planning, monitoring & evaluation

Department:
Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

PSPPD
PROGRAMME TO
SUPPORT PRO-POOR
POLICY DEVELOPMENT

POLICY BRIEF SERIES

THEME 3: Child poverty (early childhood development, children and violence)

Families and children: Actions to promote family well-being and cohesion in South Africa

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The family is one of the critical societal sectors through which a healthy cohesive society can be achieved. Stable, well-functioning families tend to exhibit higher levels of social capital and resilience, which in turn contributes to greater social cohesion at the societal level (Ziehl, 2003). Conversely, "the absence of a stable, nurturing family environment has been found to have a profoundly damaging impact on the individual, often leading to behaviour which is profoundly damaging to society" (Centre for Social Justice, 2010:6).

Apartheid policies had devastating effects on family life in South Africa and the creation of homelands and forced resettlement together with migratory labour policies strained and disrupted family relations. Recognising this, and the importance of families, the Programme to Support Pro Poor Development (PSPPD) financially supported a project that focussed on better understanding patterns of family cohesion and values in South Africa using data from the 2012 round of the South African Social Attitude Survey (SASAS). The intention of the project was to design evidence-based policies that serve to strengthen and promote the well-being of South African families.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Children and alternative family forms
South Africans are still relatively prejudiced against certain alternate family forms. Small shares of South Africans believe that a lesbian couple (23%) and gay couple (18%) can bring up a child as well as a heterosexual couple. Despite this, trends over the last decade show a softening of negative attitudes toward homosexual marriages and parenting. Other alternative family forms, such as single parenting, are more readily embraced by South Africans with 69% agreeing that a single parent can raise a child as well as two parents together.

There is also a strong recognition of the role of fathers in raising children, with 72% of adults saying that men should *not* have less responsibility for child rearing than mothers, 75% saying being a father brings considerable respect, and 88% favouring the view that most fathers desire a loving relationship with their children. There is, however, widespread concern that men are unable to be co-resident with their children (for various structural reasons), which has resulted in a reasonably strong appeal (56%) for state assistance to support fathers. A significant majority of South Africans also continue to support efforts to encourage the adoption of non-kin children in need. Slightly over half (53%) of the adult public agree that society should be doing more to encourage the adoption of children in need.

Gender ideology and work-family balance
The family survey included a number of items examining gender ideology with specific reference to the tensions between women's economic participation and caregiving responsibilities in families. Overall, the findings largely point to support for the traditional gendered division of labour, with female employment generally only tolerated due to economic necessity. To this effect, while three-quarters of the adult population believe a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work, 62% express the opinion that most women prefer domestic duties and child rearing to formal employment. There is also ambivalence in responses to statements regarding young children suffering when their mothers work, and family life suffering when the woman has full-time employment.

The data suggest that women's gender roles have not been fundamentally transformed. The enduring support for the gendered division of labour has a number of implications for both women and men, who are unable to break out of their stereotypical roles. Women who work are likely to experience a double burden of domestic and employment responsibilities. In addition, working mothers may experience stigma, with paid employment seen as the antithesis to ideal femininity and motherhood (e.g. the stereotype of successful 'career women' being ruthless and unfeminine) (Rudman & Glick 2001).

Views about children
South African adults hold a positive attitude towards children, with almost all South Africans (97%) agreeing that raising children is one of life's greatest joys. Large shares also opposed the idea that having children imposes restrictions on the freedoms of parents (63%), represents a financial burden on families (59%), or restricts parental career opportunities (58%). There is also a deeply-rooted notion that adult children are an important source of help for elderly parents (83% agree). Nevertheless, a notable minority share (25-28%) does recognise that having children places constraints on employment and career prospects of one or both parents.

Child poverty
As part of this study, an attempt was made to define child poverty in South Africa using the socially perceived necessities method. This involves asking the adult public to specify which items they believe are essential for *all* children to have in order to secure an acceptable standard of living. This method was previously also applied in the 2007 SASAS round. In common with most other studies of this type, the 50% majority is used as a threshold for determining whether an item is a socially perceived necessity. In 2012, 9 of the 25 definitional items were deemed "essential" by at least 50% of the adult population (Table 1). Many of these items relate to basic needs, such as food, hygiene, health care, education and clothing, and these were regarded as essential child needs by the highest share of South Africans.

The results confirm that the public's definition of child poverty continues to encompass core elements of material deprivation, human capital deprivation and health deprivation, all of which relate to key areas of government intervention to promote child well-being. Further findings revealed that the adult public agreed that not being able to provide for the basic needs of children erodes the dignity of the parents and child alike. Poverty alleviation policies are therefore not only fundamental to material needs, but there is a clear demand for the state to address family poverty as the basis of preserving dignity.

Legitimacy and acceptability of policy intervention in family life
While the extent and specific form of government family policy is likely to be the subject of considerable ideological debate in any country context (Hantrais, 2004), from the SASAS family data it is apparent that the public wants proactive intervention by government in relation to different aspects of family life.

This is evident in a number of instances from the analysis conducted. Some examples have already been cited, such as the fairly strong support for the state to assist fathers to play a fuller role in the lives of their children, and a clear demand for the state to address family poverty as the basis of preserving dignity.

