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Toward the development of a Family Policy for South Africa

A call for an effective, robust poverty alleviation strategy

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Toward the development of a Family Policy for South Africa: A call for an effective, robust poverty alleviation strategy¹

1. Introduction

Poverty, high mortality due to HIV/AIDS and other life-threatening diseases, substance abuse, unemployment and inequality were cited as the main challenges affecting families in contemporary South Africa during stakeholder consultations on the development of a Family White Paper for South Africa. Conducted by the South African national Department of Social Development, discussions with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders were held in all nine provinces and nationally at the beginning of 2012. Over 500 participants attended the series of consultations.

This paper describes the feedback received from participants and documents their views regarding a policy on families, particularly within the context of poverty in South Africa. The paper describes participants' dominant positions on critical issues encountered by families in South Africa, the most pressing of which are poverty-related. Participants' views on a proposed policy framework targeting families and making provision for the promotion of family well-being will be discussed. In addition, the paper synthesises policy measures suggested by participants that should be adopted by the South African government to strengthen families so that they are in a better position to combat the debilitating effects of the aforementioned socio-economic risk factors.

2. Critical challenges facing families in contemporary South Africa

2.1 Securing a regular income

A number of poverty-related issues were described as the main challenges affecting families in contemporary South Africa. Across all provinces and in the national consultation, poverty was raised as the prime factor contributing to the demise of families in South Africa. For the most part, poverty was defined in relation to a lack of sufficient income to meet individual's basic needs.

Participants related how a lack of income could directly lead to the separation of family members, due to the need to find or take-up employment in a location away from the family home. Migrant labour has historical roots in South Africa's apartheid regime – however, despite the advent of democracy in South Africa, the country's slow economic growth and job creation challenges has perpetuated migrant labour practices. It is noteworthy that intergenerational disjuncture is especially acute in South Africa, fuelled

¹ The authors acknowledge the National Department of Social Development, Directorate: Families and Strategic Developments who funded and led the consultative processes on the draft Green Paper on Families. The authors facilitated the consultative meetings.

by the necessity for younger generations to seek employment and work in cities, resulting in physical separation from older generations (Makiwane, 2010)².

The impact of poverty on the most vulnerable members of families was a common theme across provincial groups. Participants related how children, the elderly, and the disabled, are most affected by poverty. Family poverty is perhaps most evident in the high rate of child poverty that exists in contemporary South Africa. Hall and Chellis (2011)³ illustrate that despite a decrease in child poverty rates between 2003 and 2009, some 76% of children in 2009 were living below an 'upper bound' poverty line (R1, 016 per person per month). The greatest decrease in child poverty over the same period occurred for children living below the 'ultra-poverty' line of \$2 a day (or R278 per person per month). However, more than one-third (37%) of children in South Africa were living under this ultra-poverty line in 2009, an indicator of severe deprivation. Hall and Chellis (2011) also show that child poverty remains more extensive than adult poverty.

South Africa's social grant system is considered to be comprehensive and is lauded as a significant contributor to the alleviation of child poverty over the last decade. South Africa's social grant system was a common topic of debate at the provincial and national consultations, with some participants expressing concern that social grants create dependency and are not supporting a developmental approach to social welfare, while others pointed to current research that provides strong evidence to the contrary, showing how social grants improves child and family well-being and fosters job creation. In particular, debates raged regarding the apparent increase in teenage pregnancy and the use of child-bearing as a strategy to access income support, through the Child Support Grant, for disenfranchised and poverty-stricken teenagers. Some participants continued to uphold the belief that teenage girls were deliberately bearing children out of wedlock, despite the provision of research evidence that contradicted such beliefs. One example of such evidence is reported by Makiwane (2010)⁴, whose examination of fertility trends and Child Support Grant uptake rates indicates that there is no significant positive association between teenage childbearing trends and the grant over the last decade.

Child poverty remains high in spite of a comprehensive social security system targeting children in South Africa. There are a number of factors that fuel child poverty in this country which includes the fact that few children are co-residing with their fathers, considered to be primary income-earners, and the fact that the rates of remitting by members of households who have left their families, remain low. Child poverty is also a consequence of high rates of unemployment, with more than one-third (37%) of children living in households where no adults were employed in 2009.⁵

² Makiwane, M (2010) The changing patterns of Intergenerational Relations in South Africa. A paper presented at the UNITED NATIONS EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON ADOLESCENTS, YOUTH AND DEVELOPMENT, New York 21-22 July 2011.

³ Hall, K and Chellis, M (2011) *Children and income poverty: A brief update. Children Count brief*. Cape Town: Children's Institute, University of Cape Town.

⁴ Makiwane, M (2010) The child support grant and teenage childbearing in South Africa. *Development Southern Africa*, 27(2): 193-204.

⁵ See note 3.

2.1.1 The influence of living arrangements on poverty

The absence of fathers from their families was raised as a critical concern amongst workshop participants. Participants were apprehensive about the impact of absent fathers on children, and how, especially where the father is the primary income earner in the household, the separation from the family perpetuates income poverty.

