

Reflections

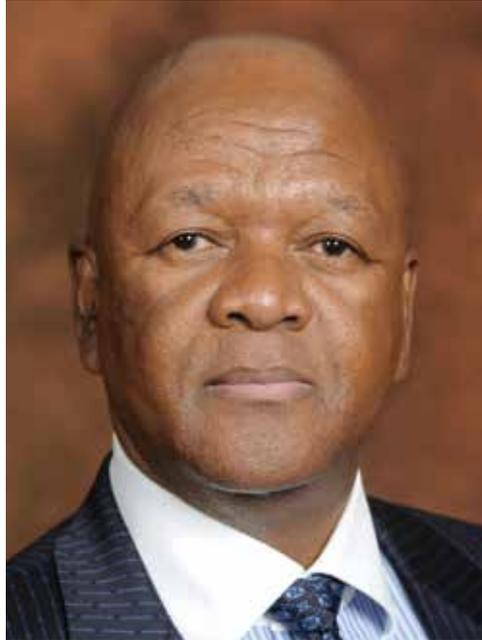
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South Africa's children, particularly those from poor backgrounds, face numerous challenges including poverty, inadequate nutrition, poor parental care, poor quality education and limited prospects to access tertiary education, which according to the National Income Dynamic Study, offers passage out of poverty.

Despite democratic and economic reforms since 1994 that have resulted in average growth in the economy, many children are trapped in poverty and are excluded from important aspects of social, economic and political life. Compounding the problem is that 21% of children do not live with their parents. Poverty is highest amongst these children. Poverty is also higher for 62% of children growing up without their fathers, as on average women earn lower than men. Though measures such as the Child Support Grant (CSG) have been successful to reduce the proportion of children living below the food poverty line (from 60% to 30%), the absolute number of children still living below food poverty remains high at 5.5 million. If we use the upper bound poverty line (which others have argued is a more appropriate measure of child poverty), then over half of children in South Africa live in poverty. The implication is that many of South Africa's children experience malnutrition and 25% of children under five are reported to be stunted. Progress has also been made in terms of fulfilment of children's socio-economic rights. The vast majority of children (77%) live in formal housing thanks to government's investment in the National Housing Programme. In addition, 69% of children have access to clean drinking water on site. Though these numbers show progress, they also reveal the need to do more. More needs to be done to respond to the 3.4 million children who live in overcrowded housing conditions and the six million living without access to clean drinking water.

Globally, it is increasingly recognised that investing in early childhood development is cost effective and beneficial for long-term



development. South Africa joined the global community when the Sustainable Development Goals of Agenda 2030 were adopted by world leaders in 2015. The SDGs make a case for measuring progress that countries make in addressing challenges of poverty and hunger by tracking the experiences of children. They call on governments to: end hunger and malnutrition particularly in children; halve the number of children living in poverty by 2030; reduce maternal mortality; and end preventable deaths of newborns and children under the age of five.

Although adopted prior to the SDGs, the National Development Plan (NDP) aligns with Agenda 2030. The plan recommends interventions in health, water and sanitation, human settlements, education and social protection to unlock the potential in our children and allow South Africa to reap this demographic dividend by 2030. The plan acknowledges that without addressing poverty and inequality, the democratic project remains unfinished. It also emphasises responding to the needs of children. Improving the quality of education, skills development and innovation is a top priority for the country to achieve the targets in the development plan. In addition, the plan targets a reduction in the number of households living on R418 per month per person to zero, and infant mortality from 43 to 20 deaths per 1,000 live births; eradication of micronutrient deficiencies; improvement in literacy and numeracy levels, and an increase in the number of children who have at least 12 years of schooling. We need to build on the successes of programmes like the CSG to reduce the number of children experiencing hunger and malnutrition. Importantly, we also need to invest in programmes that strengthen capabilities of caregivers, recognising that most of our children are not living with their biological parents. The role of fathers in their children's well-being and development also needs to be more emphasised. Far too many children (62%) are growing up without their fathers.

To achieve these targets, improve the foundation we set for our children and unlock the transformation potential in children requires a capable and committed public service, capable of implementing government strategies and inspiring society to care for its young. Work done by the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation shows significant weaknesses in implementation of programmes targeted to children. Evidence from this and other work, such as the *South African Child Gauge*, must be used to strengthen the public service (and other role-players like private sector and civil society organisations) to respond better to the needs of children. We need to use the right indicators for the NDP to track progress that the country is making in addressing challenges faced by children. We must remove all barriers for children to access quality services, particularly in the first 1,000 days.

Moreover, South African society needs to be conscientised about the importance of investing in our children if we want to move the country forward. Parents, caregivers, teachers, and policy-makers need to remember that we are today deciding on what country we want in the future. The way we raise or treat children – and what we teach them about who they are, their potential and power – are all moulding the adults they will be tomorrow. Therefore, if we want to transform South Africa and build a society with stable families and communities, strong and accountable institutions, sustainable economic growth; and a country that maximises the potential of its people, that is culturally rich and has a place in the changing world; then we need to pay careful attention to how we are raising our children. To radically transform South Africa requires us to invest in their care, health, education and protection; and we need to do it from early on.