

DSD and Treasury defies High Court orders and continues to fail vulnerable children and grant recipients

by **Bridget Masango MP** – DA Shadow Minister of Social Development

Honourable Chairperson, today's debate is about the difference between the presentations from the Department of Social Development and its entities that we listened to during the portfolio committee meetings, and the stark reality faced by millions on the ground. Those whose livelihoods are at the bottom of the pile of both government and social development's priorities.

We hear of 91% of grants paid but read reports and messages from civil society and the public that tell a completely different story. We watch harrowing scenes of people stampeding Post Offices and SASSA offices from 5 am, only to be told they won't be served because only 45 people would be served on that day. This has been a daily reality for thousands who have no choice but to subject themselves to this demeaning and inhumane treatment just to put food on their tables.

One of Parliament's duties is to ensure that the laws it makes, are implemented. Last year the Social Development Portfolio Committee processed the Social Assistance Amendment Bill (SAAB), which was subsequently signed into law by the President and was a part response to the North Gauteng High Court's order calling for the Comprehensive Legal Solution to the Foster Care crisis 10 years ago. Everyone welcomed this piece of legislation. We looked forward to offering some reprieve for orphaned children who would be given a top up grant to the child support grant.

Little did we know that Treasury would simply remove this money from the Department's budget. The backlog in the foster care saga is far worse than anyone can imagine; and is set to continue. Additionally, money from the Department's medium-term budget has also, inexplicably, been removed while the numbers of those who need it most, increase exponentially.

The decisions made by this Department and Treasury become more reprehensible the further one delves. A reduction in the budget for the Foster Care Grant comes into play, while not budgeting for the introduction of the CSG top-up for orphans living with relatives as planned to comply with legal requirements. The Department and Treasury have effectively decided to deny further access to the foster care grant for relatives caring for orphans in anticipation of the new CSG top-up replacing the use of the FCG for this category of children; yet they have not put the CSG top-up in place yet. This is regressive action for a very vulnerable group of children and is constitutionally not permissible.

These decisions are bizarre at best and morally indefensible at worst. They are punitive to the very children we are supposed to protect, and those who care for them. We demand that Treasury amends this budget to address these challenges.

Children remain at the receiving end of an uncaring government that takes decisions that do not have THEIR interests at heart. Shame on you! Children's Rights are enshrined in our Constitution and in Law. If we treat our children with disdain, how can we possibly believe that future generations will be well balanced, well developed and well rounded? It just isn't possible.

Chairperson, it will be interesting to see how South Africa responds to the latest requirements from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. They have called on government to provide information on measures taken *"to increase the child support grant in view of growing unemployment and poverty"*. They further call for measures to ensure that children without birth certificates can also access the grant. The ANC will have to provide a response to this question in its next report to the UNCRC, which is due by February 2022.

Given the pressure to increase the value of the CSG, it will be hard for this government to justify its failure to the UNCRC, let alone explain the real decline in the value of the grant. The world will be watching.

Chairperson, with reference to the 6 million SRD grant recipients who have no way of feeding their families because of persistent high levels of unemployment, I repeat my recent comment: It is ludicrous that this ANC government has decided to pay monthly cash bonuses to civil servants but refuses to prioritize protecting the most vulnerable citizens during a pandemic.

Starving South Africans have had an uphill battle to get their grants from DSD since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. The R350 grant is no exception. DSD needs foresight and determination to plan ahead, or this spiralling crisis of poverty and hopelessness will be its legacy.

As the Democratic Alliance, we will not waiver in our fight for the poor and vulnerable. That is what responsible governments are supposed to do.

Thank you.