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# Ghana Education Service Lively Minds Early Childhood Education Parenting Programme

Lessons learned about government  
implementation of the programme at scale



thrive

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# Abbreviations

CLCD	Center for Learning and Childhood Development
CPD	Continuing professional development
ECD	Early childhood development
ECE	Early childhood education
GES	Ghana Education Service
GES-LM	Ghana Education Services Lively Minds
KG	Kindergarten
LM	Lively Minds
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoGCSP	Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PTA	Parent–teacher association
RCT	Randomised control trial
SISO	School Improvement and Support Officer
ToT	Training of Trainers
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund

# Executive summary

This report highlights lessons learned about the implementation at scale of the Ghana Education Services Lively Minds (GES-LM) programme, which focuses on achieving quality and holistic early childhood development (ECD) for kindergarten (KG)-age children in rural Ghana. The programme seeks to improve the quality of learning and care in both KGs and at home, recognising that parents are the key to achieving this. KG teachers are trained to mobilise and train mothers in their community to deliver play schemes – structured play-based learning activities in small groups – to KG children.

The GES-LM programme also improves parenting knowledge, attitudes, and the quality and frequency of home-based learning and care through parenting workshops led by KG teachers that teach the importance of ECD and lessons on nutrition and hygiene, while building parents' confidence. Teachers also broadcast local language radio programmes that provide practical information and ideas for parents across northern Ghana.

This report sets out the findings of a study undertaken across two regions and four districts in northern Ghana where the GES-LM programme has been implemented for over two years. The study documents the lessons learned in the government implementation of the GES-LM programme at district, regional, and national government levels. The study is guided by three overarching research questions:

1. How was the GES-LM model adapted for implementation at scale?
2. What lessons are learned about government implementation of the GES-LM programme at scale in the following areas:
  - developing government ownership of the programme;
  - implementing roles and oversight processes at the different levels of government;
  - building motivation among GES staff, teachers, and mothers; and
  - the financial and human resourcing for the scale-up?
3. What are the wider lessons for quality implementation at scale that may be applicable in other countries?

These questions guide the study to explore several aspects of the GES-LM programme, including its implementation, scaling, and lessons learned for international learning.

## Key findings:

**The GES-LM programme was implemented through a rigorous process of piloting and testing.** The programme's efficacy was demonstrated through testing, while small-scale pilots were undertaken to test the model's implementation processes and quality assurance mechanisms for scaling.

**Engagement across government was key to institutionalising the GES-LM programme.** Discussions with Ministry of Education (MoE) agencies facilitated support for the programme. This approach ensured that key aspects of institutionalisation, such as teacher accreditation, were in place prior to scaling. A GES-LM Working Group was established to coordinate government engagement.

**Government ownership of the GES-LM programme was continually reinforced.** Stakeholder visits to support the programme reinforced perceptions within the Ghana Education Service (GES) that the programme is government-owned. The creation of a national GES-LM Officer supported quality assurance and is a symbol of government ownership and commitment to programme sustainability.

**Adaptations are key to ensuring programme sustainability.** Monitoring targets and district team sizes were reduced to respond to government financial constraints. This approach affected the monitoring and oversight quality in sampled districts but was necessary to ensure sustainability at scale.

# 1. Introduction

Ghana has demonstrated great efforts to improve ECD through the introduction of two years of compulsory state-provided KG for 4–6-year-old children in 2008.<sup>1</sup>

The Government of Ghana has also updated its ECD policy, which now has a strong focus on play-based learning,<sup>2</sup> as well as making efforts to ensure that all children aged 0 to 8 years have equitable access to quality health and nutrition, in addition to their educational needs.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Ghana’s ECD policy seeks to provide information and guidance to parents and caregivers of young children.<sup>4</sup> However, two key barriers persist, particularly in rural areas, which the GES-LM programme aims to overcome: low-quality teaching and home-based care.

**Low quality of KG teaching:** Key challenges include large class sizes; low teacher to student ratios; a lack of teacher training in ECD, child-friendly learning materials, and adoption of child-led learning; and the overuse of rote-based teaching.<sup>5</sup>

**Poor home-based care and education:** A typical KG-aged child spends 75% of their time at home and parents/caregivers are the ones that have the greatest opportunity to nurture their child’s learning and development. However, rural parents struggle to provide quality nurturing care and learning opportunities as they lack access to the knowledge, skills, and community needed to do so.<sup>6</sup> In many cases, this is compounded by low self-esteem and confidence regarding parenting.<sup>7</sup> A study conducted with over 2,500 parents in rural Ghana found that only 13% of parents had conducted any form of play or stimulating activity with their child in the past three days.<sup>8</sup> As well as failing to nurture their child’s learning, this also affects the child’s physical, socioemotional, and language development and school-readiness.<sup>9</sup> In turn, this lack of school-readiness makes it harder for these children to progress in school.

The GES-LM programme addresses these two challenges concerning the provision and effectiveness of Ghana’s ECD policy, including the low quality of KG teaching and the poor level of home-based care and education in rural settings. The programme tackles these barriers by targeting KGs and homes.

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<sup>1</sup> Ackah-Junior *et al.* (2022), p. 298; Horsham *et al.* (2022).

<sup>2</sup> Center for Learning and Childhood Development (CLCD) (2024).

<sup>3</sup> Ackah-Junior *et al.* (2022).

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MoGCSP) (2018); United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Annan (2020); Wolf (2020).

<sup>6</sup> Ackah-Junior *et al.* (2022); Aurino *et al.* (2020); Kabay *et al.* (2017).

<sup>7</sup> Wolf (2020).

<sup>8</sup> Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) (2020).

<sup>9</sup> Suntheimer *et al.* (2024).



To combat the problems of low-quality care and education in public KGs, teachers and mothers are trained and empowered to set up and run low-cost educational play schemes in their school KG to enable children to learn through play.

To tackle the problem of poor parenting practices, KG teachers lead a group parenting workshop for mothers each month, and teachers broadcast a weekly local language radio programme for parents to teach them simple, practical ways to improve their home-based care using local resources.

Teachers receive regular ongoing training, supervision, and support through GES regional and district teams. The non-governmental organisation (NGO) Lively Minds (LM) provides GES with a structured package of capacity-building support to enable GES to deliver the programme itself. This includes a suite of programmatic content, operational systems, tools, training, and coaching support.

