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Childcare at the Multilateral Development Banks: Expansion, Integration, and What's Next

An Updated Review of Multilateral Development Banks' Investments, 2021-2024

KELSEY HARRIS · ASTHA MAINALI

Abstract

Since CGD's 2021 review of childcare investments at multilateral development banks (MDBs), global attention to childcare has grown, driven by increasing recognition of its role in women's economic empowerment, labor force participation, and broader development outcomes. This paper evaluates how childcare has evolved in this time by examining childcare-related projects approved by ten MDBs between June 2021 and December 2024, supplemented by interviews with MDB childcare leads and project teams. We identify 163 new projects with childcare components, representing \$20.94 billion in core financing and \$2.7 billion in co-financing and grants – a 67 percent increase in funding for childcare since 2018. The findings point to a shift in how childcare is positioned: increasingly not only as an early childhood or human capital intervention, but as an enabler of women's economic participation. Despite this strong overall momentum, measurement of childcare outcomes remains uneven, and some sectoral entry points are underutilized. Drawing on portfolio analysis and practitioner interviews, the paper identifies lessons for future MDB investments, including the importance of diagnostics and business-case evidence, cross-sectoral partnerships, context-specific models, adaptive implementation, and stronger attention to quality, financing, institutional ownership, and evidence. To sustain and deepen recent progress, MDBs should treat childcare as core economic infrastructure aligned with the jobs agenda, invest in diagnostics and evidence, strengthen coordination, local ownership, and financing, and improve measurement and accountability, particularly for outcomes related to women's economic empowerment.

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Definition
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AfDB	African Development Bank
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
CAF	Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean
CGD	Center for Global Development
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EIB	European Investment Bank
ESG	Environmental, Social, and Governance
GIL	Gender Innovation Lab
IBRD	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
IDA	International Development Association
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
IFC	International Finance Corporation
ILO	International Labour Organization
IsDB	Islamic Development Bank
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
MDB	Multilateral Development Bank
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PDB	Public Development Bank
TTL	Task Team Lead
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UN	United Nations

UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
WBG	World Bank Group
WBL	Women, Business and the Law
WEE	Women's Economic Empowerment

1. Introduction

In the last several years, largely in response to COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019), there has been increased global attention to childcare in recognition of its importance to development and women's economic empowerment (WEE). The staggering amount of unpaid care work that women do as compared to men (Gottlieb et al., 2024), which was exacerbated during the pandemic, has been well established and its importance acknowledged at the highest levels (United Nations [UN], 2024). Yet despite this evidence and attention, policies, investment, and engagement still fall short of adequately addressing global childcare gaps (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2023).

It has been nearly five years since an earlier study by the Center for Global Development (CGD) which established a baseline of childcare programming at these institutions (O'Donnell et al., 2021). As the last review included projects from 2000 through mid-2021, a moment in which the world was still responding to COVID-19, we anticipated that the subsequent five years could reflect increased momentum and investments in childcare from that date. In this period, we have benefited from new evidence and lessons learned from policies and programming, including from multilateral development banks (MDBs).

In this paper, we evaluate investment, reflect on how childcare has evolved at the MDBs in this span of time, and propose lessons that can inform future investments at these institutions. To do this, we consider notable components from these institutions related to childcare, review projects approved from June 2021 to December 2024 across ten MDBs for childcare components, and complement the portfolio review with interviews with MDB childcare focal points and project leads. This review points to a measurable expansion of financing of childcare at the MDBs, as well as an improvement around how childcare is positioned as an enabler of WEE.

As donor institutions continue to evolve their priorities, this review supports increasing attention and investment towards quality, affordable, and accessible childcare solutions that advance WEE and broader economic development and gender equality.

Notable developments in childcare at the MDBs since 2021

Since 2021, there have been significant expansions of childcare initiatives at the MDBs. The table below summarizes recent developments, which are described in further detail in the subsequent sections. The major new programs or initiatives were concentrated at the World Bank Group (WBG) and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB); while other MDBs had mentions of childcare in various strategies and reports, we did not find evidence of dedicated initiatives or programs.

Institution	Description of Development	Date
IFC	Care2Equal Project launched	2022
World Bank	Launch of Invest in Childcare Initiative, catalyzing \$385 million thus far	2022
World Bank	Childcare embedded in World Bank corporate priorities, including IDA20 Policy Commitment on increasing access to childcare in 15 countries	2022
World Bank	New Women, Business, and the Law (WBL) indicator on childcare piloted, eventually expanded to include 190 countries	2022
World Bank	Invest in Childcare Policy Academy launched with 110 policymakers from 13 countries	2024
IDB	IDB Cares Initiative launched	2025

World Bank: Invest in Childcare initiative

A major global development was the [Invest in Childcare](#) initiative, which was launched in 2022 ([World Bank, 2025c](#)) to drive more and better-quality investments in childcare across the World Bank. The initiative, funded through International Development Association (IDA) and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and contributions to the World Bank’s Early Learning Partnership Multi-Donor Trust Fund through donor government and philanthropic support, has catalyzed \$385 million thus far ([Devercelli et al., 2026](#)). At the country level, the initiative supports countries to make the case for childcare and design and implement quality projects through catalytic country grants, incentive match funding for World Bank-supported country operations, technical assistance to teams, and capacity building opportunities. At both the global and country level, analytical work (including impact evaluations, data collection efforts, and the development of new tools and guidance) is helping to address knowledge gaps, build the evidence base, and inform programming.

The first three years have seen strong demand from country teams, with a steadily expanding number and distribution of grants ([World Bank, 2022b](#)). At the time of writing, Invest in Childcare had committed funding to 73 catalytic country grants, 19 incentive grants to World Bank-financed operations (led by governments), 24 impact evaluations and dozens of country situation assessments, diagnostics, and other analytical work across 65+ countries ([World Bank, 2025b](#)). Additionally, an 18-month Invest in Childcare Policy Academy was launched in May 2024 with 110 policymakers and 60 World Bank staff participating from 13 countries (with proposals received from 24 countries), further demonstrating the high levels of interest in childcare from country governments ([World Bank, 2024c](#)). At the WBG corporate level, the initiative also supported the delivery of the IDA20 Policy Commitment “to expand access to quality, affordable childcare in 15 IDA countries, especially for low-income parents” ([World Bank, 2022a; 2022b](#)), ultimately achieving expanded access in 24 countries. Childcare is also integrated into the 2024–2030 World Bank Gender Strategy and the forthcoming Education and Skills Strategy, and, while it was not included as a specific country-level Policy Commitment in IDA21, childcare is referenced in the IDA21 Policy Package as an enabler for women’s economic participation ([IDA, 2024](#)).

International Finance Corporation (IFC): Care2Equal

As part of the Invest in Childcare Initiative, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) launched the Care2Equal Project (IFC, n.d.-a) in 2022, to promote inclusive, family-friendly workplace policies, including employer-supported childcare and parental leave, aimed at advancing gender equality and workforce participation. A strong example of the IFC's approach and the goals of Care2Equal is the Care2Equal Peer Learning Platform (known as Care2Equal El Salvador, or C2E SVL), implemented in partnership with Fundación Empresarial para la Acción Social (FUNDEMÁS). Care2Equal El Salvador brought together 12 leading companies operating in El Salvador to exchange knowledge, share best practices, and set commitments to promote family-friendly workplaces, including parental leave. Over the course of one year, the IFC supported the companies to make progress on two firm-specific goals related to family-friendly workplaces. At the end of the year, 73 percent of the pledged commitments were fully achieved, and the remaining 27 percent of commitments were partially accomplished.¹ As a result, the companies acquired positive business lessons like how to encourage productivity and the well-being of their employees and how to achieve savings by reducing absenteeism and turnover rates.

World Bank: Women, Business and the Law (WBL)

Invest in Childcare financed the inclusion of childcare into the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law (WBL) project, which collects and analyzes data on laws and policies related to WEE and gender equality. First introduced through a pilot in 2022, data on childcare are now available for 190 economies (World Bank, 2026). The indicator provides a high-level global picture of the legal and supportive frameworks – laws, policies, and institutions – related to childcare, as well as enforcement perceptions; among the 10 indicators² studied by WBL, childcare shows some of the widest disparities between legal frameworks and how those laws are being applied, and supportive frameworks remain weak. However, WBL's research points to the strong economic potential of improving these laws and policies and their enforcement. Using a cross-country difference-in-differences design, WBL estimates that the enactment of childcare laws is associated with an average 2 percent increase in female labor force participation, rising to up to 4 percent five years after enactment (Anukriti et al., 2023).

Inter-American Development Bank (IDB): IDB Cares

The IDB also launched a new care initiative, "IDB Cares," in March 2025. IDB Cares is an institution-wide effort to expand care services and infrastructure for children, older adults, and people

¹ These outcomes were cited in written feedback from IFC staff.

² Women, Business and the Law (WBL) 2.0 includes ten indicators that assess constraints and enabling conditions affecting women's economic participation: Safety, Mobility, Workplace, Pay, Marriage, Parenthood, Childcare, Entrepreneurship, Assets, and Pension. Each indicator is measured through three components: (i) legal frameworks (laws and regulations), (ii) supportive frameworks (implementation mechanisms and institutional supports), and (iii) expert opinions (de facto experience in practice). See World Bank, *Women, Business and the Law 2.0*.

with disabilities and is built on three pillars – governance and financing, coverage and quality of services, and shared responsibility for care (IDB, 2025). This effort takes a systemic approach to care and recognizes the long-term economic and societal benefits to improving care services and infrastructure.

Key recent evidence on childcare released by MDBs

The MDBs have been placing greater emphasis on synthesizing, curating, and producing evidence on what works in the provision of childcare services to advance WEE across different contexts. For example, the World Bank Invest in Childcare initiative is developing new resources, tools, and technical guidance to support policymakers and other partners working to expand access to childcare and has curated a list of childcare reports organized by institution and region (World Bank, 2025a). One such paper, a 2023 evidence and practice policy note written as an analytic foundation to the World Bank’s 2025–30 Gender Strategy, emphasizes that improving access to affordable and accessible center-based childcare services and the quality of childcare services have been shown to be effective mechanisms to address care needs and increase women’s participation in the economy (Ahmed et al., 2023).

In 2026, the World Bank completed a review of projects with childcare activities approved between 2017 and 2025 (Devercelli et al., 2026), finding a substantial increase across all regions and sectors – detailed further in Section 4 – driven by the support from the Invest in Childcare initiative. Prior to this review, in 2019, the World Bank performed an in-depth portfolio review of 69 projects, approved between 2009 and 2017, that included childcare as an activity, evaluated their approach, and presented some lessons learned around analysis, quality standards, partnerships, costs, and monitoring and evaluation. While outside the scope of this paper, the recommendations in the review remain relevant, including the following 5 key findings (Haddock et al., 2019): 1) more analysis is needed in project design; 2) more focus on quality of childcare services is needed; 3) partnerships across, within, and outside government – including with the private sector – are important for service delivery; 4) project costing and budgets should include childcare service delivery; and 5) projects should monitor and evaluate childcare activities.

Additionally, the Gender Innovation Lab (GIL) Federation³ at the World Bank has looked across its regional GILs and considered what lessons can be learned from impact evaluations to determine what policies are effective to advance gender equality. The GIL Federation has found evidence in Burkina Faso (Ajayi et al., 2022) the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Donald et al., 2018), and Indonesia (Dervisevic et al., 2021) that provision of affordable childcare is beneficial for both mothers

3 Gender Innovation Lab (GIL) Federation is a network of six World Bank regional labs that promote gender equality by combining research with hands-on operational support. The labs identify key barriers to gender equality, test innovative solutions, and ensure evidence informs project design, policy dialogue, and financing decisions at the World Bank. By linking research directly to implementation, the GILs help scale effective gender interventions and support the World Bank Group’s 2024–2030 Gender Strategy.

and children (Halim et al., 2025). The GIL Federation's research has also established that hours of childcare services should be aligned with caregivers' working hours (via the East Asia and Pacific GIL) (Halim et al., 2021) and that low-cost information campaigns can be effective in changing norms and practices related to taking parental leave (via the LAC GIL) (Querejeta et al., 2023), concluding that multifaceted interventions are necessary to increase uptake of childcare services and improve WEE.

Since 2021, regional practices and innovation labs within the World Bank and regional development banks have also released new reviews on what works in different regional contexts. Some notable recent publications are outlined below.

- **Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC):** A WBG overview of the evidence in the LAC region discusses the effectiveness of more nuanced interventions like afterschool care and the subsidization of home-based childcare to increase women's employment in Chile and Colombia, respectively (World Bank, 2023b).
- **Asia and the Pacific:** The Asian Development Bank (ADB), in collaboration with the International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) performed a review of childcare in 48 economies in Asia and the Pacific, providing recommendations and detailed case studies to guide increased investments in the childcare sector to advance gender equality. Some of the findings in Asia and the Pacific include the existence of high out-of-pocket costs for parents even when subsidies exist, a fragmented and difficult to navigate childcare ecosystem, deficient childcare systems with children aged 0–2 and those with disabilities most under-served, well-below-average wages and inadequate benefits and job security for care workers, and gaps in the monitoring and evaluation of quality standards, if they even exist (ILO et al., 2023). Amongst the recommendations presented to address these issues, some include increasing evidence-based investments in childcare, minimizing low-income parents' childcare costs, ensuring decent work for care workers through legal frameworks and implementation, extending social protection systems for such workers, and implementation, measurement, and monitoring of the quality of childcare services.
- **Sub-Saharan Africa:** The Africa GIL at the World Bank summarized lessons learned from pilots of different low-cost childcare models in four countries – Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ethiopia, and the DRC. These lessons span the design and implementation stages, covering topics such as caregiver selection, service location and type, monitoring approaches, and long-term sustainability. Key takeaways include the value of tailored approaches to local contexts, the importance of involving parents and communities to encourage uptake and foster ownership, and the challenges of enforcing cost-sharing mechanisms. Due to various financial and operational barriers, the pilots had mixed results in achieving long-term sustainability (Cassidy et al., 2023).

- **Global:** Additionally, the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIIB) and UN Women, via the Finance in Common Summit Gender Coalition, released a synthesis report which makes the case for investments in care infrastructure by Public Development Banks (PDBs), including case studies that illustrate how PDBs in different regions are investing in infrastructure that meets caregivers and care recipients' needs, embedding care considerations into physical infrastructure projects, supporting decent work in the care sector, working with governments to finance the mainstreaming of care priorities, and funding research and data to support financing and policymaking (AIIB and UN Women, 2025).

With these institutional developments and new research in mind, we revisit and update our prior analysis of MDBs' investments in childcare to see how investments have evolved and incorporated new evidence and lessons learned.

2. Methodology

To compile childcare-related investments at the MDBs, we conducted a thorough search of each institution's project database for projects from June 2021 to December 2024. We used a wide range of keywords including "childcare," "child care," "child-care," "childhood care," "creche," "day care," "daycare," "early childhood education," "nursery," "nurseries," "preschool," "preschools," "pre-school," "Pre-primary," "preprimary," "pre-primary," and "unpaid care," and "unpaid care work."

We carefully reviewed the results for relevance and recorded all projects with a childcare component.⁴ When this approach did not yield results, we expanded our search to the full website of each institution using the same terms. When it was unclear if the project included childcare, we also examined project documents, as some institutions did not explicitly mention childcare in the project summaries but included relevant indicators, objectives, or appendices in the detailed documents. For institutions with non-searchable databases, we manually reviewed all projects tagged under sectors like "infrastructure" and "services" to identify those with childcare components.

To ensure the comprehensive inclusion of childcare-related projects into our analysis and to validate the accuracy and completeness of our findings, we reached out to the ten MDBs listed below, soliciting their insights to address any identified gaps. This collaborative process not only deepened our understanding of the program design, methodologies, tools, and strategic approaches employed in childcare investment initiatives by these MDBs but also offered a platform to examine the nuances of program design, implementation, and impact. The findings from these meetings are detailed in section 4 of this paper, and a description of the methodology taken for the interviews is provided in Appendix B.

⁴ See Appendix C for the definitions utilized in this paper for childcare, ECD, ECE, and ECCE/ECEC.

We reviewed projects for the following institutions:

1. African Development Bank (AfDB)
2. Asian Development Bank (ADB)
3. Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)
4. European Investment Bank (EIB)
5. European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)
6. Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (CAF)
7. Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)
8. International Finance Corporation (IFC)
9. Islamic Development Bank (IsDB)
10. World Bank (WBG)⁵

Through our search of institutional project databases and via meetings with MDB staff, we compiled a comprehensive list of childcare projects from the ADB, AIIB, EIB, EBRD, IDB, IFC, and WBG. We found no childcare projects that were approved at the AfDB, CAF, or IsDB during the period in question – institutions that represented the smallest section of projects in our previous review.

We assessed each project to understand whether childcare was substantively incorporated into the project design, activities, and monitoring and evaluation frameworks. We included projects that expanded the provision, access, affordability, quality, or enabling environment for childcare services – including through daycare, creches, pre-primary education or early childhood care and education, after-school services, or employer-provided childcare – or where childcare was explicitly linked to WEE outcomes.

We excluded projects where childcare was referenced in an illustrative or contextual manner but without associated activities, financing, or measurable outcomes. We also excluded projects that focused solely on early childhood development (ECD) or early learning outcomes – such as home visits, parenting programs, or nutrition interventions – unless they included a clear childcare function that enabled caregivers to leave children in external care and thereby reduced time constraints on parents. Accordingly, a preschool project was not included in our dataset if its primary focus was improving children’s learning outcomes, but it was included if it expanded the availability, affordability, or duration of care – for example, by adding an additional year of free preschool for four-year-olds.

5 At the time of this review, we treated the International Finance Corporation (IFC) as a separate institution because it operated as a distinct World Bank Group entity, with a private-sector mandate and project portfolio separate from IBRD/IDA operations.

Appendix A provides a detailed overview of our criteria for assessing project inclusion, and the findings below reflect CGD's inclusion criteria for identifying childcare components within MDB operations, assessing whether childcare is substantively incorporated into projects. While this approach applies CGD's defined operational framework, individual MDBs may use different portfolio-tracking methodologies or classification criteria. As a result, project counts and financing totals reported here may differ modestly from figures published by specific institutions.

3. Findings

Across the seven MDBs with qualifying childcare projects, we identified 163 new projects with childcare components approved between June 1, 2021, and December 31, 2024. This is a considerable achievement, representing close to half of the total number of childcare projects that CGD identified from 2000 to mid-2021 (348) and nearly a three-fold increase in the average annual pace of childcare projects compared to the earlier period (O'Donnell et al., 2021).

In the 3.5 years prior to our review (January 2018–June 2021), there were 145 childcare projects (Figure 1). Therefore, the post-June 2021 period reflects an acceleration from just a short time prior, with 12.4 percent more childcare projects approved in an equivalent time span. These projects together represent \$20.94 billion in core financing,⁶ plus \$2.7 billion in co-financing and other grants. In contrast, financing totaled \$12.47 billion in the prior 3.5-year period, representing an approximately 67 percent increase in funding for childcare in a relatively short amount of time.

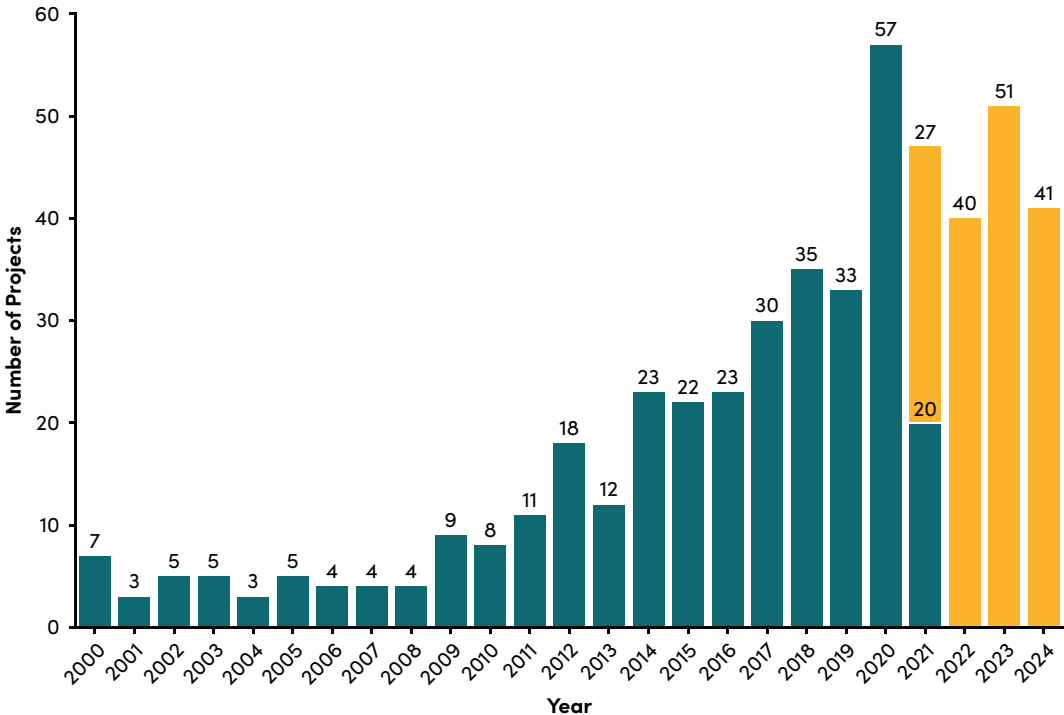
While about \$976 million across 20 projects – 4.7 percent of the total core financing and 12.2 percent of the projects in our sample – is fully dedicated to childcare, most of the core financing is embedded within broader initiatives across education, social protection, infrastructure, health, agriculture, and other key sectors, with childcare integrated into the project activities. This represents a 7.5 percentage-point decrease in the number of projects with dedicated financing from our 2021 review (19.8 percent), though when the total financing for 2018 to mid-2021 is compared with that from mid-2021 to 2024, we observe a 4.9 percent increase in financing. In other words, while there are fewer dedicated childcare projects at the MDBs, the dedicated projects that do exist account for more financing overall.

6 We distinguish between core financing and co-financing when reviewing MDB projects that include childcare activities. Core financing refers to resources provided through the Bank's primary lending instruments, such as IBRD loans, IDA credits or grants, Program-for-Results (PforR), and Investment Project Financing (IPF), where childcare activities are embedded within the project's components and results framework. Co-financing refers to additional resources provided by external partners, such as multi-donor trust funds, bilateral donor grants, or other parallel financing arrangements that support the project but are not part of the MDBs' main lending envelope. Because MDB project documents typically report financing at the overall project level, it is usually not possible to disaggregate the specific amount of financing allocated to childcare activities within each project (the World Bank's Early Learning Partnerships trust fund, which finances the Invest in Childcare initiative, is the exception to this). When childcare is identified as part of a project component or activity, we therefore record the total project financing amount, while recognizing that only a portion of that financing may directly support childcare.

Most core financing for childcare is integrated – meaning it is embedded within broader projects rather than structured as standalone childcare projects. As such, assessing the effectiveness of these investments requires attention to how childcare components are designed, implemented, and evaluated within the larger project frameworks. If childcare is meaningfully integrated into larger projects, it can be more impactful than a smaller, dedicated project. Therefore, we cannot interpret a decrease in dedicated childcare projects as a negative development since the last review.

Number and distribution of childcare projects

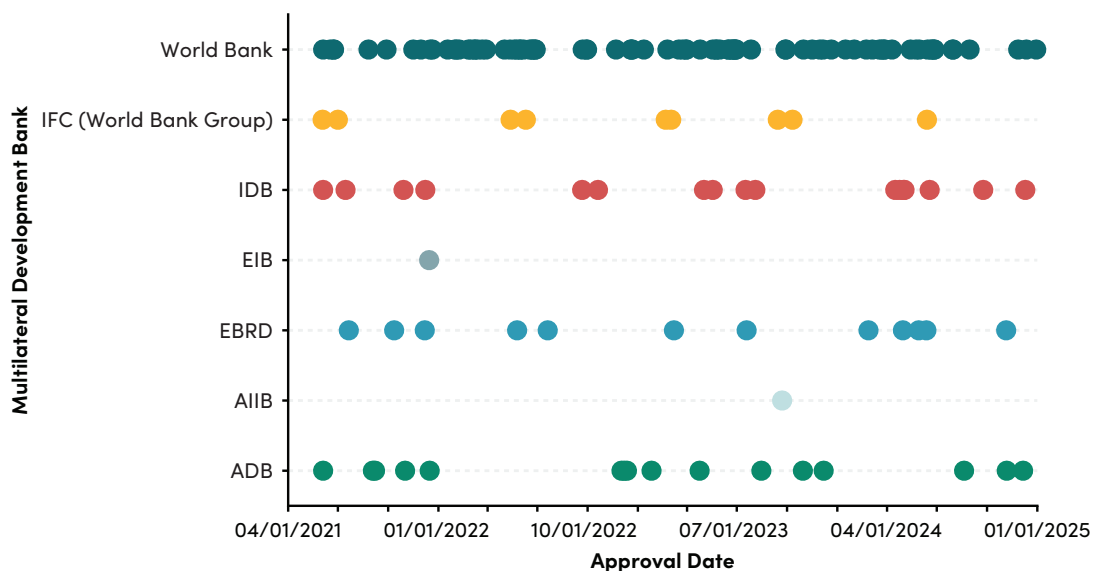
FIGURE 1. Number of childcare projects approved at the MDBs from 2000–2024



Notes: Projects from 2000 to mid-2021 are shown in teal (original analysis), while projects from mid-2021 to end-2024 are shown in yellow (updated analysis). The 2021 data point aggregates projects from both reviews and is presented as a single combined value. In 2021, the original analysis identified 20 projects and the updated review identified 27 additional projects; these represent distinct projects and have been consolidated without double counting.

We observe a slight drop in the number of MDB projects approved with childcare components in 2024, with 47, 40, 51, and 41 approved in 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024, respectively (Figure 1, with distribution across institutions shown in Figure 2). Core financing amounts for these projects were also significantly lower in the last year reviewed, with \$3.14 billion in 2024, compared to \$8.91 billion in core project funds in 2023.

FIGURE 2. Time distribution of projects from mid-2021 to 2024, by MDB



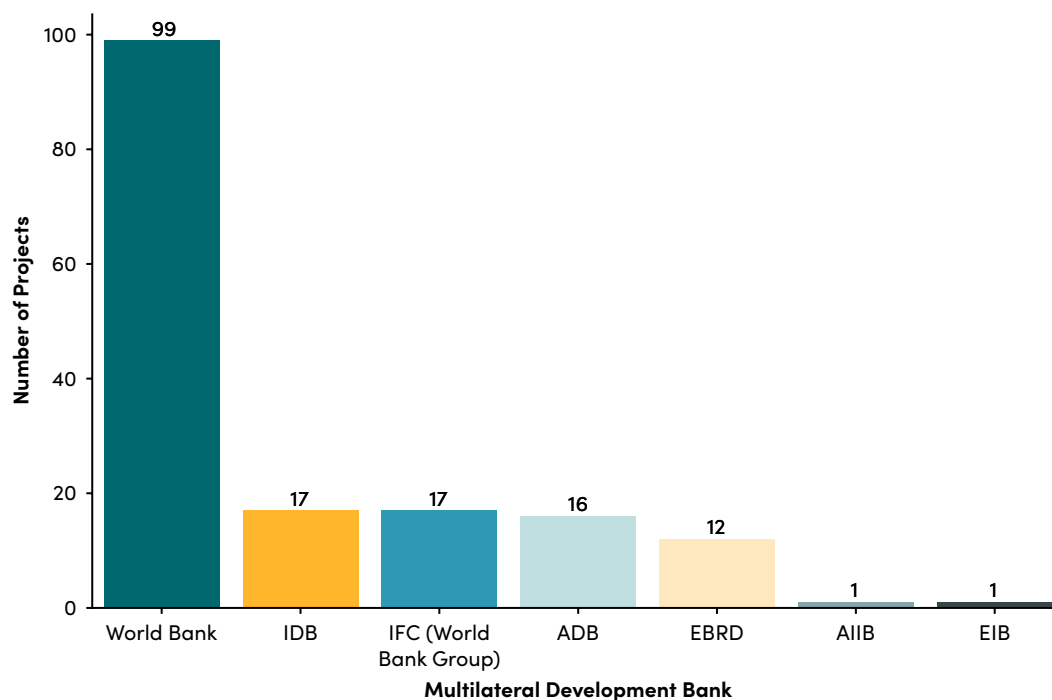
Notes: IFC has 17 projects in total. The figure shows the 9 projects with complete approval dates; the other 8 projects are excluded because they only report the approval year, either 2023 or 2024.

Projects by institution

The World Bank accounts for approximately 61 percent of the projects in our sample, similar to our 2021 review (59 percent). The EBRD, ADB, IFC, and IDB have a closely equivalent, smaller share of the projects, with between 12–17 projects each over this 3.5-year period;⁷ together, this equates to approximately 16.7 percent of the total core financing, or \$3.49 billion. The EIB and AIIB each have one project (Figure 3).

⁷ The IFC confirmed projects up to October 2024, so childcare projects approved from October–December 2024 at the IFC may not be included in this dataset.

FIGURE 3. Number of childcare projects by MDB institution

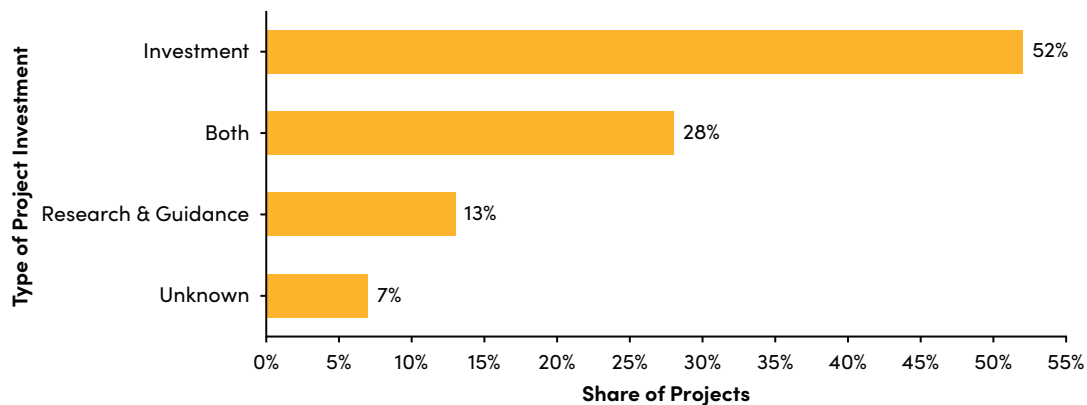


Types of investments

Approximately half of the projects in our sample are direct investments (Figure 4). However, compared to our prior review, the MDBs have demonstrated a greater emphasis on research and guidance – such as diagnostics, surveys, and analytical work – and projects that intentionally combine these components with investments, such as construction of childcare facilities following a market demand study. This reflects a shift towards integrating childcare into upstream analysis to inform project design, rather than treating it as a standalone investment. This aligns with the WBG Umbrella Facility for Gender Equality’s 2019 recommendation, which highlighted the lack of diagnostics as a constraint to determine whether and how childcare should be included in a project given country context (Haddock et al., 2019).

For example, the World Bank’s Early Childhood Education and Care for Kosovo’s Human Capital Project combines analytical work and direct investment to expand access to early childhood education and care (ECEC). The project pairs upstream work – including support for quality standards, data systems, and analysis of childcare provision – with investments in facilities, learning materials, and vouchers for vulnerable families. It also explicitly links childcare access to women’s labor-force participation, illustrating how MDBs are beginning to integrate childcare into broader project design, aligned with women’s economic outcomes, rather than treating it solely as a standalone service to advance learning outcomes (World Bank, 2024c).

FIGURE 4. Investment type



The MDBs continue to concentrate childcare-related investments in lower-middle income countries (approximately 51 percent of our sample, as shown in Figure 5), with projects in Sub-Saharan Africa comprising a growing share of the total (29 percent, as shown in Figure 6), despite the AfDB not being represented in our sample. This trend is driven in large part by the World Bank’s emphasis on Sub-Saharan Africa, with 45 percent of projects focused on that region. The Middle East and North Africa is the least common region, represented by about 6 percent of projects.

At the country level, India is most represented in our project list, with \$1.63 billion in core financing across eight projects, half of which are financed by the World Bank. The full geographical distribution of projects in our sample is shown in Figure 7.

When considering dedicated versus integrated projects, LAC hold the largest number of dedicated childcare projects, with the other regions each having a very small number. This could be in part due to institutional priorities, as 80 percent of those projects are managed by the IDB.

An emphasis on different types of care in different regions and country income levels is also reflected across the project list. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, a focus on daycares or creches is highly represented, while pre-primary or early childhood education (ECE) is the most common type of care in East and Central Asia projects.

