

**A**s civil society and NPOs it is important that we look around and examine what is happening in the world. By focusing on what is currently happening, we can anticipate the future and be better able to support and serve the communities that we work with. In considering the state of civil society globally, a very disconcerting picture emerges. Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah, General Secretary of CIVICUS described it best when he said: “The last year has been deeply unsettling for most of us in progressive civil society. Almost everywhere in the world, almost everything we stand for is under threat – from civic freedoms to climate action, from minority rights to internationalism. Rising populism and extremism are fuelling falling levels of public trust in civil society and providing convenient cover for attacks on civic space. Perhaps most worryingly, in too many countries we are losing the public argument.” (CIVICUS, 2017:4). The 2017 *State of the Civil Society Report* produced by CIVICUS, records 106 countries where they report that civil society is being “seriously constrained.” (CIVICUS, 2017:7)

Around the world we see unprecedented levels of restriction on civil society and NPO activity. We see a clear threat from right-wing extremism in the USA led by Donald Trump (such as the withdrawal of funding from [Planned Parenthood](#)), such as in India, where [20,000 NPOs](#) have had their licence taken away by the new government since May 2014, and in Russia. Our own government has made disturbing comments about greater control of civil society and restricting the activities of the NPO sector. Indeed, Cabinet ministers have stated more than once that NPOs are funded by enemies of the state, who want ‘regime change’, and who are working against the South African government and that action needs to be taken against them.

As civil society and NPOs we must:

1. Start speaking out again and confront government and business as we did in the 1980s and early 1990s. We must actively challenge the political and economic order.
2. Form and work in alliances and collaborations.
3. Be aware of who offers us funding. Funding may seem attractive but beware of being captured.
4. Maintain our independence, autonomy and integrity.
5. Use technology and social media to make our voice heard globally and to effect change. With the Web, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, we have an unprecedented opportunity to make our voices heard. But this too is under threat with [Zimbabwe clamping down on social media](#) this past week.



South Africa, and the world, needs a vibrant civil society and NPO sector. However, our work environment is faced with more restrictive legislation predicted. In this we need to remember the old trade union slogan “An injury to one is an injury to all”.

ERIC ATMORE  
Director

## SOUTH AFRICA CALLS FOR A CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

~ Bridget Kahts, Jessica Blom and Eric Atmore

**Children's deaths in South Africa means the pressure for the country to act has increased.**

Since the start of the year, more than 60 children have been murdered, in the Western Cape alone. The reality is that South Africa's children face numerous challenges resulting from widespread poverty and inequality. These challenges include neglect and abuse, child-headed households; orphans and vulnerable children; the inequality of the education system; inadequate housing; widespread hunger; limited access to basic services; HIV/Aids; and inadequate child health care. Two-thirds of South African children live in poverty.



Since the demise of apartheid in 1994, legislation has been passed and policies formulated to address these challenges faced by children. The Bill of Rights sets out the rights of children – to education, shelter, health and protection from abuse and maltreatment, among others. A number of laws pertaining to the rights of children have also been passed. These include the Children's Act (2005); the Children's Amendment Bill (2006); the Prevention of Family Violence Act (1993); the South African Schools Act (1996); the Child Justice Act (2008); the Domestic Violence Act (1998); and most recently, the National Integrated ECD Policy (2015).

Despite this, it is clear that as a country, we are not effective in protecting and advancing the rights of children. To address these challenges, stakeholders in the children's sector are unanimous that a Children's Commissioner is necessary, and that we urgently need to explore the role, scope and powers of such an office.

In September this year, the Draft Western Cape Commissioner for Children Bill 2017 was gazetted. The Bill is currently under review with non-profit organisations (NGOs) and stakeholders in the sector submitting comments for the improvement of the Bill, where a central concern is the lack of independence afforded to

the Commissioner in the Bill.

The Centre for Early Childhood Development is part of a committee who are drafting a joint NGO submission on the Western Cape Commissioner for Children Bill.

The need to establish a Children's Commissioner has been voiced for a number of years. This is driven by the fact that despite the legislation intended to protect children, the situation is dire and necessitates an independent position, such as a Children's Commissioner tasked with protecting children's rights and well-being.



