

Investing in children: The drivers of national transformation in South Africa

David Harrison (DG Murray Trust)

The focus of the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health on survive, thrive and transform comes at a time when South Africa is looking for the next wave of social and economic transformation. And the strategy highlights how we should look first to children if we are to create new impetus for sustained change.

Children are a highly concentrated nucleus of power. Their power to think, to imagine and to relate well to others is the nation's source of social intelligence and human capital. Tapping that power more effectively provides one of the greatest opportunities to transform South Africa over the next 20 years. If we fully develop the capabilities of young children so that they are able to learn when they go to school and get a decent job when they grow up, then South Africa would have fuller employment; greater economic growth; and a safer, happier society. *The key question is: how?* The answer is simple: If we nurture their normal growth and development – from conception to adulthood – we will unlock that human potential. Their innate genetic programming will do the rest, and children will flourish (as outlined in the essay on p. 32). Such radical change would disrupt intergenerational cycles of poverty and drive down levels of inequality.

The current gaps in the provision of early childhood development (ECD) services present major opportunities to change the trajectory of national growth over the next decade. However, these gains will be fully realised only if quality schooling and adolescent support follow intensified investment in the early years to enable young people to transition into productive adulthood.

While there has been progress in key areas of child development, it has not been enough to trigger a tipping point where public investments start to yield meaningful returns on education and training. Essentially, this essay argues that addressing three "critical gaps" could level the playing field and boost human capital development. These include national-scale efforts to: 1. prevent stunting; 2. ensure all children are ready to read by the time they go to school; and 3. develop networks of support for vulnerable children and teenagers.

In summary, this essay seeks to answer the following questions:

- Why is it essential to invest in South Africa's children?
- What do children need to thrive?
- What progress has been made to support children's optimal development?
- What else is needed to unlock children's potential?
- What can be done to address these critical gaps?
- How can we fast-track progress towards a "tipping point"?

Why is it essential to invest in South Africa's children?

Since 1994, South Africa has achieved significant gains with democratic institutions and service delivery infrastructure mostly in place. However, this progress has yet to transform South Africa into a safer, inclusive, growing economy. In the absence of significant economic growth, new gains will only come about by using resources better – by allocating and spending money more efficiently. In this regard, our greatest failure is that we have not invested properly in our children. Arguably, this is the single biggest reason for the persistent and seemingly intractable effects of apartheid, and the greatest threat to the success of our democracy. On the other hand, it presents a real opportunity to change the nation's trajectory over the next decade.

According to tax data,¹ 10% of the population owns 90 – 95% of all wealth, while the poorest half of the population owns no measurable wealth at all. The wealthiest 10% are predominantly White, while the poorest 50% are almost all Black. Such extreme inequality is a primary reason for persistently high rates of crime, violence and social unrest.²

If concentration of wealth is the measure of the health and stability of a nation, then South Africa is even more fragile now than it was in 1994.³ At the heart of the problem is a failure of broad-based skills development to drive productivity and inclusive economic growth. The increase in the national skills base has been relatively small (only 25% of the labour force were skilled in 2014 compared to 21% in 1994), and racial disparities have widened. For example, the increase in White skilled workers in the first two decades post-democracy was double that of Africans (a 45% increase versus 20%).⁴ This points to the enduring legacy of apartheid and the failure of post-apartheid South Africa to reverse the trends. One measure of progress would be younger workers becoming more skilled. However, official national statistics suggest that the reverse is true – and that the proportion of skilled African workers aged 25 – 34 actually decreased between 1994 and 2014.⁵

Any discussion of the state of skills development in South Africa almost invariably focuses on higher education and training, which is characterised by low in-take and high drop-out rates. South Africa's 26 universities and 50 technical, vocational and educational training (TVET) colleges all prepare young people for work. Yet only one in eight youth go to university, and of these, over 40% drop out without completing their degree.⁶ The university drop-out rate among Black students for three- and four-year degrees is one-and-

a-half times higher than for White students (58% vs 39%).⁷ In effect, this means that only 5% of all African and Coloured young people in South Africa successfully complete university.

