

National Child Protection Week: Is awareness creation enough?

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The annual National Child Protection Week, which started in 1997 as an initiative of the Minister of Social Development, will be celebrated from 29 May to 5 June this year to promote awareness of the rights of our country's children. It is also commemorated to create awareness in communities about the need to protect children from any form of abuse and neglect, violence and exploitation.

The rights of our children are enshrined in the Constitution in accordance with the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child. In all these documents, the principles of child rights are the same, namely that the rights of children must be upheld, promoted and that children in particular must be made aware of their rights, which include the right to protection. However, making children aware of their rights does not mean that these rights will be realised.

Children's rights can only be upheld if the child's right is prioritised in any decisions made about them. Structures must also be put in place to promote and protect these rights in society. The reality in our country, however, is that the implementation of the rights of children is not necessarily central to the decisions and actions taken about them.

South Africa has signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is based on four principles in particular. Two of these principles, namely the right to survival and the right to protection, are important to our local context. The former principle – the right to survival – is strongly linked to the right to nutrition, which is enshrined as a constitutional right of the child in Section 28 of our Constitution. But the right to food is a right that was not always upheld, even before the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2019, for example, the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund found that 14% of the country's children go to bed hungry every night, i.e., about 2,5 million children.

In conclusion ...

Educating children, parents and communities about what children's rights are is an important step in raising awareness. But we also know that knowledge about a topic does not necessarily mean effective implementation. Thus, even if all children have a good understanding of what their rights are, it will not ensure that they are upheld. For that, the rights of children should be central in any decisions that politicians make about the child. Furthermore, structures set up by the state to protect children should be continuously and closely monitored for effective implementation. If the authorities do not actively promote and protect the rights of our children, awareness of children's rights will remain just that – awareness without realisation.

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