

## *Towards the development of a family policy for South Africa*

### **Introduction**

This policy brief highlights the need for policy focused on the needs of families in South Africa. It is the outcome of a study in which participants' views on critical issues encountered by families in South Africa highlighted some of their most pressing challenges, most of which are poverty-related. The document considers alternative policy positions that might improve the current situation.

The brief presents participants' views on a proposed policy framework targeting families and providing for the promotion of family wellbeing. In addition, the document proposes that the South African government adopt the recommendations made by participants to strengthen families in order to combat the debilitating effects of development challenges and other socio-economic risk factors.

The Department of Social Development (DSD) commissioned a White Paper on Families in South Africa and over 500 stakeholders participated in discussions concerning the paper in the first quarter of 2012. During these discussions and consultations, poverty, high mortality due to HIV/AIDS and other life-threatening diseases, substance abuse, unemployment and inequality emerged

as the main challenges affecting families in contemporary South Africa.

### **The effects of poverty on South African families**

According to Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), South Africa is unlikely to achieve Millennium Development Goal 1 (Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger) if the implementation of the government's poverty-reduction programme continues at current levels (Stats SA 2010). Poverty and inequality continue to undermine the family as an institution by reducing its effectiveness in realising the roles of its members in society.

The immediate cause of poverty in South Africa is the low level (or lack) of earned income. Despite several initiatives, large numbers of adults remain unemployed and employment creation has not been realised to a level that will significantly reduce the effects of poverty on households. This inability of many people to secure employment has led to families facing additional burdens due to limited or no income. Thus, in many families there are few adults who are in paid employment, yet who support a large number of economically dependent persons.

'It is true, women are sending money home ... if you can look at it between males and females that have started working ... the first thing a young person who is female does with her money, she will think of buying furniture and bring it home, but the male will buy a car forgetting where they come from.'

Workshop participant, 2012

Poverty still reflects apartheid human-settlement patterns and virtually all extremely poor households are found in the former bantustan regions, informal settlements and townships. The *Fifteen-Year Review of 2008* by the Department of Provincial and Local Government points out that persistent inequality is largely the result of the reproduction of existing disparities in the ownership of income, resources, skills and other determinants of people's capacity to take advantage of opportunities. In addition, inequalities reduce the redistributive effects of economic growth and skew the benefits of growth towards those who are already economically resourced.

As far as poverty is concerned, women endure a disproportionate burden of the outcomes of past policies. Whereas men worked in various industries during the apartheid era, many women remained in the rural areas to take care of family members. Historically, women received income primarily in the form of remittances from their spouses. Indeed, the gender division of labour continues to influence how families function. Women typically assume more household responsibilities, spend more time on unpaid care work than men, and form a greater proportion of discouraged work seekers. Data from the 2000 Time Use Survey showed that South African women spent less time than men did on learning, social and cultural activities, and using mass media, but spent more than double the time that men did on household maintenance and care (Budlender et al. 2001). This situation is further exacerbated by the inadequate provision of childcare facilities, resulting in women spending even less time on waged work. This consequently increases women's vulnerability to poverty.

There is, therefore, a gender dimension to poverty within families, and women continue to be marginalised in relation to men in terms of socio-

economic opportunities, such as employment. According to Stats SA, the unemployment rate for females was 27.5% in the April–June 2012 quarter; the figure for males was 22.8%. Ten years earlier, in 2002, the corresponding figures were 33.9% and 26.1% for females and males respectively. Therefore, while the rates have decreased, females continue to have higher unemployment rates compared to males.

Women in paid employment still earn less than their male counterparts, which further exacerbates their vulnerability to poverty. Duncun (2010) noted that on average, South African women across all races earn 71% of the income of men averaged across all races. The disparities in income correlate not only with gender, but also with race, and African women earn 85% of what African men earn, 71% of what white women earn and 46% of what white men earn (Van Aardt & Coetzee 2010, 2011).

Child poverty is another development challenge in South Africa and is a direct consequence of family disintegration. In their report, *The state of the world's children 2005*, the United Nations Children's Fund presented the following definition of child poverty: 'Children living in poverty experience deprivation of the material, spiritual and emotional resources needed to survive, develop and thrive, leaving them unable to enjoy their rights, achieve their full potential or participate as full and equal members society.'

