

RAISING A CITY

HOW ADDIS ABABA REIMAGINED EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

“My hope is for Addis to be the best city in Africa to raise a child and to be a mother.”

Adanech Abiebie, Mayor of Addis Ababa

Since 2019, Addis Ababa has been in a period of rapid transformation to ensure all young children and families, particularly the most vulnerable, are able to thrive. Sparked by learning exchanges in Denmark and Brazil, senior city officials took inspiration on how early childhood development (ECD) investments (focused on the period from birth to age 8) can have multiplier effects in helping a city achieve multiple goals—from improving children’s development trajectory to reducing poverty, advancing women’s economic empowerment, addressing climate change, and more.

Over this seven-year journey, Addis Ababa has been working to reach 330,000 vulnerable households and 1.3 million children with multiple types of ECD support. Through the city’s investments, more than 5,000 new jobs have been created for women serving as parental coaches who conduct home visits to vulnerable households. In addition, over 18,000 teachers have been trained to lead pre-primary classrooms using play-based pedagogy, 3,734 day care workers have been trained to lead and integrate play-based approaches in day care centers, and the city has expanded green spaces where children and communities can play, connect, and build social cohesion.

Addis Ababa’s ECD investments span health, nutrition, and responsive caregiving during the first 1,000 days of a child’s life: quality play-based pre-primary education for children 4-6 years, child care services to enable mothers to enter the workforce, and safe, green spaces for all children and families to play and build community.

The purpose of the case study is to tell this story. It documents Addis Ababa’s journey of investing in ECD and shares learnings with policymakers and others on the challenges, key elements of success, and recommendations. It demonstrates how high-level political commitment can unlock transformative outcomes for children and families. Ultimately, this case study is intended to inform and inspire policymakers to invest in ECD initiatives in their own cities, regions, or countries.

CONTEXT OF ETHIOPIA AND ADDIS ABABA

Ethiopia is one of the fastest-growing countries in Africa, with a population of approximately 114 million—projected to reach 137 million by 2037.¹ In Addis Ababa, young children constitute a significant share of the population: there are over 1.3 million children under age 6, representing about 20% of the city's total population.² At the same time, Ethiopia continues to face significant human development challenges. In the 2024 UNDP Human Development Report, the country ranked 175 out of 193 countries on the Human Development Index.³ In 2019, 36% of Ethiopian children under 18 were living in poverty.⁴

Child health and nutrition indicators further highlight persistent vulnerabilities. A government-conducted 2024-2025 demographic and health survey found that across the country, 40% of children under age 5 were stunted, and 12% were severely stunted.⁵ While outcomes in Addis Ababa were comparatively better, stunting still affected 14% of children under 5 in the capital.⁶ Gaps in early learning access also remained substantial. As of 2019, only 44% of eligible children nationwide were enrolled in pre-primary education.⁷ In Addis Ababa, enrollment was slightly higher at 49%.⁸

Rapid urbanization and high fertility rates have intensified demand for services for young children and families, particularly in urban centers such as Addis Ababa.⁹ In response, Ethiopia has expanded its engagement in early childhood development (ECD) over the past two decades through improvements in health systems, increased access to pre-primary education,

1 Ethiopian Statistical Service, October 16, 2024, <https://ess.gov.et/>.

2 *Situation Analysis of Children and Women: Addis Ababa* (UNICEF, 2019), <https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/media/2316/file/Addis%20Ababa.pdf>.

3 *Human Development Report 2024* (United Nations Development Programme, 2024), <https://annualreport.undp.org/assets/Annual-Report-2024.pdf>.

4 Elizabeth Spier et al., *Study on Parenting for Early Childhood Development in Ethiopia* (American Institutes for Research, 2023), <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/Study-on-Parenting-for-Early-Childhood-Development-in-Ethiopia-Report-May-2023.pdf>.

5 *Ethiopia Mini Demographic and Health Survey 2019: Key Indicators* (Ethiopian Public Health Institute, 2019), <https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/media/1721/file/The%202019%20Ethiopia%20Mini%20Demographic%20and%20Health%20Survey%20.pdf>.

6 Ibid.

7 Elizabeth Spier et al., *Study on Parenting for Early Childhood Development in Ethiopia* (American Institutes for Research, 2023), <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/Study-on-Parenting-for-Early-Childhood-Development-in-Ethiopia-Report-May-2023.pdf>.

8 Sintayehu Abate Temesgen et al., *A Baseline Study on the Early Childhood Development Landscape in Addis Ababa: Summary of Study Findings* (Ethiopian Public Health Association, 2021).

9 Ibid.

and the adoption of multisectoral policy frameworks.¹⁰

These national efforts have unfolded alongside growing global recognition of the importance of the early years for lifelong health, learning, and well-being. This momentum coalesced internationally in 2018 with the World Health Organization’s adoption of the Nurturing Care Framework, which outlines a holistic approach to supporting early childhood.¹¹ Ethiopia has been an active participant in this global movement, first introducing a National Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Framework in 2010¹² and later adopting a revised version in 2022.¹³ The updated policy explicitly aligns with the five pillars of the Nurturing Care Framework: health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, safety and security, and early learning.

Despite these advances, the scale and pace of urbanization have continued to amplify the need for high-quality, coordinated ECD services. Prior to recent reforms, existing systems were largely fragmented, with uneven curriculum standards, limited professional training pathways, and inadequate data systems. The combination of rising demographic pressure and systemic gaps created a compelling context for Addis Ababa’s citywide ECD reforms.



Photo: Young girl playing at a new playground in Addis Ababa.

