

Child Wellbeing and Poverty in South Africa

National Workshop leads to Establishment of a Child Research Network

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Background

Poverty, unemployment and inequality appear to be increasing in South Africa. At least 45% of the South African population lives in absolute poverty¹, and many households still have unsatisfactory access to clean water, energy, health care and education². Unemployment rates have risen from 33% in 1996 to 37.0% in 2001³. Rising inflation rates have caused escalating food prices, which directly impact on the well being of the poor. In 2002 an estimated 11 million children under 18 years were living on less than R200 per month (Streak 2002⁴).



However, poverty is more than merely income insufficiency. It also includes a lack of opportunities, lack of access to assets and credit, as well as social exclusion. Poverty is complex, multi-faceted and fluctuates in depth and duration. Considering children's living conditions currently in South Africa, it is apparent that indicators of their well being should be broader than merely income poverty measures.

Within the general socio-economic situation in the country, children are a particularly vulnerable group requiring special protection and under the Constitution, they have the right to a minimum standard of living to ensure their survival and development. Interventions have been targeted at the child and family, but their impact is difficult to measure due to the shortage of data on child well-being and poverty.

Aim and Objectives

A national workshop was held in Cape Town in February 2003 in order to identify the information needs and determine the best possible means to address them in a comprehensive and co-ordinated manner. Organised by the Children's Institute (UCT), Idasa's Children's Budget Unit, the National Department of Social Development, and the Child and Youth Research and Training Programme (UWC), the workshop brought together approximately 70 participants from research agencies, national departments, (Health, Education, Social development), funding agencies, and other child-related institutions.

Their objectives were to identify existing data on child well-being and poverty, the gaps in current research data, the specific data requirements of key roleplayers and to determine the best possible methods for generating the required child poverty and well-being data. A key objective was the development of a coordinated 'action plan' with those individuals or organisations with an interest in the generation of credible, reliable and up-to-date child poverty data.

Workshop Outcomes

Many of the key research agencies and researchers in child poverty and well-being presented their work, and their perspectives on the key data gaps, and what types of research are required. They thus began the process of establishing a child research agenda for South Africa,

although it was stressed that such an agenda must incorporate the needs of data-users, policy-makers, advocacy groups as well as funders too.

Most participants felt that there was need to establish a network to co-ordinate child research efforts by means of:

- ▶ an Internet database and clearing-house for all child-related research in South Africa,
- ▶ a list-serve, regular meetings or annual conferences on current research activities
- ▶ facilitating the participation of researchers around specific research questions and projects
- ▶ maintaining a national child research agenda to highlight the important gaps and research needs

It was felt that such a network should be owned by the research community, and should be as inclusive and representative as possible. It was felt that there was need for a very specific child focus, which might get lost if incorporated into existing general research networks, but that links with well-established networks were important.

It was agreed that the four agencies, that organized the workshop would form the interim Task Team to begin the process of establishing such a network, and to explore the various options for its structure and functioning.

The report of the workshop, which will include an inventory of all the research reported and presented at the workshop, is currently being prepared. Should you require a copy or should you wish to join the fledgling Child Research Network, please email Teresa Guthrie (teresa@rmh.uct.ac.za).

References

- 1 Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive Social Security System (Col). 2002. "Transforming the present, Protecting the Future: Consolidated report". p16. Figure varies between 45% and 55% depending on the poverty line and measure used. Further details on this figure were not available.
- 2 NEDLAC FOCUS POVERTY, Dialogue Vol. 2, No. 3: <http://www.nedlac.org.za/docs/dialogue/1998/poverty.htm>
- 3 Col. Ibid. p.20. Using an expanded definition of unemployment.
- 4 Streak J. 2002. Child Poverty Monitor. No.1. IDASA.

