

# All children in South Africa have equal rights, but most are born into unequal conditions

By [Andy du Plessis](#), issued by [FoodForward SA](#) 20 Nov 2023

Millions of children across South Africa grow up so disadvantaged from the day that they are born that it is virtually impossible for them to claw their way out of poverty, given the complex dimensions of poverty that severely impact people's lives.



According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef South Africa) two-thirds of our children under six years of age are eligible for early childhood development (ECD) programmes but do not have access to them; more than half the children in South Africa continue to live below the poverty line; and one third of girls experience some form of violence before the age of 18.

The situation is so perilous for children that Unicef describes South Africa as 'a country where children have equal rights under the Constitution, but where the worlds into which they are born and their opportunities in life are very unequal'.

While children's rights, such as the right to basic nutrition, healthcare, and social services, are protected in our constitution the lived experience for children in underserved communities is very different. One third of children in South Africa suffer from malnutrition, principally because of poor access to nutritious food. According to data from the Department of Health, over 15,000 cases of severe acute malnutrition required hospitalisation during the 2022/23 financial year. Reports of child dying of starvation and becoming severely ill because of buying cheap, unsafe food in local communities is on the rise.

Our government's inability to adequately address widespread social problems, despite having large budgets to manage, has exacerbated the circumstances of millions of people over the past three decades. The child support grant of R510 is grossly insufficient to provide a child with adequate nutrition and meet their cost-of-living expenses for a month. The nutritional supplements provided by the Health Department for children that suffer from malnutrition are not only insufficient, but also irregular.

The National Planning Commission recently released their 10-year review of the National Development Plan (NDP),

concluding that government cannot be trusted to implement the NPD, and that if any progress was to be realised, government cannot be at the centre of its implementation. This lack of state capacity leaves it up to the private sector and the non-profit (NPO) sector to advance the rights of children and move our country forward.

FoodForward SA, a NPO that focuses on the recovery of edible surplus food from the food system to address food insecurity and malnutrition, believes that early intervention with proper nutrition that includes dietary diversity, is key to ensure that our children receive a proper head start. More than 50% of FoodForward SA's support to our national network 2,750 beneficiary organisations are focussed on ECDs, Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC), school and after-school care programmes, and various health-related programmes such as our Mother and Child Nutrition Programme.

FoodForward SA implemented the Mother and Child Nutrition Programme in the Western Cape and Eastern Cape six months ago, following high incidences of malnutrition in pregnant and nursing mothers and children in these regions. In partnership with the Philani Nutrition Centre, targeted clients from households with high levels of food insecurity and acute malnutrition receive a nutritious food parcel for the family each month. The results are very encouraging as all the clients' weights have improved since the intervention started.

Living in a country where the minority become successful while the rest suffer insufficient access to food, poor quality of healthcare, poor service delivery, and inhumane living conditions, along with the indignity that accompanies this, is a huge risk for economic growth and social and political stability.

As we commemorate World Children's Day on 20 November, let's renew our commitment to investing in our children now in order to break the cycle of poverty in underserved communities and shape our beautiful country's long-term health, stability and prosperity.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy du Plessis is managing director of FoodForward SA.

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