



*The South African
National
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A call for national leadership of children's rights as a national development priority in 2021 and beyond

9 February 2021

Joint statement by the South African National Child Rights Coalition (SANCRC) and the South African Civil Society Coalition for Women's, Adolescents' and Children's Rights (SACSoWACH)

February is a critical month when the country's leaders set the national planning agenda. We call on our leaders to use this opportunity to make the realisation of children's rights a national development priority in 2021 and beyond.

Global and regional legal and development instruments recognise that sustained recovery and growth depends on human capital. They accordingly obligate child-centred governance to guarantee that all children and their families will receive the services needed to secure the development of all children to their full potential. Notably, through interventions that will lay the foundations in their earliest years.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the global Survive, Thrive and Transform Agenda; the global Nurturing Care and INSPIRE Frameworks; Africa's Agenda for Children; and the G20 ECD statement of commitment all compel child-centered developmental governance as the basis of sustainable, inclusive development. Increasingly, treaty and development bodies are measuring and holding states to account for sustainable development using a combination of child rights indicators. One such instrument – "flourishing index"¹ - assesses progress using a combination of children's health, education, growth, and experiences of violence.

The Opening of Parliament and the State of the Nation Address (SONA), the State of the Province Addresses (SOPA), the determination of national and provincial budgets, and the tabling of line department's plans and budgets provide the blueprint for government action in the coming year. The focus of national planning is shaped by the President's SONA and Premier's SOPAs. The budgets, plans and accounting take their direction from these opening dialogues.

The President and Premiers are presented with a critical opportunity to use their SONA and SOPAs to identify and commit to making children's rights a national priority. There is a need for visible, transformational leadership of a unified government drive to realise children's rights to the nurturing care required to secure their equal development to their full potential. Such an approach is essential to secure and sustain South Africa's socio-economic recovery by building its human capital foundations and minimising the deepening inequities and losses wrought by COVID 19.

This is government's commitment to children and the country as a whole. Government has, through its ratification of treaties and development instruments listed above, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the Children's Act (2008), the National Child Care and Protection Policy (2019), and the National Plan of Action for Children (2020), committed to make the realisation of children's rights to, not

¹ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(19\)32540-1/fulltext#seccestitle60](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(19)32540-1/fulltext#seccestitle60)



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just survive, but also develop to their full potential, a national development priority to be actioned by all organs of state.

Securing the routine provision of comprehensive services for all families and children to enable their development to their full potential is a state-wide responsibility. This responsibility can only be fulfilled under the leadership of a child-centred developmental state. The state must obligate, and hold every level, branch, and department of government to account for providing the services needed to secure children's development.

As we move into 2021, the country's focus must be to minimise the immediate and long-term consequences of COVID-19 and to ensure we achieve our ongoing goal of eliminating poverty and inequality. On this there is consensus.

However, where the country lacks consensus and adequately visible, high-level leadership is on just how important children's rights are to secure these outcomes. The evidence and law are clear: to secure long-term, inclusive, sustainable development requires that every child, especially the chronically marginalised, develop to their full potential. This requires the realisation of their rights to health, nutrition, responsive parenting, protection from harm, education (from birth), and social protection.

There is a fatal error in our national recovery and development plan. It does not adequately and explicitly recognise and prioritise children's rights as the engine of sustainable, inclusive development. Equally so, it does not create a government-wide duty for providing the services essential for equalising the rights of all children to develop to their full potential so that they may drive our long-term recovery.

If we look back at the last three SONAs, there is recognition of isolated rights such as education as key to development. This is not enough. The SONAs do not recognise and make children's comprehensive and interrelated rights that found their equal and full development an explicit national priority.

There is overwhelming, compelling evidence that children's development requires realisation of their collective rights. Malnourished children, children living in poverty, children who battle disease, children who experience unresponsive caregiving, children who experience violence and children who receive little or poor quality education may survive, but they are at a very high risk of failing to develop. As such, rather than becoming the next generation of economically active citizens, nurturing parents, and strong leaders, they are at risk of being trapped in an intergenerational cycle of poverty. They are at risk of becoming the heads of the next generation of poor households that will face the same battles that their parents face now.

Sadly, this is the reality for most children in South Africa. Tackling only one or some of these challenges, such as increasing education or access to food, will have little lasting impact on overcoming accumulative deficits. Continued pursuit of a siloed, fragmented approach rather than a coherent, long-term child-centred governance agenda will further erode our human capital foundations.

Changing the inevitable trajectory requires high level political leadership. It requires the President and Premiers to make children's development an explicit national priority to be realised through the adoption of a national child rights governance system by every organ of state.



