

Foreword

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The publication of the 2024 South African Child Gauge (*Tracking progress and enhancing early childhood development*) occurs at an opportune time. Firstly, it is a welcome follow up to the 2013 Child Gauge (*Essential services for young children*) which for the first time focused attention on the range of services and supports needed to nurture young children's development and promote their overall well-being. In other words, what needs to be in place for young children to thrive and flourish. The 2024 issue is a wonderful opportunity to assess the progress that has (or has not) been made over the past 10 years in improving the lives of young children in South Africa.

The last half century has transformed our understanding of the human brain, the remarkable capacities of infants and children, and a deep understanding of what young children need to thrive. The Lancet series^{1,2}, the Nurturing Care Framework³ and the publication of the World Health Organization Early Child Development Guidelines⁴ provide everything we need to know in terms of evidence for policy, implementation and systems change. But part of what these documents show is that children in South Africa and other poor countries face a myriad number of risks and threats to their development. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated aftershocks have precipitated a substantial growth in global poverty⁵ – increasing poverty by 10%, which has affected over 100 million more children. Many poorer economies are mired in debt and development gains are backtracking with increases in malnutrition and stunting⁵. Nearly 60% of children in early learning programmes in South Africa are not developmentally on track, while 81% of Grade 4 children in South Africa are unable to read for meaning.

This year also marks the convergence of a number of significant local events. It marks the fifth time South Africans have voted in a democratic election, and for the first time, the African National Congress lost its absolute majority. This has ushered in a government of national unity with all the promises and problems that coalitions such as this bring. The

last few years have also seen the transfer of responsibility for improving early child development from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Basic Education. The government of national unity begins its work however with a country characterized by massive inequality, endemic poverty, an education system that is failing the vast majority of South African children, and in a world increasingly characterized by conflict and political polarization. And all of this is taking place against the backdrop of catastrophic climate breakdown.

Almost 10 years ago, together with Professor Linda Richter and colleagues, we published a report entitled 'Early Means Early' where we presented findings from interviews with policy makers, stakeholders and members of the public about the importance of the early years. We concluded that one of the major barriers to providing services to the youngest children is the tendency for people to 'age-up' – and believe

that it is only during preschool that learning and other key skills are acquired – despite most respondents being cognizant of the massive brain changes taking place in the first years of life.

Unfortunately, the term 'ECD' continues to be routinely used as 'shorthand' for a developmental **process**, a developmental **outcome**, and even for a **place** (preschool). Coherent framing is essential to guide interventions and financing. One concern with the transfer of responsibility for improving early childhood development to the Department of Basic Education is the danger that efforts will be concentrated on preschool and Grade R. Yet if we continue to fail to invest earlier in the health, nutrition and care of pregnant women, infants and young children, then even the best attempts at improving later platforms are likely to achieve only partial success.

The successful publication of a WHO Guideline is an important yardstick of when a certain threshold of evidence in a field has been obtained. With the WHO ECD Guideline⁴, we are in a position to state, with some confidence, that we know how to deliver and implement interventions to improve



ECD in the early years. We know what to do. What we do not know is always how to implement these in the real world. Given this, I would contend that the testing of new 'branded interventions' through RCTs is no longer required. Rather, what we need is the careful cultural and contextual adaptation of existing programmes using implementation science with close attention to the structural and social determinants of optimal child development across the life course. We also require more research to isolate the "active" ingredients of interventions⁶ that would assist us in reducing the significant overlap in a saturated programming field.

Climate breakdown is a singular threat to young children, and as is the case in most crises, the poorest and most vulnerable children are suffering, and will suffer the most. Policy, implementation and research priorities need to place climate breakdown front and center to ensure appropriate programmatic and systemic change to improve the resilience of children, families and communities. Research to fully describe the unique vulnerabilities of young children to climate breakdown is also essential.

Without wishing to sound overly heretical, the widespread practice of assuming that interventions that have been shown to be effective in tightly controlled RCTs will immediately be successful when implemented within a health or education system has done a disservice to the field of improving ECD, as well as to global health more generally. Results from RCTs are often not generalizable, and expecting comprehensive long-term benefits in contexts of high adversity is a bit like "placing flour in an oven for an hour and expecting a cake"⁷. Systems change takes time and happens in small steps and requires multiple shifts in multiple systems. Evidence is critical, but my contention is that the first step to achieving system change is to acknowledge that unless we put children at the center of our policy making and our decision making, they are likely to continue to play second fiddle to the vicissitudes of politics and the unpredictable currents of social and economic development.

There has been significant global and local success in advocating for improving early childhood development. Unfortunately, however, adequate financing has not followed. We need new, sustainable financing models, that incorporate a long-term component, and because funding for young children is 'too little, too late' the youngest children must be prioritized.

In a fascinating new book (*History for Tomorrow: Inspiration from the Past for the Future of Humanity*) the philosopher Roman Krznaric looks to history for lessons to help our present. In it, he makes a subtle but important clarification. He notes, that in fact the oft cited Chinese word for crisis is not so much about crisis and opportunity, as it is about a 'change point' or 'critical juncture' where a crucial decision needs to be made about the way forward. It is clear that young children in South Africa are in crisis. But this crisis offers an opportunity to do things differently. Given the crisis and this critical juncture, now is the time to pause. To pause and to think anew. The old way of doing things is simply not working for our children. I implore you President Cyril Ramaphosa and Minister of Basic Education Siviwe Gwarube, to firstly acknowledge the crisis our children find themselves in, and to then make the critical decision to prioritise young children in your planning for the way forward. Please be brave in your decision making and put children first. Please hold close the crucial understanding that early means early. Please put young children at the center of your policy making and position your investment in young children as an investment in reducing poverty and inequality, offering (easily) the highest rate of return, and in so doing build the foundations for future economic growth and a healthy and caring society.

Our children are in crisis, but in the words of Rebecca Solnit "Hope is not a door, but a sense that there might be a door at some point, some way out of the problems of the present moment even before that way is found or followed. Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope." The time to act for children is now.

References

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