The situation for students at TVET colleges is even worse with high drop-out rates, and those that stay the course battle to find practical experience to become certified. In effect, taking drop-out into account, the national throughput rates for many TVET courses are less than 30%.⁸

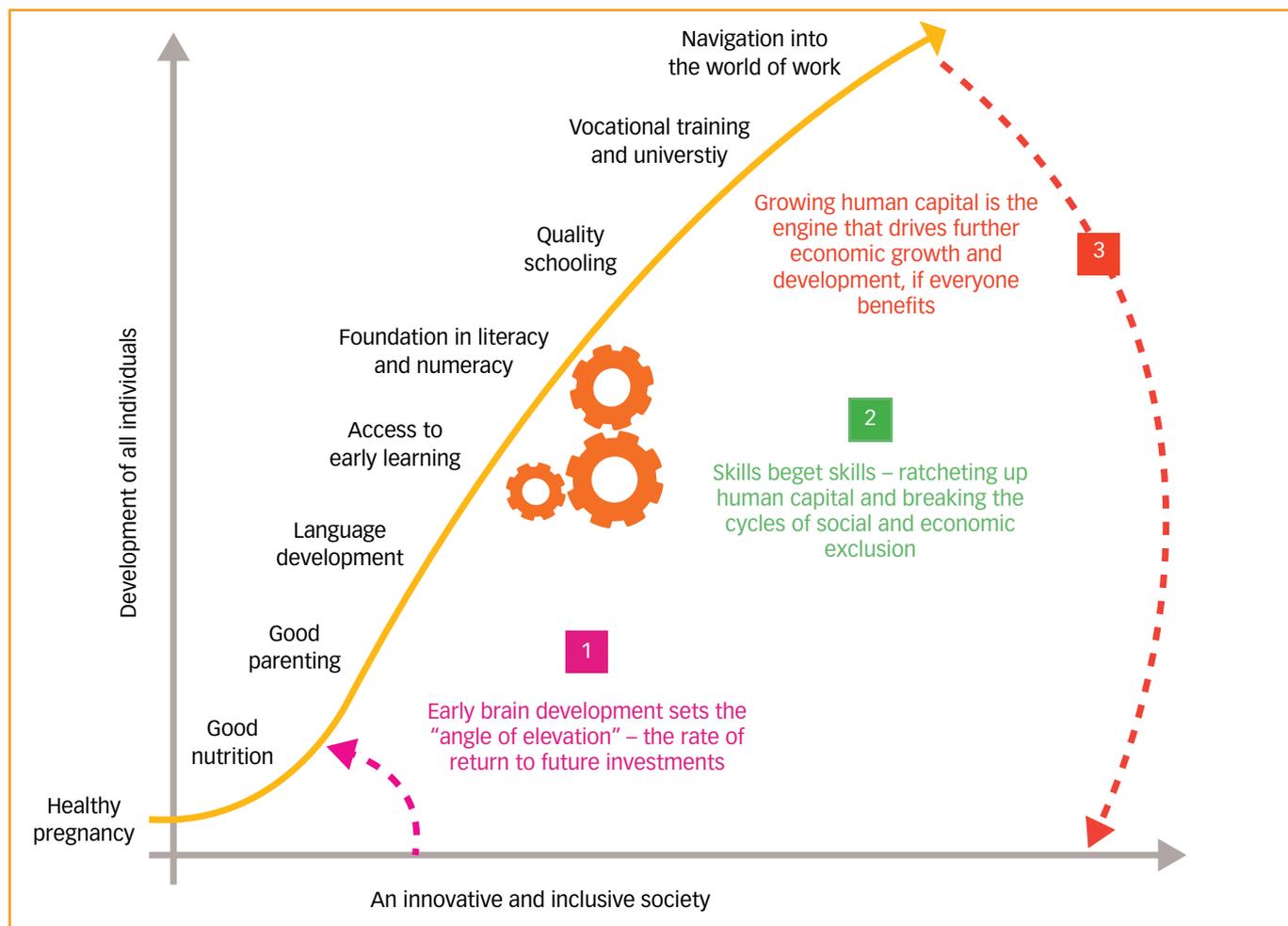
Many of these problems stem from children's struggle to learn, which is made worse by the poor state of basic education. Just 45% of children who enter grade 1 pass grade 12. Over two-fifths drop out of school and another sixth fail grade 12. Those that drop out are more likely to have failed a number of grades before dropping – or being pushed – out.⁹ In fact, the children in the poorest (quintile 1 and 2) schools enter school at a disadvantage – already scoring about 20% less on entry for maths and home language than children in higher quintile schools.¹⁰ These findings point to major deficits in language and cognitive ability that have already accrued by the age of five.¹¹ This is not surprising, given the intense sensory, language and cognitive development which instinctively happens in the first few years of life if the right ingredients are in place. Figure 9 illustrates the critical inputs that shape the trajectory of human

