

# Reflections on children in South Africa

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South Africa has undergone a remarkable transformation since its democratic transition, which began in 1994. The country has successfully institutionalised the rule of law and democratic freedoms, increased access to basic infrastructure (e.g. water, sanitation and electricity) as well as to housing, education and preventive health care services. South Africa has managed a difficult transition towards fiscal discipline, increased its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita growth rate to around 3.6% and revamped moderate employment creation during the past three years.<sup>1</sup> Growth has contributed to a modest reduction in the percentage of people living in poverty, though not inequality, since poor people's income grew less than rich people's income, despite the expansion of the social grant system.

During the past decade, public expenditures on health, education and the social grant system have all dramatically increased, reaching respectively an estimated 3.2%, 5.4% and 3.2% of the GDP during fiscal year 2006/2007.<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite the progress achieved, there remain challenges in addressing historical inequities caused by apartheid, particularly access to quality education, health care services, basic infrastructure and social welfare programmes and services for the population, of which more than a third are children.

The social welfare system has not coped with the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS, which not only contributed to an increase in the infant mortality rate but also left a large and increasing number of children either living with sick parents, or orphaned and in need of family care or alternative care. For children made vulnerable by poverty and HIV/AIDS, access to early childhood development and other social services is still



low. While enrolment in Grade 1 is high, far less children actually pass matric, which indicates that many children fall out of the education system along the way. Finally, employment for matric graduates proves to be challenging, as is evident by high youth unemployment rates due to, among other factors, the mismatch between the skills acquired and those required by the labour market.

Therefore, despite the progress of the past decade, too many children living in South Africa still fall through the cracks of the social welfare system

during their formative years.

However, the expansion of social security for children since 1994 is an extraordinary achievement. Through the Care Dependency, Child Support and Foster Care Grants, South Africa is mitigating the widespread poverty affecting millions of children, primarily as a consequence of high unemployment. Yet, looking forward, how should the success of today's care and protection, health, nutrition, education and safety net policies targeted at children be measured, say for example, 15 to 20 years from now?

It can be argued that the only true measure of success would be a substantial reduction in the proportion of children eligible to receive any of the above-mentioned grants, provided that income thresholds used to define grant eligibility keep pace with inflation.

Such a decline will take place if, and only if, the current generation of children receive the care and protection that they are entitled to; if they accumulate the human capital required to live healthy lives; if they are able to join the labour force better equipped than their parents, and, consequently, have better means to support their offspring.

<sup>1</sup> The Presidency, Republic of South Africa (2007) *Development Indicators Mid-Term Review*.

<sup>2</sup> Author's calculation from National Treasury (2007) *Budget at Glance 2007* (for education and health) and from National Treasury (2007) *Adjusted Estimates of National Expenditures Vote 17 Social Development* (for social grants).

