

GUIDING THE CARE OF CHILD-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

Welfare institutions have struggled to come to terms with child-headed households. In particular, how to deal with the complex and varied nature of these households that requires the involvement of several sectors and co-operation between all spheres of government and civil society. *Stanley Molefi* and *Zitha Mokomane* recount a new approach to this issue.

The nature of families is changing all over the world. In sub-Saharan Africa this involves high levels of labour migration with parents leaving their children behind; high levels of poverty; the impact of HIV and AIDS, and political instability and conflict that often force children to migrate alone to seek asylum.

Child-headed households are one of the most documented family structures to have emerged in recent years as a result of these changes. These households are characterised by the absence of a parent/caregiver, and by a child or youth assuming the role of primary caregiver in respect of another child or other children in the household, providing basic needs such as food, clothing and psychological support.

Child-headed households have profound implications for the wellbeing of children.



The South African context

In South Africa, the Children's Act of 2005 regards a child-headed household as one where the parent, guardian or caregiver of the household is terminally ill, has died or has abandoned the children in the household; no adult family member is available to care for children in the household; or

a child older than 16 has assumed the role of caregiver to children in the household.

Child-headed households have profound implications for the wellbeing of children. Typically, children in these households are deprived of a warm, safe environment; lack parental care, and are at risk of having to cope without adults and with poorer living conditions than their counterparts in mixed-generation households.

The number of children living in child-headed households is significant.



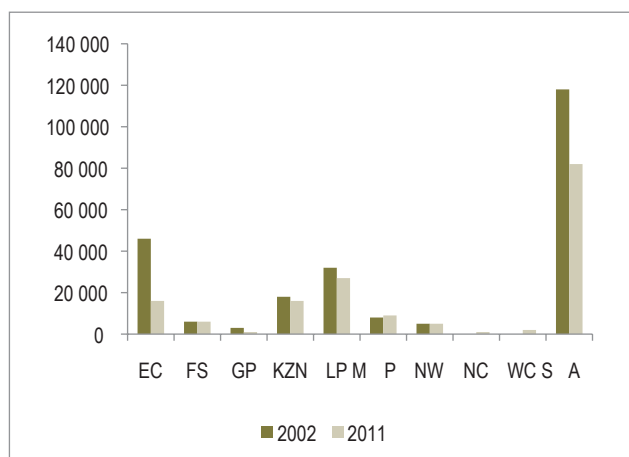
Data on how many households are managed by children is scarce, but available estimates show that while the overall proportions of child-headed households are low (Table 1), the number of children living in these households is significant. For example, data from the South African Child Gauge have shown that in mid-2011 about 82 000 of the 18.5 million children in South Africa were living in 47 000 child-headed households. In terms of the child-headed households per province (2002 and 2011 data indicators), it was found that Limpopo had the highest number (34%), followed by KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape at 20% each (Figure 1).

Table 1: Estimate of the percentage of households headed by children under the age of 18, South Africa 1995–2011

Source	Percentage of CHHs	Type of Statistic South Africa data	Reference Year
Richter & Desmond (2008)	0.11	OHS	1995
Richter & Desmond (2008)	0.34	OHS	1997
Richter & Desmond (2008)	0.45	OHS	1999
Computed from Statistics South Africa's (2004) tables	0.89	Census	2001
Richter & Desmond (2008)	0.67	GHS	2002
Richter & Desmond (2008)	0.66	GHS	2003
Meintjes, et al. (2010)	0.47	GHS	2006
Meintjes & Hall (2013)	0.70	GHS	2011

Source: Adapted from Mturi (2012) and Meintjes & Hall (2013)

Figure 1: Number of children living in child-headed households by province, South Africa 2002 and 2011 (thousands)



Source: Adapted from Meintjes & Hall (2013)

The plight of children living in SA's child-headed households was not adequately addressed.



South Africa is a signatory to a number of international and regional treaties and conventions committing to the protection and care of all children in the country, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and is therefore committed to protect all children, including those in child-headed households. This is also reflected in the Children's Act of 2005 and several other national policies.

Despite this enabling policy and legislative framework, the plight of children living in child-headed households in South Africa was, for a long time, not adequately addressed. This was partly due to the complex nature of the households, which required co-operation between all spheres of government and civil society. To facilitate a service delivery model that met the needs of child-headed households, the National Department of Social Development developed the National Guidelines for Statutory Services to Child-Headed Households (2010) and the Strategy on Statutory Services to Child-Headed Households (2011).

Promoting the rights of children in child-headed households

Efforts to use these documents to provide statutory services to child-headed households have, however, illuminated gaps in the standardisation and uniformity for services to children in these households. To facilitate ease of use and reference by practitioners and other parties, the National Department of Social Development with support from the US President's

Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) commissioned the HSRC to merge the two documents into one, called the Consolidated Strategy and Guidelines on the Statutory Services to Child-Headed Households.

The consolidated document promotes 'the rights of children living in child-headed households to develop their full potential within their communities, focusing on prevention, early intervention and a continuum of care through a multi-disciplinary and inter-sectoral approach.'

It furthermore provides a framework for rendering services that address the needs and challenges facing children living in child-headed households, and quality services to promote the care, protection and wellbeing of children in these households.

The document addresses the following broad sections:

- **Legal and policy framework:** brief overview of national, regional and international legislation and policies that mandate South Africa.
- **Rights of children in child-headed households:** addresses realising the rights of children; overview of norms and standards in providing services; rights to a name and nationality, inheritance and property rights, and protection from abuse, maltreatment, neglect, education, healthcare, and social assistance and security.
- **Rendering services to child-headed households:** services available to child-headed households; steps practitioners need to follow in rendering services to these households, and details of the mandated role-players for provision of services to child-headed households.
- **Institutional arrangements:** the role of the Department of Social Development in ensuring a co-ordinated service delivery to child-headed households at national, provincial, district and local levels, and the role of other parties (other government departments, civil society organisations, international non-governmental and donor agencies, and academic institutions).
- **Key strategic areas:** strategic areas to achieve the vision and objectives of the Consolidated Strategy and Guidelines, namely prevention and early intervention, protection, capacity building, resource allocation, and monitoring and evaluation.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** collecting and analysing reliable information for planning, monitoring and improving service delivery to child-headed households.
- **Resource needs:** key financial and human resources to effectively implement the key tenets of the Consolidated Strategy and Guidelines.

Overall the Consolidated Strategy and Guidelines is meant to harmonise legislation with practice so to ensure that children living in child-headed households have access to essential services, benefits and protection. ■

Authors: Dr Zitha Mokomane, chief research specialist, Human and Social Development (HSD), HSRC; Stanley Molefi, PhD intern, HSD, HSRC.