# Adopting a violence prevention approach: Shifting from policies and plans to implementation

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The 20 years of democracy celebrations provide an opportunity to reflect on the founding principles of South Africa's Constitution, which gives every child the right to be protected from maltreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation.[1] Yet, children's daily experiences clearly indicate that violence has been normalised and that we have a long way to go before realising their fundamental right to be protected from violence.

This essay draws together some of the key arguments raised in the preceding essays and reflects on what is needed to translate policy into practice for a sustained violence prevention approach. It aims to answer the following questions:

- What are the current dimensions of violence against children?
- What are the opportunities and challenges to prevent violence?
- What is needed to translate policy into a sustained approach to prevention?

## What are the current dimensions of violence against children?

There is a lack of data on the exact number of abused and neglected children in South Africa due to an inefficient surveillance system, and a lack of nationally representative research that systematically explores children's experiences of violence. Nevertheless, existing evidence suggests that large numbers of children are affected (see the essay by Mathews and Benvenuti on pp. 26 – 34). Limited evidence on some forms of violence such as emotional abuse, humiliating punishment and children with disabilities has meant that these issues are not discussed in this publication, but these areas will need to be addressed as a part of a comprehensive response to violence against children.

The normalisation of violence in South Africa's past has resulted in a widespread tolerance of violence which enables perpetrators to act with impunity.[2] This is compounded by high levels of poverty, unemployment and income inequality, and patriarchal notions of masculinity that support the use of violence and risk-taking – all which contribute to the extraordinary high levels of violence in South Africa.[3]

Mathews and Benvenuti describe how a complex web of interrelated risk factors contributes to the vulnerability of children. Poverty and inequality shape children's life experiences and outcomes, and increase their risk of experiencing violence.[4] Patterns of violence change across the life-course: Young children are most vulnerable in the home and, as they get older, a distinct gendered pattern emerges, with girls at increased risk of sexual assault and boys more likely to become perpetrators or victims of physical abuse or assault (see the essay by Mahlangu, Gevers and De Lannoy, pp. 73 – 79). Gender inequality and patriarchy contribute to the subordinate position of children, and increase their vulnerability to violence in the home, community and school (see Dawes and Bower's essay on pp. 58 – 64, and Mahlangu et al, on pp. 73 – 79).

The widespread acceptance of violence against children permits harsh parenting practices, and contributes to a culture of silence which allows violence to occur without consequences. Violence has a long-term adverse impact on multiple generations, as evidenced by boys' increased risk of becoming perpetrators of violence if they have witnessed violence in the community or at home. It is therefore critical to address social norms in order to break this cycle and protect children from violence. The "One Man Can" community mobilisation intervention (see case 16 on the opposite page) is an example of good practice that draws on a range of strategies to challenge social norms and cultural practices and to end violence through a shift in men's and boys' behaviour and attitudes to gender equality.

The impact of violence occurs at multiple levels with subtle, life-long intergenerational consequences, hampering a child's development, learning ability, self-esteem and emotional security, and can lead to risk-taking and violent outcomes. The impact of violence goes beyond the physical scars to have a lasting impact on the child's self-esteem, psychological development, learning ability, employment prospects and life expectancy, and can lead to risk-taking and violent outcomes, which in turn compromise the well-being and life chances of future generations (outlined in Dawes and Bower's essay on pp. 58 – 64). This requires an urgent response and greater investment in violence prevention, as the benefits to child well-being and human and social development outweigh the adverse long-term impact of violence. In addition, evidence shows that treating the effects of violence after it has happened is more costly and less effective than primary prevention.[5]

## What are the opportunities and challenges to prevent violence?

South Africa has made significant strides over the past two decades in developing policies to ensure that children are given the protection from abuse and neglect promised by the Bill of Rights. In 1997, the White Paper for Social Welfare introduced an approach to transform the welfare system by laying the conceptual foundation for a shift from a response-driven approach to prevention and early

intervention (see the essay by Jamieson, Wakefield and Briede on pp. 51 - 57). Yet, as outlined in this essay, most government funds continue to be channelled into response services.

The slow shift in translating policy into practice is arguably due in part to the lack of policy coherence across departments responsible for addressing children's issues. While the Children's Act[6] outlines a range of social services to ensure the care and protection of children, a wide range of government departments such as Health, Social Development, Basic Education, Justice and Correctional Services, Public Works and Police Services are responsible for the delivery of services to children and families. However, government programmes tend to operate in isolation as if they are not aimed at the same child population. Synergies across programmes and interventions are not explored enough to maximise impact, resulting in fragmented service provision.

