



POLICY BRIEF

Children and Nutrition



March 2024

Summary •••

As we move toward the 2024 general elections, politicians will tell their stories and how their parties are best suited to lead South Africa. They will remind potential voters about their past contributions, visit far-flung places and dole out food parcels and T-shirts to the poor to prove that they care.

And yet, we must ask the fundamental question – how much do they care when we are a nation in crisis with a silent epidemic of hunger that a campaign food parcel cannot cure? The converse seems to be the case – that South Africans, particularly children, have been abandoned by the very government tasked with ensuring their rights as enshrined in the Constitution.

In this policy brief, we examine the status and circumstances of our country's children who feel the impact of hunger and malnutrition throughout their lives, starting in the womb. We need to address this urgently because child malnutrition and hunger are preventable. However, we need sufficient political will to implement the right solutions.

●●● Introduction

“Children must, at last, play in the veld, no longer tortured by the pangs of hunger or ravaged by disease, or threatened with the scourge of ignorance, molestation and abuse, and no longer be required to engage in deeds whose gravity exceeds the demands of their tender years.”

Former South African President Nelson Mandela

Former President Nelson Mandela spoke about releasing children from “the pangs of hunger” when he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993. Thirty years later, children are yet to be released from the torture of hunger pangs.

They are dying of malnutrition. At least 30 children a day die of malnutrition-related causes, and 27% of children under five are stunted. These are not random incidents, and for this to happen, a set of adverse circumstances or factors have come together to create what has been described as the slow violence of hunger in South Africa.

Take, for instance, the 2022 inquiry held by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) into Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) among children in the Eastern Cape. When the final report was released in November 2023, it found that children are being robbed of their right to food and nutrition, dignity, life, equality, social assistance, health and education.¹

The SAHRC told us what we’ve known for some time – that systemic failures have led to far too many children being assigned to a crushing existence of deprivation. Furthermore, it highlighted the interplay of intergenerational poverty, inequality and the lack of fundamental opportunities for mainly black South Africans.

The key challenges we need to address urgently

The burden of inequality

The World Bank defines South Africa as a middle-income country with a gross national income per capita of between \$1 046 and \$4 095. It also describes South Africa as the world's most unequal nation.

In 2022, the World Bank called the inequality of opportunity in South Africa exceptional, meaning that most citizens are born into a poverty trap that neither they nor their children are likely to escape. This means that lives are still informed by the legacy of apartheid and this continues because of a lack of post-apartheid transformation, with the top 10% of the population holding 71% of the wealth. In contrast, the bottom 60% had only 7%.²

Local data further underscore this inequality. In its November 2023 Household Affordability Index, the Pietermaritzburg Economic Justice and Dignity Group (PMEJD) shows the difference between the unemployment rate for black African and white South Africans, which stood at 36% and 7.6%, respectively.



