




## Review Article

## The organization and challenges of childcare services in sub-Saharan Africa: A scoping review

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## ABSTRACT

Quality childcare is central to child development, gender equality, and economic productivity, yet childcare services (CCSs) in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) remain poorly understood and weakly governed. This scoping review, conducted in accordance with PRISMA-Scr, synthesizes peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2023 on the organization of CCSs in SSA. Nineteen eligible studies reveal a highly diverse childcare landscape encompassing public, private, community-based, and informal providers with significant implications for equity and quality. Most curricula emphasize child minding and safety over structured developmental stimulation, and regulatory oversight is largely limited to formal centers, leaving the extensive informal sector largely unregulated and unsupported. Widespread challenges—including inadequate funding, weak supervision, untrained staff, and infrastructural deficits—reflect broader structural constraints. Together, the findings underscore the need for integrated policy reforms, expanded public investment, and strengthened support systems to ensure equitable, developmentally nurturing childcare across the region.

### 1. Introduction

Across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the provision of quality, accessible, and affordable childcare services (CCSs) has become increasingly central to scholarly, policy, and development debates (Bakibinga & Matanda, 2022; Clark et al., 2017; Waterhouse et al., 2022). The urgency of this agenda is clear: rapid urbanization, shifting labor markets, and rising female labor-force participation are transforming patterns of work and care, while demographic pressures have intensified demand for reliable childcare. Yet the region's childcare systems—formal and informal—remain underdeveloped, uneven, and weakly regulated, with significant implications for child wellbeing, gender equality, and economic growth.

Evidence consistently demonstrates that inadequate or poor-quality childcare undermines early learning, cognitive and socio-emotional development, and long-term health and earnings trajectories (Biersteker et al., 2016; Nampijja et al., 2023; Oloo et al., 2023; Slemming et al., 2022). At the household and societal levels, gaps in childcare provision suppress women's employment, limit household economic

mobility, and reduce productivity. Conversely, well-organized CCSs create dual-generation benefits, supporting child development while enabling parents—particularly mothers—to enter and remain in paid work (Clark et al., 2017, 2019; De Henau et al., 2019). Major global frameworks reflect the strategic significance of childcare. Early childhood education (ECE) is embedded in SDG 4.2, the World Bank's Human Capital Initiative, and the Nurturing Care Framework, all of which underscore the role of structured, safe, and nurturing environments in promoting early learning, wellbeing, and protection. Likewise, the ILO and WIEGO position childcare as pivotal to inclusive economic development, decent work, and gender-equitable labor markets (ILO and WIEGO 2021). The emphasis on the early years is grounded in robust evidence on rapid brain development during infancy and early childhood, a period in which high-quality CCSs can provide stable relationships, responsive caregiving, and enriched learning experiences that shape lifelong trajectories.

Despite this global consensus, SSA continues to face substantial deficits in the organization, governance, and financing of childcare. The urgency for improvement is acute: expanding childcare access is

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essential not only for advancing children's developmental outcomes but also for enabling equitable participation in labor markets, reducing gendered time burdens, and addressing structural inequalities that shape family wellbeing across the region. Effective policy design, however, requires a clear understanding of how CCSs are currently structured including who provides them, under what conditions, with what kinds of support, and with what implications for quality and equity. Existing research remains fragmented, varies in methodological rigor, and is rarely consolidated in ways that can guide systemic reforms. This creates a critical evidence gap at precisely the moment when African governments, multilaterals, and civil society actors are increasingly seeking to invest in the childcare sector.

This scoping review addresses this gap by synthesizing published evidence on the organization of CCSs in SSA. It examines five interrelated dimensions: (1) the types and ownership of childcare arrangements, (2) curricula and services provided, (3) systems of supervision, regulation, and oversight, (4) sources and modalities of institutional and community support, and (5) operational and structural challenges facing providers. By consolidating dispersed findings, the review identifies research gaps and highlights areas requiring targeted policy attention and programmatic investment. Such synthesis is essential for informing debates on childcare governance, strengthening national childcare systems, and improving the quality and accessibility of services for young children and their families.

