

Children and inequality: Closing the gap

George Laryea-Adjei (UNICEF South Africa) and

Mastoera Sadan (Programme to Support Pro-poor Policy Development, National Planning Commission, the Presidency)

Equality is both a founding *value* of the Constitution as well as a fundamental *right*. Yet, despite the Constitution's intent to "heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights"¹, the legacy of apartheid continues to constrain efforts to address poverty and inequality in South Africa. While poverty has declined marginally, inequality – as measured by income – is rising.

This issue of the *South African Child Gauge* describes how inequality shapes the lives and life chances of millions of children in South Africa. The essays in this collection examine the interplay of different dimensions of inequality. Closing the divide between rich and poor is not just important for reducing gaps in intergenerational well-being, it is also essential for long-term economic growth and political stability.

This concluding essay pulls together the dimensions of child inequality as discussed in the various essays, highlights key opportunities and challenges, and flags some considerations for policy and practice. It is guided by the following framing questions:

- Why a rights-based approach to achieving equality?
- What are the dimensions of inequality amongst South Africa's children?
- What are the current opportunities and challenges?
- What are the critical considerations for policy?

Why a rights-based approach to equality?

The Constitution and a number of Constitutional Court judgments provide important guidance for addressing child inequality in the country, as outlined in Liebenberg's essay (pp. 24 – 31).

Firstly, the Constitution recognises children, by virtue of their age, as a specific and vulnerable group in need of protection, and thus requiring societal effort to promote and protect their best interests. Inequalities between the adult and child population need attention, and official statistics must be disaggregated to reveal particular challenges that children face – and these should receive special attention from policy-makers and planners.

Secondly, the Court's commitment to a substantive interpretation of the right to equality requires the government to move beyond a focus on equal opportunities and strive towards equal outcomes. For example, it is not sufficient to have equal access to education if the (poor) quality of education in poor communities fails to ensure equal outcomes. Quality service remains an important consideration, and any attempt to bridge equity gaps should be guided by the imperative of achieving equal child outcomes.

Achieving such outcomes should support upward mobility for all children, and not "level down" (p. 26).

Thirdly, a focus on the principles of equality and non-discrimination recognises the differences between groups of children and the social and historical drivers of these differences. This suggests the need to move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and a greater consideration of appropriately designed policies that consider challenges faced by various groups of disadvantaged children.

What are the dimensions of inequality among South Africa's children?

From a global perspective, economic, spatial, social, cultural and political inequalities – though they exist on their own – usually intersect or converge upon identifiable groups of citizens, either simultaneously or sequentially over time.² As various dimensions of inequality converge on particular groups of citizens, these groups experience various degrees of exclusion from political, social and economic opportunities,³ in many cases culminating in the creation of "poverty traps" from which it is hard to escape either through personal effort or public policy. For children the impact is particularly severe, and may lead to long-lasting developmental setbacks. Understanding the interaction between the various dimensions of inequality is therefore essential for appropriate policy response.

Hall and Woolard's essay (pp. 32 – 37) indicate a high level of economic (income) inequality in South Africa. Children are more likely than adults to live in the poorest households. Stark racial differences in the economic circumstances of children show how the history of apartheid has given rise to the particular economic, social and spatial patterns of inequality amongst children in South Africa today. While pro-poor policies have helped reduce child poverty in the post-apartheid period, they have failed to reverse increases in income inequality. The structural nature of inequality therefore requires interventions that take a medium- to long-term view.

Income inequality has a significant impact on children's living conditions, access to services and life trajectories. This is illustrated in a 2011 review by the South African Human Rights Commission, the Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities and UNICEF which found that:

... compared to a child growing up in the richest quintile, a child in the poorest income quintile is two times less likely to have access to adequate safe water and sanitation; two times less likely to be exposed to early childhood develop-

ment programmes; three times less likely to complete secondary education; seventeen times more likely to experience hunger; and twenty-five times less likely to be covered by a medical scheme.⁴

Wright and Noble also demonstrate stark spatial dimensions of inequality among children in South Africa, and how the most severe child deprivation remains concentrated in the former homelands (pp. 38 – 42). This raises questions about how to deal effectively with the cumulative disadvantage that children in the former homelands continue to face.

The essays on early childhood development (pp. 52 – 57), health (pp. 58 – 64) and education (pp. 69 – 73) also indicate stark dimensions of social inequality and that particular groups of children continue to be deprived of these critical opportunities for accelerated development. For example, quality ECD services offer huge long-term economic and social benefits – not only to individuals but to society at large. Yet, ECD centres are yet to reach the majority of children in poverty and those with disabilities (p. 54).

Overall, particular groups of children – very young children, children in poverty, many African children, children with disabilities, and children living in the former homelands and informal settlements – appear to experience multiple deprivations. This requires a combination of innovative and intersectoral approaches to close the equity gaps that they face. Further policy-related research and action are also needed to respond to the complex interplay of protective factors and the various dimensions of inequality.

What are the current opportunities and challenges?

