

Early Childhood Education (ECE)

*Driving Some of the
Largest Learning Gains
Documented in Africa*



Pharo Foundation's Early Childhood Education (ECE) programme in Somaliland was among our first large-scale education initiatives, created to expand access where almost none existed. At the time, fewer than 6% of pre-primary-aged children were enrolled, meaning most began school late, unprepared, and often years behind their expected grade. In 2019, we responded by building classrooms and centres within public schools, laying the groundwork for what has since become Somaliland's flagship ECE initiative.

The Problem

Access to ECE in Somaliland has been constrained by scarce resources, high pupil-teacher ratios, and very low remuneration for teachers. Nationwide, there are only 258 centres serving about 18,000 children, meaning over 94% of pre-primary-aged children still lack access to formal early education. This lack of preparation fuels widespread age-grade mismatch: many children are two or more years older than the official grade level, reflecting both late entry and slow progression. Without ECE, too many children begin primary school without the literacy, numeracy, or socio-emotional foundations needed to succeed.

Our Response

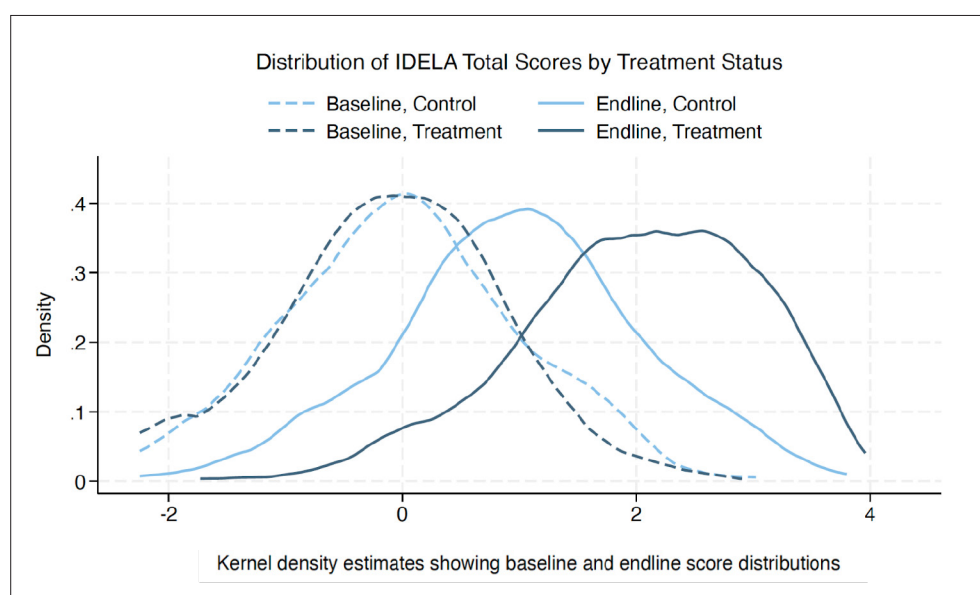
Pharo Foundation has established ECE centres within public primary schools in Hargeisa and Berbera, now serving more than 1,200 children annually across 17 schools. We provide classrooms, teacher training, health checks, and daily nutritious snacks, addressing both learning and wellbeing. We also co-authored Somaliland's first national ECE curriculum with the Ministry of Education in 2017, now cited in the country's national development strategy.

Our Impact

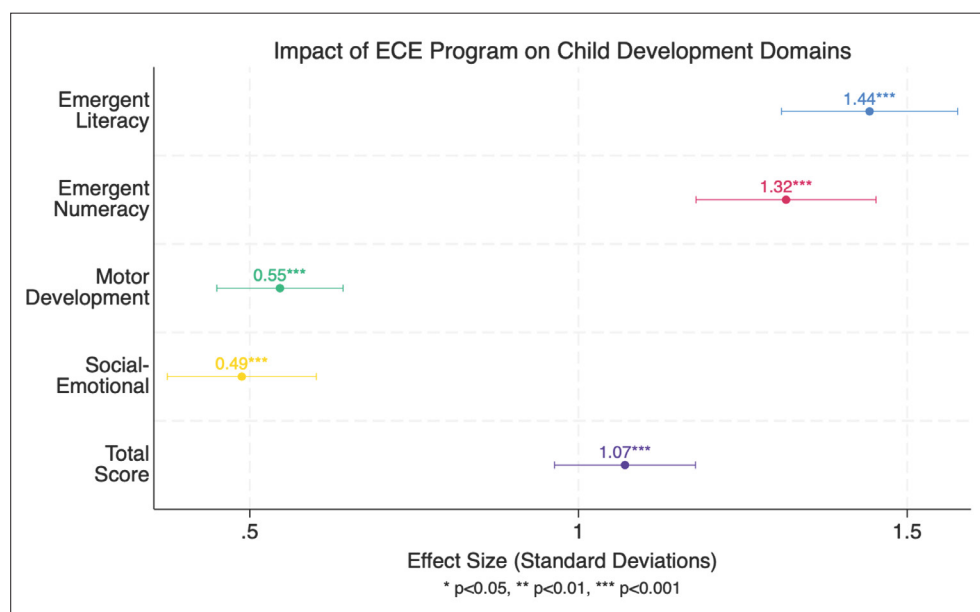
To understand our impact, we carried out Somaliland's first randomised controlled trial (RCT) of an education intervention, collaborating with researchers at UC Berkeley (De Goyeneche et al., 2025). Over 1,500 children applied for ECE places; a public lottery allocated access. Using the IDELA framework to measure learning outcomes, the nine-month programme produced transformative gains:

- **+1.44 SD in literacy and +1.32 SD in numeracy.**
- **+1.07 SD overall, among the largest effects recorded in global ECE literature.**
- **Positive spillovers to parents, who invested more time in home learning and reported improved wellbeing.**

The evaluation shows that our ECE model not only improves readiness for primary school but also reshapes family investment in education.



Notes: Figure shows kernel density estimates of standardized IDELA total scores at baseline and endline for treatment and control groups. The rightward shift in the treatment group's endline distribution demonstrates that program effects represent genuine improvements across the entire ability spectrum rather than gains concentrated among high-performing children. Sample includes 1,142 children randomized to treatment and control groups.



Notes: Intent-to-treat (ITT) effects of the early childhood education program on standardized IDELA assessment scores. Each point represents the treatment effect in standard deviations with 95% confidence intervals. All effects are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. Sample includes 1,142 children randomized to treatment and control groups.

Looking Ahead



Despite these results, sustainability remains a challenge. Families show meaningful willingness to pay (~\$30 per month), but this still covers only two-thirds of the true per-child cost (~\$46 per month). Continued subsidies and co-funding are essential to maintain quality and expand.

For the first time, we have begun to secure external support: the Jonathan Bayliss Foundation contributed GBP 50,000 toward nutrition costs, an important milestone for our global partnerships team. Building on this success, we are seeking additional partners to help close the funding gap and to scale beyond Hargeisa and Berbera.

In parallel, we are working with national policymakers to integrate ECE into Somaliland's education system, so that our proven model can lift outcomes across the country.