

Reflection

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Families are our greatest resource. It is through the efforts, care and support of families that children grow and develop to inherit and safeguard the future of the state: they are its next generation of scholars, teachers, nurses, politicians, business people, workers and parents.

Taking this long view is important because it reminds us that no matter how much effort is spent on getting policies and services right – whether they are about labour laws or tax systems, tertiary education or land reform – it is ultimately people that they aim to serve, and many of those people are young or not yet born. Alongside every step to reduce inequality and grow the economy, we need to be investing in the future beneficiaries and custodians of the country.

The South Africa we inherited in 1994 was a country where families had been deliberately undermined, fragmented and weakened. In the democratic period we have introduced policies to support and strengthen families with an understanding that families take various forms.

The state has a clear compact with families. It is articulated in section 28 of our Constitution, in the National Development Plan and in the international agreements to which we are committed. The primary duty for child care and support lies with families, while the state must provide the necessary infrastructure and a suitable and safe environment for them to do so. Families have a wide range of discretion in how they organise their care arrangements and bring up children,



in line with our pluralist legal system and our commitment to freedom of culture and religion. And children have their own agency, for example when it comes to requesting or consenting to certain health services. But certain things are not negotiable: children must attend school, and they must not be abused. Compacts work both ways, and these responsibilities must be shared.

In developing a comprehensive social protection package, the state aims to ensure that all children, no matter how poor, have enough to eat, receive the health services they need, are able to learn and acquire an education, have an adequate place to live, and are protected from crime and environmental hazards. It also needs to ensure that when there is an emergency – whether it is a medical emergency, a fire or a situation of domestic violence – families, or children themselves, can call on responsive services and know that they will respond.

While we have increased access to services, the key challenge for government is to focus attention on improving the capacity of responsive services and the quality of services. Investments in early childhood are essential to ensure that no child is left behind.

The *South African Child Gauge* is a useful resource as we consider how to strengthen collaboration between families and the state in order to provide children with the best chance in life and, in so doing, nurturing our society and the future of South Africa.