MAY 6–8, 2026

INVESTING IN THE EARLY YEARS

A Global Technical Financing Forum

KIGALI, RWANDA

TRACK 3: SYSTEM INTEGRATION
May 7, 2026

In support of Act For Early Years

Republic of Rwanda | ECDAN Early Childhood Development Action Network | AfECN Africa Early Childhood Network | unesco | unicef | World Health Organization | NCDA National Child Development Agency

Dialogue 3: How can we strengthen the financing architecture for young children?

Moving from funding to financing.

Dialogue 3 Track 3: System Integration (Gasabo 1st floor)

- **Focus:** How can public-private partnerships be leveraged for long-term sustainability?
  - How do we ensure catalytic and private finance complement, rather than replace, public responsibility for services for young children?
  - What guardrails are needed to prevent exclusion, quality erosion, and unsustainable financing obligations?
  - How can financing pilots or blended models be absorbed into national budgets, transfer systems, or longer-term public financing pathways?
- **Chair:** Anastacia Ngunjiri, Associate, iGravity
- **Framing:** Ivelina Borisova, Senior Early Childhood Expert, UNICEF
- **Discussants:**
  - Carien Vorster, Director Global Partnerships & Advocacy, Federer Foundation
  - Shoeshoe Mofokeng, Executive Director, Network of Early Childhood Development of Lesotho (NECDOL)
  - Sheunesu Tawanda Mutsau, Representative, Chief Accountant, Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Zimbabwe
  - Pacifique Kwizera Irumva, Director Kumwe Hub, Part of Save The Children International
- **Rapporteur:** Michael Kiema, Senior Associate Consultant, iGravity

Agenda

- Session framing
- Panel discussion
- Group discussions
- Rapporteur recap
- Closing remarks

Ivelina Borisova

Senior Early Childhood Expert, UNICEF

The Moment We Are In and Why System Integration is the Key Question

$21B
annual financing gap for pre-primary in LMICs

0.4%
median govt spend on pre-primary as % of GDP

10%
of GDP — cost of not investing in ECD

$1.57T
global capital seeking impact invest. +21% p.a.

The Risk

Financing pilots set up **outside** public systems — catalytic capital, blended finance, impact bonds — can fragment rather than strengthen the ecosystem without deliberate integration.

If pilots remain parallel structures, they become permanent substitutes — not pathways — to durable public funding.

The Opportunity

Pilots designed for **integration from the start** — with defined absorption pathways, guardrails, and transition plans — can catalyze systemic change and strengthen public financing over time.

The question is not whether to innovate, but how to ensure innovation flows back into the public system.

What This Session Must Answer

01

Complement vs. Replace

How do we ensure catalytic , innovative and private finance complement /catalyze/mobilize—rather than replace—public funding and responsibility for early childhood services?

02

Guardrails Against Harm

What guardrails prevent exclusion of marginalized children, quality erosion, and unsustainable financing obligations on governments?

03

Absorption into Public Systems

How can innovative financing pilots or blended models be absorbed into national budgets, transfer systems, or longer-term public financing pathways?

These questions are sequential: you cannot absorb what lacks guardrails, and guardrails are meaningless if the design is substitutive.

Opportunity and Caution — Held Together

The evidence doesn't tell a simple story. Both sides are real.

When it works: what IF genuinely adds

Fills specific proof-of-concept gaps

Catalytic grants, outcome-based models, etc. test service models govts cannot yet afford to scale — generating evidence needed to unlock public budgets.

Builds the missing infrastructure

Non-state providers, workforce systems, data infrastructure — all strengthening, not replacing, public delivery.

Draws in capital govts can't access

Guarantees, impact bonds, co-investment platforms mobilise financing outside domestic budgets or ODA.

Signals what government should fund next

A well-designed pilot generates costs and accountability structures that make the case for domestic public investment.

When it distorts: the risks we cannot ignore

Parallel structures that never integrate

Pilots outside public systems become permanent substitutes — comfortable for funders, corrosive to state capacity.

Equity drift as models scale

IF instruments default toward the 'bankable' — better-off communities, more measurable outcomes, less complex populations.

Unsustainable fiscal obligations

Govts left holding costs of a model they didn't design for children whose expectations were raised — when the funder exits.

Quality erosion under private delivery

Without minimum standards in regulation — not provider goodwill — quality declines as providers cut costs or cherry-pick.

