



Intergenerational Poverty: The Plight of South Africa's 'Born Frees'

*"The born-frees are grappling with the question of the meaning of freedom in post-apartheid South Africa. They seek an antidote to their reality, wherein blackness continues to be mocked and marginalised."*¹

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1. Introduction

The so-called 'born free' generation figure prominently in a debate at the very heart of South Africa's present socio-economic predicament.¹ The country's high rates of poverty and inequality, rooted in the apartheid era, are a stark reminder not only of our ever-present past, but of a potentially foreboding, yet undetermined, future. A recent study found that about 63% of young South Africans (or 3 969 000) live in poverty, with the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo having the highest rates.² Taking a closer look at the statistics reveals two glaring facts. Not only are income and poverty strongly correlated with race, gender and age, but poverty levels among this young generation remain strikingly close to those of their parental generation (most of whom would have been young people in 1996).³

Despite government intervention in various forms over the past two decades, many children born to poor households continue to suffer the indignities of poverty. These often include lack of access to adequate nutrition, clean running water or adequate sanitation. These factors reduce the likelihood of good health for poor children. Combined with poor quality schooling, the prospect of poor long-term health reinforces a cycle of deprivation from which it is hard for current and future generations to escape.⁴ The widespread nature of the intergenerational transmission of poverty has raised a number of fundamental questions. Why do poverty levels remain so intractably high in spite of government

interventions? How, in terms of policy, can we turn the tables on multi-dimensional poverty in the long-term?

It is internationally recognised that investing in quality services for infants and young children has a high return later in life. In other words, when we lay a good foundation in the early years of life to enable children to perform better in school, they are more likely to be productively employed as adults and to live as healthy, contributing citizens for a better society.⁵ On 9th December 2015, the *National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy* was approved by Cabinet. The Policy sets clear targets for the transformation of the early childhood development sector. But the fundamental question is whether this piece of policy is truly transformative, or merely palliative.

2. Poverty, Inequality and the Apartheid Past

While the phenomenon of intergenerational poverty is by no means peculiar to South Africa, in our context it unequivocally displays the thumbprint of our unique past. The apartheid project produced one of the most unequal societies in the world. The level of "economic engineering," with the goal of "racialising access to resources, property and wealth, within the rubric of a capitalist economy, was one of the striking singularities of the apartheid project".⁶ Although by the time the National Party came into power, South Africa's economy was already "shaped by the contours of race[,] the apartheid system

entrenched “the economic imprints of race, hardening racial boundaries on the possibilities of accumulation, access to skills and economic advancement”.⁷

As evidenced by the nature and degree of poverty and inequality in post-apartheid South Africa, many legacies still persist. According to Alan Hirsch, “it is certainly possible to trace some of the country’s relatively poor performance since 1994 to compromises of that era.”⁸ Hirsch highlights that, among other things, “[a]ssets such as wealth and land could have been more radically redistributed” and the “the apartheid structure of cities could have been more urgently addressed”.⁹ A reduction in resource-inequality is certainly a necessary condition for addressing the intergenerational transmission of poverty. However, it is certainly not a sufficient condition. This calls for a deeper understanding of the causes of intergenerational poverty.

3. Understanding Intergenerational Poverty: Causes and Consequences

At a recent roundtable hosted by the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office,¹⁰ Mr Kevin Roussel highlighted that while most understandings of poverty define the concept in terms of economic descriptors, mainly the lack of resources,¹¹ poverty can more broadly be defined as a lack of intrinsic and instrumental capabilities. Here, ‘basic capabilities’ denotes “basic freedoms, such as the freedoms to avoid hunger, disease, illiteracy, and so on”.¹² Amartya Sen defines poverty as ‘capability deprivation,’ where a person is deprived of “[the] *actual* ability to do the different things that she values.” He continues that “the relationship between resources and poverty is both variable and deeply contingent on the characteristics of the respective people and the environment in which they live – both natural and social”.¹³

3.1. Macro-level factors

Philippe Burger, employing the work of Miles Corak, highlights that there is a very strong correlation between inequality and intergenerational mobility. Countries where intergenerational mobility is low (that is, the children of the rich are likely to be rich, while the children of the poor are like to be poor) are usually also countries where inequality is high. By comparison, countries where intergenerational mobility is high (more specifically, whether a

parent is rich or poor does not have a bearing on whether their children are rich or poor) are usually also countries where inequality is low.¹⁴ Corak explains how “[i]nequality lowers mobility because it shapes opportunity.”¹⁵

The South African Human Rights Commission is instructive in this regard: “Children born into poor and socially excluded families are at high risk of being caught in a poverty trap. They have little chance of getting a good education, because the school system of most poor people is weak. When they leave school, the sluggish demand for unskilled workers means that few will find or hold a job, and those who do succeed will not be well remunerated or securely employed”.¹⁶ However, this explanation of intergenerational poverty is inadequate without an understanding of the factors, internal to the family household, which stymie intergenerational mobility.

