



Growing Up In The New South Africa¹

"The situation of most African children remains critical due to the unique factors of their socio-economic, cultural, traditional and developmental circumstances, natural disasters, armed conflicts, exploitation and hunger, and on account of the child's physical and mental immaturity he/she needs special safeguards and care..."

African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

1. Introduction

A generation of children has grown up in the 'new South Africa', but for so many of them it could be argued that this has made little difference: they face a world of disappointments, with unemployment, limited access to institutions of higher learning, and enduring structural inequality. What impact has the new South Africa had on the lives of the children of today? How do they experience the realities of their lives? It is important that the experiences and observations of children should be taken seriously. Children's participation in matters that affect them is a central theme of the Children's Act 38 of 2005. Indeed, the agency of children is vital to meaningful change, since they are not passive objects but rather subjects who interpret their reality and have hopes and aspirations for 'a better life for all'. Children can tell us what burdens they carry and what help they need in order to set those burdens down.

2. The Life Space of a Child

The 'life space' of a child extends from birth to the age of eighteen. This is in keeping with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child; Section 28 of the Bill of Rights in our Constitution; and the provisions of the Children's Act.

The 'life space' of a child is a fractured space.² It

is fractured by enduring poverty, lack of service delivery, difficulties in accessing grants and educational opportunities, domestic violence, crimes against children, and the slow implementation of the protections and services contained in the Children's Act. Poor nutrition, HIV/AIDS, and the re-emergence of chronic TB and malaria impact heavily on the lives of children. In addition, gender-based violence and violence against children remain an endemic theme of our social fabric. Children are inherently vulnerable and it is therefore imperative that the life space of a child should be approached with both respect and a profound sense of responsibility.

3. The First Thousand Days³

The government's health and social services cluster has targeted the first thousand days of a child's life as critical. This equates roughly to the period from birth to the age of three. This integrated approach sees early diagnosis of diseases and other problems, and appropriate intervention, as an investment in the future and thus as making sound financial sense. Such a strategy requires an intersectorial approach, and this is a theme of the Children's Act. It will require the co-operation of the Departments of Social Development; Health; Women, Children and People with Disability; and Home Affairs. The departmental briefing by the Department of Women, Children and People with Disability (DWCPD) reported that, while policy is

determined at a national level, the implementation thereof is the responsibility of provincial and local government. This often means that there are delays and haphazard service delivery.

This focus on the first thousand days also emphasizes the importance of the health and nutrition of the mother during pregnancy and lactation. At present the Department of Health is engaged in a campaign to promote breast-feeding and has withdrawn infant milk formula from its clinics. One of the motivations given for this policy is that so many babies are born to mothers living in informal settlements where there is poor sanitation, making sterilization of bottles difficult. Likewise in many rural areas there is limited access to clean water, with women and children walking vast distances to fetch water from rivers or boreholes.⁴ The Sunday Times recently reported that in KwaZulu-Natal there are instances of people consuming cow dung to provide bulk and to supplement their meagre diet.⁵ Encouragingly, there has been some suggestion by the DWCPD that the Child Support Grant be extended to pregnant women; hopefully this will be taken further in due course.

4. Disability

Regarding the disability and/or chronic illness of children, the DWCPD speaks of the need for babies and young children presenting signs of disability and chronic illness to be tested and if necessary treated at an appropriate medical facility. While this is certainly an imperative, accessing such facilities is very difficult: there are not enough of them in many parts of the country, and public transport is scarce and expensive. Furthermore, referral to such facilities is dependent on the local clinic and the ability of clinic staff to recognise developmental delays, and symptoms of underlying conditions such as diabetes and TB. Interventions such as physiotherapy, occupational- and speech-therapy are not available to all children, and there is a paucity of appropriate assistive devices. Devices such as wheelchairs and hearing aids have to be made taking into account the specific child for whom the item is intended, in the same way as spectacles are made; there is no 'one size fits all' assistive device.⁶ This lack of assistive devices seriously compromises a child's quality of life and his or her participation in the life of the family, school and community.⁷

5. Neighbourhoods

Children live in families, communities and neighbourhoods and are shaped by the points of contact and intersection with these environments. Neighbourhoods include the immediate dwellings and streets, but also schools, clinics, churches and public facilities. They also include taxi ranks, shebeens, street markets, and places where illegal substances may be bought. But neighbourhoods are also comprised of the people who live in them, and these may include gangs, drug-pushers, and people who seek to exploit children in various ways. Especially in urban areas and informal settlements with high population densities, neighbourhoods can be dangerous places for children. Children are shaped by the experiences, both positive and negative, of their interaction with these environments and the consequences thereof. The quality of care they receive has a profound impact on their self esteem and their evolving sense of identity. Bray emphasises that the entire nature of the neighbourhood/community must be taken into account: physical, social, mental health, emotional, attitudinal and spiritual.⁸ The recently published UNICEF report on "The State of the World's Children" indicates that "poor children living in urban areas also experience high levels of depression and distress".⁹ Such stresses include those of high-density living and lack of privacy; the high rate of violent crime, sexual abuse and domestic violence; anxiety about the future; poor nutrition and frequently chaotic school environments.

