

Citizens of South Africa, Vote for Your Children. The Early Childhood Development Sector is in Crisis.

By Zena Haynes and Yusrah Ehrenreich



This Wednesday, 29 May, South Africa will hold its 2024 national and provincial elections. As we approach the country's seventh democratic election, the question that should be of paramount importance is, "What are political parties planning to do for the youngest citizens in South Africa; the children in our country who are the most vulnerable and do not get to vote?"

To assist with this answer, the [Centre for Early Childhood Development](#) (CECD) analysed 11¹ political party manifestos from the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), African National Congress (ANC), ActionSA, Build One South Africa (BOSA), Democratic Alliance (DA), Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), Freedom Front Plus (FF Plus), Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), RISE Mzansi, uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MK Party) and the Patriotic Alliance (PA). This was done in order to unpack the promises of each party on issues that affect the holistic development of young children in our country. It must be understood that the holistic input required from an ECD perspective, for children to reach developmental milestones and develop optimally, goes

¹ The political parties mentioned in this article were selected based on the number of seats they currently have in the National Assembly, their popularity among registered voters as per the Ipsos poll conducted between October and December 2023 and recent municipal by-election results.

beyond Grade R and early education. It includes maternal and child healthcare, nutrition, social protection and other social services, which CECD considered when reviewing the manifestos.

These political party promises were further interrogated at an election debate hosted by CECD on 7 May 2024 with nine of the major political parties discussing their positions on addressing the needs of children in South Africa.

Simply put, these elections come at a time when the ECD sector in South Africa is in crisis. Alarming statistics reveal that 57% of children in an early learning programme in South Africa are not on track for their cognitive and/or physical development and so fail to thrive by the age of five.² This has shocking knock-on effects; 81% of South Africa's Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning in any language, including their home languages.³ Pit latrines remain an unsafe and undignified reality for one third of early learning programmes in South Africa and less than 1% of early learning programmes offer toilets for children with disabilities.⁴ By age five, one in four children in South Africa is stunted because of malnutrition.⁵ This is not surprising in a country where more than 62% of children are identified as multidimensionally poor.⁶

So, how will political parties urgently address this ECD crisis if elected into power?

Early education

Regarding early education, it is encouraging to note that eight of the 11 political parties explicitly mention ECD interventions while the DA, FF Plus and PA only refer to Grade R, which is the final year of the ECD phase of a child, when a child is typically 5, turning 6. This is concerning given that ECD begins at conception and an estimated 90% of a young child's brain is developed by the age of five⁷ – the earlier years prior to Grade R is thus crucial and cannot be ignored by our political leadership.

² Giese, S., Dawes, A., Tredoux C., Mattes F., Bridgman G., van der Berg S., Schenk J. and Kotzé J. 2022. Thrive by Five Index Report Revised August 2022. Innovation Edge, Cape Town. Available: https://thrivebyfive.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Index-report-w-addendum_singles-May-2023.pdf

³ Department of Basic Education. 2023. PIRLS 2021: South African Preliminary Highlights Report. Department of Basic Education: Pretoria. Available: https://www.up.ac.za/media/shared/164/ZP_Files/2023/piirls-2021_highlights-report.zp235559.pdf

⁴ Department of Basic Education. 2022. ECD Census 2021: Report. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education. Available: <https://datadrive2030.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/ecdc-2021-report.pdf>

⁵ Dulvy, Elizabeth Ninan; Devercelli, Amanda Epstein; Van Der Berg, Servaas; Gustafsson, Martin; Pettersson Gelande, Gunilla; Kika-Mistry, Jesal; Beaton-Day, Frances Mary. 2022. South Africa Public Expenditure and Institutional Review for Early Childhood Development (ECD PEIR) (English). Washington, D.C. : World Bank Group. Available: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099192001242341964/P1756791e5e59bde1ad6714d311b6261dd284d0e6d65>

⁶ UNICEF, 2020. Child Poverty in South Africa: A Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis. Pretoria, South Africa: UNICEF.