Table 1 below shows the level of co-residence between parents and their children (under 10 years of age) in South Africa, compiled using the General Household Survey 2010.

Table 1: Children aged 0-10 years living with their parents in South Africa, 2010

Parent/s children are living with	% of children
Both parents	37.1
Father only	2.8
Mother only	28.7
Both parents absent	31.4

Source: Calculations by Makiwane from the General Household Survey (2011)⁶

As illustrated in the table above, the living arrangements for children, influenced by migration and job-seeking behaviour, access to schools, child care choices and other factors is such that very few children are co-residing with their parents, especially their fathers. Approximately 60% of children younger than 10 years of age are not living with their biological father, and the relationship between absent fathers and high child poverty levels in the South African context needs further exploration.

While over many decades, rural households in South Africa were sustained by remittances from young men who work in the mines; all indications are that while circular migration has not abated, the rate of remitting has declined considerably. Low levels of remittances received by households who have family members working elsewhere is a key factor contributing to family poverty, as shown in Table 2 below, derived from the General Household Survey 2010.

The gender-based distinctions reflected in the receipt of remittances are noteworthy and possibly point to female-headed households needing greater support, and are perhaps an acknowledgment of the multiple roles that women play in relation to sustaining families, sometimes as income-earners, as well as fulfilling a range of household and child care responsibilities. Female unemployment levels are high nationally (Patel, 2012)⁷, exacerbating the vulnerability of households headed by females. According to analyses of the General Household Survey from 2002 to 2010⁸, the percentage of female-headed

⁶ Statistics South Africa (2011) *General Household 2010*. Pretoria, Cape Town: Statistics South Africa.

⁷ Patel, L, Hotchfeld, T, Moodley J, and Mutwali R (2012) *The gender dynamics and impact of the Child Support Grant in Doornkop, Soweto*. CSDA research report. Johannesburg: Centre for Social Development in Africa, University of Johannesburg.

⁸ Statistics South Africa (2011) *Social profile of South Africa, 2002 – 2010*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.

households increase with age, peaking at 54% for women older than 70 years of age. This demographic portrait of households indicates that there are certain distinctions between female-headed and male-headed households: female-headed households generally contain more dependants and have a larger average household size.⁹

Table 2: The proportion of household heads who receive remittances in South Africa by gender, 2010

Remittances as an income source for the household		
Household head	Receives remittances	Does not receive remittances
Male	11.3%	88.7%
Female	26.2%	73.8%

Source: Calculations by Makiwane from the General Household Survey (2011)¹⁰

The accumulative effect of these factors is that the pattern of wealth flow from one generation to another is not conducive to wealth creation and nation building. Co-operation between generations facilitates wealth accumulation (Makiwane, 2010)¹¹, which is a potentially powerful avenue for economic empowerment in South African society.

However, many participants also described the relationship between lack of income and other elements of human development and quality of life, such as ill health, lack of or the poor quality of education, and the proliferation of violence in South African communities.

2.2 Health-related factors

A common challenge identified as seriously impacting on family well-being, across all the provinces, was health-related concerns. HIV/AIDS was indicated as a fundamental health and social factor, which has left an undeniable imprint on families and South African society. Participants acknowledged the historical impact of HIV/AIDS and reflected how it has contributed to changes in family structures and the emergence of 'new' family structures, such as child-headed households. Participants also noted the impact of HIV/AIDS on orphanhood and related concerns about child well-being and family care.

'Skip-generation households', or granny-headed households, are another family form considered to be emerging as a consequence of poverty and HIV-related factors. Due to adult HIV-related deaths and the income insecurity described earlier, deceased or working parents leave their children behind in the care of grandparents. Makiwane (2010)¹² describes how contemporary South African society is characterised by high generational disjuncture, referring to the level of disconnection between generations. The

⁹ See note 8.

¹⁰ See note 6.

¹¹ See note 1.

¹² See note 1.

existence of 'skip-generation' households that has suffered the loss of a middle generation family member is perhaps the most extreme form of generational disjuncture, as one generation is in fact completely removed, leaving the oldest and youngest generations to engage in 'reciprocal solidarity' (Makiwane, 2010)¹³.

Other health-related matters that participants raised were life-threatening diseases (other than HIV/AIDS) and their impact on family life, as well as the effects of disability, identified as an issue requiring greater priority due to the burden of care often being placed in the hands of a family member.

Substance abuse and dependency was a common concern across the provincial consultations. Participants noted its detrimental effect on family life and well-being. Substance abuse was frequently associated with despondency and despair due to South Africa's economic climate and individual's inability to obtain gainful employment, to secure a regular income. Crime and gangsterism were also highlighted as related social ills.

Health-related challenges are closely linked with loss of income, due to the financial burden associated with accessing health care and, in the case of family members who are caring for ill or disabled family members, the loss of income should the care-giver no longer be able to earn wages because of their care-giving responsibilities.