Following the introduction of the GES-LM programme in Ghana in 2008, and its later adoption by GES in 2019, it is being scaled up across Ghana, firstly through the northern regions of the country, and then nationally. GES has recognised the importance of this study for understanding the success factors and barriers to quality implementation within its governance processes on the GES-LM programme. More widely, the GES-LM programme and this research study explore how to implement and scale up an ECD parenting programme and ensure it is effectively implemented into existing government systems.

The overall objective of the study is to identify lessons learned from the implementation and scale-up of the GES-LM programme that might provide useful insights for ECD programming in other countries. The study complements a randomised control trial (RCT) measuring the child outcomes of the programme.

This study will answer three research questions:

1. How was the GES-LM model adapted for implementation at scale?
2. What lessons are learned about government implementation of the GES-LM programme at scale in the following key areas:
  - developing government ownership of the programme;
  - implementing roles and oversight processes at the different levels of government;
  - building motivation among GES staff, teachers, and mothers; and
  - the financial and human resourcing for the scale-up?
3. What are the wider lessons regarding quality implementation at scale that may be applicable in other countries?

## 2. The scaling up of ECD programmes in the wider literature

Prior research on programme scaling – both in ECD settings and more broadly in development programme management – has indicated that there are several key challenges that need to be acknowledged and addressed to maximise the potential for successful scaling.

Richter *et al.* examined ECD interventions across several low- and middle-income countries and identified necessary success factors for scaling.<sup>10</sup> These include government involvement from early on in the programme, gaining buy-in from officials at all levels of government and within the community, and having a clear roadmap for scale-up.

In the literature, the scaling of quality ECD services is described as an iterative process, involving stages of testing, both of the programme itself and of the wider government services and policy changes that need to be in place to enable such scaling.<sup>11</sup> Yoshikawa *et al.* argue that, without proper preparation and the onboarding of key stakeholders, a pathway to scale from ‘small to bigger’ can face significant challenges. Small-scale ECD interventions need to factor in the myriad of challenges associated with scale and ensuring quality. It is also important to consider that successful scaling of ECD services can only occur when certain key factors are all assured, such as the need for government buy-in, the ability to leverage key stakeholders in the delivery and sustainability of the programme, and ensuring financial stability.<sup>12</sup>

Adequate planning for scaling, including an appreciation of the financial commitment an ECD service requires at scale, and how ECD services can engage stakeholders, is regarded as crucial in the literature.<sup>13</sup> Failure to consider these aspects has resulted in a loss of efficacy in previous ECD interventions when brought to scale. Programmes often suffer in quality due to poor implementation in new locations, while oversight, monitoring, and quality assurance processes are not maintained.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Richter *et al.* (2017).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*; Yoshikawa *et al.* (2018).

<sup>12</sup> Yoshikawa *et al.* (2018).

<sup>13</sup> Biersteker (2010).

<sup>14</sup> Yoshikawa *et al.* (2018).

A further complication to consider when planning to scale ECD interventions is the wider implementation context when involving government. The implementation of ECD programmes often requires several other government agencies due to their connection to further developmental outcomes, such as hygiene awareness, disease prevention, and parenting support. It is therefore necessary to develop intricate relationships – both political and logistical – with other government agencies and bodies.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, bringing ECD programmes to scale also imposes a significant financial burden on recipient governments. Biersteker – in an analysis of an ECD programme brought to scale in South Africa – highlights that a significant challenge lies in how government would finance the programme at scale. The South African Government did not provide firm financial commitments towards the ECD programme, and the programme was not prioritised for further funding commitments, which led to challenges in ensuring quality and beneficial outcomes for children.<sup>16</sup>

These points from the wider literature – iterative testing, early engagement with stakeholders and political figures, promoting ownership and local buy-in, and financial and human resourcing considerations – are, in turn, addressed through the case study of the GES-LM programme. The case study demonstrates how GES-LM has approached these aspects of scaling, and what lessons can be derived from the experience of bringing the programme to scale.

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<sup>15</sup> Cavellera *et al.* (2019); Milner *et al.* (2019).

<sup>16</sup> Biersteker (2010), p. 13.

# 3. The GES-LM programme — context and implementation

The GES-LM programme is an innovative ECD parenting programme, which includes a focus on play-based learning and family and community engagement.

Between 2008 and 2016, LM developed the programme through an iterative process of design and testing with rural communities in Ghana and Uganda. Between 2017 and 2019, LM and GES conducted a pilot in Ghana in 250 communities across six rural districts to test whether the programme could be implemented successfully through GES systems. An RCT was carried out, which found that the programme improved children’s learning by the equivalent of an extra year of schooling. As a result, in 2019, the MoE and GES decided to adopt the programme and scale it to 64 districts across the northern half of the country. The programme became known as the GES-LM programme.

The GES-LM programme has three distinct phases of implementation, as outlined in Box 1 below. The Annexure contains further detailed information on the programme components, including the play schemes, parenting workshops, and a radio programme.

## Box 1: Implementation phases of the GES-LM programme

(1) Setup Phase (one school term):

LM and GES regional teams support district teams to set up the programme in all KGs in the district. This involves district team sensitisation, school sensitisation, a six-day Training of Trainers (ToT) workshop for KG teachers and setting up the programme in the communities. Community set-up is delivered by the KG teachers, with supervision provided by district teams, and involves two community meetings and eight two-hour workshops for enrolled mothers.

(2) Embed Phase (five school terms)

During this period, the programme runs, but district teams receive capacity-building support from LM. This includes capacity-building workshops, coaching, and project management support.

(3) Sustain Phase:

LM has no direct contact with the district teams, and GES works alone.

GES-LM Coordinators at the national, regional, and district levels – appointed by and reporting to GES – are responsible for supporting the programme and ensuring it runs smoothly.

The implementation of the GES-LM programme in the sample regions and districts of this study was intended to be guided by a detailed understanding of the capacities of the relevant GES staff in delivering the programme effectively.

