



Evaluation of the South African National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy

Research Overview

The 2015 South African National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECDP) mandates a public package of comprehensive ECD services.

It emphasises inclusivity for children with disabilities and delivery in healthy environments with proper housing, water, sanitation, and energy. It requires public awareness about ECD services and their accessibility. The policy integrates these services across various settings, including homes, community programmes, and centre-based programmes.

The Genesis research team conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the NIECDP.

In late 2023, 10 focus group discussions and 40 key informant interviews were held to gather diverse perspectives on the various policy aspects. We then reviewed primary data and secondary data (including legislation, policy documents, and academic research) before validating findings in December 2023 with stakeholders in the ECD sector. Their feedback was used to guide the final report, available [here](#).

Key Findings

The NIECD Policy is recognised as progressive and comprehensive, enhancing the recognition and scope of early childhood development.

Enablers of the NIECD policy include a shared vision, collective goals, and an engaged civil society, fostering widespread action.

Key successes of the policy include:

- Role clarity within its integrated framework, aiding sector organisation
- An evidence-based approach that shapes effective service delivery strategies
- Serving as a valuable tool for ECD service delivery
- Creating a shared vision among government, non-profit organisations, and businesses
- Emphasising the critical importance of the first 1000 days in a child's life
- An effective framing from a child's rights' perspective

Though, there have been some overarching challenges too. These include:

The NIECD Policy and the implementation functions around it have not been sufficient to meet the target of universal ECD access by 2024, and are not considered on track to achieving quality universal access to ECD by 2030. Certain policy-related factors might have contributed to these unmet goals, such as:

- There is no approved accompanying implementation plan
- Lacks clear funding and resource allocation guidelines for ECD services and staff
- Ineffective multi-sector coordination mechanisms, leading to poor accountability
- Absence of strategies tailored to each province's socio-economic context
- The policy length impedes full comprehension and implementation
- Significant gaps in policy monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance



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for every child



Below, the progress made against each of the policy's short-, medium- and long-term goals are outlined.

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| By 2017, legal frameworks, organisational structures, planning, and universal and equitable financing are to be achieved. | While the organisational structures have been set up, such as the NIMC, NIDC, and ISF, they are not considered to be functioning optimally. The financing and legal framework goals were not achieved in 2017, or since. |
| By 2024, services are available and accessible to all target groups. | While essential components were agreed upon, they are not yet accessible to all young children. |
| By 2030, a complete, age and development appropriate, quality ECD programme is accessible for all target groups. | The sector is not on track due to lack of coordination, including provincial to national strategies, financial constraints, and access barriers that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable children. |

The area of Social Protection is largely on track to achieving the policy's goals.

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| The 2024 social protection goal is to ensure young children and caregivers have early access to essential documents and income support, fostering conditions for optimal child development. | <p>Status: Progress made, e.g. near universal birth registration and Child Support Grant (CSG) coverage at 82% in 2020; more work needed for CSG to reach the most vulnerable.</p> <p>Revised Policy Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pre-delivery CSG registration at Antenatal Care centres• Simplified income and employment verification processes• Creation of a central employment database to accelerate CSG access and assist first-time applicants |
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The areas of healthcare and nutrition, and infrastructure present a medium risk of failing to achieve the policy's goals.

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| By 2024, the healthcare and nutrition goal is to deliver services enhancing the health, nutrition, development, and safety of infants and young children. | <p>Status: Progress made, e.g. a, reducing infant, under-five and maternal mortality. However, maternal anaemia and stunting rates remain high.</p> <p>Revised Policy Recommendations:</p> <p>In the revised policy, these goals should be included or emphasised:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Comprehensive childcare for under 3s outside ECD centres• CHWs to identify and assist vulnerable children to address food insecurity• Provide mental health support for women during and after pregnancy• Place parents at the centre of child health and nutrition |
| The ECD infrastructure goal is to ensure government investment in safe, accessible, inclusive, and well-equipped facilities. | <p>Status: The Conditional Grant has facilitated improved programme registration rates and eligibility for subsidies, yet registration remains slow. An Infrastructure Blueprint was developed but not distributed.</p> <p>Revised Policy Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Update the ECD Infrastructure Blueprint, and include it as an addendum in the revised policy |

The areas of early learning, parent support, leadership & coordination, funding, and human resources present a high risk of failing to meet the policy goals.

