

The 2013/14 National Budget – What does this mean for children?

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Introduction

Childline South Africa monitors the budget speech annually in order to assess its impact on children and families, and as the well-being of children is directly linked to the well-being of the families and communities in which they live.

This year's budget appears to have two major foci – both of which are critically important for families and communities, and therefore, if expenditure on these 2 identified issues is successfully implemented, the well-being of children will be substantially improved.

Two major budget foci:

1. The implementation of the National Development Plan (NDP): for those who have worked through the NDP, successful implementation of the plan will substantially improve the lives of all South Africans, including children. However unless budget is allocated to the implementation of its 10 principle objectives, the plan will remain a “paper tiger”. Allocation of budget to the plan is therefore welcomed.
2. Economic Development which is broad based, more inclusive and benefits the millions of disadvantaged unemployed South African, particularly unemployed youth. Again – the well-being of families and communities is inextricably linked to the opportunity to work and earn a living. Research also indicates that, apart from potential deficits in care experienced by children living in households in which there is no employed adult, or no stable income, children in these households are more vulnerable to all forms of abuse – physical and emotional, as well as sexual abuse.

Furthermore, where there are high levels of unemployment in communities, youth do not have a future orientation or life plan, so the motivation to work at school means low, as they do not anticipate a job at the end of the educational road, and the motivation to delay instant gratification for future greater good, is simply not there.

So all the provisions in the budget that relate to job creation and economic empowerment are welcomed enthusiastically.

Specific provisions relating directly to the welfare, education and health of children

1. The increase in grants is welcomed, although once again this does not keep pace with inflation and the elderly, the disabled, and those caring for children either as unemployed parents/caregivers or foster parents will be hard pressed to sustain their present (and in many instances low) standard of living. The phasing out of the means test for the old age pension is also a positive as the means test is expensive to apply for both the state and the pensioner who has to provide the supporting documentation when applying. The state will be able to tax back from those who have private incomes as well as receive the state pension and therefore recover a portion of this financial outlay.

It must be noted that many grandparents already shoulder the burden of care for orphaned grandchildren, and the meagre increase in the foster care and child support grants (R20 each) will mean that for many elderly caregivers, a greater portion of their own pension will be diverted to support children in the family, as well as the unemployed. This despite the fact the Ex-Minister of Social Development, Zola Skweyiya, made it clear that the old age pension was meant to support the elderly – not children.

2. Expenditure on health care – the Minister made mention of the National Health Insurance plan and the pilot roll out of this in 10 districts. The lack of detail makes it difficult to comment on increased health expenditure and what is allocated to the development and implementation of this project. The assurance that this would not place new revenue demands on taxpayers in this financial year came as a relief to many tax payers. However in the speech itself (not in the official version of the budget) Minister Gordhan noted that the possibility of an increased demand in the longer term, remained a future decision.
3. Education continues to be a major budget item and this year sees increased allocations to higher education institutions as well as technical high schools. This will contribute to skills development in older children and youth, thus expanding their future opportunities with regard to employment.

Support for social services

The announcement of increased transfers to Non-Profit Organisations and increasing the Social Work workforce is very welcome. Again one needs the detail of how this money will be allocated. One would like to avoid the previous loss of the millions of rand that occurred with the allocation of money for the development of sustainable livelihoods to non-government and community based organisations, without a thorough assessment of their capacity for managing transfers of this nature.

Justice

There have been many very recent calls for increased spending and efficiency in the Criminal Justice System, with the focus on the murder and rape of Anene Booysens and reporting on other horrendous crimes against children. Increased budget allocations were made to the various departments in the CJS. The Thuthuzela Centres for the management of victims of sexual crimes were specifically mentioned for budget allocation. Whilst this is welcomed, there is an urgent need to ensure that a portion of this funding is allocated to direct victim services and support. A victim who, through the provision of victim support services, is coping or learning to cope with the trauma of sexual assault will be better able to cope with the rigours of giving evidence, thus contributing to higher levels of conviction.

Corruption

A substantial and frank comment on the need to curb corruption was made towards the end of the budget speech with a clear focus on corruption in procurement processes and government officials who do business with government. Indeed – if corruption could be curbed or reduced, this would

free up significant resources which could then be allocated to making the national budget more child and family friendly.

Conclusion

Overall the budget is a good one for children – one could wish for more, but given the economic situation and the huge numbers of children within the grants system, one's expectations must be within the boundaries imposed by the reality of increasing needs but decreasing resources in real terms.