

Foreword

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This excellent volume describes malnutrition in children as “slow violence”. That may seem like an exaggeration, but it is exactly right. It would take a powerful malevolent force to inflict havoc on a child in the way that malnutrition does. Let’s put it plainly, malnutrition systematically destroys a child: it damages their chances of survival, their cognitive development, their immune system, their bone and muscle structure and their livelihood prospects.

But the wrecking ball that is early childhood malnutrition can be prevented. We know what to do. It is not glamorous, nor characterised by silver bullets. It is about all corners of society working in unison on behalf of children’s rights. Governments must lead. They need to make this a top priority. They need to develop an evidence-based plan and then finance, implement and monitor it. The progress in child nutrition statistics should be pored over by the Minister of Finance as much as the economic statistics are. It is incredible in a country that is as well-endowed as South Africa that stunting rates are 27% and that they have been at this level since 1999. Kenya’s stunting rate has halved over the corresponding period and is now lower than South Africa’s. South Africa’s agriculture, social protection, health systems, water and sanitation systems and its schools and early childhood development centres all need to be mobilised by the Government to fight this violence.

Businesses that act to make nutritious foods more available and affordable should be rewarded by fiscal policy; those that wantonly do the opposite should be punished by the same levers. Civil society should organise around the violence against children that is malnutrition. Where is the “extinction rebellion” against unaffordable nutritious food? Development Banks should find ways to leverage private sector investment from pension funds and impact investors

towards small and medium enterprises that do good things for nutrition in the fields of food, water, sanitation and health services. Women’s care responsibilities should be properly recognised through law and remunerated accordingly so that women do not have to choose between working and taking care of their infants.

Active South African civil society and strong labour unions should be fighting for children’s rights from the point of conception. The world class research community in the country should be documenting outcomes, calling out inaction and generating and testing effective solutions to combat this violence. COVID-19 is going to make all of this harder, but even more important to do. We must deny COVID-19 the legacy of a generation of children whose lives and livelihoods have been undercut irreversibly by the infection and the efforts to control its spread.

It is often said that when a dark situation cannot be discarded, then it must be because of a curse. Malnutrition is not a curse. It is a condition waiting to be vanquished. But this can only happen if there is an evidence-based plan to combat it, the political and administrative resolve to put it into action and the technical finesse to monitor and course correct those actions.

South Africa has all of these capacities in abundance. The time to mobilise them is now. This report can serve as a beacon, showing where we want to get to; a spotlight on what is working and what is not; and a light in the dark for the 27% of South African children who have been cast there by the powerful forces of malnutrition. I was born in South Africa and I am a child of this country. But whether or not we were born in this land, we must all be stronger for South African children, now and in the future. The violence must stop and we must be the ones to stop it.

