

Let's all do our bit to help better the lot of vulnerable children

DEE MOSKOFF

THIS week is Child Protection Week in South Africa. It is a time to focus on how safe a country South Africa is for children and what we are doing to make our country safer for the most vulnerable among us. Given our heinous high incidence of child rape and child abuse, we need to do a great deal more than what we have done and are doing to protect children.

When we speak about the protection of children, it is easy to focus narrowly on the obvious issues affecting their personal safety and miss the bigger picture. Of course, we need to protect children from sexual predators, but they are not their biggest threat. Poverty and deprivation are.

The SA Child Gauge, which is produced annually by the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town, monitors the progress made by the government and civil society towards realising the rights of children.

Children in South Africa have a constitutional right to parental or

family care, shelter, dignity, safety, basic health-care services, education, and protection from neglect, abuse, degradation and exploitation.

According to the 2009/10 SA Child Gauge:

- 21 percent of children in South Africa (about 3.9 million) are orphans who have lost one or both parents.

- 23 percent of children do not live with either of their biological parents.

- About 34 percent of children live in households where no adults are employed.

- Nearly two-thirds of children (64 percent) live in households with a per capita income of less than R569 a month.

- 18 percent of children live in households that report child hunger and 18 percent of children between the ages of one and nine have suffered from stunting, which indicates chronic malnutrition.

- Children under five account for 80 percent of child deaths in South Africa. These deaths result from neonatal causes and childhood infections (HIV, diarrhoea and lower res-

piratory infections). Injury is the leading cause of death among older children.

- Most childhood deaths are rooted in poverty.

The picture that these stats portray is consistent with the picture presented by people who work at grassroots level with orphans and children at risk.

Connect Network is a coalition of 98 NGOs working with vulnerable women and children in the Western Cape. Collectively, these NGOs serve 22 218 women and 50 036 children per month.

According to Connect members, the big issues facing vulnerable children include:

- Absence of maternal care, love, hygiene and food because parents are either deceased or unemployed, ill or addicted to alcohol and/or drugs.

- Lack of access to education (often due to children not having birth certificates, which prohibit them from being able to register at a school).

- Lack of access to the child grants because they do not have

birth certificates.

- Lack of access to health care and immunisation.

- Emotional, physical and sexual abuse, most often at the hands of an adult known to the child.

- Deprivation as a result of parents/caregivers who abuse the child grant system.

- Abandonment and neglect at the hands of grandparents who are too old or frail to care for toddlers or effectively parent teenagers.

- Commercial and sexual exploitation by drug-addicted parents or caregivers.

- Developmental setbacks caused by foetal alcohol syndrome and/or HIV/Aids.

It is the role of the government to provide a safety net for children at risk, through social development initiatives and the system of social assistance grants. The 2009/10 SA Child Gauge reports that "just over nine million children received the child support grant in July 2009, almost 110 000 children received the care dependency grant, and a further 511 000 children received the foster child grant".

Commendable as it may be, the social grant system is but one intervention by the government to address the basic needs of vulnerable children. But the government alone cannot fix the problem. And nor can the tens of thousands of NGOs, complementing the work of

Our mission is to encourage and equip the good people who do sacrificial work...

the government. Civil society and the corporate sector must help carry the burden of responsibility.

Connect Network exists to facilitate the networking of organisations, churches and individuals with Christian values.

We endeavour to enhance the Christian response to women and

children at risk through:

- Providing care and support to the people working in member organisations.

- Advocating effective relationships, synergies and a "collective voice" between members.

- Identifying and assisting with partnerships and collaboration.

- Sharing information, resources and solutions.

In the Connect fold some of the edu-care centres are run by volunteers who are themselves illiterate and innumerate. Very often they are "gogos" and in their care are children in grades 4 and 5 who cannot write their own names.

Our mission is to encourage and equip the good people who do this sacrificial work to improve the quality of care they give to children.

One of our programmes is a course called quality improvement system (QIS) comprising six modules – governance; financial accountability; project planning and design; people care; child protection; and child well-being.

The course takes two years to complete and costs Connect R24 000

an organisation, but the NGO pays only R4 800. Connect fundraises to cover the balance.

Fifty NGOs have benefited from one or more modules of QIS, and 18 NGOs are committed to the whole two-year cycle.

One NGO has applauded the training it received on child protection.

When a concerned mother reported her suspicions that her young child was being sexually abused, the staff knew exactly how to handle the situation appropriately. They have a Child Protection Policy which outlines their duties and steps in reporting abuse.

Many NGOs cannot even afford the reduced price of the course. Why not make a worthwhile investment in building the capacity of an NGO by introducing them to the internationally recognised standards and biblical principles in QIS?

● *Dee Moskoff is the director of Connect Network, a coalition of 98 NGOs serving vulnerable women and children in the Western Cape. For more about Connect, visit www.connectnetwork.org.za*

Street people book their place on library shelf

A remarkable book written by the Symphony Way people has a message for all about the spirit of community among the poor, writes **Jeanne Hromnik**



OUR STORY: The residents of Symphony Way rose above their hardships to write a book.