10 *Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia National Early Childhood Development and Education Policy Framework* (Government of Ethiopia, 2022), <https://dpgethiopia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/ECDE-Policy-Framework.pdf>.

11 *Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development* (World Health Organization, 2018), <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241514064>.

12 *National Policy Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ethiopia* (Government of Ethiopia, 2010), <https://www.scribd.com/document/797635777/National-Policy-Framework-for-ECCE-in-Ethiopia>.

13 *Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia National Early Childhood Development and Education Policy Framework* (Government of Ethiopia, 2022), <https://dpgethiopia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/ECDE-Policy-Framework.pdf>.

Addis Ababa's ECD journey: Timeline of key milestones

- 2019**
 - Learning exchanges and capacity building.
 - Addis Ababa key officials begin learning about ECD through capacity-building workshops and international exchanges. Two study tours approved by then Mayor Takele Uma Benti: to Denmark and Brazil.
 - Cross-sectoral city-level governance body established and led by the deputy mayor.
 - Six ECD initiatives conceived to pilot in three sub-cities: 1) Expand playgrounds, 2) incorporate ECD considerations into the health system, 3) introduce parental coaching through home visits, 4) expand access to play-based learning in pre-primary education, 5) establish day care services, and 6) establish the African Center for ECD (formerly the Center of Excellence, Innovation and Learning for Early Childhood Development).
- 2020**
 - August: Mayor Adanech becomes the first female mayor.
 - Comprehensive ECD program launched by the Mayor.
- 2021**
 - Baseline survey conducted in Addis Ababa.
- 2022**
 - Addis Ababa ECD baseline survey conducted and findings disseminated on February 20.
 - Strategic Programs Management Office (SPMO) established and drafted a roadmap to provide clear guidance for implementing the initiative.
- 2023**
 - Mayor Adanech participated in the first cohort of AMALI (African Mayoral Leadership Initiative).
 - Defined her legacy goal and developed the transformative plan.
 - Strategy and first implementation roadmap approved and officially launched.
 - ECD Steering Committee established with 16 senior city officials: Mayor Adanech (Chair), deputy mayor, head of mayor's office, head of SPMO, and heads of the Bureaus of Health; Education; Women, Children, and Social Affairs; Urban Beautification and Green Development; Housing Development and Administration; Design and Construction; Finance; Public Service and Human Resource Development; Transportation; Community Participation; Youth and Sports; and Culture Arts and Tourism.
- 2024**
 - African Center for ECD (AfC-ECD) established. Begins engaging different regions of Ethiopia and some African countries to support baseline surveys.
- 2025**
 - African Center for ECD supported five regions in conducting baseline surveys, strategizing their respective regions' ECD initiatives and crafting ECD roadmaps. Developmental assessments conducted by the center, and a multi-sectoral Mayoral dashboard established by the SPMO.
- 2026**
 - AfC-ECD begins collaboration and process of baseline as part of a collaboration with Mombasa County of Kenya, and international ECD conference organized.

ECD STRATEGY IN ADDIS ABABA

Under the leadership of Mayor Adanech Abiebie, the city government of Addis Ababa launched a holistic, multisectoral ECD investment, “Children: The Future Hope of Addis Ababa Early Childhood Development Program (Future Hope of Addis).” First introduced as a pilot in 2019 and fully adopted in 2021, the program aligns with the Nurturing Care Framework and aims to ensure that 1.3 million children under age 6 are developmentally on track in health, learning, and well-being. In addition to investing in young children, the city’s strategy has also focused on strengthening children’s enabling environments.¹⁴ While the investments are for the whole city, particular attention has been on the 330,000 vulnerable households as a priority for the city to support holistic ECD.¹⁵

The Future Hope of Addis program is coordinated by the Strategic Programs Management Office (SPMO) directly under the mayor, and a central feature of the program is its multisectoral structure, which goes beyond siloed departments. The SPMO is staffed by a small team (less than 10) who provide technical support and navigate government systems and policies.

The SPMO coordinates a multi-sector coordination group that includes heads of city bureaus (including health; education; women, children and social affairs; urban beautification; and more) as well as the 11 sub-cities. This group is chaired by the mayor and meets regularly to review progress, make necessary adjustments, and ensure collaboration. This approach emphasizes integrating ECD interventions into existing service delivery platforms, increasing coverage of early childhood services, and establishing systems to support coordinated planning across sectors.

The initiative also includes efforts to expand public access to early childhood services. These include integrating ECD into all public health centers and hospitals in Addis Ababa, providing home-based parental coaching, delivering play-based learning through public and private pre-primary schools for children ages 4-6 (three years of schooling), creating and upgrading day care centers of various modalities (including public workplace, community-run, publicly financed, private, NGO, and day-mother day care centers), and developing playgrounds and other child-friendly public spaces.¹⁶

Given Addis Ababa’s size and its administrative role within Ethiopia, city officials have described the program as having potential relevance for other urban contexts. This framing positions Addis Ababa as a site for generating lessons on multisectoral coordination, workforce development, and municipal approaches to ECD. To this end, the city administration

¹⁴ *Children: The Future Hope of Addis Ababa Early Childhood Development (ECD) Program - Program Brief* (Addis Ababa Office of the Mayor, 2022).

¹⁵ Kebede Worku, “African Center for ECD: Overview of the Center,” Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, May 2025.

