

Theme: Early Childhood Development and Social Cohesion

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Families and inequality

1. The major issues helping to explain structural poverty and persistent, deep inequalities:

The nature of family formation contributes significantly to persistent poverty among women and children, and to persistent inequalities between women and men.

Many households are not formed around a marital couple and nuclear households are not the norm in South Africa. This is particularly evident in African families. In comparison to other groups in the country, marriage rates are far lower among Africans and rates of non-marital childbirth are higher. In the absence of marriage or the cohabitation of parents, children typically live in households with their mother. Temporary labour migration, which separates parents from children, also remains a persistent feature of African households. Most labour migrants continue to be men (although female labour migration has also increased over the past two decades).

The nature of family formation means that African women are more likely than African men to live in households with children; and African children are far more likely than other children to live only with their mother and without their father, or with neither parent.

Research conducted for this focus area shows that, as in many countries, the very large majority of children in South Africa receive primary physical care (they are fed, bathed, taken to school, helped with homework, taken care of when ill, etc.) from women. When children live

About this brief

This brief was commissioned by the Mandela Initiative to help inform a synthesis report on its work since the 2012 national conference, *Strategies to Overcome Poverty and Inequality*, organised by the University of Cape Town. The MI provides a multi-sectoral platform to investigate and develop strategies to overcome poverty and reduce inequality in South Africa. While the Nelson Mandela Foundation is a key partner, the Initiative has relied on collaborations between academics and researchers, government, business leaders, civil society, the church and unions.

The synthesis report serves as a framework for reporting on the work of the MI at a national gathering on 12 – 14 February 2018 at the University of Cape Town. The MI *Think Tank* has identified the objectives for the gathering as:

- to anchor the contributions of the MI within an analysis of the current South African political and economic context;
- to share the recommendations emanating from the MI-related work streams at a policy/strategic level to advance the goal of eliminating poverty and reducing inequality;
- to critically engage with the potential impact of the recommendations on eliminating structural poverty and inequality; and
- to discuss ways of promoting popular conversations and debate about what needs to be done to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality, beyond the MI.

The synthesis report aims to assist participants to prepare for the national gathering. The report drew on findings from the sectoral research projects of Think Tank members; the MI's *Action Dialogues*; a report on an MI *Community of Practice workshop* with research chairs from different universities to identify cross-cutting themes emerging from the MI's *research programme*; and the work programmes of others who have expressed an interest in contributing to the goals of the MI.

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with their mother, then the mother is almost always the primary physical caregiver. African children are less likely than other children to live with their mother (partly because of labour migration as well as higher rates of maternal mortality), and they are therefore more likely to receive primary care from other women, and mostly from their grandmother.

Although women are almost always the primary caregivers of children, the responsibility for the financial care of children is not borne disproportionately by men. Among African children, mothers are far more likely than fathers to provide financial support for a child's schooling. Rather than a gender division of labour in the provision of care particularly to African children, both the primary physical care and the financial support of children are most often provided by women.

2. The main reasons for the persistence of poverty and inequality:

i) Households that include relatively more women and children are over-represented among the poor. This is partly because women and men continue to face unequal opportunities in the labour market. Women are far less likely than men to be employed, and they are more likely to be unemployed, and particularly when we include those who are not (or have given up) actively searching for work. Men are not only more likely than women to be employed but, among the employed, men earn significantly more than women.

An important factor accounting for these gender differences is women's responsibility for childcare, and caring labour more generally, which limits their ability to search for employment, and the type of employment they access (including whether employment is full-time or part-time). Occupations also continue to be sex-typed, and the type of work typically associated with 'women's work' tends to be lower paid work.

In the context of very low marriage rates, gender differences in labour market outcomes are not offset in the household through the sharing (even if unequally) of resources between women and men. Rather, many women, and particularly African women, live in households without men. Given that women are more likely than men to live with children, women typically share their lower income with more dependants. Although the receipt of social grants among women (and children) is high, income from social grants is considerably lower than income from employment, and it is typically not sufficient to lift women and children out of poverty (except at a very low threshold).

ii) Families are sites where economic disadvantage is reproduced.

Research conducted for this focus area highlights one mechanism through which economic disadvantage in the family is reproduced: through children's acquisition of human capital. Persistent race differences in educational outcomes in post-apartheid South Africa are very well documented: in comparison to other children, African children are significantly less likely to maintain grade for age and they are more likely to drop out of school. These differences are explained partly by the poor performance of schools which the majority of African pupils attend. But the socio-economic characteristics of children's households also influence children's progress through school.

African children (10 – 17 years) spend significantly less time on learning activities than other children, and particularly outside school hours (in the afternoons and evenings of a weekday and during the weekend). This is because African children live in poorer households (race differences in time allocations to learning are not evident among children with the same socio-economic status). It does

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not appear that children in poorer households spend less time on learning because they face more constraints on their time (African children spend as much time on leisure as other children, and they are more likely than other children to evaluate their day as not busy enough). Rather, poverty appears to influence the encouragement and opportunities for children to study in the home environment. In poorer households, for example, there is less physical space to study, access to books and computers is more limited, and children may receive less input with homework from parents (and particularly fathers) who are less likely to be resident in the household.

3. Recommendations at a macro policy/strategic level:

Concrete recommendations or initiatives, as reflected in the National Development Plan for example, concern nutrition programmes for mothers and children; and early childhood development (ECD) programmes.

Other broad policy recommendations include: public employment programmes with a specific focus on women; security of tenure for communal farmers and particularly women; and an urban development policy to accommodate migrants.

4. Potential impact of these recommendations in eliminating persistent poverty and inequality:

Effective nutrition and ECD programmes are important strategies to reduce both the short-term and the longer-term implications of poverty and economic disadvantage. ECD programmes could also relieve the child-care commitments of mothers, making it easier for women to participate in the labour market.

However, these recommendations locate the care of children firmly with mothers. There seems to be little recognition of the responsibilities of fathers, and how the contributions of fathers to children can be encouraged (through the provision of paternity leave, and social education programmes for example) or 'enforced' (through an effective maintenance system).

Urban development policy also needs to recognise more explicitly the importance of housing in urban areas to accommodate not only migrants but also their families, and the role of the physical home environment for the well-being of children.

For more information on the Mandela Initiative:

