

# We do care for children, but only on paper

*This weekend the world commemorated Universal Children's Day. Lauren van Niekerk and Eric Atmore look at the main areas that South Africa can focus on to create a better future*

**I**N DECEMBER 1954, the UN General Assembly recommended that all countries institute a Universal Children's Day, to be observed as a day of worldwide fraternity and understanding between children.

It recommended that the day was to be observed also as a day of activity devoted to promoting the welfare of the children of the world. The date, November 20, marks the day on which the assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, in 1959, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in 1989.

Universal Children's Day is therefore an appropriate time to reflect on how South Africa treats its children.

While we have made progress since 1994 in the services to children and resources allocated, a time of honest reflection to assess exactly how we are doing is called for – and it is our assessment that we are not doing particularly well, and that our future is at risk.

Our commitment to child rights is more in words than in actions. While our politicians continually talk about how important it is to protect our children, the political will is clearly missing. No amount of baby hugging and baby kissing by politicians can disguise the fact that we are failing our children.

So what is the evidence to lead us to this conclusion?

Education is a human right and all children are promised education in our constitution. Every child is entitled to nine years of quality education. The legislation and policies are in place for this, but the quality of education is, in most cases, very poor.

Children attend dysfunctional schools, are taught by teachers who arrive late for school and drunk, are taught by some teachers who sexually abuse them, and do not have desks or textbooks.

It is encouraging to see that South Africa has a high level of school enrolment and attendance between Grades 1 and 12, with 96.4 percent attendance in 2008. But there are still 400 000 children across South Africa who are not attending school. And the quality is poor. Our children leave school unable to read, write or count at the required levels. Our Grade 3 and 6 numeracy and literacy results are among the lowest in the world and of every 100 children who enter Grade 1, only about 30 percent eventually pass Grade 12.

The main reason for children dropping out of school is poverty. Other reasons

include illness, exam failure and pregnancy. Access to school is essential for achieving one's human right to an education. Many barriers exist that may hinder access to education, including extensive distances to the nearest school, poor roads and lack of transport.

According to Statistics South Africa (2009), 21 percent of children aged between seven and 13 and 33 percent of high school-aged children had to travel more than 30 minutes to their nearest school.

Basic rights, such as the right to clean and drinkable water, are denied, while water is often of poor quality and young children become particularly susceptible to illnesses such as diarrhoea and cholera.

The General Household Survey 2008 shows that nearly seven million children in South Africa live in households without direct access to clean drinking water.

## The main reason children are dropping out of school is poverty

Worse still is that there has been very little improvement in children's access to water from 2002 to 2008. There are prominent differences in access to water across the provinces – more than 90 percent of children in the Western Cape, Gauteng and Free State have an adequate supply, whereas in KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Limpopo, it's less than 50 percent.

Added to this is the lack of access to basic sanitation in many households. Poor sanitation is common countrywide, including unventilated pit latrines, bucket toilets and in some cases no toilet facilities at all.

This results in children becoming vulnerable to a range of illnesses and diseases, such as cholera, bilharzia and skin infections. The state's goal to provide adequate sanitation to all and to eradicate the bucket system has helped to improve access from 47 percent in 2002 to 61 percent in 2008. But there are still more than 7 million children using the bucket system and unventilated pit latrines. They are at risk of contracting diseases that contribute to the 6.7 percent mortality rate of children under the age of five.

South Africa adopted the Millennium

Development Goals in 2000. Goal four aims to reduce the under-five mortality rate by two thirds from the 1990 figure, from 60 deaths per 1 000 live births to 20, by 2015.

However, our current mortality rate of our youngest and most vulnerable citizens is a devastating 67 deaths per 1 000 live births – 70 000 children under 5 die each year.

The respected South African Child Gauge 2009/10, published by the Children's Institute, lists the five leading causes of death in under-5s: HIV/Aids (35 percent), neonatal problems (30 percent), diarrhoea (11 percent), infections (11 percent) and pneumonia (6 percent). They are dying from preventable conditions due to deficiencies in our health system, and from environmental risk factors.

Recent research in a number of hospitals found that 60 percent of children under 5 years who died were underweight for their age and 33 percent were severely malnourished. Interestingly, the majority of children who died from malnourishment also had HIV/Aids.

Despite the fact that there has been a substantial drop in reported cases of child hunger, the General Household Survey shows that there are still 3.3 million children living in households where child hunger has been reported.

There appear to be significant inequalities across the provinces and population groups, with the highest rates of child hunger reported in the North West, Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal.

Child hunger is found predominantly among the African population (20 percent), with coloured children at 10 percent and white children at 2 percent.

When he was Education minister, Professor Kader Asmal said, when speaking of children and education: "We must not fail them." It is clear from the evidence that we have.

The government denies that our children are substantially at risk.

Pointing to wordy policies, strategy documents and intentions and plans will not educate our children and will not feed, clothe or house them. Only action driven by political will to put children first and the accompanying financial resources will.

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**DEEP TROUBLE:** South Africa has child-friendly policies but the country is still not adequately caring for its children, putting our future at risk. PICTURE: AP