¹⁶ *Program Review of Addis Ababa City Administration Early Childhood Development Program (AfC-ECD, 2026).*

has established the African Center for Early Childhood Development (AfC-ECD), an institution intended to support research, training, and learning exchanges related to ECD. The Center operates as a technical body with a mandate to synthesize evidence, support capacity building, and facilitate knowledge sharing within Ethiopia and across African countries. It also supports the scaling of ECD lessons from Addis Ababa to other parts of Ethiopia and the broader African continent.¹⁷

The following section outlines the key outcome areas of the Future Hope of Addis program and highlights key achievements to date.



Photo: A man and child play together in an Addis Ababa playground.

¹⁷ AfC-ECD, *Center of Excellence, Innovation and Learning for Early Childhood Development: Strategic and Operational Plan* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2024).

ADDIS ABABA'S KEY OUTCOME AREAS AND ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE



1. Support the first 1,000 days of life through parental coaching, health, nutrition, and social support services

(Bureau of Health; Bureau of Women, Children, and Social Affairs)

This outcome area spans the period from birth to age 6 but primarily focuses on the first 1,000 days of a child's life. It leverages primary health facilities, households, and supplementary feeding centers to support children's developmental progress and reduce malnutrition and stunting.

ECD INTEGRATION INTO PRIMARY HEALTH CENTERS

Implemented under the Bureau of Health, this component involves embedding ECD-related activities—such as developmental milestone tracking and nutritional screening—into existing maternal and child health services, as well as supporting parents and caregivers in responsive caregiving. Specifically, this has included:¹⁸

- Incorporating developmental and nutritional screening into routine “well baby” visits at public health centers and hospitals.
- Using population-level developmental assessments to track trends among children under 3.
- Aligning screening with referral pathways to parental coaching programs, nutrition services, and social support.

¹⁸ Addis Ababa Office of the Mayor, “Nurturing Care in the Health System and Home-Based Parental Coaching,” Early Childhood Development Leadership Exchange, May 2025.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

- 102 health centers and 12 public hospitals (goal: 101) have integrated ECD into routine health service delivery.¹⁹
- 3,200 health professionals trained (goal: 2,700).²⁰
- 98.1% of children under age 5 in health facilities had a developmental screening.^{21,22}
- 22.1% of children under age 5 in health facilities had a nutritional screening to check for stunting and other nutritional deficiencies.^{23,24}

PARENTAL COACHING, SUPPLEMENTARY FEEDING, AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

Implemented by the Bureau of Health and Bureau of Women, Children, and Social Affairs, this component targets the most vulnerable families through one-on-one home-based support. It includes:²⁵

- A home-based parental coaching program delivered by a newly established cadre of parental coaches (focused on 330,000 vulnerable households).
- Monitoring of developmental milestones and malnutrition screening at the household level.
- Targeted supplementary feeding for pregnant and lactating mothers and children under age 3 in low-income households.
- Guidance on early stimulation, responsive caregiving, and positive parenting practices.
- Referrals, as needed, to additional social support services.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

- 5,165 parental coaches trained and 5,030 deployed (goal: 5,000).²⁶

19 “Children: The Future Hope of Addis Ababa,” Early Childhood Development Indicator Portal, 2026, <https://aaspmo.gov.et/#top>.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 As of June 2025, 813,244 out of 828,995 children under age 5 that visited a public health facility in the city had a developmental screening.

23 “Children: The Future Hope of Addis Ababa,” Early Childhood Development Indicator Portal, 2026, <https://aaspmo.gov.et/#top>.

24 As of June 2025, 183,459 out of 828,995 children under age 5 who visited a public health facility in the city received a nutritional screening, including assessments for stunting and major nutritional deficiencies. This indicates that 77.9% of children who visited health facilities did not receive nutritional screening. The city has identified this as an area for improvement, with a focus on strengthening the institutionalization of nutritional screening and Growth Monitoring and Promotion (GMP) as integral components of health centers’ “Well Baby Clinics.”

25 Addis Ababa Office of the Mayor, “Nurturing Care in the Health System and Home-Based Parental Coaching,” Early Childhood Development Leadership Exchange, May 2025.

26 Addis ECD Parental Coaching Report (AfC-ECD, 2026).

- 298,003 children supported across 39,850 households in 11 sub-cities.²⁷
- Share of vulnerable children off-track developmentally reduced to 22.7% (from 24.95% in 2021).²⁸

INNOVATION BOX 1



Children's well-being and women's economic empowerment through the parental coaching program

The parental coaching program has improved the lives of both children and women in Addis Ababa. All parental coaches are women. By formalizing these roles as government positions, this investment has not only supported children's well-being through regular home visits, but also provided young women with training, certification, full-time employment, and a stable income. In this way, investments in children also contribute to women's economic empowerment.



Photo: Parent coach during a family home visit



2. Support early stimulation and learning through the expansion of day care services

(Bureau of Women, Children, and Social Affairs)

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Trends in Home Learning Environment, Developmental Milestones and School Readiness (2021-2025) (AfC-ECD, 2026).

As more women enter the workforce, the demand for full-time day care for children under 4 years who are not yet eligible for pre-primary school has risen significantly in Addis Ababa. A 2021 baseline survey also revealed substantial gaps in cognitive stimulation and learning opportunities for under 4s, leading the city to prioritize day care as a key area.²⁹

Child day care services are delivered through multiple modalities, including publicly financed centers, workplace-based centers, community-run centers in low-income condominium communities, NGO/private providers, and more.³⁰ Progress across these modalities has varied, reflecting differences in uptake and implementation across sub-cities.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE³¹

- 1,068 new daycare centers (as of February 2026).
- 21,388 children under age 4 accessing daycare centers (including 7,464 from vulnerable households).
- 3,734 staff trained and employed in daycare centers.
- 77.6% of children ages 7 months to 3 years on track in motor development and 78.7% on track in language development.



