

Reviewing child deaths in South Africa

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The Fourth World Congress on Family Law and Children's Rights presented an opportunity to reflect on child deaths in South Africa and to frame this understanding within a rights perspective. The Children's Institute paper on child deaths critically analysed South Africa's commitments to further child survival in light of its obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the South African Constitution. The paper focuses on child deaths and is aimed at addressing the following key questions:

1. What are the commitments to child survival in terms of the CRC and the Constitution?
2. What advancements have been made for the nation's children in the 10 years since the introduction of democracy?
3. How far is South Africa in meeting the Millennium Development Goals and World Summit for Children goals on child survival (i.e. reducing infant and child death rates)?

Despite the many achievements by the State in the last decade, South Africa lags far behind in achieving the World Summit and Millennium Development Goals on child survival. These goals are primarily geared towards the reduction of the infant mortality rate (IMR: number of deaths for under-one-year-olds per 1 000 live births) and the under-five mortality rate (U5MR: number of deaths for under-five-year-olds per 1 000 live births). Child survival prospects in South Africa are dismal, and the country is nowhere near its targets for reducing the IMR and U5MR.

In fact, projected estimates based on a Medical Research Council Burden of Disease study indicate that the number of children dying is rising at an alarming rate. The number one killer for many young children is HIV/AIDS. In addition, diseases of poverty, trauma and violence are increasingly important contributors and lead causes of death for many more of the nation's children.

The following recommendations are aimed at addressing some of these challenges and thereby enhancing child survival prospects:

- There is a need for improved information to enable the ongoing monitoring of progress in meeting goals on child survival.
- There is a need for co-ordinated planning and service provision inter-sectorally, between government departments and across the three spheres of government.
- Sectors other than the health sector should be made accountable for interventions that impact on child survival. This can be done by clearly identifying the obligations of each department towards ensuring child survival, and by ensuring that all role players understand what is required in terms of the CRC and the Constitution.
- A comprehensive HIV/AIDS plan (i.e. not just drugs) is essential. The Department of Health has already adopted such a plan in 2003 but it is fundamental that the plan adequately considers and provides for children's special needs

In conclusion: All departments and all spheres of government need to have plans aimed at reducing child deaths. Furthermore, child survival can only be improved through the advancement of a multi-pronged and co-ordinated plan to advance their well-being. This approach should be nested in the realisation of children's socio-economic rights.

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The Children's Institute, University of Cape Town, aims to contribute to policies, laws and interventions, that promote equality and realise the rights and improve the conditions of all children in South Africa, through research, advocacy, education and technical support.

