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# Growing **Early Childhood Development (ECD)** Skills and Nurturing Children

Learnings from SEF Collaborations in the ECD Space



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Department:  
Trade, Industry and Competition  
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PRESIDENTIAL  
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Industrial Development Corporation



# How South Africa nurtures and develops our children will determine the future of the country.

South Africa's Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector is still recovering from the widespread job losses and programme closures triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. The Social Employment Fund (SEF) is seeking to address this by contributing to employment opportunities, skills development and quality early learning; while the SEF's learning arm, the Social Employment Network (SEN) is fostering collaboration and knowledge sharing.

This knowledge brief was developed by Daniella Horwitz with contributions from [Impande](#), [Nal'ibali](#), [Lima Rural Development Foundation](#), [Economic Development Partnership](#) and [Thembaletu Development](#).





# What is the SEF and how does it work?



The SEF provides funding to Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), enabling them to scale their impact as well as create temporary part-time jobs for unemployed individuals in marginalised communities.

The SEF is a collaborative partnership between the government and contracted CSOs known as Strategic Implementing Partners (SIPs). SEF participants are hired by these SIPs and are paid a stipend for the community-building activities they provide. The objective is to complement existing employment initiatives within civil society, promoting skills development, economic growth and the common good. It's about opening doors for more South Africans to have a chance to participate in the economy while gaining confidence and dignity.



SEF kicked off in 2022 and is managed by the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC), which works with up to 40 SIPs per annual

cycle, each operating in a variety of community-driven thematic areas such as: Early Childhood Development (ECD), Community Health, Community Safety, Food Security, Environment, Placemaking and the Arts. To reach potential SEF participants, the SIPs often partner with grassroots structures and community-based organisations.



The IDC deposits the SEF stipend directly into participants' bank accounts, ensuring the payment is accounted for by participants. An additional non-wage component is allocated, on a cost-recovery basis, to the SIPs for the management of the employment programmes, infrastructure development and the purchasing of necessary supplies such as early learning readers.



The rollout of the SEF is supported by the Social Employment Network (SEN), a learning and support network managed by the Economic Development Partnership (EDP), which facilitates a regular meeting space for SIPs to address common challenges and collaborate around opportunities. The network also shares and documents learnings that are fed back to government as structured input to inform the design of future iterations of the SEF.

# Early Childhood Development in South Africa



Each year, approximately **5%** of South Africa's public budget is dedicated to early childhood development (ECD) services.<sup>1</sup>



The majority of this funding is directed towards maternal and child healthcare, as well as the Child Support Grant (CSG).



Only **6.5%** of ECD expenditures are allocated for early learning, nutritional support and assistance for primary caregivers.<sup>2</sup>



South Africa has approximately 7 million children under 6 years of age, and over a quarter of households have children in this demographic.<sup>3</sup>



Most of these children live in poor households, below the official “upper-bound” poverty line, and nearly **40%** live in homes that do not have enough income to provide for basic nutritional needs.<sup>4</sup>



High household poverty rates mean it is crucial that young children access quality ECD services to ensure their future development.



ECD builds the intellectual, physical and emotional scaffolding for all future investments in human capital and largely determines the rate of return to schooling, technical and vocational training and university education.<sup>5</sup>

- 1 Ilifa Labantwana and Kago Ya Bana. 2018. *A plan to achieve universal coverage of early childhood development services by 2030*. Discussion document
- 2 Desmond, C., Richter, L. & Martin, P. 2016. Development of an investment case for early childhood development in South Africa: *Prioritizing investments in early childhood development* (study commissioned by UNICEF South Africa). Pretoria: UNICEF.
- 3 Hall K, Almeleh C, Giese S, Mphaphuli E, Slemming W, Mathys R, Droomer L, Proudlock P, Kotze J, and Sadan M. 2024. *South African Early Childhood Review 2024*. Cape Town: Children's Institute University of Cape Town and Ilifa Labantwana.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ilifa Labantwana. 2024. *A plan to achieve universal coverage of early childhood development services by 2030*. Discussion document

# Changing Learning, Changing Lives

The SEF has demonstrated how financial stability for educators directly improves educational outcomes. With reduced financial stress, ECD practitioners can focus more on improving their teaching practices, which is essential for early childhood development. Beyond benefiting individual practitioners, SEF's support enhances the overall quality of ECD centres and improves the chances of them getting registered with the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and qualifying for an ECD subsidy. This highlights how investing in educators can be a catalyst for long-term community development and improved learning opportunities for young children.

Before participating in the SEF, Lindeka Mathambo, the principal of Ikhaya Kids Pre-School in Umzimkhulu, KwaZulu Natal (KZN), struggled financially which affected her well-being and her ability to interact with her students. The SEF stipend has been life-changing: "With less financial stress, I now invest more time and effort into preparing my lessons," she says.