3. Prepare children 4-6 years for primary education through expanded access to pre-primary education

(Bureau of Education)

This outcome area aims to increase enrollment among children ages 4–6 and prepare them for primary school by integrating quality pre-primary education into public and private schools. This effort builds on 2021 baseline data showing that only 49% of children ages 4–6 were enrolled in pre-primary education.³²

This initiative promotes child-centered, play-based learning approaches aligned with how young children naturally learn. It strengthens pre-primary education through teacher and school leader training, play-based pedagogy, and improvements to classrooms and play-

²⁹ Sintayehu Abate Temesgen et al., *A Baseline Study on the Early Childhood Development Landscape in Addis Ababa: Summary of Study Findings* (Ethiopian Public Health Association, 2021).

³⁰ “Addis Ababa ECD Program: Daycare Center Transformation in Addis Ababa,” Addis Ababa Office of the Mayor, n.d.

³¹ “Children: The Future Hope of Addis Ababa,” Early Childhood Development Indicator Portal, 2026, <https://aaspmo.gov.et/#top>.

³² Sintayehu Abate Temesgen et al., *A Baseline Study on the Early Childhood Development Landscape in Addis Ababa: Summary of Study Findings* (Ethiopian Public Health Association, 2021).

grounds. Additional components include the provision of free school meals, uniforms, and learning materials, as well as employment opportunities for women.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE³³

- 1,169 public and private schools participating (goal: 1009).
- 18,202 teachers and education staff trained (goal: 16,676).
- 341,622 students enrolled.
- 220 public pre-primary schools transformed (goal: 100).
- 137,524 children benefiting from school feeding programs in public schools.
- 2,305 women employed to support school feeding programs.
- International Development of Early Learning Assessment (IDELA) scores improved from 68% in 2021 to 84% in 2025, with strongest gains in numeracy and motor development.³⁴
- Near-universal readiness for primary school among 6-year-olds by August 2025.³⁵



4. Improved access to play facilities and child-friendly environments

(Bureau of Women, Children and Social Affairs and Bureau of Urban Beautification and Green Development)

This outcome area aims to strengthen ECD in urban settings by expanding access to child-friendly public spaces. It includes the construction of playgrounds, enhancement of green spaces, and the “Sunday Closed Streets” initiative, which temporarily repurposes streets for children’s play and community activities.

These efforts aim to provide safe, inclusive, and stimulating environments where children can play, socialize, and engage in early learning activities. This area of investment does not rely on a paid workforce; instead, the city collaborates directly with communities and families. For Sunday Closed Streets, the bureaus work with the Traffic Management Office to ensure road safety and accessibility during closure periods.

While playground construction required initial funding, the Sunday Closed Streets initiative is low-cost, with families contributing toys and learning materials. These public spaces improve child well-being, promote positive parenting practices, and strengthen community engagement in creating more child-friendly urban environments.

³³ “Children: The Future Hope of Addis Ababa,” Early Childhood Development Indicator Portal, 2026, <https://aasp-mo.gov.et/#top>.

³⁴ *Trends in Home Learning Environment, Developmental Milestones and School Readiness (2021-2025)* (AfC-ECD, 2026).

³⁵ Ibid.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE³⁶

- 4,391 playgrounds constructed (goal: 12,000).
- 75,780 children accessed playgrounds (including 33,039 economically vulnerable children and 898 children with disabilities).
- 114 Sunday Closed Streets for play (goal: 121); by 2025, an estimated 87,870 children had used them.

INNOVATION BOX 2



Investing in children for climate goals

As part of Addis Ababa's contribution to the national Green Legacy Initiative, the city has leveraged green space investments to support children's development. Investments in parks, playgrounds, and Sunday Closed Streets provide safe, accessible outdoor spaces where children can play, explore, and learn.

Recent corridor and riverside development projects have introduced walkways and cycling lanes, further improving the city for children and families. These spaces support physical activity, social interaction, and early learning while contributing to environmental sustainability and climate resilience. By embedding child-friendly design within the city's greening agenda, Addis Ababa demonstrated how investments in climate action and urban transformation can simultaneously support young children's development and well-being.³⁷



Photo: Playground established in Addis Ababa.

³⁶ "Children: The Future Hope of Addis Ababa," Early Childhood Development Indicator Portal, 2026, <https://aaspmo.gov.et/#top>.

³⁷ Jantiray Abay, "In Addis Ababa, Learning through Outdoor Play: A Major Early Childhood Initiative Supports Climate Action," Early Childhood Matters, December 2, 2021, <https://earlychildhoodmatters.online/2021/in-addis-ababa-learning-through-outdoor-play/>.



5. Establishment of the African Center for Early Childhood Development (AfC-ECD)

For this final component of the Future Hope of Addis program, the AfC-ECD was established as an institution responsible for knowledge management, research, workforce development, and technical advisory functions. According to its strategic plan, the Center supports learning and capacity-building efforts within Addis Ababa, other Ethiopian regions, and in the broader African context.³⁸

Since its establishment, the Center has played a role in coordinating and conducting major assessments and program reviews, including multiple baseline studies across the country building on the learning from the 2021 Addis Ababa baseline.³⁹ The Center is now in the process of providing technical support to the county of Mombasa, Kenya in conducting its own baseline survey as was done in Addis Ababa and other parts of Ethiopia. These studies have provided the empirical foundation for tracking changes in home learning environments, developmental outcomes, pre-primary enrollment, and school readiness across the city.