By 2030, provide quality early learning for all children until school age.

Status: Initiatives like the Vangasali Campaign and waiving NPO registration requirement fees have aided registration and subsidies. However, implementation is patchy, and gaps persist in reaching universal coverage.

Revised Policy Recommendations:

- Simplify ECD centre registration
- Enhance the focus on non-centre based ECD services, such as home and community based-based initiatives (especially for vulnerable children not reached by existing ELPs)

The 2024 parent support goal aims to enhance parental knowledge and capacities and provide specialist support for vulnerable parents.

Status: Effective parent support programmes are scattered geographically, with no common framework and ad-hoc implementation. The National Parenting Programme has had a limited reach and integration.

Revised Policy Recommendations:

- Establish a common Parent Support Framework
- Consolidate initiatives for scaled-up, diverse family support
- Appoint a central body to oversee and expand the National Parenting Programme
- Develop landscape assessment to identify service provision barriers to scale

The leadership and coordination goal is to establish governance structures that uphold the principles, vision and goals of the Policy.

Status: The functionality of ECD coordination committees varies. Overall, improvements in leadership, accountability, and coordination are needed to achieve policy objectives.

Revised Policy Recommendation:

- Mechanisms for enhanced accountability and oversight should be explored and encouraged in the revised policy

The funding goal is to secure and distribute sufficient funds to ensure universal access to quality ECD services, prioritising the essential components, and support for low-income families.

Status: Progress made, e.g. the Conditional Grant but sector remains underfunded. There is an urgent need for more resources to provide quality comprehensive ECD services for all children.

Revised Policy Recommendations

- The Costed Implementation Plan should accompany the revised NIECD Policy to pinpoint funding needs

The human resources goal is to develop enough skilled ECD practitioners and provide ongoing management support.

Status: Accredited training providers numbers have grown, but there is still a shortage of ECD practitioners and CHWs. There are issues of inadequate pay, qualifications, and an unclear career path.

Policy Revision Recommendations:

- CHWs to provide comprehensive child development support
- Formalise training for ECD practitioners, parents and caregivers
- Needs assessment to identify the HR requirements to accompany revised policy



Suggestions to make the revised NIECDP more engaging



Simplify and shorten the NIECD Policy for effectiveness.

Reduce the policy to a core document that outlines essential goals and strategies, while supplementary provincial and local documents provide specific, actionable details tailored to their unique contexts. For example, a local addendum might detail funding and service plans for community-based ECD centres in a specific municipality.



Implement a comprehensive indexing system for easier navigation.

This involves creating a detailed table of contents with hyperlinks and incorporating a keyword search feature or glossary for quick information retrieval. For example, financial officers can easily find financial information by clicking on the finance module in the table of contents.



Enhance the Policy with visuals and examples.

This means integrating infographics, diagrams, real-life examples, testimonials, and photographs to illustrate key concepts and demonstrate the policy's real-world impact. For instance, infographics could depict ECD milestones, while testimonials and photographs could showcase successful ECD programmes in action, making the policy more engaging and relatable for stakeholders.



Ensure goals are measurable and objective.

This means setting clear, quantifiable targets informed by official data sources, such as a Human Resource Capacity Needs Assessment for the ECD sector. For example, including indicators like the under-5 mortality rate and the number of registered centres helps track progress and understand the current status of the ECD sector, guiding future improvements.



Develop an advocacy and communications strategy to drive stakeholder engagement.

This would involve conducting workshops and providing explanatory documents to help stakeholders understand how the policy aligns with other government initiatives and its intended outcomes. Actively involving key ministries in the policy revision process could enhance ownership and role clarity.



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Genesis Analytics

Head Office 50 Sixth Road, Hyde Park, Johannesburg | Phone +2711 994 7000 | Registration# 1998/001950/07
East Africa 9th Floor Europa Towers, Lantana Road, Westlands, Nairobi | Phone +254 701 945 800 | Registration# PO51570125T