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Before COVID-19 South Africa was faltering.

- Pre-covid-19, South Africa ranked 127th “on the flourishing index, lower than countries with much fewer resources. This means that children face many more health, development and sustainability challenges.”²
- South Africa’s 2019 SDG report confirms that poverty levels increased and our inequality levels remain the highest in the world.³
- South Africa’s inability to escape the poverty/inequality trap is fundamentally linked to its inability to address inter-generational child poverty. Despite 30 years of pro-poor policies, 6 out of 10 children are multidimensionally poor. They are income poor and are deprived of health, nutrition, quality education and basic services – all of which are essential to their development and movement out of poverty.⁴
- The impact on their development is stark. It is estimated that 38% of children under the age of five years are at risk of poor development outcomes.⁵
- Child poverty levels and the resulting risk of poor development are intergenerationally entrenched amongst Black African children, children in under-serviced rural areas and informal settlements, and children with disabilities.

COVID-19 has deepened an already existing human development crisis. It is “leading to the deepest global recession since the Second World War”⁶ and will “usher in the first reversal in the fight against extreme poverty in a generation.”⁷ It has weakened the capacity of already vulnerable families to provide children with the care they need.

Government is, now more than ever, duty-bound to meet its obligations and provide support to overcome the challenges preventing families from providing and children receiving the nurturing care needed to secure their optimal and equal development.

Data from the NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 studies ⁸ provide clear evidence of impact of COVID 19 on the ability of caregivers to provide nurturing care for development.

- Between February and April 2020, 3 million jobs were lost. There has since been some bounce-back, but has been low in households that care for the majority of South Africa’s children. The largest job losses were experienced by poor, rural, female, and unskilled people who have not benefited from the limited bounce back seen in WAVE 2.

² <https://theconversation.com/drastic-action-is-needed-to-ensure-a-better-future-for-south-africas-children-132291>

³ Statistics South Africa. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Country Report 2019 – South Africa. Pretoria

⁴ UNICEF South Africa. 2020. Child Poverty in South Africa: A multiple overlapping deprivation analysis. <https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/media/4241/file/ZAF-multidimensional-child-poverty-analysis-policy-brief-07July-2020.pdf>

⁵ https://nurturing-care.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/South_Africa.pdf

⁶ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/06/08/covid-19-to-plunge-global-economy-into-worst-recession-since-world-war-ii>

⁷ https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/2020-year-review-impact-covid-19-12-charts?cid=ECR_E_NewsletterWeekly_EN_EXT&deliveryName=DM88574

⁸ <https://cramsvey.org/reports/>



- Childcare is affecting women's labour market outcomes more than men's. In June 2020, 3.4 million women said that looking after children precluded them from economic activity.
- The closure of schools deepened educational inequality. It is estimated that children lost 40% of the teaching year in 2020 with poor children in no-fee schools most deeply affected for various reasons, including lack of access to remote teaching opportunities - laying the foundations for deepening the educational gap between rich and poor.
- A whole cohort of young children have lost crucial early childhood education. In 2018 almost 50% of children under the age of 5 years attended an ECD programme. In 2020 only 13% attended ECD programmes – the lowest figure in 18 years. Most children out of ECD are in the care of their families who lack the resources to secure their care, protection and education.
- Hunger and food insecurity increased to compound already alarming malnutrition statistics. Pre-COVID, close to 30% of children under 5 were stunted. In 2020, 32% of households reported running out of money for food. Access to food through schools dropped from 80 to 25% of children.
- There is little data, but much anecdotal evidence that the mental health and caregiving capacity for nurturing parenting and protection has been deeply compromised. As a result, children in lockdown are at a high risk of violence, abuse and poor care and education in homes where adult caregivers are under stress. Between 2017 and June 2020, depressive symptoms doubled from 12 – 24%.
- Similarly, the health system's diversion of resources to COVID 19 impacted hugely on children's access to essential preventative and health promoting services, including immunisations, well-baby visits and developmental screening and support.⁹

The resulting fall out for families and children exposed systemic weaknesses in government's response to support families to provide nurturing care which left families exposed to the unprecedented risks that were not adequately mitigated through subsequent remedial measures.

