



**SHARED BLUEPRINT**  
**TO ACHIEVE**  
**UNIVERSAL ACCESS**  
**TO QUALITY**  
**EARLY LEARNING**

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## INVITATION TO PARTNER FOR CHILDREN

ECD is on the move, and a movement is forming around it. There is a growing, unified commitment to putting children first: Bana Pele!

Recognising the profound impact of early childhood development (ECD), the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has embarked on a strategic reorientation of the education system to strengthen foundational learning. The ECD Census, the Thrive by Five Index and the Public Expenditure and Institutional Review have provided a solid evidence base to build from. The Mass Registration Drive has made significant progress in galvanising provincial action, supported by eCares, our digitised ECD management information system. This is bringing more Early Learning Programmes (ELPs) into the formal system, especially in underserved communities where children need it most.

The DBE's [2030 Strategy](#) provides clear direction: to achieve universal access to quality early learning for every child in South Africa. It is an ambitious but necessary goal.

Last year, I co-convened the Bana Pele Leadership Summit with Business Leadership South Africa. The Summit brought together leaders from various sectors of society to align behind a single plan to close the ECD access gap, improve quality and secure long-term funding for the sector. A key outcome was the agreement on bold, tangible targets to guide our shared mission over the next five years. The Government's commitment to this roadmap has already been reinforced by the announcement of a R10 billion increase to the ECD subsidy over the next three years.

But the Summit was not a once-off event. It was a launchpad that has generated real momentum. Since then, we have convened the country's largest ECD funders, who have committed to deeper collaboration in support of our shared goals. In addition, the convenors of the Summit's commissions, together with other partners, initiated the development of this Blueprint to respond directly to three urgent questions raised at the Summit:

1. How do we transform from isolated programmes to collaboration at scale?
2. How do we accelerate this critical transformation over the next five years?
3. How do we ensure what we build is sustainable towards and beyond 2030?

This Blueprint is not a theoretical policy paper. It is a practical framework for action. It embraces the principle that no single actor, whether in government, business or civil society, can achieve these goals alone. Meaningful transformation depends on ecosystem collaboration, aligning the strengths of many in pursuit of a shared national priority.

To drive lasting impact at scale, we must also shift from linear to exponential thinking. This Blueprint outlines how. It proposes new approaches to collaboration, innovation and system orchestration. It helps each actor understand the unique value they bring, while creating platforms to connect, coordinate and co-create with others. It calls for solutions that are inclusive, grounded in local realities and driven by shared accountability.

As we move forward, let us stay guided by a simple truth: investing in our children is the most powerful investment we can make in our nation's future.

This is an invitation to collective action, to co-create solutions that transcend any one organisation or actor. Through this journey we will learn many lessons, and we will need to regularly update this Blueprint based on what we discover. We will therefore release a new, updated version annually. But I invite all South Africans to walk this journey with us, to learn the lessons of innovation together, while placing children first, Bana Pele, and help us build an early learning ecosystem where every child can truly thrive by five.

**Siviwe Gwarube**  
Minister of Basic Education  
Republic of South Africa



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The *Bana Pele Shared Blueprint to Achieve Universal Access to Quality Early Learning* was developed through a collaborative process with partners across government, civil society and the private sector. This partnership, built on decades of experience in the early learning sector, reflects the spirit of collective action needed to achieve the goals set out in the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) 2030 Strategy for ECD Programmes and the ambition of the Bana Pele Leadership Summit. The DBE led the development process of this Blueprint.

### Reference Group

The Reference Group provided critical guidance and expertise throughout the development of this Blueprint. We extend our sincere appreciation to the following members:

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### Feedback and Collaboration

This document was strengthened through multiple rounds of consultation and collaboration, including 38 detailed public responses and valuable input from partner organisations. Engagement extended beyond formal submissions, with more than 150 people attending the Shared Blueprint webinar while the document was downloaded more than 200 times, reflecting broad interest and shared ownership of the direction set out here.

The final chapter of this Blueprint is a call to action. As a living document, it will continue to evolve and grow with the contributions of all partners in early learning. Our gratitude extends to all those who are helping bring this vision to life and to those who will join the journey ahead.

### Mr. H.M. Mveli

Director-General, Department of Basic Education

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## COMMONLY USED ACRONYMS

API	Application Programming Interfaces
DBE	Department of Basic Education
eCares	Early Childhood Administration and Reporting System
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ELOM	Early Learning Outcomes Measure
ELP	Early Learning Programme
ISF	Intersectoral Forum
MTEF	Medium-Term Expenditure Framework
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PED	Provincial Education Department
PMU	Project Management Unit
PYEI	Presidential Youth Employment Initiative
QASS	Quality Assurance and Support System
RTO	Resource and Training Organisation

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**2030 Strategy** – The Department of Basic Education’s national strategy for achieving universal access to quality early learning by 2030, with a particular focus on the most excluded children.

**Bana Pele** – A Sesotho phrase meaning Children First, capturing the guiding principle of putting the needs and rights of children at the centre of national development.

**The Blueprint** – A shared implementation guide that supports actors across the early learning ecosystem to align strategies, build shared support systems and collectively deliver on the 2030 Strategy.

**Community Assets** – Tangible resources that exist within communities and programmes that can be expanded, strengthened or adapted to reach more children with quality early learning. These include proven ELP knowledge and practices, local talent, such as youth, elders and caregivers, trusted community spaces that can be repurposed for learning, nearby facilities that support child health and development and open, trusted data and insights that guide evidence-informed decision-making.

**Community Support Groups** – Collaborative, localised networks that work toward shared goals to support early learning programmes and families. These include Community Collectives, ELP Partner Collectives and Civil Society Collectives, which provide trusted, context-specific support, strengthen local accountability, share learning and mobilise communities around quality early learning.

**Community Talent** – Local youth, elders and caregivers whose skills, lived experience and cultural knowledge can be activated to strengthen early learning. This includes volunteer, entrepreneurial and workforce potential that expands access, improves quality and creates inclusive livelihood pathways when recognised, supported and connected to ELPs.

**Early Childhood Development (ECD)** – The period from birth until the year before a child enters formal school when foundational brain development occurs. ECD encompasses early learning, health, nutrition, responsive caregiving and psychosocial support, enabled by safe and stimulating environments for children to learn and play.

**Early Learning** – Structured, developmentally appropriate opportunities for stimulation and learning in the critical years of a child's life. This includes both formal and informal group-based settings that support children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development.

**Early Learning Ecosystem** – The diverse, interconnected network of people, systems and institutions that collectively enable early learning. This includes ELP providers, families, NGOs, RTOs, government, funders and community groups.

**Early Learning Programmes (ELPs)** – Programmes attended by young children on a full- or part-time basis that offer structured learning and care. These include centres, playgroups, day mothers, mobile services and toy libraries.

**ECCE Outcomes Fund** – An outcomes-based financing initiative led by the DBE in partnership with the Education Outcomes Fund and donors. The Fund links funding to independently verified improvements in access, quality and child development outcomes, supporting the expansion and strengthening of ELPs in underserved communities.

**Ecosystem** – A connected network of organisations, individuals, systems and resources that interact and collaborate to achieve shared goals or create value within a specific domain or context. It extends beyond traditional boundaries to include partners, stakeholders, platforms and external entities that influence or contribute to outcomes. Ecosystems are characterised by interdependence, where participants both give and receive value through their relationships and interactions.

**ELP Provider Technology Systems** – Digital platforms and tools that support ELP providers by streamlining management, expanding access to learning resources and connecting practitioners to peers, coaches and administrative systems, helping reduce isolation and strengthen daily practice.

**Government Networks of Support** – National, provincial and local government actors responsible for enabling and resourcing frontline early learning through policy, financing, regulation, systems and coordination.

**Government Systems for Support** – The systems and enabling conditions that align, coordinate and sustain the early learning ecosystem, including multi-stakeholder orchestration, clear and inclusive policy frameworks, efficient government processes across all levels and strategic coordination of public and private funding.

**Mixed-modality Model** – A flexible approach to early learning delivery that recognises and supports programmes across multiple settings, including centre-based, home-based, mobile and community-based models, allowing services to adapt to local contexts while meeting shared health, safety and quality standards.

**Networks of Care Closest to the Child** – The group of actors closest to the child who shape daily early learning, caregiving and development. This includes ELP providers, families and early learning partners such as NGOs, RTOs and community actors who support quality delivery and learning at the frontline.

**Network Effects** – The amplified impact that emerges when early learning ecosystem actors are purposefully connected and exchange value, enabling shared delivery, faster learning, reduced risk and innovation at a scale no single actor can achieve alone.

**Open Bana Pele Network** – A network to be established that will build a new pipeline of ELP providers by connecting them to learning, delivery and financing opportunities, stimulating innovation, strengthening livelihoods and supporting sector growth.

**Population-based Planning** – Planning and delivering services based on the demographics, needs and contexts of specific local populations, rather than applying uniform solutions across all areas.

**Shared Support Systems** – Foundational public goods and systems, including physical, digital, human and financial, that lower the cost and complexity of change, reduce duplication, enable coordination and support the consistent, high-quality delivery of early learning at scale.

**Social Compact for ECD** – A structured, co-developed partnership that brings together government, civil society, funders, communities and the private sector around a shared vision for ECD. It aligns roles, resources and solutions to implement the 2030 Strategy, strengthen collaboration and institutionalise participation and shared responsibility so that all children can thrive by five.

**Support Systems for Networks of Care** – A coordinated set of supports that enable ELP providers to deliver high-quality care at scale. These include the shared narrative, talent development pathways, ELP provider technology systems and the ELP Impact Hub for data and innovation.

**Thrive by Five Index** – South Africa's largest national early childhood development survey that determines how many children in ELPs are developmentally on track across early learning, physical growth and social and emotional functioning. The Index tracks outcomes by income, gender and geography, identifies key predictors of healthy development and guides action to improve outcomes for all children.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## A NATIONAL COMMITMENT TO UNIVERSAL QUALITY EARLY LEARNING

South Africa faces both a challenge and an opportunity. Over one million children still lack access to quality early learning, the foundation they need to thrive in school and life. Yet we have the knowledge, the partners and the commitment to change this.

This Blueprint sets out to answer a single question:

**How can we build a sustainable early learning ecosystem that reaches every child, especially those historically excluded, with affordable, quality early learning programmes by 2030?**

This question is rooted in the Department of Basic Education's [2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programmes](#) and was reaffirmed at the first Bana Pele Leadership Summit in March 2025.

The Blueprint presents a practical pathway to align and mobilise everyone involved in early learning, from government, communities and early learning programme (ELP) providers, to families, NGOs and funders, to **move at scale, with speed and sustainability**, so no child is left behind.

## THE EXPONENTIAL CHALLENGE

Chapter 2 outlines the exponential nature of the challenge. South Africa's early learning system faces persistent constraints including fragmented services, unequal access, limited resources and inconsistent quality. These issues create a growing implementation gap, the difference between children needing access and those actually reached, which will widen with population growth.

Yet within these gaps lies clear opportunities for transformation. As detailed in chapter 3, South Africa has significant assets and capabilities that can be leveraged but only if we shift our collective mindset:

- **From scaling what works → To designing networks that work at scale**  
What works may not scale and what scales may not work in every context. Pilots often succeed in specific settings but stumble when conditions shift. We must design for scale from the outset, by building networks that can adapt and deliver across diverse contexts.
- **From viewing diversity as a challenge → To embracing diversity as the solution**  
No single solution can solve a complex, context-dependent problem. Instead of striving for uniformity, we must foster a thriving and unified ecosystem where multiple effective solutions co-exist, adapt and respond to local needs, but all deliver quality early learning.
- **From piloting–testing–replicating → To distributing the ability to solve**  
Proven solutions do not always travel well. Real transformation comes from enabling those closest to children to lead problem-solving. This means investing in shared systems that support thousands of local actors to design, adapt and deliver.



## THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR SCALING IMPACT

Achieving universal access requires the entire system to work as a coherent whole, valuing collaboration, recognising diversity and always centring on children.

- **Who we act for:** *Children*, who need joyful, nurturing, safe and stimulating environments both at home and in ELPs to thrive by five.
- **Who we act with:** *The Networks of Care* closest to the child, which include ELP providers, families (parents and caregivers) and ELP partners, as well as the *Government Networks of Support* comprising national, provincial and local government actors who enable and resource frontline delivery.
- **What we can leverage:** *Community Networks of Support* including community organisations, ELP partner and civil society collectives, as well as *Community Assets* such as local knowledge, talent, physical spaces and data.
- **What must enable the system:** *Robust Shared Resources for Care*, which includes the shared narrative, talent development, digital platforms and innovation capacity; and *Government Systems for Support*, encompassing orchestration capabilities, policy frameworks, government systems and financing mechanisms.

## AN AGENDA FOR ACTION

Scaling quality early learning requires a flexible, phased approach. The Blueprint outlines five overlapping stages to guide implementation:

- **Prime:** Strengthen the ecosystem, policies, government systems and funding foundations. This stage is already underway.
- **Engage:** Enable ELPs at scale via the shared narrative, knowledge, talent development and technology.
- **Support:** Nurture ELPs through local collectives, civil society collaboration and community talent.
- **Sustain:** Respond to emerging needs via nurturing spaces, nearby facilities, data systems and innovation hubs.
- **Integrate:** Ensure continuous improvement by listening, learning and adapting through system-wide feedback loops.

Alongside initiatives already underway, such as the [Bana Pele Mass Registration Drive](#), the eCARES digital platform, the [Thrive by Five Index](#), a historic R10 billion increase in the ECD Subsidy over the medium term and innovative financing via the ECCE Outcomes Fund, the Blueprint identifies 23 priority actions essential to meeting the 2030 vision (chapter 4). Key priorities include:

- Appointing a dedicated orchestration team to coordinate Blueprint actions.
- Launching the Bana Pele Accelerator Fund to fast-track access expansion.
- Co-creating a shared national narrative through inclusive engagement.
- Rolling out a unified national digital platform for ELP providers.
- Establishing a network to build a new pipeline of ELP providers.
- Building a National Data Observatory to bring together insights from diverse sources.

## BUILDING A SHARED NARRATIVE OF CARE

Lasting transformation demands more than policies and systems, it depends on a shared societal belief in the power and importance of early learning. The Blueprint calls for a national narrative, co-created with families, providers, partners and communities, that celebrates children's potential and embeds early learning into everyday life. Through creative storytelling and engagement, this narrative will ignite a collective sense of responsibility, inspire behaviour change and sustain action.

## A CALL TO COLLECTIVE ACTION

Achieving universal quality early learning is a collective mission that requires coordinated action beyond isolated efforts. This Blueprint provides the foundation, but it is your commitment and collaboration that will activate a responsive, inclusive ecosystem. Every actor, whether an ELP provider, parent, partner, policymaker, funder, community leader or creative contributor, has a vital role to play. Now is the time to connect, collaborate and lead with courage and ambition. Together, purposeful, aligned action can build exponential momentum, reaching every child in every community.

The time to act is now, let us accelerate progress, together.



# 01

## THE CALL TO COLLECTIVE ACTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND TO THIS BLUEPRINT

**Every child in South Africa deserves the opportunity to thrive physically, cognitively, emotionally and socially, before starting school. While millions of children already benefit from a variety of early learning programmes (ELPs), over one million children still lack access to quality early learning.**

The Department of Basic Education's [2030 Strategy for Early Childhood Development Programmes](#) commits to closing this gap by achieving universal access to quality early learning by 2030. Universal access, as defined in the Strategy, means every child who needs early learning should have a place available to them. Not every family may choose to enrol their child, but lack of access should not be a barrier to attendance. Reaching this goal requires more than expanding services, it calls for a fundamental shift in how we think, plan and work together. At the centre of this transformation is a single, unifying question:

**How can we build a sustainable early learning ecosystem that reaches every child, especially those historically excluded, with affordable, quality early learning programmes by 2030?**

Achieving this ambition demands an all-of-society response, what the [2030 Strategy](#) calls the [Social Compact for ECD](#). This Blueprint advances that vision through a practical framework for coordinated action. It calls for a shift from slow, linear progress toward rapid, exponential transformation: working at scale, shifting from top-down mandates to shared leadership and from distributing pre-packaged solutions to empowering everyone to co-create, adapt and solve challenges together.

This Blueprint lays out that pathway for exponential change, offering a practical framework to align and orchestrate the entire early learning ecosystem, from government, communities and ELP providers, to families, NGOs and funders, to move at scale, speed and sustainability, so no child is left behind.

This Blueprint should be read alongside the 2030 Strategy, which sets the policy direction (why), while this document focuses on the practical steps to make that vision a reality (how). The Blueprint is not a detailed implementation plan, but rather a proposed set of coordinated actions that can move the country closer to its goal. The Blueprint is like a compass rather than a detailed map. It provides strategic direction and invites all ecosystem stakeholders to align their efforts toward a common vision. The orchestration teams, progress teams and action leads will work together to develop the detailed implementation plans needed to turn these actions into reality.



## 1.2 FOCUSING ON EARLY LEARNING

Universal access, as defined by the [National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy](#), means every community has the right mix of ECD services tailored to local needs. According to the World Health Organization's (WHO) [Nurturing Care Framework](#), this includes responsive caregiving, healthcare, nutrition, clean water and sanitation, as well as safe, stimulating places to learn and play.

While the 2030 Strategy covers ECD broadly, from birth until the year before a child enters formal school, this Blueprint focuses on one critical and scalable entry point: expanding access to quality early learning in diverse group-based settings. This focus does not diminish the importance of health, nutrition or family support. Rather, it prioritises early learning as the area where rapid, measurable progress at scale is most achievable. Research shows that quality group learning in these formative years yields the greatest developmental impact and can be effectively scaled through targeted policies, funding and partnerships. Delivery models must therefore be flexible and inclusive, reflecting South Africa's diverse communities so they can eventually extend to all children under five. And throughout, ELPs must complement and reinforce what families are already doing at home, recognising parents and caregivers as children's first educators.