capital development. It draws on the famous Heckman equation which showed that pre-school education is the best investment in human capital that a country could make,¹² effectively setting the compound rate of return to subsequent investments in education and training. The diagram provides a framework for a comprehensive strategy for skills development which should start bottom-up by recognising that children are the source of human capital. Such a framework is not yet in place in South Africa.

Many models of human capital development focus simply on the amount of money earned by individuals, and fail to understand that these benefits must be widely and fairly distributed in order to capitalise fully on a nation's potential in the long run. Figure 9, therefore highlights how skills development thrives best in an innovative and inclusive society.¹³

This essay argues that the *normal* growth and development of children – from conception to adulthood – will unlock substantial human potential. In other words, creating an environment in which *all* children can thrive has the power to drive social and economic transformation and create a society where each person's brain is used to its full extent *and* where everyone stands to benefit. In the face of increasingly concentrated wealth in South Africa, investment in children is a powerful force for greater equality.

Figure 9: The trajectory of human capital development



Source: DG Murray Trust (2017) *Imagine a South Africa where Every Person has the Opportunity to Fulfill their Potential*. Cape Town: DGMT.

What do children need to thrive?

A thriving child is capable, motivated and connected, and able to act on a sense of real and imminent possibility.

- Children's *capabilities* are rooted in the stock of "physiological capital" that accumulates before and after birth.¹⁴ This includes children's innate capabilities (or genetic endowment), which are either enhanced or diminished by extrinsic factors (such as home and environmental conditions, nutrition and access to health care). This form of human capital largely accumulates in the first 1,000 days of life. It determines the brain's responsiveness to stimulation, and establishes the child's lifelong learning potential which is key to human productivity.
- The *motivation to succeed* promotes resilience and the ability to "bounce back" from adversity. A strong motivation to succeed – established in the early years – promotes learning, reduces adolescent risk-taking behaviour and enhances the prospects of lifelong achievement.¹⁵ Children respond well to rewards and incentives – and even modest opportunities can build a sense of real and imminent possibility in life. This goal-directedness can develop quickly in pre-schoolers if their parents and teachers know how to develop their skills of self-regulation and ability to get things done (executive function). Mastery of language and the ability to read are major milestones in the development of self-efficacy (one's belief in one's ability to succeed), which in turn drives the motivation to learn and to succeed.¹⁶
- *Healthy relationships* protect children and can help them thrive despite adversity. The psychologist Ann Masten synthesised the findings of dozens of studies¹⁷ which confirmed that parental love and care build resilience. Further protective factors include a child's *connectedness* to another significant adult in their life when they are young, and to groups of friends and classmates as they grow up. Effective schools and supportive community structures play a large part in buffering children and adolescents from adversity. Masten calls these simple, yet profound, factors the "ordinary magic" that can enable a child to keep bouncing back in the face of hardship.