FIGURE 5. Projects by country income level

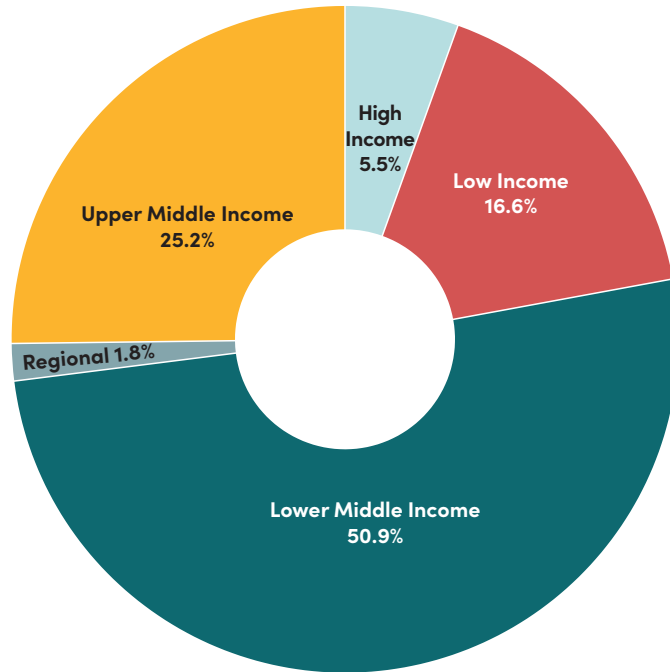


FIGURE 6. Childcare projects by MDB, disaggregated by region

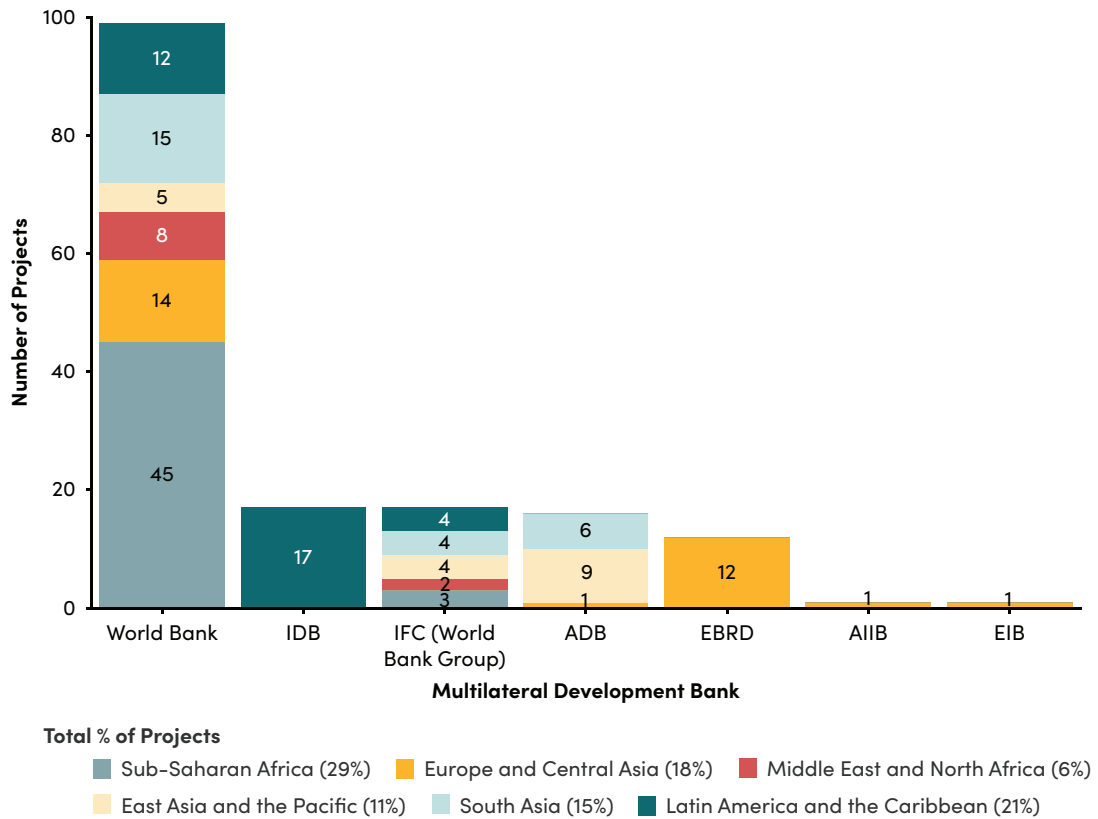
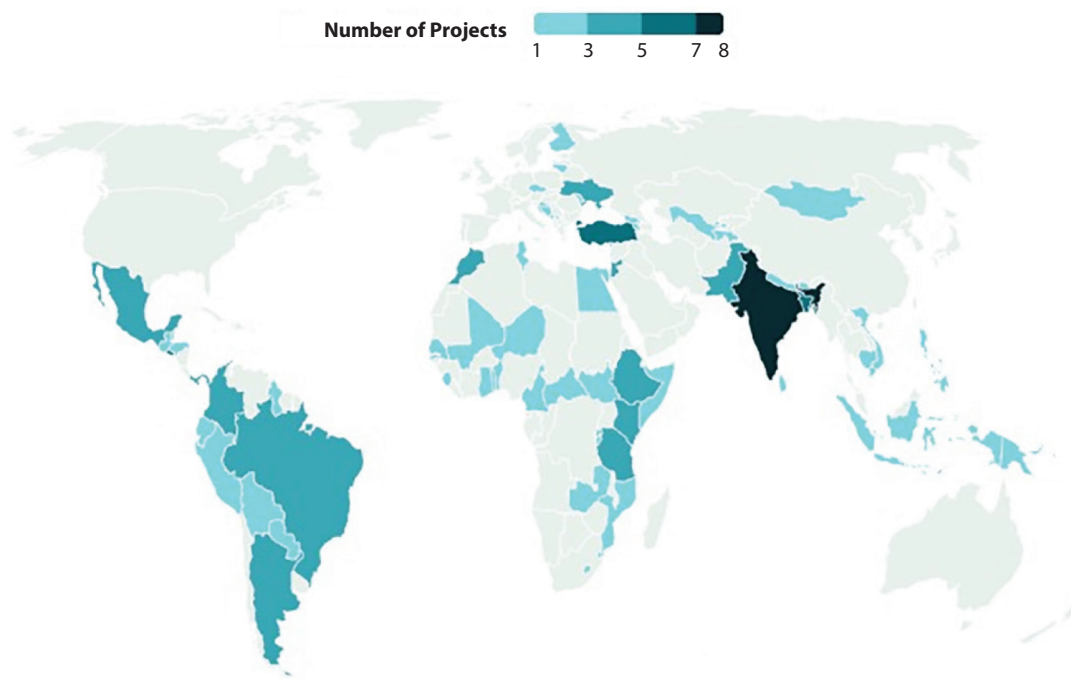


FIGURE 7. Geographical distribution of childcare projects, June 2021–December 2024



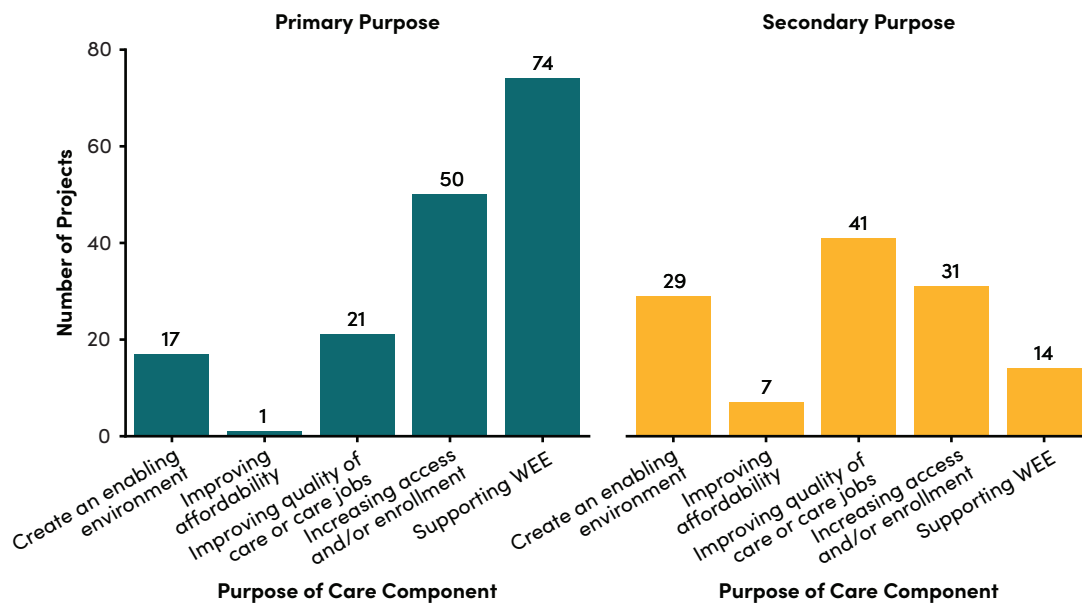
Source: World Bank Official Boundaries.

Purpose of inclusion of childcare

Over time, we also see a shift in the stated purpose of the childcare component across MDB projects. Previously, it was more common for MDBs to include childcare in project activities to improve children’s learning and development outcomes, with less emphasis on advancing WEE. In CGD’s 2021 review, only 13 percent of the projects reviewed that included a results framework showed a focus on unpaid caregivers’ outcomes, while 36 percent had outputs focused on children’s outcomes (O’Donnell et al., 2021). In this analysis, we evaluated both the primary and secondary objective of the childcare component in the project based on the context, project activities, and results framework indicators; for each project, we determined if it had a goal to increase access to childcare, improve childcare affordability, improve the quality of childcare or care jobs, support WEE, or improve the broader enabling environment (such as through policy change). Our analysis of the objectives is shown in Figure 8.

Our most recent sample demonstrates an increasing recognition of WEE as a core objective and childcare as a central driver of WEE. Over the 3.5-year period reviewed, we observed that the goal of supporting WEE was consistent, with the majority of projects in our sample including WEE as a primary or secondary purpose of including childcare.

FIGURE 8. Primary and secondary purpose of care



We see other trends in the MDB's approach to including childcare in projects over the 3.5 years surveyed. While the objective of increasing access to care was stable throughout the period, the share of projects that focus on improving the quality of care or care jobs has increased since 2021. Additionally, more recently, efforts to improve WEE are being incorporated in projects alongside objectives related to increasing access and improving quality, marking a recognition of the structural impact that accessible and quality childcare can have on women's empowerment, employment, and equality.

Inclusion of childcare in results frameworks

From June 2021–2024, childcare becomes increasingly visible as a measurable and strategic component in project results frameworks. Childcare is included in 103 projects' results frameworks, or about 63 percent of our sample. This represents a shift from treating access to quality childcare as an add-on to a core outcome, perhaps in part due to the influence of the Invest in Childcare initiative and other gender and childcare experts embedded in MDB operations. In the World Bank's 2019 childcare portfolio review, very few projects contained monitoring or evaluation of childcare activities, and the authors recommended that project teams improve measurement and include related metrics in results frameworks (Haddock et al., 2019). This seems to have been taken to heart and positions MDBs for greater impact and sustainability of these efforts.

Examples of indicators in results frameworks associated with childcare include:

- Increased enrollment of children in childcare centers or preschools
- Number of childcare centers newly opened, rehabilitated, or renovated
- Percentage of childcare centers or preschools meeting national quality standards
- Number of women with childcare support participating in programs or gaining employment

Additionally, it is promising to see an increasing reliance on measurement indicators that contain sex-disaggregated data, time-use indicators, and impact evaluations on women's empowerment. For example, the World Bank's Additional Financing to Rwanda Stunting Prevention and Reduction Project in Rwanda includes two key indicators: "number of children enrolled in ECD services that are designed to fulfill a childcare function (due to location, hours of operation or other design feature)" and the "percentage of mothers/caregivers with children enrolled in childcare/ECD who report increased hours spent in lucrative activities, including self-employment or paid work" (World Bank, 2023d). These indicators directly link economic outcomes and women's empowerment to the provision of childcare and go beyond a sole focus on learning outcomes typically observed in ECD projects.

Conversely, there are 45 projects where there is no childcare-related indicator in the results framework despite including childcare in the project activities. In the remaining projects, results frameworks were unavailable, and thus inclusion of childcare was unclear. This makes it difficult to track the impact of the project activities towards the objectives associated with childcare. Often, this was because childcare was a supportive element of the project, such as inclusion of daycare during trainings for women. In some circumstances, we did not have access to the results framework as it was not made public on the MDB website or shared by MDB staff.

We also observe a range of types of childcare in MDB projects and categorized all projects across three areas: daycares, nurseries, or creches; early childhood education and preschool; and a mixed approach or other kinds of childcare, including temporary care solutions. The most prevalent type of care (44 percent of projects) was for the youngest children via daycares or similar centers, which often aligned with an objective of increasing WEE (Figure 9). ECE and other types of care were represented in 30 percent and 26 percent of projects, respectively. This breakdown roughly carries over to each institution, with a few exceptions worth noting – the IFC has a smaller share of ECE projects, and the ADB and IDB have a larger share of projects focused on daycare, nurseries, or creches (Figure 10).