PICTURE: HENK KRUGER

THE POOR are not a particularly engaging lot, any more than you and I, and poverty of education is a fact that means the poor will be with us for a very long time. Thus, the recent publication of *No Land, No House, No Vote* is impressive.

It is not a political exercise – though, what is not politics in South Africa? – but the stories of the Symphony Way pavement dwellers told by themselves.

A number of conditions were presented by them to the publisher: no one's story was to be refused, despite repetitiveness; there was to be minimal editing, despite peculiarities and, sometimes, obscurity of language; and the proceeds of the book were to go to "the community" as a whole.

One by one they rose to speak at one of the launches of the book in Cape Town this month:

"We want you to live with us and

be part of people who live in shacks."

"We not stupid, we people of principles, we can speak on our own behalfs... it was our social problems that put us where we are now."

Among the ironies that emerge from their book is that they managed to form a community

"We need to stand up against our government, not left to be rotten..."

"There is a time for bad things, there is a time for good things."

It was clear at the launch – where the well-heeled brushed shoulders

with the less well-heeled in a warm and well-lit room – that, as one speaker put it, "in this country we have two countries".

Despite the absence of a structured presentation, salient dates emerged and some statistics – with a backlog of 400 000 houses in the Western Cape alone, none of the poor present was likely to be getting a house in the near future.

Some people had already been waiting for more than 26 years. It was claimed that only 2 percent of the national budget is allocated to housing whereas in other countries it is closer to 5 percent.

That the divide in the country is not a racial issue needed to be said and was, in fact, debated in terms that led all the way back to Van Riebeeck and other white "visitors".

One of the most passionate speakers at the launch claimed that you could "count the coloured people (in the New Gateway houses

adjacent to Symphony Way) on the fingers of one hand".

This aspect of the story, which is told in detail, relates to the origin of the pavement dwellers' occupation of Symphony Way.

A DA councillor (unnamed at the launch but very much a presence in the book) invited backyard dwellers from Delft to occupy newly built Gateway houses adjacent to Symphony Way, which were being re-allocated to the largely black former occupants of the burnt down shacks of Cape Town's Joe Slovo settlement. He made it a racial issue and had said something like: "If you want houses, go and kick doors."

Many people did just that.

The law was quick to come down on them and, despite an initial stay of eviction, removed them with brutal force from these houses on February 19, 2008.

It is a story that can, and did, bring tears to one's eyes. In this and

subsequent developments, no political party is exempt from guilt: ANC as well as DA councillors and other executives are equally involved.

The people's solution, as witnessed by the title of the book, was not to vote and, further, to spoil ballots. A march on Parliament took place on May 16, when another book launch was held in Cape Town.

Ultimately, the people who blockaded a stretch of Symphony Way for a year and a half – the longest civic protest in the history of the country – are intent on telling their story – and on telling it themselves. Their blockade ended in mid-2009, prior to the World Cup, when they were forced to move to Blikkiesdorp, one of Cape Town's infamous TRAs (Temporary Relocation Areas).

Among the ironies that emerge from their book is that they managed to form a community at Symphony Way that should serve as a model in the housing crisis in this

country: "We staying like a family on that road", one of the members said, "and after that people decided to tell their stories".

When one of them was arrested and spent three months in prison for standing up to aggressive law enforcement, he said that all he could think of in prison was Symphony Way.

And he was sure that he was being thought of by all in Symphony Way.

Blikkiesdorp is not a community. It is described by the pavement dwellers as "for pigs", a place where rapists live around the corner and drug dealing is rife.

In appearance it is like a concentration camp and facilities are poor, with four families to one toilet and tin walls that let in heat and cold.

No Land, No House, No Vote is the story of the poor, a book all South Africans should read. It has two well-written introduc-

tions: one by writer and activist Raj Patel, author of the New York Times best-seller *The Value of Nothing*, and the other by Miloon Kothari, former Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, UN Human Rights Council.

That it was successfully assembled and has found its way into the public arena is not least the work of a middle-class activist who prefers to be unnamed.

Without people like him, the poor would have even less of a voice.

The publisher also deserves credit. Pambazuka Press (www.pambazukapress.org) is a small non-profit Pan African publisher with offices in Cape Town, Oxford, Dakar and Nairobi.

The heartbreak of many of the Symphony Way stories and the style of their authorship carries this mission even further.

● *Jeanne Hromnik is a freelance journalist*

WHEN did this mania for "political correctness" start turning us into gibbering fools?

Life is filled with serious issues, but we waste our time and energy thinking up bizarre ways of being inoffensive.

Good heavens, even the Noddy books have been censored because they allegedly show the police in a poor light.

PC Plod is a toy, for goodness sake.

Now I read that the animal rights people are demanding more dignified names for animals.

According to the British Journal of Animal Ethics, we must no longer refer to domestic animals as "pets". This is a very demeaning term, they say.

