

# **UNICEF. (1988) *Children on the front line: The impact of apartheid, destabilization and warfare on children in southern and South Africa.* New York City: United Nations Children's Fund.**

## **OVERVIEW**

### **SOUTH AFRICAN CHILDREN**

Ever since the 1976 Soweto revolt, black children in South Africa have been at the cutting edge of their country's history. They began by protesting an inadequate and racist educational system and, in subsequent years, fought a broader front for political change that would both stiffen the resolve of their elders, and lead to the transformation of the society in which they were trapped. There are few countries in the world, at any time in history (with the possible exception of Palestinian children today), where children have found themselves so clearly in the forefront of a determined and violent struggle for change or where so much historical weight has been placed on such young shoulders.

### **PHYSICAL SURVIVAL**

South Africa is one of few countries worldwide to export food in considerable quantities. Yet, it is also a country in which there is widespread hunger and where diseases associated with malnutrition take a heavy toll in deaths.

In 1968, when kwashiorkor (malnutrition) was last a notifiable disease in South Africa, there were nearly 11,000 cases reported:

- \* 9,800 (89%) of these were African.
- \* 1,000 were 'coloured.'
- \* 12 were Asian.
- \* 7 were white.
- \* Whites...who constituted 17% of the population, accounted for less than 0.1% of the kwashiorkor.

### **SIE MACHT SICH NICHT WISSENDICH ("You make yourself not to know.")**

The statistical information a society chooses to collect or to ignore about itself speaks volumes about priorities and politics within it...Regarding South Africa, it is worth noting that the society has developed three different ways of 'making itself not to know' about uncomfortable truths:

\* Not collecting data. Statistics on infant mortality of white, 'coloured,' and Asian babies are carefully gathered but there is no systematic measurement of...African mortality.

\* Discouraging people from reporting certain embarrassing facts. By removing kwashiorkor from the list of 'notifiable' diseases in 1968, the government removed the legal obligation on the medical profession to inform the authorities of all such cases.

\* Declaring certain areas to be invisible for the purposes of gathering national statistics. Thus, the creation of 'black national states' out of the impoverished rural reserves...in the five years after 1976 did wonders for South Africa's tuberculosis figures. (pp. 40-41)

According to the Second Carnegie Inquiry (1982):

The resettlement camps within the homelands appear to be particularly hazardous areas in which to raise children. In Tsweletswele...for example, as many as 10% of the pre-school children surveyed had clinically definable signs of kwashiorkor, well above the 3% national average.

But the problem is not confined to the resettlement camps or even to the 'homelands.' In the Stellenbosch district of the western Cape, an area noted for wealthy farms, a survey of 1,800 young children in 21 coloured primary schools finds that at least 21% of them suffer from both stunting and malnutrition.

The evidence strongly suggests that for many people in the rural areas, diet is much worse today than it was for their grandparents...Take a case from a farm in Stellenbosch of a three and a half year old child whose daily diet was found as follows:

- o Breakfast: Slice of brown bread and margarine; coffee with half teaspoon of sugar and Cremora.
- o Lunch: Coffee with half teaspoon of sugar and Cremora.
- o Supper: Coffee with half teaspoon of sugar and Cremora.
- o Between meals: Dry bread. (pp. 41-42)

...there is evidence of improvement in some places, but in other areas things have got worse...on the east Rand and in the eastern Cape, the infant mortality rate, after falling significantly, appears to have risen in the past few years...Both 'coloured' and African children are between 14 and 15 times more likely than their white compatriots to die before their fifth birthdays. (p. 45)

## **DISEASE**

The vulnerability of children to bad sanitation, inadequate water supplies, poor nutrition, and a disorganized household is evident in the incidence of gastroenteritis...the most common cause of death in the 'coloured' community and the second most common among Africans.

## **DEATH RATE DUE TO GASTROENTERITIS**

- \* Whites: 4 of every 100,000.
- \* Africans: 88 of every 100,000.
- \* Coloureds: 176 of every 100,000.

## **HOUSING**

Devastating diseases among young children such as gastroenteritis, measles, and tuberculosis, are often exacerbated by the poor socio-economic conditions under which so many people in South Africa live. The malnutrition epidemic weakens resistance to disease. But children's health is also tightly connected to housing conditions and the general environment in which they live.

