



SA's Meagre Early Childhood Development Subsidy is a Human Rights Issue

From 1 April 2023, an additional R1.6 billion will be added to the early childhood development (ECD) grant over the medium term. The aim is to increase the number of children receiving the ECD subsidy which goes towards the maintenance of the educational facilities they attend, their teachers' salaries, and the food and resources they receive. However, in 2022, the subsidy paid was a mere [R17](#) per child attending centres registered with the Department of Social Development per day – less than the cost of a loaf of bread. Although more money has now been allocated, it will need to reach more children, so the contribution per child will be well below R17.

This is according to Deb Zelezniak, CEO of the Santa Shoebox Programmes, which uplifts the lives of underprivileged children around South Africa and Namibia via various projects such as [Santa Shoebox Legacy](#). She explains that, with the Department of Basic Education no longer requiring ECD centres to register as non-profits in order to be eligible for the subsidy, the theory is that thousands more children will benefit, but that the R1.6 billion boost will be insufficient given the sheer number of centres that will be able to apply. “Back in 2021, only [33%](#) of registered ECD centres were recipients of the Social Development grant. Now, with 42 420 registered and unregistered ECDs vying for the funding, one has to question the implications for our children.”

Speaking in light of Human Rights Day, she notes that while it will hopefully mean that more children will have access to ECD services - thereby upholding their right to education - at less than R17 per child, these centres won't be able to afford to uphold other rights such as access to adequate nutrition, sanitation, and quality care.

“It is very troubling, especially when one considers that early childhood development plays a critical role in shaping a child's future,” she points out. “Children who do not receive proper care and education during their [early years](#) are at a greater risk of falling behind academically and experiencing long-term negative impacts on their mental and physical wellbeing.”

“This is affecting children even now,” says Zelezniak. “For instance, only [55%](#) of ECD centres have access to running water inside the premises, while [22%](#) exclusively use a bowl or bucket to wash their hands, yet access to water for all – not to mention an environment that is not harmful to health or well-being - is enshrined in the country’s [Bill of Rights](#).”

“With poor hygiene practices being a key factor in the spread of diarrhoeal disease, the [second leading](#) cause of mortality in children under five years old, access to clean water and proper sanitation at ECD sites is crucial as it ensures the children’s very right to life,” she adds.

“But this is just the tip of the iceberg of need, with the latest [ECD census](#) revealing that the majority of centres lack infrastructure, learning material, and teacher training. Recognising that Government cannot tackle this alone, there are those in the private sector that have been compelled to step forward and bolster Government’s efforts in meeting these needs,” shares Zelezniak. “Santa Shoebox Legacy, for example, has spent over R1.5 million on improving ECD centres around the country to date, with additional activations planned for 2023.”

These funds were spent on bringing lasting change to Santa Shoebox beneficiary children and the communities in which they live, by establishing new and transforming existing ECD centres in rural South Africa. Issues tackled include the demand for training among educators, access to potable water, literacy and nutrition for growth and development.

“The President has acknowledged that ‘access to quality education for all is the most powerful instrument we have to end poverty’, and that this needs to start with very young children. The private sector needs to work more closely with Government to pool our resources and equip these kids with the foundations they need. What we spend now on our children is ultimately an investment in the future of our country. Not only is this an economic imperative but a human rights issue too,” concludes Zelezniak.

About the Santa Shoebox Programmes

Traditional Santa Shoebox: Over the last 16 years, 1 077 289 Santa Shoeboxes each containing eight specified items of treats and essentials have been given to underprivileged and socially vulnerable children throughout South Africa and Namibia. From 01 September each year, Santa Shoebox donors choose their beneficiary child/ren by name, age and gender and are given the child's clothing size. Each personalised shoebox reaches the very child for whom it was pledged. Using the Santa Shoebox app, donors are able to track their shoebox from the moment it is pledged to the magical moment it is handed to the child.

Virtual Santa Shoebox: These shoeboxes are purchased online by donors and are available year-round, meeting the needs of donors who live too far from drop-off points, are too busy to shop or have health issues. Components are chosen by the donor on the Santa Shoebox website, the shoeboxes are packed by the Santa Shoebox Team and delivered to children attending far-flung rural facilities. A Virtual Santa Shoebox contains the eight specified items, as well as additional items, such as masks, a lunchbox and books. A Virtual Santa Shoebox costs R450 plus an optional delivery fee of R30.

Santa Shoebox Legacy: All Santa Shoebox Project operating costs are covered by corporate sponsors. Privately donated funds have been accruing under the SSB Legacy Fund which are now being used to bring permanent change to the lives of Santa Shoebox beneficiary children and the impoverished communities in which they live

Fiduciary information: As a Level One Contributor to B-BBEE, the Santa Shoebox Project earns 100 points on the generic scorecard, and with Section 18A status, is able to provide a tax-deductible receipt in recognition of donations. The Project is an initiative of the JOG Trust (IT2671/2009). The Trust is registered as a Public Benefit Organisation (PBO-930031301), a Non-Profit Organisation (NPO 102-098) and holds a current ICPR in support of 100% SED compliance.

Social media:

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YouTube: The Santa Shoebox Project

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