Firstly, LM developed the roles and responsibilities of regional and district GES team members who would need to run the programme in their regions/districts, aligning with their current roles/responsibilities, and agreed these with the National Early Childhood Education (ECE) Director. Regional and District Directors were then tasked with selecting teams from within their offices. This included identifying an LM Coordinator to lead and coordinate the programme (ideally the ECE Coordinator within the region or district). They also appointed a team to deliver the programme, including all School Improvement and Support Officers (SISOs), the ECE Coordinator, a School Health Education Programme Coordinator, and a Public Relations Officer. This team is responsible for training and supervising the KG teachers. LM also determined what capabilities/skills these teams would need (based on the experience of delivering the pilot) and developed a package of technical support and training.

The GES-LM programme also incorporated several quality assurance systems to improve the monitoring of the implementation and activity quality of the programme. These included a monitoring dashboard that identified whether activities were taking place in the district, and incorporated monitoring and feedback data to analyse the quality of the activities and attendance levels. The scope of the dashboard was further expanded during the implementation of the programme to allow access to all regional and district GES teams. It is overseen by the national GES-LM Officer. A special measures escalation system was in place from the beginning of the programme to identify whether districts, schools, and communities are undertaking the programme correctly, and to alert the GES-LM Coordinators if there is an issue. Quality assurance systems were also developed for the regional GES-LM Coordinators to call their district equivalents to ensure that the programme runs smoothly.

Regional GES officials were additionally given specific pointers to mention when speaking with their district teams, teachers, and mothers that emphasised the government ownership of the programme. The aim was to ensure that the message remained the same across the rollout of the programme. It was emphasised that GES-LM was adopted at the highest level of government, and that it was a permanent and mandatory alteration to the curriculum, rather than a short-term NGO programme.

# 4. Methods

## Study design

The study is a deep-dive qualitative analysis, focused on four districts (in two regions) where the programme has been implemented for two years. The locations were purposively sampled by LM based on criteria provided by the research team. The sample included two regions that were ‘implementation success stories’ and two that were less successful (Table 1), in terms of local ownership, motivation, and adherence to the implementation systems. The four sampled districts were in the first set to commence implementation of GES-LM and are now in the Sustain stage of the programme (meaning that the districts now receive limited high-level technical support from LM).

Table 1: Sample of regions and districts

Regions	Districts
<b>Region 1</b> ( <b>implementation success story</b> )	District 1 (implementation success story)
	District 2 (less successful implementation)
<b>Region 2</b> ( <b>challenging implementation context</b> )	District 3 (implementation success story)
	District 4 (less successful implementation)

This study employed both in-depth qualitative interviews and a documentary analysis of secondary data to support the analysis of government implementation of the GES-LM programme.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 33 key informants. Interviews were conducted with GES officials at the district, regional, and national levels, as well as with LM staff in Ghana and the UK, as indicated in Table 2 below. The key GES informants for this study play central roles either in the daily operation of GES-LM in their respective districts and regions or in the oversight of the programme’s implementation and scaling at the national level. LM staff in Ghana and the UK have been present throughout the implementation of GES-LM. As such, they can provide valuable insights into key areas of ECD programme scaling, such as securing government buy-in and ownership and ensuring effective oversight, monitoring, and quality assurance processes are in place.

A documentary analysis was undertaken using a range of secondary data to further understand the context of the sample locations and to identify opportunities and barriers to quality implementation by the Ghanaian Government at scale. These documents included GES-LM monitoring data for the sampled districts and regions and collated data at national level, provided by LM. These data are derived from monitoring forms filled out by district SISOs during regular

monitoring and supervision visits. The data helped reveal some of the common issues faced by SISOs when filling out the monitoring forms. The study was also given access to LM’s internal implementation review of GES-LM<sup>17</sup>, which supported the study by outlining implementation challenges faced by both LM and GES, as well as scaling strategies for the programme.

Table 2: Study sample

Category of participant	Number of interviews
National GES ECE Unit	2
Regional GES officials (2 regions)	Regional Directors of Education (2) Regional ECE Coordinators (1) Regional LM Coordinators (2)
District GES officials (4 districts)	District Directors of Education (4) LM Coordinators (4) ECE Coordinators (2) Heads of Monitoring and Supervision (4) SISOs (4)
LM (NGO)	7 LM staff

## Data analysis

Detailed notes were taken of all the interviews. Data analysis was supported by the use of NVivo qualitative software. A coding framework was developed based on the research framework detailed above. All the interview notes and documents provided by GES and LM were uploaded to NVivo and systematically coded.

<sup>17</sup> Horsham *et al.* (2022)

## 5. Findings

### Adapting the GES-LM programme for scale-up

**Following the testing and trialling of the GES-LM programme, which showed positive outcomes, GES and LM developed a Partnership Agreement in 2021,** with a commitment to institutionalising and scaling GES-LM, first to all 64 rural districts in northern Ghana, and then nationally. To scale up the programme, several key adaptations were made to the programme.

**First, the programme was to be implemented by GES using a ToT approach.** KG teachers were to deliver activities at the community level, with support and supervision from the district, regional, and national GES teams. The goal was for GES to run and fund the programme itself. As the methodologies and activities in the programme are different from the normal work of GES staff, it was agreed that each district office would receive a two-year package of capacity-building support from LM to help them set up and embed the programme. After this period, each district would move into the Sustain phase, during which they would run the programme themselves with support and supervision from regional and national government and a small LM trouble-shooting team.

**The 2021 Partnership Agreement also integrated GES-LM into wider government systems, by including key stakeholder agencies within the MoE.** Detailed plans, roles, and responsibilities for each agency were developed in anticipation of the national scale-up of the GES-LM programme. This included the National Teaching Council, which was brought into the Partnership Agreement to institutionalise the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) points system into GES-LM.

**Within Ghana, teachers must participate in a compulsory CPD accreditation scheme to retain their teaching licences.**<sup>18</sup> GES-LM was included in this scheme following discussions between GES, LM, and the National Teaching Council, with teachers not having to pay to accrue CPD points through their participation in GES-LM. Rather, teachers participating in GES-LM would be able to accrue CPD points to facilitate their re-accreditation as teachers. Including the GES-LM programme in this scheme as a free alternative engaged teachers and demonstrated the institutionalisation of the GES-LM programme. In addition, professional teacher motivation and retention is a key challenge in Ghana,

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<sup>18</sup> As part of the CPD accreditation scheme and to ensure they continue to be accredited as professional teachers, all teachers in Ghana must attend a set number of accredited courses every two years. Courses undertaken as part of the CPD scheme usually charge a fee, to be paid by teachers.



especially in rural areas, and the provision of CPD points for teachers participating in GES-LM has encouraged teacher retention and motivation in the programme.