Although a small number of reviews have examined discrete aspects of childcare in Africa—such as paid childcare markets (Hughes et al., 2021a), functions of ECE institutions (Fonsén et al., 2019), pandemic-related disruptions (Shumba et al., 2020), and early childhood development policies (Abboah-Offei et al., 2022)—no existing synthesis has systematically interrogated the organization of childcare across SSA. This review therefore provides the first regional overview focused on the institutional, regulatory, and operational dimensions of childcare provision.

While childcare services broadly encompass the care and supervision of children—from infancy to age 18—by individuals other than their parents, whether paid or unpaid, formal or informal, and delivered within or outside the home (Kamerman, 1991; Kumatia; Quartey 2021; Nankinga et al., 2022), this review adopts a narrower analytic focus. Specifically, we examine the institutional, regulatory, and operational dimensions of early childcare provision—that is, school-based or otherwise institutionalized care and learning for young children from birth to the start of primary education (Eurostat & UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015). This focus reflects our interest in the structures and systems underpinning formal early childhood care in African contexts. The organization of CCSs is used in this review to encompass the structures and processes through which services are governed and delivered, including ownership and management, regulatory and supervisory mechanisms, curricula and service content, financing, workforce capacity, and the operational constraints shaping implementation (Ahrne, 1994; Wheelan, 2005). Mapping these dimensions is crucial for informing future research, guiding policy reforms, and strengthening childcare systems as SSA confronts pressing demographic, economic, and social challenges.

## 2. Methodology

This scoping review was designed and reported in accordance with the *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Extension for Scoping Reviews* (PRISMA-ScR) to ensure methodological transparency, reproducibility, and conceptual clarity. The review synthesizes peer-reviewed, English-language studies published between 2000 and 2023 that examine the organization of childcare services (CCSs) across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The year 2000 was selected as the lower bound because it corresponds with the adoption of the United Nations Millennium Declaration, which significantly elevated global attention to early childhood development, gender equality, and human

capital formation, catalyzing empirical research and policy engagement on childcare systems in low- and middle-income countries.

Eligible studies addressed one or more dimensions of CCS organization, including: (1) types and ownership structures; (2) curricula and scope of services; (3) systems of supervision, regulation, and oversight; (4) sources and forms of institutional, financial, or community support; and (5) operational and structural challenges affecting service delivery.

## 3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Studies were included if they examined childcare services delivered by governments, organizations, communities, or individuals providing care to children while parents or guardians were working or otherwise absent. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods observational or descriptive designs were eligible. Exclusion criteria comprised literature reviews, commentaries, case reports, letters, conference abstracts, and studies focused exclusively on orphanages. Only studies conducted in countries designated as part of SSA by the Library of Congress were retained (Library of The Library of Congress, n.d.).

## 4. Search strategy

The search strategy was developed in collaboration with a PhD-trained librarian with expertise in child health and social policy. Guided by established scoping review frameworks (Arksey and O'Malley 2005; Levac et al., 2010; Tricco et al., 2018), we systematically searched EMBASE, Google Scholar, AJOL, JSTOR, Web of Science Core Collection, ERIC, EBSCOhost, and PsycINFO between 27 November and 11 December 2024. Searches incorporated both controlled vocabulary (e.g., MeSH, Emtree, and database-specific Subject Headings) and free-text keywords to capture terminological variation across disciplines and contexts. Boolean operators, truncation symbols, and proximity operators were used to maximize sensitivity and precision. A representative free-text search string was: (“childcare” OR “child care” OR “early child” OR preschool OR “day care” OR daycare OR kindergarten) AND (“childcare service” OR “early childhood education” OR ECE OR “childcare arrangement”) AND (Africa OR “sub-Saharan Africa” OR SSA). Database-specific controlled vocabulary included, for example child care; kindergarten; early childhood education for EMBASE Emtree; and Child Care; Early Childhood Education; Preschool Education; Child Development for EBSCO Subject Headings. These terms were paired systematically with topical qualifiers (e.g., organization, management, quality, supervision, oversight, regulation, workforce, curriculum) and geographic identifiers (Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, SSA).