A Three-Stage Integration Pathway

The pilot is the argument for public investment — not a permanent parallel track

1

Design for Integration

- Define public responsibility boundaries upfront
- Set non-negotiables: equity, quality, access
- Identify target absorption pathway before piloting

2

Build Guardrails from Day 1

- Equity screens: equivalent access for the poorest quintile is non-negotiable
- Anti-exclusion standards & monitoring
- Quality floors that private providers must meet
- Exit clauses & Government retains stewardship, standard-setting, and fiscal ownership

3

Activate Absorption

- Budget absorption triggers (coverage, proof-of-concept)
- Timeline not open-ended: partners commit to progressive handover
- Transfer financing into national systems progressively
- Fiscal pathway: how does this become a budget line? Which transfer mechanism?

Each stage is a prerequisite — pilots that skip to absorption without integration risk institutionalising fragmentation.

A note on accountability

Accountability That Holds

Who holds actors accountable when models drift?

- Define public responsibility upfront; Government sets the terms; civil society and communities have standing to challenge
- Who defines outcomes? Who verifies them? Who can say 'this isn't working'?
- Local organizations need data, resources to perform this role
- Funders and implementors cannot be judge and jury on their own performance

What Does Country Readiness for Innovative Finance Look Like?

1	**Policy & Mandate Clarity**	Defined public service standards for ECD exist	Legal basis for non-state provider contracting	Sector strategy with financing gap analysis
2	**Service Package & Costing**	Services are specified (what, for whom, where)	Unit costs are estimated and validated	Differentiation between publicly/privately financeable
3	**Trust Infrastructure**	Provider registry and licensing system in place	Data collection on service delivery outcomes	Payment rails and accountability mechanisms
4	**Institutional Capacity**	Ministry can contract, monitor, and pay providers	Grievance mechanisms protect communities	Technical capacity for results measurement
5	**Absorption Pathway**	Pilot has defined trigger for national budget absorption	Intergovernmental fiscal transfer mechanisms exist	Political commitment to fiscal integration over time

KEY PRINCIPLE

Not All Services. Not All Contexts. The Match Matters.

Services suited to IF

- Parenting support
- Community ECD centres
- Digital early learning
- ECD materials & nutrition
- Workforce training

Services that must stay public

- Universal health & nutrition
- Child protection services
- Core public pre-primary
- Inclusive ECD services
- Humanitarian ECD

Conditions that enable IF

- Costed service packages
- Results data systems
- Gov't contracting capacity
- Regulatory frameworks
- Political will for absorption

Conditions that disqualify IF

- No public system to absorb into
- No quality enforcement
- Populations too marginalised
- Instrument-driven design
- No transition plan

The critical question is not 'can we use innovative finance?' but 'is this the right instrument for this service, in this context, with a clear path back to public financing?'

Three Questions for This Session

A — Complementarity

When has catalytic finance strengthened a public ECD systems?

What does genuine complementarity and leveraging look like in practice, from each actor's perspective?

B — Guardrails

Who is responsible for catching drift — when costs rise, quality drops, or vulnerable communities get left out?

Does that accountability exist in practice? Do local organizations have the data and standing to perform it?

C — Pilot to System

Is full government absorption always the right goal? Is there a legitimate long-term role for private actors in ECD?

What was the 'X factor' when a pilot successfully transitioned into a national budget? What gets in the way?