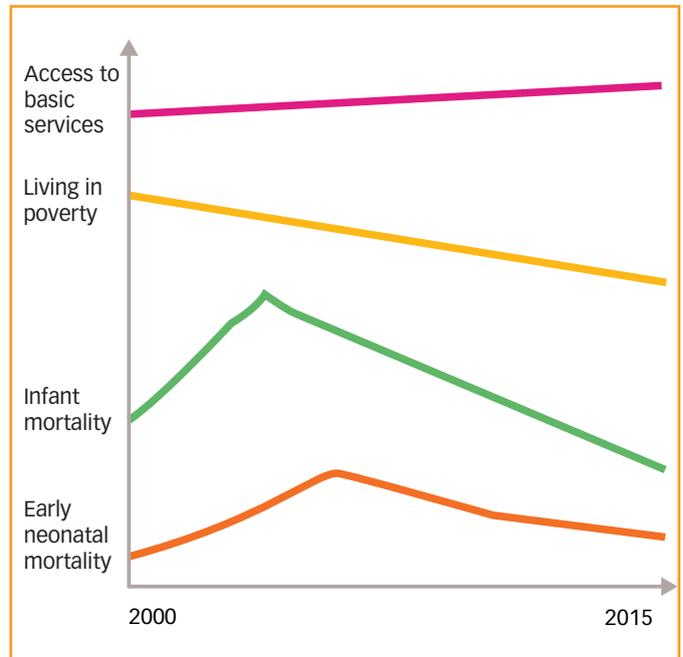
Together, these factors lay the foundation for effective education and training, and for the empathy, critical thinking and imagination that characterise an inclusive and innovative society.¹⁸

What progress has been made to support children's optimal development?

South Africa has made good progress in the past 15 years – in reversing the worsening infant and mortality rates due to HIV and in cushioning children from the extremes of poverty through child grants and state-subsidised electricity, water and sanitation (as outlined in figure 10).

The percentage of children under six living below the national upper bound poverty line (R965 per month in 2015) declined from 79% in 2003 to 62% in 2015. Over the same period, the proportion of children under six living in households with inadequate services declined from 40% to 30%.¹⁹

Figure 10: Elements of child development showing good progress



Source: Derived from: Hall K, Sambu W, Berry L, Giese S, Almeleh C & Rosa S (2016) *South African Early Childhood Review 2016*. Cape Town: Children's Institute, UCT & Ilifa Labantwana.

There also has been good progress in providing antenatal and obstetric care. Women are booking earlier for antenatal care (61% booked before 20 weeks in 2015/16 compared to 38% in 2010/11)²⁰ and more deliveries now take place in health facilities (96% in 2016, up from 83% in 1998)²¹. Antiretroviral treatment has dramatically reversed infant mortality by reducing the vertical HIV transmission rate at 18 months to 4.7%.²² These changes are significant, but on their own they are not enough to create the conditions for children to thrive.

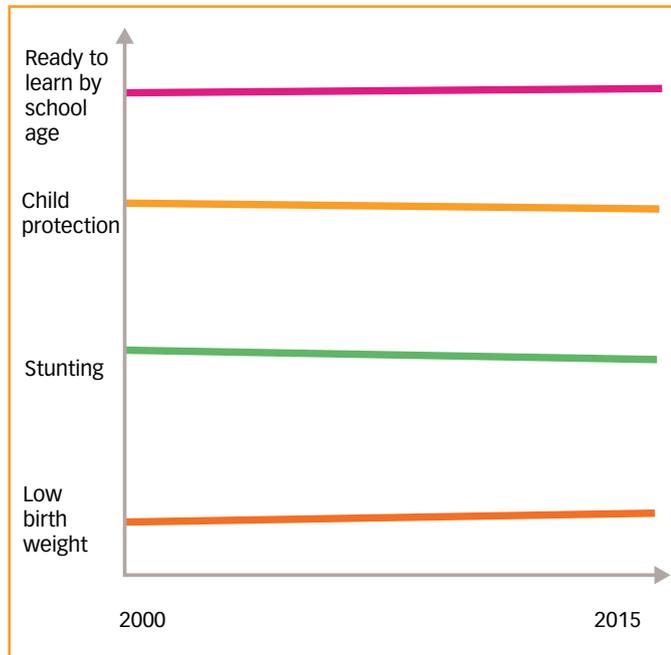
What else is needed to unlock children's potential?

There remain several crucial areas of child development where there has been little or no progress (figure 11 on p. 46) and increased investment in these areas has the potential to promote children's optimal development with significant long-term benefits.