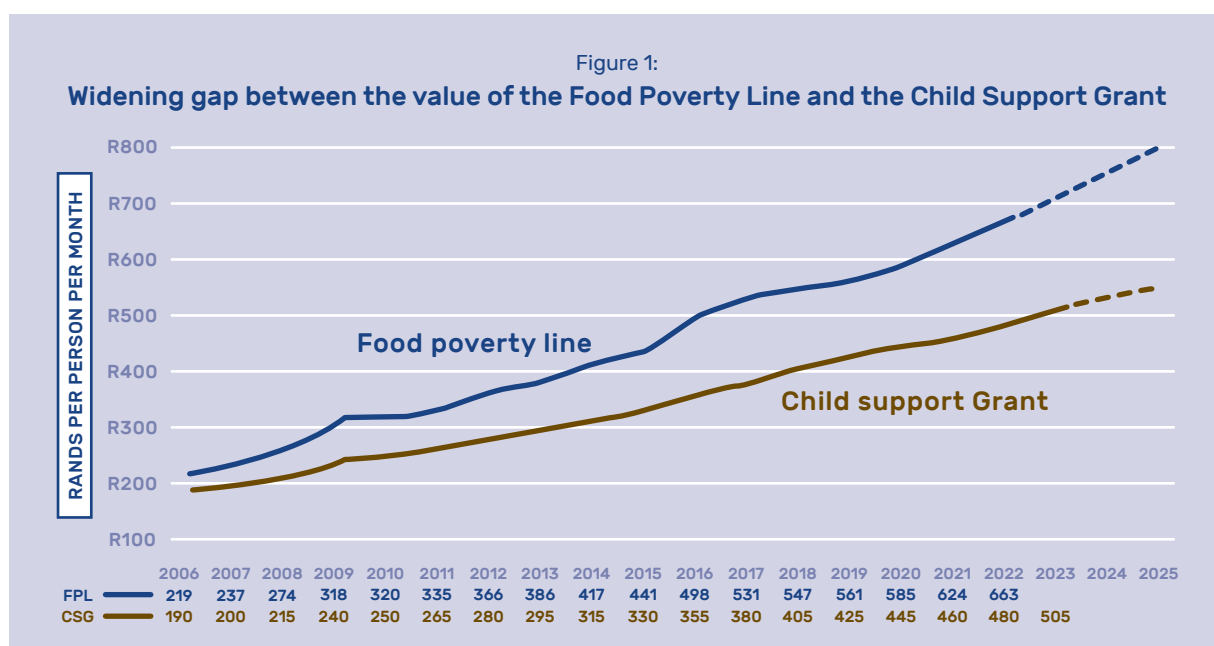
Poverty

- **MULTIDIMENSIONAL POVERTY:** This is also where we find the most abject of conditions for our nation’s children – 62.1% of children experience multidimensional poverty, confronting deprivations in areas such as housing, nutrition, and education. Poverty, race, and geographical location emerge as the main reasons for child poverty, with children from poor households, black African children and those residing in rural areas facing a higher likelihood of multidimensional poverty.

The link between poverty and nutrition also works the other way: undernutrition in childhood negatively affects health and educational outcomes and the individual’s capacity for work and income-earning in adulthood. There is considerable evidence that early deficits, particularly in the first three years of life, can have long-term effects on work capacity, and adequate nutrition is critical for pregnant mothers and young children.³

- **POVERTY LINES:** According to the PMEJD, 55% of South Africans live below the upper-bound poverty line of R1 558, with over 29 million black African South Africans falling into this category.
- **FOOD POVERTY LINE:** Add to this figure the 25.2% or 13.8 million South Africans living below the Food Poverty Line of R760 (as set by Statistics South Africa in March 2023) and an unemployment rate of 31,9%.
- **INABILITY TO AFFORD NUTRITIOUS FOOD:** The PMEJD calculates a child’s average monthly cost of a basic nutritious diet. In November 2023, it was set at R946,98, showing that the R510 Child Support Grant (CSG) is below the cost of a nutritious diet and the Food Poverty Line of R760. (The CSG was increased by R20 in the February 2024 budget.)

The graph below illustrates the widening gap between the Food Poverty Line and the Child Support Grant.



SOURCE: Hall K, Proudlock P & Budlender D. (2023) Reducing Child Poverty: A review of child poverty and the value of the Child Support Grant. Conducted by the Children’s Institute, University of Cape Town for the National Department of Social Development.

Hunger and health implications

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, one in 10 children lived in households where children were reported to go hungry at least sometimes because there wasn't enough money for food.⁴

- **SEVERE ACUTE MALNUTRITION:** Deaths caused by severe acute malnutrition were the leading causes among children under five from 2015-2019 (apart from 2018), with 5 336 deaths recorded.⁵ Half of all child deaths in hospitals in 2018 had malnutrition as a contributing cause.⁶
- **STUNTING:** This condition occurs when children suffer long-term nutritional deprivation and is defined as a height-for-age less than two standard deviations in the World Health Organisation (WHO) Child Growth Standards median. It often results in delayed mental development, poor school performance and reduced intellectual capacity. In turn, this affects economic productivity at a national level.⁷ South Africa's stunting rate of 27% among children under five is unacceptably high for a middle-income country.

Maintaining the status quo

The Children's Institute, in *Reducing Child Poverty: A Review of Child Poverty and the Value of the Child Support Grant*, states that if the CSG remains low, then child food poverty is likely to increase. *"This, in turn, will lead to increased child inequality, deprivation, malnutrition and stunting. Increases in these child-centric indicators will be viewed by international treaty bodies and South African courts as evidence that the state is not achieving progress in realising children's right to social assistance and is unjustifiably violating the basic nutrition rights of over seven million children."*⁸

Systemic failures

The tender invitation by the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation for an evaluation of South Africa's National Food and Nutrition Security Plan (2018-2023) states that a similar review in 2014 found that South Africa had placed greater emphasis on food production than nutritious food. *"The National Food and Nutrition Security Plan notes that there are over 50 programmes that the national government implements to address food insecurity and malnutrition... The evaluation findings showed significant implementation weaknesses, including human resources, material resources, data management, and weak institutional coordination."*⁹ (Although this tender was awarded to Genesis Analytics in 2022, the final report due in March 2023 has not been made public.)

• Lessons from other countries

ARGENTINA: The Universal Child Allowance for Social Protection (Asignación Universal por Hijo para Protección Social) was introduced in 2009 to focus on cash transfers to families with children under 18, children with disabilities (no age limit) and pregnant women who were unemployed or worked in the informal economy. The long-term aim was to break the intergenerational poverty cycle and, in the first year, it reduced child poverty – 13.1 percentage points in the case of child poverty and 4.6 percentage points in the case of extreme child poverty. As a conditional grant, it also increased school attendance and reduced the dropout rate.