To enhance completeness, we conducted backward citation tracking by manually screening the reference lists of all included studies. This iterative process allowed the identification of additional relevant publications not captured through database indexing.

## 5. Article selection, quality considerations, and analysis

All retrieved records were imported into Zotero for systematic management and de-duplication. Three reviewers independently screened titles and abstracts against the inclusion criteria. Disagreements were adjudicated by a fourth reviewer, and consensus decisions were documented. Full-text screening was conducted independently by the same three reviewers using predefined eligibility criteria. A structured Excel template was used to extract bibliographic information (title, authors, publication year, language), study design and objectives, geographic context, characteristics of childcare services (including ownership, service features, and regulatory context), study populations, and key findings. We employed a narrative synthesis approach. Following Thomas and Harden's (2008) thematic synthesis framework, reviewers iteratively coded and categorized extracted data into four analytical themes, namely types and ownership of CCSs, curricula and services provided, supervision, oversight, and support systems,

challenges facing CCSs in SSA. Quality assessment was undertaken to contextualize methodological rigor; however, consistent with scoping review methodology and PRISMA-ScR guidance, no studies were excluded based on quality appraisal alone.

## 6. Search results

The initial search identified 1418 titles. After de-duplication and refinement, 107 unique titles proceeded to title and abstract screening. Following full-text reviews by three independent reviewers, 19 titles (articles) met all inclusion criteria. These comprised seven qualitative, five mixed-methods, and seven quantitative articles. A PRISMA-ScR flow diagram summarizing the selection process is provided in Fig. 1. All included articles are listed in the reference section.

## 7. Results

### 7.1. Types and ownership of childcare services

Across the reviewed articles, a commonly reported feature of the childcare landscape in SSA is its marked heterogeneity, both in service type and ownership structure. This diversity has direct implications for governance, equity, quality, and regulation. Studies consistently show that CCSs in SSA operate along a continuum from formal, center-based provision—such as nurseries, preschools, daycare centers, and kindergartens—to informal or non-center-based arrangements, including nannies, house-helps, kinship care, and neighbor-provided services (Amitor Kumatia & Quartey, 2021; Biersteker et al., 2016; Hughes et al., 2021a, Hughes et al., 2021; Nampijja et al., 2023; Nankinga et al., 2022).

Formal center-based services are most commonly public, private, or community-owned and require registration, although enforcement of

registration varies across settings (Ejuu, 2012; Jegathesan et al., 2023; Munthali et al., 2014; Nganga, 2009). Informal center-based services, by contrast, typically operate from residential homes or improvised community spaces, often without registration or adherence to formal quality standards (Clark et al., 2019, 2021; Hughes et al., 2023). Non-center-based arrangements remain widespread and often constitute a critical mode of childcare due to their affordability and accessibility, as illustrated by Kenya, where house-helps constitute around one-fifth of childcare provision (Owino & Yigezu, 2023).

This diversity of ownership reflects both high demand and unequal access. Public centers tend to align more closely with national quality or ECE standards but are insufficient in number. Private centers expand supply but vary significantly in cost and quality, potentially widening inequalities. Community-owned and informal providers offer cultural proximity and flexibility, yet most lack regulatory oversight or institutional support. Consequently, the type and ownership of CCSs a child accesses can meaningfully shape their exposure to developmental opportunities or risks, reinforcing broader structural inequities.