**An additional adaptation for scale-up of GES-LM was the establishment of the GES-LM Working Group, a national body accountable for the programme.** This Working Group – featuring figures such as the Deputy Director-General of GES, representatives from the Ministries of Health and Gender, and the GES-LM Officer – was established to create a detailed operational plan to encourage integration and adaptations to embed the programme in government processes.

## Scaling-up the GES-LM programme — changes in the Sustain phase

While several adaptations were made to the GES-LM programme prior to scaling, further changes were made during the scale-up within the districts and regions sampled for this study by GES staff to support the successful implementation of the programme.

**A key adaptation within the Sustain phase was the necessary reduction in monitoring practices due to government financial constraints.** During the Embed phase of the programme, district teams were required to visit all schools in their district (at least once a term). During the Sustain phase, it was agreed that the supervision requirement would drop to 20% of schools receiving one visit per term. This was a decision made by national GES.

**Concurrently, the number of GES-LM team members that support the programme was reduced due to the decrease in monitoring needed during the Sustain phase. However, SISOs, whose normal role is to monitor schools, would continue monitoring the GES-LM play schemes in schools along with their normal monitoring duties.** SISOs were initially concerned that a reduction in additional team members would adversely affect the workload of district teams, but this has not proven a problem in the sampled districts as the reduction in staffing numbers was in line with the reduction in monitoring targets. The reduction in team members was decided by District Directors based on a consideration of budgets, district, and circuit sizes to ensure that the team was not overburdened with additional work.

**Although the reduced monitoring was necessary from a cost and capacity perspective, it inevitably affected the quality and extent of oversight.** Some district officials noted subsequent effects on the quality of implementation, such as teachers' and mothers' relaxed attentiveness to the play schemes, in the knowledge that there would only be one in-person visit per year from GES.

**The LM technical team continues to provide support with data monitoring, evaluation, and quality assurance processes during the Sustain phase.** LM staff continue to provide district teams with data to support them in deciding which schools to prioritise for visits each term to ensure adequate monitoring coverage of the programme. They are also aware that GES faces difficulties in utilising all the dashboards and monitoring and evaluation processes introduced as part of the GES-LM programme. Interviews with GES district teams indicate that they have experienced challenges in completing forms on time and submitting them

correctly, and still need to be chased up by regional GES-LM Coordinators and the national GES-LM Officer.

**Some regional and district teams reintroduced additional monitoring visits to address the less stringent monitoring requirements in the Sustain phase.** In the sample district that had done so, this additional monitoring was carried out in an ad-hoc manner. One of the sampled regional teams also increased the number of unannounced visits per term to both district offices and schools to counteract the reduction in district monitoring. **LM has been sensitive to the need for changes in GES systems during scale-up.** While LM has developed several dashboards and monitoring processes to allow GES to have detailed oversight of the quality and number of activities occurring across districts and communities during scale-up, it has been sensitive to the challenge of introducing new systems and processes. The LM technical team were keen to emphasise to GES officials that their current approaches are not wrong, but that changes are needed to make quality assurance processes more robust.

*"[We] acknowledge that what [GES] are doing is not wrong and then try to show them this new approach, why they need to adopt this and add to their approaches because when we go in and you tell them what you are doing wrong, they are going to resist it because that is what they have always done and it has worked for them" (LM staff member)*

**In turn, GES respondents at the district and regional levels clearly understood why they needed to make changes to their approach.** Across the districts and regions sampled, GES officials were aware that their previous procedures of monitoring and oversight at the KG level had not been sufficiently robust for the GES-LM programme, with monitoring targets often unclear, and levels of oversight uneven across districts. District teams now have termly performance targets, work plans, and risk registers to ensure quality in the programme. Training – including mandated top-up training twice a term – and monitoring and evaluation systems, such as a real-time monitoring dashboard, have been introduced to strengthen quality assurance processes.

**Both GES and LM respondents noted that some GES staff are having issues with completing their quality assurance processes due to a lack of hardware and challenges relating to data analysis skills, particularly during scale-up and the Sustain phase.** The GES-LM programme has introduced a myriad of quality assurance, monitoring, and evaluation processes, including real-time evaluation dashboards and digital monitoring forms for district teams to submit. However, the interviews highlighted that many district and regional teams lack the hardware – laptops and smartphones – needed to adequately complete monitoring forms, while the LM technical team noted that, during the Sustain phase, quality assurance processes are not always completed. Several reasons were given for this by both GES and LM staff, including a lack of training and understanding among district staff of the need for robust quality assurance processes, alongside a concern from GES staff during the Sustain phase that they now had limited technical assistance from LM with data analysis and quality assurance.

**LM does not supply hardware to GES teams and has worked hard to ensure that the programme can be run and overseen without a reliance on hardware.** However, LM staff reflected that any programme scale-up needs to account for a

lack of hardware and training for quality assurance processes. LM staff reflected that a detailed study of existing hardware availability and staff capabilities would be valuable for scale-up in another context. Further training for district teams – and continual reinforcement of the quality assurance processes they need to monitor the GES-LM programme – is being undertaken by GES with support from LM.

**Importantly, GES-LM funding has also enabled district GES teams to implement wider work within other educational sectors.** Several district-level GES officials reported that the GES-LM programme has facilitated other work undertaken by district teams. For instance, funding from this programme has enabled SISOs to undertake more stringent monitoring of other classes within the schools they visit for GES-LM. District teams explained that, prior to the implementation of the GES-LM programme, there was not sufficient funding available to effectively undertake their required monitoring and quality assurance activities. This point was emphasised by district GES officials.

*'GES-LM activities are just part and parcel of our GES work. So, we box them together. Because we are not well-resourced to do monitoring [...] when we have the resources to go out and monitor, we have to do holistic work.'* **(District Head of Monitoring)**

*'Honestly, GES have always had funding problems, logistical challenges to do monitoring and supervision, but with GES-LM support we have been going out to do our activities and even do other GES work.'* **(District GES-LM Coordinator)**

## Wider findings

The following sections highlight key findings and lessons learned that correspond to the areas of building government ownership, implementation roles, and oversight processes at the national, regional, and district levels of GES, building motivation among GES staff, teachers, and mothers, and financial and human resourcing for the scale-up. These components correspond, in turn, to the key criteria for successful scaling, as noted in the earlier literature review section.

