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**Joint media statement issued by DGMT and the Equality**

**Collective: A new social compact must put children at the centre of South Africa's national development. Here's why.**

When political parties agreed to form a Government of National Unity (GNU), they committed to an inclusive national dialogue with political parties, labour, business, civil society and other sectors. The goal is to develop a 'social compact' that would enable South Africa to meet the aspirations of the National Development Plan (NDP) by 2030.

Adequate investment in early childhood development (ECD) is the most effective action a country can take to break cycles of intergenerational poverty. This means ensuring children attend quality early learning programmes, are safe, cared for and have access to nutritious food so that their bodies and brains can grow and develop.

However, some of the gains we've made since 1994 to improve the lives of children are starting to reverse. Child poverty and child mortality have **increased sharply**, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. There's no time to waste. With just six years left to meet the NDP targets, we need to accelerate our investment in children as the development of our nation depends on it.

This is why a coalition of NGOs working in the ECD sector are calling on the GNU to prioritise the development and well-being of children (0-18



years) in the proposed national dialogue so that we emerge with a social compact that places children at the centre of national development.

The coalition includes Ilifa Labantwana, the Equality Collective, SmartStart, Grow Great and the DG Murray Trust (DGMT).

“We need a common agenda for children that can act as a powerful rallying call to take South Africa forward,” says David Harrison, CEO of the DG Murray Trust.

“We are not going to achieve the NDP’s targets of economic growth and productivity if we don’t put children at the centre of our national development agenda. We can’t increase employment rates without building human capabilities, we won’t see more skilled workers entering the labour market without quality education and we won’t see productivity without food security,” Harrison explains.

The coalition has identified five opportunities that must be part of a national social compact going forward.

## **#1 Back crucial ECD reforms**

Children need nurturing care during their first 1 000 days of life in the form of adequate nutrition, opportunities for early learning, good healthcare, responsive caregiving, safety and protection. However, there are large gaps in accessing these fundamental pillars of early childhood development which is why the sector has long been lobbying for reforms

that would improve the accessibility and quality of ECD for all children. This intensive lobbying has culminated in the recent publication of the [People's Manifesto for Early Childhood Development](#) which outlines the systemic changes and coordinated effort needed to boost the sector. Almost 6 000 people, 170 organisations and four political parties (Democratic Alliance, RISE Mzansi, BOSASA and ActionSA) have already said they support the manifesto.

## **#2 Businesses and government must work together to reduce the cost of nutritious food**

Adequate nutrition is not just a need; it's a child's right. Even though we live in a country that produces enough food, high levels of poverty and inequality coupled with the rising cost of food mean far too many people suffer the consequences of child malnutrition. One in four children under the age of five are stunted because of chronic malnutrition. We need to make nutritious food more affordable through the proposed [double-discounting](#) of 10 high-protein foods. These foods were chosen because they could provide high nutritional value at the lowest cost, especially for families living below the Food Poverty Line. The proposal championed by DGMT and Grow Great asks food manufacturers and retailers to forego their profits on at least one product label of the 10 food items and for the government to support this proposal by providing a rebate to retailers and manufacturers.

### **#3 Extend nutrition support to all early learning programmes**

If children don't eat well, they can't grow well and learn well. The government currently provides a R17 per child per day subsidy to registered early learning programmes of which just R6.80 is intended for nutrition. But the subsidy reaches too few children and is too low. This is why the government must provide nutrition support to all children attending early learning programmes, including those that are not yet registered.

### **#4 Support the Children's Amendment Bill**

The Children's Amendment Bill is a crucial piece of legislation that will unlock an enabling legal framework for the provision of holistic, well-funded, inclusive and quality ECD in the country. Passing this draft law must be a priority for the seventh Parliament before the end of 2025. Not only does it streamline the registration process for early learning programmes, but it also mandates municipalities to do their part by ensuring the availability and maintenance of ECD facilities. Many of the barriers to registration lie at local government level where land-use requirements (zoning), excessive costs for building plans, high fees and onerous health and safety requirements all pose hurdles for ECD practitioners. Passing the bill will make a difference in improving access to early learning in some of the country's poorest communities. However, there is still work to be done to ensure that municipalities guarantee an enabling environment for ECD provisioning.

## **#5 Work together to accelerate delivery for children**

Placing children at the centre of national development and fast-tracking the delivery of services requires the combined effort of government, civil society and business. Responding to the needs of children does not fit neatly into the mandate of a single state department, instead it cuts across several departments, with civil society playing a crucial role in plugging gaps in delivery. What we need now is political commitment, a common agenda and a whole-of-society response.

“As we build up to the proposed national dialogue, we hope that children themselves are given the chance to participate in the discussions to shape a new social compact for the benefit of the entire country,” Harrison concludes.

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**This statement was issued by DGMT, the Equality Collective, Ilifa Labantwana, SmartStart and Grow Great. For queries or interview requests, please contact DGMT Communications Specialist Corné Kritzinger on 060 679 7964 or send an email to [corne@dgmt.co.za](mailto:corne@dgmt.co.za).**