3.2. Individual level factors

Informed by a life course understanding of development, the *South African Child Gauge* highlights “the precarious situation of children as they transition into young adulthood, with a focus on youth aged 15 – 24 years”.¹⁷ “[O]lder generations transmit different ‘capitals’ to the younger ones”: financial, human, cultural, social, and symbolic capital.¹⁸ De Lannoy and colleagues point out that the “[t]ransfer of these capitals is influenced by a complex set of factors, both within and outside an individual’s household”.¹⁹

As De Lannoy and colleagues insightfully point out, the apartheid system produced inequality not only in terms of income or personal well-being, but also in terms of other kinds of capital: Youth from lower-class backgrounds may thus lack the necessary kinds of ‘capital’ to enable upward social mobility. They may lack knowledge and information (‘cultural capital’) about the educational and labour market that they need to make informed choices. Youth from poorer environments may also lack the financial means (‘economic capital’), the status or prestige (‘symbolic capital’) and the networks (‘social capital’) that would provide them with the leverage needed to enter better educational institutions.²⁰

4. South Africa's Policy Landscape and Poverty-Reduction

The purpose of the National Development Plan (NDP) is to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality in South Africa by 2030. The NDP recognises quality early childhood development services, especially for the most vulnerable, as a key means to overcoming the apartheid legacy of poverty and inequality.

Although much of the current situation of the youth can be understood to have its origins in apartheid, "it is equally important to ask why more than 20 years of post-apartheid policies and interventions have not managed to make a significant shift in the life chances of today's youth".²¹ Among the key shortcomings of current childhood development services is that the coverage of "quality early childhood development services is uneven and has not reached the most vulnerable".²² Moreover, the "quality and coverage of early childhood development services for children aged birth to four is poor".²³ Another limitation has been the lack of "a truly integrated approach to youth development that is grounded in a thorough understanding of the realities of youth and the way in which multiple dimensions of poverty intersect and constrain young people's life chances".²⁴

Since 2013, the government has spearheaded the development of the country's first "national policy aimed at providing a multi-sectoral enabling framework for ECD services. The new policy, called the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy, was approved by Cabinet in December 2015".²⁵ It plans to "give direction and facilitate the provision of a comprehensive package of early childhood development services for all infants and young children, including children with special needs, children with disabilities and other developmental challenges".²⁶ The essential components of the comprehensive package are "maternal and child primary health interventions"; "nutritional support"; "support for primary caregivers"; "social services"; and "stimulation for early learning".²⁷

5. Conclusion

"The 'born-free' generation is alienated, disillusioned and frustrated, and distrusts government and authority generally".²⁸ In terms of its ability to eradicate poverty and inequality, the decisive question is whether or not South African's policy landscape is merely palliative or is designed to establish a platform for further and more fundamental transformation. The nature and magnitude of the challenges posed and presupposed by the intergenerational transmission of poverty are formidable.

Given that in excess of a million children are born every year, the gradual realisation of comprehensive ECD services will not suffice.²⁹ "Early childhood, especially the first 1 000 days from conception to two years, is a particularly sensitive and rapid period of development, laying the foundation for all future health, behaviour and learning. When children do not receive the necessary input and support to promote their development during this critical period, it is very difficult and costly to help them catch up later".³⁰ At a systemic level, poor children need an "enabling environment in terms of health, education, assets, social and family networks, and geography to escape a poverty trap".³¹ It is, therefore, unsurprising that the most poverty stricken parts of our country are the former homelands. "Children caught in poverty traps are most likely to be black Africans, to live in rural areas of the former homelands, and to have poorly educated parents. Weak family structures also mean that they often do not live with both parents".³²

Thus, while the *National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy 2015* is potentially transformative, its long-term benefits are not only dependent upon its proper and swift implementation, but upon dealing with the wider systemic inequalities that beset and characterise South African society in so far as health, education, assets, social and family networks, and geography are concerned. Otherwise, the predicament of South Africa's 'born free' generation will become the plight of multiple 'born free' generations.

