

Reflection on child poverty and inequality

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We need to think hard about how we bring up our children because the foundations laid in childhood will stay with them throughout their lives. The love and care they receive, the quality of health care, adequate nutrition and exposure to a stimulating environment all affect their physical, emotional and cognitive development.

In 2007 the medical journal *The Lancet* published a series of studies on the impact of poverty on a child's life chances. The studies estimated that cognitive development of over 200 million children under the age of five was held back by poverty, ill-health and under-nutrition,¹ and identified early childhood as "the most effective and cost-efficient time to ensure all children develop their full potential".²

Poverty has major long-term impacts on a child's development. For example, the debilitating effects of undernutrition last throughout the child's life. A five-country study that included Brazil, Guatemala, India, the Philippines and South Africa found that undernutrition was related to stunting, fewer years of schooling and reduced economic activity.³ The effects last across generations as women who were undernourished in childhood are more likely to give birth to underweight children.

The *South African Child Gauge* is an important contribution to evidence-based policy-making. It demonstrates the importance of using child-centred analyses to ensure that policies are responsive to children's needs. It tells us that while many development indicators are improving in South Africa, this is not always the case for children. It shows that far too many of South Africa's children are being left behind. One fifth of children have lost at least one of their biological parents.⁴ Nearly two-thirds of children lived below R575 per month.⁵ Over a third lived in households where no adult was employed and nearly two million children lived in informal houses and backyard dwellings.⁶ A third of children did not have access to drinking water at home.⁷

The poor quality of education that our children receive has been a focal issue for many years now. Despite high rates of attendance, the latest results from the 2011 annual national assessment shows that the average grade 3 learner scored 35% in literacy and 28% in numeracy.⁸ The painful fact is that most schools do not provide children with the skills they will need in adult life. Many children grow up in environments which expose them to violence from a very early age. Their safety is compromised in the home, schools and on the streets of their communities. They are exposed to substance abuse, and are vulnerable to unplanned pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases.

The National Development Plan⁹ focuses on how we can overcome these challenges. The plan proposes introducing a special nutrition programme for pregnant women and children under two. It identifies ways to improve both the quality and availability of health care for everyone, but especially for mothers, infants and children. To improve education standards, the plan suggests that all children should have access to two years of quality early childhood education before they start

formal schooling. It also identifies measures to improve the quality of school education, and make schools and communities both safer and more child-friendly.

The plan builds on our many laws, programmes and policies that are intended to improve children's lives and give them a better start in life. South Africa is a signatory to the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child. Our social security system is intended to ensure no child grows up without access to the basic means of subsistence. A recent study found that children who were enrolled on the Child Support Grant at birth stay at school longer and are less likely to suffer ill-health than those who only access this financial support later in childhood.¹⁰ The roll-out of universal access to grade R, the no-fee schools policy and the National School Nutrition Programme have also made a difference in tackling some of the effects of child poverty.

However, the implementation of policies and laws is uneven. The quality of services children can access varies depending on who they are and where they live. The legacy of apartheid continues to impact adversely on children's life chances. Children in rural areas and informal settlements have access to lower quality services than those in middle-class suburbs. Girls face more difficulties than boys, and children with disabilities are at an even greater disadvantage.

The most important investment that we can make as a country is to invest in the well-being and development of our children so that they can go on to lead healthy and active lives. The *South African Child Gauge* makes an important contribution to the debate on how we can best achieve this objective.

We must give meaning to the rights enshrined in our Constitution and create a society that is fair and just. We invite all sectors of society to work together to implement proposals in the National Development Plan and to continue to find ways to address poverty and inequality. We owe it to our children now, and to future generations.

References

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