## 1.3 EMBRACING MIXED-MODALITY

South Africa's early learning system must move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. This Blueprint embraces a mixed-modality model, recognising that programmes can and should take place across a variety of settings, including centre-based programmes and non-centre-based options like community playgroups, mobile services and home-based models.

This diverse mix allows early learning services to reach more children, reflect local cultures and languages and adapt to different geographies and resource levels. Far from hindering scale, diversity enables it. Regardless of setting, every programme must meet minimum health, safety and quality standards to ensure every child can thrive.

## 1.4 REDUCING FRICTION TO CHANGE

Unequal access and inconsistent quality are not random but tied to longstanding, interconnected frictions: historical inequalities, persistent poverty, structural hurdles and fragmented delivery models that have shaped the sector for decades.

This Blueprint refers to these challenges as the implementation gap, which has two parts:

- **Access Gap:** Due to inadequate coverage, many children, particularly those in marginalised communities, still lack access to early learning opportunities.
- **Quality Gap:** Even where children do attend programmes, learning experiences often vary greatly, limiting developmental outcomes for children.

Though daunting, these gaps also present clear opportunities for change. Every point of friction reveals where the system can, and must, evolve.

Instead of applying small-scale fixes or isolated pilots, we can turn barriers into enablers.

Where coordination has been weak, we must invest in shared support systems and unlock collaboration through shared data, interoperable platforms and aligned policies. Where local providers and communities have been isolated, we focus on support and shifting decision-making closer to the ground.

This is fundamentally a systems challenge. For too long, dedicated actors have worked in isolated walled gardens, each cultivating their own beautiful space, creating islands of excellence in a challenging environment. While these gardens are a testament to the sector's resilience, creativity and commitment, and deserve to be celebrated, the time has come to think bigger and bolder.

This Blueprint invites those who have nurtured these celebrated spaces to open their gates and connect with others, transforming walled gardens into a thriving, interconnected forest ecosystem. In a forest, diverse roots intertwine underground, sharing resources and strengthening the whole. Above ground, varied branches reach toward sunlight, each unique, yet all growing together.

This is the shift we are calling for: from beautiful walled gardens to a resilient forest ecosystem flourishing together. Not uniformity, but rich interdependence. Not competition, but collective growth. Working in new ways, so that every part supports and sustains the others, and every child can thrive.

## 1.5 ORCHESTRATING COLLECTIVE ACTION

No single organisation can close the early learning gap alone. A resilient, sustainable system depends on coordinated action across government, civil society, communities and the private sector.

This document is a Shared Blueprint, a common foundation for all ecosystem actors, irrespective of size, to co-create aligned action plans for 2030. It is a flexible guide, not a rigid prescription, designed to harness collective strength for universal, quality early learning.

While some collaborative structures exist, such as local community forums and intersectoral platforms, more dedicated orchestration is needed. This includes leadership teams, multi-stakeholder design processes and high-level governance structures to ensure transparency, continuous learning and adaptive implementation. This orchestration team structure will be described in Chapter 4.

## 1.6 WHAT'S NEXT

This opening chapter has introduced the vision and role of the Blueprint as a dynamic roadmap for collective action. Chapter 2 explores the scale and urgency of the exponential challenge ahead; Chapter 3 maps the diverse actors, assets and support systems in the early learning ecosystem; Chapter 4 outlines the five-stage rollout strategy; Chapter 5 details how roles are being strengthened; Chapter 6 focuses on transforming public narratives about early learning; and Chapter 7 energises the network to drive a coordinated, national movement for impact.

# 02

## OUR EXPONENTIAL CHALLENGE

### 2.1 VISION 2030: AN EXPONENTIAL IMPERATIVE

**The 2030 Strategy places children at the heart of South Africa’s early learning agenda, guided by four urgent and interconnected priorities:**

**Expanding Access:** Reach an additional 250,000 children between 2025 and 2027, then 950,000 more between 2027 and 2030, bringing 1.2 million more children into quality early learning by 2030.

**Raising Quality:** Improve developmental outcomes by increasing the percentage of children classified as green (on track) on the Thrive by Five Index from 46% in 2024, to 48% by 2027 and 51% by 2030. At the same time, reduce those in the red category (falling far behind) from 28% in 2024, to 24% by 2027 and 19% by 2030.

**Resourcing the Sector:** Mobilise financial and non-financial resources from public, private, philanthropic and corporate partners to support this targeted scale-up.

**Enabling Government Systems:** Build transparent, responsive and integrated government systems as the backbone of early learning support networks focused on modernising core business processes, improving management information systems and digitising key functions across Provincial Education Departments (PEDs) and local government.

The response must match this challenge with an exponential approach. Incremental change is not enough. We need a system-wide transformation that scales quality and inclusion as fast as children need it.

### 2.2 SHIFTING TO AN EXPONENTIAL MINDSET

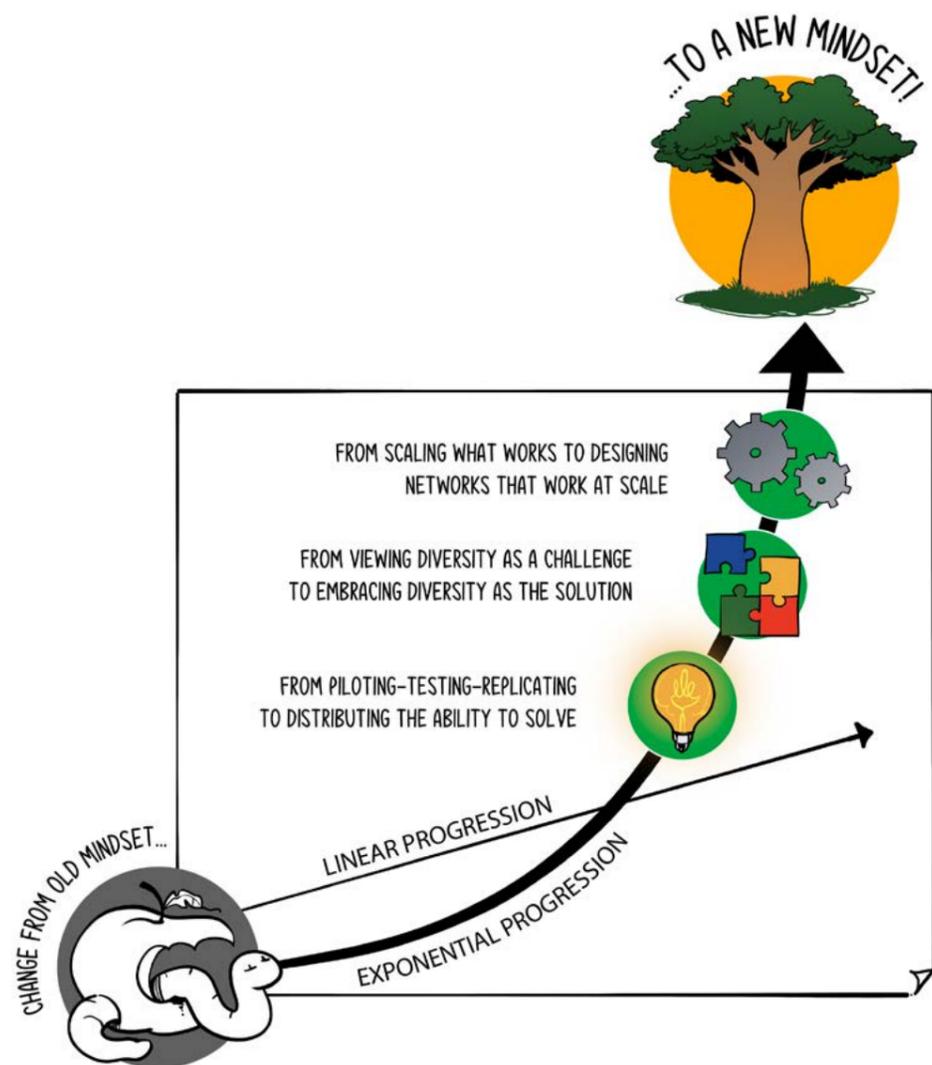
Reaching all children who need early learning, especially those historically excluded, will take more than expanding what already exists. It requires a new way of thinking across the ecosystem. We cannot depend on isolated projects or fragmented pilot initiatives. Growing slowly from one to ten to twenty programmes limits our ability to meet the large-scale need. The challenge is too big to solve alone, and too urgent to delay. We must create conditions where many actors solve problems together, enabling thousands to co-design and adapt solutions collaboratively.

This is the foundation of the exponential mindset: a fundamental shift from cultivating isolated excellence to building an interconnected ecosystem where everyone’s efforts multiply each other’s impact. Rather than asking “How can I solve this alone?”, we must ask: “If I cannot solve this challenge for everyone by myself, how can I create the conditions for many to solve together?”

To put this mindset into practice requires three key shifts, supported by shared actions: amplifying network effects by strengthening connections between government, civil society and markets; unlocking innovation through co-creation that enables locally rooted solutions; and investing in shared support systems, essentially the public goods like the shared narrative, policy frameworks, digital platforms and funding mechanisms that empower actors across the whole system to succeed together.

The three key shifts are:

- **From scaling what works → To designing networks that work at scale**  
What works may not scale, and what scales may not work in every context. Pilots often succeed in specific settings but stumble when conditions shift. We must design for scale from the outset, by building adaptive networks that deliver across diverse contexts.
- **From viewing diversity as a challenge → To embracing diversity as the solution**  
No single solution can solve a complex, context-dependent problem. Instead of striving for uniformity, we must foster a thriving and unified ecosystem where multiple effective solutions co-exist, adapt and respond to local needs.
- **From piloting–testing–replicating → To distributing the ability to solve**  
Proven solutions don’t always travel well. Real transformation comes from enabling those closest to children to lead problem-solving. This means investing in shared systems that support thousands of local actors to design, adapt and deliver.



## 2.3 AMPLIFYING NETWORK EFFECTS

The early learning system is, at its core, a network. Like all networks, its value increases as connections grow stronger and more purposeful. When key actors exchange value, what they give and receive from one another, momentum builds. The result is network effects, collective impact that becomes greater than the sum of its individual parts. These effects are not just helpful, they are essential to achieving exponential change by 2030.

Reaching every child, across all geographies, income levels and social contexts will require activating the full ecosystem, from government at all levels, ELP providers and families, to NGOs, funders, community organisations and technical partners and researchers.

When these actors are connected and coordinated, the ecosystem becomes more responsive to local needs, supports context-appropriate solutions, enables peer learning, reduces risk and accelerates both innovation and reach. A dynamic, networked system doesn't just work better, it works faster, fairer and at scale.

## 2.4 UNLOCKING INNOVATION THROUGH CO-CREATION

Not every actor currently has the clarity, capability or capacity to contribute fully, or collaborate effectively. But innovation cannot depend on a few centralised sources. It must come from everywhere. To unlock this potential, the ecosystem needs to remove barriers and create environments where diverse innovations can emerge and thrive.

South Africa's diversity means children grow up in very different settings, shaped by different histories, resources and social norms. Standardised, top-down models have often failed to bring lasting, relevant change. Solutions co-created locally with families, providers and communities are more relevant and sustainable.

Core principles for co-created innovation include:

- Viewing children as active participants, not passive recipients.
- Positioning families as engaged partners in learning.
- Empowering ELP providers to design contextual solutions.
- Using technology to support, not replace, human relationships.
- Embedding diversity as a strength, not a problem.

Every actor must become a problem-solver, spreading the ability to innovate across the system. Small wins ripple outwards, creating exponential impact needed to reach every child.



## 2.5 INVESTING IN SHARED SUPPORT SYSTEMS

To support widespread collaboration and innovation, the ecosystem must lower the costs and complexity of change. Shared support systems provide this foundation.

Just as airlines share airports and websites share the internet, the early learning system needs shared platforms for service delivery, data, learning and funding. When done well, shared support systems enable a mixed model where government, NGOs, private providers and communities contribute according to their strengths, coordinated under a common vision.

The benefits are clear: reduced duplication and costs, improved quality and consistency across settings, and stronger collaboration and knowledge-sharing overall. Shared support systems allow scale while preserving diversity, quality and local responsiveness.

[The Blueprint](#) identifies five essential types of shared support systems:

- **Physical support:** Facilities, community spaces and early learning centres.
- **Digital support:** Platforms like eCares, data dashboards and coordination tools.
- **Talent development:** Training pathways, mentorship and ELP provider networks.
- **Funding mechanisms:** Blended finance models, pooled funding and subsidy mechanisms.
- **Policy and legislative frameworks:** Regulations and guidelines enabling quality services.

Many assets already exist, such as the [Thrive by Five Index](#), [Bana Pele Mass Registration Drive](#), eCares and the [Early Learning Outcomes Measure \(ELOM\)](#). Others still need to be developed or scaled. Effective use of these support systems require strong orchestration. This means financial, operational and strategic coordination that aligns actors, tracks progress and adapts to evolving needs. Open digital protocols and AI-enabled tools can enhance these systems by making it more agile, integrated, interoperable and inclusive.



## 2.6 AT THE CORE: THOSE CLOSEST TO THE CHILD

True change starts with families and [ELPs](#), the people children interact and engage with everyday. They have the greatest influence on children's development and are the focus of this Blueprint.

Expanding access to quality early learning means supporting the existing network of over 200,000 trusted and resourceful ELP providers, primarily Black women micro-entrepreneurs. This makes investing in [ECD](#) a powerful lever for gender equity by creating livelihoods for women in underserved communities and lowering barriers to formal employment.

Children learn important and foundational capabilities from families in the home. Language, particularly their mother-tongue, is a powerful example of this, learning not through formal teaching but through the natural rhythms of daily care, conversation and love. This learning is irreplaceable and continues throughout a child's life. ELP providers do not replace this vital role. Instead, they work as partners with families, complementing what happens at home by offering group-based learning, nutrition and care. Affordable early learning also enables parents to enter or remain in the workforce, unlocking greater financial independence and inclusion while knowing their children are thriving.

Achieving universal access by 2030 requires growing this network in size, quality and financial strength. This growth must happen rapidly and sustainably, underpinned by enabling support systems, innovation platforms and systemic reforms that improve quality, financial resilience and support sustainability.

To reach every child, we must move from fragmented short-term interventions to a connected ecosystem. This means investing in relationships, tools and shared support systems that allows diverse actors to learn from one another, amplify each other's efforts and adapt to local needs.

The next chapter introduces the key actors in early learning and explores their unique roles in building a more coordinated, inclusive system.



# 03

## COMING TOGETHER FOR IMPACT

### 3.1 BUILDING THE EARLY LEARNING ECOSYSTEM

**Universal access to quality early learning by 2030 depends not just on individual actions but on how well the whole system works together. Progress hinges on the ability of diverse actors across government, civil society, communities and families to align their efforts, share responsibility and support each other toward a common goal.**

At the heart of this ecosystem is the child. Children are reached through the people, programmes and places that shape their daily lives, starting with families at home and extending to ELPs and community spaces. Strengthening early learning means supporting those who directly care for children: families as first teachers and ELPs led by dedicated practitioners, caregivers and micro-entrepreneurs who complement and extend home-based learning.

This chapter introduces the key actors in the ecosystem, their unique roles and how coordinated action across sectors can build an ELP ecosystem that grows in reach, resilience and equity.

Understanding the early learning ecosystem requires systems thinking, an approach that recognises complexity and interconnectedness, mapping the feedback loops and interactions between different actors and initiatives. Rather than viewing each component in isolation, systems thinking helps us see how parts work together as a whole, revealing the interdependencies that drive change.

The Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN), in partnership with Harvard University and South African ECD partners, has developed an ECCE Systems Map to support the scaling of interventions sustainably and equitably across the Global South. This map complements the Blueprint's approach by illustrating how actors, assets and systems interact to enable transformation. Readers can explore the ECCE Systems Map [at this link](#) to gain deeper insight into how the ecosystem dynamics outlined in this chapter operate in practice.

### 3.2 KEY ACTORS, ASSETS AND SYSTEMS

To turn ambition into action, the system must act as a coherent whole that encourages collaboration, embraces diversity and focuses on those closest to the child. This Blueprint prioritises empowering ELP providers while energising the broader ecosystem that supports them.

South Africa's early learning ecosystem can be understood through four interconnected dimensions:

- **Who we act for:** *Children*, who need joyful, nurturing, safe and stimulating environments both at home and in ELPs to thrive by five.
- **Who we act with:** *The Networks of Care Closest to the Child*, which includes ELP providers, families (parents and caregivers) and ELP partners, as well as the [Government Networks of Support](#) comprising national, provincial and local officials who enable and resource frontline delivery.
- **What we can leverage:** *Community Networks of Support* including community organisations, ELP partners and civil society collectives, as well as [Community Assets](#) such as local knowledge, talent, physical spaces and data.
- **What must enable the system:** *Robust Shared Resources for Care*, which includes the shared narrative, talent development, digital platforms and innovation capacity; and [Government Systems for Support](#), encompassing orchestration capabilities, policy frameworks and financing mechanisms.

This approach ensures all actors are identified and supported to act at scale while aligning diverse strengths toward one goal: improving early learning outcomes for all children, especially those most at risk.

Early learning delivery must operate as a dynamic system of change that learns from evidence, adapts to local realities and evolves through continuous feedback from ELP providers, families and communities. Flexibility and responsiveness are critical, always grounded in the shared mission that every child thrives by five.

While the DBE and its sister departments continue to play a central enabling role, the ecosystem's effectiveness depends on keeping children's needs first and empowering partners at all levels to lead confidently within their spheres. This requires convening multiple partners, supporting collaborative planning and implementation, and embedding learning and adaptation processes.

Throughout this Blueprint, we use specific terms to describe different groups of actors and systems, such as Networks of Care, Community Networks of Support and Government Systems for Support. These names are provided for clarity and consistency, but we recognise that actors within the ecosystem may identify themselves differently. As the shared narrative develops through listening and engagement, the language we use will continue to evolve to reflect how communities and practitioners choose to describe their own roles and relationships.