The Department of Social Development's Draft National Strategic Plan (NSP)[7] is a welcome development as the strategy acknowledges that prevention and early intervention programmes have not been given the necessary attention although the Children's Act provides for these. The slow shift in practice is arguably due to a number of factors such as a limited conceptual understanding of prevention and early intervention, limited budgets for prevention programmes, and a limited workforce to deliver prevention and early intervention services.[8] In addition, the Children's Act does not articulate smoothly with the public health model and has implications for planning and resourcing. Evidenced-based planning is at the centre of the public health model to inform the design and targeting of prevention programmes. The Children's Act requires provincial Social Development departments to compile profiles of existing prevention and protection services in relation to the need for these to inform both national and provincial strategies. To date, only one province has completed their provincial profile.[9]

The challenges are to respond to the levels of violence against children and to shift to a prevention approach over time; yet there is limited empirical evidence of what works. The NSP outlines a five-year strategy that aims to strengthen prevention efforts. It is envisaged that this intervention will decrease the demand for child protection services. However, five years is too short a period to achieve significant impact, and the NSP is pragmatic in this regard as it asserts that the shift to prevention would be gradual. The NSP notes that if prevention interventions are well designed and effectively implemented, they may, over the short to medium term, increase awareness of violence against children and lead to an increase in reporting and demand for statutory interventions.

### Case 16: One Man Can – Mobilising men to end violence

*Wessel van den Berg (Sonke Gender Justice)*

The One Man Can (OMC) campaign is a multi-level community mobilisation intervention of Sonke Gender Justice that uses innovative education and advocacy processes to encourage community members to take action to end violence, improve gender equality and promote human rights. The programme actively engages with community members, especially men and boys, in the process of understanding, reflecting on, and reconfiguring masculinities and gender inequalities in their families and communities.

Several evaluations have been conducted on the impact of OMC. An impact evaluation[10] found that more than half of the 265 randomly selected participants in OMC activities responded better to incidents of gender-based violence than prior to their involvement in OMC by reporting these to the police. A qualitative study[11] completed with 78 men in nine focus groups across six provinces in South Africa found that men reported less HIV-risk-taking behaviour like using alcohol, and an increased likelihood to share parenting tasks:

> *OMC helped me in that regard because I was a person that used to like fun and drinking alcohol. I was always out there with the boys drinking. I didn't have time for my girlfriend and my daughter… OMC changed the way I live my life and the decisions that I make as a man. I have done away with some things that I used to do because they were not helping me. Being a better man is good because it means I can give my daughter all the attention she needs.*[12]

In a qualitative impact evaluation[13] in 2010, 60 in-depth interviews were carried out with men who had completed OMC workshops. Men described reductions in the use of violence against women by learning, for example, how to control their anger:

> *Attending the OMC workshops, I got to understand the wrongs of my past behaviour and I started understanding that men should also listen to the women's inputs. During the workshops I would feel as if the facilitators were talking directly to me or that maybe one of them knew about my life.*[14]

> *OMC changed me in a way because it changed my own relationship. If my girlfriend is angry with me and even if she is the one that is wrong, I calm down and talk to her without fighting. I respect her and I know that I should not beat her up. She even told me that things have changed in the way I act in our relationship and she is happy about it*.[15]

Men also spoke about how they shifted towards becoming more caring towards children:

> *OMC changed a lot of things in me. I used to be the kind of person who was feared in the village by young people because of my tough reputation. I was the kind of man whom, when a child cries would be told "I will call him," and the child would go quiet. The training I got from OMC changed me in a way that I was taught not to intimidate children but be more caring to them.*[16]

**Sonke Gender Justice**: Challenges gender inequality and promotes men's involvement as fathers

Despite these challenges, the NSP is a step in the right direction and the first five years should be seen as the first phase of a longer-term strategy of investments towards more enduring change. It may take decades to change the situation due to the large numbers of children affected and because of the associated normalisation of violence in South African society. Despite these challenges, the prevention interventions featured in this issue of the *South African Child Gauge* illustrate that change is possible. At the same time, it is critical that increased government investment in prevention programmes should not come at the expense of response services as both are necessary to break the intergenerational cycle of violence.

The NSP proposes more research but it very narrowly focuses this recommendation on studies on the effectiveness of interventions. Ideally, the research agenda needs to be much wider and should address the key gaps in the knowledge base. Data on violence against children in South Africa come predominantly from cross-sectional studies that provide limited evidence on risk and protective factors, which is essential for the design of effective prevention programmes.

In addition, broader societal factors such as the role of patriarchy and changing masculinities (including how men perceive their role in society in relation to other men, women and children and, importantly, the role men play as fathers) all require in-depth understanding. In addition, qualitative research should be undertaken on perceptions of children and their place within the social hierarchy of the family and society more broadly.

