

Foreword

Shirley Pendlebury

Director, Children's Institute, University of Cape Town

South Africa's Constitution envisages a society that respects the equality and dignity of every person – child and adult alike; a society that cares about people's socio-economic well-being as much as it cares about their personal and political liberty. Socio-economic rights are inextricably tied to civil and political rights. Equality, dignity and liberty are hollow notions where people live under conditions of multiple deprivations, without the means to live a decent and dignified life.

Children have a special place in the Constitution.

Section 28 of the Bill of Rights safeguards rights to care and protection for children, over and above the rights they have in common with everyone else. In its particular attention to children's rights, the Constitution sets the ideal for an environment where every child may flourish, in the present (during childhood and for each successive generation of children) and in the various stages along the road to adulthood.

How well is South Africa doing in fulfilling its constitutional commitments to children? This is the question that motivates the Children's Institute's *South African Child Gauge*, which offers an annual snap-shot of the situation of children and reflects critically on a selection of conditions that help or hinder children's well-being and their enjoyment of their rights. In her introductory essay to the first edition, *South African Child Gauge 2005*, Marian Jacobs commented on two factors that aggravate the circumstances of children in South Africa and dilute efforts to realise their rights. One major obstacle is the HIV/AIDS pandemic; the other is widespread poverty. The two are intertwined and both, singly and together, have a disastrous impact on children, compromising their healthy development and well-being.

Children in the context of HIV/AIDS was the central theme of the first edition of the *South African Child Gauge*; and children and poverty the central theme of the second. The *South African Child Gauge 2007/2008*, the third edition, focuses on children's right to social services and the policy and legislative developments that provide the foundation for realising this important but, until now, neglected or misunderstood right.

While the right to social services is just one of a basket of special rights for children, its realisation is critical if we are to overcome the effects on children of widespread poverty, social fragmentation and a deep-seated culture of violence. A child who is abused or neglected is a child whose dignity and well-being are damaged. Waiting until the damage is done before providing protection against further harm is, in many cases, too late. Prevention and early intervention lie at the heart of the new approach to social services for children and their families.

Along with the many others in the children's sector who participated tirelessly in public deliberation towards the development of a comprehensive Children's Act, we at the Children's Institute celebrate the legislative gains for children over the last year. The essays in the *South African Child Gauge 2007/2008* examine the meaning of children's right to social services, as well as the human resource and budgetary requirements for giving effect to this right. Undoubtedly, the comprehensive Children's Act takes South Africa into a new era of child care and protection.

Whether the Act can make a real difference for those children who are most vulnerable to neglect and abuse will depend on budgetary allocations and expenditure on children's social services. It will depend, too, on developing enough of the right categories of people to provide these services. Without a broad range of social service practitioners, the careful thinking underpinning the Children's Act will have little effect in realising children's right to protection against abuse and neglect. The quality of care and protection rests largely on the recognition and support given to families and the many people providing social services to children – from community development workers to early childhood development practitioners; from child and youth care workers to nurses, occupational therapists and psychologists; from qualified social workers to auxiliaries and volunteers.

The task ahead calls for courage, commitment and political will, and for tough decisions on how best to deploy and develop available resources. Its ultimate reward will be a society in which children can live, learn and play in safety and dignity.