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¹ “Some characterise born-frees as [those] who were born in 1994 and voted for the first time in the 2014 general elections...The born-frees are not a homogenous generation. There are...[some] that are at the universities. Others, because of their socioeconomic circumstances, loiter in the streets.” Ibid.

² Wim Pretorius, “63% of young SA children live in poverty – study,” *news24*, May 13, 2016, <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/63-of-young-sa-children-live-in-poverty-study-20160513>

³ Ariane De Lannoy, Murray Leibbrandt and Emily Frame, “A focus on youth: An opportunity to disrupt the intergenerational transmission of poverty” in *South African Child Gauge: Youth and the intergenerational transmission of poverty 2015*, ed. De Lannoy A, Swartz S, Lake L & Smith C (Cape Town: Children’s Institute, 2015), 24.

⁴ SAHRC & UNICEF, *Poverty traps and social exclusion among children in South Africa*. (Pretoria: SAHRC, 2014), 17.

⁵ See http://www.dsd.gov.za/index2.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=652&Itemid=39

⁶ Deborah Posel, “The Apartheid Project, 1948-1970” in *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, Volume 2, 1885-1994, eds. Ross, R, Mager, A K & Nasson, B (Cape Town: Cambridge, 2011), 336.

⁷ Ibid, 336.

⁸ Alan Hirsch, “How Compromises and Mistakes Hobbled South Africa’s Economy,” *New Agenda 61* (2016): 11.

⁹ Hirsch, 11

¹⁰ On Thursday 28 July, the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office hosted a Roundtable Discussion on ‘Intergenerational Poverty’. There were five guests speakers, Ms Musa Ngcobo-Mbere, Chief Director for Early Childhood Development from the Department of Social Development, Mr Elroy Paulus, Advocacy Manager of Black Sash, Mr Kevin Roussel, Executive Director of Catholic Welfare & Development (CWD), Ms Venessa Padayachee, National Manager of Advocacy and Lobbying at the National Institute for Crime Prevention and the Reintegration of Offenders (NICRO), and Ms Jacqueline Hoorn, Regional Supervisor at NICRO.

¹¹ i.e. less than a dollar a day; the lack of income; not getting an education.

¹² Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), *Human Rights and Poverty Reduction: A Conceptual Framework* (Geneva: United Nations, 2004), 9.

¹³ Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (London: Penguin Group, 2009), 254.

¹⁴ Philippe Burger, “What is Hobbling Us? A response to Alan Hirsch,” *New Agenda 61* (2016): 17.

¹⁵ Miles Corak, “Income Inequality, Equality of Opportunity, and Intergenerational Mobility,” *Discussion Paper Series 7530* (2013):21.

¹⁶ SAHRC & UNICEF, 18

¹⁷ De Lannoy, Leibbrandt and Frame, 22

¹⁸ Ibid, 25

¹⁹ Ibid, 25

²⁰ Ibid, 25-26

²¹ Ibid, 28

²² Republic of South Africa, *National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy* (Pretoria: Government Printers, 2015), 26.

²³ Ibid, 26 “[V]arious policy and programmatic gaps and a range of deficiencies in implementation and systems mean that a number of early childhood development services are not available to all young children. In addition, the quality of a number of the services that are universally available varies and is inequitable across geography, population group and income quintiles.” Ibid, 35.

²⁴ De Lannoy, Leibbrandt & Frame, 28

²⁵ Hall, K, Sambu, W., Berry L., Giese, S., Almeleh, C. and Rosa, S., *South African Early Childhood Review 2016*. (Cape Town: Children’s Institute, University of Cape Town and Ilifa Labantwana, 2016), 5.

²⁶ (Department of Social Development, 2016:1)

²⁷ Hall, Sambu, Berry, Giese, Almeleh & Rosa, 5

²⁸ Ben Turok, “The Architecture of South Africa’s Political Economy,” *New Agenda 61* (2016): 33.

²⁹ Hall, Sambu, Berry, Giese, Almeleh & Rosa, 5

³⁰ Ibid., 5

³¹ Research on Socioeconomic (ReSEP) group, “How Lack of Assets Affect Child Poverty and Social Exclusion,” *PAN: Children Policy Brief 2015 (5)* (2015):1.

³² Ibid, 1