

# Communities of practice for social systems strengthening to improve child wellbeing



## Investing in the foundation phase of schooling: how digital tools can help

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South Africa's Constitution and global commitments, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasise children's rights to health, safety and education. Despite progress in some areas, many children still face challenges linked to poverty, hunger, education, health, violence in the home and community and inadequate access to protection and care services. **These difficulties hamper their learning and performance.** It is also an underlying cause of inequality between rich and poor children. Addressing these challenges early on in the Foundation phase of schooling (aged 6-8 years) could set children on a new path for better learning and social outcomes.

## Digital tools for child wellbeing

Early investments in children yield long-term societal benefits<sup>1</sup>. However, delivering coordinated support in resource-constrained environments remains difficult. Digital tools offer a solution by streamlining data collection, enabling integration across departments, and supporting evidence-based decision-making. South Africa's National Development Plan 2030 and e-Government Strategy prioritise digital innovation to deliver citizen-centered services that could reduce inequality and improve lives.

## Communities of Practice for Child Wellbeing (CoP)

From 2020 to 2023, the Community of Practice (CoP) initiative aimed to enhance child wellbeing for early grade learners by strengthening social support systems around them. Piloted in Johannesburg and Limpopo, the project developed and tested a digital tool, the Child Wellbeing Tracking Tool (CWTT) to assess children's needs and implement targeted interventions. A multi-sectoral team representing health, education and social services collaborated to identify risks and tailor support.

## Challenges in service delivery

South Africa's child wellbeing services face several hurdles:

- **Fragmented service delivery:** Departments lack an integrated view of children's needs, limiting coordinated efforts.
- **Data gaps:** Insufficient data hampers planning, resource allocation and policy development.
- **Limited evidence:** Interventions often lack evidence of feasibility or impact.
- **Customised solutions needed:** Tools to identify risk across well-being domains are scarce.
- **Monitoring limitations:** Without robust data, evaluating intervention outcomes is difficult.

## The Child Wellbeing Tracking Tool

The CWTT collects and integrates data across six domains of child wellbeing. Information from children, caregivers, teachers are compiled into a digital dashboard, highlighting at-risk children to inform targeted interventions.

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<sup>1</sup> Desmond, C., Richter, L. & Martin, P. 2016. Development of an Investment Case for Early Childhood Development in South Africa: Prioritizing Investments in Early Childhood Development. Pretoria: UNICEF

## Benefits of digital tools

1. Real-time data capturing enables informed planning and resource allocation.
2. Dashboards help prioritise children needing immediate support.
3. Monitoring tools enhance service delivery to at-risk children.
4. Evaluation capabilities improve understanding of intervention effectiveness.

## Key findings and lessons from the pilot

The CWTT demonstrated value in identifying children at risk and informing interventions. Practitioners valued its clear, actionable insights. However, challenges included:

- Digital literacy gaps and connectivity issues.
- High development costs, though potential long-term savings are significant.
- The need for rigorous data management and real-time analysis tools.

To scale up, implementation must address:

- Training practitioners in digital literacy.
- Offline functionality for tools in areas with poor connectivity.
- Collaboration across sectors to streamline data sharing and interventions.

## Scaling up and policy implications

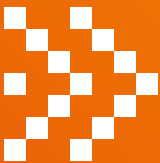
The CWTT aligns with national strategies like the Department of Health's e-Health initiative and the Department of Social Development's social protection systems. Scaling up requires:

- **Policy reforms:** Frameworks for data sharing and increased resources.
- **Practical steps:** Co-developing platforms with robust governance and ethical guidelines.
- **Technical support:** Ensuring secure data storage and accessible hardware.
- **Human resources:** Building digital literacy and providing ongoing support.
- **Access to data:** access to affordable and reliable data or network services.

## Conclusion

Digital tools like the CWTT have the potential to transform child wellbeing services by enabling evidence-based, integrated and targeted interventions. Addressing South Africa's digital divide and fostering collaboration across sectors will ensure these innovations improve outcomes for all children, contributing meaningfully to the country's 2030 development goals. By combining technology with human expertise, South Africa can support children to thrive.

Visit our website for more information <https://communitiesforchildwellbeing.org/> or contact Dr Matshidiso Sello [matshidisos@uj.ac.za](mailto:matshidisos@uj.ac.za)



**Communities of Practice web link:**  
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