The NSP acknowledges the multi-sectoral nature of prevention and early intervention and proposes that an internal task team of key role-players should be set up to build an integrated prevention and early intervention system and drive the implementation of the NSP. A key function of this task team will be co-ordination at national, provincial and local level, with the national Department of Social Development driving this process. This interdepartmental functioning is fundamental to its success, but it is precisely institutional issues and co-ordination that have bedevilled implementation in the past. It will require political will and leadership from the department, through the Deputy Director-General responsible for violence prevention, who should lead the task team and who should make the human and financial resources available for the successful planning and implementation of the strategy (as outlined in the Jamieson, Briede and Wakefield essay on pp. 51 – 57).

Given that violence prevention is a societal issue, the task team should also include key role-players outside government. An important question is how the task team will do things differently as there are currently a myriad of task teams and interdepartmental committees across government that have proved ineffective. The task team should also take into account existing structures. For instance, the Inter-Ministerial Committee (IMC) on Root Causes of Violence Against Women and Children, formed in 2012, was tasked to develop a five-year action plan led by the Deputy Director-General responsible for social services in the Department of Social Development. A Programme of Action for 2013 – 2017 has since been developed and approved by Cabinet, but has not yet been made public. This raises concerns about government's delay in consulting civil society partners, who will be partly responsible for its implementation.

**Case 17: Isibindi safe parks – Creating safe spaces for children to play**

*Moefeeda Salie-Kagee (National Association of Child Care Workers)*

Isibindi Safe Parks were designed and conceptualised by the National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW) in 2002. The parks provide safe, supervised, exciting and happy places for children affected by poverty and HIV/AIDS to play, access developmental opportunities and be with caring adults. Currently 187 Isibindi Safe Parks operate throughout South Africa with a focus on rural and underserviced areas.

Isibindi Safe Parks hosted play and recreational activities for over 35,325 children between April 2013 and March 2014.[17] Children visited safe parks an average of 33 times each year across 1,847 formal projects and 143 informal projects, amounting to over one million visits during this period. While the parks provide a safe, supervised place for children to play, they also provide a space in which adults are able to teach children about their rights, address issues of child abuse and help children access other resources.

Child and youth care workers who work directly with children in the parks come from the communities they serve and provide an authentic voice to debunk myths that place children at risk. In addition, the Isibindi Safe Parks offer adolescent development programmes that address issues such as HIV, gender, abuse and domestic violence.

The Isibindi Safe Parks are implemented in partnership with civil society organisations, communities and provincial departments of Social Development. The parks open during "children's hours" – after school and during weekends, public holidays and school holidays. Child participation is encouraged and formalised through structured programmes (including a local version of the Hyde Park "soap box" concept), and children with disabilities are included.

The programme is grounded in child and youth care theory and practice, and minimum standards[18] guide every aspect of service delivery in line with international criteria for successful play services.[19]

Currently being successfully replicated in Zambia by the Zambian Association of Child Care Workers, the model is also informing an international response to refugee children being mounted by the Swiss Foundation of the International Social Services and the International Ferderation of Educative Communitites (FICE International).

Similarly, the Council on Gender-Based Violence was formed in 2012 to co-ordinate a multi-sectoral response to gender violence, led by the Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities. Following the 2014 national elections, this department no longer exists and the Minister in The Presidency is now responsible for women's affairs, but the fate of the council is yet to be determined. Unless the co-ordination of these committees is streamlined, we will continue to have a fragmented response to a complex problem that requires co-ordinated efforts and strong leadership from within government.

## What is needed to translate policy into a sustained approach to prevention?

The public health approach to violence prevention[20] has been widely promoted and is the approach adopted in this book (as outlined in Van Niekerk and Makaoe's essay on pp. 35 – 42). The aim is to stop violence through a systematic, multi-sectoral approach by preventing the problem from occurring (primary prevention), detecting it early when it has occurred (secondary prevention) and responding to reduce the long-term impact (tertiary prevention).[21] This approach aims to address risk and protective factors across multiple levels of the social-ecological model (see pp. 30 – 31): from the individual, through to relationship, community and societal factors. The following shifts from policy to practice are essential for a prevention agenda:

### 1. Build a common understanding of prevention

It is important to build a common understanding of what constitutes prevention. In particular, this understanding of prevention needs to inform the design and delivery of effective primary prevention programmes and be incorporated into the education and training of social service professionals. Services have focused on responding to violence rather than targeting families and communities to prevent violence before it occurs. Planning of services needs to take into account community profiles so that programmes can target the identified risk factors in each community.

Traditional approaches to violence prevention have addressed mainly risk factors, but more recently emphasis has been placed on boosting protective factors.[22] Here the focus is on identifying existing strengths and building the resilience of children and their families through collaboration with other service providers. This resonates with the NSP, as it highlights the importance of intersectoral collaboration between government departments and non-profit organisation service providers as well strengthening families to protect children and prevent statutory intervention.

