

facts

about 'Invisible' and Excluded Children (2006)

Children Count



Abantwana Babalulekile

Fact sheet No. 4 of 2006

Introduction

South Africa committed itself to implementing a 'first call for children' by ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1). This commitment is consistent with the South African Constitution, which declares that a child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child (2). Hence, as a key duty-bearer, the government must consider children in all its strategies, policies and programmes to ensure that issues that cause children to become excluded and 'invisible' are addressed.

This fact sheet draws on the United Nations Children's Fund report, *The State of the World's Children (SOWC) 2006*, which highlights the combination of devastating and unprotected conditions many children are faced with, such as negligence, abuse and poor housing. These are a few of the factors that may cause a child to become 'invisible' or excluded from his or her community (3).

The *SOWC 2006* report is aimed at creating an understanding of excluded and 'invisible' children around the world who are often exposed to many harsh and at times inhumane circumstances. Although the report identifies such children under separate themes, each with its own identifying issues, it should be acknowledged that the circumstances that deem a child either 'invisible' or excluded almost always occur simultaneously.

All issues discussed under the overarching themes of 'invisibility' and exclusion are important and need urgent attention. However, it is beyond the scope of this fact sheet to capture all the factors that cause children to become 'invisible' and excluded. Issues pertaining to 'invisibility' and exclusion in relation to child deaths, social grants and housing have been elaborated on in previous fact sheets produced by the *Children Count – Abantwana Babalulekile Project* of the Children's Institute (see www.ci.org.za).

The Children's Institute, University of Cape Town, monitors progress in realising children's socio-economic rights by presenting evidence that reflects on change effected by the government and other duty-bearers to children. This fact sheet is a joint product of the *Child Survival Project* and the *Children Count – Abantwana Babalulekile Project* at the Institute. A key message of the *Child Survival*

Over 18 million children live in South Africa. The government must consider them in all its strategies, policies and programmes to ensure that issues that cause children to become 'invisible' and excluded are addressed

Project is to advocate for an integrated plan with targeted interventions that would decrease the large amounts of avoidable child deaths in South Africa. The fact sheet aims to:

1. Highlight and synthesise the key themes raised in UNICEF's *The State of the World's Children 2006* report.
2. Illuminate the circumstances of 'invisible' and excluded children as defined and described in the *SOWC 2006* report.
3. Present important issues relevant to the South African context with regards to the demographics and nutrition discussions in *The State of the World's Children 2006*.
4. Identify limitations of the data presented in the report.
5. Recommend child survival strategies aimed at minimising children's 'invisibility' and exclusion.

Background

UNICEF is mandated by the United Nations General Assembly to advocate for the protection of children's rights; to help meet the basic needs of children; and to expand children's opportunities to reach their full potential (4). Executive director Ann Veneman explains in the foreword that *The State of the World's Children 2006* is an annual report that focuses on specific issues such as HIV/AIDS, girls' education, nutrition, child labour and early childhood development. She points out that, despite enormous efforts to provide necessary services to all children, millions still die every year across the globe.

The *SOWC 2006* report emphasises the millions of children who have not yet gained from development – the ones who have been 'invisible' or who remain excluded. The report reflects on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as a tool to monitor whether governments are fulfilling their duties to their nations. By monitoring government programmes, the MDGs will contribute to a monitoring and evaluation system that could be particularly effective in a growing country such as South Africa (5). It would mean that, by meeting the MDGs, the lives and prospects of millions of children faced with a myriad of issues that prevent their maximal development would be improved.

It is important to bear in mind that *extreme poverty and hunger, child and maternal mortality, HIV/AIDS, primary education and environmental sustainability* as MDGs are not independent of each other. Each may be described separately but they are in fact interconnected. Although all these issues cannot be addressed at once, it should be borne in mind that they may occur simultaneously in one community.

To capture and illustrate the themes presented in UNICEF's *SOWC 2006* report, two important issues were selected to describe both the 'invisible' and excluded child in this fact sheet. These two issues, which were raised in the UNICEF report, are *demographics* and *nutrition*. Relevant statistics are used to depict children's 'invisibility' and exclusion. Hence international, regional, national and local data are presented in this fact sheet based on the *SOWC 2006* report and the Institute's *Children Count – Abantwana Babalulekile* database. The discussion of the two issues not only identifies who the 'invisible' and excluded children are, but also shed light on *why* they find themselves missing out on development. 

