

Minister of Social Development

The Honourable Nokuzola Tolashe

It is with pleasure that I introduce the 17th annual review of the *South African Child Gauge*, a valuable publication that gives a detailed account of the well-being of children in our country. As I write this piece, I am filled with optimism that my department, working in collaboration with all key partners, will continue to use this publication as a barometer as we work towards a South Africa fit for children.

The year 2024 marks 30 years of freedom and democracy in South Africa. This historic milestone requires a proper reflection on how far we have come in protecting and promoting the rights of our children who have a special place in the Constitution of our country.

The *Child Gauge* provides a unique opportunity to celebrate our collective achievements in areas where we have made progress. It also requires that we consolidate our collective efforts in areas where we are lagging behind.

We launch this publication against the backdrop of an alarming increase in child malnutrition in some parts of the country. I am pleased with the measures taken to date to implement the recommendations of the South African Human Rights Commission on this matter and we will continue to do all we can to protect children from food insecurity and hunger, as we continue to strive to improve outcomes for all children to fulfill their true potential.

Working jointly with the Departments of Health and Home Affairs, we have prioritised coordinated efforts to ensure universal birth registration to facilitate access to essential services from birth. Tackling child poverty will remain central to the work of the Government of National Unity over the next five years.

The National Development Plan recognises early childhood development (ECD) as the period of human development from conception to when the child turns 6 years old. This is a cornerstone for development as it provides a firm foundation for



learning and pathways to economic upliftment. The National Integrated ECD Policy seeks to maximise positive opportunities for children to get an early start in life that will provide a strong platform for the future success of our country. The establishment of the Inter-Ministerial Committee on ECD by President Ramaphosa, with Social Development as one of the key member departments, is a fundamental shift and commitment to address the needs of those children whose lives, opportunities and ambitions are constrained by poverty, unemployment and inequality. At the heart of this shift is a desire to see more investment in the early years.

Following the transfer of the ECD coordinating function to the Department of Basic Education in 2022, the role of social service professionals in relation to ECD programmes for young children and their families was redefined. The support we give on a daily basis includes support to families with young children, prevention and early intervention services as well as specific services to support families with children with disabilities and children in need of care. These services remain central to the mandate of the Department of Social Development.

The National Plan of Action for Children (2024 – 2029), which is currently undergoing national consultation processes, is instructive in what we need to do over the next five years to address some of the policy and programmatic shortcomings highlighted in the *Child Gauge*. These consultations will include engagement with many children across South Africa – enabling children and young people to have their voices heard and to raise issues that concern them.

I want to record my sincere appreciation to all who have supported and contributed their expertise to this publication. We look forward to working with all our partners to take forward the recommendations and ensure that children's rights remain at the centre of our work for this electoral term and beyond.