Carien Vorster

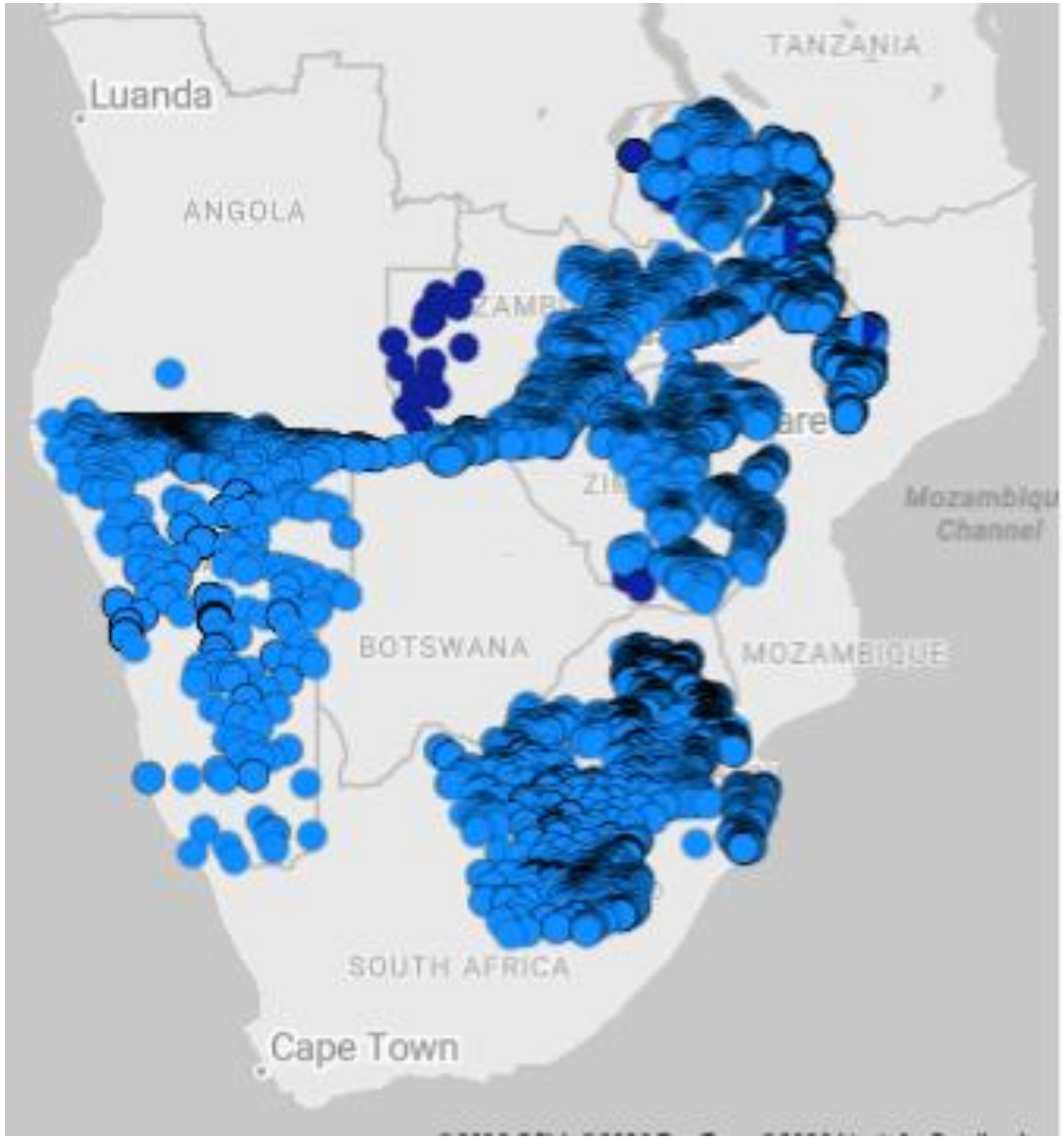
Director Global Partnerships & Advocacy, Federer Foundation

School Readiness Initiative, 2019 – 2026

SDG 4.2 One year of quality pre-primary before Grade 1

- Free, offline digital resources
- Self-guided course on early learning
- Curriculum-aligned child tracking tool
- Stakeholder mobilization
- Play-based learning & playgrounds
- Some construction and IGAs

