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Care Reform Summit

Concept Note

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One Child One Family - Hope and Homes for Children,
South Africa is hosting a Child Care Reform Summit
on 12 – 13 November 2025.

Objectives of the summit

- Revisit and secure the re-commitment of stakeholders to take all necessary system-strengthening measures to establish a developmental family- and child-centred national child care and protection system as per our treaty, sustainable development, and policy undertakings to ensure every child lives in a family and not an institution where they receive the nurturing care and protection they need to thrive.
- Take stock of the progress made to date, the foundations that are in place, and the work that remains to be done to fulfil our shared commitments.
- Develop a time-bound roadmap of measures and actions that must be taken to ensure progressive fulfilment of our undertakings by 2030.
- Establish the institutional mechanisms to provide leadership, coordination, and technical support to ensure the development of a detailed implementation plan, its resourcing, execution and monitoring and reporting on progress.

Background and context

South Africa has committed to advancing a rights-based, child-centred development agenda. This means it recognises that building inclusive human capital development to drive transformation requires prioritising and investing public resources to secure the equal and optimal development of all children, especially those who have been historically marginalised. It has, to this end, committed to establishing a developmental child care and protection system that ensures all children live with families who receive the support they need to provide the care children need to develop their potential.

The evidence is clear. Children's development depends on receiving nurturing, responsive care that includes basic services such as health, birth registration, nutrition, education, protection, and having a quality, responsive relationship with their parents, other primary caregivers, and other children in families and communities. Healthy, responsive relationships are critical. Children who don't receive responsive care, regardless of their material circumstances, are at high risk of poor development



South Africa

Children placed in institutions, irrespective of their access to basic services, grow poorly and fail to thrive because of the absence of nurturing care from a primary caregiver. i

Results from 75 studies across 19 countries confirm that children raised in orphanages experience delayed physical and cognitive development, including their IQ, language, speech and vocabulary, and physical growth (height, weight and head circumference). In addition, it negatively impacts their mental health, social and emotional regulation and health, and raises the risk of inappropriate emotional and interpersonal behaviour. ii

“Building human capital for achieving inclusive, sustainable development depends on eliminating orphanages and other institutional care facilities, placing all children within families, and ensuring they receive responsive, nurturing care from parents or other primary caregivers.”

Since transitioning to democracy, the government has recognised that transformation depends on developing the untapped human capital potential residing in the country’s greatest asset – its large and growing population of children. It has been further recognised that this, in turn, depends on children living in families that provide nurturing, responsive care.

The South African government has, therefore, since the adoption of the first post-Apartheid White Paper on Social Development in 1997, committed to a developmental child care and protection system that invests significantly in strengthening families by providing them with support and services to enable them to provide nurturing, responsive care, and ensuring that children are not removed from families.

Where removal is essential, there is an unequivocal commitment to ensure they are not placed in orphanages or other institutions, but well-resourced, family-like settings that provide quality, nurturing, responsive care.

The commitment to a child- and family-centred developmental protection system has been reiterated and amplified in subsequent policies and laws, including the Children’s Act No 38 of 2005 (as amended), the National Integrated ECD Policy (2015), the National Child Care and Protection Policy (2019) and the White Paper on Families (2021).

As the country enters the last medium-term planning period before it must account for the SDGs, it is not on track to achieve global, regional and national development goals. This is because it has not developed the required inclusive human capital.

Despite increasing investments in health and education, South Africa is losing approximately 60 per cent of its potential human capital, and, of greater concern, has not made inroads into these losses for more than a decade. The Human Capital Index (HCI) – a measure of the extent to which a country develops the potential of its child population by the time they exit childhood at the age of 18 years- has not changed in the past ten years.

Children will today, as was the case ten years ago, only develop 43% of their potential by the age of 18 years, compared to a global average of 56%.iii The losses start early and accumulate across the life course. In 2024, only 42% of children enrolled in Early Learning Programmes are developmentally on track. The numbers are significantly higher for those not in ELPs. 82% of young children who are not enrolled in ECD centres are not on track. And it remains low.



The World Bank attributes the loss of development potential to deficits in nurturing care in children's care environments. It estimates that 75% of children in lower- and middle-income countries, including South Africa, do not receive minimally adequate nurturing care to support the development of human capital.^{iv}

The nurturing care deficit is, in considerable measure, a result of the slow progress in establishing the developmental child care and protection system that South Africa committed to in 1997. As a result, many vulnerable families and parents do not access the services and support in the combinations required to meet their children's needs. Many children continue to be removed, often for avoidable socio-economic reasons, from their families. Many continue to be placed in institutional, rather than family-based alternative care, where they do not receive minimally adequate nurturing care. Once so placed, it is frequently so for extended periods. There is limited monitoring of the quality of institutional care, reunification with parents is low, and many children remain in care until they age out into communities without adequate aftercare to secure their reintegration.

The UNv and AUvi child rights committees of experts' most recent concluding observations raise concerns about the government's failure to honour its rights-based development commitments. Notably, the failure to establish a developmental child care and protection system and the resulting failure to provide parents with essential services to enable them to meet their children's needs and secure their development; the large numbers of children removed from their families and placed in institutional care, rather than with families or in family-like settings, and the failure to ensure reunification, reintegration and after-care services.

At the United Nations Summit of the Future, convened on 22 September 2024, world leaders adopted the Pact for the Future,^{vii} committing to fulfil existing commitments and accelerate strategic interventions key to unlocking human capital development to achieve the SDGs. A key commitment was to implement existing treaties and policy commitments to strengthen the care environment through family-oriented policies to improve access to social and economic services for all children, enabling them to develop their full potential.

