



## CLOSE TO 25 PER CENT OF SOUTH AFRICA'S YOUNG CHILDREN DO NOT FARE WELL

### *A call for more attention to the psycho-social needs of South Africa's young children*

- Recent surveys undertaken in Eastern Cape, Free State, Kwazulu Natal and Western Cape show that there is 'reason for concern' about the psychosocial wellbeing of 24 per cent of five-year-old children. They may face severe emotional or mental challenges and experience difficulties in relating to other children, their families, caregivers, communities and their broader environment.
- These findings, involving well over 2,000 children spread over rural, semi-urban and rural areas. Additional information was gathered from parents, teachers and school principals.
- The highest percentage of children where there was reason for concern was found in the Eastern Cape at 37 percent, followed by the Free State at 28 percent, Kwazulu Natal at 20 percent and finally the Western Cape at 11 percent. In the main, children from urban and semi-urban regions seem to fare better than those living in rural areas.

*The data were obtained by using an especially designed instrument, the 'Universal Psychosocial Indicator for Five-Year-Old Boys and Girls' or UPSI-5. This is an easy-to-handle tool whose outcomes, taken over large groups of children, enable policy- and other decision-makers to gauge differences between various populations of children, e.g. boys vs girls, region vs region, rural vs urban, and changes over time.*

- With mortality rates for infants and for five-year-old children rapidly declining and approaching the Millennium Development Goals in the country, **due attention should now be given to the psychosocial development of those children who survive.** This, however, is still not well done and children's health and development remain largely framed in terms of their physical health, and increasingly of their educational achievements.
- It is now generally understood that psychosocial wellbeing is key to children's survival.

- In June 2015, representatives from policy-making, education, child-care, funding, non-governmental and research institutions gathered at Nelson Mandela Children's Fund in Johannesburg to learn about the research findings and to share ideas about effective and scalable approaches that would fully address the psychosocial well-being of young children.
  - As a first step, it was argued that a nation-wide comprehensive impression of the psychosocial well-being and health of young boys and girls should be gained;
  - Most importantly, it is believed that thereafter regularly recurring surveys at school based level will naturally lead to an increase in attention for the psychosocial well-being of children, strengthen and create new policies, encourage innovations, stimulate research, inform training opportunities, and, inexorably, serve the nation's young children;
  - It is fully understood that this is a daunting challenge, where noble intentions and commitments are just not good enough. Much more needs to be done and this is indeed a plea to help make these initiatives a reality.
- This plea is made against the backdrop and in accordance with promising policy actions that benefit young children: the Integrated ECD Programme of Action; the phasing in of Grade R year in schools for 5-and 6- year-olds and the Integrated School Health Policy.

The most crucial elements of this appeal are:

- Target setting as to what is considered the desired psychosocial well-being of five-year-old children;
- Decision on the implementation of recurring nation-wide surveys and dissemination of outcomes;
- Setting of a research agenda and agreement on how to share its findings with the wider public;
- Buy in of the national Government of the usefulness of a standard measurements tool and the critical role it can play in highlighting the psycho-social needs of young children;
- A cost-benefit analysis of the savings to the country if the psycho-social needs of young children are met.

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