2.3 Family and community safety

Violence, whether family-based or originating in communities, was explained as another critical social ill crippling family well-being. Violent acts, especially those that occur within the family, such as rape and a range of abuses, were highlighted as causal factors resulting in the breakdown of family life and family relations. Acts of violence within the family were noted as being particularly harmful to children, regardless of whether or not the child is victimised. Various forms of child abuse and neglect were described, including child labour outside of the home, which in many instances, can be deduced to be a consequence of parents or care-givers' coping strategies in relation to low income levels. Research points to the prevalence of child abuse as greater in poorer areas than in affluent areas. In fact, poverty is often perceived to be a causal factor of child abuse (Parker and Dawes, 2003)¹⁴.

Domestic violence was recognised as a complex phenomenon due to perceived notions of culture and the subsequent meanings attached to gender relations within marriage and family.

Financial difficulties and associated stresses were identified as a source of conflict within marriages and unions. Conflict, in relationships where violence and force are employed as a conflict management strategy, could escalate and result in physical violence.

These were the key issues identified by participants as impacting negatively on family well-being, all of which are linked, whether directly or indirectly, to income insecurity. The complex inter-play between a

¹³ See note 1.

¹⁴ Parker Z and Dawes A (2003) *Child sexual abuse in Atlantis. A research report*. Children's Institute, University of Cape Town.

lack of income, the associated stresses and the factors that result in the breakdown of families was a common theme emerging from the consultations across the provinces.

3. Toward a policy addressing family issues

Drawing on discussions on the key issues affecting families in South Africa, participants described their views on a policy addressing family issues. They called for a policy that is unique to the South African context. In particular, the policy should:

- Ensure the inclusion of a variety of different family forms and culture, such as the practice of 'ubuntu'
- Be grounded strongly in 'African-centred', indigenous research, especially regarding current traditional family practices
- Draw on best practice from other countries
- Target all families within South African society, regardless of socio-economic status, to prevent stigmatisation and patronising attitudes toward the 'poor' and 'disadvantaged'

Furthermore, participants called for a policy to address the current fragmentation of services targeted at families. They recognised the need for a comprehensive policy intervention that would provide a co-ordinating mechanism to align existing family-related policies and laws. In addition, the policy should ensure the regulation of services to families and the promotion of family preservation and family strengthening.

4. Recommended policy measures that support family well-being

Participants discussed some of the main aspects of a policy that supports family well-being in a context of poverty. A common recommendation is that the policy should prioritise prevention measures to curtail the escalation of family problems and the eventual breakdown and separation of families.

Participants recognised that basic needs should be met first and acknowledged this as a critical first step toward supporting families and improving their ability to cope with family-related challenges. As such, poverty alleviation measures are imperative to address the lack of income and poor access to basic resources. The notion of a family grant was recommended as a possible intervention that should be explored. Participants noted that a grant targeting families rather than individuals may be more appropriate as currently individual grants are used to support entire families, as indicated in recent research on the Child Support Grant (Department of Social Development and UNICEF, 2012)¹⁵. This intervention is recommended as a tool to prevent family disintegration, to enhance family cohesion and to assist at-risk families who are also financially unstable.

¹⁵ Department of Social Development and UNICEF (2012) South Africa's Child Support Grant. Summary findings from an integrated qualitative-quantitative evaluation. www.dsd.gov.za

5. In conclusion: a call to develop a robust poverty alleviation strategy

“The prosperity of every state and the well-being of every community depend on whether families are financially stable and can secure the opportunities necessary to provide a better future for their children. When opportunity is available, parents can work and provide for their families; and children can learn, grow, enjoy safe and healthy childhoods, and in turn, become productive, contributing members of the community and workforce.”¹⁶

This is a useful quote to draw on when considering the core elements of effective family policy. Financial stability and security is fundamental; this can only be achieved by the provision of equitable opportunities. Family policy must have a long-term trajectory, not only to influence the current population, but to ensure that the benefits of effective family policy and positive family outcomes extend beyond the current generation.

This paper has reflected on the need to build more family-friendly policies in South Africa that will reduce the level of poverty among children and enhance inter-generational wealth accumulation. Some of these family policies could include the reinforcement of tax exemption laws for supporting children and the increase in the tax deduction attributable to child support. This should be done within a broad framework that promotes work-family balance. These policies could include introduction of a generous paternity leave and introduction of work benefits that are accrued by dependents of workers. A family social grant, as promoted by participants of the consultative workshops, is another method that could be introduced to strengthen families. Families generally prefer a social security system that targets families in addition to those that are meant for individuals.

Participants of the provincial and national consultations on a family policy for South Africa unequivocally identified poverty as a major challenge – if not the predominant challenge – impacting on the well-being of families in South Africa. The complex relationships between poverty, health, education, safety and security and other quality of life indices were fully recognised in discussions. Participants called for a policy that addresses family issues and that sufficiently recognises the urgency to intervene at the most fundamental level – to alleviate poverty and ensure income security for all South Africans. Prevention measures, including poverty alleviation, are pivotal to ensure that families not only survive, but are enabled to thrive and make lasting and valuable contributions to South African society – from one generation to the next.

¹⁶ Center for the Study of Social Policy (2006) *Policy Matters. Twenty State Policies to enhance States' prosperity and create bright futures for America's children, families and communities*. Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy.