



Building Tomorrow, Today

# Early Learning Resource Unit (ELRU)

## Company Profile 2022

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Quality Early Childhood Development (ECD) Programmes  
for vulnerable children in impoverished communities of South Africa



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## Introduction

### ELRU Vision

A good start in life for every child.

### ELRU Mission

Building tomorrow, today by facilitating better child outcomes for children in vulnerable communities through effective early intervention programmes.



### Organisation Overview

The Early Learning Resource Unit (ELRU) is a non-profit organisation (NPO 003-285) and registered Public Benefit Organisation (PBO 930010808), authorised to issue Section 18A tax certificates.

ELRU is governed by a board of trustees, namely Mr Richard Brown (Chairperson), Mrs Elizabeth Engelbrecht, Mr Kanu Sukha, Mrs Tarisai Mchuchu-MacMillan and Mr Faraaz Bray.

Our footprint is established across three South African Provinces, the Western Cape (includes the City of Cape Town, Cape Winelands and Saldanha Bay municipal districts) with two service points in the Northern Cape and six in the North West Province

### Current Beneficiary Reach

- 39 Pregnant women
- 618 Fieldworkers
- 2940 ECD Principals and practitioners
- 723 ECD Centres
- 32 415 Children (reached directly and indirectly)



### Our History

ELRU's roots stem back to 1972 when a team of individuals passionate about early childhood development started the Athlone Early Learning Centre in Kewtown. The area was one of the oldest sub-economic townships created under the Group Areas Act for coloured people in Cape Town, established as a result of forced removals and displacement of families from District Six.

The focus of this educational Centre was on children in economically marginalised townships, created because of separatist and racist policies. These policies, by their very nature, denied and thwarted the potential of the people living there.

The Athlone Early Learning Centre set out to expose young children to Programmes that would stimulate their cognitive ability and ease their transition to learning in formal school. At this time, the education department did not generally recognise that there was a correlation between the effects of poor environments on children's ability to benefit from formal schooling.

The Athlone Centre team was both innovative and pioneering, realising the need for a different community development approach. They developed one that was child-centred while being sensitive to context and culture (a departure from the traditional thinking in the education department at that time!). The Centre presented an exciting opportunity to explore how children learn and to support teachers to facilitate learning.

The community work organisation, known as BABS (Build a Better Society), worked alongside the Centre to strengthen family and community support for children, as well as providing leadership for realising the aspirations of local people.

The pioneering work of the Athlone Centre gained recognition throughout South Africa as an educational institution. Eventually, seven members broke away and the Early Learning Resource Unit (ELRU) was born in Lansdowne in 1978. The Programmes implemented at the Athlone Centre formed the basis of materials development and training programmes which ELRU later went on to further develop and disseminate countrywide and beyond. For over 43 years we have been a pioneer in early childhood development (ECD) through research, creating evidence and influencing the policy environment to ensure that children's rights to early education are realised.

## What We Do

The Early Learning Resource Unit (ELRU) specialises in providing quality early childhood development (ECD) opportunities to young children from conception to age six – the period during which brain growth is at its most rapid – reaching economically marginalised communities whose children face abject poverty and have limited or no access to essential services. ELRU aims to help young children reach their full potential by building tomorrow, today.

Early childhood development (ECD) is a comprehensive approach to programmes and policies for children from birth to six years of age. Its purpose is to protect the rights of children to develop their full cognitive, emotional, social and physical potential.



ELRU builds the capacity of the parents, caregivers and early learning practitioners around young children from the first 1000 days because we believe that the parent is the child's first teacher. By enhancing and safeguarding the caregiving capacity of adults, we ensure that **circles of support** surround the young child during each age and stage of their development. This means their primary needs are continuously met and ensures optimal social, physical, emotional and cognitive development by the time the child reaches grade R at age six.

