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2010/2011 SA Child Gauge puts children's political rights under the spotlight

Children's participation in decisions that affect them is essential for South Africa's democracy, for improved service delivery, and for children's development.

This is one of the key messages of the *South African Child Gauge 2010/2011* - an annual review of the situation of children in the country, which was released today (Tuesday, 16 August 2011) by the University of Cape Town's Children's Institute (CI). This thought-provoking sixth issue puts children's political rights under the spotlight, and explores how listening to children can help strengthen democracy and improve service delivery.

The Children's Act legalises children's right to participate in decisions that affect them. This, explains lead editor and the CI's senior advocacy co-ordinator, Lucy Jamieson, "requires a fundamental shift in the way that parents and professionals engage with children - instead of talking about children, adults need to include children in conversations. It is only by considering children's views that we as adults can respond to children's needs, and act in their best interests".

Teachers, doctors, social workers and other professionals working with children are now legally required to tell children what's going on, inform children about their choices, find out how they feel, and take these views seriously. The benefits of this approach should outweigh the accompanying challenges for stressed service providers, says Minette Coetzee, professor of child nursing at UCT: "Research shows that children's participation in health care settings can ease staff workloads, help children cope better with pain and illness, reduce hospital errors and improve health outcomes."

Barriers to change

Children's participation expert, Dr Rachel Bray, says there is a tendency to underestimate children's capacity and their contribution to society, which results in few channels for children to participate in democracy today: "But children already play an active role in sustaining communities - caring for sick relatives, assisting with farming or small businesses, and maintaining links between scattered family members."

This points to a fundamental tension between progressive legislation and conservative practices. Resistance to children's participation stems from widespread and persistent beliefs that "children should respect their elders" and that "adults know best". It is precisely for this reason that the contributors to the *South African Child Gauge 2010-2011* call for what is termed a "head change, and a heart change" amongst adults.

Benefits for children

André Viviers, senior social policy specialist at UNICEF South Africa, which sponsored the publication and co-hosted the launch, explains that children benefit directly: "Children say that participation contributes to their growth and development because it helps them to express how they feel and what they think; to learn from peers; and to speak out in public about important matters."

A recent evaluation of the Soul Buddyz clubs - which work with over 140,000 primary schoolchildren around the country - affirmed that children learn new skills, develop self-confidence and create support networks that help them cope better with the pressures of being a learner, carer and/or breadwinner.

Jamieson points out that participation also enables children to "claim their socio-economic rights, or alert people to rights violations".

Benefits for society

Analysis of the latest General Household Survey (GHS) shows that there are 18.6 million children in South Africa - primarily concentrated in the rural provinces of the Eastern Cape, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal. National data often obscure children's situation, which means service delivery planners can miss the mark. For example, the GHS shows 71% of households had access to adequate sanitation in 2009 - but this applied to only 63% of children.

This situation can change if policy-makers, planners and implementers of services consult with children and take their views seriously. As Minister of Women, Children and People with Disabilities, Lulu Xingwana, highlights in her contribution in the book: "Listening to children is an essential monitoring tool so that programmes and services take account of the lived realities on the ground, and respond to their needs."

But children's participation goes beyond consulting with children about their needs. It is about strengthening democracy, says Christina Nomdo, director of RAPCAN (Resources Aimed at the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect): "It means children are empowered to

act as good members of society while they are young and develop the political experience required to participate in decision-making processes."

Prof Shirley Pendlebury, director of the Children's Institute, UCT, agrees and describes how the experience of democracy not only builds skills, it also entrenches values: "Children's participation in school governance, under the right conditions, can enable them to learn about democratic procedure and to develop the skills and values that are part and parcel of a vibrant democratic culture."

Creating an enabling environment

Another key message of the *South African Child Gauge 2010/2011* is that opportunities need to be created for children to participate in all the spaces which impact on their lives - at home, school and health care facilities; in the community and in government. Professionals such as teachers, doctors, social workers, nurses, journalists and government officials need to create supportive, child-friendly environments for children's participation.

This entails respectful, two-way communication in which children are treated as equal partners, says Jamieson: "Children's participation should be an integral part of any decision-making process that affects children - from planning and implementation to monitoring and evaluation. This means shifting our thinking about children's capabilities, experiences and contributions, and allocating time and space to ensure genuine engagement with children."

Time for action

UNICEF Representative Aida Girma points to the global significance of children's right to participate: "The Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states that children have the right to give their views on pertinent issues. As a signatory to the Convention, South Africa needs to take the necessary steps to ensure that genuine opportunities are created for children to do this."

This call to action is echoed by Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, in the foreword to the book: "As a nation we have made remarkable progress in building the legal foundation for ensuring children's best interests. Now is the time to put policies of inclusion into action by listening to children and feeding their insights into the way we run our schools, clinics, hospitals, social services, courts and government departments."

ENDS

Background information

The *South African Child Gauge 2010/2011* was released at a children's participation event in Cape Town, hosted jointly with UNICEF South Africa. The book *monitors the realisation of*

children's rights and is published annually by the Children's Institute, a child policy research unit at the University of Cape Town. Each year, the publication presents legislative developments affecting children; child-centred data on children's access to social assistance, education, housing, health and other services; and a series of essays to inform, focus and sometimes direct national dialogue and debate.

The publication is available for download on www.ci.org.za, together with accompanying resources including a poster, a child-friendly summary, and a list of children's participation projects.

A real story: *The power to make a difference*

A powerful example of how listening to children can contribute to positive change involved a 15-year-old from the Eastern Cape. She heard about the drafting of the Children's Bill at a conference, and expressed concern that young girls in her community were often abducted for forced marriages. She was so shocked to learn that people who forced children into marriage could be fined a mere R200, that it spurred her to make a public submission on the draft law to Parliament.

Working with the Children's Institute, she wrote a submission on the Children's Bill that called for a heavier fine or prison sentence. Her recommendation was adopted by Parliament, and today people can be imprisoned for up to 10 years for forcing a child into marriage or engagement.

Yet despite this change in legislation, reports on child abductions and forced marriages continue, and not one case has been prosecuted under the new law, according to Jamieson: "Children's right to protection will only become a reality when professionals such as teachers, doctors, social workers, police and prosecutors listen to children and take what they have to say seriously."

As a 14-year-old noted in a live radio broadcast in 2009: "You may give a voice to the children, even give them a very big platform, but if adults don't stop and listen to what the children are saying, it is as good as no voice".

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