- Preventing stunting could allow a million more young children to thrive each year, increasing the gross domestic product by at least 1.3% as noted on p. 36.
- If all children entered school ready to read, this would significantly boost their self-confidence and learning ability. A fully literate population would ultimately grow the economy by about 25%.²³
- Local networks of care and support could significantly reduce the vulnerability of babies with the poorest developmental outcomes, and provide a "second chance" to teenagers who missed out earlier in life (as illustrated by the case on p. 38).

Together these elements would help build children's capabilities, motivation to succeed and connectedness – and promote human capital development and social cohesion.

Figure 11: Elements of child development showing little progress



Source: Derived from: Hall K, Sambu W, Berry L, Giese S, Almeleh C & Rosa S (2016) *South African Early Childhood Review 2016*. Cape Town: Children’s Institute, UCT & Ilifa Labantwana.

Building capability: Good nutrition is the basis for good health and the ability to learn. However, the stunting rate of young children in South Africa has remained substantially unchanged over the past 20 years.²⁴ The 2016 Demographic and Health Survey found that 27% of children under five years were stunted.²⁵ Similarly, low birthweight (<2,500g) – a significant contributor to stunting – has remained unchanged, or perhaps even increased in the past decade.²⁶ Stunting thus represents a significant deadweight on the South African economy, and eliminating it would represent a significant boost to employment and gross domestic product.²⁷

Data from Bangladesh, India and Peru show that stunting is a product of deficiencies in three domains: food; environmental health (water, sanitation and hygiene); and care (including basic antenatal care, nutritional supplements in pregnancy, immunisation and breastfeeding).²⁸ Children with deficiencies across all three domains experienced stunting rates up to 30% higher than those with adequate food, environmental health and care. The multi-faceted causes of stunting pose challenges for effective intervention, and require concerted intersectoral commitment and action (see nutrition essay on p. 68). Nonetheless, it can be done. Brazil, Colombia, Malaysia, Peru and Senegal have all achieved marked gains in the nutritional status of their children.²⁹

Nurturing motivation to succeed: One of the most powerful tools in the hands of parents is early language development through reading and story-telling. This is the basis for both literacy and mathematics attainment, but is also a strong motivator for learning and personal achievement. Over a quarter (27%) of grade 6 learners are illiterate – unable to read or understand a simple text (see education essay on p. 77).³⁰ In South Africa, only 15% of adults with young children at home read aloud to them more than

once a week, and two-thirds do not read to their children at all.³¹ These facts point to arguably the most concentrated opportunity for socio-economic transformation in South Africa today: a mass mobilisation of parents, communities and teachers, together with widely available reading material, could substantially improve educational outcomes within a decade.

Strengthening connectedness: Most stunting and other forms of child vulnerability occur in households which are economically fragile and socially marginalised. These home and family factors place children at daily risk and lead to toxic stress and cumulative emotional-cognitive deficits. The burden of care rests heavily on mothers who themselves struggle to make ends meet, typically in the absence of fathers. Poorer access to early learning and schooling further disadvantages children with disabilities while high rates of violence against women and children compound economic vulnerability and add to the burden of physical and mental ill-health (see essays on safety and inclusion on p. 61 and p. 84).³² These patterns of risk and risk-tolerance tend to follow the child as he or she gets older, driving the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Roughly a million babies are born in South Africa annually, of whom at least a quarter are socially and economically vulnerable – if living below the food poverty line is regarded as a reasonable proxy.³³ These mothers and their children need support from pregnancy onwards. Encouragingly, the proportion of women recorded as having follow-up postnatal care within two days after birth rocketed to 84% in 2016³⁴ from 5% in 2009.³⁵ However, there is insufficient interaction between health and social services and young children, especially between six weeks and two years after birth (except for vaccinations and clinic attendance for illness). Yet this period is critical in establishing lifelong trajectories of human development and achievement, and we need to find ways to create social safety nets that go beyond the provision of social assistance.