### 7.2. Curricula and services provided

Curricula and service offerings varied widely, with the most common pattern being a narrow focus on child minding and safety rather than comprehensive early learning. Where structured curricula were reported—primarily in formal centers—they emphasized early literacy and numeracy, including alphabet recitation, counting, singing, and pre-writing tasks (Clark et al., 2021; Munthali et al., 2014; Mwoma et al., 2018; Were et al., 2013; Lucas et al., 2014). Some centers in SSA aligned with national ECE policies (Nganga, 2009; Sitati et al., 2016), illustrating pockets of stronger curricular standardization.

In both formal and informal settings, childcare services most consistently included supervision, play activities, hygiene support, and nutrition-related tasks such as feeding and bathing of children (Clark et al., 2021; Muasya, 2014, 2016). A smaller number of studies documented additional services, such as facilitating immunization or engaging children in basic physical activity or sport (Munthali et al., 2014; Mwoma et al., 2018; Were et al., 2013).

The implications of these variations are significant. Bornstein and Putnick (2012) suggest that providers that go beyond safety and custodial care—offering play-based learning, structured interaction, and health-enabling practices—are better positioned to support children's cognitive and socio-emotional development. Conversely, services that prioritize supervision alone may safeguard children in the short term but contribute minimally to developmental stimulation, reinforcing early learning gaps that later manifest in school readiness disparities. Ownership, funding stability, and provider training were the factors most commonly linked to these curricular differences, underscoring structural inequities in early developmental environments (Ejuu, 2012; Sitati et al., 2016).

### 7.3. Supervision, oversight, and support systems

Across the literature, the dominant finding is that oversight (regulatory mandates and enforcement) is heavily skewed toward formal, registered centers, leaving the much larger informal sector largely unregulated (Sitati et al., 2016; Ejuu, 2012; Piper et al., 2018; Halim et al., 2023). Where oversight (direct monitoring of daily practices and pedagogical quality) is present, it tends to focus on infrastructure—classrooms, sanitation, play areas—rather than curriculum or pedagogical quality (Ejuu, 2012; Sitati et al., 2016). Decentralized governance structures, particularly in Kenya, lead to uneven implementation of regulations and resource allocation across subnational units (Jegathesan et al., 2023; Nganga, 2009; Piper et al., 2018). This variability contributes to fragmented childcare systems in which access to quality care is determined by geography and local administrative capacity. Support systems (including training, materials, and financial

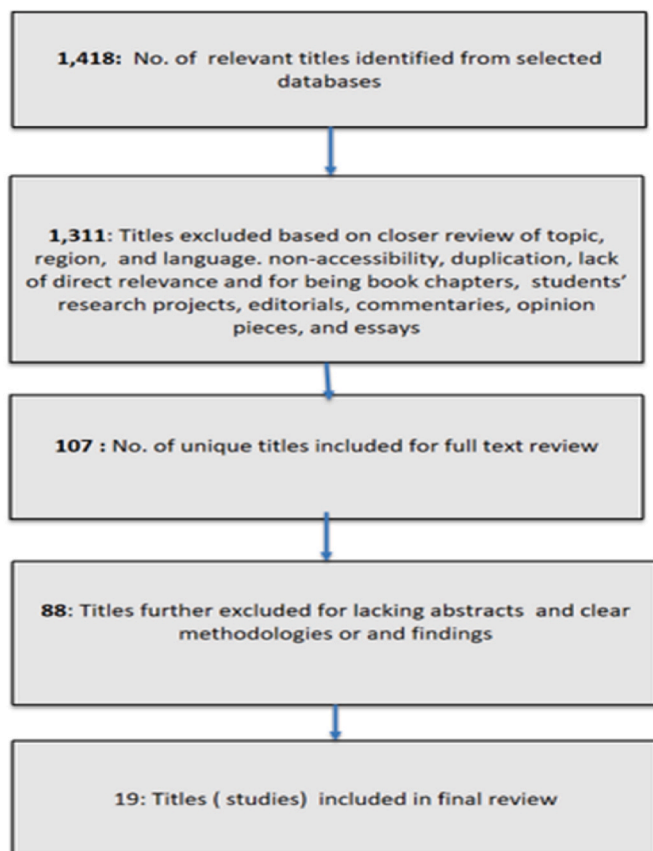


Fig. 1. Prisma flowchart.