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*My classes have become more interactive, with new activities that engage children in hands-on learning. I focus more on the individual needs of the children. I take the time to understand each child's unique challenges and strengths, implementing targeted interventions to support their development. As a result, children in my classroom are showing significant improvements in both their academic and social skills.”*

Lindeka worked as a SEF participant through Impande, a SIP working with community-driven ECD services at 520 ECD centres in KZN and the Eastern Cape. Impande's overall goals are: improved financial stability of ECD centres in rural areas, and improved school readiness of children attending them in rural communities. One of its main objectives is to support SEF participants for three years, giving them sufficient time to get their ECD centres registered so they can qualify for subsidies, which will create a pathway into sustainable employment for the ECD practitioners.

Thanks to the SEF, Impande partners with over 1 000 ECD practitioners who previously earned nothing or little and are now receiving regular stipends. This support has improved their working conditions, ability to provide quality teaching and impact on their communities.

A ripple effect of the SEF programme is increased enrolment at ECD centres. "Parents in the community have noticed the changes in the quality of education and are now more eager to enrol their children at the centre," explains Lindeka.



# The Crucial Role of Support and Training

The stipend is an important element of the SEF programme, linked to a broader vision of mentorship and support, which includes regular visits by Impande's SEF supervisors, training, and access to vital resources.

Below are key pathways of support which Impande provides as a SIP:

- **Resource Provision:** Impande supplies essential ECD resources, including fortified porridge, toys, books, and other learning materials.
- **Training and Development:** ECD practitioners receive ongoing training on the fundamentals of running an ECD programme. This includes workshops and hands-on training sessions through Impande Learning Groups, where practitioners share ideas and build skills that directly impact their teaching.
- **Monitoring and Support:** Regular visits from SEF fieldworkers have helped with ECD programme registration and implementation.

# Addressing Unemployment and Illiteracy

In 2022 (Q1), South Africa's official unemployment rate was 34.5%, according to Statistics South Africa, while the 2030 Reading Panel Report found that most children leave Grade 1, without knowing the alpha-

bet and 82% of Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning.<sup>6</sup> Unemployment and lack of education are two key social issues that the SEF is addressing.

The Nal'ibali Social Employment Fund (SEF) Family Literacy Programme commenced in 2022. Nal'ibali, the national reading for enjoyment campaign, is the implementing partner. The main aims were to increase literacy activities and resources in under-resourced communities, spread awareness about the benefits of reading and sharing stories, and tackle unemployment via job creation and skills development in targeted communities. The second phase of the project commenced in August 2023, with community-level activities concluding at the end of May 2024. The project was implemented in 91 sites across seven provinces, namely Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu Natal, Limpopo, Northern Cape and the Western Cape.

The SEF participants, known as literacy facilitators, host story sessions at creches and other ECD centres, visit community libraries to demonstrate to caregivers how to read and share stories with children, distribute books and other literacy material to the broader community and run community reading clubs.

In preparation, a three-day literacy training programme introduces SEF participants to the importance of reading and literacy. They are taught the art of storytelling, writing, play-based learning, drawing and colouring-in to stimulate a child's imagination.

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<sup>6</sup> Stent, J. 2023. *Literacy crisis deepening in South Africa, says new report*. Ground Up.

They learn how to engage with children and their caregivers to encourage reading as a daily practice. They are also taught soft skills like planning, diary management, administration, self-monitoring and reporting.

Rijiwe Songo worked as Gauteng provincial administrator for Nal'ibali during part of SEF 1 and SEF 2 (2022-2023). She worked in the field to ensure that the part-time work conducted by the SEF participants aligned to the vision and mission of Nal'ibali and that sites were functional and fully resourced. She says:

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*“There were moments when it was overwhelming because we would travel all over Gauteng. But it was also very fulfilling because in areas like Pimville, Soweto, where the only space people interact with literacy is the library, the SEF project could go into spaces where people don't go to the library, and then we're able to give them reading material and teach them how to use it. We follow through with them to see how effectively they are using it and can see the change that this project made in real time.”*

Since leaving the programme, she has gone on to become project lead for the Trevor Noah Foundation Project that Nal'ibali is implementing in Braamfischerville, Gauteng. “I am very grateful to SEF for giving me a chance. If it hadn't been for my experience with the fund, I wouldn't be where I am now”.



The Nal'ibali SEF partnership has provided children, families, ECD practitioners, educators, and communities with direct access to multilingual Nal'ibali newspaper supplements, books, stories, and literacy support. Over 20 000 children, 3 500 families and 450 ECD centres directly benefited from the literacy intervention geared to ensuring that children start formal schooling with basic literacy skills.