In some neighbourhoods there is a culture of 'denigration' and social alienation which fuels substance abuse and domestic violence. Unemployment and violent crime are pervasive. Such an environment compromises the sense of identity of adolescents and as well as their hopes and aspirations. Peer pressure to participate in risky behaviour is common. Teachers are often uncaring and there is a shortage of positive role models. This research indicates that young people do not feel engaged politically or socially and "want to belong to the New South Africa but struggle to find and inhabit it."¹⁰

6. Nodes of Care and Safe Places

Meaningful interventions in the life space of children discussed above require the

development and fostering of nodes of care and safe places for children in need. Schools are an immediate resource and site of intervention for school-going children. Teachers can be trained to recognize signs of abuse and neglect, malnourishment, disability and illness in children, and to make the appropriate referrals. Already existing school feeding schemes are making a substantial difference to the lives of children and their capacity to learn and participate fully in the educational process. Parents should be encouraged to participate more fully in the education of their children, particularly in the supervision of homework.¹¹

NGOs have always taken major responsibility for services for children in need. However, the global recession has impacted negatively on the budgets of many of these organizations, forcing them to curtail their services. Furthermore, the Department of Social Development has also withdrawn funding from such organizations. However, it is heartening that a budget has been provided for the training of child and youth care workers to help identify children at risk and to provide early intervention services, support and, where necessary, appropriate referrals. Finally, it must be emphasised that the envisaged early childhood development (ECD) programmes need to take place where children live so as to prevent children living outside the 'safety net'.

7. Social Grants and Poverty

In spite of the nearly R122 billion of the national budget allocated to social grants, many South Africans remain locked in inter-generational poverty, structural inequality, and poor quality of life.¹² The largest allocation is to the child support grant, but recent increases to this and other grants have been below inflation.¹³ This effectively means that social grants are palliative rather than transformative, a situation which is exacerbated by the fact that there continues to be a slow uptake of the grant. In addition, poverty has a feminine face, with unemployed single mothers living with children being the most vulnerable. Meaningful change has to address the empowerment of women, both for their own sake and because it is primarily women who take responsibility for the care and up-bringing of children.

The impact of poverty on the way children grow up is well-illustrated in Bray et al's ethnographic study, which was conducted in three different

communities within a five kilometre radius in the same valley of the Western Cape, namely Fish Hoek, Masiphumelele and Ocean View. The juxtaposition of these areas reflects the socio-economic structure of the apartheid past. Fish Hoek is predominately white and middle class, while Ocean View is a 'coloured' area established for people who were removed from Simonstown in the late 1960s in terms of the Group Areas Act.¹⁴ The informal settlement of Masiphumelele began as an illegal squatter camp in the mid 1980s for 'black' people working in the surrounding areas and for whom there was no accommodation. Arguably the living conditions in this settlement have not improved much in the new South Africa. This triangular study can be regarded as a microcosm for our society in general with all its contradictions and slow rate of socio-economic transformation.¹⁵

8. Child Participation and Autonomy

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that "States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law".¹⁶

The agency and resourcefulness of children and adolescents should not be under-estimated.¹⁷ Their concerns and insights must be taken seriously. Much of Bray's work focused on children and adolescents 'mapping' or describing their world through drawing, drama, crafts and games. Schools, churches and community organizations should be encouraged to employ these methods to give children an opportunity to be heard. Child rights organizations such as the Children's Institute, the Children's Rights Centre and Molo Songololo, provide children with opportunities to express themselves and to be heard, as does the kind of research conducted by Bray and her colleagues.

In recent years children have made effective representations to Parliament, notably regarding the issues of child brides and virginity testing.

Moses argues that given the priority of children's rights in the Constitution the "state is therefore obligated to ensure that children have the opportunity to be heard in matters that affect their lives".¹⁸

Many adolescents take a lot of domestic responsibility in terms of both housework and caring for younger siblings. Child-headed households are the most extreme example of adolescents taking on adult responsibilities at an inappropriate age. Children and adolescents growing up in informal settlements have a realistic anxiety regarding the threat of fire destroying their homes and all the little they have,¹⁹ while parental illness and death is another fear. Many children's lives are blighted by these anxieties.