FIGURE 9. Type of care included in project

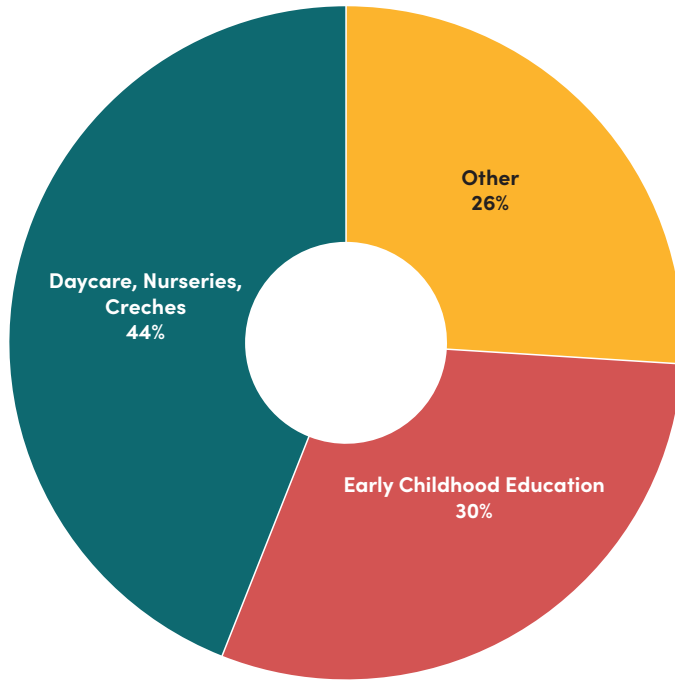
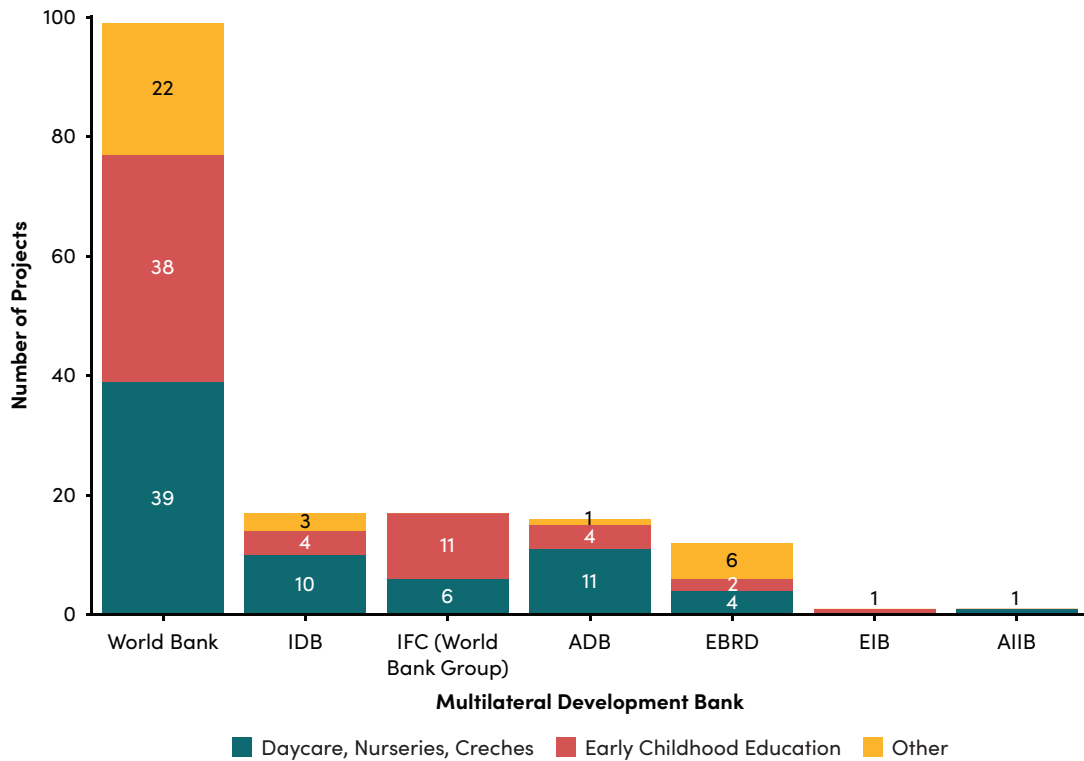


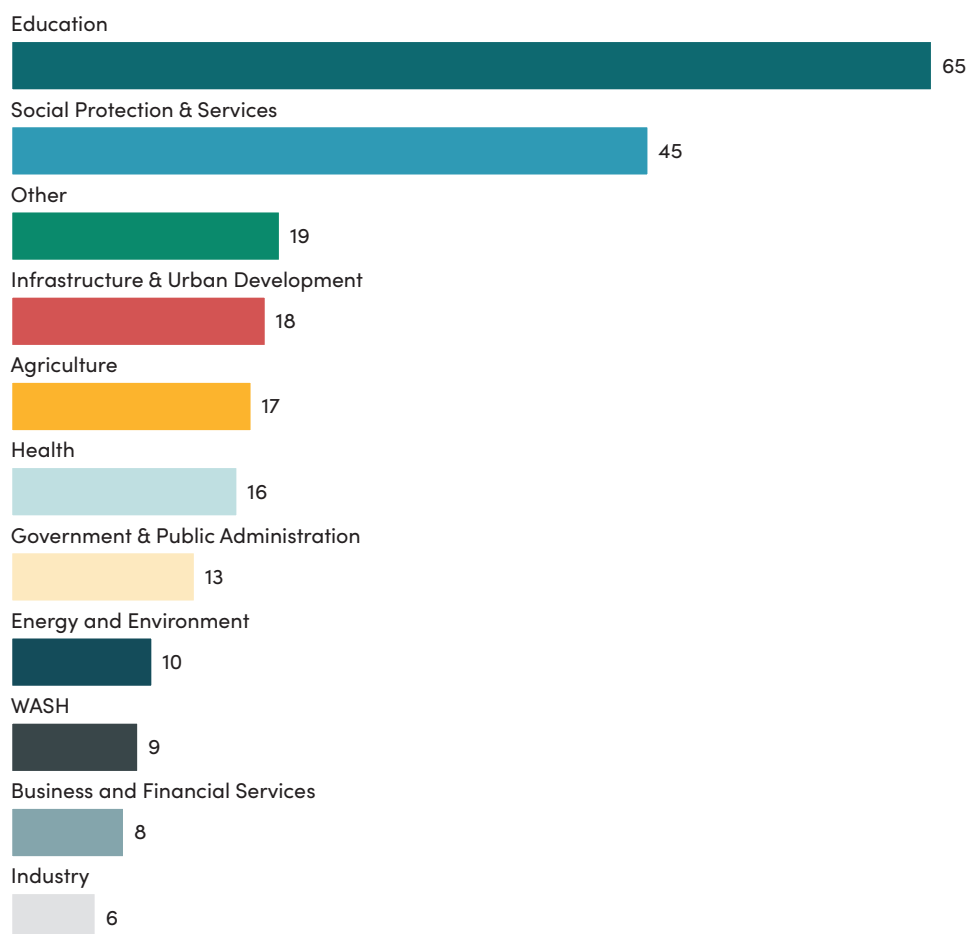
FIGURE 10. Type of care included in project, by MDB



Sectoral entry points

The sectoral distribution of childcare-related projects reflects MDB-reported sector and thematic tags listed on project webpages. Many projects are tagged under more than one sector, for example, education alongside social protection and/or health and/or tourism, which could simply indicate cross-sector classification or point to integrated design. Across the portfolio, childcare investments are highly concentrated in social sectors. Education-related components appear in around 65 percent of projects (Figure 11), while social protection features in 45 percent, indicating that MDB engagement around childcare continues to be primarily anchored in human capital development and social policy interventions.

FIGURE 11. Sectoral distribution of projects (percentage)



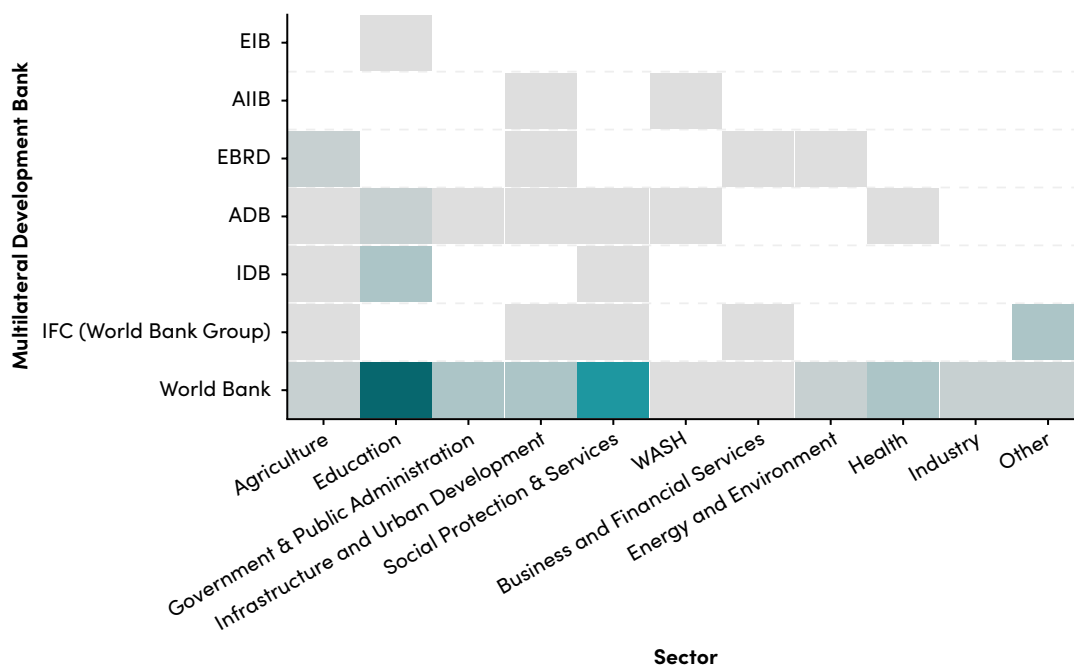
Notes: Projects were classified into sectors using project overview pages and related documentation. Because childcare interventions are often cross-sectoral, projects could be assigned to multiple sectors (e.g., education, health, and social protection). Sector classifications were recorded as binary indicators across 11 sectors. Figure 11 shows the number of projects associated with each sector, including projects assigned to multiple sectors; therefore, sector totals exceed the total number of projects in the portfolio. Education was the most common sector, appearing in 65 projects, followed by social protection and services (45 projects). While 48 of the 163 projects were exclusively education-focused (author's calculation), a total of 65 projects included an education component when multi-sector classifications were taken into account.

By contrast, sectors that often act as critical enablers of social outcomes, including infrastructure and urban development, agriculture, and health, appear in a smaller share of projects, at roughly 15–20 percent each, compared with much higher representation in education and social sectors. Further, these sectors are less frequently tagged outside of the World Bank (Figure 12).

Nineteen (19) percent of projects are grouped under an “Other” category, encompassing activities that do not fit neatly into core sector classifications. These include fisheries, tourism, trade, climate-related interventions, and mixed public-sector initiatives. A small number of IFC operations classified under Environment, Social, and Governance (ESG) are also included in this category.

Across the MDBs in our sample, some institutions have heavier emphasis on certain sectors; for example, education is a common classification for childcare projects at the World Bank, the IDB, and the ADB, while the EBRD favors agriculture (Figure 12).

FIGURE 12. Sector heatmap by MDB



Note: White = 0.

Approximately 75 percent of projects in the sample are tagged under a single sector in MDB project databases, while the remaining projects have multiple sector tags. Sector tags reflect how projects are classified in institutional databases and may not capture all components included in project activities.⁸ While around one-quarter of projects span multiple sectors, these combinations most

⁸ For simplicity, we utilized the “Sector” tags determined by the MDBs and did not perform an analysis to determine whether additional sector tags should be applied, nor did we include additional “Themes” identified by some MDBs, such as the World Bank.

often pair education or social protection with adjacent areas such as health, agriculture, public administration, or infrastructure. Integration with sectors such as water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), energy, or industry remains relatively limited, despite their potential to address underlying constraints related to time poverty, service access, and productive employment.