- Government did respond with additional social protection in the form of a COVID 19 SRD grant, the UIF/TERS benefits and temporary top-up to the CSG. However, cash alone, whilst essential, is not enough to address the complex and interrelated challenges. In addition, although women accounted for 58% of net job losses, only 34% of COVID 19 SRD grant recipients and only 4% of UIF/TERS beneficiaries were women.¹⁰
- The economic exclusion and vulnerability of women has been aggravated by inadequacies in childcare and development services. A month after programmes opened, only one quarter of the ECD sector was operating at its pre-Covid 19 levels.
- Child protection services were already under strain because of our weak systems. This deepened during COVID.
- Children with disabilities continue to fall through the cracks. Coalition members working in the sector are faced with an ever-growing need for services. When they approached government departments for support in this regard, they were passed from pillar to post and told that they must wait until 2023 for additional financial support.

⁹ <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-risks-forcing-south-africa-to-make-health-trade-offs-it-can-ill-afford-136301>

¹⁰ <https://cramsurvey.org/reports/>



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Breaking the intergenerational poverty trap through child development is key to getting South Africa back on track.

The evidence compels Government to now, as a matter of developmental urgency, adopt a system of child-centred governance to guarantee the realisation of children's developmentally critical rights.

Our fragmented and siloed approach is driving the persistent lack of progress in breaking the intergenerational poverty trap recognised in the past three SONAs. There is an urgent need to adopt a coherent, child-centred approach to governance that guarantees that children's rights are considered and advanced in every decision made by every organ of state.

This has not been the case to date as evidenced by the limited visibility of children on the national COVID 19-dominated planning agenda. There is inadequate visible leadership of children's holistic rights as a state-wide priority in high-level decision-making processes and forums, including the Covid Command Council. A fact illustrated by the multiple law suits that civil society was forced to bring to compel government to honour its commitments to children during the pandemic. It is unfortunate that litigation – a lengthy and costly fight – has had to be resorted to secure child rights governance.

Securing the routine provision of comprehensive services that will enable every family to provide children with the nurturing care they need to develop to their full potential can only be fulfilled under the leadership of a child-centred developmental state. That is a state that explicitly recognises and embeds these responsibilities into the high-level machinery that drives our national priorities under the leadership of a President, Premiers, and Executive.

Currently this level of leadership is provided for women, youth, and people with disabilities, but not for children. The Medium Term Strategic Framework 2019 – 2024 makes the former an explicit national development priority with an accompanying set of government-wide mainstreaming duties overseen by a dedicated department in the Presidency.

There is no similar prioritisation and no similar structure in the Presidency to oversee the required process of child-centred governance.

Changing South Africa's long-term development prospects requires the clear prioritisation of children's rights under the leadership of a child-centred, capable developmental state. This is a non-negotiable.

The signatories to this submission call for the following action to lay the required foundations of the mandated child-centred, capable developmental state:

1. **Political leadership at the highest level:** The President and Premiers should provide visible and vocal leadership and commitment in the SONA and SOPAs to advancing children's rights as an explicit national development priority. They should prioritise children's rights and demand state-wide planning and accountability for securing services necessary for children's holistic development to their full potential.



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2. **Executive leadership and accountability:** The Medium Term Strategic Framework should be reviewed and amended to secure government-wide responsibility to mainstream the required support for nurturing care. The responsibilities should be written into ministerial service delivery agreements.
3. **Parliamentary oversight and accountability:** Parliament should monitor and hold government to account for its child rights governance responsibilities. Parliament has a key opportunity to shape the national agenda through the SONA and related debates to ensure children's rights are front and centre of the national planning agenda. It should call for a review and revision of the MTSF to make children's rights an actionable national development priority. Given the multi-sectoral task at hand, we urge Parliament to reconsider establishing a dedicated joint standing committee on children's rights to ensure sustained, government-wide oversight.
4. **Civil society advocacy:** Civil society, including children, must be vocal advocates and hold government to account.
5. **The SAHRC and other chapter nines must be vigilant:** Chapter nines should be adequately resourced, robust advocates for government's fulfilment of its treaty implementation responsibilities through an effective national child rights governance system.
6. **Effective state-wide coordination:** Realising the equal rights of every child to develop to their full potential requires action and accountability by multiple role players. This requires effective, national high-level political leadership and mandatory, coordinated, child-centred governance. This can only be secured through a dedicated institution located at the centre of our national planning machinery – the Presidency - with an appropriate mandate, authority, capacity, and resources to oversee a unified response and hold role players to account for their non-negotiable child rights governance duties. We therefore call for the urgent establishment of an appropriate, adequately institutionalized and resourced Department of Children / Office on the Rights of the Child in the Presidency.

For further information, contact:

The Secretariat for the SANCRC

Email: Emmanuel@savethechildren.org.za

Telephone number: +27 (0)124307775 / 083 607 5236