expansion of quality and integrated ECD services.

Many leading researchers in South Africa were commissioned to produce the 14 research papers across a wide thematic focus that together provide comprehensive data on the state of ECD in South Africa and what might be required to rapidly expand the provision of ECD in the 0-4 bracket to an acceptable quality to meet service delivery objectives.

### The findings

The research findings identified many institutional and other barriers to scaling up ECD.

On legislation and policy, the findings indicate that:

- South Africa's legislative and policy framework, which is critical to effective scaling up ECD programmes, is well developed. However, lack of clarification of roles and responsibilities across the three lead departments – health, education and social development – remains a concern; and
- A major drawback to maintaining jobs in the sector is the poor salaries and service conditions.

On funding, the findings suggest that:

- Departmental budget allocations are inadequate for scaling up ECD relative to the target population;
- Funding norms and monitoring regulations are focused mainly on the provision of centre-based services. These need to be expanded to other key programmes and services such as parent education programmes, home visiting and support services, and play group interventions to reach larger numbers of vulnerable children within their homes;
- ECD centres' ability to leverage resources, both cash and in kind, were dependent on their ability to manage resources effectively and to account for their use;
- Public funding has significantly increased access to ECD training, particularly for poor and vulnerable women; and
- Channelling funding for ECD through the equitable share has been problematic because provincial treasuries continue to divert funds towards other programmes.

On capacity, training and skills development, the findings indicate that:

- There is insufficient human capacity for ECD support at all levels of government and in the NGO sector; training providers and job creation schemes are not taking sufficient account of the new job categories outlined in ECD policy; and higher-level leadership, management and supervisory training is critical for ECD practitioners, government officials and training institutions.

On quality assurance, the findings suggest that:

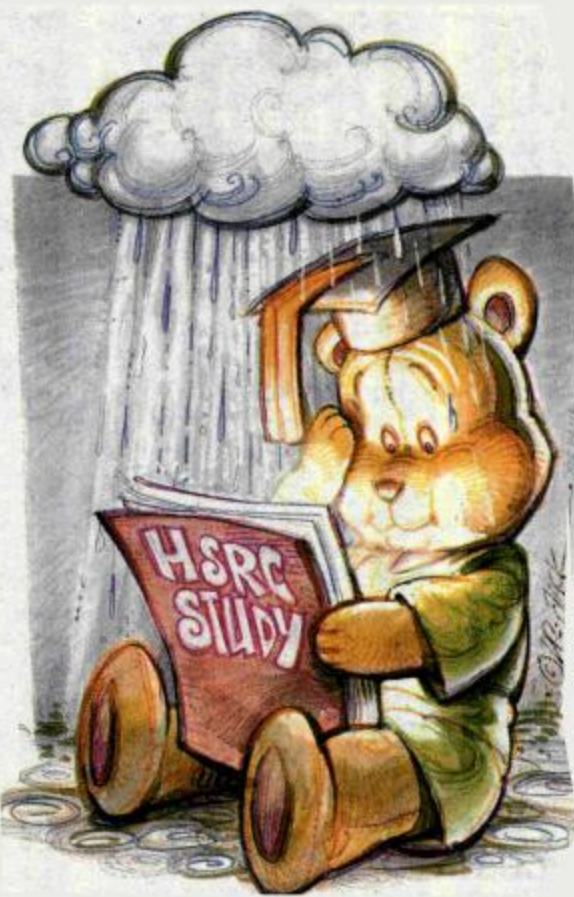
- Regular departmental quality assurance and support is lacking. Better data availability would enable planning and budgeting for training and other service needs;
- Training alone is insufficient to ensure quality. There is a need for an effective mentoring and support programme to be provided by the state;
- An integrated monitoring and evaluation unit with adequate human and

technical resources is needed to assess the impact of holistic programmes; and

- Regular, updated information on practitioner education and qualification levels would facilitate planning and budgeting and prevent learner-hopping (learners move from one stipend to the next to retain the learnership stipend, which is often higher than the wage they are likely to secure working in the sector).

Finally, on quality interventions, the research findings suggest that:

- The design of programmes must be based on the available evidence of what works. A simple, minimum set of health and psychosocial outcomes indicators and measures for children and caregivers is needed to determine whether programmes of different kinds are having the intended outcomes and impacts.
- Evidence, especially from developing countries, suggests that programmes with the greatest impact on child growth and development are



those that commence pre-natally and extend into infancy and early childhood; and

- Home-based programmes designed to improve parenting and early stimulation work best with active parent participation, frequent and long duration contact, and a supportive, stable relationship between participants and

programme staff.

The research has generated considerable information on the central approaches to strengthening institutional delivery mechanisms. A critical challenge lies in the ability of the state and a relatively fragmented and non-formal delivery sector to work in partnership.

Shirin Motala is the project manager of "Scaling Up ECD 0 to 4 Years", a research project of the Economic Performance and Development Unit (formerly the Centre for Poverty, Employment and Growth) at the Human Sciences Research Council. The project's findings in full can be found on at [www.hsrc.ac.za](http://www.hsrc.ac.za)

### Learning from Birth

**Editor**  
David Macfarlane  
davidm@mg.co.za  
**Advertising**  
Marilyn Gilmour  
marilyng@mg.co.za  
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