## SUSTAINABLE EARLY LEARNING

FOR WHOM



How can we build a sustainable early learning ecosystem that reaches every child, especially those historically excluded, with affordable, quality early learning programmes by 2030?

WITH

### NETWORKS OF CARE CLOSEST TO THE CHILD

ELP PROVIDERS

PARENTS & FAMILIES

ELP PARTNERS

LEVERAGING

### COMMUNITY SUPPORT GROUPS

COMMUNITY COLLECTIVES

ELP PARTNER COLLECTIVES

CIVIL SOCIETY COLLECTIVES

ENABLED BY

### SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR CARE

SHARED NARRATIVE

TALENT DEVELOPMENT

ELP PROVIDER TECH SYSTEMS

ELP IMPACT HUB



### GOVERNMENT NETWORKS OF SUPPORT

DBE & SISTER DEPARTMENTS

PROVINCIAL EDUCATION DEPTS

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### COMMUNITY ASSETS

ELP KNOWLEDGE

COMMUNITY TALENT

NURTURING SPACES

NEARBY FACILITIES

DATA & INSIGHTS

### GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS FOR SUPPORT

ECOSYSTEM ORCHESTRATION

EFFECTIVE POLICIES

GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS

FUNDING ORCHESTRATION

## 3.3 STRENGTHENING THE NETWORKS OF CARE

Transforming early learning requires deep collaboration among ELP providers, families, ELP partners and government at all levels. These relationships must be nurtured, resourced and actively supported to deliver quality early learning at scale.

This Blueprint identifies **three interconnected networks made up of nine primary actor groups** who together form a network of networks driving the overall ecosystem.

### 3.3.1 NETWORKS OF CARE CLOSEST TO THE CHILD

Closest to the child, these actors shape daily learning, caregiving and support.

1. **ELP Providers:** Deliver early learning in centres, homes and community spaces. They are mostly women, and support children's development, while sustaining livelihoods as micro-entrepreneurs who anchor the local care economy. Their programmes are trusted, contextually rooted and often serve as community hubs. Providers hold practical insights about what works, offering ground-level problem-solving and innovation that strengthens the wider system.
2. **Families:** Create the foundation for learning through nurturing care at home. They provide love, cultural knowledge, daily observations of children's needs and, where possible, financial contributions. Their trust in ELP providers, demonstrated through consistent enrolment and attendance, is essential to effective early learning partnerships. When families are included and respected, early learning becomes a shared effort rather than a service delivered to them.
3. **ELP Partners:** NGOs, Resource and Training Organisations (RTOs), intermediaries and community groups that build capacity, provide tools and strengthen linkages across the ecosystem. They offer training, mentorship, learning materials, data systems, operational support, access to networks and advocacy. By translating frontline insights into broader sector learning, these partners help ELP providers grow quality and are critical in contributing to system-wide improvement.

### 3.3.2 GOVERNMENT NETWORKS OF SUPPORT

These actors create the enabling conditions for frontline delivery.

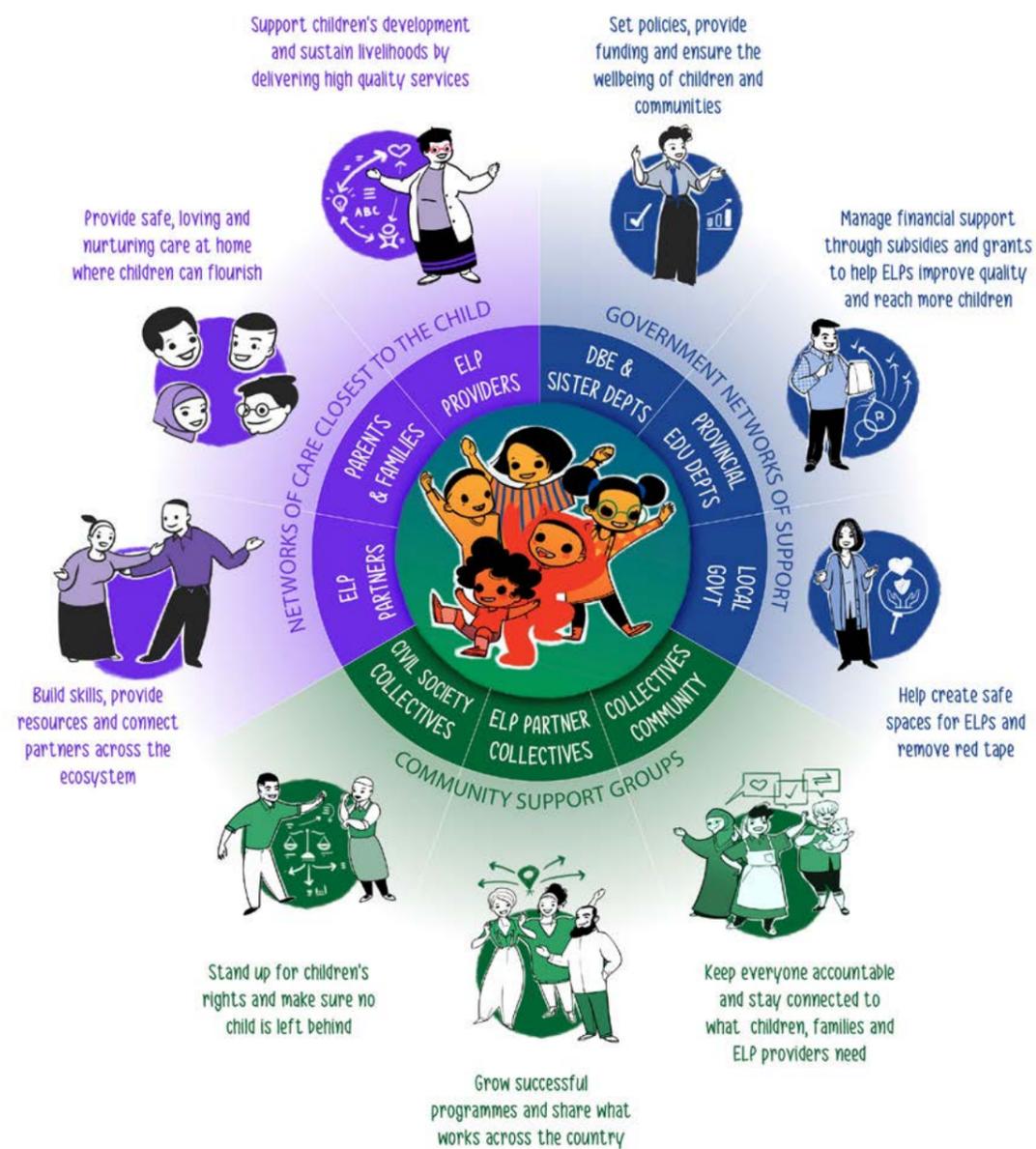
4. **The DBE and its sister departments:** Lead policy direction, public financing and accountability for child and community well-being. They provide institutional legitimacy through registration, financial support via subsidies and grants, regulatory frameworks that encourage growth, and tools and technology that strengthen quality. National government departments also play a key role in recognising and celebrating success, which builds trust in early learning services.

5. **Provincial Education Departments (PEDs):** Administer policies, funding and support to ELPs. This includes, among many other areas, registering ELPs, managing subsidies and the ECD Maintenance Grant, overseeing compliance with programme, health and safety standards and coordinating district-level support. Provincial teams work closely with providers and partners to improve quality and expand access across communities.
6. **Local Government:** Implement municipal regulatory processes for ELPs to meet health, safety and environmental standards. Local officials are a critical link between policy and practice, supporting the provision and planning of safe spaces for ELPs and helping remove regulatory barriers, especially in under-resourced communities.

### 3.3.3 COMMUNITY SUPPORT GROUPS

These collaborative localised networks work toward shared goals, offer trusted and context-specific support.

7. **Community Collectives:** Keep local communities accountable and stay connected to what children, families and ELP providers really need. They offer safe spaces, volunteers, local knowledge, cultural understanding and the ability to bring people together. When strong, these collectives make early learning a normal and valued part of everyday community life.
8. **ELP Partner Collectives:** This includes a diverse range of organisations including delivery-focused NGOs, RTOs, academic and research institutions as well as networks and membership-based partnerships. Stronger collaboration amongst these partner organisations can enable innovation, establish evidence-based best practice, accelerate new quality access and share learning across regions.
9. **Civil Society Collectives:** Advocate for children's rights, equity and inclusion, helping close gaps for the most vulnerable. These coalitions bring deep sector expertise, community credibility and a commitment to social justice. They play a vital role in identifying barriers, enhancing accountability and co-creating solutions rooted in lived experience.



To embed resilience, the DBE and its partners must strengthen the relationships linking people, places and practice. This means supporting actors across all three networks of care to collaborate, adapt and grow the early learning movement together.

In a thriving ecosystem, no actor operates in isolation. Every participant plays a dual role, both contributing to and benefiting from a dynamic exchange of services, knowledge, resources and trust. These value flows form the living connective tissue of South Africa's early learning landscape. When relationships are strong, they generate momentum. When they weaken or break, they signal friction as well as an opportunity for intentional action to rebuild trust, improve coordination and reinforce the foundation on which quality early learning depends.

### 3.4 LEVERAGING ASSETS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The successful delivery of the 2030 vision requires collaboration and iteration. South Africa's early learning sector already has powerful assets and systems that can be mobilised immediately, alongside others that require further investment and strengthening. By building on what works, and reducing duplication, progress can accelerate at scale.

This Blueprint identifies three categories of shared assets, comprising 13 building blocks that together support a cohesive and responsive system. These resources are collective assets, open to and usable by all actors in the ecosystem.

#### 3.4.1 COMMUNITY ASSETS

These tangible assets exist in communities and programmes today and can be expanded, strengthened or adapted to reach more children with quality early learning.

- 1. ELP Knowledge:** Proven practices, insights and models that improve outcomes for children across diverse settings. This includes practitioners' ground-level experience, locally relevant solutions and innovations that emerge from daily practice, and is essentially applied knowledge that strengthens the sector when shared widely.
- 2. Community Talent:** Local youth, elders and caregivers who can be activated to support access and quality. Communities hold deep reservoirs of volunteer capacity, entrepreneurial potential and cultural wisdom that enrich early learning when recognised and supported.
- 3. Nurturing Spaces:** Trusted community spaces that can be transformed into safe, accessible environments for learning, such as underused buildings, faith-based facilities, community halls or homes. With the right investment, these become welcoming places rooted in community identity and ownership.
- 4. Nearby Facilities:** Clinics, play areas and public spaces that integrate child health, development and play. When early learning connects with local health and community facilities, families gain more holistic and convenient support for their children's wellbeing.
- 5. Data and Insights:** Open, trusted datasets and evaluation tools that guide evidence-informed decision-making. This includes feedback from practitioners and families, developmental assessments, community-level insights, administrative data and tools that enable responsive planning and continuous improvement.

### 3.4.2 SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR NETWORKS OF CARE

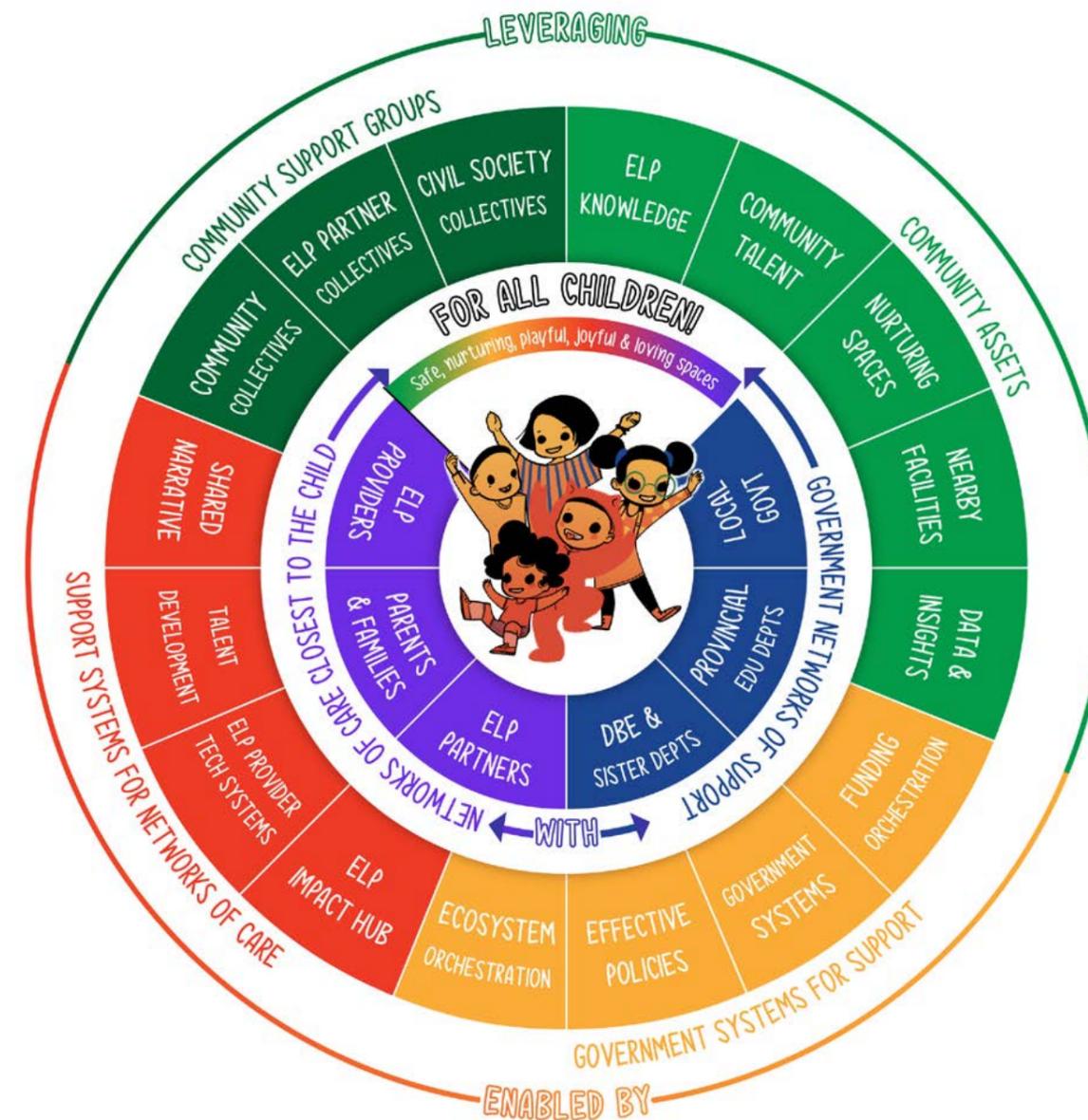
These systems strengthen day-to-day delivery by building the capability, confidence and collaboration of ELP providers. As micro-entrepreneurs, and often key community leaders, these women run small businesses that anchor early learning in local contexts. Support systems must therefore empower them to grow sustainable enterprises while delivering high-quality services for children.

6. **Shared Narrative:** A unifying vision that places children at the centre and energises families, communities and practitioners around the value of early learning. Co-created with those closest to the child, this narrative shapes how early childhood development is understood, spoken about and prioritised.
7. **Talent Development:** Pathways that attract, grow and retain local talent across the early learning workforce, including practitioners, assistants, coaches, field support and principals. They provide accessible training, mentorship, recognition and career progression that professionalise the sector while remaining open to community entry points.
8. **ELP Provider Technology Systems:** Digital tools that streamline management, expand access to learning resources and connect practitioners to peers, coaches and administrative systems. These platforms help reduce isolation, strengthen practice and improve the flow of real-time information that supports responsive decision-making.
9. **ELP Impact Hub:** A shared data and innovation space where practitioners and partners can develop, test and refine solutions rooted in local realities. The hub helps surface what works, accelerates learning across communities and enables promising approaches to be adapted and scaled.

### 3.4.3 GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS FOR SUPPORT

These enabling conditions ensure alignment, coordination and long-term sustainability across the ecosystem.

10. **Ecosystem Orchestration:** Mechanisms for accountable, multi-stakeholder coordination and delivery across all stages of the Blueprint. This includes leadership teams, regular convenings, shared communication channels and governance structures that help the sector work together effectively towards common outcomes.
11. **Effective Policies:** Clear, coherent frameworks that enable inclusive, locally adaptable delivery. Policies must balance quality standards with flexibility, allowing diverse models to thrive while protecting children's safety, wellbeing and developmental needs.
12. **Government Systems:** Transparent, streamlined processes at national, provincial and local levels. These systems include registration, subsidy administration, quality assurance, data management and regulatory processes that enable ELPs to open, stabilise and grow.
13. **Funding Orchestration:** Strategic alignment and coordination of public and private capital to enable sustained investment in early learning. This includes subsidy mechanisms, blended finance structures, infrastructure funds, livelihood support and organised philanthropic contributions that flow where they are most needed.



Together, these shared assets and support systems form a robust foundation for a coherent, responsive ecosystem. They reduce duplication, accelerate knowledge-sharing, amplify ground-up innovation and strengthen the sector's ability to scale and adapt. Many of these building blocks already exist and are functioning well. The task ahead is to deepen the connections between them, close critical gaps and ensure they work together as an integrated whole.

The following chapter outlines the strategic pathway for implementation, organised into five interconnected and overlapping stages: Prime, Engage, Support, Sustain and Integrate. Together, these stages chart how South Africa can move from intention to action, guiding the country toward universal access to quality early learning by 2030.

# 04

## BUILDING MOMENTUM IN STAGES

**Delivering system-wide change at speed and scale requires a clear roadmap. This Blueprint builds on existing progress by introducing five overlapping stages of implementation: *Prime, Engage, Support, Sustain and Integrate*. Each stage builds on the previous one while overlapping with others. Think of them as waves, later stages begin before earlier ones are complete, creating momentum and accelerating progress.**

Each stage is supported by priority actions that connect strategy to on-the-ground delivery and align all ecosystem actors.