# Collaborating In and Across Sectors

The aim of the Social Employment Network (SEN) is to help SIPs recognise synergies and collaborative opportunities across the various silos so they can amplify their impact by working together.



**Lima Rural Development Foundation (Lima) has been a rural livelihoods development service provider since 2023 for BTE Renewables and subsequently Engie, one of the biggest independent power producers in South Africa. In 2023, as part of an overall development strategy designed through community participation, Lima partnered with Goedgedacht Trust, one of the SIPs implementing the SEF in the Northern Cape, to create employment in Khai-Ma municipality located within the Namakwa District.**

In Onseepkans (OSK), an isolated cross-border town with limited employment, where Lima's inception focus for Engie had been, 30 SEF participant opportunities became available through Goedgedacht Trust to develop skills and provide community-based services towards the "common good". During the second Lima contract period, another 70 SEF participant opportunities became available which were split

between the towns of Pella and Witbank, the Engie-Lima expansion sites. Although the SEF workstreams are aligned to food security and agriculture enterprise development, there have been some great opportunities beyond those work areas for SEF participants.

At a SEN in-person meeting for SIPs, an idea was born for a partnering collaboration between Nal'ibali, Lima and Goedgedacht. This successful collaboration brought the "reading for enjoyment" early literacy methodology to the Khai-Ma sites in 2024. Goedgedacht contributed towards participant payments, workshops logistics and stationery, while Nal'ibali provided the training, reading club starter packs, story compendiums, mother-tongue anthologies and Nal'ibali supplements. Lima was responsible for the continuous implementation and monitoring of the programme.

Since the agreement was signed, 33 SEF participants have received Nal'ibali training. They started reading clubs at schools and libraries and conducted home visits to advocate for parent involvement in early literacy development. By year-end, facilitators supported four ECDs with 166 learners, facilitated three reading clubs with 24 children, and recruited 50 families for home visits.

This layered response to impoverished communities' needs is a clear example of successful cooperation amongst the SIPs, making community development more responsive and pro-active.





**By developing skills, fostering collaboration and encouraging enterprise, the SEF strengthens the social fabric of South Africa and helps build stronger civic institutions, ensuring the promotion and safeguarding of ECD.**



# Recipe for Registration

SEF provides targeted support to help ECD centres meet the necessary compliance requirements set by the DBE for registration. The programme enables SIPs like Thembaletu Development to procure essential infrastructure and materials, ensuring that ECD facilities offer a safe, stimulating, and developmentally appropriate learning environment for young children. The SEF is not only helping ECD centres gain official recognition and funding, but also promoting long-term sustainability and improved early childhood education outcomes.

Thembaletu Development's ECD support stretches over Gauteng, the Western and Eastern Cape. Thembaletu is committed to strengthening ECD centres by assisting them in preparing for registration with the DBE. In 2022-23 Thembaletu teamed up with other NGOs focused on rolling out ECD programmes in the Breede Valley Municipality (BVM) in the Cape Winelands.

At a monthly ECD forum hosted by the Do More Foundation (DMF) and facilitated by Lima, DMF's implementation partner in Breede Valley, Thembaletu conducted a needs analysis. This helped identify how they could support ECD centers selected for registration. Through the SEF programme, Thembaletu helped ECD centres with infrastructure development and learning materials. The SIP also identified suitable candidates and trained them to become ECD classroom assistants so they could contribute to daily activities and foster a conducive environment for child health and

development. Carmelia Thai-May, Thembaletu-trained classroom assistant says: "I know it is not permanent, but it allows you to work towards building on your goals."

The partners in the BVM project developed a successful recipe for ECD registration, which Thembaletu then applied to the three other districts in the Western Cape.



**Through the SEF, Thembaletu is supporting 200 ECDs in the Western Cape, the number of learners directly impacted is about 11 276. In December 2024 SEF support allowed 103 000 meals to be served to the children.**

During the implementation of the SEF, organisations and participants exchange knowledge and learn from each other, promoting innovation and the use of best practices. The SEN plays a crucial role because it facilitates strategic engagements between the SIPs and shares SIP feedback with the IDC, so that future iterations of the SEF can be improved upon. On the following page are some of the major learnings shared under the ECD theme.

# Learnings

## 1) SEF is a Springboard to Opportunity

The SEF is not just about giving an individual a part-time job for 10 months. It is also about creating a springboard to other opportunities. SEF participants practise the crucial skills necessary for career readiness, including teamwork, communication, time management, problem-solving, and leadership, which in turn improves their employability and potential for professional advancement.

