



From survive to thrive – Transforming South Africa by ensuring children develop to their full potential

The South African Child Gauge

The South African Child Gauge is the only publication to track the status of South Africa's children on annual basis.

It aims to make the latest research evidence accessible to policy-makers and practitioners and to contribute to more effective policy design and implementation for children.

It includes an overview of the latest legislative developments, child-centred indicators, and a collection of short essays by experts in the field.

All children have a right to thrive

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges states to ensure children's survival and development "to the maximum extent possible". This means children have a right to not only survive, but to thrive. In order to reach their full potential all children need nurturing care – "health, nutrition, security and safety, responsive caregiving, and early learning"¹ – are all essential. Together they protect children from adversity and unlock their human potential. Nurturing care is equally important for young children and adolescents although the nature of care and who provides it changes across the life-course. For example, in the early years nurturing care is primarily provided by parents, while in adolescence peers, teachers, mentors, religious leaders and others provide a broader network of care and support.

Parents and caregivers' attention, affection and encouragement help children develop the self-confidence to explore the world and try new things; make children more resilient and able to cope with life's challenges; improve their learning and productivity across the life course, and enable them to provide nurturing care to the next generation of children.

Ensuring that children thrive benefits everyone

Ensuring that children thrive is good for individuals – and good for society. As noted by Harrison, "children's power to think, to imagine and to relate well to others is the nation's source of social intelligence and human capital. Tapping that potential more effectively provides one of the greatest opportunities to transform South Africa over the next twenty years. If we fully develop the capabilities of young children so that they are able to learn when they go to school and get a decent job when they grow up, then South Africa would have fuller employment, greater economic growth, and a safer, happier society."² Such radical change would disrupt intergenerational cycles of poverty and drive down levels of inequality.

Children's rights are the foundation for sustainable development

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development articulates a vision of a connected world, in which no one is left behind, and everyone flourishes while protecting the planet for future generations. It is a plan of action to end poverty and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity built on a partnership to address common problems in the North and South.

The 2030 Global Agenda incorporates the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), that UN member states such as South Africa pledged to achieve between 2016 and 2030. Children are at the heart of the SDGs and the realisation of their rights is seen as the foundation for global security, sustainable development and human progress.

These commitments are not new, they derive from existing human rights instruments, and build on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The past two decades saw impressive progress towards the MDGs, yet these gains often failed to reach those most in need, culminating in stark inequalities at global and local levels.³ The SDGs have a much more explicit focus on equity and emphasise the need to reach the poor and most vulnerable so that no one is left behind.

The global goals for sustainable development



The SDGs also call for an integrated approach. The emphasis on country-level action provides a huge opportunity to bring different sectors together to tailor a specific plan to address children's needs in the South African context. Indeed, the 2030 Global Agenda resonates with the National Development Plan (NDP), which has a similar focus on inequality and recognises the diverse factors that drive an intergenerational cycle of poverty.

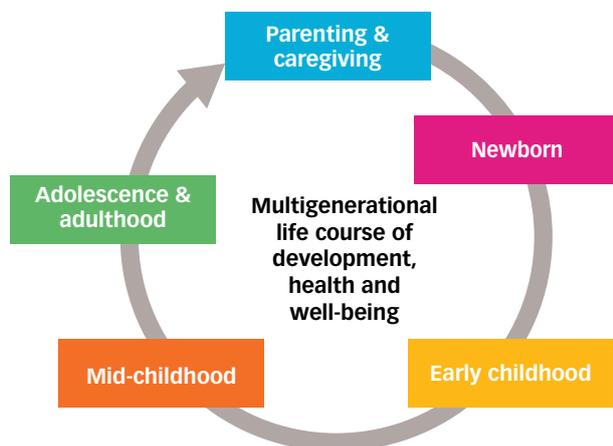
The SDGs encourage states to provide many of the essential elements needed to support parents to care for children such as decent work and access to basic services. They also promote stable cooperative governance and inclusive societies, built on strong economies and the sustainable use of resources that safeguard the environment for everyone. Finally, they respond to development challenges holistically and promote an integrated approach to service delivery, through global strategies and partnerships.