⁷ Dulvy, Elizabeth Ninan; Devercelli, Amanda Epstein; Van Der Berg, Servaas; Gustafsson, Martin; Pettersson Gelande, Gunilla; Kika-Mistry, Jesal; Beaton-Day, Frances Mary. 2022. South Africa Public Expenditure and Institutional Review for Early Childhood Development (ECD PEIR) (English). Washington, D.C. : World Bank Group. Available:

Most of the 11 political parties mention educational interventions that strengthen literacy and numeracy skills, address poor school infrastructure and resources including eliminating pit toilets, increase school safety and security, and address teacher training and competence in the classroom.

CECD also welcomes both the prioritisation of mother tongue education and/or indigenous teaching and learning methods by the ACDP, DA, EFF, FF Plus and MK Party; as well as the intention of providing special needs education, highlighted by the ACDP, ActionSA, DA and IFP.

ActionSA, the EFF and RISE Mzansi have the most comprehensive plans for ECD that go beyond simply providing ECD centres or early learning programmes to young children. Their proposed interventions include providing ECD teacher training, standardising the ECD curriculum, increasing budget allocations for ECD and removing the bureaucratic burdens of ECD centre registration. All critical interventions.

The EFF must be commended for their commitment to ECD and for keeping ECD as a priority in their manifesto since the 2019 general election. Theirs is a very grand plan, ensuring universal access to free ECD programmes, government employment of all ECD practitioners who will receive full pay and pension contributions, and training an additional 40,000 ECD teachers by 2027. During the election debate on 7 May, the EFF emphasised their committed to ensuring free education, which includes early education. They are also committed to ensuring that ECD centre teachers earn a minimum wage under an EFF government. Are these plans realistic? Be that as it may, the ECD sector needs bold, far-reaching interventions and it is our civic responsibility to ensure the EFF accounts for implementation of their promises to young children in South Africa; if or when they come into power.

It is concerning to note that ActionSA still refers to the Department of Social Development (DSD) in their plan to expand support for ECD centres. The responsibility for ECD centres moved from DSD to the Department of Basic Education in April 2022. Is ActionSA still not aware of this two years later? That being said, ActionSA recognises the arduous administrative burden placed on ECD operators to get their ECD centres registered so that they are able to access the ECD subsidy. Importantly, ActionSA plans to increase the budget allocation for ECD and increase funding for ECD centres, which will include funding for nutrition programmes and allocating more resources to ECD centres in indigent areas. Moreover, ActionSA plans on providing access to parental reading training initiatives to empower parents to help their children read for meaning. During the election debate, ActionSA's Western Cape Premier candidate, Angela Sobey, made mention of also

prioritising young children not enrolled in ECD centres and to support communities by implementing a comprehensive approach that deals with all socio-economic issues.

In their election manifesto RISE Mzansi plans to provide childcare and ECD facilities in every community. The plan involves investing in the training of ECD practitioners and childcare providers, and providing community facilities that will be kept open for 12 hours (6am to 6pm) to accommodate working parents. A tax rebate system will be implemented for single mothers and other guardians in similar circumstances, whose earnings fall below R500,000 a year. During the election debate, RISE Mzansi's representative, Dr Louise van Rhy, emphasised the importance of play-based learning for young children and asserted that the party plans to pay ECD teachers "properly", to increase the ECD subsidy to R50 per child per day and to ensure that ECD teachers are acknowledged and supported as leaders in their communities.

BOSA makes a commitment to equip social workers to work more closely with ECD centres to be able to identify home-based obstacles to children's learning and ensure that ECD centres are stimulating environments that encourage creativity and learning. During the election debate hosted by CECD, BOSA's leader Mmusi Maimane further committed to increasing funding for ECD centres and ensuring that the regulation of these centres does not overburden operators.