Malawi	Zambia
Zimbabwe	Namibia
South Africa	Lesotho



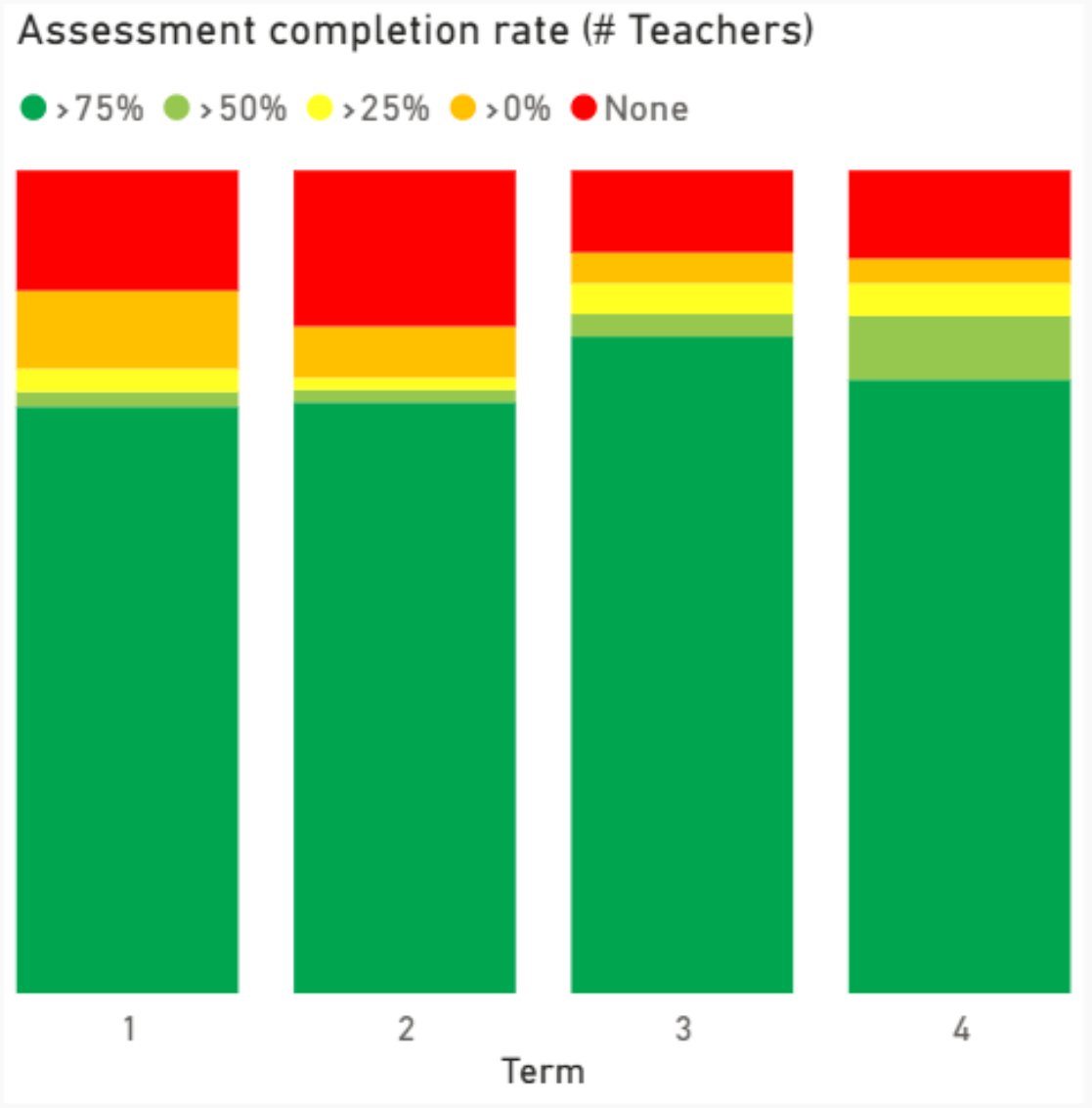
Systemic Integration

Catalytic funding for innovation:

- Devices + free digital tools
- Rural reach, self-guided
- Real-time central data

Systemic integration

- Policy & curriculum aligned
- MVP devices, size, connectivity
- Audio-visual, self-guided and peer learning
- Data systems: Indicators, unique identifiers
- Communities: Not with Government



Funding Partnerships & Results-based Financing

- Sustainability depends on system integration.
- System integration depends on scale.
- Fragmentation of funding and programmes work against scale.
- We should fund what works: Evidence-based approaches, results-based financing

Federer Foundation new strategy to 2030:

- Support Government plans in a catalytic way
- Work in partnership with other donors: co-funding and pooled funding
- Combine the best of different programmes, aim for holistic interventions

  → GPE Compact-based Multiplier
- Fund innovation and evidence-based interventions: RBF