Research conducted by UCT students explores the role, scope and powers of such an office. The findings suggest that the central mandate of the Children's Commissioner is protecting and promoting the rights of children. It was found that there are five key roles that the Children's Commissioner should play in order to fulfil its mandate: i) The first is taking on the role of being a watch dog for the children's sector. ii) The second is to raise awareness of children's rights and to give children a voice in society. iii) The third is to act as a complaints system. iv) The fourth is to support and guide policy development regarding children. v) The fifth role is for the Commissioner to be a monitoring body to ensure current mechanisms for the protection of children's rights are effective and to scrutinise such mechanisms according to the legislation.

The movement to establish a Children's Commissioner in South Africa is not new. During the drafting of the Children's Act, the Law Reform Commission considered such a position. However, until recently, it was not included as the "protections afforded children in these drafts were considered adequate" (Parliamentary Liaison Office, 2014). Due to the slow and limited implementation of the current Children's Act, and the subsequent absence of services for children in crisis, the desire to implement a Children's Commissioner has returned to the agenda.

An additional challenge is that if insufficient resources were allocated to this office, this would result in limited effectiveness, thus the office of the Children's Commissioner should be equipped with an adequate number of qualified staff who possess a thorough knowledge of the children's rights environment.

## EARLY YEARS

For a Children's Commissioner to be effective in a South African context, there should be sufficient resources, staff and mechanisms in place that ensure accessibility for all children and their families.

The jurisdiction of a Children's Commissioner should include all children residing in South Africa, regardless of their nationality, and all children should be able to lodge complaints. Accessibility should be through established provincial offices and also through a toll-free line.

The link to the full research report can be found here: '[Children's Commissioner Research Study](#)'

Article available at  
[http://www.cecd.org.za/images/Notes/  
National\\_Childrens\\_Commissioner.pdf](http://www.cecd.org.za/images/Notes/National_Childrens_Commissioner.pdf)

## STARK INEQUALITIES IN EARLY LEARNING DEVELOPMENT

~ Svetlana Doneva

South Africa's youngest children are exposed to significant variation in the delivery of critical services, including health care and social security, based on where in the country they reside.

These variations can have lifelong consequences on their health, learning ability, and earning potential.

This is according to the South African Early Childhood Review 2017, an annual measure of progress in early childhood development (ECD) service delivery.

The 2017 review reveals stark inequalities across the country and within provinces. Children aged 6 years and younger, who



live in the rural districts, are receiving disproportionately poorer services.

### Almost half of SA's children under six are rural

"This is serious when you consider that 43% of our young children are living in rural areas," says Colin Almeleh, executive director of Ilifa Labantwana and co-author of the South African Early Childhood Review 2017.

The provinces with the highest share of rural children under 6 are the Eastern Cape, 60%; Limpopo, 83%; KwaZulu-Natal, 61%, and Mpumalanga, 65%.

The 2017 review found that young children in rural areas live far from clinics and are, therefore, less likely to be fully immunised or screened for developmental delays.

Rural children are less likely to receive micro-nutrient supplementation if they are malnourished. They are also far less likely to be exposed to an early learning programme and therefore start school on a back foot.

### Early childhood: a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity

"Early childhood is a very sensitive period of development, with the brain and body growing very quickly. The development that takes place at this time will affect all future health, behaviour, and learning," says Almeleh.

"Children require certain essential services during this time to develop. If they don't receive them, it is very difficult to help them catch up later," he said.

"We know that two thirds of South Africa's young children are living in poverty and their development may be compromised if they don't receive quality early childhood services. Plans to deliver these services should differentiate between the needs of rural and urban populations."

### Improvement in health care, but provincial averages mask district inequalities

Health care is a service area showing improvement. The review finds that 61% of women are now accessing antenatal care before the 20th week of pregnancy, versus just 31% in 2005. Similarly, 89% of children are now fully immunised before their first birthday.

"These provincial and national averages can mask vast differences between districts," says Almeleh. For example, 85% of babies in South Africa are delivered in health facilities under trained personnel - an increase from 66% in 2001, which is encouraging.

