



## **EMBARGOED UNTIL 16:00 ON WEDNESDAY 21 AUGUST 2024**

### **Press statement: South Africa must invest in early childhood development to break intergenerational poverty and inequality**

Cape Town, 21 August 2024 – Investment in early childhood development matters, not just for children today, but because it boosts their lifelong health, education and employment prospects. To break free from intergenerational cycles of poverty, violence and ill-health, and boost national development, South Africa must focus its efforts on the sensitive period of early childhood, for investment to be most effective.

This is the case made by the *South African Child Gauge 2024*, being launched today by the Children's Institute, University of Cape Town. It focuses attention on early childhood development, reflecting on progress since the adoption of the National Integrated Early Childhood Development (NIECD) Policy in 2015, and setting an agenda for 2030. This 17th issue is published in partnership with UNICEF South Africa; the DSI-NRF Centre for Excellence in Human Development, University of the Witwatersrand; the Standard Bank Tutuwa Community Foundation and The LEGO Foundation.

At a time when South Africa is seeking solutions to complex societal challenges, the findings of the latest *Child Gauge* remind us that the answers lie in early childhood.

Early childhood development (ECD) refers to the processes by which children grow, develop and thrive – physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, morally and socially – from their conception until they start formal schooling. “From conception to the end of the second or third year, is commonly referred to as the first thousand days of life,” elaborated Professor Linda Richter, of the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Human Development, University of the Witwatersrand. “When we talk about early childhood development, we really mean early. While we can promote learning at four or five years of age, the potential of a child’s brain is built only once, during the first 1,000 days of life.”

If South Africa does not invest earlier in the health, development, nutrition and care of pregnant women, infants and young children, then even the best attempts at later improvement are likely to achieve only partial success.

#### **Our young children are in crisis**

In the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, families and government departments have come under increasing pressure as rising poverty and austerity cuts threaten the health, survival and development of young children.

- 1 in every 25 children dies before their 5th birthday.



- 71% of children live below the upper-bound poverty line in households that do not have sufficient income to meet their basic needs.
- Over 1 in every 4 children under 5 are stunted – a sign of chronic malnutrition that compromises physical growth and brain development.
- Less than half of 4 – 5-year-olds attending early learning programmes are developmentally on track.

It is vital to step up investments in early childhood to maximise lifelong health and development. “Harnessing the potential of ECD interventions to ameliorate poverty and inequality, and curb complex societal challenges such as violence, gender discrimination, and child maltreatment is critical for pursuing a just, equal and sustainable society,” explained Associate Professor Wiedaad Slemming, lead editor of the *South African Child Gauge 2024*, and Director of the Children’s Institute (UCT). “With the NIECD Policy as our foundation, and the proactive support of families, communities, and the whole of society, we can protect young children from harm, enable them to thrive and boost national development.”

### Five key interventions

1. **Maternal and child health care:** South Africa has made good progress in increasing the coverage of child health services, but greater efforts are needed to ensure children not only survive but thrive. This includes increasing support for pregnant women whose physical and mental health are impacted by poverty and violence, and ensuring that community-based support for maternal and child health is strengthened. Also needing improvement are the systems to identify and support children with developmental delays, disabilities and long-term health conditions.
2. **Nutrition and food security:** 1 in 4 young children are stunted (or short for age) and a further 1 in 4 are overweight or obese. This double burden of malnutrition compromises children’s long-term health and education prospects, and effective leadership is urgently needed to tackle this. Measures to address these should include:
  - restoring the value of the Child Support Grant to the food poverty line and introducing income support for pregnant women;
  - reducing the costs of a nutritious food basket and regulating the marketing of unhealthy foods to young children; and
  - establishing the long-awaited National Food and Nutrition Security Council.
3. **Opportunities for early learning:** Most early learning programmes (ELPs) are provided by the private sector, with limited state support through the ECD subsidy. This failure to invest adequately in ELPs is compromising access and quality for children in poor households. To improve early learning outcomes, it is essential to increase the value of the ECD subsidy; simplify the registration process so more ELPs can benefit from the ECD subsidy; and invest in the education, training and professionalisation of ECD practitioners.

“In addition to this, a key message of this *Child Gauge* is that young children are hardwired to seek out learning opportunities, and their vehicle for doing so is through play,” said Kerry



Kassen, Director of the LEGO Foundation in South Africa. “The adults around them need to enable rather than constrain this natural drive to learn through play by providing them with opportunities for choice, exploration and problem solving at home and in the classroom.”

4. **Families are also in need of care and support:** All children need nurturing care. But the capacity of families – parents and caregivers – to support healthy development is often compromised by factors outside of their control. This includes the impacts of poverty and a lack of resources for physical and mental health, and the disproportionate burden of care carried by women. “A loving and nurturing early childhood provides the best opportunity possible for children to thrive in life,” said Christine Muhigana, UNICEF South Africa Representative. “But being a parent or caregiver comes with multiple challenges and we need to empower every parent by ensuring they have the resources needed to create positive childhood experiences for every child,” added Muhigana.

It is critical to address the social and structural barriers to nurturing care, by:

- providing income support and affordable childcare, to enable women to return to work;
- strengthening support from community and faith-based organisations; and
- supporting parents and caregivers to provide nurturing care and encouraging men to play an active role in the care of young children.

5. **Some children need extra care:** All children benefit from universal services such as primary health care, but far too many young children in South Africa are exposed to multiple adversities that compromise their health and development – including high levels of poverty, malnutrition, violence and neglect. It is most effective – and cost effective – to intervene early to minimise harm and optimise outcomes. This requires:
- building the capacity of frontline workers to identify and respond proactively to danger signs; and
  - strengthening referral systems and care pathways to ensure children and families are able to access the support and services that they need.

### A call to action

It is vital to strengthen our commitment to young children, building on the leadership of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the National Planning Commission, and harnessing the fresh energy of the Government of National Unity to address current challenges and accelerate progress for young children.

“At this time when the state has taken charge of early childhood development, as the private sector we are provided with an opportunity to collaborate in using evidence to influence broader change by directed co-ordination, providing linkages and connections which don’t currently exist,” said Zanele Twala, Chief Executive Officer of the Standard Bank Tutuwa Community Foundation. “This time also offers us an opportunity of investing in growing an evidence base



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around what works – and crucially what does not and disseminating this widely to both the private and public sector.”

## **ENDS**

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