or technical assistance that enable providers to meet expectations) were most commonly reported in the form of NGO- and community-driven initiatives, public–private partnerships, and parental contributions (Munthali et al., 2014). Examples include the Kidogo model in Kenya, which provides training and mentorship to informal caregivers (Okelo et al., 2022; Nganga, 2009). However, such support mechanisms remain uneven and project-driven, leaving many providers without sustained access to training or resources.

Altogether, the findings suggest a governance landscape marked by weak state capacity, fragmented regulatory reach, and reliance on non-state actors to fill systemic gaps—conditions that directly shape the quality and equity of CCSs.

#### 7.4. Challenges facing childcare service

Challenges reported across studies were multifaceted and inter-linked, with five domains emerging most frequently: funding constraints, policy gaps, workforce limitations, infrastructural deficits, and urbanization-related pressures. The most consistently identified challenge was minimal or inconsistent government funding, resulting in poor infrastructure, insecure or temporary facilities, and lack of adequate learning and play materials (Ejuu, 2012; Munthali et al., 2014; Nampijja et al., 2023; Nganga, 2009; Sitati et al., 2016). Policy gaps—including unclear guidelines for children under age three and inconsistent supervision—further undermine service quality (Jegathesan et al., 2023). Munthali et al. (2014) highlight that in Malawi, community-based childcare centers (CBCCs) are owned and managed by communities who provide the caregivers, premises, food, utensils, and play materials. Though these CBCCs are facilitated and authorized by government, they remain chronically underfunded, and their facilities frequently fall below government-prescribed standards.

Workforce issues—high child-to-caregiver ratios, low pay, limited qualifications, and overwork—were widely documented and directly linked to quality concerns (Nganga, 2009, 2020; Jegathesan et al., 2023). Informal centers, particularly in densely populated urban settlements, faced acute challenges due to overcrowding, weak hygiene standards, and unsafe or unfenced environments (Jegathesan et al., 2023; Hughes et al., 2023). Infrastructure-related deficits not only compromise safety but also constrain opportunities for learning and socio-emotional development (Mwoma et al., 2018; Hughes et al., 2023).

These challenges collectively highlight the structural nature of quality deficits in CCSs. Differences in ownership and oversight produce uneven developmental environments for children, while financial and workforce constraints restrict providers' ability to deliver enriched, safe, and equitable services. The evidence suggests that improving CCSs in SSA requires integrated policy interventions linking funding, regulation, workforce development, and community-based support systems to strengthen the overall childcare ecosystem.

## 8. Discussion

This scoping review highlights how the organization of CCSs in SSA is shaped by intersecting structural, institutional, and socioeconomic dynamics that collectively constrain the quality, equity, and developmental potential of early childhood environments. Across the literature, several cross-cutting patterns emerge that illustrate both the persistent gaps and the opportunities for system strengthening. First, the diversity of CCS types and ownership models—while reflecting high demand and contextual adaptability—produces uneven access to quality care. Public, private, community-owned, and informal arrangements coexist, yet they are governed by vastly different regulatory expectations, financing structures, and workforce capacities. This fragmentation mirrors broader patterns in the region's mixed health and education systems, where service quality is often stratified by household wealth, geographic location, and social capital (Tejería-Martínez et al., 2026). As a result,

children's developmental opportunities are determined not only by family circumstances but also by the institutional logic of the childcare setting they enter (Virata and Dunkelberg, 2008). These inequities are particularly troubling given the profound influence of early childhood environments on lifelong learning, socio-emotional functioning, and health.