### Building government ownership

The GES-LM programme was kick-started through the Ghanaian Minister of Education's championing of it. Following on from this, LM developed a **stakeholder engagement strategy to ensure wide support from various agencies within the MoE as well as from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Gender.** LM was keen to build support from both senior leadership and officials. A cross-sectoral Working Group was established to provide governance functions, meeting termly. In addition, local stakeholder engagement was built into the programme curriculum to ensure regional, national, and community leadership were all engaged and supportive. Beyond this, robust testing and evidence of the programme's efficacy in producing positive child developmental outcomes supported the scale-up plans. However, the GES-LM programme has also

received continuous support at a high level since its implementation to reinforce the message of government ownership.

**Early on in the development of the programme in Ghana, LM and the Working Group engaged a variety of key stakeholders at a high level in government**, such as representatives from the National Teaching Council, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and the National Schools Inspectorate Authority, to demonstrate the benefits of the GES-LM programme and ensure buy-in. Efforts were made to identify key areas where the programme could engage with their work, and how roles and responsibilities would be managed among all stakeholders.

**Formalised processes to solidify the working relationship between GES, LM, and key stakeholders were important for further developing a working relationship.** A Partnership Agreement, alongside the establishment of the national GES-LM Working Group – with representatives from GES and all key agencies – was crucial to clearly define roles within government for the running of the programme.

**Further public mentions of the programme by political figures and the showcasing of its benefits have also been crucial to ensure continued government support and ownership.** Site visits by representatives from key stakeholders and the Working Group showcased the programme, how it would work, and the roles of various government figures within it. Political figures and parliamentary select committees have also visited play schemes and parenting workshops, reinforcing that the programme is government-owned and -led. High-level visits have helped to institutionalise the programme and motivate district and regional GES staff to engage.

**The strategy of building ownership from the outset and continually reinforcing the notion of government ownership is key to successful scaling, according to both GES and LM respondents.** District and regional GES teams were told from the beginning that this was a government-owned programme. Structured lesson plans were provided by LM and GES to deliver a singular message to regional and district teams about government ownership and the mandatory nature of implementing the GES-LM programme. This was also passed down to teachers and mothers to promote a sense of ownership among all key stakeholders, making it clear that GES-LM is not a short-term project. **Respondents emphasised that this concept of local ownership must be continually reinforced** through regular training and sensitisation workshops, both prior to and during the transition to the Sustain phase.

**Developing and sustaining the idea of local ownership is still a challenge among regional and district GES staff, and continual training and reinforcement of the notion of local ownership have been crucial.** Respondents from LM and at national GES felt that some of the indicators of strong ownership, such as teams being proactive in sourcing additional funding and ongoing quality assurance during the Sustain phase, are not seen across all districts and regions.

**Interviews with district GES officials highlighted an ongoing mindset that 'LM will come to support' if there are challenges, despite the clear emphasis from national GES that district teams need to take ownership and initiative**

**themselves.** LM staff mentioned that further training and support is being developed by GES for district teams entering the Sustain phase, and one focus will be to further reinforce how the reduction in technical support during this phase will affect them.

**Maintaining the quality of monitoring processes during the Sustain phase remains a challenge due to capacity challenges and the need for continual training in new processes.** Three of the district and regional GES-LM Coordinators interviewed noted that there have been capacity challenges in completing quality assurance processes in a timely manner, such as ensuring forms are submitted to national GES, and undertaking phone calls with district GES-LM Coordinators to ensure the smooth running of the programme.

**GES and LM staff note that further training and capacity-building workshops have been arranged to further promote quality at scale,** and that repeated training sessions are needed to embed the processes of quality assurance. GES has developed a further term, titled 'Embed term 5', to reinforce the capacity-building process before districts transition to the Sustain phase, to ensure that lessons on government ownership and quality assurance are clear.

## Maintaining motivation for the implementation of the GES-LM programme

Maintaining motivation among key participants in the GES-LM programme – GES officials, teachers, and mothers – is a key aspect of ensuring the sustainability of GES-LM at scale. While the forthcoming Thrive study on community engagement in GES-LM provides more detail than can be provided in this study on the motivations of teachers and mothers,<sup>19</sup> in the sampled districts, GES officials spoke of fluctuating levels of motivation among teachers and mothers engaged in the programme. An earlier study on the introduction of the GES-LM play schemes and KG teacher motivation found that this approach was motivating, as the play schemes create an engaging, creative environment and provide KG teachers with assistance in the classroom through training.<sup>20</sup> This is important given that a challenge in the Ghanaian education sector is widespread low teacher motivation.<sup>21</sup> The study also found that the programme reduced teacher absenteeism. This is thanks partly to the programme's motivating effects, but also to the more frequent school monitoring and more robust quality assurance processes it provides.<sup>22</sup> **However, in the sampled districts of this study, GES officials noted a gradual increase in teacher absenteeism – this was likely related to the reduced frequency of GES-LM monitoring during the Sustain phase due to public funding constraints.**

**GES officials perceived that teachers are motivated by the receipt of CPD points for their work in the GES-LM programme.** CPD points are provided in recognition of the training and development that GES-LM provides, as well as the monitoring

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<sup>19</sup> Jones (forthcoming).

<sup>20</sup> Attanasio and Krutikova (2017).

<sup>21</sup> Annan (2020).

<sup>22</sup> Attanasio and Krutikova (2017).

and quality assurance processes. There were also indications that teachers see their role in GES-LM as an **opportunity for CV development and career advancement**. Building on this, GES has given some of the high-performing teachers additional roles in the GES-LM programme, such as delivering peer top-up training and mentoring.

