

# Foreword

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**T**hanks to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, “survival and development” is not just a privilege for some. It is a human right for all children that the government of South Africa is legally bound to implement. This right is not just only about surviving, being alive, or subsisting; it is about having a fair chance in life and being offered the opportunity to thrive, as much as possible, and reach one’s full potential.

Governments should ensure, to the maximum extent possible, the survival, protection and development of every child including the physical, mental, moral, spiritual and social dimensions of their growth and development. Identification of the many risks and protective factors that underlie survival and development of the child across the life course is critical. In the context of health, for instance, birth weight, care arrangements, family history, poverty and violence threaten the survival and development of children. Timing and early intervention are critical for radically reducing equity gaps, and both early childhood and adolescence should be viewed as windows of opportunity.

The survival and development of children was a central tenet of the Millennium Development Goals. However, the focus on national averages concealed differences within countries, and among various groups of children, and left millions of the most disadvantaged children behind.

Inequities, often during early life, usually have lifelong effects, and manifest themselves in poor learning, health and employment outcomes. For example, stunting – children with a height far below the average for their age – is not only about the height of children, but that their brains have difficulty to develop fully, leading to poor learning outcomes, and lower employment rates. It should then not come as a surprise that in some corners of the continent, children could not read a single letter after going through three or four years of schooling. Inequity is also a recipe for a vicious intergenerational cycle of disadvantage.

How the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) address – in both conceptualisation and implementation – the threats to children’s survival and development is critical. “No child left behind” should go beyond being a slogan. The SDGs do not only assume that reaching the hardest to reach is realistic, but that it can be more cost-effective. Targeting evidence-based programmes

at the most disadvantaged, identified through disaggregated data, can accelerate efforts to overcome barriers to services.

This *Child Gauge* brings together nine essays that shed light on progress, and sometimes the lack thereof, towards the fulfilment of children’s right to survival and development. The authors of the articles range from academics and researchers to representatives from civil society and government. Each piece is based on research and evidence that contributes to – and resonates with – global discourses, challenges and strategies to promote children’s survival and development.

This issue of the *Child Gauge* is very timely and relevant, as implementation of the SDGs has started in earnest, with the first few Voluntary National Reviews already underway, and South Africa therefore needs to reflect deeply on how the implementation of the SDGs can contribute to the creation of a South Africa that is fit for *all* children.

The essays emphasise a South African context that is often characterised by poverty, and health system failures that continue to compromise children’s survival and development; where schooling outcomes remain poor despite high attendance; and where the interpersonal relational needs and emotional well-being of children are neglected. The impact of insecurity on children’s development across the life course, and failure to ensure substantive equality especially for children with disabilities are further challenges. The five key priorities, namely education, health and nutrition, caring relationships, safety, and inclusion rightly echo the aspiration in the preamble to the UNCRC that “the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding”.

Some of the main messages – the benefits of a child rights approach to development; the added value of equity and evidence-based programming; robust data to identify the children who are missing out; a holistic understanding of survival and development that also recognises children’s evolving capacities; and community engagement for stronger systems for health, education and protection, deserve a serious attention by all stakeholders, in particular, policy-makers.

The contents of this *Child Gauge* are clear indication that we have our work cut out for us here in South Africa. I hope – and expect – that we are ready to rise to the challenge.