### 4.1 PRIME: BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

South Africa's early learning transformation is well underway. The DBE, in collaboration with the ECD sector, has started building the policy, administrative, financial and collaborative foundations needed to scale delivery and realise the 2030 vision.

That commitment was reaffirmed at the first *Bana Pele* Leadership Summit in March 2025, where President Cyril Ramaphosa stated: "We recognise today that investing in ECD is not just about education. It is about shaping the next generation of skilled, capable and entrepreneurial citizens who will drive our economy forward."

This Prime stage is characterised by increased public investment, a growing focus on data and evidence as well as new delivery mechanisms to strengthen reach and readiness across all spheres of government. Collectively, these efforts are setting the stage for the subsequent phases of rollout, ensuring the system is ready to expand equitably and with quality.

### 4.1.1 ECOSYSTEM ORCHESTRATION

Delivering system-wide change at speed and scale begins with strong orchestration. Before new programmes can grow, the early learning ecosystem must be primed for collective action through stronger alignment, trust across all actors. The Government cannot act alone. Real transformation depends on distributed leadership and shared accountability across government, communities, civil society and the private sector.

#### ACTIONS IN PROGRESS

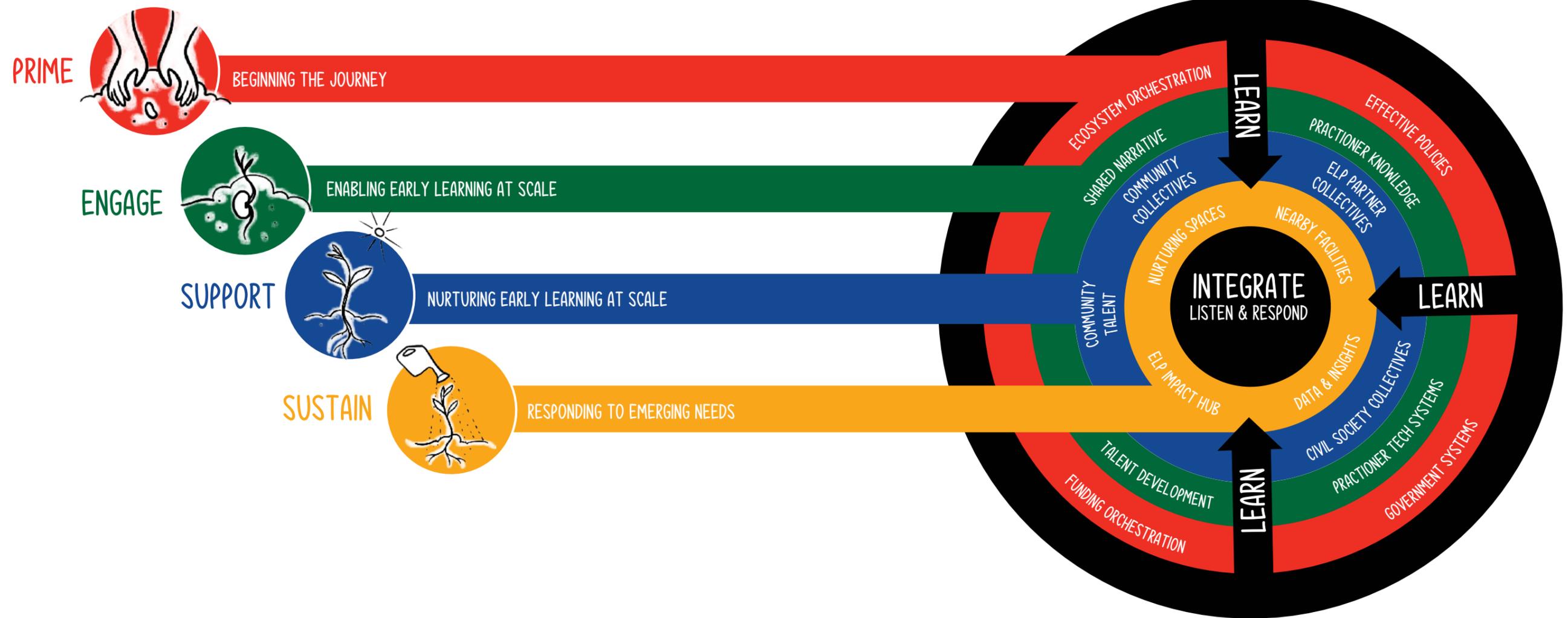
- **Collaborative mechanisms, such as ECD Forums**, bring community actors together to support and strengthen early learning centres. These need to be nurtured and their feedback integrated with future initiatives.
- At national and provincial levels, **Intersectoral Forums (ISFs)** provide platforms for joint planning between relevant departments and sector partners responsible for delivering holistic early childhood development. Rooted in the National Integrated ECD Policy (2015), these forums play a key role in fostering **multi-sector collaboration and accountability**.
- The **Bana Pele Project Management Unit (PMU)** has demonstrated a new kind of working partnership between state and non-state actors, focused on shared design, implementation and learning.
- **Annual convenings** such as the **Bana Pele Leadership Summit** energise government and ecosystem partners around shared goals.

#### ACTIONS TO BE ORCHESTRATED

- **ACTION 1: DBE to appoint a leadership orchestration team**, with a deep understanding of the network and initiatives, to support the orchestration of all Blueprint actions. In support, a **small, agile secretariat** will be set up to coordinate these initiatives. This would ensure momentum while creating space for new voices and capabilities within the system.



**FIVE STAGES OF IMPLEMENTATION**



## 4.1.2 EFFECTIVE POLICIES

Coherent, enabling policy frameworks are the bedrock of large-scale reform. Recent efforts have aligned national direction with local realities and eased regulatory barriers for early learning provision across South Africa.

Foundational frameworks such as the National Integrated ECD Policy (2015) and the National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four continue to guide the delivery of inclusive, developmentally appropriate programmes.

To strengthen the enabling environment further, a number of critical reforms are already underway, focused on simplifying registration, reducing administrative burdens and improving coherence across government tiers.

### ACTIONS IN PROGRESS

- Enacting the **2025 Children's Amendment Bill** will simplify and expand access to registration through mechanisms including conditional pathways, enabling more ELPs to enter, stay in and grow within the formal system.
- Updating the **National Environmental Health Norms and Standards** will streamline registration processes at the local level, making it easier for ELP providers to meet health and safety standards without undue administrative red tape.
- Rolling out the **ECD Red Tape Reduction Toolkit** will equip municipalities with practical tools to simplify regulatory processes, such as land use management, building control and compliance procedures that have historically created bottlenecks.

While these reforms represent major gains, several important policy gaps remain. One critical area for further attention is inclusion.

### ACTIONS TO BE ORCHESTRATED

- **ACTION 2: Strengthen existing systems and policies to improve access for children with additional support needs, including those with disabilities.** This includes developing practical guidelines and implementation frameworks for early identification and assessment, adaptive learning strategies, supportive services and clear referral and care pathways, ensuring that all children can participate meaningfully in early learning.

## 4.1.3 GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS

Transparent, responsive and well-integrated government systems underpin early learning support networks. Without them, efforts to expand access and improve quality cannot reach the scale or consistency required by the 2030 Strategy. Recognising this, the DBE and its partners have focused on modernising core business processes, improving data systems and testing new service delivery models to reach underserved communities. A well-integrated system will include local government as a critical lever.

### ACTIONS IN PROGRESS

- Launched in 2024, the DBE's Bana Pele Mass Registration Drive aims to simplify registration for thousands of previously unregistered ELPs. This framework reduces friction for both providers and district officials, especially in areas facing long-standing administrative bottlenecks.
- The drive has also served as a testing ground for new service delivery mechanisms, including the establishment of the **Bana Pele PMU** to execute the registration, support systems and subsidy payment support for ELPs.
- Complementing these reforms is the rollout of the **Early Childhood Administration And Reporting System (eCARES)**, a digital platform designed to improve data availability, support informed decision-making and strengthen service delivery.
- Coordination across government departments is being further reinforced through the **Heads of Education Departments Committee (HEDCOM) ECD Subcommittee**, which meets quarterly to align national and provincial efforts and promote greater consistency in implementation.
- The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) and municipalities will be essential in addressing regulatory barriers at the local level. Together with the DBE, they are launching a joint campaign to simplify processes and reduce red tape in the registration of ELP providers.

### ACTIONS TO BE ORCHESTRATED

- **ACTION 3: Deepen collaboration between Provincial Education Departments (PEDs) and local government through the Bana Pele ECHO Hub**, a digital learning and networking platform. The initial phase of this platform should focus on Silver registration for ELP providers. This will strengthen the relationships between environmental health practitioners from local government and social workers from PEDs to enable the safe provision of early learning services in communities.
- **ACTION 4: Publish open technology standards and guidelines** to promote system interoperability across the ecosystem to reduce effort and improve cross-utilisation of systems managed by the network.

#### 4.1.4 FUNDING ORCHESTRATION

Achieving universal quality early learning requires substantial and sustained investment from both public and private sources. The DBE and its partners are building a coordinated funding environment blending public finance with philanthropic capital, donor contributions and catalytic funding from development partners.

##### ACTIONS IN PROGRESS

- The DBE has developed a 10-year plan to expand and sustain quality access through the **ECD Subsidy**. As a result, an **additional R10 billion has been allocated** to the subsidy over the 2025/26–2027/28 Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF).
- The DBE and its donor partners, in collaboration with the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA), is piloting an **independent Infrastructure Fund** to support the maintenance and expansion of early learning facilities. Alongside this, the **ECD Maintenance Grant** remains the largest public infrastructure mechanism for ECD. Current reforms underway aim to ensure that all investments result in safe, healthy and developmentally appropriate spaces for children.
- The **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Outcomes Fund** is a promising example of results-based financing. Jointly capitalised by government and philanthropic partners, it blends over R300 million in public funds with R196 million in donor contribution to drive measurable improvements in access, nutrition and quality while enhancing accountability.

##### ACTIONS TO BE ORCHESTRATED

- **ACTION 5: Explore innovations that enable the ECD Subsidy to work more strategically** as a lever for improved outcomes, particularly for the most excluded children. This will involve testing approaches that strengthen quality, incentivise inclusion and ensure that public funding reaches the places where it can have the greatest impact.
- **ACTION 6: Establish a co-financed Bana Pele Accelerator Fund** to unlock and direct additional investment into new quality access. Designed as a catalytic mechanism supported by public and philanthropic partners, the Fund will invest in the accelerators required to expand access where it is needed most. It builds on lessons from the *ECCE Outcomes Fund* but adopts a sharper focus on scale, aiming to go live by 2028 and drive the final push toward the 2030 goals.
- **ACTION 7: Mobilise the ECCE Livelihoods Fund to support new early learning micro-entrepreneurs** with start-up capital. Working alongside the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI), the Department of Employment and Labour, the Jobs Fund, the BUSA Livelihoods PMU and others, this action will unlock the mix of finance, stipends and stimulus packages needed to lower barriers to entry and enable new ELP providers to launch and sustain viable businesses.
- **ACTION 8: Form a dedicated funding orchestration team** to coordinate the flow of resources across all capital sources, including public budgets, CSR, philanthropy and blended finance instruments. By aligning contributors and reducing fragmentation, this team ensures that investment reaches the areas of greatest need and supports coherent system strengthening. It will also design and test diversified tools such as blended finance mechanisms, development bank guarantees, microgrants and bridge financing for centres awaiting subsidies, etc.



## 4.2 ENGAGE: ENABLING EARLY LEARNING AT SCALE

This stage equips both new and existing ELP providers with the tools to deliver high-quality, meaningful experiences for children at scale. As the primary point of contact with families, they influence developmental outcomes, build trust in early learning and influence how it is valued in communities. Many are also founders and small business owners, predominantly women, driving local economic growth. Their entrepreneurship should be recognised and enabled, with access to the business capabilities, training and quality-enhancing resources needed to help children thrive.

This phase has been characterised by a society-wide shared narrative, leveraging of early learning knowledge and practices, talent development and practical technology and tools that strengthen relationships and offer ongoing opportunities to learn, grow and adapt.

### 4.2.1 SHARED NARRATIVE

A shared national understanding and appreciation of the value of early learning is essential for shifting perceptions and behaviours at scale. This narrative must be co-created, inclusive, jargon-free and resonate across diverse communities, cultures and generations. The DBE and its partners have taken initial steps to lay the groundwork for this shift.

#### ACTIONS IN PROGRESS

- The **Bana Pele Campaign** is a national effort to raise awareness about the importance of early learning and ECD programme registration.
- **Nudging the Nation** is a well researched foundational strategy document to shape the design of a broader communication and advocacy campaign.

#### ACTIONS TO BE ORCHESTRATED

- **ACTION 9: Co-create a compelling societal narrative** with workshops and convenings involving families, ELP providers, partners and community leaders. This is the foundation for the stories they tell one another about young children and must be grounded in listening, shaped by the real voices of those involved.
- **ACTION 10: Commission creative agencies to develop user-friendly materials** such as artefacts and relatable content that families, ELP providers, partners and community leaders can use to share and reinforce the narrative in local languages and contexts. In parallel, **build a collaborative communication ecosystem** that includes media partners and other platforms to amplify the narrative across programmes, channels and communities. The goal is to foster a unified and resonant understanding of early learning that is widely embraced, reinforced and reflected throughout the ecosystem.

### 4.2.2 ELP PROVIDER KNOWLEDGE

South Africa's early learning sector is rich in wisdom and tested approaches from early learning experts, educators, NGOs and community organisations working in diverse settings, especially under-resourced ones. Recognising and amplifying this expertise is essential to raising quality across the system and enabling scalable, context-responsive delivery.

#### ACTIONS IN PROGRESS

- The **Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM)** provides a validated methodology for assessing whether young children are developmentally on track. Widely adopted by NGOs and implementation partners, ELOM has become a key tool for monitoring and evaluation in the sector.
- The **Thrive by Five Positive Deviance Study** has uncovered powerful insights into the practices and conditions that drive better outcomes for children, offering grounded, real-world evidence of what's working, and why, in diverse South African contexts.

#### ACTIONS TO BE ORCHESTRATED

- **ACTION 11: Launch a national knowledge-sharing initiative** inviting open contributions from ecosystem actors. ELP providers, NGOs and content developers can share proven tools, resources and insights under open licensing models. A dedicated curation panel, which will need to be established, will review and benchmark submissions, endorse evidence-based, context-relevant content and offer guidance on what is ready to scale. This initiative will promote a culture of generosity, shared ownership and continuous peer learning.

### 4.2.3 TALENT DEVELOPMENT

Early learning happens because of the people who show up each day with care, creativity and commitment. Whether running community-based centres, working in homes or volunteering in informal settings, these ELP providers shape the daily experiences that build the foundations for lifelong learning. Recognising their contribution means investing in their growth, supporting their wellbeing and creating more consistent pathways for development, so that they are equipped and affirmed in their role as trusted caregivers, educators and champions of children's potential.

#### ACTIONS IN PROGRESS

- The DBE has initiated a **National Human Resource Development Plan** to strengthen support for those working in early learning.
- New tools are being developed and piloted, with strong support from partners, to aid implementation of the **National Curriculum Framework For Children From Birth to Four**. These include structured daily programmes and coaching resources that guide interactions between ELP providers and children, while allowing space for creativity and responsiveness.
- A national **Quality Assurance and Support System (QASS)** is being designed with defined quality standards and a practice-oriented assessment tool to help ELP providers reflect on and strengthen their work within real-world conditions.

## ACTIONS TO BE ORCHESTRATED

- **ACTION 12: Establish a multi-stakeholder capacity-building body** to strengthen practitioner support. This body will create accessible pathways for a high-calibre and diverse network of ELP providers to start, grow and improve the quality of their early learning programmes, while ensuring that new standards do not create barriers to entry for aspiring practitioners.

### 4.2.4 ELP PROVIDER TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE

In a system as vast and diverse as South Africa's, technology can be a powerful enabler, helping ELP providers feel less isolated, more connected and better supported in their daily practice. With the right design, digital tools can bring learning, guidance and real-time support closer to where care and teaching happen in classrooms, homes and centres across the country.

#### ACTIONS IN PROGRESS

- Platforms like PLAYSA offer **free, bite-sized online learning modules** for ELP providers to access knowledge and learning at their convenience and on their own terms. These modules provide practical guidance on daily routines and help reinforce foundational practices that shape children's early experiences.

## ACTIONS TO BE ORCHESTRATED

- **ACTION 13: Create an ECD National Digital Backbone** that supports the full development journey of ELP providers, from initial registration to gold-level excellence. This shared digital public infrastructure will integrate existing applications (such as ECD Connect, PLAYSA, Funda and Grow Giraffe, with emerging technologies to create a seamless, coordinated experience. This unifying backbone must also facilitate multiple pathways for ELP providers and entrepreneurs to connect with a network of peers, experienced coaches and relevant health and social support services, strengthening daily practice, improving programme quality and expanding reach.
- **ACTION 14: Establish the Bana Pele Engagement Platform**, building on the emerging multi-channel system developed through the Bana Pele Mass Registration Drive, which spans call centres, WhatsApp, USSD and fieldworkers, to enable sustained, two-way communication between ELPs and the DBE.

## 4.3 SUPPORT: NURTURING EARLY LEARNING AT SCALE

If the Engage phase sparks potential, the Support stage sustains it. It moves from one-off transactions to lasting relationships recognising that ELP providers need more than tools and training to thrive. As business owners and micro-entrepreneurs, they flourish in ecosystems of care built on trust, shared wisdom and a strong sense of belonging.

From grandmothers' lullabies and neighbourhood collectives to the spirit of ubuntu, South Africa's cultural traditions provide the invisible scaffolding that holds early learning together. When communities embrace ELP providers as their own, early learning becomes more than a service, it becomes a shared responsibility and a mutual act of care.

Building on the foundations laid in the previous stages, this one focuses on creating the conditions for sustained energy and well-being of ELP providers through community-driven support. The goal is to cultivate a system that adapts to the changing needs of children, families and providers, one that is resilient, responsive and deeply rooted in local realities.

