“Children Are The Priority” But State Programmes Fail Them And Their Parents

Dr. Norman Reynolds

The President and the Minister for Social Development have both promised that the child will now be given priority. With some as yet unexplained support from the Expanded Public Works Programme for Early Childhood Development, the next year or so, “… is an opportunity to conduct a thorough review of the status of children below six years of age in our country - especially those children living in disadvantaged families in rural areas. It is also an opportunity to examine the feasibility of expanding the child nutrition programme from primary schools to pre-schools and crèches.”[1]

Government is expanding the Child Support Grant. It is providing School-feeding to 4.6 million ‘destitute’ children in 17,000 schools. In many schools, it has absolved poor parents of the need to pay the fee set by the School Board.

The ‘priority’ is proper. 75% of South Africa’s children age 0-17 lived below the poverty line of R400/month per capita in 1999. More startling, 57% of our children lived below the lesser poverty line of just R200/month per capita. IDASA reports that, in 2002 Rands, there were approximately 5.2 million children age 0-6 and 14. 3 million children age 0-17 living below a poverty line of R490 in 2002 Rands.[2]

The expenditure on grants to children is large and growing. However, the coverage is still low and the method remains inefficient and ineffective.

Each of these programmes is narrowly focussed on the apparent problem, not on the cause. There is no informed understanding as to why poverty is so endemic and why so many parents are unable to provide for their children. They thus miss the opportunity to tackle poverty by enabling parents, acting through community, to realise the Ubuntu injunction, “Umntwana Wakho Ngumntwana Wam-Umntwana Wam Ngumntwana Wakho” or “All children are my children”; that is to become active, capable and responsible. The result is enormous wastage and lost opportunity.

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[1] Dr. Zola Skweyiya, Minister of Social Development, Child Protection Week statement. May 25th. 2004.

[2] IDASA, Budget Brief No. 144, 2004, ‘Budgeting for child socio-economic rights.’

There are two reforms that would bring high returns to this large expenditure.

1. Community as the Guarantor of Child Welfare.

The first reform is to work with community, to return to African traditions suitably modernised. The main instrument is for government to fund communities, not individuals, so that all adults are joined together as the local partner and to place responsibility where the Constitution places it, with parents. This means moving away from the mirage of direct state 'delivery' to a position where parents enjoy the means to act, to take responsibility. The state presently divides parents, pushing itself to the front. Instead, it must back parents acting within community.

2. Restore Cash Circulation to Poor Areas.

The second reform is to acknowledge that poverty abounds in the marginalised areas where most citizens still live (the townships and rural areas) and that child poverty is further concentrated in the 'rural' provinces of the Eastern Cape, Kwa-Zulu/Natal, Limpopo and Mpumalanga. In these areas, money does not 'stay to work', the local cash multiplier is as low as 1.3. Cash leaves immediately to central places that provide nearly all the goods, services, jobs and entertainment. The large expenditure on social grants, now over R50 billion per year, needs to be redesigned to correct this structural weakness by supporting local production, exchange and cash circulation. In these areas the local cash multiplier could easily become 3.0 or higher, a tripling of local effective demand, economic security and wealth.

The Problem with Existing Grants.

The way existing grants work in South Africa cements dependence whilst only providing a little and brief relief. They act to further the atomisation of society away from the extended family and community to individualism and isolation. We may all be in the 'eye' of government by way of IDs – that drive grant management - but society works best through communities that enjoy working local economies and so can look after themselves.

Community and cash circulation are two sides of the same corrective. How to make government support to children more effective?

The **Child Support Grant** (CSG) is a confusion of ends and of means. It was introduced to secure the Constitutional Rights of the Child to shelter, primary health, nutrition and access to social services. The 1995 Commission into the Child stated that giving out cash grants to 'child minders' was full of problems but it knew of no other way to reach children. The government then latched onto the grant as an anti-poverty programme - which it patently cannot be. It goes to poor households as an ineffective and inefficient income grant. The stories about single mothers using the grant to gain a bit of economic autonomy are true. Child rights may hardly improve. Moreover, it costs 40% to administer and to transfer the tiny grants to individual accounts.

