

LIVELY MINDS

SCALING NATIONALLY IN GHANA

JUNE 2026



Following the success of its partnership with Lively Minds in Northern Ghana, the Government has recently announced its commitment to scale the Lively Minds programme nationwide. This will benefit approximately 1.1 million kindergarten (KG) children enrolled in government Kindergarten schools each year.

A. Lively Minds' innovation

Ghana has made great strides in supporting early childhood care and education (ECCE), most notably through the provision of two years of compulsory state-provided kindergarten for four to six year-old children since 2008. However, the average kindergarten class size exceeds 50 children and half of primary two pupils are unable to read a single word. The 2014 Ghana Demographic and Health Survey found that for every 100 children who entered kindergarten, only 16 transitioned to senior high school.

A typical KG-aged child spends 75% of their time at home and parents/caregivers are the ones that have the greatest opportunity to nurture their child's learning and development. However, rural parents struggle to provide quality nurturing care and learning opportunities as they lack access to the knowledge, skills, and community needed to do so. In many cases, this is compounded by low self-

esteem and confidence regarding parenting. A report¹ conducted with over 2,500 parents in rural Ghana found that only 13% of parents had conducted any form of play or stimulating activity with their child in the past three days.

Encouraging psychosocial stimulation at an early age can generate long-lasting improvements in children's learning outcomes, life skills and lifetime earnings. In ECCE play based pedagogies are particularly effective. Furthermore, parental engagement is an important contributor to improved educational outcomes in early years and beyond. The challenge is to establish models of parental engagement and early education services that can operate cost-effectively at scale.

The Ghana Education Service (GES) Lively Minds programme trains 40 mothers per community to run educational play schemes in government kindergarten schools. The play schemes are designed to encourage the children to act socially, think creatively, solve problems, and learn new skills including counting and pre-literacy skills. The children are arranged in small groups, rotate around five play stations, and must handwash with soap before taking part, sensitising them to this vital practice. By using family and community members to

¹ Amadu, S., Attanasio, O., Caeyers, B., Cattan, S., Cardona Sosa, L., Krutikova, S., et al. (2018). Improving early childhood development in rural

Ghana through scalable low-cost community-run play schemes: Baseline Report. Institute for Fiscal Studies, in collaboration with Innovations for Poverty Action and Lively Minds.

deliver the games alongside teachers, parents are also exposed to good parenting practices and how to promote learning at home.

To tackle the problem of poor parenting practices, KG teachers lead parenting group workshops for mothers each month and some for fathers. Teachers also broadcast weekly local language radio programmes, aired in partnership with local radio stations, for parents to teach themselves simple, practical ways to improve their home-based care using local resources. Teachers receive regular ongoing training, supervision,

and support through GES regional and district teams.

Lively Minds launched in Ghana in 2008. In 2016, GIF awarded a grant to Lively Minds to set up and run play schemes in partnership with the GES in six districts. Further funding was awarded to the Institute of Fiscal Studies to conduct a randomised control trial, or RCT, in partnership with Innovations for Poverty Action involving randomisation of 80 schools in two districts, covering 2,400 preschool children and 2,400 caregivers.



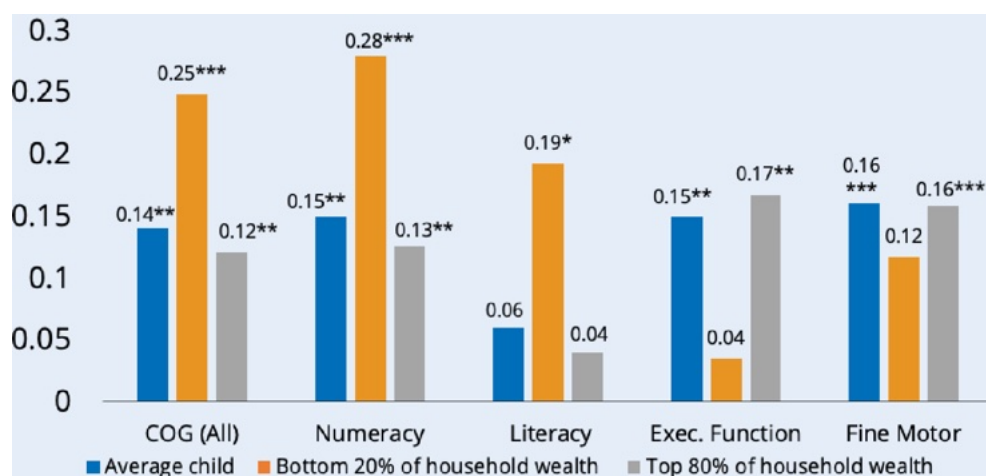
B. Evidence of impact

The GIF-funded RCT showed that the Lively Minds programme improved the school readiness of children at low cost. On average cognitive measures increased by 14.2% of a standard deviation. This is driven by significant improvements in early understanding of numbers, development of executive function (such as memory and focus), and fine-motor skills, such as improved muscle grips. Further improvements included a reduction in conduct problems and hyperactivity.