### 4.3.1 COMMUNITY COLLECTIVES

Delivering early learning at scale is not just a technical task, it is a community mission. In many areas, the strength of the local response determines whether children are reached, ELP providers are supported and services reflect the lived realities of families. That's why cultivating Community Collectives, locally rooted groups that foster care, accountability and collective action are essential.

#### ACTIONS TO BE ORCHESTRATED

- **ACTION 15: Catalyse local Bana Pele Community Hubs** to mobilise families, grassroots leaders and local champions around early learning as a shared community responsibility. These hubs will act as micro-networks that connect ELPs with the communities they serve, promote the vital role of families and providers in nurturing safe, stimulating environments and empower communities and families to embed early learning into the fabric of everyday life.

### 4.3.2 ELP PARTNER COLLECTIVES

As South Africa shifts from isolated early learning successes to widespread impact, ELP Collectives, whether informal provider networks, regional associations or issue-based coalitions, become critical agents in driving transformation. These peer-to-peer networks can strengthen local support systems, spread effective practices and spark innovation. While many NGO partners have successfully networked ELPs, a significant number remain unconnected and would benefit from peer relationships.

#### ACTIONS TO BE ORCHESTRATED

- **ACTION 16: Launch a Peer-to-Peer Club Network for ELPs**, drawing on successful models already used by NGO support organisations. Open to all ELPs within communities, these clubs will foster local collaboration, shared learning and mutual support. As part of this effort the Bana Pele orchestration team will develop a recognition and reward programme, celebrating best practices that contribute to improved child outcomes.

### 4.3.3 CIVIL SOCIETY COLLECTIVES

Civil society has long been a driving force for equity, policy influence and amplification of marginalised voices. Coalitions of NGOs, advocacy groups, academic institutions and service providers, bring deep sector knowledge, community credibility and a commitment to social justice that strengthens the entire early learning system.

As the system evolves, these collectives are well-positioned to play an even more strategic role, identifying barriers to inclusion, enhancing accountability and co-creating solutions rooted in lived experience.

#### ACTIONS IN PROGRESS

- The **ECD Infohub** is already providing a single digital entry point for early learning. By consolidating essential resources, such as subsidies, training opportunities and registration guidance, it helps ELP providers and families access support more easily. The platform also promotes transparency, informed decision-making and greater system accessibility.

#### ACTIONS TO BE ORCHESTRATED

- **ACTION 17: Create a fast-track policy escalation process** that allows collectives to raise urgent legal or regulatory concerns, especially those affecting child safety. A dedicated communication channel between the DBE, provincial and local governments would enable swift resolution through timely collaboration and coordinated action.
- **ACTION 18: Promote the widespread and sustained adoption of community feedback mechanisms** that amplify the voices of families, ELP providers and local partners, particularly in underserved areas. Feedback should be routinely shared with government and delivery partners, along with transparent updates on how it has shaped responses.

### 4.3.4 COMMUNITY TALENT

South Africa's communities are filled with untapped potential, from unemployed youth seeking purpose and livelihoods, to women caregivers and elders who already contribute care and support, often without recognition or pay. Many are already helping ELPs informally, while others are eager to step in but lack clear pathways, support or opportunities to do so. By valuing and unlocking this local talent, we can grow the early learning workforce, strengthen ELPs and promote both gender equity and economic inclusion.

#### ACTIONS IN PROGRESS

- Public employment programmes like the **Social Employment Fund** and **Jobs Fund** have shown how community members, particularly women, can play vital roles in supporting early learning. These models now need to be scaled and more intentionally aligned with the 2030 vision.
- The **National Youth Development Agency (NYDA)** and **Youth Employment Services (YES)**, in partnership with the PYEI, are currently deploying 900 youth to support the Bana Pele PMU. These young workers are assisting ELPs and districts with mass registration and subsidy payment processes, extending the system's reach while creating new livelihood opportunities for a new generation of early learning champions.

#### ACTIONS TO BE ORCHESTRATED

- **ACTION 19: Launch the Open Bana Pele Network**, to build a new pipeline of ELP providers. This will be a digital platform connecting new practitioners with curated resources for learning, service delivery and financing. This shared support system will unlock local capacity at scale, with a strong focus on enabling women and youth to access entrepreneurial and livelihood opportunities in the early learning sector. The platform should be designed to work seamlessly with SAYouth.mobi, South Africa's largest network of work-seeking youth, to expand reach and make access to opportunities easier and more inclusive.



## 4.4 SUSTAIN: RESPONDING TO EMERGING NEEDS

A resilient early learning sector is not built once, it is continually renewed. As circumstances change, we must listen, learn and adapt. This stage introduces the feedback loops, adaptive support systems and innovation mechanisms that keep the ecosystem responsive over time, building on the momentum of the Prime, Engage, and Support stages.

Sustaining progress is about more than preserving what works, it means nurturing an ecosystem that can detect where care is falling short and respond with practical, context-sensitive solutions. This requires reliable data, trusted spaces for reflection and a culture of continuous learning, so that every child, family and ELP provider can thrive in an ever-changing environment.

### 4.4.1 NURTURING SPACES

Every child deserves to feel safe, seen, joyful and supported in their learning environment. Whether formal or informal, small or large, urban or rural, nurturing spaces spark curiosity, encourage play and build deep connections and relationships that lay the foundation for lifelong development.

#### ACTIONS IN PROGRESS

- The DBE is developing a **population-based planning tool** to identify geographic areas where early learning spaces are most urgently needed. This will help ensure equitable planning and resource allocation across the country.
- The DBE has **introduced tiered registration with new Silver and Gold categories** setting clear and appropriate health and safety standards for different early learning settings, from home-based sites to larger community centres.
- To support mass registration, the ECD Maintenance Grant and DBSA ECD Infrastructure Fund are financing facility improvements. This strategy will be further **supported by targeted investments** in new ELP sites, upgrades to existing ones and the distribution of health and safety starter packs.

#### ACTIONS TO BE ORCHESTRATED

- **ACTION 20: Mobilise partners to repurpose underused public or community buildings**, like public libraries, halls, backyard plots or places of worship, into safe, joyful early learning spaces. To guide this effort, inclusive design guidelines for municipalities, providers and NGOs will be published, ensuring these spaces are accessible to children with disabilities. This will be supported by the **development of a digital and physical asset library of adaptable, low-cost design** elements that communities can use to create vibrant, nurturing environments using local resources. With the right support, even the most overlooked corners of a community can be transformed into places where children feel safe, loved and free to learn.

### 4.4.2 NEARBY FACILITIES

A child's healthy development does not only depend on what happens inside early learning spaces but is also shaped by the broader support surrounding them, including access to healthcare, parenting advice, play resources and social services. When these services are fragmented or physically distant, especially in low-resource areas, children's needs often go unmet. To nurture every part of a child's growth, these services must be brought closer to where families live, work and learn.

#### ACTIONS IN PROGRESS

- **Multi-service clinic hubs** are being piloted in select districts to bring early learning, health and parenting support under one roof. They reduce costs and travel time for families while improving access to holistic care.
- Work is currently underway to **strengthen the connection between early learning and community-based health support**. Community health workers in many districts are being trained by NGO partners to monitor children's nutritional status and growth milestones during home visits. This impactful work could be extended to visits to ELPs.

#### ACTIONS TO BE ORCHESTRATED

- **ACTION 21: Integrate key health tools, like the Road to Health Booklet, into ELP provision** to support regular monitoring of immunisations, growth and mental health. This should be implemented in partnership with district healthcare teams and community health workers, and supported by the ELP Provider Technology Systems (see Action 14).

### 4.4.3 DATA AND INSIGHTS

A resilient system does not just deliver, it learns. By listening closely to all actors, the system can understand what is working, where gaps exist and how to adapt in real time. Reliable, timely data helps track progress, spot challenges and focus investments on what matters most for young children's growth and development.

The DBE and its partners have laid strong foundations for evidence-based decision-making, setting national benchmarks, aligning frameworks and piloting new tools. The *ECD Census 2021* offered the first comprehensive mapping of ELPs across South Africa, while the Thrive by Five Index, released the same year, established a nationally representative baseline for child development and school readiness. Building on the 2021 Census data, a Management Information System was created to digitise ELP business processes such as registration and subsidy applications, called The Early Childhood Reporting and Administration System (eCares). Together, these efforts are shifting the system from reactive to responsive, so that planning and funding are guided by real-time evidence, not assumptions.

## ACTIONS IN PROGRESS

- The **Thrive by Five Index** will be conducted every three years, which will continue to track how 4 to 5-year olds are developing across key learning, health and emotional milestones. It serves not just as a snapshot, but as a strategic resource to drive improved child outcomes, underpinned by the ELOM.
- **eCares** is designed to modernise and digitise government systems while also serving as the administrative data source underpinning the Data and Insights workstream.
- The **Shared Outcomes Framework** enables coordinated monitoring and reporting across government and partners by aligning indicators with the WHO's globally recognised Nurturing Care Framework.
- **ELOM is being used by a number of partners as a formative assessment** tool to generate actionable insights for improving outcomes, especially in underserved communities.

## ACTIONS TO BE ORCHESTRATED

**ACTION 22: Establish open interfaces, APIs, access protocols and dashboards** to make data more accessible, dynamic and actionable, especially for those working closest to children. This will allow all ecosystem actors to use real-time insights for planning, collaboration and continuous improvement. With the right tools, data can become a driver of innovation and accountability across the sector.

### 4.4.4 ELP IMPACT HUB

Every community holds both unique challenges and creative solutions. To build an early learning system that is equitable, resilient and future-ready, South Africa must tap into this local ingenuity. The ELP Impact Hub is envisioned as a national engine for identifying, testing and scaling innovations that improve quality, inclusion and affordability across the early learning landscape. In addition to driving innovation, the ELP Impact Hub will also play a leading role in the Integrate stage as detailed in Section 5 of this chapter.

## ACTIONS TO BE ORCHESTRATED

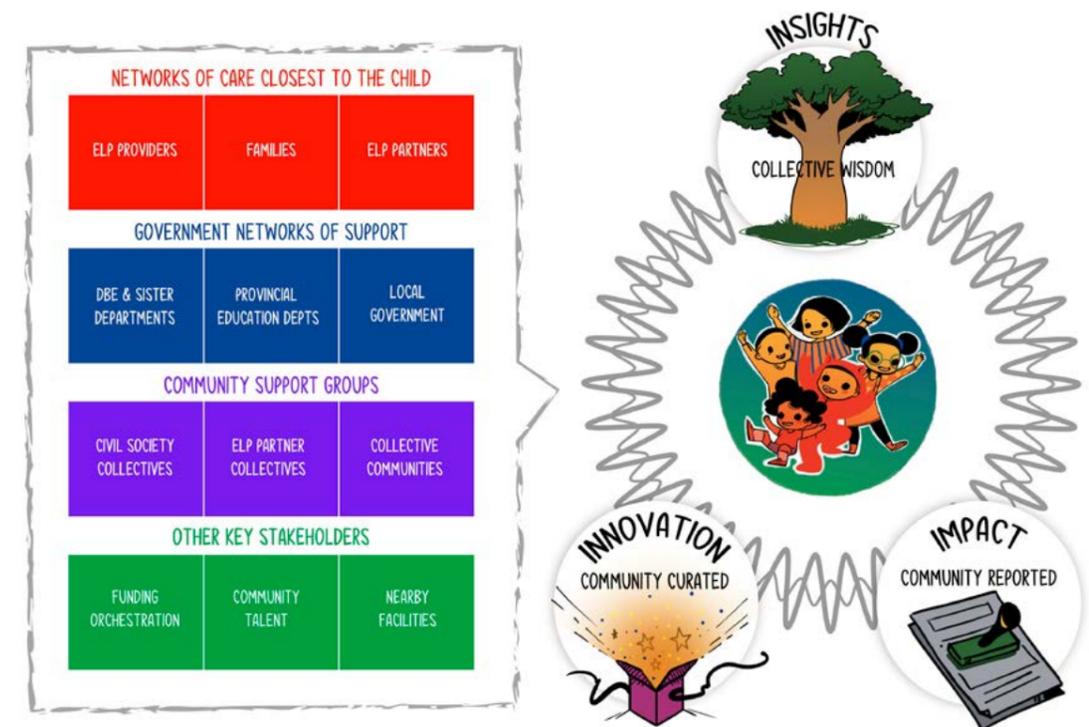
- **ACTION 23: Establish a National Data Observatory** to bring together insights from diverse sources, keeping a finger on the pulse of what is happening across networks. Building on existing assets such as eCares administrative data, Thrive by Five Index and ELOM, the Observatory will integrate real-time feedback from practitioners and communities through local language surveys, peer network conversations and AI-enabled listening tools. This approach ensures the Observatory captures not only what the numbers say but what people are experiencing on the ground. Supported by the ELP Impact Hub, the Observatory will generate the evidence, learning and innovation needed to guide and accelerate the delivery of this Blueprint.

## 4.5 INTEGRATE: LISTEN, LEARN, ACT, IMPROVE

Progress toward the 2030 vision through the actions outlined across the four stages above, should not be measured solely by how many early learning programmes are scaled or how many actors are supported. Sustainable impact depends on the system's ability to continuously learn and adapt. This means building intentional feedback loops that enable the ecosystem to listen, learn, act and improve, so every part of the system works better together. Transformation must be dynamic, not static.

The focus of this stage, which runs parallel to all the others, is simple but critical: the system will only improve if people feel heard and see tangible responses to their feedback. For the ecosystem to thrive at scale, it must be responsive. This requires structured listening mechanisms that amplify the voices of families, ELP providers, local partners, funders and government actors, in their own languages, contexts and terms.

### LISTEN TO DEVELOP INSIGHTS, ACCELERATE INNOVATION AND ACHIEVE IMPACT AT SCALE



These voices provide essential, ongoing signals about what is working, where friction exists and what needs to change. Such widespread listening cannot be passive or sporadic, it must be active, deliberate and lead to action. We need to ask the right questions, capture honest answers, learn from the data and most importantly, act on what is heard. This is how we close the gap between policy and practice, national direction and local experience, aspiration and lived reality.

## BLUEPRINT ACTIONS AT A GLANCE



### PRIME

#### ECOSYSTEM ORCHESTRATION

- 01 APPOINT ORCHESTRATION TEAM

#### EFFECTIVE POLICIES

- 02 STRENGTHEN SYSTEMS & POLICIES FOR CHILDREN WITH EXTRA SUPPORT NEEDS

#### GOVT SYSTEMS

- 03 DEEPEN PED & LOCAL GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION
- 04 PUBLISH OPEN TECH STANDARDS & GUIDELINES FOR INTEROPERABILITY

#### FUNDING ORCHESTRATION

- 05 EXPLORE ECD SUBSIDY INNOVATIONS
- 06 ESTABLISH CO-FINANCED BANA PELE ACCELERATOR FUND
- 07 MOBILISE THE ECCE LIVELIHOODS FUND TO SUPPORT NEW ELPs
- 08 FORM FUNDING ORCHESTRATION TEAM



### ENGAGE

#### SHARED NARRATIVE

- 09 CO-CREATE A COMPELLING SHARED NARRATIVE
- 10 COMMISSION CREATIVE AGENCIES TO SHARE & REINFORCE THE NARRATIVE

#### ELP PROVIDER KNOWLEDGE

- 11 LAUNCH NATIONAL KNOWLEDGE-SHARING INITIATIVE

#### TALENT DEVELOPMENT

- 12 ESTABLISH MULTI-STAKEHOLDER CAPACITY-BUILDING BODY

#### ELP PROVIDER TECH SYSTEMS

- 13 CREATE AN ECD NATIONAL DIGITAL BACKBONE THAT SUPPORTS THE FULL DEVELOPMENT JOURNEY OF ELPs
- 14 ESTABLISH BANA PELE ENGAGEMENT PLATFORM



### SUPPORT

#### COMMUNITY COLLECTIVES

- 15 CATALYSE LOCAL BANA PELE COMMUNITY HUBS

#### ELP PARTNER COLLECTIVES

- 16 LAUNCH PEER-TO-PEER CLUB NETWORK FOR ELPs

#### CIVIL SOCIETY COLLECTIVES

- 17 CREATE FAST-TRACK POLICY ESCALATION PROCESS
- 18 PROMOTE WIDESPREAD ADOPTION OF COMMUNITY FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

#### COMMUNITY TALENT

- 19 LAUNCH OPEN BANA PELE NETWORK TO BUILD A NEW PIPELINE OF ELP PROVIDERS



### SUSTAIN

#### NURTURING SPACES

- 20 MOBILISE PARTNERS TO REPURPOSE UNDERUSED PUBLIC OR COMMUNITY BUILDINGS INTO SAFE, JOYFUL EARLY LEARNING SPACES

#### NEARBY FACILITIES

- 21 INTEGRATE HEALTH TOOLS, LIKE THE ROAD TO HEALTH BOOKLET, FOR ELPs

#### DATA & INSIGHTS

- 22 ESTABLISH OPEN INTERFACES, APIS, ACCESS PROTOCOLS & DASHBOARDS TO MAKE DATA MORE ACCESSIBLE

#### ELP IMPACT HUB

- 23 ESTABLISH NATIONAL DATA OBSERVATORY TO BRING TOGETHER INSIGHTS FROM DIVERSE SOURCES

The **ELP Impact Hub** will guide and support this process by developing the tools, processes and support systems needed for meaningful listening and response. Four core actions will drive this stage:

- **Identify Key Assumptions:** The Blueprint is based on the assumption that these actions will drive progress and generate real value for all ecosystem actors. These assumptions must be clearly identified, monitored and revisited, so the system can respond and adapt if outcomes diverge from expectations.
- **Ask Meaningful Questions:** Good listening starts with good questions. Based on the identified assumptions, we must design questions that capture both facts and experiences across all nine actor groups. This includes open-ended, reflective questions that go beyond simple yes/no answers to surface nuanced, qualitative insights, especially from voices historically excluded from decision-making.
- **Use Accessible Listening Channels:** To gather meaningful feedback across the ecosystem, multiple channels that are accessible and context-appropriate must be used:
  - Self-service platforms: Online surveys, mobile apps and digital forms
  - Assisted platforms: WhatsApp, call centres and voice notes
  - Offline methods: Focus groups, mentoring sessions and community dialogues
  - Event-based capture: Workshops, site visits and convenings

Responses should be captured in the format most natural to respondents, whether written, spoken or audio-recorded and in their own languages.

