A joint effort is needed to put an end to deprivation

Grants have helped but many children require more support

Lauren Jayne van Niekerk and Michaela Ashley-Cooper write

Despite global recognition of the importance of fulfilling children’s rights, millions of South African children still suffer poverty, homelessness, abuse, neglect, preventable diseases and unequal access to education. For our country to flourish, these basic human rights need to be protected.

Every year since 1994, March 21 has been observed as Human Rights Day in remembrance of the Sharpeville massacre and the Soweto Constitution, which grants equal rights to all.

Human Rights Day is a suitable time to reflect on the progress made in realising rights for our children. Some areas show progress while results are disappointing in others. Of the population of 11.3 million, 5.5 million are aged five or younger (39.8 percent), 5.4 million are between 6 and 14 (48.6 percent), and almost 9.6 million are between 15 and 14.9 percent.

The eight Children’s Institute Child Gauge, released last October, presents detailed findings on the state of children in South Africa. A key challenge is income poverty, which affects almost every child. Children living in income poverty or below the poverty line, refers to those living in households with income of 60% of the national poverty line.

Encouragingly, the figure has decreased by more than 1 million children living below the poverty line since 2010. However, income poverty is critically linked to poor health, disrupted access to education and unsafe environments.

In South Africa, those rates for children are very high, with 58 percent of all children living below the poverty line. In 2010, 56 percent of all children below the age of five were living in income poverty.

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The programme’s expansion means that from 2005 to 2013 an extra 6.5 million children have benefitted from the grant.

Encouragingly, it is estimated that though 28 percent of eligible children (children whose primary caregiver earns less than R6 000) have access to the grant.

Another area of significant government spending is education. Worryingly, this area yields the poorest results. In fact, about 310 000 children of school-going age (out of 11.3 million) were not attending school.

Although the attendance rates are high, they disguise the issue of school drop-outs, particularly among children 14 and older.

Attendance rates slipped once schooling was no longer compulsory: 98 percent of 14-year-olds go to school, 97 percent of 15-year-olds, 93 percent of 16-year-olds, 88 percent of 17-year-olds, and 87 percent of 18-year-olds.

Among reasons for non-attendance, the most predominant is the high cost of education — and the perception that education is useless.

Of great significance is the recently published, legally binding, norms and standards for school infrastructure put out by the Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshekga.

For the first time in South Africa’s history, by law every public primary and secondary school must have electricity, water, working toilet facilities, classrooms that are safe, with a maximum of 40 pupils, internet access, adequate security and, after these are in place, adequate Libraries, laboratories and sports facilities.

Considering early childhood development, it is promising to see there has been an increase in access to Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes.

It is crucial, however, that these numbers increase much more, particularly in the younger age cohort of birth to four, as the early years have been recognised as the most critical time for brain development, as well as the ideal phase for passing on values important to building of a peaceful, prosperous and democratic society.

Early and appropriate provision and intervention for children at risk can reverse the effects of deprivation and make it possible for children to grow and develop in their full potential, reducing the need for remedial services to address developmental lags and social problems later in life.

These programmes not only affect the individual but society in terms of economic success and social well-being.

In 2013, the Department of Basic Education calculated that 294 559 children were involved in 4 657 early childhood development centres with 784 610 more attending pre-Grade R and Grade R at primary schools (93 percent at public schools and 6 percent independent schools).

To break this down further, 76 percent were enrolled in one form of ECD centre. In 2013, 51 percent of children ages 5-6 attended Grade R or Pre-Grade R.

One of the most critical of human rights for children is the right to health and access to health services, including HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment programmes.

South Africa has one of the world’s highest rates of people living with HIV.

A devastatingly high number of children are infected with HIV in South Africa, estimated in 2011 at 450 000 for children 15 and younger.

There were significant differences in rates across the nine provinces (ranging from 1.3 percent of children in the Western Cape to 6.2 percent in KwaZulu-Natal). Of concern is that, of those children eligible to receive antiretroviral therapy, only 67 percent were getting this treatment.

Although the prevalence of HIV for children and adults is increasing, the rate of increase is getting slower.

This could be due to the increased rate of use of ARVs for children as a result of improved access to treatment programmes.

Following this positive trend in child survival rates for children affected with HIV is the steadily decreasing infant and under-5 mortality rate.

The infant mortality rate (defined as the number of babies less than one year of age that dies, in a given year, per 1 000 live births) has decreased from 52 in 2000 to 32 in 2013. Similarly the under-5 mortality rate (defined as the number of children under five who, in a given year, per 1 000 live births) has decreased from a peak of 9% in 2003 to 6% in 2011.

Other programmes which the government has implemented have been aimed at reducing food insecurity, lack of access to and availability of nutrition.

However, in 2011, 2.5 million children in South Africa (14 percent) were reported as living in households where child hunger was present. This figure has decreased over the years from 16 percent in 2005 and 17 percent in 2010.

The fact that these figures have remained at this level, and not reduced significantly, speaks to effective and ineffective targeting strategies of the programmes implemented.

From these figures, it is clear that the majority of South Africa’s children are not having their basic human rights met.

One's right to the rights and well-being of children is more in words than in action. Current policies will not result in changing the lives of our youngest citizens without strong political will and sufficient financial resources.

The government and society need to work together to create a country where all children are protected, healthy, educated, and cared for.

Until this happens, the patterns of inequality and child poverty will largely remain unchanged.

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