We need to place far greater attention on mobilising local networks of care and support for these infants living below the food poverty line – and then, as they grow older, continue to support those at high risk through failure to thrive, exposure to violence or disability (see care essay on p. 51). Well-supervised and supported community health workers (CHWs) dedicated to maternal and child care have been shown to improve child outcomes.³⁶ The challenge however is to ensure the level of quality and supervision required at scale; arguably a feat unlikely to be achieved as part of government service provision. The Isibindi model is instructive, in that a national non-governmental organisation (NGO) – the National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW) – receives public funding to provide community-level support. The NACCW now reaches over 300,000 children, although that is still a small fraction of those who need support (0.6% of children under 15, or roughly 2.5% of those below the food poverty line).³⁷

The responsibility cannot fall on government and established NGOs alone, and it is crucial that broader civil society and the corporate sector take greater responsibility as well. Cape Town Embrace³⁸ is a voluntary initiative that tries to link mothers across class and race to build new “networks of possibility” for children.³⁸

Case 3: A children's National Development Plan

Christina Nomdo and Zarina Adhikari (National Planning Commission)

The National Planning Commission (NPC) was established in 2010 to advise Cabinet and guide government's long-term strategic vision for South Africa – which was then outlined in the National Development Plan (NDP). The NPC recognises children as a source of inspiration, energy and resourcefulness, and their right to participate in all decisions affecting their lives, and is therefore in the process of developing a children's NDP in collaboration with children.

The NPC plans to conduct child participation workshops in every province of South Africa and include children from all walks of life. The workshops will provide information about children's rights and how government works, and give children the opportunity to express their views on the NDP. The children's feedback will be collated into child-friendly products that communicate the NDP to other children. Insights from the children's workshops will also be shared at the monthly NPC plenary meetings, and salient matters will be shared with the President as part of an NPC report.

The first two workshops with children were conducted in March 2017 in the Western Cape. Children from the community of Groendal – a community housing mostly seasonal farm workers – were concerned about child abuse, housing, sanitation, education, drugs and pollution. They would like to see a future with better access to quality social services.

At the second workshop, the youth in the Groot Drakenstein Correctional Centre were concerned about crime, making rights real, household poverty, housing, water, drugs, gangsters, leadership, unemployment, abortion, the costs of university and election promises. They encouraged commissioners to dream of a gang-free South Africa. A child who had been used by adults to commit crimes articulated it quite well: "Die leaders moet nie die klein laaitjies gebruik om hulle vuil werk te doen nie; op die einde sit ons in die tronk en hulle worry nie." (The leaders must not use young children to do their dirty work; in the end we land up in jail and they don't care.)

Chapter 11 of the NDP focuses on nutrition, health care, education, social care and safety, while children's concerns about violence are addressed in Chapter 12 which focuses on building safer communities. In cases where children and youth raise issues that are not explicitly addressed in the NDP (such as abortion and election promises), the commissioner referred children to other laws and the nature of South Africa's democratic processes. The workshops have thus far served to encourage discussion amongst South Africans (whether they are appointed as commissioners to the NPC, children in communities or youth incarcerated in a facility) about the nature of governance in South Africa and the vision we all hold for our future.

To some extent, it has succeeded in bringing together diverse groups in support of young children, although its ability to sustain these relationships remains to be seen. It also recognises the risk that cross-cultural and cross-class relationships can be patronising and ultimately disempowering, and it is designed to recognise and assert the strengths and power of all parents.

While this essay has focused largely on young children – because the benefits are greatest at an early age – adolescence provides a second chance to "get it right", albeit at greater public expense.³⁹ Nonetheless, the cost is worth it because our society cannot withstand successive waves of unskilled young people entering the labour market and because young people need support and have a right to resources that promote their health, well-being and development. Like the first 1,000 days of life, adolescence is a time of rapid human development, which means that effective inputs can have enhanced effects. Such inputs include mentoring and healthy peer relationships that help young people navigate life transitions successfully and create the handholds for upward mobility.⁴⁰

There have been attempts to develop and sustain large-scale networks of support to young people. These include *LoveLife*, which at its peak sustained interaction with over 1.5 million young people a year.⁴¹ However, these initiatives have struggled with unpredictable funding and cash flows, reflecting fluctuating government support and donor interests. These experiences highlight some challenges of ensuring that resources are both allocated, and used efficiently, for national development.