- **Make Sense of the Voices, and Act:** Given the volume and diversity of feedback, digital tools, particularly AI-enabled platforms, will help organise and analyse responses, while identifying trends and emerging themes. The ELP Impact Hub will lead this synthesis, transforming insights into concrete action. Crucially, feedback loops must be closed, sharing back what was heard, what is being done and what is improving. This transparency builds trust, ownership and shared momentum.

This ongoing cycle of listening, learning, acting and improving will help the ecosystem grow in step with the needs of children, families and ELP providers. It ensures that transformation is dynamic, not static, and that every actor has a role in shaping and strengthening the system. The next chapter explores how these integrated actions deepen capabilities and accelerate impact for all actors in the ecosystem.

## 4.6 HOW ORCHESTRATION WILL WORK

Orchestration is like conducting a symphony, each player maintains their independence, but conductors (the orchestration teams) ensure everyone plays in harmony toward a shared outcome. These teams do not replace existing roles. Instead, they align efforts, strengthen coordination and unlock progress through collaboration, shared standards and continuous learning.

During the Bana Pele Leadership Summit, stakeholders identified four system-wide priorities:

1. Increasing access to quality early learning programmes
2. Improving quality of existing programmes
3. Creating enabling government systems
4. Ensuring sufficient resources

To drive progress on these priorities, three orchestration teams will coordinate the implementation of Blueprint actions. Each team will work with action leads to develop detailed implementation plans.

### 1. GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING TEAM

This team, led by the Bana Pele PMU, focuses on building the public sector foundations needed to deliver at scale by:

- **Strengthening execution and coordination** with PEDs to align implementation across provinces through the establishment of Bana Pele Provincial Programme Management Units (PPMUs).
- **Digitising key processes** through eCARES (registration, subsidies, infrastructure, quality assurance), which will reduce red tape for ELPs and ease the bureaucratic load for district officials.
- **Strengthening relationships** between local government and education districts to reduce regulatory barriers and create enabling conditions for ELPS, especially in under-resourced communities.
- **Improving quality delivery** through the Quality Assurance and Support System (QASS). The DBE will also roll out a standardised curriculum implementation strengthening toolkit with a mixed-modality training programme, supported by current initiatives such as PLAYSA and ECD Mobi. Quality will be further enhanced through the implementation of the Human Resources Development Plan driven by the Capacity Building Commission.
- **Integrating health and development support** by establishing systems to ensure key health services are provided to children at ELPs, and equipping practitioners to identify and assist children who are not developmentally on track.
- **Enabling knowledge sharing** by publishing open data standards and establishing a National Data Observatory, drawing on tools such as the ELOM evaluations, the Thrive by Five Index and the eCares system.

## 2. FUNDING ORCHESTRATION TEAM

This team coordinates and steers investment across the funding stack required to both accelerate new quality access and sustain the ecosystem by:

- **Ensuring a thriving and sustainable ecosystem** through the ECD Subsidy and infrastructure allocations via the Conditional Grant. The DBE and National Treasury will work to progressively increase funding in line with sector growth.
- **Enabling safe spaces and registration** of ELP sites by establishing a private sector Infrastructure Fund in partnership with donors, partners and philanthropists to co-ordinate infrastructure investment through registration data.
- **Accelerating new quality access** through the Bana Pele Accelerator Fund via a public-private partnership between the DBE, National Treasury, donors and the private sector. This will build on lessons learned from the ECCE Outcomes Fund.
- **Incentivising new growth** through an ECCE Livelihoods Fund that offers start-up and early-stage capital to prospective ELP providers in high-priority, low access districts. This will attract partnerships from public and private funders focused on youth livelihoods and strengthening township economies.

## 3. ECOSYSTEM ORCHESTRATION TEAM

This team unifies the ecosystem, ensuring alignment, forward momentum and the removal of obstacles to growth by:

- **Strengthening the Network of Care** by creating knowledge-sharing platforms where ecosystem actors can share proven practices.
- **Unifying ELP Partners** such as ECD Forums, NGOs and RTOs to bolster practitioner support.
- **Leveraging community assets** by catalysing the creation of Community Hubs as local nodes of assistance for ELPs.
- **Strengthening local ELP provider collaboration** by establishing peer-to-peer networks for practitioner learning, mentorship and collaboration.
- **Leveraging existing data systems** to generate insights that drive scale.

## SHARED PRACTICES ACROSS TEAMS

All three teams will work together on:

- **Listening to communities and practitioners** through structured feedback mechanisms.
- **Developing and implementing the shared narrative** to build a national movement around early learning.
- **Embedding the shared narrative** in communities through ongoing engagement.
- **Leveraging technological and data innovations** to bring additional efficiencies.

Each orchestration team brings together the right mix of government, civil society and private sector partners to drive coordinated action. Rather than working in isolation, these teams create the alignment and momentum needed to reach every child by 2030. The 23 priority actions outlined in this chapter detail the specific work these teams will coordinate.

## THE THREE ORCHESTRATION TEAMS



## NALEDI'S JOURNEY: A VISION OF TOMORROW

The action agenda set out above is the start of the journey to scale. This is not intended to read as a list of things to do but rather as a framing that triggers ecosystem action. To bring the five stages of delivery to life, here is an example of one of many potential stories that can emerge from this. Imagine Naledi, a young woman in a rural community who has always dreamed of helping the children in her area. This is her story, not as it is today, but as it could be when the Blueprint's actions work together as a connected, supportive system.

### JOINING THE MOVEMENT

Naledi first hears about Bana Pele through community radio, posters in her local clinic and conversations with neighbours who speak of a new national commitment to putting children first. The shared narrative resonates with her and feels like an invitation to contribute to something bigger than herself (**Action 10: Commission creative agencies to share and reinforce the narrative**).

One afternoon, she calls the Bana Pele number she's seen advertised (**Action 14: Establish the Bana Pele Engagement Platform to enable sustained, two-way communication between ELPs and the DBE**). She is welcomed by a friendly voice who guides her through some simple questions. They ask her a few questions about where she lives, why she wants to work with children and her experience. The system recognises that her village is in a priority district where children have limited early learning opportunities. It completes a child protection clearance and immediately connects her to the Open Bana Pele Network to kick start her journey. (**Action 19: Launch the Open Bana Pele Network to build a new pipeline of ELP providers**).

"You're exactly who we've been looking for," they tell her. "Let's help you get started."

### LEARNING AND GROWING

Naledi connects to a curated learning platform where she can begin building her skills at her own pace. She's able to watch short videos on her phone, even when data is limited, about how young children learn through play, what makes a nurturing environment and how to support children's development (**Action 13: Launch an ECD National Digital Backbone for ELP providers to connect with peers, mentors and other relevant health and social support services**). When she needs in-person support, she visits her local Bana Pele Community Hub where she finds experienced ELP practitioners at her local church or community centre (**Action 15: Catalyse local Bana Pele Community Hubs**).

## TAKING THE FIRST STEPS

After completing her initial training modules, Naledi is ready to start her own early learning programme. But she needs start-up capital. Through the platform, she applies for support from the ECCE Livelihoods Fund (**Action 7: Mobilise the ECCE Livelihoods Fund to support new ELPs**). The application asks: Have you found a safe space? Have you recruited children from families who need your programme?

Naledi has identified a safe space that could work and several parents in her community have already expressed interest. She gets help to repurpose her space to deliver good quality early learning (**Action 20: Mobilise partners to repurpose underused public or community buildings**). Her application is approved and she receives start-up capital to make the space safe and welcoming. She also connects with her local Community Hub, where experienced practitioners offer guidance and encouragement. One of them, Ma Mkhize, becomes her mentor. She's also invited to join a peer-to-peer network of aspiring practitioners in nearby communities. They meet online and occasionally in person, sharing their hopes, their questions and their progress. Naledi no longer feels alone, there are many others like her stepping forward with hope and courage (**Action 16: Launch peer-to-peer club networks for ELPs**).

### BUILDING A SOLID FOUNDATION

With support from the Community Hub, which includes experienced ELP partners, Naledi transforms her room into a bright, child-friendly space. She receives a health and safety starter pack with essential items like a first aid kit, cleaning supplies, age-appropriate toys and early learning materials aligned with the national curriculum framework.

Now she's ready to register with the DBE. Through the Bana Pele engagement platform, she applies for Bronze registration through the eCares platform. District officials from the Provincial Education Department and local government visit her programme (**Action 3: Deepen collaboration between PEDs and local government through the Bana Pele ECHO Hub**). They're encouraging and helpful, guiding her through what she needs to progress toward Silver registration so she can access the ECD Subsidy (Action 5: Explore innovations that enable the ECD Subsidy to work more strategically).

With help from the local social worker and the Bana Pele desk at her municipality, Naledi navigates the Environmental Health certification process, which has been streamlined through the Red Tape Reduction Toolkit. Within months, not years, she achieves Silver registration. Her programme is official and she starts receiving the ECD Subsidy, providing the financial foundation she needs to sustain her work.

## GROWING IN QUALITY

Naledi's programme is running, but she knows there's always more to learn. Through the digital platform, she accesses the knowledge-sharing library (**Action 11: Launch national knowledge-sharing initiative**), selecting resources that match her children's needs and her community's context. She also enters the Quality Assurance and Support System (QASS), which offers her coaching, not criticism. Her coach helps her see where she's excelling and where she can grow.

The local Community Hub continues to be a lifeline. In her peer-to-peer club, Naledi and other practitioners celebrate wins, troubleshoot challenges and share creative ideas. When health officials from the local clinic visit to conduct immunisations and developmental screenings, Naledi uses a simple tool to identify children who may be falling behind. She knows exactly who to contact for additional support and those children receive the help they need early (**Action 2: Strengthen existing systems and policies to improve access for children with additional support needs, including those with disabilities**).

Financial and training incentives (**Action 6: Establish the co-financed Bana Pele Accelerator Fund**), encourage Naledi to keep improving. Her children are thriving, parents are grateful and she feels the pride of meaningful work.

## BECOMING A LEADER

Three years later, Naledi's programme is flourishing. She now has Gold registration and consistently achieves strong child development outcomes. But her impact doesn't stop at her own door. She has become a mentor herself, welcoming new practitioners into her peer network, sharing lessons from her journey and helping others navigate the system that once felt overwhelming to her. She is actively contributing by providing feedback and data that strengthens the network. The network is listening and learning (**Action 23: Establish a National Data Observatory to bring together insights from diverse sources**).

When a young woman from the next village reaches out with a dream of starting her own programme, it's Naledi's turn to tell her with warmth and conviction: "You're exactly who we've been looking for. Let's help you get started. Welcome to the Bana Pele Movement".

## A GLIMPSE OF WHAT'S POSSIBLE

Naledi's story is not real, yet. But neither is mere fantasy. There are examples of Naledi's out there. This story illustrates how actions in this Shared Blueprint can catalyse more talent like Naledi by opening multiple pathways, incentivising and supporting increased quality and accelerating new access. When policies align, systems connect, funding flows and communities mobilise, the path from dream to impact becomes clear. And when thousands of Naledis step forward, supported by an ecosystem that believes in them, every child will have the opportunity to thrive by five.



# Naledi's Journey: A Vision of Tomorrow



## 1 Joining the Movement

Naledi learns about Bana Pele through local media and neighbours, calls the advertised number and is quickly welcomed, screened and connected to the Open Bana Pele Network to support children in her priority district

**ACTION** 10 14 19



## 2 Learning and Growing

Naledi builds her skills through a low-data learning platform, receives in-person support at her local Bana Pele Hub and joins a peer network that gives her confidence and connection

**ACTION** 13 15



## 7 A Glimpse of What's Possible

When policies align, systems connect and communities mobilise, thousands of Naledis will step forward and every child will have the opportunity to thrive by five!



## 3 Taking the First Steps

After completing her training, Naledi secures Bana Pele funding, prepares a safe learning space and is matched with a mentor at her local Community Hub

**ACTION** 07 16 20

## 4 Building a Solid Foundation

With Community Hub support, Naledi equips her classroom, completes streamlined registration and achieves Silver status to access the ECD Subsidy and sustain her programme

**ACTION** 03 05



## 6 Becoming a Leader

Three years later, Naledi holds Gold registration, achieves strong child outcomes and mentors new practitioners, helping them confidently start their own programmes

**ACTION** 23



## 5 Growing in Quality

Naledi continuously improves her programme through coaching, shared resources, peer support, early child screening and incentives that help her children flourish and sustain her meaningful work

**ACTION** 02 06 11

# 05

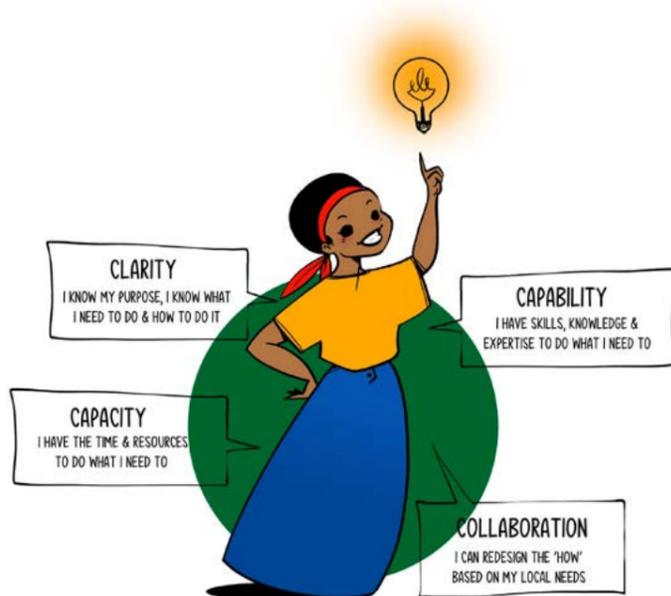
## STRENGTHENING THE ECOSYSTEM

With the early learning sector primed and mobilised for coordinated action, the focus shifts to the people and programmes that bring it to life. Foundational elements introduced in Chapter 4, such as policy reforms, support systems, digital platforms and the shared narrative, are designed to empower key actors across the early learning landscape.

### 5.1 REINFORCING THE ABILITY TO SOLVE

ELPs, families, NGOs, government officials, funders and others do not operate in isolation, they are part of an interconnected system. Strengthening their ability to solve problems within their own contexts, while encouraging them to listen, learn, adapt and improve together, is essential to achieving progress at scale, with speed and sustainability. Each actor's effectiveness depends on their own ability (clarity, capability and capacity), as well as how well they collaborate.

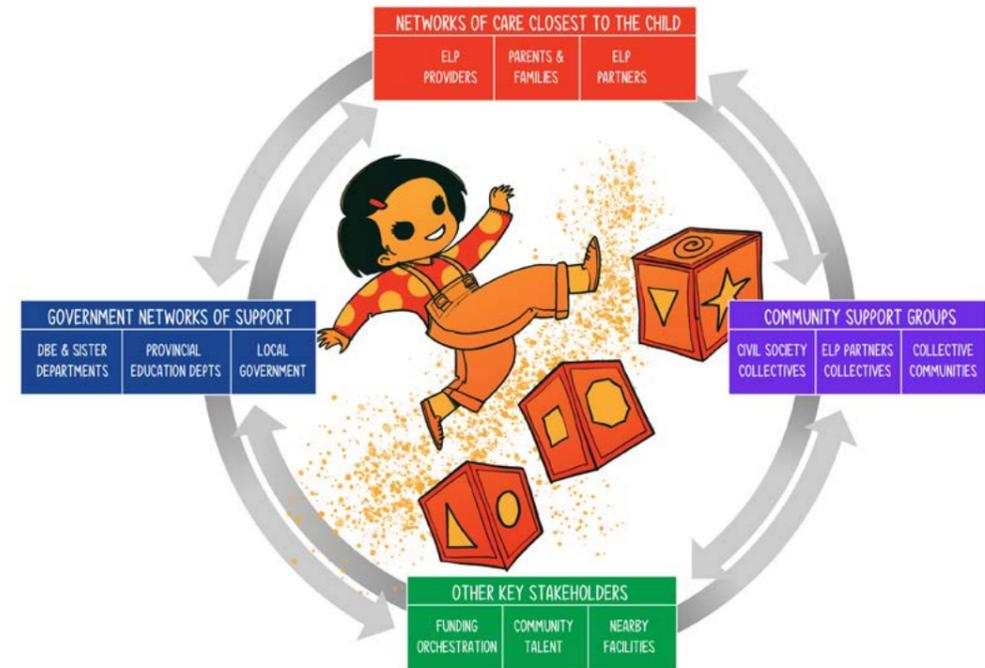
The actions outlined across the five stages of Chapter 4 support and reinforce these abilities, creating a compounding effect that makes the whole system stronger.



### 5.2 LISTENING TO EVOLVE TOGETHER

For a system to improve, honest and meaningful feedback must flow throughout, from homes and early learning centres, to NGOs, communities and government systems. As described in the Integrate stage, structured listening can strengthen key relationships and generate positive network effects, helping the system learn, adapt and improve.

#### THE VIRTUOUS LOOP: REINFORCING ABILITIES, LISTENING AND EVOLVING TOGETHER



### 5.3 STRENGTHENING ACTORS ACROSS THE ECOSYSTEM

#### 5.3.1 EMPOWERING ELP PROVIDERS

ELP providers are the frontline for delivering children's early learning and enabling their full developmental potential. While thousands already serve communities across South Africa, led mostly by women, many more are needed to achieve universal quality access by 2030.