## How We Do It

ELRU trains, mentors, coaches and supports pregnant women, primary caregivers and ECD practitioners to enhance parenting skills and knowledge, while improving early learning that impacts the child's home environment and quality of early education. Another key objective of ELRU Programmes is to facilitate access to integrated ECD services deemed essential for pregnant women and young children. These comprise primary maternal and child health, nutritional support, early stimulation, social services and support for the primary caregiver — known as the 'Essential Package'.

We aim to create safe environments for young children where they are well cared for and loved, and where they don't just survive but thrive. This requires a collective effort of working together that results in better child outcomes and improved preparedness for entry into Grade R. Our holistic models of intervention are cemented through strong partnerships and collaboration with government departments, service providers and municipalities.

ELRU's goal is to capacitate the primary caregiver to ensure that all children living in poor communities, age 0–6, have access to quality ECD services through one of the following Programmes:

- Home-visiting Family and Community Motivator Programme covering the first 1000 days (conception to age 2);
- Playgroups Programme is a non-Centre based and aimed at children ages 3–5;
- Whole Centre Development Programme for ECD Centres (ages 0–6);
- Training and capacity building across all Programmes.

## ELRU Programmes



### Family and Community Motivator (FCM) Programme

The home visiting Programme is aimed at the first 1000 days of life (conception to 2 years) when the foundations of all learning take place and the home is the key enabling environment. The goal is to nurture the primary caregiver's well-being and children's early development through good nutrition, maternal and child health care, opportunities to play and learn, as well as facilitating access to social protection services.

The pregnant mother or primary caregiver is mentored and equipped with tools and skills that will promote healthy growth and encourage the young children in their care to flourish. Where necessary, referrals are made to relevant service providers, for example, government social grants, prenatal care, medically-aided birth, identity documents and birth certification.

Caregiver workshops are held monthly in the community. Caregivers who are not registered in the Programme are also invited to attend. These workshops raise awareness about relevant topics and provide peer support for all caregivers.

#### FCM Programme

Children reached:	690
Pregnant women:	39
Caregivers reached:	730
Community jobs created:	42



For young children, outcomes of the home visiting Family and Community Motivator Programme include healthy cognitive, emotional, social development and executive functioning. For primary caregivers (especially vulnerable mothers and fathers), their level of confidence, knowledge and skills are strengthened by building their capacity to parent positively and fulfil their children’s immediate needs.



## Playgroup Programme

Structured learning and play are brought into the communities of vulnerable children (age 3–5 years) whose families do not have access to- or cannot afford to send their child to a formal ECD Centre. The Programme contributes to employment creation, training previously unemployed or partially-employed mothers and caregivers as facilitators who operate the Playgroup from their homes.

The Playgroup curriculum is dynamic with age- and developmentally appropriate group activities that support social awareness and empathy in a creative and enriching environment. The Playgroups curriculum is implemented through the SmartStart franchise model.

**Playgroup Programme**

Children reached:	3816
Community jobs created:	576



## Whole Centre Development Programme

ELRU has developed the Whole Centre Development (WCD) approach that conceptualises an ECD Centre (which refers to a crèche, day-care facility or playschool) as a collection of equally important factors. For instance, although the classroom may operate well, if the Centre’s governance or infrastructure is weak, the environment is compromised. ELRU’s Whole Centre Development Programme delivers quality early learning Programmes and holistic support that transforms the ECD environment into a space conducive to optimal learning.

This is accomplished through practitioner skills training, mentoring, leadership development and capacity building.

**Whole Centre Development Programme**

Children reached:	32 415
ECD Practitioners reached:	2940
ECD Centres reached:	723



The following are key areas that require support for the many challenges faced by ECD Centres:

- **ECD Centre development:** Centre Development Facilitators are stationed in targeted communities to train, mentor and provide on-site support aimed at improving the standard of education and care at the Centre in an ideal learning environment;
- **Training for Principals and Practitioners:** The skills and capacity building of ECD Principals and practitioners are enhanced to strengthen business skills, financial management skills and governance;
- **Infrastructure support:** ELRU provides support for infrastructure and resourcing needs;
- **ECD Centre registration:** ELRU is a Service Provider Organisation appointed by the Western Cape Department of Social Development to facilitate with the registration of partial care facilities to ensure all the requirements are met.