The Center has also contributed to workforce development through training support, technical guidance on standards and curricula, and the organization of national and sub-national learning exchanges. While the Center does not hold regulatory authority, its activities are positioned as technical and convening functions aimed at supporting evidence-informed decision-making and cross-sector learning in ECD.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

- Supported five baseline surveys in Ethiopian regions.
- Supported multiple assessments in Addis Ababa for capacity building of health extension workers, pre-primary schoolteachers, and others.
- Currently supporting the city of Mombasa in conducting its baseline survey.

³⁸ AfC-ECD, *Center of Excellence, Innovation and Learning for Early Childhood Development: Strategic and Operational Plan* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2024).

³⁹ Sintayehu Abate Temesgen et al., *A Baseline Study on the Early Childhood Development Landscape in Addis Ababa: Summary of Study Findings* (Ethiopian Public Health Association, 2021).

CHALLENGES

As with any ambitious, multisectoral investment, challenges are an expected part of the journey. In the case of Addis Ababa, many of the key challenges were most prominent during the early stages of the program's development and initial implementation. This section reflects on four key challenges that emerged during the early phases of the program, and measures taken to address them.



Challenge 1: Limited understanding of ECD and local needs

Deep ECD knowledge and, particularly, what ECD investments look like was not strong among senior policymakers in Addis Ababa or Ethiopia. The early phase of the city's journey therefore required capacity building to help decisionmakers understand both the potential benefits of ECD investments and what implementation could entail. Philanthropic partners played an important role by facilitating connections and creating opportunities for senior policymakers to learn about ECD and explore potential investment approaches. Now the understanding of ECD is strong at the highest levels in most of the city departments.



Challenge 2: Political barriers and buy-in

Integrating and solidifying ECD into citywide policy frameworks, with legal binding and dedicated budget allocations, is a complex process. It is a common challenge faced in policy reforms such as this, especially when sectoral departments have pre-existing mandates and priorities and must adapt or expand their scope.

Adopting and implementing the Future of Hope of Addis strategy was particularly hard for the Bureau of Education because the ask was quite high for them. The required shift to play-based learning represented a fundamental transformation of the existing system. This required not only political buy-in from leadership but also substantial capacity building for a workforce of more than 18,000 teachers and staff across over 1,000 schools.

Similarly, the Bureau of Women, Children, and Social Affairs had limited prior experience designing or implementing a comprehensive child care system. Building a shared understanding, achieving alignment, and planning for implementation across multiple delivery models required time and sustained effort.

One key informant mentioned that, because hierarchy is important in Ethiopian culture, the process of securing political buy-in from the various city bureaus was easier. Once the top political leader—the mayor in Addis Ababa’s case—was fully on board, senior leaders across the bureaus needed to align with her vision and strategy, as they reported to her.



Challenge 3: Coordinating across sector silos to deliver for young children and families

Because ECD is multisectoral, effective implementation requires coordination across government bodies that have distinct mandates and do not typically work together. As in many contexts, departments often operate in silos, and it can be difficult to think and work beyond these silos when responsibilities are narrowly defined.

The Mayor’s ECD Strategy Steering Committee has 16 senior city officials, including 12 city bureau heads.⁴⁰ Securing their agreement not only to join the committee and attend meetings, but also to dedicate the necessary time for coordination and collaboration, was not an easy task. The Strategic Programs Management Office (SPMO) was established to support coordination among the 16 members.

Over time, the city has established a robust multisectoral group in which bureau heads meet and coordinate regularly to ensure progress toward shared goals. This has been critical to the city’s ability to achieve its aims.



Challenge 4: Insufficient workforce

Addis Ababa’s strategy required a robust workforce to deliver services for young children and families. However, at the time when the city needed to significantly expand its workforce, a national public service hiring freeze was in place.

To address this constraint, the mayor was able to secure an exception from the Prime Minister by demonstrating the benefits of these investments. This exception enabled the city to use its own funds to hire personnel (e.g., parental coaches) as city employees, providing many young women with a stable income and benefits.

⁴⁰ City bureaus involved in coordinating and collaborating for the fulfillment of the ECD strategy include Health; Education; Women, Children, and Social Affairs; Urban Beautification and Green Development; Housing Development and Administration; Design and Construction; Finance; Public Service and Human Resource Development; Transportation; Community Participation; Youth and Sports; and Culture Arts and Tourism.

While this section illustrated five challenges that Addis Ababa city faced, it also highlights challenges that other policymakers may encounter in similar efforts. The following section presents key factors of success, many of which contributed to addressing and resolving these challenges.



Photo: Girl playing on Sunday Closed Streets.

KEY FACTORS OF SUCCESS

In reviewing Addis Ababa’s journey from 2019 to 2026, there are seven factors that have contributed to their successes so far.



1. Learning visits

The spark for Addis Ababa’s decision to invest in early childhood development came through a series of training and learning experiences focused on ECD. Dr. Kesete Admasu, former Minister of Health in Ethiopia and current CEO of Big Win Philanthropy, in collaboration with the Van Leer Foundation, arranged for three members of the city government—the heads of the Bureaus of Education and Health and the deputy mayor—to visit Denmark. There, they participated in a three-day ECD training led by the Van Leer Foundation and a site visit in Copenhagen to see ECD in action.

Tabor Gebremedhin, former head of the Addis Ababa Education Bureau and a participant in this initial visit, said, “Seeing the playgrounds in Copenhagen really inspired me.”

This was followed by a learning visit to Brazil with a larger delegation that included representatives from the Bureaus of Education; Health; and Women, Children, and Social Affairs; as well as officials from the federal Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and the prime minister’s office. This second visit enabled the larger delegation to find inspiration for initiatives they could adapt in Addis Ababa. It also helped build the relationships necessary for multisectoral coordination, which was initially chaired by the deputy mayor.