Impact on most vulnerable children

The programme is particularly successful in raising cognitive abilities for children coming from poorer households: children from the bottom socio-economic quintile saw more than twice the increase in cognitive development of others. There was also a significant improvement in the literacy skills of disadvantaged children.

Lively Minds programme impact on cognitive domains



*, ** and *** report 10%, 5% and 1% levels of statistical significance respectively. ²

With respect to social-emotion domains, Lively Minds results in 14% of a standard deviation reduction in externalising behaviours, including conduct problems (e.g. lying, cheating, bullying) and hyperactive behaviours (e.g. being fidgety, being unable to concentrate on a task).

² Source: [Improving Early Childhood Development and Health with a Community-Run Program in Rural Ghana](#), IPA Policy Brief, February 2020

Gender impact

Boys had larger improvements in their socio-emotional skills compared to girls. However, girls - on average - had larger improvements across most of the socio-emotional domains.

Health impact

Health benefits included a decrease in acute malnutrition, and an increase of children's mid-upper arm circumference (a proxy for overall weight and health) by 21mm on average.

Impact on parents

Benefits to parents include improved general knowledge about child development and pre-school quality. For example, mothers better recognise the importance of praising children when they try to do something new and are more likely to believe that play based learning is better for kids than rote based learning. Parents spend more 'productive' time with their children and are more likely to practice productive teaching strategies.

Cost effectiveness

The average total costs per child and mother in the 40 treatment schools during the evaluation period were approximately US\$37 and \$150 respectively. Overall, the programme was cost-effective in increasing cognitive skills, leading to 1.7-2.5 additional years of schooling per US\$100 spent. According to calculations by Lively Minds, the cost per child over a three-year implementation period across 257 schools was US\$19 per child, suggesting the programme would be less expensive to implement at scale.³

The evaluation report is pending publication but a working paper version is available [here](#).

³ Source: [Improving Early Childhood Development and Health with a Community-Run Program in Rural Ghana](#), IPA Policy Brief, February 2020;

C. Commitment to scale

This RCT unlocked government interest in scaling the programme more widely. GIF's Managing Director met with the then Minister of Education Dr Matthew Opoku Prempeh in Dubai on 22nd March 2019 to share enthusiasm for the findings and discuss the prospective scale up of the Lively Minds model.

Minister Prempeh subsequently delivered the keynote address at the dissemination event for the evaluation held on 8th May 2019, during which he described the evaluation as a *“world class study which shows that this programme is working....and has seen significant improvement on cognitive skills, language, socio-emotional wellbeing and health of children.”* Minister Prempeh announced the intention to scale the programme at the same event. At that time the GES faced the challenge of a proliferation of pilots with a lack of well evidenced innovations ready to scale. Consequently, they were enthusiastic about scaling nationwide. Lively Minds cautioned that the model had been designed for the more rural, poor Northern regions and may not have the same impacts elsewhere. Ultimately it was agreed to scale across 4,000 schools in 64 districts, reaching close to 270,000 children each year (2025).



In anticipation of positive results, GIF provided Lively Minds with a venture support grant of £50,000 in 2018 to develop a scaling strategy and operational model. This meant that they were well placed to negotiate the scale up immediately upon receipt of positive results.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the GES and Lively Minds in August 2019 with the goal of scaling the programme to 64 districts across Northern Ghana, and an ambition to expand nationwide if successful.

D. Global Innovation Fund catalytic scale investment

In May 2020 the Global Innovation Fund awarded a \$2.7m grant to support the initial phases of the scale up. GIF was the first donor to commit to this phase. The investment was catalytic and crowded in other funders to secure the necessary funding for the ambitious scale plan. GIF shared due diligence and engaged actively with a number of funders, who reported that GIF's investment was a contributing factor to their decision to invest. In total, Lively Minds succeeded in raising in excess of \$14m for the Ghana scale up, with donors including ELMA Philanthropies, Grand Challenges Canada, Imaginable Futures, USAID Development Innovation Ventures (DIV) and the French Fund for Innovation in Development (FID) joining the funding coalition.

