

# Foreword

The Most Reverend Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu

Children have long had a central place in our nation's heart. We admired the courage of those who stood up for justice in the struggle, and we have acknowledged just how devastating an effect our history has had on their lives. But when last did we stop to listen to children?

It is my conviction that children have a lot to teach us, if we only had the common sense – and a drop of humility – to listen to them. No longer can we hold onto the myth that we adults always know better than children. Of course, the fact that we have lived longer gives us more experiences upon which we draw to make decisions. But that is the only difference.

Children know what is happening around them and can see ways to improve their own lives, as well as those of others. Put simply, they are both the treasures we wish to protect and the resources we need to do so.

Take for example the daily lives of many rural children who balance the demands of running a home, completing schoolwork and caring for siblings or sick relatives. Scores more do the same in urban areas, perhaps with better infrastructure and services. No-one handed these children a job description. Their roles emerged as adult resources were stretched too thinly, meaning that they quickly developed an expertise in what makes a difference, and why. How better to support communities faced with chronic poverty and AIDS than to first consult those in the frontline of support, including children?

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. I often have the privilege of addressing groups of young people and am always impressed with their wisdom, idealism and enthusiasm. They have the capacity to



change things and need to be allowed the opportunity.

What is more, we know that this generation of children is eager to engage with adults and with each other, to break down the old barriers between generations and between neighbourhoods. Born into a democratic era that heralds new opportunity, children now desire more and better information about their own worlds as well as insight into the lives of their peers with different histories. Not only do children want more dialogue and involvement, but they desperately need to know what is available in order to make wise choices. For the paths to success in South Africa

are full of hope, yet snared by inadequate knowledge around entitlement and opportunity.

Our desires and efforts to include children are mirrored across the world. We would do well to join hands and learn together. This year's *State of the World's Children* report<sup>i</sup> published by UNICEF prioritises the right of children to express their views freely on all matters affecting them, pointing out that our fulfilment of this right not only benefits children but society as a whole: "The well-being and the active participation of adolescents are fundamental to the effectiveness of a life-cycle approach that can break the intergenerational transmission of poverty, exclusion and discrimination...". South Africa has fertile ground in which to pioneer participatory approaches and could make a valuable contribution to global learning.

So what does it take to engage children and really listen? The essays in this issue of the *South African Child Gauge* draw on South African experiences of partnering children in important decision-making processes, showing how they were successful and what they learnt from mistakes. In a nutshell – it is the willingness to give it a go, and to find out for oneself how inspiring and productive it is to work collaboratively with children.

<sup>i</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (2011) *State of the World's Children 2011. Adolescence: An age of opportunity*. New York: UNICEF.