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**NATIONAL ASSEMBLY QUESTION FOR WRITTEN REPLY**

**QUESTION NUMBER: 2105**

**DATE OF PUBLICATION IN INTERNAL QUESTION PAPER: 27 MAY 2022**

**INTERNAL QUESTION PAPER NUMBER: 20 - 2022**

**2105. Ms A L A Abrahams (DA) to ask the Minister of Social Development:**

(1) Whether, in the light of certain first-hand accounts contained in *The Sunday Times* newspaper dated 8 May 2022 regarding child malnutrition and hunger (details furnished), she has found that child malnutrition and hunger is at crisis levels in the Republic; if not, what is the position in this regard; if so,

(2) whether her department has provided any support to the families; if not, why not; if so, what (a) is her department’s response and/or position regarding the accounts contained in the articles and (b) is her department’s (i) short-, (ii) medium- and (iii) long-term plan to tackle child malnutrition, hunger and death;

(3) whether she will increase the Child Support Grant to be in line with the food poverty line; if not, what is the position in this regard; if so, on what date;

(4) whether she will furnish the Portfolio Committee on Social Development with a copy of the maternal support policy; if not, what is the position in this regard; if so, on what date;

(5) on what date will the maternal support policy be ready for implementation? NW2510E

**REPLY:**

1. Yes, child malnutrition and hunger have reached crisis levels in the Republic. This can be attributed to the following key drivers of food insecurity and vulnerability:
2. **Economic decline and unemployment** - The slowdown in the national economy has resulted in mass job losses over the past two consecutive years. With no employment and reduced income, millions of people could not afford to buy sufficient food including basic food items.
3. **The outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic** globally and in South Africa led to the necessary introduction of lockdown restrictions. It is pivotal to note that the country entered the COVID-19 pandemic with high levels of unemployment and a decade of weak job creation. The implementation of restrictions had a negative impact on the jobs, and the resultant reduction in household income and the purchasing power of households.
4. **Food price inflation** has significantly increased by 30% or more as observed for certain products within the food basket. Food prices have a major impact on food access in South Africa as households and individuals struggle to purchase even the most basic food items.
5. **Climate change and environmental impact** - Prior to the recent floods that affected provinces such as Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN), Eastern Cape (EC) and North West (NW), the country has also experienced drought in certain areas, which has negatively affected food production. All of these factors have had a severe impact on child nutrition, thus contributing to heightened malnutrition.

The Department is mandated by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa: Section 27 (1) (c) to make provision for the right of access to appropriate social assistance to individuals that are unable to support themselves and their dependants.

The Department has, and continues to provide support to vulnerable individuals in households in the form of social grants including the social relief of distress for families with insufficient means. Our social assistance programme is one of the biggest social protection programmes in the country, currently reaching just over 18.7 million beneficiaries for eligible children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities.

Currently, just over 13.1 million children are beneficiaries of the Child Support Grant (CSG) at R480 per child. The Department has recently gazetted the proclamation of the Social Assistance Amendment Act No. 16 of 2020 and regulations thereof, on 30 and 31 May 2022 respectively. The legislation makes provision for supplementary payments of social grants in the form of top up (50% more on the CSG) Orphans in the care of their relatives are eligible to receive the basic CSG amount at R480 plus a top up at R240 which amounts to R720 in total. By increasing the value of the CSG, we strive to ensure that these children are enabled to achieve their full adult potential by growing in a secure environment that ensures adequate nutrition.

The Department concurs with the research findings from the Child Gauge Report (2020), which identifies exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months following birth of a child as a key protective factor for the child’s survival, cognitive development and protection against Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) in the adult years. Our surveys have repeatedly shown a low prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding, with the most recent South African Demographic Health Survey (SADHS) reporting that just 32% of infants below the age of six months were exclusively breastfed in 2016. Many women stop exclusive breastfeeding prematurely due to food insecurity, a hostile home environment, inadequate support from their workplace and the weaknesses in our health care system.

Poor feeding practices contribute to particularly high levels of stunting (32%) during the first six months of life. These challenges continue into the second year of life, with only 23% of infants aged 6 – 24 months reported to have consumed a minimum acceptable diet (a composite measure of dietary diversity and food frequency). Inappropriate complementary feeding practices are associated with being overweight and obesity in childhood and later in puberty. Formula feeding has been identified as a possible cause of subsequent overweight.

The Department’s (i) short- term plan to tackle child malnutrition, hunger and death is the provision of the Child Support Grant and the Social Relief of Distress to affected families;

In addition, it must be highlighted that malnutrition requires an intersectoral approach, where social grants are only one component of a broader package of services including access to school nutrition programmes and other economic interventions to reduce the cost of food and improve its accessibility.

The (ii) medium plan to tackle child malnutrition, hunger and death includes the expansion of the social protection coverage and benefits to cater for the needs of vulnerable children and adults. The Department has on 01 June 2022 commenced with implementation of CSG Top Up and has since 2020 provided the Special COVID-19 R350 SRD Grant, which will continue until March 2023. Payment of this latest iteration commenced in mid-June 2022. The intention to link the SRD grant beneficiaries to other job creation programmes within and outside government, and sustainable livelihoods and social enterprise opportunities to expand the income generation opportunities for poor households so that they can be empowered to provide for themselves and their children.

This approach of providing social grants is supported worldwide, including by the World Bank and other multilateral institutions, which have confirmed that well-designed social protection systems support incomes and domestic consumption, build human capital and increase productivity”; and

The (iii) long-term plan to tackle child malnutrition, hunger and death includes building resilience in our communities through investing in community-based food systems and building sustainable livelihoods in our communities. In addition, the Department is developing policy proposals for extension of income support to those aged between 18-59, so that households can have a more consistent income support programme to augment the very low child support grant, which is currently below the food poverty line.

1. The Department has acknowledged on many occasions that the value of the Child Support Grant should be increased to at least the food poverty line. However, the implementation of such a policy requires government to make available the necessary budget allocation. At present, such a decision has not been found to be feasible given the fiscal and economic constraints faced by government. However, government has prioritised the needs of orphaned children, by providing the top-up grant of R240 over and above the CSG value of R480, so that these vulnerable children can access R720 per month without needing to wait for the more complex foster child care process.
2. The Maternal Support policy is still in draft form and not ready for submission to Parliament as yet. Once it has followed the approval processes it will be made available.
3. The maternal support policy still requires approval and funding by government before it can be implemented. It is currently in draft form and still needs to be approved by Cabinet, following which it will necessitate legislative amendments to the Social Assistance Act, development of regulations and approval of funding by Cabinet. This process is expected to take a minimum of two years after Cabinet approval.