

Suffer Little Children

by **Alexandra Abrahams MP** – DA Shadow Deputy Minister of Social Development

House Chair and Colleagues,

UNICEF's three main challenges for a South African child are:

1. More than half the children in South Africa live below the poverty line;
2. One third of girls experience some form of violence before the age of 18; and
3. Two thirds of children eligible for Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes do not have access to them.

These concerns are the lived realities for the vast majority of children in South Africa. It is unfortunate, Chair, that these concerns are not shared by the Department of Social Development (DSD) or the ruling government for that matter. If it were, budget cuts to DSD would be protected at all costs.

If the ANC shared UNICEF's concerns, budget cuts to sub-programme 5: Children and 7: Social Crime Prevention and Victim Empowerment, would not see a cut of 27.12% and 58.43% respectively.

1. More than half the children in South Africa live below the poverty line

The DA has long advocated for the Child Support Grant (CSG) to have a more meaningful impact and be in line with the Lower Poverty Food Line at R585 per month. Despite academic research outlining the value of investing in a child's nutrition and development needs and that the CSG contributes 63% to the capita income of the poorest 30% of households, the ANC has cut the CSG grant budget by R14.5 billion or 17.11%.

In 2018/19, some 806 children were reported to have died in public hospitals and clinics in South Africa from severe acute malnutrition. In other words, children are literally starving to death. These numbers are predicted to be much higher as not all children die in a hospital or clinic.

In 1999 South Africa's stunting rate was 25%, 22 years on and the rate is now 27%. A clear indicator that the ANC government has made no effort at all or has no idea how to stop our children starving to death.

The DA policies over the years repeatedly call for pregnant mothers to access a grant as prenatal nutrition is vital for a healthy baby and healthy mother.

In this year's APP the DSD indicated a draft Maternal Support Policy. The first 1000 days are quite literary, a life and death situation. Political Will, will be the determining factor whether it remains just words on paper.

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2. One third of girls experience some form of violence before the age of 18

Programme 4 Welfare Service, Policy Development and Implementation Support has seen the biggest programme budget cut with a 28.77 real percent change – from R1.8 billion to R1.3 billion. I would like to remind this house that it is within this programme, subprogramme 7 as mentioned earlier, where funding for GBV victims is located.

The Minister and Department cannot absolve itself from its obligation and duty to ensure protection by delegating the provision of such welfare services to NGOs without funding them properly. Especially since the department's transfer subsidy to NGOs is cut by R8.9 million this financial year. Also bear in mind that cuts to NGOs will also be made at provincial level.

As cut funds are not enough, this department has a history of either paying subsidies late, only in part or on different days each month, severely undermining the integral role NGOs play in the humanitarian relief in South Africa.

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3. Two thirds of children eligible for Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes do not have access to them

UNICEF's third main challenge for a SA child, in that two thirds of children aged 0-5 years, are not accessing an ECD programme. This means they are not receiving the necessary developmental needs required for them to succeed in school and in their adult life.

If the Minister and department really want to understand the critical role ECDs play in holding society together and for SA to prosper, the ECD sector would be priority, more so that it is the future of our country.

From an impossible registration process to onerous Covid-19 regulations and directives, to the fact that less than 25% of children benefit from a government subsidy of only R15 per child per day, to the latest: late and non-payment of the meagre Presidential Employment Stimulus Fund stipend to ECD practitioners which was meant to be paid by 31 March 2021.

While the provincial DSD departments are meant to disburse these stipends, the Minister has an obligation and duty as Minister to ensure MECs comply. It is reported that ONLY 8% of ECD practitioners have been paid. Is this true Minister? What do these numbers look like? The ECD sector has engaged the Minister and DSD since 8 April and since 12 May been holding protests. I too am awaiting a response to written questions submitted in March. For many, this relief is what stands between children accessing an ECD or being part of the growing two thirds of children who do not.

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In conclusion Chair, ensuring children do not starve or fall through the child protection system craters is not a case of financial ability but a matter of political will. Is there no political will because children cannot vote?

There is no better investment for South Africa's future economic development than investing in our children's nutrition and development. Our future citizens, the economic potential of South Africa.

If you choose not too, as the ANC has done for 27 years, you erode that child's potential and economic prospects which drives an intergenerational cycle of poverty at a huge cost for all South Africans and the South African economy.

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