

Children are dying while the Department of Social Development makes plans

By Alexandra Abrahams MP – DA Shadow Deputy Minister of Social Development

Each year the Department of Social Development (DSD) juggles its reduced budget with ever increasing poverty demands, deliberating on which social ill requires more budget than the other. This year is no different. Budget cuts to critical programmes, mean DSD must separate good intentions from actual results.

Currently, actual results, real impact in the lives of citizens are not being achieved. We see this in headlines such as in last week's Sunday Times which read: *"Hunger kills SA's children"*. In the same newspaper reports titled: *"Where malnutrition lives"*; *"Enough food in SA, but kids are starving"*; and *"Sand has become a meal for starving children"*, reflect the true and disastrous state of our nation – one where children starve to death while the big-bellied corrupt elite dine on caviar.

Covid-19 saw poverty and hunger exacerbated, but we must never forget it was the ANC government's harsh and irrational long lockdown that was the real contributor to crisis level poverty and hunger.

The child support grant is 23% below the food poverty line and 40% below the average cost to feed a child a nutritious diet. Maize meal for breakfast, lunch and supper – if you are lucky to eat anything at all – is not nutritious. The grant is a good intention, but yields no actual results in reducing child stunting and malnutrition if left at R480.

DSD and its entities are still drafting plans and policies, still reprioritizing and restructuring itself, all while children die.

Let's take the maternal support policy. A policy that has been in draft format since I joined the committee in 2019. This would be a solution for pregnant mothers to access life changing nutrition for their unborn children, but also a solution to bridge the gap between births and accessing the child support grant. It would also provide a database that can be shared with Home Affairs in order to expedite birth certificates for the vulnerable.

Another example of DSD planning, while children die, is they are still drafting its policy for integrating and linking child support grant beneficiaries to government's elusive basket of services. These beneficiaries are children not in school or who only attend to receive their one meal for the day. DSD knows exactly who needs more assistance, but with this reduced budget, it may be more convenient to look the other way.

The abuse of the child support grant by adults entrusted with it, is prevalent and is a crime. SASSA does not keep statistics on this grant abuse, with only 23 convictions reported by the Department of Justice since 2015. This needs more attention. If not, it will be like pouring water into a bucket with holes.

We must look at increasing the age limit of this grant if the child is still in school as is done with the foster care grant. The public education system is failing our children. As a result many children repeat grades and are thus over 18 years old. Instead of helping these vulnerable children, the ANC government deals them a second blow, by stripping away their grant and thus stripping away their opportunity to complete school, thereby increasing youth unemployment.

But where do we find the budget to implement the above, and move from good intentions to actual results?

It's found by rooting out wasteful and fruitless expenditure and rooting out corruption.

Over the last three years, almost R7.5 billion of all government expenditure was fruitless and wasteful.

Lastly, Chairperson, as highlighted by the Auditor-General, critical vacancies must be filled for stability. The filling of the vacant DDG for Social Welfare post must be prioritised, as well as the Director-General position, vacant since 2016.

DSD must finalise draft policies, put plans into action, and honour good intentions by committing to actual results.

If not, we will continue to read of children eating sand and wild plants, and scavenging in dumpsites to survive.