

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 upholding 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 protecting.

Every year since 1994, March 21 has been observed as Human Rights Day to commemorate the Sharpeville massacre and celebrate South Africa's 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 51.7 million, 5.6 million are age 4 or younger (10.8 percent), 4.8 million are between 5 and 9 (9.3 percent) and almost 4.6 million are between 10 and 14 (8.9 percent).

The eighth 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. Children living in income poverty, or below the poverty line, refers to children living without enough resources to meet their needs (estimated at about R604 per person a month). Income poverty is critically linked to poor health, diminished access to education and unsafe environments.

In South Africa, these rates for children are worryingly high, with 58 percent of all children living below the poverty line in 2011.

Encouragingly, the figure has decreased every year since 2003 – probably because of the significant expansion of the child-support grant in the past 15 years.

The effects of that grant cannot be underestimated. Last year, more than 11 million children had access to the grant (set at R300 a month from October).

The programme's expansion means that from 2005 to 2013 an extra 5 million children have benefited from the grant.

Encouragingly, it is estimated that roughly 76 percent of eligible children (children whose primary caregiver earns less than R3 000) have access to the grant.

Another area of significant government spending is education. Worryingly, this area yields the poorest results. In 2011, about 330 000 children of school-going



HARD TIME

Millions of children suffer from poverty, abuse and unequal access to education, the writers say

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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 slide once schooling is 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 81 percent of 18-year olds.

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

Of great significance is the recently published, legally binding, norms and standards for school infrastructure put out by 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 provisioning and intervention for children at risk can reverse the effects of deprivation and make it possible for children to grow and develop to 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 2011, the Department of

Basic Education calculated that 284 595 children were enrolled in 4 607 early childhood development centres with 784 680 more attending pre-Grade R and Grade R at primary schools (94 percent at public schools and 6 percent independent schools).

To break this down further, for children in the 3-to-6-year age cohort, 73 percent attended some form of ECD facility in 2011, with 90 percent of children aged 5 to 6 attending 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 4.2 percent in KwaZulu-Natal). Of concern is that, of those children eligible to receive anti-retroviral 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 smaller each year.

This could be due to the increased rates of survival 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-old who die, in a given year, per 1 000 live births) has decreased from 52 in 2000 to 30 in 2011.

Similarly the under-5 mortality rate (defined as the number of children under five who die, in a given year, per 1000 live births) has decreased from a peak of 74 in 2003 to 42 in 2011.

Other programmes which the government has implemented have been aimed at reducing food insecurity, hunger and malnutrition.

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 2006 and 17 percent in 2010.

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

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

Our commitment 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 trends in child poverty will largely remain unchanged.

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