Leaders undertook to develop action plans and mobilise political commitment and funding at this year's G20 Summit to ensure their implementation.

The UN and AU direct that, to fulfil its outstanding commitments, the Government of South Africa must develop and implement a systematic Deinstitutionalisation (DI) strategy grounded in a broader developmental child care and child protection system-strengthening agenda. Read together with the commitments made at the Summit of the Future and existing policy commitments, this requires systematic reform of the care system that must:

- Ensure that all parents and caregivers receive the combinations of services and support required to meet their children’s developmental needs; and
- Ensure that all children live with families and that no child is removed from families on the grounds prohibited by law, including poverty.
- Where children are removed in accordance with the law, ensure they are placed in family or family-based care environments where caregivers receive the necessary services and support to provide nurturing, responsive care, their care is monitored, and they are reunited with their families as soon as possible.

In sum, the Government must, without delay, take concrete steps to implement its long-standing commitment to operationalise a developmental child care and protection system. If this is done, deinstitutionalisation will follow.



Purpose of the summit

This Care Reform Summit has been convened to facilitate the co-development of, and secure commitment to implement a road map for establishing a developmental child care and protection system by 2030 that will ensure deinstitutionalisation by ensuring that:

- Every parent and family receives the promotive and preventative services outlined in the National Child Care and Protection Policy, enabling them to provide nurturing care and protection.
- No child is removed from their family on any of the prohibited grounds, including social and economic challenges.
- No child that is removed from their family is placed in an institution, but in a family or family-like alternative care setting.
- All children in institutional care are transitioned safely into families or family-like alternative care settings.
- All children who are placed in family-like alternative care are safe, receive nurturing care and are reunited with their own, adequately supported families as soon as possible.

Methodology

Hope and Homes for Children South Africa will convene stakeholders and experts for a two-day hybrid summit. Participants will gather remotely and in person at The Garden Venue Hotel in Johannesburg on 12 and 13 November 2025.

The programme is designed to enable the co-development of a rights-based, time-bound action plan to accelerate implementation of the country's developmental child care and protection commitments to ensure all children live in families that are supported to provide them with the care they need to develop their potential, thus contributing to accelerated human capital development to achieve the SDGs and Africa's Agenda 2063.

Several speakers will provide information and share their experiences to build a shared understanding of the enabling legal framework, the progress made, the persisting systemic gaps, the challenges to be addressed to fulfil the country's commitments, and the best practices pioneered, and lessons learned by organisations that have undertaken the care reform and DI journey in South Africa.

Opportunities will be created for participants to engage in dialogue, deliberation, and planning through several interactive, facilitated sessions to map out a shared goal, objectives, and the measures to be taken to establish a developmental child care and protection system that will result in deinstitutionalisation. Further, to agree on the process and institutional arrangements that will be put in place to lead the development of a detailed implementation plan with clearly defined outcomes, and to support, resource, monitor and report on progress in implementing the plan.

Participants

Participants will include government and non-government stakeholders responsible for providing leadership, technical support, evidence and data, advocating for care reform, implementing care reform programmes, and monitoring, reporting, and oversight of the country's fulfilment of its commitments and improved outcomes for children.

Participants include, inter alia:

- National leaders responsible for ensuring the country implements its commitments, including those to children and families, necessary to achieve the SDGs and Africa's Agenda 2063 to achieve inclusive, sustainable development.
- The National and Provincial Departments of Social Development are responsible for the national developmental child care and protection system and ensuring implementation of key policy commitments to strengthen families, ensure children live in supported families, and the development of a platform of family-like alternative care where children receive minimally adequate nurturing care and protection.
- National and provincial supporting line departments, including Health and Education, Home Affairs and others responsible for providing a suite of essential services to enable families to provide nurturing care.
- Parliamentarians and representatives from national and provincial human rights institutes
- Civil society organisations
- Traditional leaders
- Researchers and academics
- Children and youth



Expected outcomes

and impact

- Provide an inclusive collaborative platform co-hosted by government and non-government care reform leaders to develop and advance a national care reform agenda to ensure all children are cared for by families that are supported to provide them the nurturing care they need to develop their full potential.
- Secure a shared understanding of the treaty, development and policy commitments made to establish a developmental child care and protection system that ensures all children live with supported families, and institutional care is eliminated.
- Build consensus on the vision, goal and objectives that will be achieved by 2030 once the commitments are fulfilled.
- Recognise the progress made and build consensus on the remaining measures that are to be taken.
- Develop a road map of institutional and system-strengthening measures that must be taken to ensure the outstanding implementation measures are taken, monitored, reported against, and accounted for.
- A renewed state-wide commitment, high-level leadership and decisive action to measurably strengthen the national developmental child care and protection system through effective coordination, evidence-based planning, and enhanced programmes supported by increased resources (human and financial) that will result in:
 - Increased parental / family capacity for nurturing care
 - A significant reduction in the removal of children from families
 - The closure of child care institutions
 - A reduction in the number of children placed in alternative care
 - No further placements of children in institutional care
 - Routine and meaningful reunification, reintegration and after care support for children transitioning out of care into families and communities.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful,
committed citizens can change the world; indeed,
it's the only thing that ever has.”

- Margaret Mead

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**ONE CHILD
ONE FAMILY**

**HOPE AND HOMES
FOR CHILDREN** 
SOUTH AFRICA



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