



Reflections on early childhood development

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It is almost 20 years since South Africa adopted its progressive Constitution. Chapter 2 of the Constitution contains the Bill of Rights, a human rights charter that protects the civil, political and socio-economic rights of all people in South Africa. In addition, the Bill of Rights contains a dedicated clause which gives children the right to a range of socio-economic rights

in section 28(1)(c). The right to education is amongst others recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For this reason the current administration has put education at the apex of its priorities.

A range of research studies and policy declarations assert that early childhood education makes a real and lasting difference in children's lives. In this regard, government is fully committed to providing the building blocks for access to quality early stimulation, education and care for all the children, with particular focus on children in vulnerable communities.

South Africa is presently on the brink of significant development in relation to the realisation of children's right to quality early education. During the 53rd National Elective Conference of the African National Congress, held in Mangaung, Free State province, we identified the provision of early childhood development (ECD) as key to our success towards achieving the goals of the National Development Plan (Vision 2030). To this end, the conference resolved to provide universal ECD services by 2014.

During the tabling of the Budget Vote this year, we set out major priorities for ECD over the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework period. We are on course to deliver on this commitment as we

intensify our efforts to tackle poverty on all fronts, with particular focus on prevention and early intervention to break the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage, particularly in poor communities. In 2010, we committed ourselves to expand the coverage of ECD services. Many of the changes we promised have since been implemented. To date, over 900,000 children benefit from government's Early Childhood Development programme.

Following the Diagnostic Review report and the resolutions of the ECD conference held in 2012, we have approved a Five-Year Integrated Programme of Action, which identified the urgent need to improve rural infrastructure, human resource capacity, a new comprehensive funding model and amendment of the Children's Act.

As part of our long-term plan, the National Development Agency will continue to contribute to the ECD sector through interventions that include, amongst others, food security at ECD sites, strengthening the institutional, leadership and management capacity, as well as improve ECD infrastructure.

The government's present thrust is on the development of cohesive and integrated services through a national policy which will define the ECD service package and make it a public good.

The attainment of the commitment and priorities will make a significant difference to the lives of our children and also contribute to the attainment of the ambitious goals outlined in Vision 2030.

We welcome the publication of the *South African Child Gauge 2013* and I would like to thank both UNICEF and the Children's Institute for their long-standing commitment and contribution to improve access to quality education for the majority of South Africa's children.

We will continue to work together with our social partners to ensure implementation of the recommendations of this publication as part of our commitment to provide each child with an early start for a better future.