About Children Count – Abantwana Babalulekile



Children Count – Abantwana Babalulekile is a project of the Children's Institute, University of Cape Town. The project is aimed at monitoring the realisation of children's socio-economic rights in South Africa. It presents child-centred data on basic demographics and care arrangements for children, as well as on the areas of education, health (including HIV/AIDS), housing, nutrition, social assistance, and water. This fact sheet is one of a series aimed at informing the government and civil society about the situation of South Africa's children. The project hosts an interactive website of child-centred data on socio-economic indicators, which can be accessed at: www.ci.org.za/childrencount/index.htm

who

are the 'invisible' children?

Why children are 'invisible'?

According to UNICEF's *State of the World's Children (SOWC) 2006* report, millions of children are faced with 'invisibility' when their right to protection is violated. The lack of formal identification; inadequate state protection for children without parental care; the exploitation of children through trafficking and forced labour; and premature entry into adult roles such as marriage, hazardous labour and combat, are all factors that contribute to the risk of children becoming 'invisible'.

Furthermore, children may effectively disappear from official view if their very existence and identity is not legally or formally acknowledged and recorded by the State, or if they are routinely omitted from statistical surveys, policies and programmes. Birth registration is therefore an essential instrument in collecting demographic information about citizens. Demographics can be understood as a short-hand term for 'population characteristics' (6). It includes an array of characteristics such as race, age, gender, income and level of education. It is an essential statistical tool used to monitor change in and progress of a population and is particularly important to use in a developing country such as South Africa.

Birth registration

The Constitution of South Africa provides that, "Every child has the right... to a name and a nationality from birth..." (7). The responsibility of the State in recognising the name and nationality of every child would be meaningless unless there was a corresponding duty of registering their births (8). When a child is born, the first legal acknowledgement of his/her existence in the country takes place through the process of birth registration. This process captures important

demographic information. During the apartheid regime, the vital registration system excluded many South Africans, and more specifically excluded the former TBVC (Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda, and Ciskei) homelands (9).

The *SOWC 2006* argues that, without birth registration, children are 'invisible' in official demographic statistics. Registration enables a child to obtain a birth certificate, which is the most visible official evidence of the child's status as a member of society. Furthermore, a birth certificate

is proof of the child's legal relationship with its parents, and generally determines the child's nationality. The implications of unregistered births are serious – it may cause children to be 'invisible' beyond childhood. Cases of child marriage are impossible to prosecute when the exact age of a child cannot be established without a birth certificate. As adults they may have difficulty applying for a formal job or a passport.

"The value of birth registration is often overlooked due to the continuing lack of awareness that registration is a critical measure to secure the recognition of every person before the law, to safeguard their rights and to ensure that any violation of these rights do not go unnoticed." (10)

Diagram 1 illustrates the percentage of children younger than five years in developing countries who live in rural and urban areas and who were registered at the time of data collection. The data includes children whose birth certificates were seen by the interviewer or whose caregiver said the birth was registered. In comparison to other developing regions, the percentages of registered urban and rural annual births in Eastern and Southern African are dismal – the graph shows that only 44% of children living in urban areas are registered and a mere 28% in rural areas. This means that over half of children living in urban areas and over two-thirds of children living

in rural areas are unregistered and are therefore 'invisible'.

Birth registration take-up in South Africa has improved slightly post 1994 (12) but it is not clear in which age groups the improved registration took place. However, the urban-rural differences cannot be ignored; nor the lack of importance attached to vital registration at grassroots level. Hence available information should be interpreted in the context of access to and availability of services. Without vital documentation such as a birth certificate, access to government services and support, such as social grants, would be severely hampered.

In South Africa, children make up almost half of the population according to the *General Household Survey 2004*. Table 1 indicates that there are just over 18 million children living in South Africa. This constitutes 39% of the country's population (14).

The data in Table 1 shows that 21% of South Africa's children live in KwaZulu-Natal, followed by 18% in the Eastern Cape and a further 15% and 14% in Gauteng and Limpopo respectively. The majority (56%) of these children live in rural areas of the country. Given that economic opportunities are less in rural areas, it is important to create better access to birth registration facilities in these areas. If rural children can be registered