2. Evidence as the backbone

In 2020, as the pilot programs were underway, the multisectoral city team realized that they needed data to better understand the situation of young children and families in Addis Ababa. Therefore, before developing a full strategy, the city conducted a baseline study to assess early childhood conditions.

This baseline study primarily used the Caregiver Reported Early Development Instruments (CREDI)⁴¹ and International Development of Early Learning Assessment (IDELA)⁴² to collect

41 Caregiver Reported Early Development Instruments (CREDI) is a set of population-level measures of ECD for children from birth to age 3 (0-36 months) that can be used around the world. It was developed by Harvard University and is open source. It can be found at <https://credi.gse.harvard.edu/>.

42 “International Development and Early Learning Assessment: About IDELA,” IDELA, Save the Children, 2026, <https://idela-network.org/about/>.

data on children’s development. The findings identified gaps and areas where investment was most needed.

The data revealed that virtually no children in Addis Ababa played outside and that children were significantly behind developmental milestones compared to children in high-income countries.

In addition to the baseline survey, the establishment of the monitoring dashboard has endeavored to ensure that decisionmaking throughout implementation remains evidence based.



3. Political leadership and institutionalization

Mayor Adanech’s early commitment to institutionalizing the ECD strategy was a key factor in Addis Ababa’s success. In governmental contexts, political buy-in at the highest levels is crucial for a new program’s viability and longevity, specifically when it concerns institutionalization of new policies.

In order to institutionalize the ECD reforms in the eyes of citizens, recently, the city has increased citizen awareness and demand through targeted campaigns, such as reading initiatives led by the Bureau of Education. As one key informant observed, the depth to which ECD has been embedded in Addis Ababa, combined with growing public demand, would make it difficult to fully dismantle the systems and investments that have been established.



4. Government-led ownership and reduced reliance on external actors

From the initial learning visits, Addis Ababa’s journey has been government-led and owned. While NGOs and philanthropic organizations have provided technical assistance and seed funding, the development and implementation of the multi-year, multisectoral strategy has remained under government leadership.

This approach contrasts with many other contexts in which cities may endorse ECD investments but rely heavily on NGOs to implement and philanthropies to fund. The establishment of the SPMO within the mayor’s office has been critical, ensuring direct oversight of implementation. In addition, the majority of the ECD funds come from the city itself, which has reinforced government ownership and reduced dependence on external actors.

Government-led ownership of programs like these can provide many benefits. In general, governments best understand specific contexts of their own localities (and therefore can best curate program fit) and can more easily observe and assess performance than an external body.



5. Multisectoral coordination across 12 city bureaus

Multisectoral coordination across 12 city bureaus initially posed a major challenge. However, the mayor's decision to establish and personally chair this coordination mechanism—requiring bureau heads to participate and mandating the SPMO as a dedicated coordination team—proved to be a key factor in its success. Over time, coordination and collaboration have become more normalized within bureau work culture, contributing to more effective implementation of the ECD strategy.



6. Partnerships

Multiple types of partnerships have been critical to Addis Ababa's success, particularly for political buy-in, financing, and technical support. As mentioned previously, the ECD steering committee comprising 12 bureau heads and other senior city officials has been critical to the city's success. Additionally, learnings from Addis Ababa have spread to other parts of Ethiopia while garnering support from the Prime Minister.⁴³

While the city primarily funds its ECD work through its own resources, philanthropic partnerships played an important role in seeding early efforts and strengthening technical quality. Donors were able to 1) provide seed funding for training, learning visits, for government officials in education, health and other bureaus; 2) provide ongoing technical support; 3) open opportunities for peer to peer leadership support through the African Mayoral Leadership Initiative (AMALI); 4) support learning visits to Denmark and Brazil; and 5) support scaling and knowledge sharing across Ethiopia.



7. Government-to-government exchange for scale

Government-to-government (or peer-to-peer) exchange has been critical to scaling ECD efforts within Addis Ababa and supporting expansion to other regions of Ethiopia and cities across Africa. The first such exchange was hosted in Addis Ababa, where city and national officials from other African cities and countries participated in learning sessions and field visits to observe ECD implementation in practice. The AfC-ECD has played a central leadership role as the city's representative in sharing lessons learned from Addis Ababa and supporting other regions of Ethiopia and cities across Africa to initiate ECD efforts. To date, the AfC-ECD has supported baseline surveys in five regions of Ethiopia and is currently working with the city of Mombasa to begin a baseline survey.

⁴³ The Prime Minister and the Mayor are part of the same political party.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Addis Ababa has achieved a great deal for young children and their families through a holistic set of investments. The lessons from the city's experience—their successes and challenges—are now spreading to other parts of Ethiopia and to other countries across Africa.

Based on the challenges encountered and the factors contributing to success, this section presents seven recommendations for other cities and regions in Africa and beyond.



1. Find political champions

Establishing and institutionalizing policies and approaches requires high-level political champions. The term “champion” is used variably across disciplines, but in the context of ECD, it typically refers to individuals who actively and persistently advocate for the prioritization of early childhood issues. What distinguishes them is not their title, but their commitment, influence, and ability to mobilize others. In this context, champions—influential individuals who advocate for ECD—can emerge as critical drivers of change. These champions operate across sectors and geographies, leveraging their credibility, networks, and passion to elevate ECD on political and public agendas. For a city, the champion can be a mayor. At a state or regional level, it can be a governor. For national policies, it could be the prime minister, president, or a similar-level political leader who has decisionmaking authority and influence.