Similarly, there is desire for government to help families to stay together, supported by 61% of adults. Other examples include: (i) the resolute views concerning government financial assistance to ensure that orphaned and vulnerable children are cared for by their extended families (85% supports); and (ii) the strong belief (78%) that employed citizens should pay tax on their income so government continues to have money to pay for social grants for poor people (a clear indication of the positive view of the role that social grants are playing). More moderate support is evident for government spending more tax-payer money on providing advice to parents/caregivers on how to raise their children (55% supports) or spending more on providing advice to married couples (52% favours).

The one area of social policy support where family responsibility is preferred over government responsibility is in relation to childcare, both in terms of providing and paying for such care. An estimated 69% of adults think family members should be the primary provider of childcare to children under five, compared to the 12% who chose government agencies and 13% private childcare providers. Furthermore, 77% reported that the family should shoulder the cost of such childcare, compared to 19% favouring government. It is not clear whether this is a reflection of economic constraints, the availability of state and private childcare and early childhood development (ECD) facilities, or a combination of these and other factors, though this is something worth further examining given recent policy developments in relation to ECD. In all though, the results do support a clear social policy role in strengthening families, especially in helping to meet the basic needs of families so that they function optimally as cohesive and resilient units.

Table 1: Percentage of adults defining items as essential child needs, 2007 and 2012

Item	Percentage saying essential		Rank (1=high; 24=low)		Change 2007 -2012	
Author(s)	2007	2012	2007	2012	%	Rank
Three meals a day	91	90	1	1	-1	0
Toiletries to be able to wash every day	90	87	2	2	-3	0
A visit to the doctor when ill and all medicines required	88	86	4	3	-2	-1
All fees, uniform and equipment required for school	88	84	3	4	-5	1
Clothing sufficient to keep warm and dry	85	80	5	5	-5	0
Bus/taxi fare or other transport to get to school	75	73	7	6	-2	-1
Shoes for different activities	79	63	6	7	-17	1
Own bed	62	60	9	8	-1	-1
A desk and chair for homework for school aged children	49	54	12	9	5	-3
Own room for children over 10	40	47	16	10	7	-6
Some new clothes	67	46	8	11	-20	3
Educational toys/games	46	43	13	12	-3	-1
Story books	50	40	11	13	-10	2
Pocket money/allowance for school aged children	59	38	10	14	-21	4
A computer in the home for school aged children	32	32	19	15	-1	-4
A school trip once a term for school aged children	45	30	14	16	-15	2
Presents at birthdays, Christmas	40	26	15	17	-14	2
Leisure/sports equipment	34	22	17	18	-11	1
Own cell phone for secondary school aged children	22	22	22	19	0	-3
Toys or materials for a hobby	33	21	18	20	-12	2
Some fashionable clothes for secondary school aged children	32	19	20	21	-13	1
A birthday party each year	30	15	21	22	-15	1
A CD player/MP3 player/iPod for school aged children	12	9	24	23	-3	-1
A PlayStation/Xbox for school aged children	13	9	23	24	-4	1

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis emanating from the PSPPD-commissioned research on family cohesion, the following recommendations are proposed:

• With regard to child poverty, socially perceived necessities include fundamental basic needs, such as food, hygiene, health care, education and clothing, which relate to core elements of material deprivation, human capital deprivation and health deprivation. This definition can be applied to determine the extent and nature of child poverty, and can assist to determine vulnerable groups and spatial concentrations of deprivation.

• The research findings show that citizens believe that poverty and material inequalities effectively violate the constitutional right to dignity of parents and children and that government intervention is required to respect and protect the dignity of citizens. This is an important indication that the state is seen as a legitimate authority in providing social protection to ensure that the needs of families are adequately met and quality life promoted.

• More should be done to encourage non-kin adoption alongside kinship care represents a critical opening, and more should be done by the government to encourage the adoption of children in need.

• There is a demand for policy support to fathers and policies and programmes should be pursued in the country to promote positive male and fatherhood roles. Mechanisms and policies, such as paternity and parental leave, need to be put in place to ensure a greater balance between work and family responsibilities and gender equality in parenting.

• Employment-family policies need to be coherent. Employment policies strive to promote gender equity in the labour market and family policies recognise the significance of the male's involvement in households. Yet, no policy provisions are made for men's parental leave, which means that caregiving remains firmly entrenched as a women's responsibility from the onset of parenthood. Likewise, family diversity is recognised in policies, but the main focus remains on "family preservation" in line with conventional gender roles.

• Despite the overall positive view of childrearing, there is a need for caregivers of children to have information, knowledge and skills that will enable them to accomplish positive child outcomes without delaying their own career and economic advancement. The availability of state subsidised services, such as affordable child day care and after-school care, would go a long way in complementing parental responsibilities towards children's well-being, protection and development. Evidence-based, positive parenting programmes could also be implemented and made available to parents nationally.

References

Hantrais (2004) *Family policy matters: Responding to family change in Europe.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Ziehl,S.C. (2003). The Family and Social Cohesion. In D. Chidester, P. Dexter & W. Jones (Eds.), *What Holds us Together: Social Cohesion in South Africa*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

For the full report, please go to the PSPPD Poverty and Inequality Knowledge Repository: **http://psppdknowledgerepository.org/component/ jdownloads/send/9-grantee-research/366.**

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