Sheunesu Tawanda Mutsau

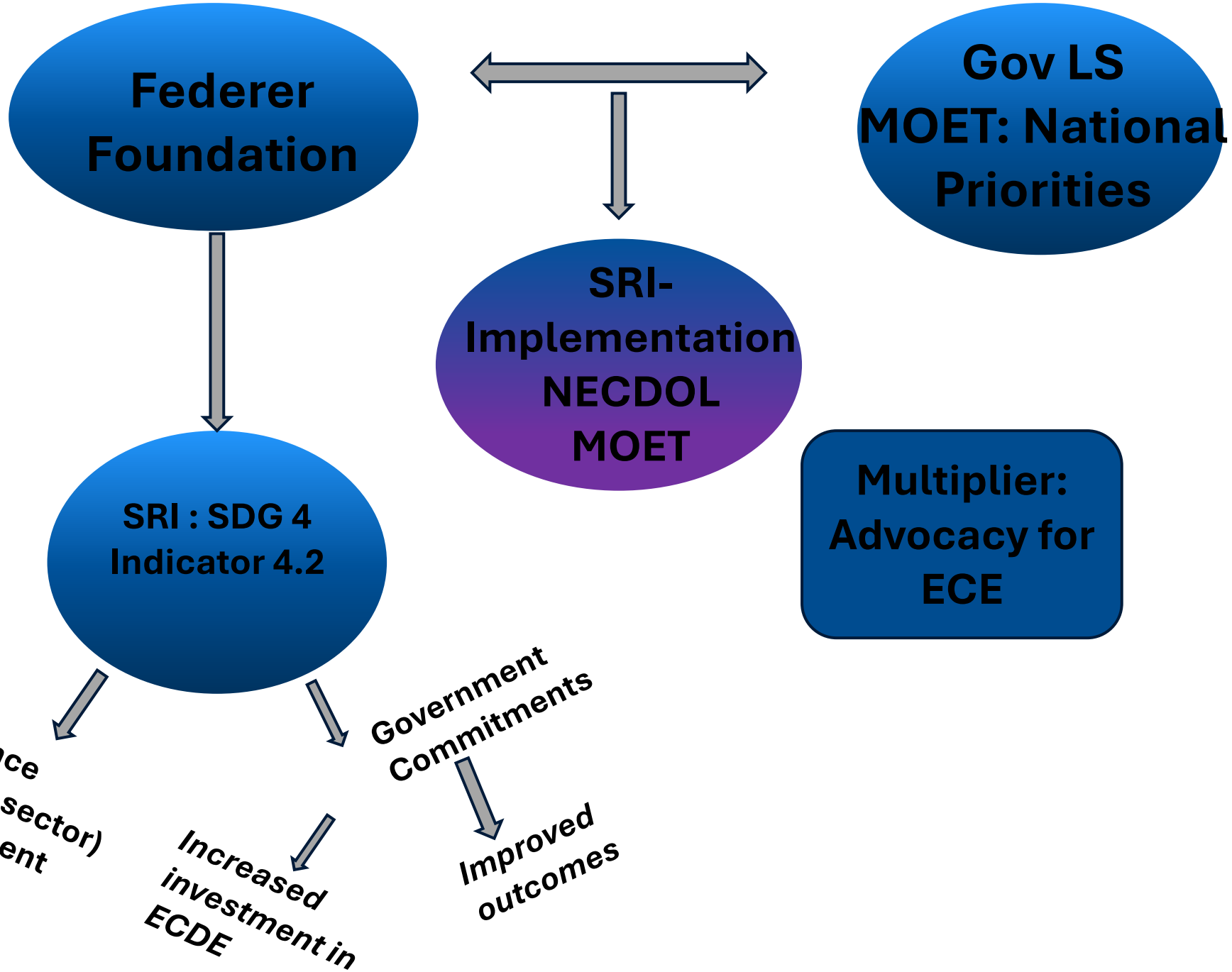
Chief Accountant,
Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education,
Zimbabwe

Pacifique Kwizera Irumva

Director Kumwe Hub, Part of Save The Children International

Shoeshoe Mofokeng

Executive Director, Network of Early Childhood Development of Lesotho (NECDOL)