This table indicates racial differences in housing availability:

Racial Category	Surplus/ Shortage of Units	Number of Houses Built, 1983-1985
White	37000	172000
Coloured	-52000	62000
Asian	-44000	37000
African	-583000	41000

...there are some conditions even worse than the single rooms in which extended families may have to live. Compounds, built to house workers only, without families, have been part of the South African political economy ever since the discovery of diamonds and gold in the 19th century...A century later saw huge new 'labour batteries' continuing to be built...In Cape Town, one researcher found that 'there are forty men to a room or dormitory, no cooking facilities are provided and the noise and crowds, especially on the weekends are, according to the men, difficult to tolerate. At least twenty women and many children share the same space...' (pp. 48-50)

### **SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF HOUSING CONDITIONS**

Although wisdom and exceptional human relations are found in some African societies, the reinforcing pressures of intense overcrowding, sickeningly impoverishing living environments, and migratory labor devastate family and individual well-being. Family disorganization manifests itself in a number of ways.

...parents, whether living together under the intense pressures of survival in the townships or separated for most of the time by the requirements of migratory labour system, have problems relating to each other in a way that binds them together as a unit of mutual support, both as partners and as parents.

How does one maintain an extended family in a one- or two-bedroom house? The grandmother comes to be regarded in many overcrowded homes as a nuisance or exploited as a source of money (pensions) or as an unpaid domestic worker or child-minder.

Pressures on males, who have virtually no status in the political economy, get absorbed by being transferred into violence, much of it against wives or girlfriends, or as drunkenness. (pp. 50-51)

These variables clearly affect children. Overcrowding and the lack of privacy often lead to incest. Little is published about these and other forms of child abuse, but those living within black townships recognize these significant challenges.

The inferiority complexes of the father—and/or mother—figure engendered by perceptions of powerlessness also lead to loss of respect by children for their parents. It is not easy for young children to understand why their father must accept being called 'boy' by the boss' child who may be their own age...Parents are often perceived as willing participants...anger...spills over into anger against older generations...implications for children in terms of role-modeling. Peer groups become the only point of reference.

In such an environment many children seldom experience love or trust or respect. How then do they learn to love, trust and respect others? And what does this imply as to their future ability to be good

parents or responsible citizens in a free society? (pp. 51-52)

In "Community of the Careless" (South African Outlook, April, 1970) Anthony Barker asks

Deprived of their natural guides, children of migrants grow through an insecure, uncertain childhood to an adult life whose sole preoccupation may be to escape the system. There must be a harvest of aggression, with the weeds of violence growing rank within it. The dreadful society is the community of the careless, of those who, treated like boys behave like boys; of those who, having no responsibilities laid upon them owe none to any man. In that chill climate will there be any place for trust? Any hope for human intercourse at all? (p. 51)

## **DETAINMENT**

Johnny, writes Archbishop Desmond Tutu, is real. He used to be a lively youngster, full of life and fun until he fell into the clutches of the security system of the apartheid regime. It is not quite clear what the police did to Johnny. Perhaps it does not matter any longer. What is certain is that he went in a lively, healthy and normal youngster and he came out a walking human vegetable. The police did something to him. It is quite important for the world to know that Johnny is no figment of a feverish imagination. I saw him, with my own eyes in Khotso House, Johannesburg. (Barker, p. 59)

An abhorrent dossier on child suffering under a past State of Emergency was released by the Detainees Parents' Support Committee (DPSC) as part of a 'Free the Children' campaign. Over a five-month period, the DPSC

estimates 8,800 children have been detained...and reports numerous allegations of their having been brutalized and tortured. A picture emerges from the report of seemingly random detentions and assaults designed to instill fear of involvement into the children...The reports notes a high proportion of children among ex-detainees referred for treatment because of physical or mental suffering during their incarceration. (London's Weekly Mail, p. 60)

## **IMPLICATIONS**

1. There is nothing more urgent in South Africa today, the UNICEF report concludes, than to find solutions ensuring that all her children can grow to maturity as human beings whole and free.
2. One must not pretend that these recorded sufferings of children do not also exist in American cities, in other parts of Africa, and around the world. Greed and selfish power-seeking, with a wanton disregard for the rights of the poor, exist among all races and nationalities, devastating families and dehumanizing children in deprived environments behind the glitter and billboards of the most fashionable cities. Only people and societies honest about their own slums, greed, prejudice and corruption will be really able to help the children of South Africa.
3. Still, the physical, economic, and social, and spiritual needs of South African young people, with those around the world, must be attended. Such concern, if genuine, demands moral and spiritual re-assessment and renewal.

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