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National Children's Day is celebrated annually on the first Saturday in November in South Africa (SA) – on 2 November in 2024. It first took place in 1999. The purpose of the day is to reflect on the state of our children and on the progress regarding the realisation of children's rights.

This article strongly aligns with the findings of the *Early Childhood Review 2024*, which was recently released by the Children's Institute of the University of Cape Town (UCT). The statistics paint a bleak picture of children's condition, and highlight the ongoing challenges that still need to be addressed. I focus on some of these challenges.

An estimated 62 million people live in South Africa, of which 20.9 million are children under the age of 18 (approximately 34% of the total population). Almost half (46%) of all children live in KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo – compared to 38% of adults.

Since 2002, the child population has grown by 57% in Gauteng alone. The number of children in the Western Cape increased by 32% during this time, and as a matter of interest decreased by 14% in the Eastern Cape. The growth has to do with the migration of households as well as new births.

In terms of the apartheid era's racial categories, 86% of children in the country are black, 8% coloured, 4% white and 2% Indian. Between 2002 and 2022, the child population grew by 15% – from 18.1 million (in 2002) to 20.9 million.

Worrying is the fact that one in five children do not live with one of their biological parents and less than 0.5% of children live in households where older children, under the age of 18, take responsibility for the younger ones.

Just under sixty percent (57%) of our nation's children lived in urban areas in 2022, while 1.6 million live in informal dwellings. Three and a half million children live in overcrowded households, meaning more than two people per room. This excludes bathrooms, but includes the kitchen as well as the living room.

Almost six million children do not have access to potable piped water in their home, while 21% do not have access to adequate sanitation in their place of residence. However, 93% of children live in a household that is connected to electricity supply.

20% of children live far from a basic health facility – this means it takes them 30 minutes or more to get to such a facility, regardless of the type of transport. Forty out of every 1,000 children die before their fifth birthday. In 2022, 2% of girls aged 15-17 years were pregnant, 27.5% of pregnant women are HIV-positive, while 1% of all South African children are HIV-positive. 82% of all children under one year are fully immunised.

Half of adolescents have experienced corporal punishment in school since 1997, despite the legal ban on it. 26% say that they have been physically hurt by an adult in their lifetime, while the same percentage of adolescents have experienced some form of sexual abuse. Some (13%) were emotionally bullied and hurt, while others (12%) experienced neglect.

As if this is not bad enough, 7.9 million children in our country live below the food poverty line (basic nutrition worth R663 per person per month). In 2022, 14.5 million children lived on R1 417 per month per person – the so-called upper-bound poverty line. About a third of children (32%) live in a household where no adult works, while 13.2 million children receive a child maintenance allowance (2024).

As a result of the ongoing poverty, 12% of children live in households where they suffer from hunger. This results in almost a third of children under five being too short for their age or underweight, 13% overweight (due to obesity), and 61% suffer from anemia. 13% of babies weigh less than 2.5 kg at birth, and between 2020 and 2022, acute malnutrition increased by a third among children under five.

Although almost all children of school-age attend school, some 300,000 children who are supposed to be in school do not go to school at all. One million primary school children travel more than 30 minutes to their school, while a quarter of 16-17 year olds have not completed Grade 9 (2022). At least many preschool children (5-6 year olds) attend a learning programme. However, we face a big problem, namely the 34% of young people – between the ages of 15 and 24 – who do not work or are not enrolled in an educational institution.

The above state of affairs regarding our children looks bad, despite the fact that our Constitution grants them certain basic rights (Articles 28 & 29) and the Children's Act (Act 38 of 2010) states that “a child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child”.

The importance of the fundamental rights of children is also recognised by international instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

The UK's Children's Institute writes the following in its 17th edition of the *South African Child Gauge* (2024): “At a time when South Africa is seeking solutions to complex societal challenges, it reminds that the answers lie in early childhood. With nurturing care and the proactive support of families, communities, and the whole of society we can protect young children from harm, enable them to thrive and build a strong foundation for national development.”

I would like to agree with my colleague, Prof Mark Tomlinson, when he says (in his foreword to the *Child Gauge 2024*) that the last 50 years have markedly changed our understanding of the human brain – as well as the astonishing capacity that children possess – especially from an early age (including babies). This development has also given us a deep understanding of what children need to thrive. There are so many publications that show us what we should know about relevant policy, implementation and system change. But we saw above what challenges, risks and threats our children, especially in South Africa, still experience regarding their development.

The Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath increased poverty worldwide by approximately 10%, affecting more than 100 million children.

Some 60% of children in early learning programmes in SA are not up to standard in terms of development. And we already know that 81% of Grade 4s cannot really read with comprehension.

Tomlinson, together with Linda Richter and other colleagues, drew up a report about a decade ago with the title “Early Means Early”. They found that role players in children’s lives tend to “age-up”. In other words, not starting to invest early enough in children’s lives – the time when their brains are just so receptive!

A further concern is that sometimes/often we do know what to do and when to do it, but we struggle to implement. We need an implementation science in South Africa. System changes require good planning and obviously take time. As Tomlinson writes: “One cannot put flour in the oven and expect a cake within an hour.”

I would like to put the following proposal to President Cyril Ramaphosa and the Minister of Basic Education, Ms Siviwe Gwarube: Our children are in crisis. Please be brave and put them at the heart of your political thinking, policy-making and decision-making. In this way, you are going to make long-term investments in our children that will enable them to make an extremely important contribution to economic growth and the establishment of a healthy and compassionate society.

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