The impact of poverty on children has also been exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic as parents and caregivers succumb to the disease. Child poverty has steadily increased in the last decade and seems to defy various policy interventions. A report by Streak et al. (2008), which analyses the Income and Expenditure Survey of 2005/06 by Stats SA, paints a clearer picture of this

phenomenon. According to the report, child poverty peaked at 65.5% and remains more prevalent than poverty among adults (45.2%), thus confirming that there is a greater incidence of children in poorer households. This is despite the massive injection of cash transfers into households with poor children through the expansion of the Child Support Grant.

### Family health in the context of HIV and AIDS

According to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, South Africa is one of the countries most affected by HIV and AIDS. The 2011 estimates indicate that 16.6% of the adult South African population aged 15 to 49 years were living with HIV and that an estimated 5.4 million people were living with HIV (Stats SA 2011a). As in other African countries, the national response has seen a shift in the model of care of people living with HIV and AIDS from hospital care to home-based care (Akintola 2004). This has partly helped to reduce the burden on healthcare facilities, especially public hospitals that often lack staff and space resources to cater for HIV and AIDS patients. It is worth noting that in most cases the assumption that there is adequate community and family support to meet the needs of patients has been found to be invalid. The reality is that with about 91% of HIV and AIDS caregivers in South Africa being women, home-based care has significantly increased the burden of care for women and girls, and aggravated the levels of work-family conflict among those who are working (Southern Africa Partnership Programme, SAPP 2005).

### The influence of poverty on family living arrangements

Historically, migrant labour systems exacerbated the situation of absentee fathers from southern African

households, and the absence of fathers from their families was identified as a critical concern among workshop participants. This finding is reflected in research elsewhere in South Africa (Richter et al. 2011). Participants were apprehensive about the impact of absent fathers on children and how the separation from the family perpetuates income poverty (especially where the father is the primary income earner in the household).

The living arrangements for families, influenced by migration and job-seeking behaviour, access to schools, childcare choices and other factors, are such that very few children co-reside with their parents.

Table 1 shows these low co-residence figures. As is evident from the data, co-residence with fathers is especially low.

**Table 1:** The level of co-residence of children up to the age of nine years with their parents in South Africa

Family type	Number	%
Both parents	583 341	32.64
Father only	40 674	2.27
Mother only	584 963	32.73
Both parents absent	577 893	32.34

Source: Calculations by Makiwane from data sourced from Stats SA (2011a, 2011b)

It is disconcerting that approximately 60% of children younger than 10 years do not live with their biological father. The relationship between absent fathers and the high child-poverty levels in the South African context needs further research investigation.

Over many decades, rural households in South Africa were sustained by remittances from men who worked in the mines and other sectors. 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 (Kaufman 1997).

The cumulative effect of the factors highlighted in the previous paragraphs is that poverty has not only been inter-generational but has also reduced the potential for the flow of wealth from one generation to another. This is not conducive to securing household economic stability and/or security. Cooperation between generations facilitates the accumulation of resources, which is a potentially powerful avenue for economic empowerment in South African society.

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

### Specific policy propositions

There is an urgent need to introduce family-friendly policies in South Africa that will reduce the level of poverty among children and enhance inter-generational wealth creation. The basic tenet of these policies is that they must be grounded in the South African context. Thus, as motivated by the workshop participants, the policies should:

- Ensure the inclusion of a variety of family forms and cultural practices, such as the practice of ubuntu. Ubuntu expounds the notion of 'I am because we are' and embraces the values of hospitality, care and compassion. By positing that one's humanity is bound up with and inextricably linked to the next person, ubuntu engenders a mutual dependency and respect among kindred people and community.

- Be strongly grounded in 'African-centred', indigenous research, especially regarding current traditional family practices. Thus, instead of relying on the widely accessible information based on a Western nuclear family model to formulate policies, more resources should be spent on research on the diverse forms of African family structures and systems.
- Draw on best policy guidelines from the African continent. The African Charter on Human and People's Rights states that the family is the natural unit and foundational basis for society and further urges states to take care of family health and morale (Organisation of African Unity, OAU 1981). Further, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) advocates for gender equality and for women and men to enjoy equal rights in marriage (SADC 2008). More relevant to this brief, the charter document emphasises that states must encourage parents to honour their duty of care towards their children and ensure that child-maintenance orders are enforced.

### Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the current state and structure of families in South Africa, together with the input of family workshops that were conducted throughout South Africa, two major policy proposals are suggested. First, there is a need to encourage a more functional extended family system. The second proposal is for a policy shift from social assistance that is solely directed at individuals, to include assistance for families.