Progress for children is stalling

Progress toward realising children's rights in South Africa has been made in some sectors. Between 2003 and 2015, the percentage of children living below the international ultra-poverty line (\$1.25 per day) dropped from 43% to 12%, while the number of children living below South Africa's upper bound poverty line (households with per capita income of less than R965 per month) fell from 79% to 62%⁴ with positive impacts on child and adolescent health, education and well-being.⁵ In 2015, 92% of children aged 5 – 6 years old attended school or early learning programmes; 89% of children had access to electricity; and 68% of children lived in households with adequate water (access to piped water inside or on site).⁶ Survival rates have improved too, and the under-five mortality rate dropped from 81 to 37 deaths per 1,000 live births between 2003 and 2015.⁷ However, we cannot just aim for children to survive. If optimal development is the goal, then South Africa's progress is far too slow.

The majority of South Africa's children remain marginalised, excluded and exposed to excessive levels of violence. An estimated one in three children are victims of sexual violence and physical abuse before they reach the age of 18 years.⁸ More than a quarter (27%) of children under-five are stunted,⁹ and 58% of children cannot read fluently and with comprehension in any language by the end of Grade 4¹⁰. Poor reading skills undermine learners' chances of receiving a quality education and minimise their opportunities for employment and active engagement in society. These compromised learning outcomes also have their roots in early experiences of poverty and under-stimulation, trauma, poor health and undernutrition. These dimensions of deprivation do not occur in isolation, rather they intersect and have a cumulative impact on children's development across the life-course.

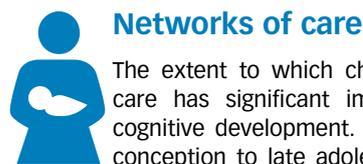
An intergenerational cycle of development



Source: Adapted from Black MM, Walker SP, Fernald LC, Andersen CT, DiGirolamo AM, Lu C, McCoy DC, Fink G, Shawar YR, Shiffman J & Devercelli AE (2017) Early childhood development coming of age: Science through the life course. *The Lancet*, 389(10064): 77-90. Figure 1. P. 79.

How do we transform our society to ensure that no child is left behind?

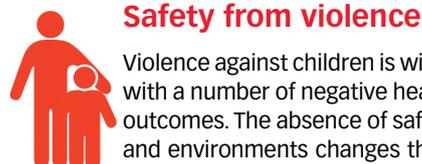
Moving forward we need to consider what children need to thrive. This extends beyond the focus on physical health to include children's mental health and well-being. It also requires adopting a life-course approach and investing in both early childhood and adolescence to promote optimal, long-term development. Collaboration across different sectors such as health, education and social services is also essential to address the multiple causes of deprivation and synergise efforts, to create an enabling environment where parents are supported and children are free from poverty and violence; have adequate nutrition; and are able to realise their learning potential. Finally, all children – regardless of age, ability, gender, race, or socio-economic status – must be included and enabled to participate so that they can imagine and achieve a desired future.



Networks of care

The extent to which children experience responsive care has significant impact on their physical and cognitive development. Responsive caregiving – from conception to late adolescence – provides emotional security and promotes trust and a sense of belonging, building a foundation for self-control, self-motivation, and the ability to engage in purposeful action. Healthy parenting has numerous benefits including improving children's self-esteem, behaviour, nutrition and educational outcomes.

Parents' capacity to provide nurturing care depends on an enabling environment – economic and social security, including early access to the Child Support Grant; good infrastructure; health, education and social services; and support from loved ones. Visits to public services are key contact opportunities with caregivers and children. State services such as antenatal care must be strengthened to assess and refer vulnerable caregivers, such as those with mental health conditions or those exposed to domestic violence. Home-, school- and- community-based programmes are critical to reach out and support children and their families in their everyday environments and enable service providers to identify vulnerabilities and intervene early. Investing in evidence-based programmes that promote nurturing care will help address equity gaps and minimise tertiary costs of treating mental health conditions, behavioural and relational problems and cognitive deficits.¹¹ There is a strong emphasis on targeting vulnerable new mothers and caregivers with young children. However, parenting programmes are required across the life course; for example the Parenting for Lifelong Health Initiative¹² adopts an age-differentiated approach and targets programmes at caregivers of babies, toddlers, young children and adolescents.