## Training

Training programmes, learning models and the creation of materials are integrated into all ELRU Programmes. They are tailored to target and strengthen specific skills that lead to the capacitation and delivery of quality-driven ECD that simultaneously supports clear career pathing. ELRU's training and implementation resources form the basis for supporting the consistent quality of ECD services and programming. This is an organically developed and evolving Programme.



## Online ECD Academy

ELRU is establishing a Learner Management System (LMS) and online academy with a complete career pathing offering for ECD Practitioners, Principals and aspiring teachers through a blended-learning approach. ELRU's ECD Academy will ensure the necessary skills and qualifications are provided in a sector where formal education is very low.

ELRU has always been an organisation focused on capacitating and upskilling the ECD workforce in South Africa. The Learner Management System will be an additional extension or added strategic offering blending across our existing programmatic interventions. We anticipate this to become a viable revenue stream for ELRU.

## Research, Systems, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

ELRU's work is shaped by ongoing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of not only the progress and development of its models but its impact on the holistic growth of young children in our Programmes.

With monitoring and evaluation embedded in our Programmes, we are provided with a wealth of information and evidence to support implementation. Knowledge and understanding are gathered from the ground up, while quantitative and qualitative data indicate the effectiveness of the systems and M&E currently in place.

## The Context in which we Work

In South Africa, six out of ten children are born into poverty with the zero to five age cohorts being most widely affected. Despite acknowledging the urgency, there is a major gap in service delivery, a lack of quality and limited access to healthcare services. Undernourished, vulnerable infants and young children are especially at risk.

Poverty is also associated with poor maternal education, toxic maternal stress, depression, and inadequate stimulation in the home. Each one of these factors has a detrimental impact on a child's physical, psychosocial and cognitive development.

In 2019, 2.5 million young children lived in households with insufficient money to cover even basic nutritional needs, increasing the risk of malnutrition and stunting in children. 14.5% of infants are born with low birth weight (under 2500g), caused by various factors including poor maternal nutrition, smoking and alcohol consumption during pregnancy and environmental factors.

The 2020 South African Child Gauge<sup>1</sup> reports that 27% of children are stunted (too short for their age), and this figure has remained at around the same level for the last 20 years. Already in 1999, the South African National Food Consumption Survey (NFCS) revealed that stunting was a problem, affecting 25% of our children ages 1-3 years<sup>2</sup>. Only 64% of vulnerable children under one year receive a Child Support Grant. Stunted growth and undernourishment immediately put the health of young children at risk, compromising immunity to illness and causing developmental delays which affect cognitive outcomes, with negative effects in later life.

The National Integrated ECD Policy (2015) recognises that young children have a range of interdependent needs that require the involvement of multiple role players in service delivery if those needs are to be met<sup>3</sup>. Reports from the 2019 SA Early Childhood Review have shown that of all five components of the Essential Package, the most significant gains have been through the health sector, which has most positively impacted caregivers and children in the poorest households. But, while this has meant that more children are surviving, they are still not thriving. Some services have made little or no progress over the past few years, particularly nutrition, early learning and caregiver support.

One of the biggest challenges in early childhood development has been to increase access to early childhood development programmes and improve the quality hereof. Three million (46%) children under six years live in rural areas and these children are the most vulnerable. Accessing early learning opportunities and ECD service delivery are a challenge due to lower population densities in remote areas, while young children (and their caregivers) may have far to travel to health services, register births and reach other essential services.



The 2019 South African Early Childhood Review<sup>4</sup> shows that 63% of children under age six did not attend an Educare, crèche, ECD Centre or nursery school, but remained at home with a parent, caregiver or day mother. 79% of children ages 0-2 do not have access to an early learning Programme and for these children who stay at home, research shows worryingly low levels of child stimulation with only a reported 53% of parents or caregivers reading books with children, 57% colouring or drawing with them, and 65% reported storytelling.