In their manifesto, the ANC guarantees universal access to high-quality ECD by 2030. During the election debate, the ANC's Cameron Dugmore said that the country does not "currently have high quality ECD" and that this has a lot to do with how government is supporting, training and paying ECD teachers. However, this, he said, will be improved when the Basic Education Laws Amendment Bill (BELA Bill) comes into effect which will make the reception year of primary schooling compulsory. He also asserted that funding is needed to pay practitioners and feed children and to ensure that local government provides services to ECD centres. He went on to say that in this financial year there is funding available to subsidise an additional 54,000 children in ECD centres, and an additional 120,000 children in 2025/2026. He also agreed that the subsidy amount must be increased.

When asked during the debate how the DA intends to guarantee universal access to ECD for all children, DA representative, Gillion Bosman, highlighted the need for the responsibility for ECD to cut across all levels of government and not to be relegated to a single department or unit in the Presidency. He asserted that support for ECD centres goes beyond funding and that it is also important to empower ECD practitioners as well as to create an enabling environment in which ECD centres can thrive. He further highlighted what the City of Cape Town is doing to waive or remove some of the penalties issued to non-compliant ECD centres while they are attempting to become compliant.

Social welfare

Most of the political parties plan to prioritise social welfare should they be elected into power. Five parties plan to increase social grants, including the child support grant. The PA states that “social grants are necessary for certain categories of people, particularly the disabled, the very poor and the elderly.” However, they go on to say that, “All other people should be prepared to work and the taking of social grants should be discouraged”. This approach highlights a unique perspective on the role of social assistance in alleviating poverty and supporting families.

The DA is the only party that recognises in their manifesto that the development of children *before* they are born is crucial. As such, the DA plans to increase the value of the child support grant and extend it to cover pregnant women, so that they are able to meet the nutritional needs of their unborn children. The DA should be commended on this! Similarly, during the election debate, DA representative Gillion Bosman, highlighted the party’s cradle to grave approach to children’s development and asserted that ECD is not a social development or education issue alone. He also emphasised that parents must be supported to provide for the social and educational needs of their children.

During the election debate, Mmusi Maimane of BOSA also mentioned focusing on the first thousand days of a child’s life by first increasing the “maternal grant”⁸ to ensure that successful development of young children is secured from before they are born.

There are plans by the IFP, FF Plus, ActionSA and PA to strengthen support for non-profit organisations and community-based organisations who look after the most vulnerable in society. The PA offers the most out-of-the-box social welfare strategy, which includes recognising the role of royal and traditional leaders by establishing a national department of royal and community affairs to fund the wealth of leadership and wisdom in local communities. We are unsure how this proposed department will differ from the current Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs.

When asked during the debate how the FF Plus intends to improve parental involvement in ECD, FF Plus representative Heloise Denner started off by saying that the BELA Bill does exactly the opposite of this, by taking away parents’ engagement and decision-making powers in education and relegating it to government. She asserted that to improve parental involvement in ECD one must first “say no to the BELA Bill” and secondly, support mother tongue education.

Dr Louise van Rhyn from RISE Mzansi asserted during the debate that everything RISE Mzansi does is “centred around young people and the fact that they are the future”. She went on to say that “the focus is on single

⁸ We note that a “maternal grant” does not currently exist in South Africa.

mothers and ensuring that they have the resources to support and look after their children, [and that RISE Mzansi will] focus on and deal with absent fathers and creating sufficient care and safety for the children in our communities". Similarly, ActionSA's manifesto commits to supporting the development of strong South African families by educating fathers on the important role they play in the family unit.

Food security and nutrition

Seven out of the 11 parties aim to address food security and nutrition in various ways. The ANC, DA, EFF and IFP manifestos all mention expanding the number of staple foods that are exempt from value added tax (VAT). The EFF, IFP and RISE Mzansi plan on giving discounts on food items and some kind of voucher to vulnerable households including those who receive social grants. The DA, ActionSA and BOSA aim to set up or work with organisations or programmes to increase access to nutritional food and reduce malnutrition and hunger. The ANC and RISE Mzansi manifestos also speak broadly about land reform and making land available for personal food production to enhance food security. These proposals highlight the recognition of food insecurity as a significant barrier to child well-being and development.