Significant investment is already flowing into the sector to enhance provider capability, sustainability and reach. The DBE's ECD Subsidy and ECD Maintenance Grant represent the largest public investments to date. The Bana Pele PMU is actively assisting providers with registration, subsidy access and compliance, aided by the deployment of 800 youth fieldworkers at the community level and 100 social auxiliary workers in education districts.

Meanwhile, non-state actors, including NGOs, social enterprises and donors continue to invest in capability development and innovation through mechanisms such as the ECCE Outcomes Fund, which is designed to incentivise new access, quality improvements and generate insights to guide ongoing investment and learning.

## REINFORCING THE ABILITY TO SOLVE

Unlocking the full potential of providers requires targeted support to build capability and foster peer-driven improvement. Key interventions include:

- A multi-modal mentoring platform that connects providers with peers and experienced coaches, both on-demand and through scheduled sessions, for reflective learning and collaborative problem-solving (Action 13).
- A unified national digital platform centred on providers, to support daily practice, learning and continuous improvement (Action 11).
- A permanent engagement platform, building on the emerging multi-channel system developed through the Bana Pele Mass Registration Drive, which spans call centres, WhatsApp, USSD and fieldworkers, to enable sustained, two-way communication between ELPs and government (Action 14).
- A Peer-to-Peer Club Network, drawing on successful models implemented by NGOs to foster local collaboration, knowledge exchange and mutual support (Action 16).

## LISTENING TO EVOLVE TOGETHER

ELP providers must feel supported, respected and empowered, especially by families, communities and government. Strong community engagement enhances their sense of capability and reduces their reliance on external partners.

While the ECD Impact Hub will lead structured listening efforts, gathering insights to inform system-wide learning and adaptation as detailed in Chapter 4, every stakeholder can contribute by asking thoughtful questions and acting on the feedback received.

Key listening prompts for ELP providers include:

- How do you experience family engagement? What support from families would make a big difference?
- What has been your biggest success, or challenge, in engaging with families recently?
- What types of NGO support have been most valuable? Where do you still need more assistance?
- How satisfied are you with current government support? What improvements would you suggest?
- Where has community support helped you the most? How connected do you feel to your community? What local challenges affect your centre's operations?

## 5.3.2 SUPPORTING FAMILIES

Families are a child's first and most lasting source of love, care and learning. Their everyday interactions, through play, conversation and connection lay the foundation for healthy development long before formal learning begins. When families feel confident in their role as educators and advocates for their children, they become powerful agents of change.

Strong, trusting relationships between families and ELP providers are critical. These partnerships create a shared sense of responsibility and help children thrive both at home and in early learning programmes. The learning that happens at home is irreplaceable with ELPs building upon what families have already begun.

Yet across South Africa, early learning is not always well understood or prioritised. Some see it as optional, while others associate it only with school readiness. What is often missing is a clear, collective understanding that early learning is essential to every child's growth, identity and future.

Building this shared understanding starts with a strong, relatable narrative that speaks to the hopes and realities of families and communities and affirms their role in shaping a brighter future for every child.

## REINFORCING THE ABILITY TO SOLVE

To fully unlock the potential of families as active participants in early learning, key interventions include:

- A compelling, jargon-free societal narrative rooted in listening and everyday realities (Action 9).
- A nationwide communication campaign to bring this narrative to life, amplified by media and partners (Action 10).
- Integrated referral systems linking ELPs with health and social services, ensuring families can access trusted, responsive support tailored to their needs (Actions 2 & 21).
- Local Bana Pele Community Hubs to mobilise families, community champions and grassroots leaders to build stronger, more connected networks of care and support (Action 15).

## LISTENING TO EVOLVE TOGETHER

When families feel heard and supported, they are more confident in enrolling their children in ELPs and more likely to ensure regular attendance. Listening becomes even more powerful when it is conducted in local languages and intentionally reaches historically under-represented voices.

Key listening prompts for families include:

- How often does your child attend an ELP? Are they growing and learning?
- What challenges do you face in supporting your child's learning journey?
- What messages about early learning have you seen or heard recently in your community or the media?
- What changes would you like to see in local early learning services?
- What support would help you better nurture your child's development at home?

### 5.3.3 EQUIPPING ELP PARTNERS

Early learning partners, including NGOs, intermediaries, researchers, trainers, innovators and service providers, are essential for expanding quality and access, especially in underserved areas.

While many providers operate as independent micro-enterprises, partners often provide the training, tools, systems and support that make quality at scale possible. ELP partners and providers need to build strong, reciprocal relationships where partners learn from the frontline experience of providers, and providers grow toward greater sustainability and independence.

#### REINFORCING THE ABILITY TO SOLVE

To unlock the full potential of ELP partners and enhance their contribution to a strong ecosystem, key interventions include:

- A National ELP Provider Capacity Building Commission to bring together government, NGOs, training institutions and providers to co-create shared frameworks for professional development (Action 12).
- The Bana Pele Accelerator Fund is a flexible funding mechanism that channels resources through trusted intermediaries and local partners, making it easier to scale early learning while staying responsive to community needs (Action 6).
- A Leadership Orchestration Team, supported by a small, agile secretariat of emerging leaders, to guide coordinated implementation of the Blueprint across actors and initiatives (Action 1).
- Open data interfaces, APIs, access protocols and dashboards to support planning, innovation and transparency (Action 22).
- A National Data Observatory to synthesise insights from diverse sources, including eCares, the Thrive by Five Index, ELOM and emerging data streams, to support evidence-based action, learning and continuous improvement (Action 23).

#### LISTENING TO EVOLVE TOGETHER

When ELP partners actively participate in listening circles and feedback loops, they can tailor their support more effectively, based on the lived experiences and evolving needs of providers and families. Listening also improves coordination with funders and government, helping ensure that the entire system is more aligned and responsive.

Key listening prompts for ELP partners include:

- What are your most significant challenges in scaling access and quality? What additional support would help?
- What common concerns are ELP providers raising? Where are the persistent gaps in quality?
- What new strengths or innovations have you observed among ELPs? What remains unaddressed?
- How is your support model evolving? Are more entrepreneurs entering the sector, and what are they asking for?
- Are ELP providers on a path to sustainability? What changes could accelerate their progress?

### 5.3.4 ENABLING GOVERNMENT AND POLICY LEADERS

At national, provincial and local levels, government plays a leading role in steering the early learning ecosystem. It coordinates planning, unlocks resources and builds the institutional scaffolding needed to expand access. With the DBE now holding the national mandate for early learning, there is a timely opportunity to drive more coherent and scalable action, grounded in strong policy, efficient systems and a growing body of locally generated data.

#### REINFORCING THE ABILITY TO SOLVE

To unlock the full potential of government leadership and orchestration, key interventions include:

- Stronger collaboration between PEDs and local government, including COGTA, SALGA and municipalities, to address regulatory barriers and align local efforts (Action 3).
- A dedicated communication channel between the DBE, provinces and municipalities to enable rapid problem-solving and more responsive action (Action 3).
- A Leadership Orchestration Team, supported by a small, agile secretariat of emerging leaders, to guide coordinated implementation of the Blueprint across sectors and all spheres of government (Action 1).
- A National Data Observatory to synthesise insights from diverse sources, including eCares, the Thrive by Five Index, ELOM and emerging data streams, to support evidence-based action, learning and continuous improvement (Action 23).

#### LISTENING TO EVOLVE TOGETHER

Government systems work better when they engage regularly with actors across the ecosystem, listening to experiences on the ground, identifying areas of friction and tracking progress. Proactive, structured listening helps ensure that national policies stay aligned with local realities, allowing for faster course correction and greater impact.

- Key listening prompts for government officials at all levels include:
- What implementation challenges are you experiencing? Where are current bottlenecks slowing progress?
- Are recent actions and reforms helping you improve access, quality or resources for scale?
- What issues or concerns are ELP providers raising most frequently? What support do they need?
- What are families saying about early learning? How are community attitudes evolving?
- Are newly developed assets and support systems being adopted and used effectively? Where are the gaps?

### 5.3.5 COLLABORATING WITH FUNDERS AND RESOURCE PARTNERS

Funders and resource partners play a critical role in shaping the future of early learning in South Africa. As the sector becomes more transparent and better aligned, through national strategies, shared data and digital support systems, new opportunities are emerging for more strategic, collaborative investment.

When public and private funding are aligned, the potential for lasting, exponential change increases dramatically. Beyond supporting individual programmes, funders can accelerate systemic transformation by backing scalable innovations, strengthening local capacity and backing national priorities.

#### REINFORCING THE ABILITY TO SOLVE

To unlock the full potential of funders and resource partners, key interventions include:

- A dedicated funding orchestration team with experience across the capital stack, spanning public budgets, corporate social investment, philanthropic, blended and multilateral finance (Action 8).
- The Bana Pele Accelerator Fund, a next-generation financing mechanism designed to accelerate new access by channelling resources through intermediaries and local delivery partners (Action 6).
- Increased investment to support new early learning micro-entrepreneurs with start-up capital, working in partnership with PYEI, the Department of Employment and Labour, the Jobs Fund, the BUSA Livelihoods PMU and others (Action 7).
- A National Data Observatory to synthesise insights from diverse sources, including eCares administrative data, the Thrive by Five Index, ELOM and emerging data streams, to support evidence-based action, learning and continuous improvement (Action 23).

#### LISTENING TO EVOLVE TOGETHER

Funders and resource leaders want to see meaningful, measurable progress, but traditional evaluation tools often miss the human experience behind the numbers. Understanding how communities experience the impact of investment requires intentional, reciprocal listening.

While the ECD Impact Hub will coordinate structured feedback and learning mechanisms (as outlined in Chapter 4), funders should also engage directly with ecosystem actors to better understand how resources are enabling change and where additional support is needed.

Key listening prompts include:

- What motivates you and your organisation to invest in early learning?
- What barriers limit deeper, strategic and collaborative engagement?
- What perspectives or stories are missing from public narratives about early learning?
- What outcomes do you want to see? Are you open to unconventional approaches to achieve them?
- How can we better leverage collective resources for greater impact across the system?

### 5.4 TOWARDS COLLECTIVE ACTION

To strengthen every actor's ability to solve challenges, we must reduce the cost and complexity of change. Public shared support systems distribute costs fairly, the shared narrative and aligned policies reduce fragmentation, and open technologies and resources increase efficiency. As we move through each stage of this Blueprint, it is essential not only to measure progress and impact, but also to understand the economics of change and how resources can be optimised for greater reach and sustainability.

In a complex system, real-time impact is hard to observe, but the clearest signal comes from the voices of the people being enabled and served, including families, providers, partners and communities. Today, tools exist to listen at scale, learn from what we hear and act on that learning, making the voice of the people vital data to improve and evolve the system together.

The next chapter explores shaping a shared narrative of care to inspire collective imagination and action for every child, in every community.



## 06

## SHAPING OUR SHARED NARRATIVE OF CARE

## 6.1 WHY SHARED NARRATIVE MATTERS

**Early learning is often described through acronyms, technical terms and specialist language, much of which is essential for system leaders but unfamiliar to parents, families and communities. This creates distance from the very people whose participation is key to children's success. We cannot scale impact if early learning feels inaccessible or exclusive.**

Specialist terminology has its place, but scaling quality early learning requires a shared narrative that places children at the centre and resonates with the network of care closest to them. This shared narrative acts as the operating system for early learning: a unifying story that helps people understand what matters, why it matters and how they can contribute.

Although it may appear intangible, a shared narrative has powerful, practical functions such as:

- **Unifying and strengthening the network of care closest to the child**, drawing families and communities more meaningfully into early learning.
- **Mobilising collective effort toward universal access**, engaging a broader range of stakeholders and actors.
- **Awakening belief in the full potential of every child** and reinforcing the value of early learning in shaping lifelong outcomes.

In a nation still healing from deep-rooted inequalities, few symbols carry greater hope for transformation than a child. Yet young children, especially those from historically marginalised communities, often remain on the periphery of South Africa's collective consciousness.

To truly transform the future, children must be placed at the centre of our national priorities. This is not only a moral imperative but a social and economic necessity. Lasting change requires more than policies and programmes, it calls for a shared belief, a collective sense of responsibility and a cultural awakening that recognises early learning as a public good and cornerstone of progress.

The goal is not merely to improve early learning outcomes, but to ignite a generational shift in how we see, value and invest in our youngest citizens.

## 6.2 THE SHIFT WE ARE CALLING FOR

Today, early learning is too often viewed as babysitting, welfare or simply a stepping stone to formal education, rather than as a critical pillar of national development. This Blueprint calls for a bold shift in societal perspective:

- **From passive to powerful:** Children are not merely recipients of care. They are future innovators, leaders and changemakers.
- **From care to catalyst:** Early learning is not a welfare service. It is a powerful driver of economic growth, social equity and national resilience.
- **From fragmented to foundational:** ELPs are not temporary solutions but vital community institutions that inspire trust, attract investment and serve as a shared public mission.
- **From sympathy to potential:** ELP providers are not volunteers or charity workers. They are entrepreneurs, skilled professionals and nation-builders, nurturing the next generation.

Shifting public perception does not happen overnight. It requires storytelling that moves hearts, symbolism that captures imagination, repetition that builds recognition and celebration that inspires action. Not just a communications campaign, a movement.

## 6.3 BUILDING THE SHARED NARRATIVE TOGETHER

This narrative cannot be imposed from above. It must be co-created through deep listening to families, ELP providers, communities and children themselves, uncovering the hopes, fears and beliefs that shape how people experience early learning every day.

The Blueprint proposes a collaborative process (detailed in Actions 9 & 10) that:

- **Listens at scale** through accessible tools and inclusive engagement, amplifying voices often excluded from national discourse.
- **Discovers shared truths** about what South Africans believe about children, childhood and our collective responsibility.
- **Creates cultural resonance** by working with artists, musicians and storytellers to translate insights into formats that feel authentic and familiar across South Africa's diverse communities.
- **Embeds the narrative everywhere** including in clinics, schools, community events, media and everyday conversations, making early learning visible, valued and celebrated.

## 6.4 EVERY VOICE MATTERS

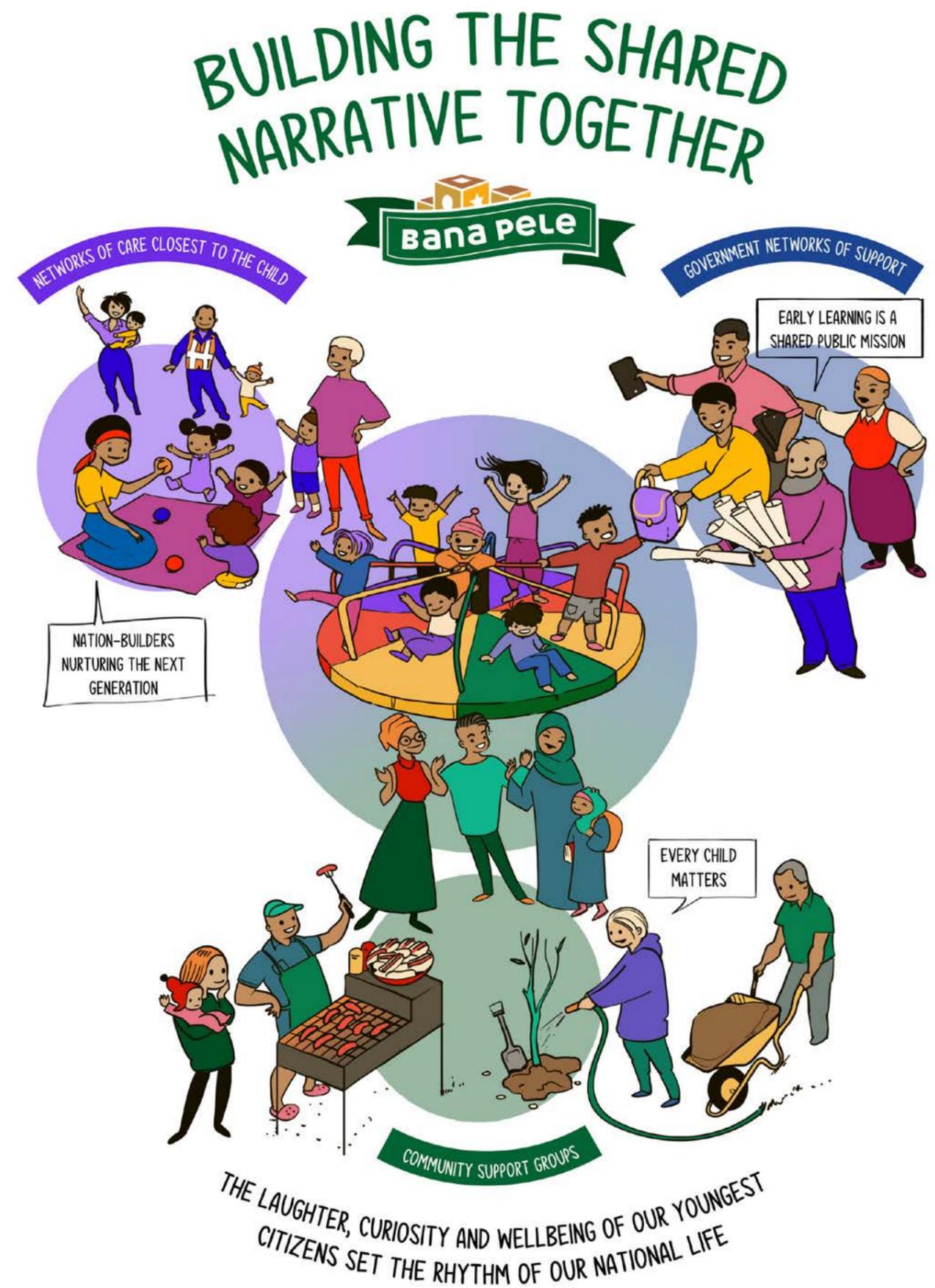
Bringing this narrative to life requires every actor in the ecosystem:

- **Families** share their stories and dreams for their children.
- **ELP providers** champion the narrative in their daily work with children and families.
- **Communities** integrate storytelling and celebration into local gatherings and events.
- **Civil society** facilitates listening spaces and amplifies grassroots voices.
- **Creative talent** translates the narrative into music, art and cultural expressions.
- **Government** leads coordination and embeds the narrative in policy and communication.