What can be done to address these critical gaps?

South Africa is considered "strong on policy, but weak on implementation" and it is fair to say that, with few exceptions, South Africa has enough policy for children and adolescents. The country's long-term blueprint for change, the National Development Plan (NDP), recognises children and young people as the source of a "demographic dividend" – and how our youthful population may help accelerate economic growth. Specifically, it identifies nutritional support for pregnant women and young children, and the extension of ECD services as fast-track strategies for poverty alleviation.⁴² Unfortunately, the idea of children and young people at the centre of development is not carried through the NDP's sector-based chapters. This weakness is now recognised by the National Planning Commission, which aims to bring children more centrally into its consultative and implementation processes (see case 3 above).

The development of the second National Plan of Action for Children (2012 – 2017)⁴³ ran in parallel with the NDP.⁴⁴ While this plan for children represents an important translation of policy to action, it is questionable whether departments regularly refer to it in developing their annual plans. Certainly, there is no routine synthesis of the indicators of progress assigned in the NDP to every relevant department.

Both ECD and nutrition are high on the national policy agenda. In the past few years, the Presidency has commissioned diagnostic

reviews on the state of ECD⁴⁵ and on nutrition for children from conception to five years⁴⁶. The former led to the development of the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy²⁰ which signalled a significant shift in emphasis toward the period from conception to age two. An encouraging early outcome of this policy was the a new national Conditional Grant for ECD which will hopefully improve access to out-of-home early learning opportunities over the next decade.

The diagnostic review on nutrition acknowledged that the Integrated Nutrition Plan had failed to promote collaboration between government departments and had not achieved the anticipated nutritional gains. Similarly, the national nutrition roadmap 2013 – 2017 published by the Department of Health has struggled to achieve the required level of concerted action.⁴⁷

While nutrition and ECD have at least attracted political attention, early language development and reading have, until recently, received little consideration. Part of the problem has been that no government department has an explicit mandate for reading in children under six – as responsibility is shared by the Department of Basic Education (early learning), Arts and Culture (libraries) and Social Development (oversight of ECD centres). The National Reading Strategy published in 2008 by the Department of Basic Education assumes that reading development starts at school, instead of in the first year of life. It has been left to civil society initiatives such as *Nal'ibali* reading-for-joy campaign (see case 4) to advocate for an earlier start for language and reading development. These efforts are starting to bear fruit, having attracted the attention of the National Education Collaboration Trust, which plans to promote reading as a lever for educational improvement in South Africa.

The National Youth Policy 2015 – 2020 covers all the bases of economic participation, education, skills and second chances, health care and risk reduction, and social cohesion.⁴⁸ It describes key interventions for achieving these goals, but it carries little weight in national planning.

Arguably, the reason why so little progress has been made in addressing the critical gaps described above is that they require a broader national mobilisation than was required to install taps, build houses and provide cash transfers. Nutrition, early language development and reading, and local networks of care and support

do not fit easily into the remit of a single government department. In this regard, we have much to learn from Latin American countries such as Mexico, Peru, Chile, Brazil and Columbia. They have shown how the full extent of resources available across government, civil society and the private sector can be mobilised to address cross-cutting national priorities for children (see box 3 below).⁴⁹

How can we fast-track progress towards a “tipping point”?

The first step is to establish clear goals and national commitments; for example:

- By 2030, zero stunting among children under five years of age.
- By 2025, all children ready to read by the time they go to school.
- By 2020, networks of care and support for the most vulnerable quarter of a million children born each year, and for at least a million teenagers who constitute the nation’s “second chance” to get it right.

The second step is to define a lead agency to mobilise concerted action for each of these priorities. Generally, there is a great reluctance to establish another state agency when most of those that already exist have proved cumbersome and expensive. A case in point is the National Youth Development Agency, which has often become bogged down in political contests and administrative problems. However, there is no reason why such an agency must be based within government, provided there is sufficient political recognition of the status of a non-government agency. A *de facto* example in South Africa is the Health Systems Trust, which has both supported and monitored health systems development over the past 25 years. It is relatively nimble, autonomous and can mobilise both public and private funding – while still being nationally accountable.