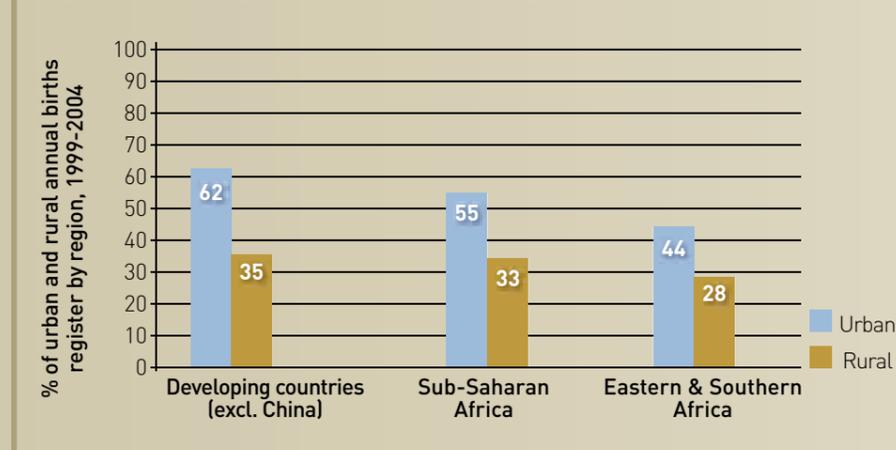
Table 1: The number and proportion of children living in South Africa in 2004, by province

PROVINCE	NUMBER	%
EC	3,215,847	18
FS	1,063,842	6
GT	2,641,736	15
KZN	3,792,375	21
LP	2,615,606	14
MP	1,307,865	7
NC	337,192	2
NW	1,488,646	8
WC	1,558,708	9
SA	18,021,817	100

Source: *General Household Survey 2004*. Analysis by Debbie Budlender (13, 14).

more easily and at less cost to the caregiver, it will remove a barrier to access to government services and support. Better birth registration will also enable the government to draw on more reliable demographic data in planning and budgeting for services.

Diagram 1: Birth registration in the developing world



Source: *The State of the World's Children 2006* (11)

who

are the excluded children?

Why are children excluded?

According to *SOWC 2006*, children are considered as excluded relative to other children if they are deemed at risk of missing out on an environment that protects them from violence, abuse and exploitation, or if they are unable to access essential services and goods in a way that threatens their ability to participate fully in society in the future. Furthermore, exclusion is multi-dimensional and includes deprivation of socio-economic, civil-political rights, which makes its definition much broader than just referring to material poverty, hence nutrition has to be understood in the same context.

Nutrition

The Constitution of South Africa provides that, "Every child has the right... to basic nutrition, shelter, basic health care services and social services..." (15). The first Millennium Development

Goal is aimed at eradicating extreme hunger and poverty. Nutrition is therefore an important aspect to explore in determining whether or not a country is moving towards realising the first MDG.

UNICEF's *SOWC 2006* report explains that mild to moderate and severe forms of under-nutrition in children are closely connected to child death, a high risk of infection and impaired development. The causes and consequences of malnutrition are many and include poverty, ignorance, incorrect feeding practices, infections and infestations, food scarcity or consumption of foods with low nutritional value (16). Access to nutritious food is a major factor influencing a child's health status. An under-nourished child who is exposed to impoverished conditions, HIV/AIDS, or who has not been immunised may be at a greater risk of impaired development than a child with access to proper nutrition. As the majority of children in South Africa live in extreme poverty and are often malnourished, these conditions can speed up the progression to AIDS if the child is HIV positive (17).

To reflect children's nutritional status, the *UNICEF SOWC 2006* report used the indicator of proportion of under-fives who are moderately or severely underweight. The statistics depicted in the report show how many children are excluded from accessing nutritious food necessary for everyday survival and general development.

According to *SOWC 2006*, children under-five years constitute almost 615 million of the world's population. Globally, 26% of this growing population are either moderately or severely underweight. In the least-developed countries, 36% of under-fives are moderately or severely underweight. In developing countries, 27% of under-five-year-olds are either moderately or severely underweight, with malnutrition being a major contributing factor. The UNICEF report notes that over 5.5 million children under the age of five die every year from causes related to malnutrition. Furthermore, malnutrition may not always cause death, but it can inflict lifelong damage on a child's mental and physical health and development.

Approximately 28% of children under-five years living in Sub-Saharan Africa are moderately or severely underweight. In South Africa, 12% of children under-five years are deemed moderately or severely underweight. South Africa's high levels of poverty contribute to caregivers having inadequate access to nutritious food essential to the well-being of their dependants (18). Underweight children generally lack essential nutrients in their diet. An annual report by UNICEF on South Africa in 2005 indicated that more than two-thirds of children who died in 2002 were underweight for their age, while just under half of these children were severely malnourished at the time of their deaths (19).