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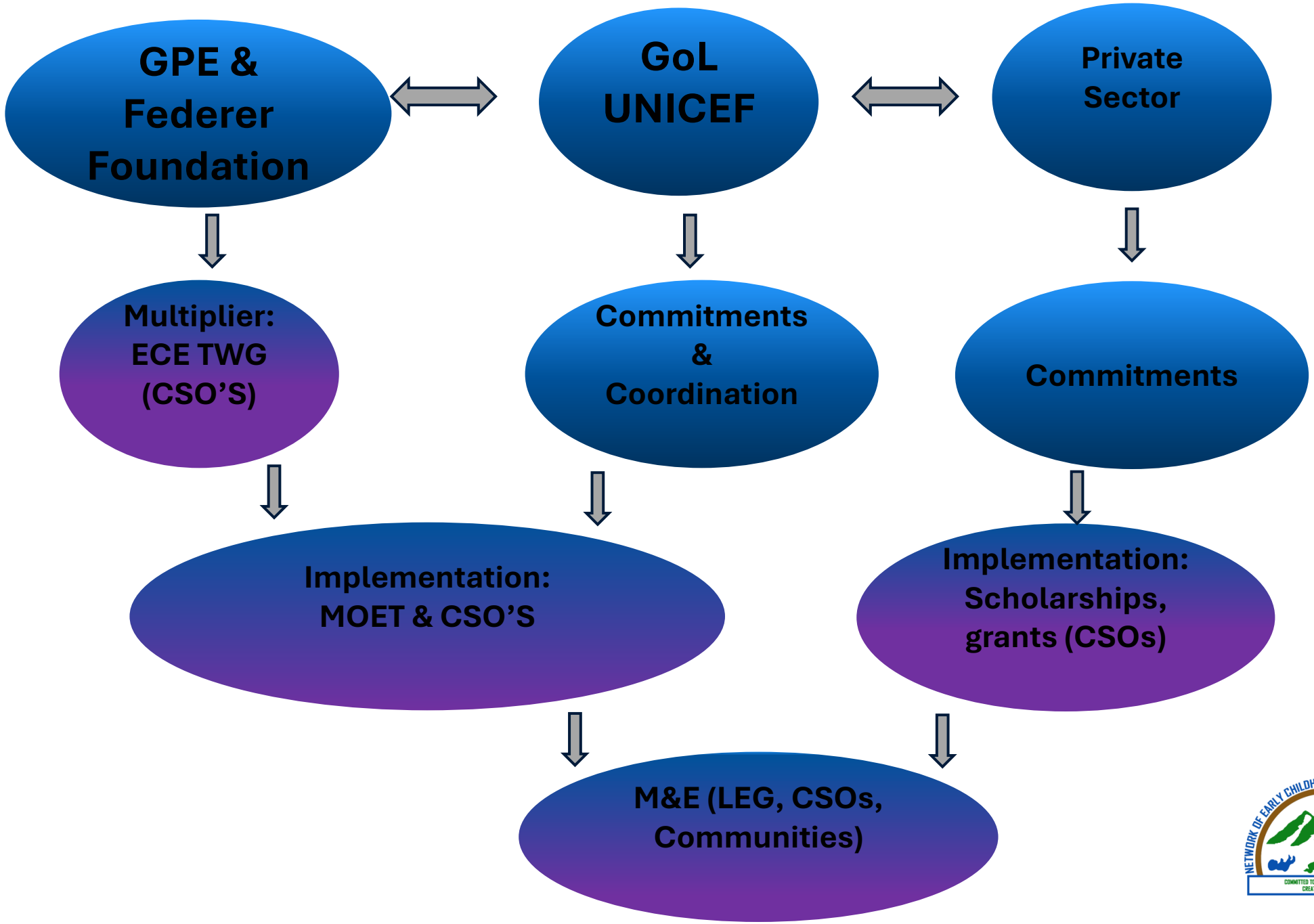
GPE & Federer Foundation
GoL UNICEF
Private Sector
Multiplier: ECE TWG (CSO'S)
Commitments & Coordination
Commitments
Implementation: MOET & CSO'S
Implementation: Scholarships, grants (CSOs)
M&E (LEG, CSOs, Communities)

Group 1 – Financing & Philanthropy Perspective

Facilitators:

- Carien Vorster + Pacifique

Guiding Questions:

- How can financing models be structured from with a realistic pathway toward government ownership or sustainability from the beginning?
- What operational realities are most underestimated when transitioning from pilot to public system?
- What does a responsible exit or handover strategy actually look like in practice?

Group 2: Government and Public Systems Lens

Facilitator

- Sheunesu Mutsau

Guiding Questions

- What makes governments trust that a financing model is genuinely aligned with public priorities?
- What are the most common reasons governments do NOT absorb pilots, even when results appear strong?

Group 3: Accountability and Equity Lens

Facilitators

Shoeshoe + Ivelina

Guiding Questions

- Who should hold financing and implementation actors accountable when models drift from their original intent?
- What safeguards are most critical to prevent exclusion, quality erosion, or unsustainable obligations?