Key to the scale plan was a comprehensive partnership agreement between Lively Minds and the GES which included commitments from the respective parties, and monitoring and accountability frameworks. Lively Minds reported that GIF's insistence that GES have "skin in the game" and take responsibility for certain budget lines during due diligence strengthened their negotiating position with GES on the partnership agreement.

E. Scaling across Northern Ghana

The programme is foremost a district level intervention, equipping district education authorities to deliver and monitor the programme, now named the GES-LM programme, with complementary support at the regional and national level to ensure it was institutionalised.

The programme delivered tapered support for districts over three phases across two years:

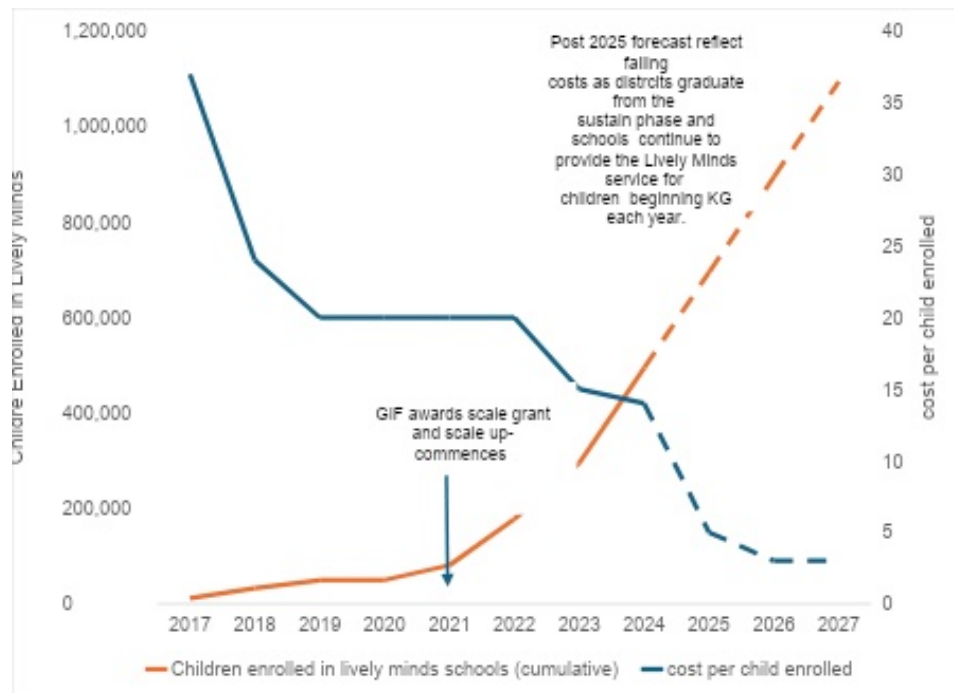
1. Setup phase (one school term): LM and GES regional teams support district teams to set up the programme in all KGs in the district. This involves district team sensitisation, school sensitisation, a six-day Training of Trainers (ToT) workshop for KG teachers and setting up the programme in the communities. Community set-up is delivered by the KG teachers, with supervision provided by district teams, and involves two community meetings and eight two-hour workshops for enrolled mothers.
2. Embed phase (five school terms) during this period, the programme runs, but district teams receive capacity building support from LM. This includes capacity-building workshops, coaching, and project management support.
3. Sustain phase: LM has no direct contact with the district teams, and GES works alone. GES-LM coordinators at the national, regional, and district levels –

appointed by and reporting to GES – are responsible for supporting the programme and ensuring it runs smoothly.

The programme was overseen by government personnel responsible for Early Childhood Education (ECE), the National GES-LM coordinator and a cross-sector steering group.

Between 2020 - 2025, Lively Minds and the GES have established the programme in 64 districts, currently reaching around 250,000 children per year. The current cost is approximately \$14 per child in the set-up term, reducing to around \$3 per child after the sustain phase.

Lively Minds scale-up



The scale-up included a focus on monitoring of implementation, with Lively Minds building a suite of tools to enable district officers to monitor the programme against key quality standards. Lively Minds' vision was to ensure that the programme was delivered to the same quality standards which had been tested in the randomised evaluation, with the hypothesis that would unlock comparable results.