Moreover, the UNICEF Report stated that "many children living in poverty are distressed by the stigma of being 'underprivileged'".²⁰ The Oxford Dictionary defines 'underprivileged' as "not enjoying the normal standard of living or rights in a society".²¹ These perceptions of deprivation are accurate. Unfortunately, feelings of worthlessness, inequality and neglect are integrated into children's sense of self, further compromising their well-being, self esteem and confidence in the future.

Child participation is the key to the future. It encourages positive citizenship as children reach maturity and have the capacity to inform sound socio-economic policies. However, "a lack of buy-in from politicians into the concept and value of children's participation and conservative notions of children's abilities and rightful place, means adults fail to take children's views seriously, thus trivialising their contribution".²²

9. Conclusion

The DWCPD reports that it is in the process of finalizing periodic country reports due to the relevant United Nations treaty monitoring bodies. This will include the second, third and fourth combined periodic report on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. While this is to be welcomed it is unfortunate that these reports are late; this delay undermines the purpose of these reports, which is to provide an evaluation tool and a guide to the development of policies and services that are in the 'best interests of the child'. Regrettably, no mention was made of the reports due in terms of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which seeks to address the especial challenges and difficulties experienced by the African child; at the present time South Africa has not submitted any reports in terms of this Charter.²³ The fact that many other Southern African countries have submitted their reports timeously speaks to a lack of political will and sense of urgency on the part of authorities here.

In general, too many services to and for children in South Africa lack coherence and are slow in implementation. This flies in the face of what Nelson Mandela said at the launch of his Children's Fund in 1995: "Our actions and policies, and the institutions we create, should be eloquent with care, respect and love". There are surely no better tools of guidance and evaluation for the services we offer our children.

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¹ Recently the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office held a Roundtable on 'Growing up in the new South Africa' with Dr Rachel Bray and this Briefing Paper owes much to her presentation and the subsequent discussion. During the past week the Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities addressed a joint meeting of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee and the Select Committee on the National Council of Provinces of the same to outline the response of the Department to the President's State of the Nation Address (SONA). Also the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Human Rights Commission held a seminar the day after Minister of Finance's Budget speech on the 'Children's Budget'.

² Dr Rachel Bray Presentation at CPLO Roundtable on 'Growing up in the new South Africa', 15th February 2012

³ The CPLO recently published a Briefing Paper on the Pre and Post Natal Care of Children. BP 278

⁴ There is much anecdotal evidence that there are instances where children are kept out of school in order to fetch water and gather fuel.

⁵ Sunday Times 26th February 2012

⁶ Ideally a child's wheelchair should be custom made so as to make the child as comfortable as possible and avoiding sores from pressure points. The wheelchair should be replaced as the child grows.

⁷ The Department of Women, Children, and Persons with Disability reported that it was moving toward a policy of 'inclusive education' for children with disability in terms of which children with disability would attend mainstream

schools. Clearly such a policy is dependent on the appropriate assistive devices and any other necessary remedial assistance being made available. The issue of safe transport is another issue which would need to be addressed

⁸ Presentation on 'Growing up in the new South Africa' CPLO Roundtable 15th February 2012

⁹ The Times 29th February 2012

¹⁰ See 8 above

¹¹ Such an approach has worked with some success in the Province of Gauteng. Sunday Independent, 4th March 2012

¹² Address by the Honourable Ben Turok at a seminar on the Children's Budget hosted by UNICEF and the Human Rights Commission on 23rd February 2012

¹³ The amounts allocated to social grants are to be reviewed in October.

¹⁴ Ocean View is one of the more cynical names given to places built to accommodate those removed in terms of the Group Areas Act-removing people from a place with an ocean view to a place where there is none and calling it Ocean View.

¹⁵ 'Growing up in the New South Africa: Childhood and Adolescence in post-apartheid Cape Town', Rachel Bray, Imke Gooskens, Sue Moses, Lauren Kahn and Jeremy Seekings. HSRC Press, 2010. This book can be ordered from the HSRC or may be downloaded from their website at www.hsrcpress.ac.za

¹⁶ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989

¹⁷ Historically children were major players in the anti apartheid struggle. The 1976 Soweto student uprising and the Western Cape school boycotts of the early 1980's are prominent examples.

¹⁸ 'Theorising Children's Participation' presented by Susan Moses University of Edinburgh, September 2006

¹⁹ Masiphumelele experienced a serious fire late last year.

²⁰ The Times 29th February 2012

²¹ The Concise Oxford Dictionary, Ninth Edition

²² See Endnote 16 above

²³ Presentation by Professor Julia Sloth-Neilson to the PPC on WCPD November 2011

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