Many participants opted to study further to gain formal ECD qualifications. In one instance 220 Nal'ibali Limpopo SEF team members were given the opportunity to study a 12-month Public Administration NQF level 5 academic course at the Salitig Training College, Limpopo.



*"This opportunity is the key to changing the lives of participants, me included. Growing up in a small village makes it hard to study or succeed. There is no funding for education and a lack of motivation. I am in fact going to be the first person with a tertiary qualification in my family. I will be exposed to greater knowledge in my field (Education) and open new career paths such as becoming a curriculum developer."*

**- Dikeledi Daisy Chokwe, Ga- Chere, Marken, Limpopo**

An independent evaluation of the Nal'ibali SEF Family Literacy project found that employment in the SEF programme lead to the expansion of social networks, which are critical for future job prospects.<sup>7</sup> Once the SEF cycle ended, many SEF participants, such as Rijiwe Songo (now working for Nal'ibali), found employment with SIPs or ECD programmes they interacted with.

The SEF also encourages entrepreneurship and self-employment. For example, some literacy facilitators went on to become reading tutors, going to homes to support children with their reading. "Parents are paying them a little bit here and there to help children with reading or help with homework, so they're starting to earn an extra income, creating a side hustle out of the skills that they've learned" explains Bawinile Peters, special project manager at Nal'ibali working on the SEF portfolio.

## 2) SEF Impacts on Child Development

In 2023, Impande conducted an Early Learning Outcome Measure (ELOM) assessment in 26 early learning programmes (ELPs) across KZN and Eastern Cape. The ELOM tool evaluates whether children are meeting key developmental milestones, such as communication, fine motor skills, and emotional regulation.

Results reveal that ELPs that received robust support (such as mentorship, nutrition, educational resources, and access to SEF stipends) showed a dramatic improvement in child outcomes. While only 40% of children in unsupported ECD centres were on track developmentally, 77% of children in centres with deeper support from Impande were progressing as expected.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, B. 2024. External Evaluation of the SEF Family Literacy Project for Nal'ibali and Axiom.



### 3) Partnerships Grow Beyond the SEF/SEN

Collaborations beyond the remit of the SEF have flowered. The partnership in the BVM is an example of the multi-faceted support brought to the ECD sector; Themba lethu invited diverse partners such as [Help2Read](#), [FASfacts](#), [Mikhulu Trust](#) and [Flourish](#) to collaborate in the ECD space and they continue to partner beyond the SEF. Naym Daniels, manager of the Western Cape Office of Themba lethu says:



*"We enhanced the sector by engaging additional partners, and we continue to collaborate with them to this day. This partnership approach is essential because the SEF alone cannot accomplish all of the work on its own."*

New kinds of relationships have been built through the SEN. Gabrielle Kelly, head of research, impact and innovation at Nal'ibali explains that the SEN extended opportunities for Nal'ibali to train other organisations working with children, so they could conduct the same kind of work (starting reading clubs, working in schools, conducting reading sessions, etc.). It also enabled Nal'ibali to learn from other organisations. Observing how other SIPs measure the impact of their work has allowed the campaign to reconsider how they measure their own impact.

### 4) Scaling Up is Challenging

One of the main benefits for all of the SIPs is that the SEF allows them to scale in a way that's not usually feasible for NGOs. Bawinile Peters expands:



*"Although we had presence in different provinces, the networks, the relationships in the SEF allow us to have manpower to reach the communities in a more hands-on way, and to actually do more work on-the-ground than we did previously. We've also gone and built extensive new networks in different communities than we did previously."*

A major learning is that scale up requires organisations to build enormous capacity internally to manage more people and reporting. It also allows them to understand the advantages and disadvantages of scale, which not many of them have had the opportunity to experience. The Nal'ibali model typically depends on the existing capacity of provincial administrators, but it has learned from other SIPs that they can work through partners who take responsibility for managing the participants.





## How the SEN Amplifies the Impact of the SEF

The Social Employment Network (SEN) facilitates partnerships and co-learning among the Strategic Implementing Partners (SIPs) working in marginalised communities; this develops skills, improves agency and maximises the SEF's impact. This Early Childhood Development (ECD) knowledge brief is the first in a series focusing on a community-driven thematic areas and sharing life-changing stories and lessons learned from the SEF iterations.



*"The SEN is a form of trust between us and our partners on the ground to allow for joint learning and the sharing of collaborative issues back to us as the fund manager. The problems societies face are too large for any one group to face by itself. Individual pockets of excellence are concentrated within various organisations. When these are put together, they are amplified and magnified. It is the only way to scale benefit in this economy, with the limited resources that we have."*

**- Bhavanesh Parbhoo, IDC  
Programme Manager, Partner-  
ship Programmes**



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