To test this hypothesis Lively Minds has been participating in a further randomised evaluation of the scale-up, with early results suggesting that the programme does deliver similar impacts to that observed in the earlier efficacy trial.

An external review of the government led scale up and GIF's interactions with the Lively Minds points to several success factors and lessons learned:



1. Activating parents as the sleeping giants of early childhood education (ECE)

The Lively Minds model is premised on activating parents as the often neglected and underutilised agents of change. Empowering parents helps to build understanding of early childhood development (ECD) and awareness of how this can be improved in the home and at school. For Lively Minds, their programme is first and foremost a parenting intervention. In addition, activating parents to deliver interventions improves scalability by eliminating the need for and cost associated with skilled partners. It also helps to build the demand and positions the programme as a wider movement of change.

2. Designing for scalability from the outset

Developing a programme that works within existing government systems and minimises the need for new hardware and roles was essential. Maintaining simplicity within the core programme and not requiring advanced hardware ensures that the programme can be scaled within existing government processes: *"I would say that [an ECD programme] has to work with an existing system, and existing personnel. If you're setting up too many extra roles, if you're relying on externals and banking on technology, like this would work if everyone had a laptop, or everyone had Excel, it can't work."* (LM staff member)

3. The value of incremental piloting, testing and remaining adaptable

Incremental phases of testing the programme enabled Lively Minds to make adjustments and ensure that the programme was fully adapted to scale. The GIF funded efficacy trail was instrumental in validating the approach and building government buy-in. During scale up adaptability remained essential as Lively Minds grappled with school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic and fiscal constraint, necessitating changes to team configurations and monitoring regimes without affecting delivery of the core components of the innovation at school level.

4. Deep government ownership

The LM-GES programme would not have succeeded without deep government ownership from various public agencies. This ensured continuous support and commitment, including creating formal structures and a process for participation of the National Teaching Council, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and the National Schools Inspectorate Authority. The creation of a dedicated GES-LM coordinator helped to manage and promote government ownership of the programme.

Deep government ownership was underpinned by a carrot and stick approach, blending recognition and awards with accountability for performance in an extremely comprehensive and well thought through partnership agreement. Ongoing training helped to reinforce local ownership for frontline personnel. Participating teachers received points for their continued professional development which could be used toward re-accreditation.

Some challenges remain with scale up, however, including: maintaining teacher motivation, especially for activities which fall outside school hours; ensuring appropriate oversight at the regional level; and securing funding for ongoing monitoring activities, especially against a backdrop of fiscal crises in Ghana.

F. Incorporating radio programming

In early 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools and the government's focus shifted to distance learning. Lively Minds quickly adapted its programme for radio broadcast, developing interactive shows focused on good parenting practices and how to play pedagogically informed games with young children. During the pandemic they supported the government to broadcast more than 1,100 hours of content in 16 languages to an estimated listenership of two million people in 18 districts. They now continue to broadcast every week. The radio aspect reinforces the importance of parents as the sleeping giants of ECE and equips them to be more effective caregivers for their children. Lively Minds is currently undertaking an evaluation of the radio programming in Southern Ghana, where the radio operates as a standalone programme.

G. The future outlook for Lively Minds: scaling nationwide

Following the success of scale-up in Northern Ghana, the GES announced its intention to scale the programme throughout the rest of the country. This has been enabled in part by the \$118m investment in Ghana's early education sector from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and the Ghana Accountability for Learning Outcomes Project (GALOP). The funding will be used for ongoing monitoring and support from the existing 64 districts. Lively Minds will then play a key role in supporting the government to roll-out the programme to the remaining 80 rural districts, with a parenting workshop only

adapted version of the model to be implemented in 117 urban/peri urban districts. Lively Minds' role will evolve, focussing on providing technical assistance to the government, rather than direct engagement in the scale up.

The GES Lively Minds programme will now be implemented in 15,000 schools in Ghana, more than half of which are in rural districts. This will benefit 1.1 million children per year, with 3.5 million expected to take part in the programme between 2026 and 2030. This represents a fantastic success for Lively Minds and endorsement of their thoughtful approach to institutionalising this impactful innovation with government partners at scale. Lively Minds is already looking to the future and how to build on this success in other countries.

This example also showcases the power of GIF's approach: investing in evidence to test what works; backing innovations with clear pathways to scale; providing catalytic capital to crowd in the investment needed to achieve scale; using staged funding to commit additional resources as the evidence for potential impact at scale grows; and being a thought partner providing advice and accountability along the way.