**Despite this, GES officials reported a dip in some teachers' enthusiasm for the elements of the programme that require work outside of school hours.** This largely relates to the monthly parenting workshops, which are delivered by teachers. Some schools had also started to deliver the play schemes before the school day starts, as this time is preferred by mothers (although this diverges from the GES model). Due to this, **some teachers see the GES-LM programme as 'additional work'. Lingering perceptions that GES-LM is an 'NGO programme', outside of the national curriculum, were reported as a factor in this.** To address this, GES plans to undertake further training to reinforce that the programme is a government initiative. This highlights the challenge of developing strong local ownership for initiatives that were initiated with NGO support, even where (as in this programme) they are implemented through the government system from the start.

**District officials explained that mothers' motivation to participate in the programme is now waning in some areas in the Sustain phase.** This will be explored in a forthcoming Thrive study on the community drivers of the GES-LM programme.<sup>23</sup> Of relevance to this study on government implementation processes, two of the sampled districts had commenced novel initiatives to maintain mothers' motivation to participate:

- recognising mothers as teaching assistants, to motivate them by including them in the teaching hierarchy;
- actions taken by district teams to make mothers feel included and cared for – such as visiting them when they are bereaved; and
- including mothers in decisions on how the programme is run (for instance, being responsive to their requests to change the timing of the play schemes).

## Oversight, monitoring, and quality assurance in the GES-LM programme

### National level

**GES engagement of a dedicated national GES-LM Officer has both shown government commitment and helped to institutionalise the programme into GES structures.** Currently, the GES-LM Officer acts as a useful point of connection between LM and GES, and will gradually take on more of the NGO's technical support roles. The GES-LM Officer undertakes regular monitoring and quality assurance, and speaks to teams right down to individual SISOs to understand

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<sup>23</sup> Jones (forthcoming).

what challenges they are facing, why they have not completed their monitoring forms, and whether training is going ahead as planned.

**The role has strengthened the recognition among GES officials that GES-LM quality assurance is to be led from the national level,** and that there are mechanisms, meetings, and feedback sessions led from each level with the overall oversight of the GES-LM Officer. Across the sampled districts and regions, GES officials felt strongly that the GES-LM Officer role is key to the programme's sustainability.

**Both GES national officials and LM staff agreed that an earlier engagement of a national GES-LM Officer would have been beneficial in supporting the implementation of the programme.** The GES-LM Officer role was universally praised in interviews across national, regional, and district levels as being a useful point of contact and support for GES officials in the Sustain phase, while also acting as a key figurehead that demonstrates government ownership of the GES-LM programme. These were both aspects that LM staff reflected upon as challenges early on in the development of the programme where the GES-LM Officer role would have been beneficial.

## Regional level

**The initial implementation of the GES-LM programme focused on the district level. Building regional governments' capacity to oversee the programme occurred later, as a key focus of the scale-up.** GES officials reflected that, with hindsight, it would have been beneficial to factor in regional government from the start, both to build ownership and to strengthen oversight. As regional teams were engaged later, some regional GES respondents felt this had affected their knowledge and capacity to support the GES-LM programme.

**Both GES and LM noted that it would have been useful to implement the ToT model factoring in regional teams early on in the implementation of GES-LM. This would have ensured that all levels of government were knowledgeable about and involved in the programme from the beginning.** Both LM and GES staff felt that this would further embed the programme in government systems and promote awareness and capacity to support the scale-up across the levels of government;

*'We realised that the regions were having a challenge in really supervising the programme quality at the district level because the districts knew the programme more than the region. We realised that, from the beginning, the involvement of the region was very low in terms of the knowledge of the programme as compared to the district and so we had to come back and do what we call regional capacity building to now increase the capacity of the regional team member to match up to the district members so that they can have a certain level of knowledge about the programme and be able to supervise them accurately.'* (LM staff member)

## District level

**The GES-LM programme has implemented robust monitoring and oversight measures, and has provided wide-ranging skills that have improved the quality**

**of district oversight across their work for GES-LM and beyond.** Perceived improvements included the formality of monitoring, its regularity, and clearer SISO roles and responsibilities. Thanks to this, several officials felt that GES-LM standards and training have made monitoring across the education sector as a whole much more effective.

**The district GES-LM Coordinator role provides a clear point of contact for the district team to report issues and challenges/complaints.** District team respondents reported that the clear structure identifying to whom they should report challenges around the programme's running has led to a more responsive feedback system, and the clear identification of whom they should contact in the event of an issue with the programme was valuable.

## Resourcing and institutionalisation of the GES-LM programme

### Human resourcing of the GES-LM programme

**Creating dedicated GES-LM Coordinator roles using GES personnel in each region and district has also helped to promote government ownership of the programme,** alongside enabling programme management and quality assurance processes. In most districts, the GES-LM Coordinator role has been integrated into the work of the ECE Coordinator, which has promoted integration with wider work. ECE Coordinators at regional and district levels were invited to become GES-LM Coordinators, but this was not a compulsory requirement.

**The sampled district teams did not feel that their workloads were greatly impacted by the GES-LM programme; a key desire noted by LM in its planning of the integration of the GES-LM programme into Government of Ghana systems.** District GES officials rarely mentioned that they felt they had faced challenges with the additional requirements needed to complete the monitoring of the GES-LM programme, such as submitting monitoring forms and visiting play schemes. Most respondents noted that the programme has facilitated their additional work beyond GES-LM, by giving them the financial support needed to undertake monitoring activities beyond the programme.

### Institutionalisation and financial resourcing of the GES-LM programme

**The Government of Ghana funds the core human resource costs – national, regional, and district teams – of GES-LM.** However, additional government resourcing is constrained by the financial crisis that Ghana is facing. Due to this, the programme currently remains reliant upon LM funding for GES-LM work.

**LM staff are realistic about the challenges the Government of Ghana faces in relation to funding, and stress that any scale-up of a programme needs to account for financial challenges.** It is a long process and LM staff are approaching the situation pragmatically. Despite the Government of Ghana's inability to pay for the programme at present, this is not a sign of a lack of interest or commitment to the programme, but rather a result of unfavourable circumstances. It will take time for the Government of Ghana to secure funding



for the programme, but LM is willing to continue to provide financial support where needed.

**Throughout the setup of the GES-LM programme, GES and LM have remained pragmatic in ensuring the programme is not reliant upon expensive changes to existing practices and hardware.** A conscious effort was made to utilise existing systems, personnel, and hardware wherever possible to minimise costs and prevent the programme from faltering due to expensive changes needed during scale-up. Pragmatic changes to reduce the financial burden on the programme, such as the reduction in monitoring practices at the district level, have been taken to ensure the core costs of the programme, such as the rollout of the play schemes and parenting workshops, can continue to be met despite the financial challenges facing the Government of Ghana.