Safety from violence

Violence against children is widespread and associated with a number of negative health, economic and social outcomes. The absence of safe, nurturing relationships and environments changes the brain architecture and function, often resulting in aggressive and antisocial behaviours.¹³ Such as, uncooperative and defiant behaviour as pre-schoolers; hitting others, bullying or lying in middle childhood; truancy, alcohol or drug use and involvement in crime and violence in adolescence; reckless and erratic behaviour and work history, partner violence, and the continuation of violence into adulthood.¹⁴ Violence has intergenerational consequences, as children who experience violence are at higher risk of victimisation and perpetration – including adopting harsh or violent parenting practices. Violence against children cost South Africa an estimated R239 billion – or 6% of the gross domestic product – in 2015.¹⁵

Children are at a greater risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence when they live in poor households, when one or both

parents are absent, and when they are exposed to conflict in the home, and alcohol, drugs and crime in their home or community.¹⁶

We can protect children by challenging social norms and values that normalise violence; supporting parents and caregivers through home- and community-based parenting programmes; and providing life-skills programmes for adolescents. But, violence will continue until we address structural drivers such as poverty and inequality. There are a number of violence prevention programmes already in place. The challenge is to evaluate which ones are effective and to increase the funding, scope and reach of these services. Moving forward we need to strengthen coordination and collaboration across departments, and between researchers and service providers. South Africa should become one of the Global Partnership's "Pathfinders" to take advantage of global resources and partnerships that can help translate our investments into significant gains for children.



Learning

Access to quality education across the life course is a central focus of the SDGs. School attendance rates in South Africa are close to 100%, yet most children are still not acquiring basic skills: only 57% of a cohort will pass matric and about 21% will qualify to go to university.¹⁷ Low levels of reading proficiency are one of the root causes of poor schooling outcomes.

The problem begins early as by the end of Grade 4 most learners cannot read fluently and with comprehension in any language. There are many reasons why children are not learning to read, and multiple factors often coincide to restrict children's ability to acquire this essential competency. For example, extreme poverty and malnutrition compromise children's cognitive development. Foetal alcohol syndrome, HIV and other health conditions may lead to developmental delays and disability. Learning disabilities are often not identified early, if they are identified at all. Little attention is paid to reading in teacher-training programmes and limited access to books, and confusion around how best to teach reading have further undermined reading in the classroom.

In order to address these deep-rooted challenges, we need a concerted prioritization of reading, at all levels from national government down to school leadership and parents. To improve reading outcomes we need to: provide graded-readers in the language of learning and teaching; invest in teacher training, feedback and support; make time to read both in and outside the classroom as a daily routine; eliminate large classes; and develop a standardised annual assessment to track progress and diagnose problems.



Nutrition and health

Stunting rates remain unchanged over the past 20 years, affecting one in four children under five (27%).¹⁸ This rate is extraordinarily high for a middle-income country. Stunting has a detrimental impact on children's lifelong health and cognitive development, compromising children's education and employment prospects, and increasing the risk of obesity, heart disease and diabetes in adulthood, with an estimated cost of R62 billion per year¹⁹.

Stunting is a manifestation of chronic undernutrition where inadequate dietary intake and recurrent infections undermine children's growth and nutritional status. These immediate drivers of undernutrition are rooted in high levels of child poverty, food insecurity, and poor access to health, water and sanitation services.

Government's plans to strengthen the primary health care system and invest in community health workers (CHWs) have the potential to extend health care to vulnerable households, and CHWs have proven effective in promoting breastfeeding and nutritious weaning foods, and enabling the early recognition and treatment of acute childhood illnesses. Yet strong leadership, concerted inter-sectoral action and a broad social movement for child health are needed to address the root causes of stunting – poverty, unemployment, inequality and suboptimal public services.



Inclusion

The concept of inclusion resonates with the core principle of the SDGs "that the dignity of the human person is fundamental, and that we endeavour to reach the furthest behind and the most vulnerable first".²⁰ While inclusion efforts specifically target those who are most vulnerable and marginalised, the premise is that everyone benefits in an inclusive approach, not just those perceived to be vulnerable. For example, if we can transform environments so that children with disabilities are able to survive and thrive, it will enable the inclusion of other vulnerable groups.

The principle of inclusion is based on the premise that society needs to change to accommodate diversity and respond to a wide range of differences and needs. The inclusive development process envisaged by the SDGs will therefore only be achieved through the transformation of systems and services. This includes increasing awareness and visibility of vulnerable children through the disaggregation of data and equity targets; creating welcoming and inclusive services; identifying and removing the barriers that currently perpetuate exclusion; and providing specific supports and a continuum of care across the life course to enable all children to participate on an equal basis.

