

South Africa stands to benefit significantly from investing in its young

10 Oct. 2013, CAPE TOWN – Better school results, increased productivity, long-term economic growth and social cohesion are some of the benefits that South Africa can gain by investing early in its children. These can be achieved by improving maternal and child health and nutrition, supporting caregivers in the context of prevailing poverty, and ensuring that all children get access to early learning opportunities, followed by quality education in the first years of schooling.

These issues are discussed in the *South African Child Gauge 2013*, which is released today [eds: Thursday, 10 Oct. 2013] by the Children’s Institute, University of Cape Town, in partnership with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and Ilifa Labantwana. This year’s annual review of South Africa’s children focuses on essential services and support for young children and illustrates how these can serve as a great equaliser by breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

The publication draws on the latest research evidence and coincides with government’s efforts to develop a national policy and programme for ECD which will, according to the Minister of Social Development, Bathabile Dlamini, “define the ECD service package and make it a public good”. The re-engineering of primary health care and current review of the Children’s Act offer further opportunities to strengthen the delivery of essential services for young children.

The current situation

Lizette Berry, senior researcher at the Children’s Institute and lead editor of the *South African Child Gauge 2013*, says the unequal society in which South Africa’s children are growing up is “threatening their development, and that of the country in the long term”. General Household Survey data from 2011 show that 58% of children aged 0 – 9 years were living in households with an income of less than R604 per person per month. Poverty impacts on children’s health and nutritional status, and a recent survey by the Human Sciences Research Council found that the growth of more than 25% of children under three years is stunted due to malnutrition. The quality of nutrition in the early years affects brain development, intelligence, schooling outcomes and economic productivity in adulthood. Educational outcomes are poor, a tell-tale sign that many young children are ill-prepared for formal schooling, and pointing to challenges in the education system.

Caregivers need support

The health and well-being of caregivers is the “single most important contributor” for children’s health, survival and development, according to psychologist Mark Tomlinson from Stellenbosch University. Primary caregivers’ ability to provide a healthy, nurturing and stimulating environment is critical. But caregivers in South Africa are facing many challenges – a combination of poverty, violence, illness and social isolation which affects their ability to care for children in a way that will ensure good developmental outcomes. Mental health conditions are common in poverty contexts, especially where caregivers face multiple burdens.

Overall, investing in young children is about social justice, explains Ilifa Labantwana programme leader, Sherri Le Mottee, to “give each child the best possible start in life, regardless of their home



circumstances, with the end goal of social cohesion by supporting and equipping them to be well-adjusted, caring and productive individuals in adulthood”.

Getting the basics right

The negative effects of poverty can be mitigated by a continuum of services aimed at the different stages of children’s development. According to co-editor Andrew Dawes, “child development begins before birth; so what is needed is adequate support from pregnancy, through infancy, the pre-school years and into the foundation phase.” The *South African Child Gauge 2013* outlines an essential package of services and support for young children and their caregivers that includes nutritional support, health and social services, support for primary caregivers, and stimulation for early learning that begins at birth, and into the early schooling years.

Poverty and associated challenges compromise the mental health of caregivers and this makes it more difficult for them to provide adequate care to young children. At least a third of mothers living in poverty are affected. An important recommendation is better support for caregivers, such as parenting programmes that improve parenting skills and knowledge of early childhood development and help prevent child abuse and neglect. Other mechanisms of support for caregivers include routine mental health screening at primary health facilities, and widely available psycho-social support. Caregivers also need access to affordable child care, social grants, and other social services.

Access and quality

“Early childhood development programmes can be centre or home-based, formal or non-formal. We therefore need interventions through various channels such as home visits, playgroups, ECD centres, multi-purpose centres, clinics and schools that reach children and families in different contexts – especially the most vulnerable,” explains UNICEF South Africa representative, Aida Girma.

Health points of contact with children are important opportunities for support, says Berry. “A key opportunity is the expansion of community-based health services as part of the current re-engineering of primary health care – these can reach into the home to support the very young and their families. Other priorities are maternal and child health services and nutritional support to expectant mothers. In particular, children younger than three years must be prioritised for nutritional support if we want to see improvements in children’s health and educational outcomes.”

It is also important to improve access to quality early learning programmes, says co-editor Linda Biersteker from the organisation Early Learning Resources Unit. “Access for children in poor and rural communities is very limited. And where there are ECD centres, caregivers must pay fees to top up government subsidies, making such centres largely unaffordable for the majority of young children.” Furthermore, the quality of early learning teaching – in ECD centres, as well as in grade R to grade 3 – needs urgent attention and requires better trained practitioners and teachers.