**District GES officials note that it is vital that programmes like the GES-LM programme be institutionalised through legislation to guarantee funds are ring-fenced and ensure successful scaling.** GES officials across all the sampled Sustain districts focused heavily on seeking access to the Government of Ghana's Common Fund to supplement the financial support given by LM, with limited success. The Common Fund is provided by central government to allocate money to local governments to 'address developmental challenges in their districts'.<sup>24</sup> The GES-LM programme does not have ring-fenced funding akin to other GES programmes. As such, money provided by the Government of Ghana to the Common Fund has already been spent by the time District Directors are able to compile a formal request for funding for GES-LM.

## Wider lessons for international learning

The findings from this study not only provide valuable lessons learned for GES-LM in Ghana as it continues its scaling, but also highlight some key lessons for international learning. The lessons have come not only from the GES officials interviewed for this study, but also from reflections by LM staff involved in the programme since its inception in Ghana.

**For one, the GES-LM programme achieved success thanks to an iterative testing and piloting process that occurred both prior to and during government buy-in and ownership.** A demonstration of the efficacy and value of the programme for the Ghanaian government has proved valuable not only in ensuring government buy-in, but also in supporting the sustainability of the programme by integrating governance elements of the programme into existing government systems. Adopting a similar approach in other contexts – to focus on how the programme can provide positive impacts at scale – is vital to unlock government buy-in and support.

**Developing a programme that works within existing government systems and minimises the need for new hardware and roles is key.** Early on in the implementation of GES-LM, LM was aware of the large capacity gap between the desired quality assurance systems and processes by LM, and the reality on the

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<sup>24</sup> Suhuyini *et al.* (2023).

ground with GES. Maintaining simplicity within the core programme and not requiring advanced hardware ensures that the programme can be scaled within existing government processes.

*'I would say that [an ECD programme] has to work with an existing system, and existing personnel. If you're setting up too many extra roles, if you're relying on externals and banking on technology, like this would work if everyone had a laptop, or everyone had Excel, it can't work.'* (LM staff member)

**Consistent training and strengthening standards with government personnel are crucial.** GES-LM onboarding training has been designed to work without advanced tools or hardware, and adaptations to the training made during the scale-up have focused on strengthening key aspects of the programme, maintaining regular monitoring, adhering to standards, and building both the motivation to execute the programme and the skills to undertake the tasks required of GES staff. **Continuous oversight of the training programme and ensuring that regular support and supervision are available are key to developing capacities among staff to ensure they can effectively undertake their roles.**

*'Often with the ToT, it's kind of approximate; saying let's do a training and then they'll be able to cascade the training and deliver, it's not just going to work. And although we kind of knew that before, it was a learning that it takes a huge amount of time to change people's practices and attitudes. Behaviourally, it takes time, it needs constant practice and reinforcement, and you can't overload people, so you have to do training, lots of follow-ups, ongoing training, coaching.'* (LM staff member)

**Financial challenges will be present during scaling – and further donor financial support needs to be anticipated.** LM staff were realistic about the Ghanaian Government's financial capacity to fund the programme, with LM providing the two-year package of support to ensure the setup of GES-LM. However, as financial challenges have continued, the scaling strategy of GES-LM has had to adapt – not only through the reduction in monitoring, but also through donor flexibility and financial support beyond the anticipated handover date of the programme to government. **Being adaptive to the challenges of the government in supporting the programme financially is vital.**

*'The way we look at it is that basically we want to get government paying for the programme. We said we'd get government to pay within two years and that was wrong. You have to be a lot more patient. We were very binary; we were like well if government don't want to pay for it in two years they are not interested in the programme, but it's much more complicated. And I think you do need to set an ultimate timeline, but it's going to take a long time to get budget secured.'* (LM staff member)

**Consistently reinforced messages of ownership and the value of the programme for communities are key to ensuring sustainability at scale.** For GES-LM, formalising and institutionalising the programme into career development programmes for teachers – such as the CPD accreditation scheme – is invaluable in ensuring teacher buy-in. LM reported that if similar programmes were to be scaled in other contexts, having a representative figure or team of individuals in a

role akin to that of the GES-LM Officer from the outset would be valuable in ensuring coordination, government ownership of the programme, and maintaining quality at scale.

## 6. Study limitations

The study is based on a small sample of four districts and two regions. This enabled a deep dive into specific locations. To gather insights that were applicable to a wider number of districts, the interviews with regional GES staff included questions on other districts in their region. Similarly, the interviews with LM and national GES officials gathered insights on lessons learned across all the focal regions, and challenges faced prior to the entry of the sample regions and districts during the Sustain stage.

It should also be noted that the districts sampled for this study were some of the earliest districts engaged in the programme. Therefore, some of their experiences may not necessarily reflect the experiences of districts that entered the programme later, as some implementation processes detailed in this study will have been refined since the earlier cohorts were onboarded. In addition, the significant time between the district engagement with the programme and when the interviews were conducted for this study means that there are potential issues surrounding the accurate recollection of details on programme implementation by GES officials. This issue has been mitigated through a documentary analysis as a supplementary source of information alongside the interviews.

Finally, there is the issue of bias in interview responses. This study's sample focused on respondents who are delivering the GES-LM programme. Therefore, while they are adequately placed to speak about the implementation and scale-up of the programme, this study should be considered alongside the GES-LM Community Study,<sup>25</sup> which provides a more rounded exploration of the GES-LM programme with insights from programme recipients, such as mothers and wider community members.

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<sup>25</sup> See Jones (2025).

# 7. Conclusion

This report has explored both success factors and barriers to implementation of the GES-LM programme at scale, demonstrating some key findings for the scale-up of similar ECD interventions in other contexts. Utilising interviews with GES officials across four districts and two regions – alongside national GES staff and staff at LM – this report has explored both successes and challenges in how the GES-LM programme was first implemented in northern Ghana and how government buy-in was ensured, alongside the experiences of early districts and regions in the programme.