However, there are districts where the in-facility delivery rate is as low as 45%, which calls for a targeted service delivery response.

### Children are not getting sufficient nutrition

The review reports 77% of children aged 6-23 months are not fed a minimum acceptable diet, thus compromising their growth and increasing their risk of infections.

It also reports that over a fifth of children under 5 are stunted - a result of chronic malnutrition which has lifelong adverse consequences on health, learning and participation in the economy.

Under-nutrition is also evident in increasing obesity and overweight rates among children under five (13% are overweight nationally), which increases their risk of heart disease and diabetes into adulthood.

Vitamin A supplementation is a widespread nutritional intervention but coverage rates reveal striking variation across districts.

Nationally, over 57% of children aged 12-59 months received vitamin A supplementation. However, in some districts this number is lower than 40%, while in others it is over 90%.

### Early learning characterised by widespread inequality

"Young children need quality early learning programmes from the time they turn 3. Without it, they are not prepared for school," says Sonja Giese, executive director of Innovation Edge and co-author of the report.

"Our poorest children aren't accessing quality early learning. This is consistent across all provinces.

A 4-year-old from a low-income household has only a 50% chance of being enrolled in an early learning programme, compared to a wealthier child who has a 90% chance. As a result, South Africa's poorest children are starting school on the back foot," said Giese.

The 2017 review analysed recent data from South Africa's first population level preschool assessment tool, Early Learning Outcomes Measure, and found that children in the bottom income quintiles performed considerably worse than wealthier children, across all developmental areas - but, especially, in emergent literacy and language, as well as cognitive and executive functioning.

### Persistent gaps in child support grant access

Urban districts under-perform their rural counterparts in the roll-out of the child support grant, which is available to children whose caregivers have a monthly income of less than R3 800 if they are unmarried.

"Early access to the child support grant is associated with improved nutritional, health and education outcomes for children," says Katharine Hall, senior researcher at the Children's Institute and co-author of the review.

"That means children should start receiving the grant from as early as possible. But only two-thirds of babies under a year receive the grant, and the share is even lower in the urban provinces."

Only 55% of poor infants in the Western Cape are receiving the grant, and an even lower 49% in Gauteng.

"This is of great concern because it is the most needy and vulnerable children who are excluded."

She said the government will need to find a way to resolve a few million exclusions if it is to meet its goal of covering 95% of people eligible for social security benefits by 2019, as set out in the Medium Term Strategic Framework.

### Translating the national ECD policy into practice: still much work to do

Multiple government departments are responsible for service delivery for ECD - the three key departments being Health, Social Development and Basic Education.

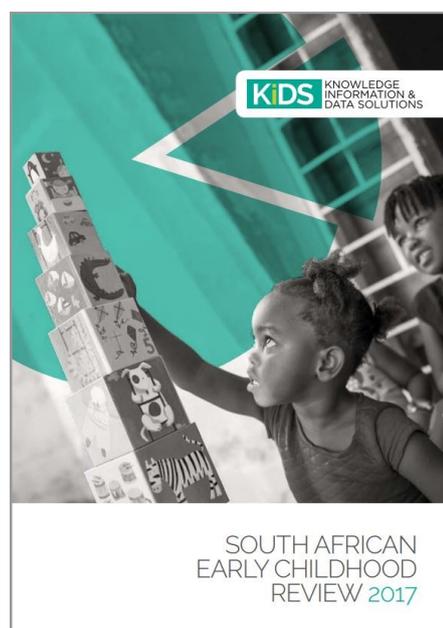
They are guided by the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy, which was approved by the cabinet in December 2015.

"This year, we have seen the development of a draft national implementation plan and some provinces working on ECD strategies aligned to the policy," says Lizette Berry, one of the co-authors of the SA Early Childhood Review 2017.

"This is encouraging, but to reach the policy's goal of providing all children with essential services much more work needs to be done. The plan still needs to be circulated among civil society stakeholders.

"We will also need to see amendments to the existing legislation, new leadership structures, accountability mechanisms, and sufficient budget being allocated to ECD services," Berry said.

*The full report can be accessed by clicking here:*



Article available at  
<https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/opinion/stark-inequalities-in-early-learning-development-11583952>