Michael Kiema

Senior Associate
Consultant, iGravity

What The Session Aimed to Answer

01

Complement vs. Replace

How do we ensure catalytic, innovative, and private finance complement /catalyze/mobilize (rather than replace) public funding and responsibility for early childhood services?

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These questions are sequential: you cannot absorb what lacks guardrails, and guardrails are meaningless if the design is substitutive from the start.

From isolated pilot to embedded public system

Automatic scale-up and institutionalization cannot be assumed — they require deliberate, sustained effort.

1 Design for Integration

- Define public responsibility upfront – government role in pilots
- Set delivery non-negotiables: equity, quality, access
- Identify absorption pathway before piloting – at onset
- Align with national policy & sector strategy – identify/ create champions

2 Build Guardrails from Day 1

- Equity screens: access for poorest quintile – avoid cream skimming
- Quality thresholds private providers must meet
- Clear anti-exclusion monitoring & grievance mechanisms
- Government retains stewardship & fiscal ownership

3 Activate Absorption

- Budget absorption triggers/ milestones: coverage + proof-of-concept
- Time-bound handover — partners commit to exit
- Transfer financing into national systems progressively
- Identify fiscal pathway: which transfer mechanism?

Where possible, always leverage existing delivery/ policy frameworks

What the session surfaced

Insight 1 — Complementarity

Sustainability requires system integration — and integration requires scale.

- Fragmented funding and programmes work against scale. Catalytic finance must support government plans and align to curriculum, data, and policy frameworks, not run parallel to them.
- The question is not whether to innovate, but how to ensure financial innovation flows back into the public system. Pilots are the argument for public investment — not a permanent federal track.
- Government has vetting steps before integration. Models must align with national priorities, respond to local fiscal/capacity realities, be affordable, proven at scale, and politically navigable.
- Strict qualifications can exclude local implementors. Readiness grants to help ECD centres get registered are needed, the goal is to strengthen local capacity, not gate it.

Insight 2 — Guardrails and accountability

Civil society is the connective tissue — but only when it has standing, data, and resources.

- CSOs bridge government and private sector. NECDOL mobilised 3.5 million in local private sector commitments (Vodacom) to unlock the GPE Multiplier grant, demonstrating the catalytic role of civil society advocacy.
- CSOs support fundraising, implementation (equitable resource distribution), and accountability, ensuring government spends ECD funding on ECD, and does not redirect to other sectors.
- Guardrails require ensuring policies align with local needs. Government must be consulted at every training and implementation stage so it can take over when the CSO moves on.
- Private sector comes to alleviate government burden — reaching populations excluded from existing public systems. Not everything must scale via government, but it must operate within government frameworks.
- Funders and implementors cannot be judge and jury on their own performance. Local organisations need data access and standing to hold the system accountable.

What the session surfaced

Insight 3 — From pilot to public system

The capital ladder works, but government must be co-designing from Stage 1, not just approving at the closing.

- Catalytic → recoverable grants → concessional loans → external capital. Each stage de-risks the next. E.g., A clinic supported now serves 10,000 patients/month while making monthly repayment, demonstrating sustainability (Kumwe Hub).
- RFF/GPE Multiplier: pooled co-financing with government compact commitments (skin in the game) is the most credible absorption path. Three of six RFF countries have now activated a Multiplier.
- Zimbabwe: partners must avoid parallel systems.

Interventions must respond to existing problems, tailored to fiscal and capacity realities.

Unresolved tension — Bringing government in at the onset

How do we bring government to the table before the model is built — not just for approval at the end?

- Private investors are often averse to government delivery frameworks — procurement cycles, pay scales, reporting — making early government co-design structurally difficult.
- Without government at Stage 1, absorption at Stage 3 risks becoming a negotiation. Data integrity and privacy (who owns what?) remain unresolved when government enters late.
- Open question: is full government absorption always the right goal, or is there a legitimate long-term role for private actors within government frameworks as public capacity expands?
- Open question: conversation oscillated between integration of financing vs other programmatic components. How do draw attention to emerging financing modalities and their role in public systems?
- Does everything have to scale through government?