## Implementation of the GES-LM programme — successes and barriers

This report first addressed the implementation, setup, and adaptation of the GES-LM programme to operate at scale. Overall, the programme was introduced into Ghana effectively. The process of developing the programme – first through pilot studies and LM implementation, and later through explorations of how to scale through government involvement – demonstrated an iterative approach to testing and adaptation. Immediate issues to at-scale implementation – such as the adaptation of a ToT model, and the refinement of the Setup, Embed, and Sustain phases of the programme – were identified early as barriers to successful and sustainable implementation at scale.

Government buy-in and ownership – key aspects of scaling identified in the wider literature on ECD programming – were also ensured early on and effectively. The advent of the GES-LM programme as an ECD intervention centred on play-based learning, alongside well-known challenges of parenting practices and poor teaching quality, merged effectively with existing political priorities in Ghana. LM staff acknowledged that the then-Minister of Education was instrumental in kickstarting the adoption of the LM model for government implementation and scale-up, as its play-based pedagogy aligned with the political priorities of the government of the time. Nevertheless, efforts were made to ensure government buy-in from the offset, including early engagement with key agencies within the MoE that needed to be onboarded to ensure the smooth implementation and scaling of GES-LM – the National Teaching Council, the National Schools Inspectorate Authority, and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment –, alongside key ministries to support integration into the Ghanaian government, namely, the Ministries of Gender and Health.

Further institutional roles at all levels of government have also been shown to be valuable in gaining government buy-in, as well as in reinforcing ownership. The introduction of the GES-LM Working Group – with figures representing all the

aforementioned agencies and ministries, alongside key GES and LM staff – has served to represent the programme politically and provide coordination at a national level. The introduction of the GES-LM Officer has also been instrumental; the Officer provides clear steering on the programme by sitting on the Working Group as well as playing a key role in demonstrating government ownership to GES staff and ensuring standards are met at all levels. Clear integration of the GES-LM programme through the GES-LM Coordinator role has also reinforced government ownership and that GES-LM is a mandatory GES programme at the regional and district levels.

Necessary adaptations at scale have been made to ensure the sustainability of GES-LM, responding to financial challenges in Ghana. Broadly speaking, these adaptations have been positively implemented and received. Although initially hesitant about the reduction in monitoring targets and staffing levels, GES staff responded that these reductions have not had a negative effect on their roles and responsibilities. However, it must be noted that some standards and levels of staff motivation to implement the programme have slipped. This is evident, most notably, in the rise in teacher absenteeism, which could be related to the reduction in monitoring levels, alongside waning teachers' and mothers' enthusiasm for the programme after its transition to the Sustain phase. While these issues are discussed in more depth in a forthcoming Thrive study,<sup>26</sup> the findings outlined here represent a challenge to programme sustainability that will be faced by other ECD programmes at scale. Further study is therefore required to understand their causes and how to resolve them.

Finally, this report has highlighted the value of GES-LM in introducing more system-wide changes and improving standards in the Ghanaian education sector. A key outcome of the GES-LM programme, thanks to its myriad of quality assurance, monitoring, and evaluation processes, and robust training for GES staff, has been the wider improvements seen across GES work, with improved monitoring standards across the wider education sector. This demonstrates that the scale-up of programmes of this standard in other contexts could introduce and support wider positive system changes.

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<sup>26</sup> Jones (2025).

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# Annexure

## GES-LM programme components

The following sections contain a brief description of the core components of the GES-LM programme.

**Play schemes:** In each community, 30–40 mothers are trained by KG teachers to come into the KG for 1.5 hrs a day each in small groups, four times per week, to run play schemes. The mothers teach children in small groups using educational Teaching Learning Resources already approved by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, which stimulate learning across a range of skillsets and support the KG curriculum. This provides a practical way to overcome the structural challenges of large class sizes so that children can benefit from regular, high-quality participatory, discovery-based, and child-led educational play. Children must also wash their hands at the start of the session, which familiarises them with this vital practice and has been shown through the RCT to lead to positive health outcomes.<sup>27</sup>

The programme includes the following activities designed to strengthen community ownership and support school management:

- regular community meetings held to encourage correct age enrolment to KG;
- parent–teacher associations (PTAs), Community Ambassadors, and District Assemblies encouraged to visit regularly to provide support; and
- programme discussed as a standing agenda item at PTA meetings.

In addition, as part of their training to run the programme, KG teachers, headteachers, and GES district teams are trained in the following topics, which supports their ability to deliver the KG curriculum and improve their normal teaching practices. This reinforces and complements the work conducted by the KG In-Service Teacher Training programme. The training includes:

- the importance of holistic ECD and the role of caregivers;
- how children learn and child-centred learning;
- play-based and discovery learning;
- managing challenging behaviours;
- correcting mistakes;
- making and using teaching and learning resources; and
- maintaining a positive classroom environment.

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<sup>27</sup> IPA (2020).

**Parenting workshops:** KG Teachers deliver monthly group parenting workshops that support holistic early childhood care and education for children aged 3–8 years old. The parenting course challenges social and gender norms that undervalue child development and teaches parents simple, practical ways to provide early childhood care and education using locally available materials.

**Topics covered in the workshops include:** ECD, nutrition, hygiene, child rights, play, communication, malaria prevention, financial awareness, self-esteem, and inclusive education, among others.

**Radio programme:** GES staff (normally KG teachers) are selected and trained as radio presenters, known as 'Star Presenters'. Similar to the parenting course, radio topics cover a wide range of parenting areas to support holistic child development and parental wellbeing. The show uses an interactive, relatable, and fun storytelling format to engage listeners in real-world challenges that they face as parents and guide them to discover practical, no-cost solutions that they can implement in their homes and communities. The show also complements the play schemes and parenting workshop as it provides opportunities for communities running the play schemes to share and learn from success stories and encourages listeners to get involved.

# Thrive

Thrive is a multi-country research programme that aims to support countries to turn what we know about positive early childhood development into practical, scalable, low-cost programmes, able to transform societies over multiple generations. Working closely with policymakers and other stakeholders, Thrive aims to build understanding of early childhood development service delivery models and how they can be provided cost effectively and at scale, and how these systems can innovate, improve, and better serve children and communities in low- and middle-income countries.

Our five focus countries are Bangladesh, Ghana, Kiribati, Sierra Leone and Tanzania.

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