During the election debate, ActionSA's Angela Sobey highlighted the need to prioritise the first thousand days of a child's life and ensure that pregnant women receive sufficient nutrition so that children do not experience stunting as they grow up. She further stated that ECD centres need to be capacitated and resourced to ensure that children enrolled receive adequate nutrition.

The ACDP, FF Plus, MK Party and PA do not mention nutrition or food security as a main policy priority in their manifestos. The ACDP, PA and MK Party mention nutrition support under their early education priorities, while the FF Plus does not mention any kind of nutrition support.

Housing and inclusive spatial development

Five of the 11 parties are of the view that it is important to ensure decent and affordable housing for South African families, according to their manifestos. The PA and ACDP agree that informal settlements should be eradicated, however the PA takes it a step further by wanting to criminalise the erection of any further informal settlements. The EFF plans to provide "high-quality, spacious housing with a minimum of three bedrooms" to all citizens. Safely assuming this is free housing, it is much more generous when compared to the IFP's plan to increase the income threshold for access to subsidised housing from R0 – R3,500 per month, to R0 – R5,500 per month. Four of these five parties state that amenities such as water, electricity and sanitation are important components of decent and dignified housing.

Healthcare

Nine of the 11 political parties set out plans in their manifestos regarding the provision of healthcare services. A highly contested topic when talking about healthcare has been the National Health Insurance (NHI) Bill which aims to provide free quality healthcare services to all South Africans, effectively removing the need for private medical aid schemes. Since the release of election manifestos, President Cyril Ramaphosa has signed the NHI Bill into law despite the DA, FF Plus, ACDP and ActionSA committing to challenging its implementation in their manifestos. The DA's plan seems to be more focused on private healthcare rather than improving access to quality public healthcare, while the other parties seem to prioritise public healthcare services more. The PA is not opposed to developing a comprehensive state healthcare system, such as the NHI, but is of the view that the state must first prove it is able to use the resources already allocated to it before demanding more. Nevertheless, the PA is committed to raising the quality of public healthcare to a similar level as private healthcare by going into public-private partnerships.

The EFF has the most ambitious plan to achieve universal health coverage which includes constructing specialised hospitals, including paediatric facilities, to address specific disease categories. Their plan also includes giving attention to childhood developmental and cognitive health, screening for visual, hearing and mobility challenges in adults and children, and screening for food insecurity at health care facilities.

Safety and security

Three political parties' manifestos state plans to prioritise safety and security by strengthening the police service and expanding police visibility. ActionSA and the PA agree on the need for specialised services to deal with specific types of crime, including missing children, sexual offences, gangsterism and violent crime as well as dealing more harshly with violent crime. The PA, however, makes a radical proposal to bring back the death penalty for certain categories of offences including "murder, but particularly the murders of women by men, muti killings, the rape of children, murders committed in jail and acts of corruption that can be categorised as forms of high treason". The EFF plans to make counseling services available at police stations to assist women and children who have experienced abuse. During the election debate, EFF representative Zenande Dyantyi explained that the EFF also plans to have police on patrol in all densely populated areas to keep children safe from gender-based violence and child abductions.

In conclusion, as South Africa stands at a crossroads, the forthcoming elections offer an opportunity to shape the trajectory of the nation's future. An ECD crisis exists in South Africa. It must be understood that if our political leaders address the unequal access to quality ECD opportunities and systemic disadvantages faced by young children in South Africa, as a nation we will break cycles of poverty and foster a more equitable and just society. We cannot afford to neglect the well-being and development of the young children in our country anymore. To end, we offer the words of Lester Kiewit who facilitated the election debate: "elections are not about the present but about the future; you vote for your children."

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