### 2. Develop a coherent policy framework

The current conceptualisation of prevention and early intervention in the Children's Act does not neatly map onto the public health approach to violence prevention, which is promoted globally. The current scope of early intervention services outlined in the Children's Act encompasses an array of violence prevention interventions that include both secondary and tertiary prevention that can lead to confusion and inaction. The pending Children's Act amendment process provides an opportunity to align the South African prevention framework with international thinking.

### 3. Promote an evidence-based approach to planning

The NSP highlights evidence-based planning as one of its strategic objectives and emphasises the need for a functional surveillance system across departments. The National Child Protection Register[i] (NCPR) is a potential source of data but it is currently not functioning as an effective tool to monitor the incidence of children in need of care and protection. It is critical that administrative data sources, such as the NCPR and the National Register for Sex Offenders[ii] be streamlined and managed effectively. Surveillance is the cornerstone of understanding the pattern of violence against children, and where and how services should best be targeted. There is an urgent need for national prevalence and incidence data to enable effective planning. In addition, the provincial profiles[iii] stipulated in the Children's Act should urgently be completed to document the current extent of protection and prevention progammes in relation to provincial needs.

### 4. Develop an evidence base to demonstrate what works

Very little is known about what kinds of prevention programmes work in low- and middle-income settings.[23] The evidence base for South Africa is limited to a few programmes that have been evaluated.[24] Most interventions are currently modelled on what has been shown to be effective in high-income settings, such as the promotion of parenting programmes, but simply importing "effective" programmes might not mean they are effective in our local setting. It is also important to draw on home-grown solutions. For example, the Isibindi Safe Parks (case 17 on p. 83) is a promising model of primary prevention that has now been adopted in other countries. It is therefore important to invest in developing an evidence-base of what works in the South African context. This will require government, civil society and research institutes to work in partnership to generate a knowledge base that will inform the design and development of effective programmes.

### 5. Invest in prevention programmes

Investing in primary prevention is clearly in the best interests of the child and will reduce the long-term costs to individuals and society. Primary prevention of violence should however not be at the cost of response services and both are needed to shift social norms in the long term. Prevention efforts, to be most successful, should start early with both the caregiver and child to reduce the risks and enhance protective factors (see Dawes and Bower's essay on pp. 58 – 64). In addition, programmes should be costed and adequately budgeted for. Currently, primary prevention programmes are mainly delivered by non-profit organisation services with limited funding from government. Multi-dimensional programmes and sustained budgets are required to tackle violence effectively and ensure long-term results.

### 6. Adopt a multi-sectoral response

Preventing violence against children is multi-dimensional and cuts across government departments. Although the Children's Act outlines a framework for prevention and early intervention services, it requires departments to work collaboratively and with defined roles and responsibilities. Prevention of violence is not just a responsibility of the Department of Social Development and should be integrated into performance areas across numerous departments, including Health, Basic Education, Justice and Correctional Services, and the Police Services.

Strong leadership from within the Department of Social Development is needed to build consensus and develop a common strategy for preventing violence that is incorporated across government departments and civil society. For example, parenting programmes have been prioritised by the Department of Social Development as part of their early childhood and development strategy. This dovetails with violence prevention initiatives and for this reason synergies with existing programmes should be sought for maximum impact.

## Conclusion

Violence affects large numbers of children daily and South Africa has a legal obligation to address this problem and ensure that children are protected. The Children's Act provides a framework for prevention and early intervention programmes, but this policy has not yet been implemented at scale. Preventing violence against children is not a "luxury". It is a necessity in order to stem the tide of violence in society as a whole. Investing in violence prevention is therefore a priority – but should not be at the cost of response services. Both approaches are critical to shifting children's experiences and to ensure that they become productive and well-integrated members of society.

Prevention programmes should not be viewed in isolation, but should be seen as central to contributing to the well-being of children and their families. Programmes should target children throughout the life-course, starting in the early years to prevent violence before it occurs. This means the focus is not just on social services. Prevention interventions also need to be integrated into primary health care and early childhood development services and schools to make optimum use of these key points of contact with children and families. Finally, violence prevention requires stewardship at the highest level to drive a national strategy, forge intersectoral partnerships and unlock the resources that are needed to make a difference in the lives of children.

> *We owe our children – the most vulnerable citizens in society – a life free from violence and fear.*[25] Nelson Mandela

i The National Child Protection Register is provided for by the Children's Act and should serve as a register of all children who have been abused or deliberately neglected in order to protect abused children from further harm, monitor progress of cases and plan services for prevention.
ii The National Register for Sex Offenders provides a record of perpetrators convicted of committing sexual offences against children and is designed to prevent them from working with children.
iii The Act says that the Member of the Executive Council for Social Development in each province is responsible for the compilation of provincial profiles a year after the Act came into effect, and that these should be updated on an annual basis.

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