Where childcare is explicitly embedded within non-social sector designs, however, these entry points can play an important enabling role. For example, the ADB-supported Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Cities Improvement Project integrates daycare and early childhood care within an urban infrastructure and services program. Childcare is directly linked in the project's results framework to the objective of increasing women's access to economic opportunities and participation in urban governance (*Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Cities Improvement Project: Gender Action Plan, 2021*). This is done through investments that combine skills development and income-generating spaces with on-site daycare, as well as improvements to childcare, transport, and residential facilities at women's education institutions. This approach illustrates an underutilized pathway for MDBs to address care constraints at scale by embedding childcare into infrastructure and service delivery systems that already shape women's access to work and time spent providing care.

4. Insights from MDB childcare leads and project teams

To validate and contextualize project portfolios at each of the MDBs, and to better understand the evolution of childcare-related projects over time, implementation lessons, and emerging effects of integrating childcare into broader operations, we interviewed 19 staff across the MDBs. Interviewees included institutional leads on gender or childcare and project-level task team leads (TTLs) and other project team members from the World Bank, IFC, IDB, ADB, and EBRD working on childcare-related projects in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Latin America, and Asia. We also reached out to staff at IsDB, AfDB, AIIB, and CAF but were unable to engage them within the timeframe of this review.

These conversations provided qualitative insights that were difficult to glean from project documentation alone. At the same time, the findings reflect the perspectives of the interviewees and may be subject to institutional or individual bias, which could not be fully accounted for given the scope of the interviews. Key takeaways from these discussions are outlined below.

Portfolio evolution and institutional momentum

Overall, conversations with MDB focal points and TTLs pointed to strong continued momentum and interest from stakeholders around the issue of childcare. Technical assistance has been a key contribution of the MDBs to determine market demand and gaps, clarify the economic and

business case for childcare solutions, and identify specific opportunities for investment and policy change. An example is the IFC, which has produced reports on the business case and best practices for employer-supported childcare in more than 20 countries (IFC, n.d.-b). In Fiji, this analytical work informed the development of a childcare guidance note intended to support the design of the country's first national childcare policy (IFC, 2023).

Over the last several years, MDB portfolios of childcare-related projects have evolved and shifted, and different approaches and populations are being prioritized across the institutions. For example, given aging populations in Asia, elder care has historically been prioritized over childcare at ADB, but there is recognition of the need to build greater momentum and interest in childcare and shift to a more balanced approach. Similarly, there has historically been more of a focus on children's outcomes rather than women's outcomes at IDB. However, there has been a recent move at IDB towards orienting projects to advance WEE, in line with its institutional gender strategy. Similarly, IFC has focused on family-friendly policies that support women's economic participation, such as maternity leave policies, and moving forward, staff have identified a need to focus more on fathers, such as increasing parental leave in countries like Brazil.

Both EBRD and IFC noted that most of their investments are focused on the private sector due to their client base and mandates. In that context, there has been a focus on changing policies and behaviors around care and increased emphasis around the business and economic case for investing in care. As a result, EBRD has seen private sector clients acknowledging the benefit of family-friendly policies and the fact that care responsibilities should be shared. EBRD staff also noted the increasing demand for childcare to support refugees' employment in the private sector and the opportunities to expand and connect childcare work with the green transformation.

At the World Bank, support from the Invest in Childcare initiative, the inclusion of childcare within the institution's gender and education strategies, and the growing link to the jobs agenda have been key to driving significant recent growth in childcare activities within World Bank-supported projects. The World Bank recently concluded an in-depth portfolio review, which found that World Bank-supported projects with childcare activities increased from 9 in 2019, in 7 countries, to 130 in 2025, in 66 countries, a substantial increase across all regions and sectors (Devercelli et al., 2026).⁹ The majority of projects have focused on increasing access to childcare services, including through partnerships with the private sector, and in recent years there has been greater attention on the quality of new and existing services and activities to strengthen the enabling environment. Demand from World Bank teams and governments for financial and technical support from Invest in Childcare far exceeded World Bank staff expectations (World Bank, 2025b).

⁹ While this increase roughly tracks with CGD's findings on the number of childcare projects at the World Bank, our figures differ slightly due to methodological differences. In particular, project counts in this review (Figure 1) are based on the year projects were approved, rather than the years in which they were active. As a result, a project approved in 2024 appears only in the 2024 count, even if implementation continues in subsequent years.

Conversations with staff at these institutions pointed to five key lessons learned around design, implementation, and scaling for impact. Each lesson is supported with specific project examples that came through in our discussions.

Lesson 1: Diagnostics and business-case evidence can support more sustainable childcare programming

MDB staff emphasized that having sufficient time and funding for diagnostics, surveys, market research, and business-case analysis can support more sustainable childcare programming. This upstream work can help clarify market demand, affordability, caregiver working hours, cultural preferences, service quality, provider capacity, and future scaling opportunities. Across interviews, a consistent theme was that evidence on affordability, demand, productivity, retention, and return on investment can help make the case for childcare to governments, investors, and MDB leadership.

- **Catalytic grants from World Bank's Invest in Childcare initiative:** The Invest in Childcare initiative's Bank-Executed grants—smaller catalytic grants of \$250,000 or less that began in 2022—respond to country needs and have often been used to perform analytic and policy dialogue work that helps make the case for childcare, strengthen the enabling environment, or provide a foundation for future World Bank projects with childcare activities. To date, 20 countries have received larger incentive grants from Invest in Childcare to build on activities financed by the catalytic grants and integrate childcare into World Bank operations (Devercelli et al., 2026). While results from these catalytic grants are not yet public, TTLs reflected on the value of the information generated on market realities, cultural preferences, and future scaling opportunities.
- **Business case reports from Care2Equal at the IFC:** IFC's Care2Equal program has produced reports on the business case and best practices for employer-supported childcare in more than 20 countries (IFC, n.d.-b). In Fiji, this analytical work informed the development of a childcare guidance note intended to support the design of the country's first national childcare policy (IFC, 2023).
- **Baseline ECCE assessment in Türkiye:** In Türkiye, a baseline assessment conducted by EBRD, ILO, and Sweden identified gaps in public and private early childhood care and education (ECCE), as well as low labor force participation rates among women due to disproportionate levels of unpaid care. The report set forward recommendations on the roles of ECCE actors and associated best practices (Dedeoğlu et al., 2021).
- **Time use study in The Gambia:** In The Gambia, a study funded by Invest in Childcare is underway to determine what is considered affordable childcare in the country, and a time-use survey is being conducted to better understand caregivers' working hours. These activities are intended to ensure that childcare project design is sustainably designed and meets the needs of women and their families (World Bank, 2024a).

Lesson 2: Partnerships are essential because childcare sits across fragmented mandates

Strong partnerships were identified by MDB staff as critical for successful childcare project design and implementation. Childcare often cuts across multiple ministries and agencies, including social protection, education, labor, gender, health, and local government. Building trusted partnerships and effective coordination mechanisms takes time and can be complicated by governance structures, institutional silos, limited technical capacity, and political transitions. In some contexts, interviewees noted that no single government entity has a clear mandate to lead on childcare, making partnerships and strong coordination mechanisms especially important. However, once built, these partnerships can help align fragmented mandates, strengthen local ownership, support service formalization, and create a more enabling environment for childcare provision and women's labor force participation.

- **Using existing efforts to embed the enabling environment in Ethiopia:** In Ethiopia, pieces of the childcare enabling environment are being built opportunistically through a World Bank-supported social development operation that provides childcare within Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) centers and safe spaces as part of broader conflict recovery efforts. The operation is embedding childcare training modules within the national ECD framework and exploring the development of a national childcare certification (Phipps-Ebeler, 2024). This illustrates how partnerships can help integrate childcare into existing systems and support service formalization over time.
- **Multilateral partnerships in Türkiye:** Following the baseline assessment described above, EBRD, ILO Türkiye, and the Union of Municipalities of Türkiye formed a partnership to improve municipal regulations and advocate for policy reform to strengthen childcare delivery by Turkish municipalities (Rosca, 2021). Through this partnership, EBRD provides technical support on the regulatory, financial, and operational aspects of care investments and helps coordinate a policy working group. In this case, the institutional partnership created a mechanism to support municipal policy reform and implementation.
- **Technical expertise via a local non-governmental organization (NGO) in Ethiopia:** Across institutions, interviewees emphasized that early and proactive collaboration with local and municipal government officials can support the long-term sustainability of childcare efforts. However, limited technical expertise within government can be a barrier. In Ethiopia's Adaptive Safety Net program, one approach was to contract a local NGO with ECD expertise to provide technical support to the government (World Bank, 2020).
- **New peer learning spaces in Lebanon and Jordan:** Dissemination and cross-learning between MDB staff and peers were also described as beneficial. Interviewees noted that a peer learning platform for MDB staff has worked well in Lebanon and Jordan through Care Arabia, and that similar approaches could be applied in other regions or larger countries.¹⁰

¹⁰ This information came from a qualitative interview with IFC staff.

Lesson 3: Context determines which childcare models are viable

MDB staff repeatedly emphasized that childcare models cannot be transferred wholesale from one country or region to another. Social norms, affordability, trust in providers, labor market conditions, caregiver preferences, and the structure of existing services all shape what is feasible. This is especially important where families may need childcare but may not be willing or able to pay for formal services once subsidies are withdrawn.

- **Demand-side issues in Asia and the Pacific:** ADB staff noted that while there has been a shift toward more direct investments in childcare and care infrastructure, implementation and community buy-in for paid childcare initiatives remain challenging in many countries. For example, in the Philippines, demand for paid care remains low despite government efforts to set minimum caregiver wages. Staff emphasized the need for more research to ensure programs are practical, context-specific, and effective, as well as greater attention to shifting social norms gradually and in ways tailored to distinct stakeholder groups.
- **Gender norms in Lebanon and Jordan:** IFC staff noted that in Lebanon and Jordan, through Care Arabia, it has been important to employ women staff at IFC, as women who are nursery owners in the region are often most comfortable talking to other women. This illustrates how gender dynamics can affect engagement with providers and the implementation of childcare initiatives.
- **Different childcare models in the DRC:** Policymakers and MDB leaders often look to widely cited childcare successes, such as Kidogo, the home-based entrepreneurial franchise in Kenya, as potential models. However, these models cannot be seamlessly adapted to every context. In the DRC, promoting home-based childcare entrepreneurs was not suitable because that model of childcare was not common or desired by parents. As a result, different models had to be considered for the World Bank-executed pilot, and a parental education component was added to address perceptions of quality childcare that differed from international standards.
- **Local care needs and preferences in The Gambia:** Ongoing analysis in The Gambia on childcare affordability and caregiver time use reflects the importance of understanding local care needs before designing or scaling interventions (World Bank, 2024a). These data are expected to help ensure that project design responds to caregivers' work schedules and families' ability to pay.

Lesson 4: Adaptive implementation often reveals childcare constraints that were not fully visible at design stage

TTLs reported unanticipated learnings over the course of project design and implementation; this at times required project pivots, which in some cases enabled a more specific focus on childcare

and caregivers. These examples suggest that early and frequent consultations with stakeholders and beneficiaries, as well as flexibility during implementation, are important to ensure that activities reflect caregiver and community needs.