For example, throughout Addis Ababa's journey, securing buy-in and approval from high-level decisionmakers, from the mayor to the sector department heads, was essential and enabled wide-scale political buy-in, investment into implementation and scale up.



2. Ground the strategy and implementation on context-specific data

Grounding a strategy and implementation on context-specific data for policies and planning is not new, but it does require time and a financial commitment that some cities, states, or regions may not already invest in.⁴⁴ Through the experience of Addis Ababa, we can see that this initial upfront investment has returns. The baseline study first conducted in Addis illuminated very clearly the gaps in children's development in the city, enabling the mayor and the city team to double down on their planned government investment and prioritize the most crucial elements to improve children's development outcomes.

44 C. J. Van Leeuwen et al., “City Blueprints: Baseline Assessments of Water Management and Climate Change in 45 Cities,” *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 18, no. 4 (2016): 1113–28, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-015-9691-5>.

The city also learned that cookie-cutter approaches do not work, and local context matters. While learning visits to Denmark and Brazil were inspirational, city leaders understood that the same approaches could not simply be replicated in Addis Ababa. In Brazil, parental coaches are volunteers. In Addis Ababa, the city faced both low child development outcomes and insufficient employment opportunities, particularly for women. As a result, the city designed its parental coaching model to create new full-time civil servant positions. This approach aimed to improve child development outcomes while also expanding economic opportunities for women.



3. Start somewhere and build

With myriad needs in a city, state, or region, starting everything related to young children—from expanding pre-K and child care options to integrating ECD into health systems—may not be politically feasible or fiscally possible. Yet, based on a baseline assessment, government officials can select one or two investment areas where they might have political alignment and financial capacity as a starting point.

Addis Ababa did not attempt to do everything at once, nor did it start from scratch. One of the first initiatives piloted was through the primary health system. Given the existing network of health centers and staff, training health workers to incorporate developmental milestones screening, nutritional assessments, and responsive care and play was relatively feasible. With minimal additional investment, health centers also established small play spaces where children could engage while parents or caregivers attended health appointments.

The city initially piloted six initiatives across three sub-cities, allowing teams to test models on a smaller scale. A baseline survey was then conducted to assess children’s developmental gaps and determine whether the selected initiatives were appropriate. This process has unfolded over seven years. While it required initial investments from the city and philanthropic partners, starting small and building on existing systems enabled Addis Ababa to scale gradually across the city. Other cities can adopt a similar approach by starting with even a single pilot initiative in one location and expanding over time.



4. Invest in ECD to achieve multiple city goals

Investing in ECD may not be the primary goal of a city, state, region, or country. Yet, investing in it can have multiplier effects and help governments achieve multiple goals.⁴⁵ For example, investing through cash transfer for mothers and babies, establishing nutritional supplemental programs, or increasing jobs to cover more pre-K spots can all contribute to women’s economic empowerment and poverty reduction. Investing in playgrounds can both benefit young children and families, but also improve air quality and therefore climate goals.

45 Grace Leach, *Prioritising Early Childhood Development: One Powerful Solution to Many Global Challenges* (Roger Federer Foundation, 2025), <https://federerfoundation.org/assets/publication/pdf/prioritising-ecd.pdf>.

Addis Ababa's primary objective has been to improve ECD outcomes. However, ECD is inherently multisectoral, and investments in ECD are beginning to contribute to broader city goals, including poverty reduction, women's empowerment and employment, and climate objectives. For example, the parental coaching program has helped young children's development while also expanding civil servant employment opportunities for women. As the program is still relatively new and the city is still gathering data and measuring longer term impacts, it is unclear if there is a direct causal link between ECD investments and women's economic opportunities, but the increase in jobs for women is a positive sign.

Similarly, investments in learning through outdoor play⁴⁶—through expanded green spaces, playgrounds, tree planting, and the closure of streets on Sundays for children's play—have indirectly supported the city's Climate Resilient Development Strategy (2020–2050).⁴⁷ These initiatives have enabled children's play while also contributing to reduced pollution and increased carbon capture.

While these two examples were not the primary intended outcomes, ECD investments have generated multiplier effects that advance multiple city goals simultaneously.

“It soon became clear that the two issues were linked, and we could achieve a double win by preparing our children for the future while achieving environmental benefits for the entire city.”

Jantirar Abay, Deputy Mayor, Addis Ababa, 2021

⁴⁶ Jantirar Abay, “In Addis Ababa, Learning through Outdoor Play: A Major Early Childhood Initiative Supports Climate Action,” *Early Childhood Matters*, December 2, 2021, <https://earlychildhoodmatters.online/2021/in-addis-ababa-learning-through-outdoor-play/>.

⁴⁷ Ethiopia's Long-Term Low Emission and Climate Resilient Development Strategy (2020-2050) (Government of Ethiopia, 2020), https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/ETHIOPIA_%20LONG%20TERM%20LOW%20EMIS-SION%20AND%20CLIMATE%20RESILIENT%20DEVELOPMENT%20STRATEGY.pdf.



5. Find efficiencies in existing budgets

When investing in new policy areas, energy is often placed on raising new funds through the government itself or external sources. Yet only focusing on new money can create barriers for starting something. Finding efficiencies in existing budgets where a budget line could be re-interpreted could better enable new policy growth. For example, a budget line focused on improving existing community spaces could be designed with young children in mind. A health system that already has funds for training health workers can modify the content of that training. These examples might not require more money, but a different way to use money that is already in the system.

