



Publication		
THE HERALD		
Page	Date	AVE (ZAR)
8	Thurs 12 Oct 2017	9907.25



Deprivation of children in rural areas leads to lifelong disadvantages, review suggests

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LEAFY suburbs or overcrowded shacklands, urban children in South Africa have a huge advantage over their rural counterparts.

An extensive review revealed exactly what that advantage means – half the children under the age of six in our country are being deprived of even the most basic services and, as a result, face a lifetime of lower earning potential, poorer health and hampered learning ability.

The South African Early Childhood Review 2017, released yesterday, analysed over 40 data points measuring the progress of early childhood development (ECD) service delivery.

The provinces with the highest share of rural children under the age of six are the Eastern Cape, 60%; Limpopo, 83%; KwaZulu-Natal, 61%, and Mpumalanga, 85%.

“This is serious when you consider that 43% of our young children are living in rural areas,” Ilifa Labantwana executive director and co-author of the review, Colin Almeleh, said.

The review found rural children:

- Live far from clinics;



SLOW PROGRESS: Children living in rural areas face many problems

- Are less likely to be fully immunised;
 - Are not adequately screened for development delays;
 - Are less likely to receive help if they are malnourished; and
 - Start school on the backfoot as they are less exposed to early learning before that.
- “Early childhood is a very sensitive period of development, with the

brain and body growing very quickly. The development that takes place at this time will affect all future health, behaviour and learning,” Almeleh said.

“Children require certain essential services during this time to develop. If they don’t receive them, it is very difficult to help them catch up later.”

One in five children is stunted, but only some access the crucial vita-

min A supplementation services.

This is an example of how things differ across provinces and how an over-focus on national statistics masks those differences – nationally, more than 57% of children aged 12-59 months received vitamin A supplementation.

However, in some districts this number is as low as 40%, while in others it is more than 90%.

Mncedisi Twala, of the Abemi Grassroots Movement, said: “We are made to be what we are today because of circumstances.

“Most poor people can’t get healthy food because they don’t have the means.

“Children go to bed hungry and mainly eat starch to fill their bellies.”

Multiple government departments are responsible for service delivery for early childhood development, but it is mainly the departments of health, social development and basic education.

“This year, we have seen the development of a draft national implementation plan and some provinces working on ECD strategies aligned to the policy,” one of the review’s co-authors, Lizette Berry, said.

“This is encouraging but much more needs to be done.” – TimesLIVE