What the session surfaced

Cross-cutting need — Central agencies to guide engagement

- **Government needs a dedicated coordination function to guide, vet, and integrate partnerships — not leave it to individual ministries.**
- Zimbabwe: vetting before integration is a crucial step — alignment with national priorities, affordability, systems strengthening, and proven impact must be assessed centrally.
- Without a central anchor — an inter-ministerial body or national ECD unit — partners engage fragmented ministries, creating duplication and missed absorption opportunities.
- Central agencies must manage data integrity, privacy, and standards — ensuring tools align with national curriculum and systems rather than creating parallel infrastructure.

What the session surfaced (additional)

RFF (Philanthropy)

GPE experience

- Catalytic funding for innovation (digitizing education systems). Integration approach: ensuring policy and curriculum alignment (tool digitized existing curriculum and tests); devices fit the context (build MVP devices, provide offline/ online access), ensure easy of use (teachers can adapt tool standalone), data systems (government appetite high to get data on schools – the app filled this role as well; alignment with existing data systems for tools to be practical rather than create parallel systems), cultural fit (communities role in development)
- Some components will never integrate with the system
- Sustainability depends on system integration; scale drives integration (too small or niche innovations are less likely to scale)

Government should be engaged throughout not approval only and project closing

Zimbabwe (Government)

Government have steps for vetting before integration (crucial step)

- Alignment with national priorities
- Model needs to informed by local context – interventions should not seek problems but designed/ respond to existing problems allowing it to tailor to fiscal/ capacity realities,
- Affordability
- Systems strengthening (e.g., multiplier grant that provides support while requiring government investment – skin in the game)
- Proven impact and scalability
- Political considerations – need to be able to navigate political contexts
- Strict qualifications contribute to exclusion and can limit access to services. Effort should be made to strengthen local capacity rather than exclude implementors (e.g., readiness grants to support ECD centers get registered)
- Need to avoid parallel systems – partners should

Most interventions do not have government input at the beginning. Most partners do not want to government led (leading to parallel delivery approaches e.g., curriculum + straining systems further and compromising quality); cream skimming
How can we bring gov to the table at the onset?

Need to think of ourselves (philanthropy/ implementors/ NGOs) as partners working with government and coordinate efforts and go as one rather than fragmented engagement

BRAC example: adoption does not happen over time examples of cases taking 5 – 10 years for government adoption
Depends on the context and we cannot force solutions

Emerging concerns: e.g., Government role in accessing/ owning infrastructure e.g., how to ensure partners observe data privacy and who owns the data (what happens if it turned off?)

What the session surfaced (additional)

Kumwe (private sector)

What level of the delivery pyramid are we intervening e.g., are we supporting the most vulnerable populations at the base (e.g., refugee communities)?

- Private sector comes to alleviate burden from government e.g., reaching populations excluded from existing gov systems (expanding access)
  - E.g., support low-cost health care centers via nurse prenuers - bring healthcare closer to populatoins and reduce burden on public infrastructure especially in areas where there is large strain on government
  - Not everything has to scale via public systems. Certain gaps can be filled via private partners but within government frameworks, especially as government expands its capacity over time.

Does every solution have to scale via government
- The type of research/ innovations is important e.g., co-creation approaches are more suited to adoption compared to top-down solutions – requesting scale at the end does not work

Role of centralized agencies to guide overall strategy and partnerships

BRAC example: adoption does not happen over time examples of cases taking 5 – 10 years for government adoption
Depends on the context and we cannot force solutions

NECDOL (CSOs)

Role as advocacy agent (Early learning kiosks – child steps)

- Bridge between government and private sector including commitments from local private sector (Vodacom) raised 3.5 million to unlock the multipler grant
- CSOs support fundraising (advocacy) and implementation (equitable distribution of resources)
- Accountability role to ensure government spends funding in ECD and does not re-direct resources to other sectors
- Guardrails: ensure policies align with local needs (advocacy),
- Sustainability: always part of government implementation supporting with technical support, highlighting key areas of need

What the session surfaced (additional)

Designing for adoption

Pilots designed outside public systems risk becoming permanent substitutes, not pathways. Integration must be the condition of entry, not an afterthought.

Private investors vs. Government tension

Government:
Private investors: often averse to government delivery frameworks (procurement rules, pay scales, reporting cycles) creating structural barriers to absorption that goodwill by itself cannot resolve.

Role of community and CSOs

Without civil society and community standing to challenge drift, funders and implementors risk being judge and jury on their own performance.

Thank you

Together, we can unlock financing that will translate evidence into budgets and budgets into services for young children and their families!