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Nutrition and Early Childhood Development

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Introduction and background

Early Childhood Development (ECD) and nutritional support are at the forefront of the [National Integrated ECD Policy of 2015](#). The lack of proper nutrition can result in poor health and poor early educational outcomes for children, which in turn contribute to persistent inequality ([Ilifa Labantwana, 2017](#)). Nutrition guidelines for ECD centres are well gazetted by the National Department of Health. However, malnutrition and stunting have become a serious concern and have altogether been exacerbated by COVID-19 in the South African context ([South African Child Gauge, 2020](#)). In December 2020, about 50% of young children had no access to food due to the closure of ECD centres. Malnutrition and stunting arise from the social issues of poverty and inequality ([Statistics South Africa, 2020](#)). The statistics have revealed that about 30% of South African children are living below the food poverty line, with the ECD subsidy reaching only about 10% of children. Nutritional support and access to ECD subsidies for children from birth to five years are therefore critical to strengthen children's

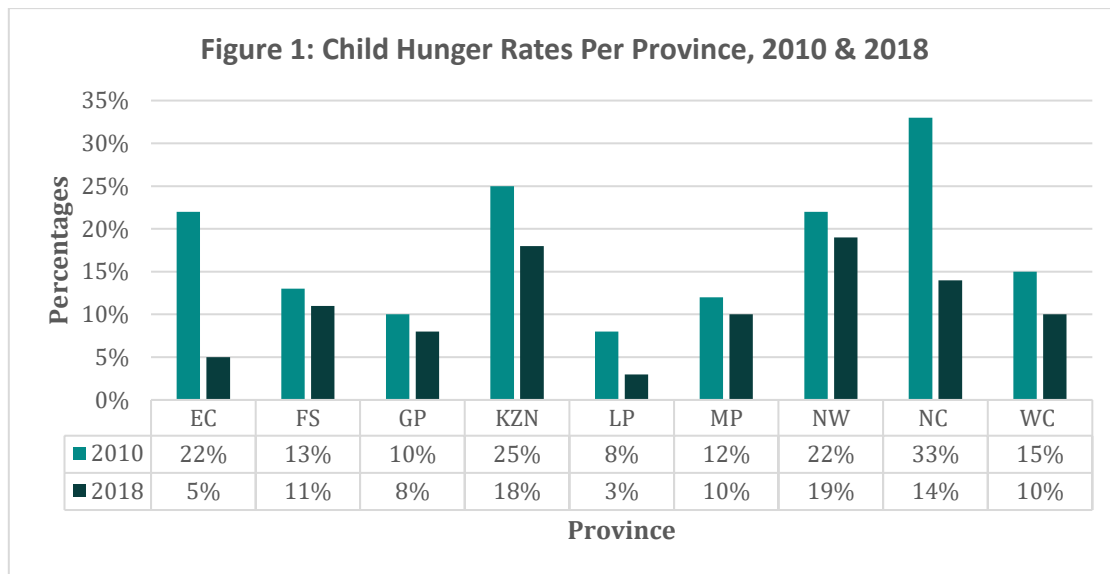
cognitive development and achievement of developmental milestones.

The prevalence of malnutrition in South Africa

Nutrition is an important component of children's health and is essential for their cognitive development ([WHO, n.d.](#)). Good nutrition means healthy eating through a balanced diet inclusive of vegetables, fruits, balanced iron and vitamins. Malnutrition, on the other hand, refers to a lack of nutritious foods or of a balanced diet. The indicators of adequate nutrition in younger children involve weight and height measurements. The South African Child Gauge (2020) estimates that about 27% or 1 in 4 young children are malnourished and less than the average height for their age due to a lack of access to nutritious foods in early childhood. About 13% or 1 in 8 children are overweight.



Figure 1 shows child hunger rates, which are an indication of food insecurity, in South African provinces between 2010 and 2018.



Source: [Hall & Sambu \(2010 & 2018\)](#)

Overall rates of child hunger in South Africa decreased from 17% to 10% between 2010 and 2018, with the biggest changes observed in the Eastern Cape, Limpopo and Northern Cape. While the child hunger data does not reveal the dietary diversity among children, children can be well-fed and not hungry but still be malnourished. Malnourished mothers are more likely to give birth to malnourished children, meaning that malnutrition is a cycle (SA Child Gauge, 2020). Parental involvement in ECD is thus more important than ever.

Effects of the pandemic

The [National Income Dynamics Study \(NIDS\) – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey \(CRAM\)](#) found that “Approximately 400 000 children went hungry in every wave of NIDS-CRAM between May 2020 and May 2021” ([Spaull et al, 2021, 7](#)). A contributing factor was the

reduction in the number of children receiving school meals during the pandemic due to school closures and rotational time tabling. The NIDS-CRAM report *Food insecurity in South Africa: Evidence from NIDS-CRAM Wave 5* ([van der Berg, Patel, & Bridgman, 2021](#)) indicates that in spite of various measures such as social grant top-ups, food relief in the form of food parcels and efforts by non-governmental organisations, since the start of the pandemic in South Africa, hunger and food insecurity “has settled at a permanently higher equilibrium level in comparison to pre-2020 levels” ([van der Berg et al., 10](#)). The report concludes that policy makers should be aware of measures needed to address child hunger. This is particularly important for children from vulnerable households in the current socio-economic context and given the tragic consequences of enduring hunger for stunting and children’s long-term development.

A Nutritional Support Programme

The Unlimited Child

[The Unlimited Child \(TUC\)](#) is working in collaboration with JET in the [Anglo American South Africa \(AASA\) Education Programme](#) to deliver quality ECD programmes, including nutritional support, across communities adjacent to the four AASA Business Units (Kumba, Platinum, De Beers and Coal SA). TUC

parents includes ECD centre-based programmes which teaches parents about stimulation activities they can do with their children that are aligned to the [National Early Learning Development Standards \(NELDS\)](#).

is involved in providing porridge-based meals to the AASA ECD sites and provided social relief in the form of food parcels at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nutritional support is inextricably linked to parental involvement. Since many parents or caregivers in South Africa face extreme conditions and stressors, they require support. TUC support to

Additional resources for Nutritional Support

- [National Nutrition Awareness 2012 resources](#) Theme 'Eat more vegetables and fruit every day'
- **National Department of Health**
 - The DoH has enacted the [Nutrition Guidelines for Early Childhood Development Centres](#) (2016) to provide a safe and healthy food environment for children under five years.
- **National Department of Social Development (DSD) ECD subsidy**
 - [The DSD provides nutritional support to registered ECD sites through the ECD subsidy.](#)
 - The subsidy is available per child per day for children 0-4 years whose caregivers pass an income means test.
 - A meal is given per child for R15 per day three times a day.
 - The limitation of the ECD subsidy is that unregistered centres is significantly excluded from accessing the subsidy.
- **Department of Basic Educations' National School Nutrition Programme:** Recognising the importance of adequate nutrition, the NSNP aims to enhance the learning capacity of learners through the provision of a healthy meal at schools.
- **The World Health Organisation's Nurturing Care Framework** includes the provision of adequate nutritional support for younger children.

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