Budlender and Woolard point out the positive effects of South Africa's extensive social assistance programme on child poverty (pp. 48 – 51). Social grants are the primary source of income for poor households in South Africa and are associated with positive health and educational outcomes for children. Yet they are unlikely to have a significant impact on inequality specifically, given the extreme differences between rich and poor and the relatively small value of the Child Support Grant (CSG) (p. 49). Other policy instruments are required to reduce income inequality, particularly those that would expand gainful employment. Among social grants, the impact of the CSG on multiple dimensions of child poverty would be even greater if more children are reached in their very early years.⁵

Early childhood development (ECD) is recognised as one of the surest ways of bridging intergenerational divides.⁶ Sound ECD offers tremendous benefits in terms of future income as well as development outcomes. Though some of the key components of ECD (such as grade R) are being provided at scale, many essential services are yet to reach disadvantaged groups in good measure. Children in richer quintiles have much greater access to quality ECD programmes, particularly from private providers (p. 55).

The successful roll-out of grade R provides an important lesson

on the central role of the state in expanding services to children in poverty. Yet ECD centres are failing to reach those most in need. While the ECD subsidy is pro-poor, it fails to cover the full costs of centre-based care, which effectively excludes children who cannot afford to pay fees. ECD programme implementation has largely focused on centre-based provision, and there are no home-based ECD programmes at scale for very young children, particularly those in the crucial first 1,000 days.

In this context, the state has to take on more responsibility by investing more, and in an equitable manner, in proven ECD services for the very young. While the relatively successful roll-out of grade R is to be welcomed, it does raise the question of which interventions at what time will have the most impact on child development. Policy instruments are urgently required to define appropriate delivery and funding models that will close the gap and expand the reach of both home and facility-based services to those most in need.⁷

The proposed National Health Insurance and the re-engineering of primary health care offer important opportunities to address the disparities between private and public health care spending and extend the reach and quality of health care services (pp. 58 – 64). The success of these initiatives, among others, depends on substantial investment in both the numbers and training of community health workers to ensure adequate coverage and quality of care.

Quality education is usually a great “equaliser” yet there has been little progress in bridging the inequality gaps in South Africa. Branson and Zuze demonstrate that while public expenditure is high, achievements remain poor (pp. 69 – 73). Schools in richer communities are able to raise additional funds to support a wide range of initiatives, including increasing the number and quality of teachers and management. Schools in poorer communities are unable to catch up, perpetuating unequal outcomes.

What are the critical considerations for policy?

South Africa has made significant progress in reducing multi-dimensional child poverty since the end of apartheid. Numerous programmes funded from public sources – including the CSG, free access to health care for pregnant women and young children, the National School Nutrition Programme, and subsidised water and electricity for poor families – are all associated with improved outcomes for children. However, greater effort is required to ensure that services reach those children most in need and to close the gap between rich and poor.

This issue of the *South African Child Gauge* alludes to weaknesses in the implementation of very good policies and laws. The National Development Plan similarly demands “increased focus on implementation” in the years ahead, and acknowledges many instances where implementation of good policies was “weak” or “patchy”.⁸

Furthermore, there is a close link between geography of child deprivation in South Africa and the “institutional vulnerability” and poor performance of local municipalities – particularly those in the

former homelands who are likely to have less economic and organisational capacity to speed up child development.⁹ This spatial dimension of inequality requires further policy-related work in the areas of governance and regional planning to strengthen and support services to families and children in these areas.

Overall, pro-poor programmes like the CSG and birth registration have been implemented well by global standards. However, several child-related programmes have not been implemented well, including quality education and prevention of violence. This raises the question: what are the underlying factors for weak implementation in some sectors? Do they lie in organisational capacity, the design of intergovernmental arrangements, leadership, accountability mechanisms, or perhaps in other factors? Further research is needed to identify the factors that help or hinder implementation of programmes that are meant to reduce child poverty and inequality.

Child outcomes are better where policy coherence exists. For example, the roll-out of grade R yielded better results when combined with access to the National School Nutrition Programme and the provision of appropriate infrastructure. Despite the benefits of integrated approaches to address multiple dimensions of inequality, the coordination of intersectoral programmes remains a challenge. The National Development Plan speaks of “coordination failures, split accountability and overlapping mandates that hinder the implementation of existing policies”.¹⁰ Addressing these challenges is particularly important in the context of early childhood development and primary health care, both of which rely on effective collaboration across different departments, including local government.

The political dimensions of inequality, in particular issues related to voice and power relations, also need attention from policy-makers. Children’s views are rarely considered in the development of services that directly affect their well-being. Yet, their resourcefulness, resilience and agency are well tested.

The publication of this issue of the *South African Child Gauge* is timely. As noted in the National Development Plan, “eighteen years into democracy, South Africa remains a highly unequal society

where too many people live in poverty and too few work”.¹¹ The plan acknowledges that inequality in South Africa is deeply structural and linked directly to the historical legacy of apartheid. Furthermore, it is compounded by factors such as race, geography, class, and gender, and limited access to economic opportunity.

This inequality will be further entrenched if the country fails to act decisively. Children born in 2012 will turn 18 in 2030 – the year when the National Development Plan hopes to have achieved a more equitable, just and prosperous South Africa. The challenge for government and society is to act decisively today in the best interest of all children in South Africa:

*There is a burning need for faster progress, more action and better implementation. The future belongs to all of us and it is up to all South Africans to make it work.*¹²

Trevor Manuel, Minister in the Presidency: National Planning Commission

References

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- 8 National Planning Commission (2012) *National Development Plan 2030*. Pretoria: The Presidency, p. 314.
- 9 UNICEF (2011) *Discussion Paper on Equity and Child rights in South Africa*. Pretoria: UNICEF.
- 10 See no. 8 above, p. 43.
- 11 See no. 8 above, p. 24.
- 12 See no. 8 above, p. 1.