An enabling system

Contributors to the *South African Child Gauge 2013* recommend several important approaches to strengthen the ECD system. Local government is identified as a strong contributor in the delivery of



services for young children as municipalities could target vulnerable children effectively in response to local needs. However, adequate resources and capacity are critical. This includes investment in human resources and training in multiple sectors, and adequate and appropriate funding models to support delivery of an essential package.

Girma stresses the need for “good governance and leadership that outline roles and responsibilities and provide clear lines of accountability to ensure effective delivery”. This includes what Berry describes as a national coordinating structure with the authority to oversee activities, enable collaboration and monitor implementation: “It is recommended that the national ECD policy, which is currently being developed, should focus on these crucial elements of an effective system, and facilitate the establishment of such a coordinating structure.”

While government has specific responsibilities to support young children and families, ECD is everyone’s business, says Le Mottee: “In essence, every person who comes into contact with young children has an opportunity to shape and support their development.”

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The publication can be accessed at www.ci.org.za. For more information, contact:

General queries on essential services for young children

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Nutrition

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Maternal and child health

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Support for caregivers

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Parenting programmes

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Early schooling

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Statistics on children in South Africa

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Early childhood development initiatives available for the media queries

Gauteng initiatives on early childhood intervention

In 2010, the Rehabilitation Directorate of the Gauteng Department of Health started a consultative process on early childhood intervention (ECI) for children with developmental problems or disabilities. A provincial multidisciplinary task team on ECI was formed and a framework for delivering ECI in Gauteng has been developed. With no additional resource investments, most districts in Gauteng have implemented targeted ECI programmes.

Contact: Elma Burger, Rehabilitation Directorate, Gauteng, Dept of Health – 082 494 1138 or Wiedaad Slemming, Division of Community Paediatrics, Wits University – 072 035 6281

Perinatal Mental Health Project (PMHP): Caring for maternal mental health

The PMHP, University of Cape Town, provides maternal mental health services that are integrated into routine antenatal care, at three obstetric facilities in Cape Town. Clinic staff are trained to screen women for risk for and symptoms of depression and anxiety, and eligible women receive free individual counselling during pregnancy and up to one year after the birth. Every woman counselled receives a routine follow-up phone call after birth.

Contact: Simone Honikman, Perinatal Mental Health Project – (021) 685 9624 or 082 895 2416

Yakhumndeni Mentor Mother Project: Mentor mothers reach into vulnerable homes

This project is a pilot programme of the ECD Programme of Siyabhabha Trust – Caritas SA (the development agency of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference). It is a home-visiting programme that screens and refers malnourished children and expectant mothers to ensure early access to health and social services. The mentor mothers are tasked to screen, refer, monitor, advise and support.

Contact: Elizabeth Brouckaert, Siyabhabha Trust – (012) 323 6458 or 083 324 4007

Early Learning Resource Unit: Improving the quality of mathematics and science in grade R classes

An intervention to improve the quality of maths and science learning was piloted by the Early Learning Resource Unit in grade R classes in two districts of the Western Cape. Participating educators received training, three site visits, and resources. Participating classrooms showed overall improvement and the outcomes confirm the importance of working on the learning programme as a whole and increasing educator confidence in the subject area.

Contact: Linda Biersteker, Early Learning Resource Unit – (021) 762 7500 or 083 724 0977



Positive parenting: The Parent Centre

The Parent Centre, an NPO in the Western Cape, runs a Positive Parenting Skills programme which mostly serves families from poor communities. The programme recognises that children's behaviours are motivated by various goals and that encouragement and praise are important for children. Expected programme outcomes include parents understanding the stages of child development and being able to apply positive discipline techniques successfully.

Contact: Venecia Barries, The Parent Centre – (021) 762 0116

Support in rural areas: Khululeka Community Education Development Centre

Khululeka focuses on meeting the expressed needs of the most rural, resource-poor populations in the Queenstown area of South Africa's Eastern Cape. The Centre works together with communities to provide high quality ECD programmes and services including a preschool enrichment programme, family home-visiting programme focusing on access to social grants, health and nutrition, and caregiver support; and an infant and toddler support programme for caregivers of children aged 0 – 6 years.

Contact: Rene King – 083 517 1721

Assisting women in poor rural areas: Ntataise

Ntataise is an independent, not for-profit organisation which helps women in poor rural areas gain the knowledge and skills to establish ECD programmes for children in their communities. Ntataise has provided training and support to more than 10,000 women involved in ECD – who in turn have reached more than 300,000 children – in some of South Africa's most disadvantaged communities. Ntataise has also established a network of early childhood development training organisations, spanning seven of South Africa's nine provinces and reaching more than 1,000 pre-schools and 1,500 practitioners.

Contact: Puleng Motsoeng – 082 092 8762