But for both rural and city-dwelling children alike, young children growing up in poor households risk exclusion from ECD services as these households are less likely to afford transport to and from clinics and other government offices or to be able to pay fees for ECD Centres or crèches.

The abovementioned statistics have been further exacerbated since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> May J, Witten C & Lake L (eds) (2020) *South African Child Gauge 2020*. Cape Town: Children's Institute, University of Cape Town.

<sup>2</sup> <https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/xmlui/handle/10413/4015>

<sup>3</sup> The Departments of Social Development, Health and Basic Education are three key sectors responsible for delivering essential ECD services to young children. Other important departments include Home Affairs, the South African Police Services and Justice, and local government.

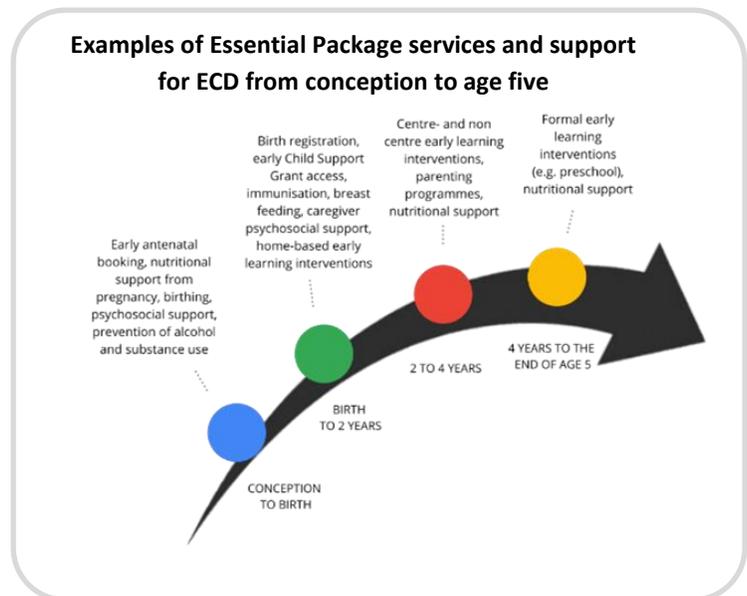
<sup>4</sup> Hall K, Sambu W, Almeleh C, Mabaso K, Giese S and Proudlock P (2019) *South African Early Childhood Review 2019*. Cape Town: Children's Institute, University of Cape Town and Ilifa Labantwana

## The Solution

Children have a higher chance of reaching their full potential if they receive love, food and nurturing care – basic human needs– from the time they are in the womb.

Coupled with services that provide access to nutrition, health care, social security, early learning and positive parenting, these elements are critical for optimal growth, wellbeing and healthy development in young children. Combined, they make up what is referred to as the ‘essential package’ of services for ECD.

ELRU facilitates access to essential services, each of which provides comprehensive ECD support that aligns with each age and developmental stage. They are delivered across all ELRU programmes and interventions, either directly or through referrals (where necessary).



## Conclusion

It has been argued that investment in early childhood development is one of the most effective long-term strategies to alleviate poverty and achieve social and economic equality in South Africa. Research<sup>5</sup> from world-renowned economist and Nobel Prize laureate Professor James Heckman has shown that investing in high-quality birth-to-five Programmes for children can deliver a 13% per year return on investment. His research analyzes a wide variety of life outcomes, such as health, crime, income, IQ, schooling, and the increase in a mother’s income after returning to work due to childcare, and shows that children who are exposed to quality early childhood development programmes are more likely to complete formal schooling and become gainfully employed in their adult years.

Through ELRU’s interventions, we aim to create a safe environment for children where they are loved, have access to quality early childhood development (ECD) programmes and where children don’t just survive but thrive.

At the heart of our strategy, ELRU remains committed to addressing the greatest challenges facing early childhood development: *access to quality* ECD services for all vulnerable children.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. James Heckman, “Heckman Equation” García, Jorge Luis, James J. Heckman, Duncan Ermini Leaf, and María José Prados. “The Life-cycle Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program.” (2016)

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