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Scaling Childcare to Promote Women's Economic and Child Development in Ethiopia

Impact Story 1

KEY IMPACTS

This project's primary objective was to reduce women's and girls' unpaid care responsibilities and strengthen women's economic empowerment and early childhood development. By addressing childcare as a binding structural constraint, the project aimed to reposition childcare as economic infrastructure rather than a social service. The project achieved measurable reductions in unpaid care work, improved women's economic outcomes, strengthened workplace productivity, and advanced system-level change.

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Project Overview

The [*Scaling Childcare to Promote Women's Economic and Child Development in Ethiopia*](#) project set out to generate robust evidence and policy pathways for scaling high-quality, safe and inclusive childcare services in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The primary objective was to reduce women's and girls' unpaid care responsibilities and strengthen women's economic empowerment and early childhood development.

The project targeted low-income women, female civil servants, economically vulnerable households, and children under four years of age, including children with disabilities, with additional intergenerational benefits for school-age girls. By addressing childcare as a binding structural constraint, the project aimed to reposition childcare as economic infrastructure rather than solely a social service.

Project Activities

The project implemented a mixed-methods, longitudinal research and engagement strategy focused on two childcare modalities:

- institutional (workplace-based) daycare centres for civil servants, and
- publicly financed daycare centres serving low-income and vulnerable households.

Key activities included baseline and midline household surveys, time-use analysis, childcare-quality and disability inclusiveness analysis, maternal mental health and social capital analysis, qualitative interviews, and administrative data collection to build a longitudinal panel dataset.

Alongside evidence generation, the project invested heavily in system strengthening. This included co-development of childcare workers training manual, standardisation and operational manuals, large-scale workforce professionalisation through the training of 1018 childcare workers or caregivers citywide, using standardised curricula and operational manuals, expansion of disability-inclusive childcare through the provision of 48 wheelchairs and 67 hearing aids, and sustained policy engagement through validation workshops, high-level dialogues, and advocacy with municipal and federal authorities.

Delivery was led by a coalition comprising the Policy Studies Institute, the Addis Ababa City Administration Bureau of Women, Children and Social Affairs, and ActionAid Ethiopia.

Project Achievements

The project achieved measurable reductions in unpaid care work, improved women's economic outcomes, strengthened workplace productivity, and advanced system-level change.

Longitudinal survey data shows that women's unpaid care work reduced by an average of 1.6 hours per week across both childcare modalities, with time reallocated to paid employment. Among institutional daycare users, girls' unpaid family work declined by 8.5 hours per week, accompanied by a reduction in school absenteeism of around 19 percent.

Women's economic outcomes improved substantially. Institutional childcare users saw increases in monthly income of approximately 746 ETB and a 13.5 percent rise in paid work hours, alongside higher job satisfaction, improved punctuality, and reduced absenteeism. Public childcare primarily enabled labour market entry, with 55 percent of women entering new employment and income gains of 42.5 percent among female-headed households. These findings are based on baseline (2024/25) and midline (2025/26) survey rounds, supported by qualitative interviews and administrative records.

At a system level, the project contributed to workforce professionalisation, disability-inclusive service delivery, and policy shifts recognising childcare as economic infrastructure. Evidence generated by the project informed policy dialogue that resulted in the Addis Ababa City Administration approving a dedicated budget line and endorsing formal recognition of childcare workers within the civil service framework.

Challenges & Lessons Learned

The project faced challenges related to data collection fatigue among respondents, hesitancy from some institutions to participate due to quality concerns, and ongoing shortages of trained childcare workers. Macroeconomic pressures and coordination challenges across government levels also constrained rapid scaling. These challenges underscored the importance of trust-building with institutions, careful field management, and sustained investment in workforce pipelines.

Key learning centred on the value of collaborative policy spaces. Evidence uptake was strong when policymakers, civil society, and researchers engaged jointly in interpreting findings and co-designing solutions.

The project also learned that embedding equity, particularly disability inclusion and gender-sensitive targeting, must occur early to prevent exclusion as scale accelerates.

Care Sector Contributions & Next Steps

The project's main contribution to the care sector is its reframing of childcare as productivity-enhancing economic infrastructure. By combining longitudinal impact evidence with workforce development and policy engagement, the project moved beyond pilot interventions towards institutional reform and system-level embedding of care services.

Next steps focus on deepening fiscal institutionalisation and supporting replication beyond Addis Ababa. Planned actions include engagement with finance and planning authorities to influence budget allocations, development of targeted investment cases for childcare and regional learning exchanges to support adaptation in other regions. Key recommendations are to formalise childcare within public budgeting frameworks and to continue investing in professional, inclusive care workforces as a foundation for sustainable scale.

About the Africa Cares Together Community of Practice

The [Africa Cares Together Community of Practice \(ACT CoP\)](#) is a vibrant, inclusive network of diverse actors committed to amplifying care work across Africa. It is coordinated by ActionAid International (AAI) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and is funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Global Affairs Canada (GAC), and the Hewlett Foundation. The ACT CoP network is made up of members from the 19 projects of the [Scaling Care Innovations in Africa \(SCIA\)](#) initiative, a partnership between IDRC and GAC.

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