Table 2 presents some startling evidence on underweight children in South Africa in 2000 and highlights the urgency to address children's access to nutritious food:

- One out of every 10 children (10.3%) was found to be underweight, while 1.4% of children were severely underweight (21).
- The Northern Cape Province has the highest

Table 2: Proportion of children age 1 – 9 years who were underweight and severely underweight in South Africa in 2000

PROVINCE	UNDER-WEIGHT CHILDREN %	SEVERELY UNDER-WEIGHT CHILDREN %
EC	7.1	1.0
FS	14.3	1.0
GT	8.8	0.5
KZN	6.0	0.6
LP	15.0	1.6
MP	4.2	2.1
NC	23.7	8.9
NW	15.3	1.3
WC	8.3	0.9
SA	10.3	1.4

Source: *The National Food Consumption Survey (NFCS)* (20)

percentage of both underweight and severely underweight children in South Africa.

Nutrition is essential for survival and development. As mentioned earlier, exclusion

is multidimensional and therefore requires a holistic approach that would give effect to the realisation of children's socio-economic rights in the country.

Progress towards including children

The post-1994 government has acknowledged the importance of collecting statistics on mortality and causes of death and now prioritises the collection of both. In October 2004 the Department of Health established on-line birth registration systems in three large hospitals in KwaZulu-Natal. Since then, similar facilities have been launched in other large public hospitals in the Limpopo and North West provinces with the aim of reaching all public hospitals in the next three years (22). South Africa has also initiated the Health and Nutrition Programme and Primary School Nutrition Programme.

Limitations

Identifying limitations will help to devise strategies aimed at including and making all children 'visible'. Most of the current available data, both local data and those in the UNICEF *SOWC 2006* report, refer to children under-five years. The report indicated that national aggregates fail to capture the full picture of the exclusion of all children. According to both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Constitution children are all persons under in the age of 18 years, and statistics and data should reflect that.

Thus:

- assessing child well-being on the basis of national data alone is insufficient; and
- household surveys are not providing complete insight into the exclusion that children face and existing administrative data and information systems therefore need to be strengthened.

Recommendations

The recommendations below are a combination of the approaches suggested by *The State of the World's Children 2006* report, as well as the outcomes from a *Child Survival Project* roundtable discussion hosted by the Children's Institute (23).

To meet the Millennium Agenda for children – including the excluded and the 'invisible' – the following is required:

- Integrating a human rights-based approach to development in all existing and future government policies, laws and programmes.
- Increased access to essential services for those children and their families who are currently missing out on these.
- Facilitating children's input in policy and law-

making, budgets, research and programmes – along with donors, international agencies, civil society, the media and the private sector.

- Ensuring that the principles of universality and non-discrimination govern interventions aimed at children.

The recommendations in the UNICEF *SOWC 2006* are divided in four areas aimed at different branches of government and civil society: legislation, finance, programmes and research.

Legislation

- National laws must match international commitments for children.
- Legislation that entrenches or fosters discrimination must be altered or abolished.

Finance

- Legislation and research must be supported by budgetary allocations, institution-building and reform.
- Child-focused budgets must be introduced in all aspects of government budgeting.

Programmes

- Capacity-building empowers marginalised children, families and communities. An example would be to include community-backed feeding schemes in schools and the broader community.
- Package services together to increase access to them.
- Satellite and mobile services can provide services to children in remote or deprived geographic locations.

Research

- A strong research focus on child-centred data will provide child-specific solutions that will aid policy-makers and civil society in the construction of appropriate legislation and programmes.
- Census and household surveys can be immensely useful in enumerating vulnerable children and identifying factors that increase the risk of exclusion.

The incorporation of a child-centred or 'children first' approach in all decision-making concerning children will hold profound benefits to both children and the country as a whole. 

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Contact details

Tasneem Matthews, *Child Survival Project*: Tasneem@rmh.uct.ac.za

Kashifa Abrahams, *Child Survival Project*: Kashifa@rmh.uct.ac.za

Lizette Berry, *Children Count – Abantwana Babalulekile*: Lizette@rmh.uct.ac.za

Children's Institute, University of Cape Town, 46 Sawkins Road, Rondebosch, 7700

Tel + 27 21 689 5404 Fax +27 21 689 8330 E-mail ci@rmh.uct.ac.za Web web.uct.ac.za/depts

Compiled by Tasneem Matthews. Edited by Charmaine Smith and Kashifa Abrahams. Design by Candice Turvey.

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