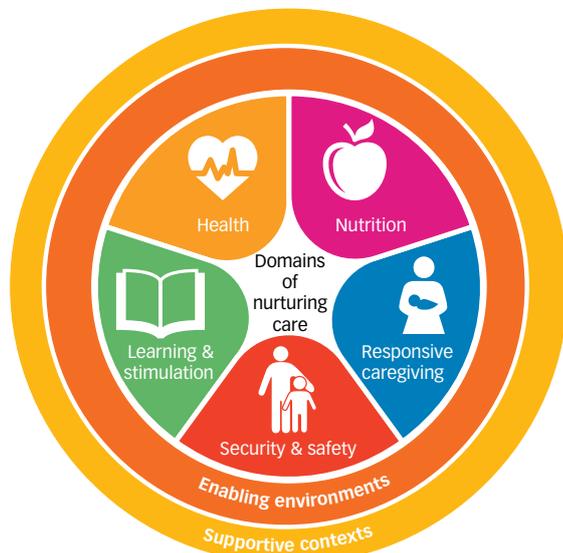
General principles to transform systems and services

- **Start with the most vulnerable** to ensure that all children thrive and that no child is left behind.
- **Care and connectedness** are essential elements of child- and family-centred services. Children and families are entitled to an integrated package of services and support, and the interconnections between services need to be strengthened to ensure a seamless experience for children of all ages. But connectedness on its own is not enough. We also need to humanise services and shift attitudes and behaviour to create more welcoming and inclusive environments for children and their caregivers.
- **Good leadership and management** is another core ingredient required to spearhead a transformed and responsive society. One of the keys to doing things differently is to build capacity for effective leadership in every sphere of society – including government, civil society and the corporate sector.
- **Sustainable funding** for programmes that address the intersecting challenges facing children throughout the lifecycle is essential. Given current fiscal constraints, government, the private sector and civil society organisations should work together to develop a multi-sectoral strategic funding plan to avoid duplication and ensure all essential services are funded.
- **Disaggregated data** is needed to make children more visible, especially those most vulnerable, and to better target services and monitor progress.

A call to action – work together so all children thrive

Children maximise their potential when they are well nourished, responsively cared for, have opportunities to learn, and are protected from disease, violence and stress. Yet most children in South Africa are faring badly in all these domains of nurturing care. Action is urgently required to transform the environments that limit children's potential.

Nurturing care, enabling environments and supportive contexts



Source: Adapted from: Daelmans B, Darmstadt GL, Lombardi J, Black MM, Britto PR, Lye S, Dua T, Bhutta ZA, Richter LM & Lancet Early Childhood Development Series Steering Committee (2017) Executive Summary: Early childhood development: The foundation of sustainable development. *The Lancet*, 389(10064): 9-11.

Clinics, schools and other services should be attuned to the evolving needs of children and caregivers across the life course; with strong referral systems and linkages between different sectors to support children's holistic development. At a societal level, we require systems, cultures and processes that give priority to those children who are most vulnerable so that no child is excluded because of their age, ability, socio-economic status, race or gender. These investments in children will benefit not only the individuals concerned, but will also help drive national transformation, sowing the seeds for a more equitable society and a more sustainable future.

Government, civil society, business, researchers, health, education and social-service professionals – all have a role to play in promoting nurturing care and creating enabling environments in which children can

thrive and reach their full potential – as do parents, caregivers and children themselves. But we cannot achieve these goals in isolation. We need to reach out and connect our efforts so that we can provide children with seamless support across the life course. Actively engaging with the Sustainable Development Goals will ensure that we start with the most vulnerable and that no child is left behind.

Parents and caregivers

- Offer nurturing care in a supportive home environment where children feel loved, safe and accepted, and have opportunities to learn.
- Take care of your own physical and emotional well-being. Ask for support from family, friends and services in your community when you experience personal and family challenges.

Community leaders

- Enable safe and supportive community environments for children of all ages, including adequate infrastructure and resources.
- Advocate for multi-sectoral, child- and family-centred services in your community.

Donors

- Develop a funding strategy to address the intersecting challenges facing children instead of working in silos.
- Invest in children throughout their life cycle.

Academic and research institutions

- Develop and test innovative approaches that improve service delivery and reach the most vulnerable.
- Disseminate research findings to inform policy development and strengthen practice.

Government

- Collaborate across sectors and levels of government to promote holistic child development.
- Develop comprehensive packages of care for children of all ages and their families, including home-visiting and other prevention and early intervention programmes.

Civil society organisations

- Establish a broad social movement to address the drivers of childhood adversity – widespread poverty, rising inequality and poor and fragmented public services.
- Advocate for greater investment in children to address structural inequalities.

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