Second, the findings show that curricula and service offerings vary substantially, with most childcare arrangements—especially informal or low-cost services—focusing primarily on safety and custodial care. While essential, this orientation often comes at the expense of structured learning, responsive caregiving, and socio-emotional stimulation. The disparities in service quality reflect the uneven institutionalization of early childhood development (ECD) across SSA, where ECE is frequently framed as school preparation rather than holistic development (Boakye, Etse, et al., 2008). This raises critical policy questions about what constitutes “quality” in diverse cultural and economic contexts and about how governments can promote equitable access to developmentally supportive environments.

Third, the review reveals striking gaps in supervision, oversight, and support, particularly for informal providers who constitute the majority of childcare in the region. Weak state capacity, limited regulatory reach, and fragmented decentralization arrangements contribute to significant variability in enforcement of standards. Where oversight does exist, it tends to emphasize physical infrastructure rather than pedagogical quality or caregiver–child interactions. These gaps not only undermine quality assurance but also place an outsized burden on caregivers operating in resource-poor settings. The rise of NGO-driven support models—such as the Kidogo example in Kenya—indicates potential pathways for strengthening informal providers, yet such models remain small-scale and dependent on external funding.

Finally, the challenges facing CCSs—insufficient funding, infrastructural deficits, untrained or overwhelmed staff, and rapid urbanization—reflect deeper systemic issues (García et al., 2008). These include persistent gender norms assigning women primary caregiving responsibility, the expansion of informal labor markets, and limited public investment in social services (Aidoo, 2008). Addressing these constraints requires more than technical upgrades; it demands integrated policy responses that link childcare to broader agendas in gender equality, labor policy, social protection, and urban planning.

Taken together, the findings illustrate that childcare in SSA is not merely a service but a nexus of social, economic, and political processes. Strengthening the sector will require coordinated efforts to expand public financing, professionalize the workforce, develop inclusive regulatory frameworks, and build partnerships that leverage community strengths while ensuring developmental equity for all children (Jaramillo & Mingat, 2008). The substantial evidence gaps identified—particularly regarding informal care, workforce experiences, and regulatory implementation—also underscore the need for more systematic, context-sensitive research.

## 9. Conclusion

This review demonstrates that childcare services in SSA are characterized by diversity, fragmentation, and persistent inequities that undermine their potential to support children's development and enable caregivers—especially women—to participate fully in economic life. While pockets of innovation and strong practice exist, particularly within community-led and NGO-supported models, the broader childcare ecosystem remains constrained by limited public investment, uneven regulatory oversight, workforce capacity challenges, and infrastructural deficits. The review highlights the urgent need for coherent policy frameworks that integrate childcare into national development agendas, recognizing its role in human capital development, gender equality, and inclusive growth. Strengthening CCSs will require expanding government funding, establishing tiered regulatory systems that meaningfully encompass informal providers, improving

workforce training and remuneration, and enhancing support structures through multisectoral partnerships.

Our study is not without limitations. We acknowledge that language constraints may have excluded potentially relevant studies and encourage future reviews to broaden linguistic inclusion criteria to encompass other widely used languages in the region, thereby strengthening the evidence base. Nevertheless, the findings presented here reflect the available peer-reviewed literature identified through our predefined criteria. The small number of eligible studies highlights a significant research gap in understanding how childcare systems in Africa are organized, governed, and experienced—insights crucial for developing a more comprehensive understanding of early childcare services. Future primary research should prioritize longitudinal and comparative studies examining how childcare arrangements shape child development outcomes, analyses of workforce experiences and competencies, and evaluations of regulatory and financing reforms.

By consolidating the available but fragmented evidence, our scoping review provides a foundation for advancing policy, programming, and research aimed at transforming childcare systems in sub-Saharan Africa into equitable, developmentally supportive, and sustainable structures.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Chimaraoke Izugbara:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Marion Ouma:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kirabo Suubi:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Chryspin Afifu:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Tijani Salami:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Evelyne Opondo:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of the use of AI

We declare that AI was not used in the preparation of this paper.

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### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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