BELIZE: Building Opportunities for Our Social Transformation (BOOST) came into existence in 2010 with two main aims: to achieve immediate poverty reduction through a small but regular cash payment, and break family cycles of poverty through the human development of children. These aims were to be achieved through small but steady cash transfers to poor households that qualified for the programme. In the first five years, the BOOST programme had several direct achievements, such as improving the hope among children exiting poverty and their well-being. It has shown itself to be efficient and effective overall.¹¹





Recommendations

Increasing the CSG

There has been an upswell in calls to raise the CSG, particularly above the Food Poverty Line.

In its 2022 submission to the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), UNICEF South Africa called for an increase in the grant, saying that it is insufficient to cover children's basic nutritional needs. They argued that the long-term consequences of malnutrition, such as stunting, are costlier than the short-term expense of raising the CSG. UNICEF supported using cash-plus programmes, which combine cash transfers with other interventions like nutrition education and access to healthcare, as effective measures to reduce malnutrition and enhance child development.

The Children's Institute, in its 2023 report on the CGS, advocates a phased-in approach "that does not shock the national budget but still achieves substantial poverty reduction effects for children within five years, with the potential to transform the prospects for a current cohort of children, and with benefits that will flow forward to future generations".¹²

The SAHRC agreed that the CSG amount is inadequate, saying, "The paramount concern lies in the grant's value, which does not provide sufficient financial support to ensure that all eligible children receive the nutrition essential for their growth and development".

It called for a top-up nutrition grant, saying, "Such an enhancement would align with the state's constitutional obligation to ensure that children receive the nutrition they require, thereby bridging the gap between the current grant value and the minimum threshold necessary for basic nutrition". The Commission also urges a phased-in approach to increasing the value of the grant.¹³

Broadening access to the CSG

There has been an equally urgent call to extend the grant into pregnancy. In its December 2023 report, “Investigation into maternity and parental benefits for self-employed workers”, the South African Law Review Commission urged greater protection for pregnant women by extending the CSG into a maternal support grant.

The Commission advocates “that the existing Child Support Grant be extended to all eligible poor and vulnerable pregnant women, including self-employed workers in both the formal and informal economy, who fulfil the criteria for child support grant and that the maternity support should be provided for six months of pregnancy and be registered in the name of the expectant mother. The maternity support should be converted into a CSG after the child’s birth by section 6 of the Social Assistance Act, 2004”.¹⁴

Other recommendations

- **FOCUSED INTERVENTION:** The government needs to address the lack of coordination and single focus on nutrition and give real effect to the National Food and Nutrition Security Plan, starting with establishing a National Food Council that will become a central mechanism for leadership and alignment of government action. The Committee on Morbidity and Mortality in Children recommended improving nutritional data collection at the hospital and primary levels for targeted intervention.¹⁵
- **COLLABORATIVE ACTION:** There is broad agreement that civil society organisations and the private sector have become essential actors in the food security and nutrition space, and these partnerships can be strengthened considerably through government collaboration.
- **AFFORDABLE, NUTRITIOUS FOOD:** In another brief, we focus on budget-friendly food products, that should be ring-fenced for affordability by the government, manufacturers and retailers.



Conclusion

President Cyril Ramaphosa has made two critical public statements about the role of nutrition, poverty and the well-being of children. In February 2021, he suggested that *“maternal health, child nutrition and early childhood development are vital to the transformational programme of this government.”*¹⁶

In September 2022, he said, *“Child malnutrition is one of the greatest impediments to the well-being of our people and the development of our society... The fight against child poverty is, therefore, one of the priorities of this administration”.*¹⁷

Yet, while the ANC’s 2019 Manifesto mentions children 11 times, nothing is said about child hunger and nutrition.

Hunger is mentioned only once in the context of land reform.

Malnutrition is never mentioned.

Neither is child hunger and malnutrition mentioned in the ANC’s manifesto.

Endnotes

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What is Change Ideas?

DGMT's Change Ideas is a new initiative that makes cost-effective and scalable policies accessible to the public and politicians. These policies, drawn from years of implementation experience, research, and embeddedness in South African civil society, offer opportunities to get South Africa out of the inequality trap. Change Ideas aims to empower you with comprehensive policy briefs, research findings, and expert perspectives on 10 key opportunities identified as pivotal for fostering sustainable change.



Making change possible

This policy brief was written by Phylcia Oppelt, Project Lead of Change Ideas, with contributions from other pivotal projects within DGMT. We want to thank Grow Great and its partners in civil society for laying the groundwork for the policy proposals contained in this brief.



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