- **Childcare as a constraint to job training in Ghana:** In Ghana, childcare initially surfaced not through project design but during implementation, when young women participating in job training began citing lack of childcare as a major constraint. This unanticipated need led to new efforts to support childcare entrepreneurs and expand services as part of the care economy.
- **Unmet care needs in Moldova:** The World Bank's Education Quality Improvement Project in Moldova was initially focused on skills development and school grants, but it became clear that the employment needs of mothers and caregivers were an important gap that needed to be addressed to support working parents and increase women's labor force participation. This led to a deeper focus on expanding access to full-day childcare through the rehabilitation of nursery classrooms in public kindergartens, the piloting of a per-child financing model, and the formal engagement of local governments to sustain these services beyond the close of the project (Bendini, 2025).
- **Champion-building in Kosovo:** In Kosovo, the World Bank's Early Childhood Education and Care for Kosovo's Human Capital Project (World Bank, 2024d), faced slow engagement at the political level, requiring patient coordination and the cultivation of champions within the working-level government. Adaptive learning also contributed to the introduction of vouchers for vulnerable families and support for randomized controlled trials to more rigorously assess outcomes.
- **Cross-cutting implementation barriers:** Across contexts, interviewees identified infrastructure gaps, local technical capacity constraints, fragmented responsibilities across ministries, institutional ownership, and demand-side willingness to pay as recurring implementation challenges. While these constraints can limit the pace or scope of delivery, they also provide important lessons for future project design.

Lesson 5: Early scaling experiences point to the importance of quality, financing, institutional ownership, and evidence

Because the projects reviewed span June 2021 to December 2024, many were only recently approved or had only recently begun implementation. As a result, it is too early to assess project-specific results in many cases, particularly for World Bank recipient-executed Invest in Childcare projects. However, interviews pointed to several early examples of scaling potential and highlighted common conditions for sustainability: government ownership, integration into existing systems, quality assurance, sustainable financing, and evidence that childcare supports both child development and women's economic participation.

- Scaling center-based services to other states in India:** ADB's Early Childhood Development in Meghalaya Project aims to improve ECD and maternal mental health in northeast India (ADB, 2023). A component of the project provides center-based ECD services through daycare centers, crèches, and mobile crèches for children ages 1.5 to 6 (ADB, 2021). The project is progressing in collaboration with the Government of India, and discussions are already underway with four other state governments to implement similar, customized ECD initiatives, with national-level engagement also ongoing. Interviewees identified several factors supporting scale, including integration with existing schemes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and Anganwadi centers, deployment of graduate fellows, alignment with government structures and state and national policies, and consultations with mothers. Initial findings around childcare hours have indicated that providing childcare services from morning until late afternoon, such as 9 AM to 4 PM, allows mothers to pursue work opportunities more effectively and enhances their economic participation; as a result, efforts are being made to expand childcare hours at daycares to better support working mothers. A trust fund mechanism is also being developed to help scale programs to other states, and discussions are ongoing with the Accreditation Council of India to develop a quality assurance framework for childcare.
- Scaling through existing community nutrition centers in Côte d'Ivoire:** In Côte d'Ivoire, a World Bank-supported Health, Nutrition, and ECD Program (World Bank, 2023a) is scaling childcare through existing community nutrition centers, supported by a \$10 million investment (World Bank, 2025c). The approach expands the hours and days of service, adapts existing spaces for childcare, and strengthens quality through practitioner training and the operationalization of standards. In all, 150 centers have been selected for the pilot and will reach more than 3,000 children, with plans to scale up to reach over 60,000 children through the next phase of the program.
- Coordinating education and social protection investments in Ghana:** In Ghana, the World Bank is supporting the government to scale childcare and early learning through coordinated investments across education and social protection. In education, the Ghana Accountability and Learning Outcomes Project is extending hours of public preschool for children ages 3 to 5 through afterschool clubs, building on near-universal access to free preschool (World Bank, 2024b). These efforts are intended to reach 65,000 children in aftercare and improve quality for 2.5 million children nationwide. At the same time, community-based childcare for younger children ages 0 to 3 is being piloted, including models for working mothers in deprived communities and urban marketplaces, reaching 2,500 children. The Ghana Jobs and Skills project is supporting scale and sustainability by developing competency-based childcare training aligned with the Ghana National TVET Qualification Framework (Glinskaya, 2024), while the Ghana Productive Safety Net Project 2 (World Bank, 2023c) will improve quality and scale up childcare for public works beneficiaries in 720 sites, reaching approximately 10,800 women and children.

- **Scaling full-day nursery services through kindergartens in Moldova:** In the World Bank's Education Quality Improvement Project in Moldova, participatory project design and strong donor coordination have laid the groundwork for institutionalization and scaling. The Ministry of Education has selected 15 public kindergartens to expand full-day nursery services, and a pilot financing model based on per-child costs was planned for 2025. The project also supports reforms to better track ECEC outcomes (Bendini, 2025). These efforts, alongside policy shifts to formalize care and encourage employer-provided childcare, signal a serious effort toward long-term institutionalization and scaling.
- **Expanding childcare through the private sector in Lebanon and Jordan:** Through Care Arabia, launched in 2024, IFC has supported childcare providers and private firms through grants and low-collateral loans (Mashreq Gender Facility, (n.d)). The first phase benefited 18 private companies and 50 childcare providers across Lebanon and Jordan. Several participating firms also signed a pledge related to employer-supported childcare. The project reflects collaboration among MDBs, private sector actors, government counterparts, and industry associations.
- **Building on earlier investments in Uruguay:** IDB's Program to Support the National Integrated Care System in Uruguay, which concluded in 2022, provides an example of how lessons from earlier care-system investments can inform subsequent project design. The program coincided with a 20 percent increase in ECEC (IDB, 2024), a decrease of 5.4 hours per week in unpaid care work by women, and a 10 percent increase in public satisfaction and awareness of Uruguay's national care system.¹¹ IDB drew on lessons from this earlier operation to design a new care project launched in 2024, focused on closing specific gaps in care services for children with disabilities, including migrant children.

5. Recommendations

Overall, the continued expansion of childcare at the MDBs is encouraging and reflects an enhanced recognition of its importance to women and economies. However, there remains room for improvement when it comes to how childcare is meaningfully integrated and monitored in project operations. Additionally, some institutions with smaller childcare portfolios can benefit from peer learning on how childcare components can support broader development and institutional goals.

As a caveat to the positive portfolio trajectory observed, both the number of childcare projects that were approved and the total amount of core financing declined in 2024. However, as this calculation is based on approval dates, it may reflect normal annual fluctuations and coincide with numerous active projects approved in prior years. Nonetheless, this trend should be monitored to ensure that recent momentum on childcare at the MDBs is not lost. Monitoring such trends – and ensuring

11 These statistics were provided via an interview and written feedback with an IDB TTL conducted in January–February 2025.

childcare is designed, owned, and measured as further outlined below – will help protect gains as institutional priorities evolve.

Four key recommendations follow to guide the integration of childcare in future investments at the MDBs.

1. Treat childcare as core economic infrastructure aligned with the jobs agenda

Childcare is essential enabling infrastructure for WEE and cannot be an afterthought or an add-on in MDB policy or operations. Where women's labor force participation is a binding constraint, increasing access to affordable, quality childcare unlocks productivity, increases labor supply, and generates returns to investments. Without addressing childcare constraints, MDB investments risk failing to reach women or sustain their economic participation.

The MDBs, particularly the World Bank, are placing increasing emphasis on jobs as a mechanism for poverty reduction, economic growth, and empowerment. Childcare supports this agenda in two distinct but reinforcing ways. First, access to affordable, quality childcare enables women to participate more fully in labor markets, including wage employment, skills programs, and entrepreneurship. Second, expanding childcare services can generate jobs and stimulate local demand in the care economy. One clear example of this dual role is entrepreneurship, an area long prioritized by MDBs as a driver of jobs and growth. Many childcare providers are women-led enterprises, and access to childcare also enables women to start and grow businesses in other sectors.

The MDBs have an opportunity to strengthen both women's economic participation and job creation by further integrating and scaling childcare-related investments in their operations. However, additional research on the measurable returns to investment in childcare, including how it supports jobs and WEE, would help strengthen the evidence base needed by MDBs, governments, and the private sector to sustain and scale their investments in this area.

2. Invest in diagnostics and evidence for better-designed projects

Evidence from MDB childcare projects and discussions with TTLs indicates that childcare investments are more likely to achieve uptake, local ownership, and sustainability when service design reflects local demand, affordability, and women's working conditions. Projects that move forward without this diagnostic work – particularly around operating hours, preferred care models, institutional responsibilities, and willingness to pay – face higher risks of underutilization, weak ownership, and financial unsustainability.

Multiple projects reviewed, including in India, The Gambia, the DRC, and Ghana, illustrate how misalignment between childcare services and women's work preferences and realities can limit the project's impact on women's economic participation, even where services were available. In contrast, projects that used upfront analytic work to tailor service hours, delivery models, and financing mechanisms were better positioned to support women's employment and sustain services beyond the life of the project. These findings reinforce that childcare is not a standardized input: its effectiveness depends on context-specific design choices, including how quality principles are applied in practice, which can best be informed through early diagnostic work. MDBs should therefore expand and protect catalytic financing for childcare diagnostics, treating this analysis as risk mitigation rather than an optional step before scaling service delivery or infrastructure investments.

3. Strengthen coordination, ownership, and financing across government, communities, MDBs, and the private sector to ensure childcare solutions are sustainable

The long-term success of childcare projects is contingent on government buy-in and support from a range of stakeholders. As discussed above, the integration of childcare across a variety of sectors is a positive development, but the inclusion of multiple government ministries – including those that have limited expertise in childcare – can lead to fragmentation and unclear accountability. In contrast, projects with clear governance, early interministerial coordination, and engagement at the subnational level are more likely to see continued implementation and government support over time. Additional training and capacity building for government counterparts on managing childcare systems, applying quality standards, and implementing care-responsive budgeting may be necessary to strengthen technical expertise and enable effective and sustainable implementation.

Sustaining childcare at-scale will also require clearer and more durable financing arrangements. While catalytic grants and MDB-supported operations can initiate childcare programs, long-term continuity depends on integration into domestic budgeting processes, clarity and coordination as it relates to cost-sharing across ministries, and, where appropriate, structured partnerships with the private sector.

Local ownership is also important so that childcare initiatives can continue once projects are concluded. Engagement of stakeholders, including caregivers, early and often, is critical to success. The identification of childcare champions at all levels within governments and the MDBs can further support sustainability; examples could include women in leadership roles, policymakers, or managers within the MDBs. These approaches strengthen continuity and accountability, which is especially important when childcare components span multiple ministries and implementation levels.

4. Strengthen measurement and accountability to track progress towards childcare-related outputs and outcomes, particularly as it relates to WEE

Clear and deliberate measurement is critical to the impact, effectiveness, and sustainability of any MDB project. Given childcare's cross-sectoral nature, weak measurement can result in it becoming symbolic or subsumed within larger projects. This becomes especially important given the reduced share of dedicated childcare projects.

While the World Bank found in 2019 that few projects monitored childcare activities, our analysis shows that this has shifted, as most of the childcare projects in our sample included childcare in their monitoring and evaluation frameworks. However, our review finds that 36 percent of projects did not formally track childcare activities, which limits accountability, learning, and incentives to prioritize childcare over the course of implementation. Thus, despite progress since 2019, further improvements in monitoring and evaluation are still needed.

Further, there is uneven attention to WEE in projects' results frameworks. Some focus solely on outputs like enrollment, infrastructure, or compliance with quality standards, while others take a more systemic, outcome-oriented approach that links provision of childcare to women's economic outcomes. For example, some projects include indicators specific to both childcare uptake and women's labor force participation, in recognition of the positive impact on WEE that increased access to quality, affordable childcare can have. Moving forward, projects that include childcare should include at least one indicator explicitly linking childcare to WEE outcomes. Additionally, the inclusion of robust impact evaluations, including the 29 funded through the World Bank's Invest in Childcare initiative, will be critical to ensure that future investments are fit for purpose (Devercelli et al., 2026).

Given the growing portfolio of childcare investments across the MDBs, shared learning spaces within and across regions and institutions can offer an opportunity to strengthen cross-project learning on design, implementation, and sustainability. A peer learning platform such as the one that was successful in Jordan and Lebanon can serve as a model for exchange in similar contexts.