#### 1. A more functional extended family system

This brief analysis confirms that a growing number of families are without one or both biological

'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours. It says that I am human because I belong. I participate. I share. A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole ...'

Archbishop Desmond Tutu  
(1999: 274)

parents. In addition, the primary family unit is at odds with the reality of the majority of South African families. The overview of families in South Africa reveals that significant changes over the years, brought about by globalisation, modernisation, migration and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, have contributed to a transformation of the family structure and family relations. Family transformations have resulted in fewer co-residing primary family units.

The presence of nuclear families and intimate couples, which was once predicted to be a logical conclusion of society moving towards modernisation, has emerged as the primary family unit only among those of higher socio-economic status. At the same time, multi-generational and extended families remain the most common family structure among people of lower socio-economic levels. Based on these realities, there is a need for realignment towards an explicit policy that recognises and supports extended families.

Given the range of possibilities for family formations, accepting this multiplicity of social relations within and across households would offer an improved understanding of livelihood strategies and more accurate theorising of contemporary South Africa's social terrain (Richter & Amaoteng 2003). New approaches would therefore allow us to move beyond a 'pathology or deficit model of families as disorganised and disintegrating, towards an understanding of family adaptation and coping' (Richter & Amaoteng 2003: 250). As part of this approach, a concentrated effort to support both traditional and emergent family forms should be undertaken. Thus, families may live far apart or

be dispersed 'across national borders and stretched kinship networks across vast geographic space' (Turner 2002: 397). If not household units, then families should be recognised and supported in all of their complexity. This could include encouraging family communication across geographical spaces and facilitating easy flow of monetary resources from one geographical area to another.

## **2. *The reconfiguration of the current social assistance programme***

The other policy proposition advanced relates to the reconfiguration of the current social assistance programme. Social assistance has been at the forefront of the South African government strategy for assisting communities. Since the 1990s, government has shown commitment to assisting families and communities by developing the White Paper for Social Welfare. This paper emphasised the developmental social welfare approach and care by families and communities, instead of the institutional-based care model promoted by the government prior to 1994 (Department of Welfare, South Africa 1997). The institutionalisation of payment of monthly social grants to citizens who have different needs is one major policy intervention for poverty alleviation brought in since the advent of democracy. These social grants assess individuals using age (either too young or too old), disability status and economic level of individuals. Drawing on discussions of the key issues affecting families in South Africa, provision of aid-support to families should be the paramount occupation of the state in addition to aid to individuals.

## Implementation strategies for the family policy

The implementation of a sound family promotion policy is a responsibility of all government departments. However, it is anticipated that the DSD will play the main coordinating role as this department is the focal point for programmes aimed at supporting family life and the strengthening of families in the country. Other government departments, such as the Department of Justice, should consider effective systems to enforce child-maintenance systems and ensure that breadwinners, especially men, take responsibility for positive fatherhood and child support. Various forms of maintenance for those who are unable to provide monetary rewards should be explored.

The Department of International Relations and Cooperation should facilitate mobility of capital across political borders as a way of assisting wealth transfer between members of families. The government should work towards increasing the minimum amount required for exchange-control reporting requirements as suggested by Truen et al. (2005). Furthermore, there is a need to promote a wider range of service providers other than the established banks, so as to facilitate an easy transfer of money.

The South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) is mandated to guarantee the provision of comprehensive social security services against vulnerability and poverty within the constitutional and legislative framework. This organisation should ensure that eligible families, family members and caregivers have access to the various social security and social assistance programmes aimed at strengthening and protecting the family in South Africa.

The Department of Labour should develop and implement paternity-

leave systems that would encourage men to play a more involved role in family caregiving, particularly in raising children and providing emotional support to their children. The role of the private sector in the promotion of family life and the strengthening of families needs to be informed by the manner in which employers are able to develop programmes that create a healthy balance between work and the family. It is well documented that employees' failure to adequately balance work and family responsibilities compromises workplace productivity and profitability due to problems such as high turnover, increased absenteeism and tardiness. This can also lead to decreased job satisfaction, productivity and work quality.

In sum, the aspirations for a positive family-centred society in South Africa can be more meaningfully realised if a family policy is part of the landscape of policies promoting social cohesion in the country. As part of promoting social cohesion in South Africa, this brief has made policy suggestions that should be adopted by the South African government and which will strengthen families so that they are in a better position to combat the debilitating effects of poverty.

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