The third step is to mobilise a sustained funding base for each of these national programmes. In this regard, there are private foundations eager and willing to support, provided that the government is also committed. Currently, many good ideas fail to materialise because it is so difficult to align public and private funding. Together with the respective lead departments, National Treasury should be more proactive in establishing co-funding mechanisms to address the critical gaps. These need not require the pooling of public and private funding but should ensure upfront commitments from both sides to sustain the national programmes over the long term.

Addressing the critical gaps requires a willingness to do things differently and the NDP recognises that the next big changes will require an unprecedented level of partnership between government, civil society and the corporate sector. This essay has argued that the next wave of transformation must tap into the power of children. Setting the precedent through innovative national programmes that address the critical gaps for children and adolescents could be a giant leap towards the tipping point where new skills drive national transformation and create a more equitable society.

Box 3: Cross-cutting national priorities for children: What’s worked in other countries?

- A clear set of national priorities.
- A lead agency (addressing one or more priorities).
- A well-defined national branded programme of action for children.
- Central strategies around which intersectoral action can be organised.
- Defined processes for implementation.
- Scorecards and tracking tools to gauge progress.
- Efficient mobilisation of resources, both public and private.

Case 4: Nal'ibali – Transforming children's literacy learning opportunities

Carole Bloch (Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa, University of Cape Town)

Holistic approaches to teaching and learning, which nurture emotions at the same time as bodies and minds, are ones which give all children the opportunity to thrive educationally.⁵⁰ This view underpins the approach of the *Nal'ibali* reading-for-enjoyment campaign which aims to deepen meaningful reading and writing habits among communities across South Africa. Understanding how children learn helps us provide the attention, resources and conditions needed to nurture their potential for complex and creative learning. Evidence from neuroscience shows how inbuilt emotional systems drive learning – particularly attachment (bonding, belonging, being loved, being social), play (being curious, imagining, creating, exploring), and discovery (finding out, seeking, making meaning).⁵¹

Our brains work by recognising patterns and predicting what will happen next based on past experiences.⁵² The pattern of story is the organising framework we use to make sense of our lives⁵³ and imaginative play is the active manifestation of stories.⁵⁴ Reading and writing – like listening and speaking – begin and continue as purposeful activities in daily life.⁵⁵ Literacy therefore develops in young children when they understand the languages being used,⁵⁶ spend time with people who interact with them and role model the power and purposes of print in authentic ways,⁵⁷ and have opportunities to practise as they explore and play.

This informal apprenticeship⁵⁸ and “close-up encounters with print” motivate children to behave like readers and writers at the same time as they start to identify and master the sound and letter patterns which transmit written language. Drawing on these principles, *Nal'ibali* is driving a national media campaign,

providing multilingual reading materials; and partnering with organisations and government to train and mentor adults to run reading clubs in homes, schools and communities. In 2017 there were 1,660 reading clubs, reaching 47,150 children. Over 13,000 adults have been trained, and 30 million bilingual newspaper supplements have been distributed.

Training and mentoring focus on inclusive action, interest and enjoyment. In training sessions adults experience the same kinds of activities that they are encouraged to do with children – choosing stories, reading aloud, listening to one another's views, writing and acting out one another's stories.

Spending an hour in reading clubs where adults have grown to appreciate and act on these principles means interacting with a largely confident, curious and light-hearted group. There is usually some singing and game playing. Children are eager to lead and join in with lots of laughter and smiling. A sense of belonging pervades.

Some of the time children choose books to explore. They sit or lie comfortably, however they want to and there is a mix of different happenings. Some children mouth the words quietly or read to themselves, others pour over illustrations, in pairs or groups, chatting, paging backwards and forwards through a book together. Sometimes a story is told, and there is usually a story read aloud by an adult (or sometimes by a child). This might be followed by the children choosing to draw, write about or act a related scene or character – or, something else which they feel inspired to do. Nobody has to be there, nobody has to participate, but when the ethos is relaxed and welcoming, there is a serious desire to join in.

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