When a nation listens deeply to its children, and to those who raise and teach them, it cannot remain the same. Budgets shift. Policies shift. Public attitudes shift.

Achieving universal access to quality early learning requires more than commitments in policy, it calls for a society where every child matters in practice, in every home, community and institution. This Blueprint invites all South Africans to help build a society where the laughter, curiosity and wellbeing of our youngest citizens set the rhythm of our national life.

The next chapter turns to translating this shared narrative and growing movement into concrete, collective action, calling every ecosystem actor to step forward, now and together.



# 07

## ACCELERATING PROGRESS, TOGETHER

### 7.1 ACTING NOW, ACTING TOGETHER

**The journey now shifts from individual effort to collective action. It's about how your role, strengthened by the foundations laid throughout this Blueprint, now connects with others to activate a coordinated, responsive early learning system.**

We are moving beyond isolated heroes to a network powered by shared systems and tools, mutual accountability and continuous learning. In every system value is exchanged, each actor offers something essential and, in turn, benefits from the contribution of others. When these exchanges increase and improve over time, they induce network effects, generating momentum far greater than the sum of individual actions.

Now is the time to bring forward your voice, your context and your ideas. The tools exist, the platforms are ready and the partners are here to grow with you.

Let's build a joyful and successful future for our children, together.

#### 7.1.1 CALLING ELP PROVIDERS

Every day, you create safe, loving spaces where children play, learn and grow. You solve problems with creativity and limited resources. You build trust with families who count on you, offering encouragement and feedback centred on every child's growth. You are the foundation on which this entire system rests.

Now, we call on you to:

- **Deepen connections with children, families and your wider community** by creating safe, nurturing environments where children's wellbeing is the priority.
- **Embrace proven practices that support better outcomes**, using tools like the ELOM and adopting technology to enhance your effectiveness and efficiency.
- **Connect with other ELPs in your area** to exchange ideas, offer mutual support and grow a strong local community of best practice. Together, we can create impact at scale.
- **Make use of available services** such as training, technology, support systems and subsidies to strengthen the quality of your programme, improve delivery and enable long-term sustainability.
- **Provide feedback** on these services so the ecosystem can better meet your needs and the needs of the children you serve.

With the support of families and partners, extend your reach so that more children can benefit from your care. Grow with the ecosystem. Reach more families. Help ensure every child has access to the quality early learning they deserve.

#### 7.1.2 CALLING FAMILIES

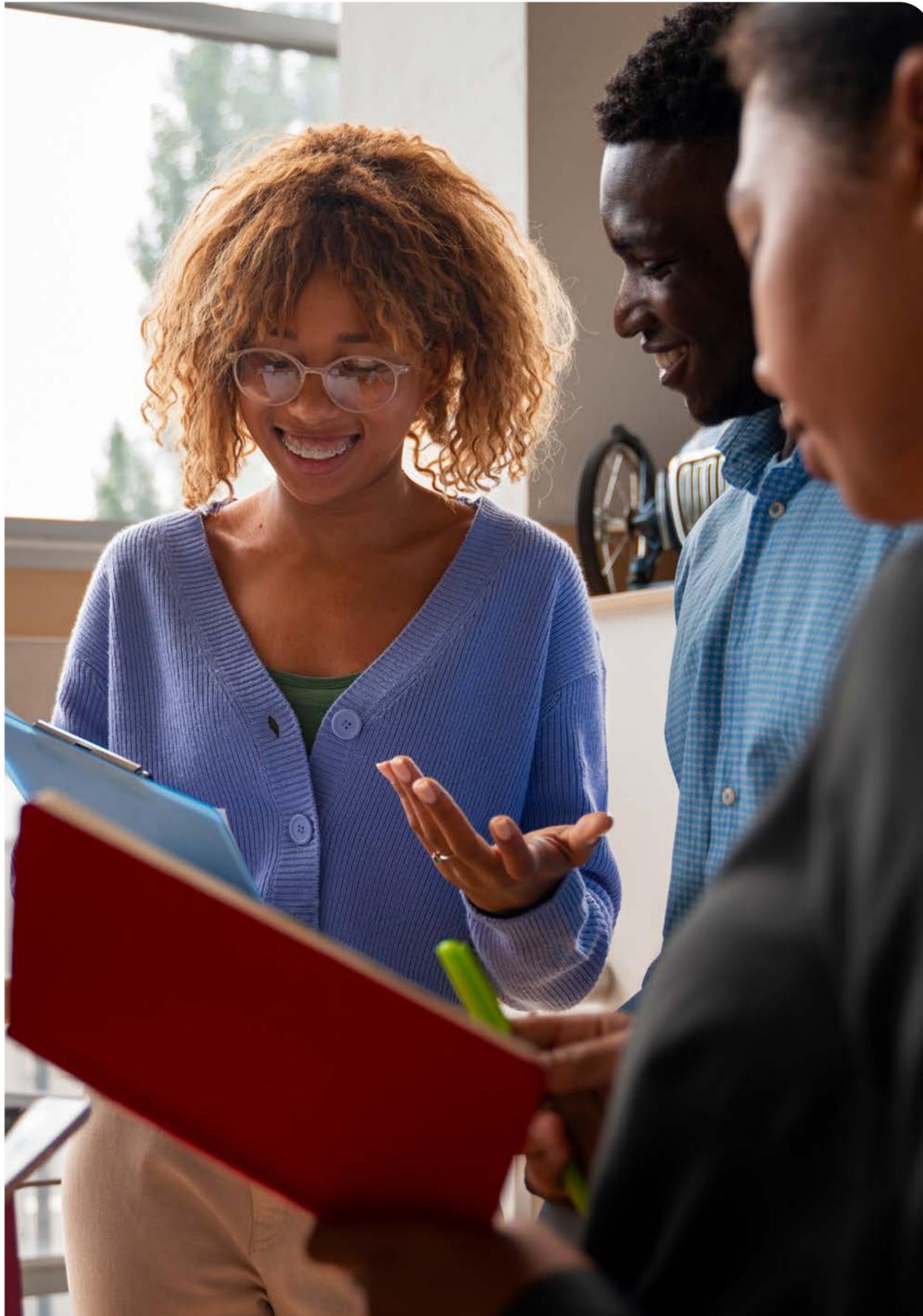
You give your children a name, a sense of belonging and their mother tongue. You provide the warmth of home, the comfort of family and the essentials of food, shelter and safety. You are their first teacher, introducing them to words, stories, songs and the spark of imagination. You know how to seek out what's best for your child, whether healthcare, nourishment, protection or education.

The learning that happens in your home through everyday conversations, play and care is the foundation for everything else. ELPs build on what you have already begun and it is important that you build trust with ELPs, working hand-in-hand to support your child's growth, confidence and success. Your contributions, financial and otherwise, help sustain your local ELP. In return, ELPs become part of your village of care. You engage with them respectfully, investing in them as they invest in your child's future.

Now, we call on you to:

- **Enrol every child in early learning** and ensure they attend regularly. These early years are critical for lifelong success and wellbeing.
- **Partner actively with your ELP.** Learn how to support your child's development in a safe, loving home. Ask for guidance on play, storytelling and nutrition.
- **Ask for feedback on your child's progress.** What milestones should you watch for? What strengths are emerging? What extra support might they need?
- **Support your ELP together with other families.** Help them thrive as a trust community asset. Advocate for early learning and share its value with others.

Together, we can ensure every child has the strong foundation they need to grow, learn and thrive.



### 7.1.3 CALLING ELP PARTNERS

You have helped build a rich, diverse and caring early learning ecosystem through practical tools, training and proven programmes that have deepened quality and expanded access across the country. You have driven innovation, solved complex challenges and developed solutions that improve early learning at the frontline.

Your investment in research, monitoring and data collection has laid the foundation for much of what we now know about what works for young children. Through partnerships with ELPs and community-based providers, you have extended reach where it's needed most, sustained by local and international funding.

Now, we call on you to:

- **Take on the challenge of scale**, moving beyond scaling what has worked in limited contexts to building an ecosystem that reaches every child, everywhere.
- **Collaborate to expand quality access**, particularly in underserved communities and priority districts. Align with others on where and how to grow provision, share resources and IP and leverage joint platforms to drive efficiency and impact.
- **Adopt ELOM as a shared standard** for measuring child outcomes, and use the **Thrive by Five Index** to guide action. Data-driven collaboration is key to ensuring more children are developmentally on track by age five.
- **Strengthen the Networks of Care Closest to the Child** by working closely with ELPs, families and other ELP partners. Step beyond organisational lines and brand identities to ensure more ELPs are connected, supported and resourced to thrive.

You have led with innovation. Now, we call on you to lead with coordinat

### 7.1.4 CALLING GOVERNMENT AND POLICY LEADERS

You have laid the groundwork for universal early learning through an enabling policy framework that supports mixed-modality delivery. You have reformed registration requirements and demonstrated commitment to bringing unregistered sites into the formal system through the Bana Pele Mass Registration Drive.

Access has expanded through increased eligibility for the ECD subsidy, and government remains the single largest investor in early learning via the conditional grant. You have embraced innovation, backing funding mechanisms like the ECCE Outcomes Fund and partnering with initiatives such as the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention (PYEI) and the Jobs Fund to create livelihoods within the sector.

Your investment in district and provincial capability through the Bana Pele PMU reflects a recognition that strong, local systems are key to sustained delivery.

Now, we call on you to:

- **Lead the orchestration of the early learning funding stack** (outlined in Chapter 4), bring together public, private and philanthropic funders to grow total investment and align funding flows for greater impact towards 2030 and beyond.
- **Champion an open, interoperable delivery system** where key government platforms, including eCares, the Thrive by Five Index, ELOM and emerging data streams, can be accessed by all actors, public and non-state, so they are equipped

with the insights needed to support every child.

- **Strengthen leadership across all levels of government**, national, provincial and district, ensuring officials have the capability to help ELPs register, expand and thrive, especially in underserved communities.
- **Convene inclusive, action-oriented forums** with non-state partners that promote alignment, learning and shared accountability. Focus governance efforts on scaling quality access, not just provision, by 2030.
- **Collaborate with municipalities** to remove regulatory barriers and enable more ELPs to open and grow, especially in high-need communities that remain excluded.
- **Increase investment in job creation** within early learning. To meet universal access goals, we must incentivise and support a new generation of ELP providers, empowered to build resilient, community-based micro-enterprises.

You have shown bold leadership in policy and investment. Now is the time to lead a fully coordinated, system-wide effort through the orchestration teams outlined in this Blueprint, grounded in partnership, powered by data and focused on equity, to ensure that no child is left behind.

### 7.1.5 CALLING FUNDERS AND RESOURCE PARTNERS

You have invested in NGOs that deliver, innovate and build capacity across the early learning ecosystem. Through your support, a rich tapestry of tools, insights and delivery models has taken root, strengthening the foundation for scale. You've demonstrated a willingness to fund differently, backing innovative mechanisms like the ECCE Outcomes Fund and testing new approaches that are adaptive, accountable and impact-driven.

Now, we call on you to:

- **Treat early learning as a strategic investment** in the country's future, an investment in human capital, economic growth and social stability, not simply as an act of charity.
- **Incentivise collaboration over competition.** As funders, you shape the culture for the sector. Support cooperation, shared learning and systems that strengthen early learning and serve diverse communities.
- **Align more closely with public investment.** Public-private synergy is critical to achieve universal quality access. Co-investing with the government can unlock scale while ensuring equity.
- **Focus on the problem, not a fixed solution.** Be flexible. Support approaches that evolve with evidence, data and changing societal needs. Let child outcomes, not brand loyalty or legacy, guide your investment decisions.
- **Use data to drive learning, not control.** Measures such as the ELOM should be tools for learning and improvement, not gatekeepers. Funders play a key role in helping the sector use data to drive impact without creating fear or rigidity.
- **Back innovations that improve child outcomes.** Your resources can accelerate promising models, close access and quality gaps and drive progress, especially in underserved communities. Let the speed of innovation set the pace for scaling impact.

With your continued partnership, early learning is well poised to become one of South Africa's most powerful levers for lasting social and economic transformation.

### 7.1.6 CALLING COMMUNITY AND LOCAL LEADERS

You are the pulse of your neighbourhoods. Through places of worship, stokvels, sports clubs, cultural groups and civic associations, you shape the daily life of your communities. You create spaces of belonging, safety and connection. Your influence, resources and relationships already support the wellbeing of children, and you are uniquely positioned to do even more.

Now, we call on you to:

- **Promote enrolment and regular attendance in ELPs.** Ensure that every young child in your community has access to early learning during these vital years of development.
- **Support and uplift local ELPs.** Offer access to safe spaces for children, help raise awareness and celebrate programmes that are making a difference. If more provision is needed, help make it possible.
- **Encourage stronger ties between families and ELPs.** Help build trust, improve communication and make early learning a visible and valued part of everyday community life.
- **Promote collective action.** Collaborate with ELP providers, families and local authorities to align efforts around the common goal of helping every child thrive.
- **Create inclusive community spaces.** Develop or activate local play areas and gathering spaces where children, elders and youth can connect, learn and grow together.

You don't have to do everything, but your leadership can make a powerful difference. As a community leader, you can be a catalyst for local change. Early learning is not just the responsibility of families or ELP providers, it's a shared mission. And your role is essential.





### 7.1.7 CALLING CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

You have long been the steady hand of innovation, advocacy and service delivery in early learning, often stepping in where formal systems have yet to reach. Now, your role is evolving from working independently to enabling deeper collaboration and system-wide transformation.

With strong community roots and the agility to act quickly, you are essential to building and sustaining this movement. As connected, trusted and knowledgeable changemakers, you serve as a critical bridge between policy and practice, between institutional structures and everyday realities. By anchoring your work in collaboration, shared purpose and collective action, you help energise an ecosystem that delivers for every child.

Now, we call on you to:

- **Align your work with this Blueprint.** Let it guide your programme design, partnerships and advocacy toward the shared goal of universal quality access.
- **Strengthen ELPs in your communities.** Build local networks for peer learning, support and collaboration, especially for ELPs in under-resourced areas.
- **Encourage enrolment and attendance.** Use your platforms to advocate for early learning access, inclusion and consistency for all children.

Your voice carries weight, your reach spans communities and your leadership is vital to weaving together a cohesive, inclusive early learning system that leaves no opportunity unexplored and no child without support.

### 7.1.8 CALLING DIVERSE COMMUNITY TALENT

You are the wise elders and entrepreneurial youth who help shape how childhood is seen, experienced and celebrated. Through art, music, design, technology, storytelling and community projects, your creativity sparks imagination, shifts mindsets and brings joy to young children and their families.

Now, your talent is needed more than ever, to help reimagine early childhood not just as a life stage, but as a space of possibility, dignity and shared responsibility.

We call on you to:

- **Elevate the place of children in society.** Use your creativity and influence to help communities see early learning as a joyful, essential part of life.
- **Create cultural artefacts** such as music, stories, games, visual design and digital tools, that enrich early learning experiences and celebrate every child's uniqueness.
- **Collaborate with ELPs, families and local leaders** to bring your work into homes, centres and public spaces, so children grow up surrounded by inspiration.

You don't need to be an early learning expert to make a meaningful impact. Every creative contribution helps build a more joyful, inclusive world for our youngest citizens.



## 7.1.9 CALLING LOCAL HEALTH FACILITIES

You are often the first point of contact for ensuring the health and wellbeing of young children and their families. Every immunisation, wellness check and clinic visit is an opportunity to strengthen the vital connection between health and early learning. These two domains are inseparable, progress in one directly supports outcomes in the other.

Your relationships with families are built on trust earned through consistent care. You see children at their most vulnerable moments and guide parents through critical early health decisions. When you connect families to early learning opportunities, you extend your impact beyond physical health to cognitive, social and emotional development.

Now, we call on you to:

- **Champion early detection and prevention.** Regular screening and prompt nutritional support for at-risk children are critical for eliminating stunting and ensuring healthy development.
- **Build stronger partnerships with local ELPs.** By collaborating with ELP providers in your catchment area, you can extend vital health services, such as immunisations, deworming, vitamin supplements and developmental screenings, to more children, more effectively.
- **Support the wellbeing of caregivers.** Maternal and caregiver mental health is essential to child development. Your guidance, empathy and referrals can make a lasting difference for entire families.

When health and early learning systems work together, every child benefits. By deepening collaboration with ELPs, community health workers and social services, we can ensure more children grow up healthy, nurtured and ready to thrive.



## 7.2 SHAPING OUR COLLECTIVE FUTURE

The road ahead will not be easy. Transforming South Africa's early learning ecosystem will take patience, persistence and above all, partnership. Yet, as this Blueprint shows, the building blocks for change are already in place: people like you, proven programmes, tools that connect us and a shared commitment to every child's right to thrive.

Policies and systems alone will not deliver our bold and urgent 2030 vision. Exponential change that sustains at scale happens when people engage and act together. Whether you are an ELP provider shaping learning every day, a parent raising your voice, a partner bridging gaps, a government leader driving systemic reform or a funder resourcing this work, your actions matter. This system grows stronger because of you.

The five stages outlined in Chapter 4 (Prime, Engage, Support, Sustain, Integrate) provide the roadmap. The 23 priority actions offer the stepping stones. The orchestration teams create the coordination. But it is your commitment, your collaboration and your courage that will bring this Blueprint to life.

vNow is the time to reflect on your role, clarify where you can act, connect with others in your community and the ecosystem, develop shared capabilities and capacity and step into this collective journey with courage and ambition. This is your invitation to lead, to collaborate and to energise the early learning movement. Thousands of small, purposeful actions, taken together, can create a ripple effect greater than anything one actor could achieve alone.

Together, we can build a future where every child matters, not just in our words, but in our daily actions, in every neighbourhood, every centre, every clinic, every home and every heart.





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# SHARED BLUEPRINT TO ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY LEARNING

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