6. Conclusion and future research

This review finds that, in a short period of time, there has been a measurable expansion of childcare at the MDBs through both increased financing and the positioning of childcare as an enabler of WEE. Relative to five years ago (O'Donnell et al., 2021) childcare is increasingly integrated into project design and results frameworks, with greater attention to quality, local context, and women's labor market realities. These shifts have strengthened the potential for positive impacts on women, children, and economies. Yet, integration remains uneven across institutions, and gaps

remain in coordination, outcome measurement, and consistent linkage of childcare to women's economic outcomes. In some projects, childcare components are still underutilized or insufficiently measured, particularly when integrated in larger projects, potentially limiting their effectiveness and sustainability.

As multilateral resources become more constrained and MDBs place greater emphasis on job creation and economic growth, childcare can be an enabling investment that supports women's economic inclusion. Continued prioritization and robust financing of this issue through initiatives like Invest in Childcare and IDB Cares, as well as private sector-focused efforts led by the IFC and EBRD, will be critical to sustain the recent momentum. Upcoming institutional moments, including the IDA22 replenishment in 2027, serve as an opportunity for MDB donors to signal whether childcare will remain a core priority of development finance or whether it will be overtaken by other priorities.

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Appendix A: Methodology for evaluation

Following a search of projects, we evaluated each project for its inclusion of childcare components utilizing the following detailed methodology.

INCLUDE	
	<p>Expanding provision, access (including through vouchers or other direct financial support), or affordability of childcare (daycares, creches, ECCE centers), pre-school, pre-primary education, or after-school services (including expanding days and hours these are offered)</p>
	<p>Making childcare services higher quality (e.g. safety, infrastructure, training/skills building or better pay/working conditions for staff, minimum quality standards, teacher/caregiver-child ratios, regulations/quality assurance mechanisms)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essential infrastructure for childcare/pre-schools (e.g. facilities, WASH, electricity, heat/air conditioning)
	<p>Improving the enabling environment for childcare (e.g. parental leave policies, flexible workplace policies, local/national policies on childcare, institutional arrangements)</p>
	<p>Connection to provision of childcare with a WEE measurement indicator (e.g. labor force participation or time-use)</p>
MAYBE INCLUDE	
	<p>ECE or ECD</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclude ECD (e.g. anything that is limited to home-visits, parental trainings, nutrition support) unless childcare centers are included where parents can leave their children for care • Quality components specific to ECE (e.g. a focus on specific learning outcomes; include if the intention is to increase attendance)
	<p>Preschool and kindergarten</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-school activities (include if there is a focus beyond learning outcomes) • Kindergarten, depending on the age of enrollment and whether this is considered part of pre-primary (do not include if kindergarten is part of primary school)
	<p>Trainings that provide childcare (consider the length of training, the extent of the training inclusion in project design, and the certainty of the provision of childcare during training)</p>
	<p>Changing attitudes and norms regarding childcare (if about gendered perceptions in the home, probably exclude; if changing social attitudes so that families utilize childcare or changing perceptions of policymakers, consider including)</p>
	<p>Lack of clarity around childcare activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mention of childcare as a sub-project for future implementation (review the most recent project documents; if it is eventually excluded, do not include, but if it is unclear, then include) • Projects that only reference childcare through non-specific, permissive, or exceptionally vague language (e.g. “may”, “if needed”, “could,” “such as,” “alleviating constraints to childcare”). Include only if they go on to explicitly describe services, financing, delivery mechanisms, or measurable outputs

DO NOT INCLUDE



Childcare as contextual or illustrative

- Projects that simply mention childcare as a constraint in the context section, but it is not included in the project goals, implementation plan, or results framework
- Trainings that consider the need for childcare but do not actually provide it



ECE or ECD only

- Sole focus on ECE or learning outcomes for children
- ECD interventions focused on home visits, better parenting, nutrition, cognitive development, etc., without providing care externally for children
- Home care for children by parents



Childcare components are not actually being implemented, such as projects that have been dropped or where the childcare components of the project were planned but never implemented



Infrastructure that is non-essential and does not aim to increase attendance or enrollment (i.e. energy efficiency projects that are focused on generating profit/savings or internet connectivity that is oriented solely around educational outcomes)

Once we had the list of childcare projects, we evaluated each project against additional criteria.

- **Is the project dedicated to childcare, or is childcare a small integrated component of a larger project?**
- **Does the Results Framework explicitly include childcare?**
- **What type of childcare is included in the project?** Options include early childhood education (including preschool, kindergarten); Daycare, nurseries, creches; or Other (including temporary care).
- **What is the primary and secondary purpose of the childcare component?** Options include: Increasing access and/or enrollment; improving affordability; improving the quality of care or the quality of care jobs; supporting WEE; or creating an enabling environment.

Important note: This research began in 2024, and at the time of data collection, project data for 2025 was not available. Additionally, the IFC verified childcare projects up to October 2024 but not beyond that. Therefore, the project database encompasses projects that were approved from June 2021 to December 2024, to the best of our knowledge. We are aware that MDBs have their own ways of tracking childcare, with access to additional information not publicly available. Therefore, as our dataset is predominantly based on information from public documents, it is possible that there are additional projects with childcare components that are not known to us. However, this standardized review of childcare projects across different MDBs provides informative insight into how this portfolio has evolved over time.

Appendix B: MDB interviews

Interviews with childcare focal points at the MDBs

These interviews were designed to capture an institutional and portfolio-level perspective on childcare investments across MDBs. Discussions focused on four areas: portfolio evolution, cross-cutting lessons, measurement of impact, and institutional knowledge resources. We also requested focal points to review and verify project lists. Conversations were tailored to each focal point's role and institutional context.

- (i) **Evolution of the childcare portfolio:** We sought to understand how focal points characterize the status of childcare projects within their institutions, including recent and forthcoming pipeline activities, particularly those linked to women's economic empowerment (WEE). We also explored whether the increased policy attention to childcare and gendered care burdens following COVID-19 was reflected in portfolio growth or shifts since mid-2021. Finally, we discussed how focal points view the future direction of childcare work, including institutional priorities, country-level demand, and broader dynamics that may influence the scale and focus of childcare investments going forward.
- (ii) **Cross-cutting lessons:** We invited focal points to reflect on lessons learned across childcare projects and country contexts, drawing on their oversight of multiple operations. These discussions examined what has worked well, where challenges have arisen, and how implementation experiences differ across settings. We also explored perspectives on "what works for whom," distinguishing between context-specific insights and lessons that may be more broadly applicable.
- (iii) **Measuring impact:** We examined how focal points assess the evidence-base on childcare impacts within their institutions. For projects with integrated childcare components, we explored whether there is evidence of improved outcomes, including for WEE, and how such impacts are measured. For dedicated childcare projects, we discussed the types of measurable impacts tracked and the indicators used. We also explored challenges related to demonstrating the return on investment in childcare, including data limitations, attribution, and time horizons, as well as what could strengthen impact measurement going forward.
- (iv) **Institutional resources and evidence:** Finally, we asked focal points to identify relevant institutional resources that could inform this review, including published research, impact evaluations, operational guidance, or projects with results indicators. These discussions helped identify existing evidence and knowledge products within MDBs that could complement the portfolio analysis and support future learning on childcare investments.

Interviews with project Task Team Leads (TTLs) at the MDBs

These interviews were focused on 3 areas – design, implementation, and impact. Discussions were tailored based on where the project was in its implementation and whether any results were yet available.

- (i) **Program Design:** We sought to understand how the childcare programs were tailored to meet the specific needs of the target population, with particular attention given to the requirements of caregivers, notably women. Furthermore, we explored the envisioned metrics for measuring progress and success, assessing how these were embedded within the results framework. Critical to this discussion was whether the project design reflected meaningful engagement with local stakeholders and how it ensured alignment with the cultural values inherent in the community.
- (ii) **Implementation:** We invited MDB representatives to share the top three lessons learned from the implementation of childcare initiatives, including challenges faced and the strategies adopted to overcome them. Additionally, we assessed the effectiveness of outcome tracking for children, caregivers, and care workers, focusing on the data collection tools and methods that proved most beneficial, alongside recommendations for enhancing tracking in future projects.
- (iii) **Impact:** For integrated childcare projects, we examined how the incorporation of childcare components enriched the overall impact of project financing, identifying any synergies or multiplier effects that emerged. In the context of dedicated projects, we delved into the range of developmental impacts observed and the strategies employed to ensure the sustainability of the project model. We also reflected on whether these initiatives have shifted local perceptions regarding the significance of childcare and catalyzed increased demand for childcare programs, particularly from government stakeholders. Lastly, we discussed how the insights gained from this project could inform future initiatives and what additional resources or partnerships would be essential for scaling up efforts, thereby ensuring sustained impact.

Appendix C: Definitions of key terms

Definition	Age Range	Primary Focus	Key Features/Distinctions
Childcare			
<p>As per, <i>Invest in Childcare</i>, Childcare refers to services provided to care for children while their parents are working or otherwise unavailable. Quality childcare ensures that children are safe and have opportunities to learn and develop positive relationships with caregivers and peers.</p> <p>(Source: <i>Devercelli & Beaton-Day, 2020</i>)</p>	<p>Primarily for children from birth up to primary-school-entry age (typically up to age 5–6) but can also include after-school care.</p>	<p>Care and supervision</p>	<p>Childcare services can be delivered in various settings, including:</p> <p>Center-based care: Such as daycares, nurseries, and crèches.</p> <p>Home-based care: Care provided either in the child’s own home or in a caregiver’s home for a group of children.</p> <p>Family and other informal arrangements: Care provided by relatives or friends, which may or may not be remunerated.</p>
Early Childhood Development (ECD)			
<p>ECD encompasses the physical, cognitive, motor, language, social, and emotional development of children in the early years. UNICEF emphasizes that ECD is a fundamental right of every child, as recognized by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)</p> <p>(Source: <i>UNICEF, 2023</i>)</p>	<p>From birth until entry into primary school, with a strong focus on the first 1,000 days (from conception through age 2), when brain development and physical growth are most rapid and sensitive.</p>	<p>Holistic Development</p>	<p>ECD takes a holistic, multisectoral approach, combining interventions in health, nutrition, responsive caregiving, protection, and early learning. Unlike narrower approaches like ECE (focused only on education), ECD aims to address the full range of influences shaping a child’s future — especially for vulnerable populations and in crisis-affected contexts.</p>
Early Childhood Education (ECE)			
<p>ECE refers to structured educational programs designed to support the development of young children in various domains, including cognitive, social, emotional, and physical aspects. These programs are typically delivered in formal settings and aim to prepare children for primary education.</p> <p>(Source: <i>UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016</i>)</p>	<p>Aged 3 years up to the official entry age for primary education, which varies by country but is often around 6 years old.</p>	<p>Education</p>	<p>Structured learning programs focused on school readiness, offering foundational skills for a smooth transition to primary school. Unlike childcare, it emphasizes education over custodial care.</p>

(Continued)

Definition	Age Range	Primary Focus	Key Features/Distinctions
Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)/Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)			
ECCE encompasses education, health, nutrition, and social services supporting holistic child development and school readiness.	Birth to 8 years	Education and Care	Most comprehensive in combining structured education with care and service delivery.
ECEC refers to all arrangements providing care and education for children under compulsory school age, regardless of setting, funding, opening hours, or program content.	Birth to compulsory school age (~5–6 years)		Emphasizes both educational and caregiving aspects; includes various settings and program types.
ECCE or ECEC includes both care and education components for ages 0–8 but often focuses more specifically on children aged 3–6, including pre-primary education			
<i>(Source: UNESCO, 2024; OECD, 2021; Harris et al., 2024)</i>			