The corrective is for government to redraw the CSG as a “All children are my children” Child Rights grant and to then invite all communities, self-identified at street, neighbourhood or village, to register all their children under 14 years old within local Child Rights Societies. That could cover almost 14 million children! All adults in each community would prepare and sign a ‘Charter for the Child’ and together administer a single joint budget that pooled the grants due to all the children in each registered community. To the mainly physical rights in the Constitution, community based Child Rights Societies could add the moral and intellectual growth of the child (Early Childhood Development) and good parenting. Considerable joint and voluntary effort would swell the impact of the grant as Africa’s traditions of humanity, mutuality and spirituality regain their strength.

Communities will face some opposition from those who presently receive the CSG. Government could add some incentive to help the whole community to decide to switch from the present, poorly conceived grant paid to child minders, to a Child Rights formula.

Government is now providing **School-feeding**[3] to “all the destitute children, some 4.6 million”.[4] This excludes most children under 6, some 5 million odd children who are the most at risk as few go to pre-schools or playgroups and few pre-schools receive school-feeding grants. It covers a mere 32% of the 14.3 million poor children under 17! The School-feeding programme has recently moved from Health to Education and, as promised by government, will hopefully and urgently be reviewed.

The main innovation should be to make school-feeding a universal right and to pass the cash to the schools. At present the rule is that contracts must be reached with business persons or NGOs or churches, all of whom buy-in food from distant wholesalers. This denies communities what they need most; the local circulation of cash so that it can be used to buy as much locally produced food as possible. That move would allow school-feeding funds to stay and to work three or more times within communities: to produce food, to feed children and to help parents to ‘earn’ the small school fee by producing and selling food to the schools. There is a school-garden programme that helps parents to grow the food. That must be multiplied manifold. To do that community gardens and household egg and milk and field crops like maize will be needed.

Community grown school food together with a Child rights programme allows communities to realise a goal they value most - that all children are in proper pre-schools, that all in school are fed, and that those too young to go to school or in organised playgroups are guaranteed good food by the community. One community, Huntington in Limpopo, is asking government to back its adoption of this ‘whole reform’ model. It will invest in gardens and other food production. It

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[3] The Child Nutrition Programme.
[4] Parliamentary debate, Ministry of Education Budget, The Star, Thursday July 1, 2004, page 3.

will also levy 10% on school fees to set up an internal bursary scheme to ensure all families can pay fees. And it is asking for a Child Rights programme to replace the CSG that reaches very few of its mainly poor children.

At present very few children go to community based pre-schools because few parents can pay the fee of around R30 per month. Moreover, government has led a presumably unintended assault on community pre-schools by its ill judged political decision to provide a ‘free’ reception year, Grade R, to six year olds. Some of the few trained teachers have left community pre-schools to gain a proper salary with government. Many pre-schools have closed because, when the oldest age cohort leaves the school a large percentage of the fee base goes with it. The ‘free year’ for six year olds helps parents and communities mimic government’s abandonment of the 5 million or so children 1 to 5 who represent the highest possible return on public and parent investment. The result, ignored by policy makers in government, is that very few small children are in registered pre-schools or managed playgroups. Most are not eligible for the school-feeding programme. Present policy is a “Lose-Lose” model for children, parents, communities and local economies.

Government has reacted to parent inability to pay primary and secondary school-fees by exempting payment in poor areas. This move does not address the parent need to be enabled to pay for their children, to be responsible, and it leaves schools in poor areas short of income.

It is time government built upon South Africa’s most cherished and useful traditions and understood and acted upon the structural causes of widespread poverty that is so debilitating of parental abilities. Its first aim must be to use its enormous spending power to enable parents and communities to be the lead actor, to be responsible, to build their financial competence, to encourage them to act jointly, to reward local production, to make local economies work, and to become capable partners of government.

The school-feeding and the CSG are worth R1500 and R2040 per child per year or a total of R3240. This could be multiplied three times at least in every community, rural and urban if paid out for the local purchase of food and of services for children.

These two programmes would generate R10000 worth of community and locally based economic activity per child per year. With 14 million children under 17 years living in poverty, R45 billion in grants would produce a child, parent, community, school, agricultural and local economy revolution worth R150 billion per year. That would add 15% or more to GDP, all in the hands of the poor. It would be returned almost entirely to government as additional taxes and to society as reduced crime, new business opportunities, higher returns to education spending and by way of vast savings on health. There is no other programme, public or private, that can begin to compare. Returning to normal, to our true economic and social foundations, can be spectacular.