Addis Ababa was able to do this with many of its ECD initiatives. For example, integrating ECD into the primary health system did not require substantial new financial resources, as the Bureau of Health already had relevant structures and budget lines for creating child-friendly environments and health staff training. The team simply expanded a line for professional development to include child development, responsive caregiving, and related topics—small additions to existing, funded activities.



6. Plan scale and institutionalization from the beginning

Strategically planning scale and institutionalization from the beginning of a policy development and implementation process can mean the difference between policies that only span one political cycle and ones that are enduring. This often requires shifting one's mindset for that goal. Planning scale from the beginning is part of the process to ensure institutionalization and longer-term systems change. There is no single or agreed upon definition of scale, but governments should think about how they define scale and how that fits with their goals.⁴⁸ Scaling could mean expanding geographic coverage, assisting more people with one intervention, or reaching citizens with multiple supports.

Once a government knows what it defines as successful scale, it can then think about how that scaling process can be achieved and how it will help institutionalize what they are starting for enduring systems change.

Addis Ababa planned institutionalization and scale from the beginning, first across the city and, over time, nationally. Currently, though, they are in the early stages of defining what quality they want and developing the systems to measure it. Three decisions they made that facil-

48 L. Woltering et al., "Scaling – from 'Reaching Many' to Sustainable Systems Change at Scale: A Critical Shift in Mindset," *Agricultural Systems* 176 (November 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.agsy.2019.102652>.

itated this were the establishment of the AfC-ECD, SPMO, and the multi-sectoral coordination committee. Through these three groups, Addis passed legal regulations for some of its ECD investments, physically through parks and streets and through curricular modifications in early education. Further, by increasing jobs among its citizens and conducting public campaigns such as reading initiatives, demand for ECD services has also gone up. If political priorities change in Addis Ababa in the future, there is a strong basis for these investments to endure.



7. Build a team with various perspectives and skills

Implementing an ECD strategy requires expertise in political navigation, technical design, financial management, program implementation, workforce management, monitoring and evaluation, research, and public communication. Bringing together individuals with diverse skill sets and lenses will help cities, states and regions looking to implement these policies. Addis Ababa has done this through the SPMO and engaging a team to support public demand campaigns. With regular meetings, teams with varying perspectives can challenge one another and help the team see varying perspectives, which then open up the conditions for choosing the best path to achieve the overarching goal.

CONCLUSION

“A child-friendly city creates comfort, safety, and opportunity for everyone.”

Adanech Abiebie, Mayor of Addis Ababa

Addis Ababa’s journey over the last seven years to establish, implement and scale a robust ECD strategy for the city has had challenges, but has mostly seen a positive trajectory.

Through expanded access to a wide range of ECD services benefiting young children and their families, the city has begun to see multiplier effects: improvements in developmental outcomes, reductions in malnutrition, increased employment opportunities for women, and greener urban environments that foster community connection, social cohesion, and progress toward climate goals. These visible improvements have contributed to rising citizen demand for ECD, further reinforcing institutionalization and long-term transformation.

Addis Ababa’s experience demonstrates that when investments are government-led, owned, and championed, they can generate faster and more durable benefits for citizens. And when cities also support peers in other regions and countries, the potential impact is even greater.

With the myriad positive impacts, the rest of Ethiopia and the world is watching. The AfC-ECD is already supporting five Ethiopian regions and Mombasa, Kenya to conduct baseline studies and consider ECD investments. While policymakers often assume that national policy must drive local change, Addis Ababa’s experience shows that cities can also shape national policy agendas and beyond.

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ANNEX 1: METHODOLOGY FOR CASE STUDY

This case study was conceived between Brookings Institution and the AfC-ECD to document and inspire other policymakers to learn from Addis Ababa's experience. The case study used qualitative methods to examine the development and implementation of ECD initiatives in Addis Ababa. The analysis drew on document review, key informant interviews, and observation conducted in Addis Ababa. The case study was co-designed by the Brookings Institution and the AfC-ECD, ensuring that local expertise, programmatic experience, and political and institutional context informed the analysis. The case study went through rigorous peer review and editorial process to fact check data and ensure quality.

The case study relied on two primary categories of evidence. First, four key informant interviews were conducted with stakeholders closely involved in the initiative: two members of AfC-ECD leadership and two representatives from philanthropic organizations supporting ECD efforts in Addis Ababa. Interviews focused on the political dynamics shaping Addis Ababa's ECD agenda, including the origins of mayoral commitment, strategies for navigating political constraints, approaches to mobilizing funding, key drivers of progress, implementation challenges, the role of philanthropic partners, and lessons for other governments considering similar investments. AfC-ECD members reviewed the data with the Brookings Institution team to ensure accuracy.

Second, the research team conducted a document review of core policy and program materials, including AfC-ECD and SPMO strategic and program overview documents. Among them were the "Baseline Study on the Early Childhood Development Landscape in Addis Ababa (2021)," "Trends in Home Learning Environment, Developmental Milestones and School Readiness (2021–2025)," the "Program Review of the Addis Ababa City Administration Early Childhood Development Program (February 2026)," and other relevant planning and implementation documents. Most of the documents were provided by the city administration and AfC-ECD.

Limitations of this study include a small number of interviews focused primarily on institutional leadership and philanthropic partners, which may limit the range of perspectives represented, particularly those of frontline implementers and beneficiaries. The analysis also relied largely on existing program documentation and self-reported data, constraining the ability to independently verify outcomes or attribute observed changes to specific interventions. As a qualitative case study, the findings are intended to support policy learning and reflection rather than establish causal impact or generalizable results.

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