It's all very well to refer to naked women in porn magazine as "Pets", but animals are no longer pets. From now on we have to refer to our dogs, cats, goldfish and parrots as "companion animals".

And, of course, we do not "own" them any more. We are "human carers", not owners.

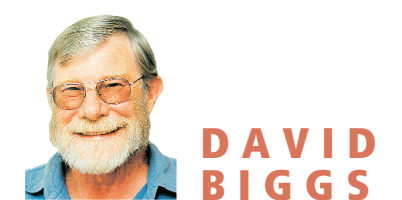
The word "wild" apparently denotes barbarism, so there are to be no more "wild" animals.

Instead we will have "free living" animals, or "free roaming" ones.

The silly thing about this is the animals concerned obviously don't give a hoot whether we call them pets or companions or fur-balls.

All they're interested in is being fed regularly, exercised and looked after.

My cats (if I am still allowed to



DAVID BIGGS
Tavern of the Seas

call them cats and not "feline house sharers") don't even have names. They are referred to as "black cat" and "yellow cat". They don't seem to find this demeaning, as far as I can tell. Black cat has hung around my property (if I am still allowed to refer to it as mine) for almost 20 years, without showing any indication of resentment.

Yellow cat is too lazy to care what anybody calls her. She seldom moves out of earshot of her food bowl. I can call her until I'm blue in the face and she doesn't even open an eye, but the tinkle of cat pellets landing in her bowl gets her full attention.

Wild animals have no idea what humans call them. Nor do they care. Whether we think of them as free roaming, free-range, or simply wild, they still have claws, sharp teeth and beaks and are best left alone.

The idiots who think up these daft, bunny-hugging ideas would do better to keep their silly notions to themselves and save the trees cut down to make the paper on which they publish their inanities.

The planet would be a little healthier for that.

Last laugh

A six-year-old girl was allowed to stay up for dinner one night as a special treat when her parents were entertaining guests.

Once the family and guests had been seated at the table, the wife turned to the little girl and said: "Mary, would you please say grace for us."

The little girl blushed. "I don't know what to say," she mumbled.

"Of course you do," prompted her mother. "Don't you remember what Daddy said at lunch today? He started by saying, 'Dear God... I'm sure you remember.'"

And the little girl rolled her eyes to the ceiling and said: "Dear God! Why on earth did we ask those boring people to come to dinner tonight?"

The Wanderer

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SA's language largesse translates into trouble

LOST in translation. That's often where we are in South Africa, stumbling about in misconstrued and clumsy words spoken or heard in a second language or translated through the idiosyncratic filter of an interpreter.

Many better brains than mine have explored the bedrock importance of language in the daily functioning of our complex society with its 11 official languages and several more on the streets imported from elsewhere in Africa (I can recommend Antjie Krog's *A Change of Tongue* and *Begging to Be Black* as good examples) but still we grossly underestimate the issue. Especially English speakers. We have a breath-taking arrogance.

Fortunate enough to be schooled from birth in what has become the global language we simply expect the rest of the nation to come to us and to be judged on our terms. It's an extraordinary truth that most domestic workers in Cape Town can communicate effectively in more languages than those who employ them (and who enjoyed far more extensive and expensive education). I know I am guilty in that regard.

Should Blade Nzimande suggest that our children must master an African language to graduate from an African university, we instinctively and intemperately rage against the notion. And so many of



MIKE WILLIS
Open Mike

us dismiss President Jacob Zuma as a poor communicator. In English undeniably he is hesitant but what he like in Zulu? I'm ashamed to say I don't know – he may well be a brilliant speaker in his first language and surely that matters more than we ever acknowledge.

The reverse applies as well. Thabo Mbeki was hailed by many as an intellectual, I suspect simply because he had a dense mastery of the English language which actually disguised an alarmingly closed mind on many issues. He also rarely spoke in public in Xhosa. Why?

I always found it intriguing, and remarkably uncommenced upon, that Mbeki, the champion of Africanism, was the first president of this country to give his entire

state opening of Parliament speech in the coloniser's English. His Afrikaans predecessors always used plenty of their own *taal* and Nelson Mandela switched languages frequently. Even Trevor Manuel's budget speeches occasionally veered off into Xhosa as many listening business heavyweights wondered whether he was whacking up corporation tax while they couldn't understand him!

Typically, Helen Zille is one of the few politicians to tackle this problem head on. Apparently, she has become a masterful (or would Julius call that "madamful") Xhosa speaker, giving colloquial platform performances in the language which political analyst Aubrey Mathiqi in Business Day said were more effective than most of the ANC leadership could muster.

It's a pity that more media attention was given to Zille's dancing shoes than to her speaking skills because this stuff matters as the dreadfully overblown Equality Court case about the *dubula ibhunu* song has shown.

Julius Malema's lawyer claimed that *dubula ibhunu* has become *shoot the boer* via "a media translation". Many dismissed that claim quickly. Too quickly in my view because that singular translation of the original expression has gained immutable status in most reporting.

I am not remotely qualified to assess any alleged political shifts in the meaning of *ibhunu* since 1994 but, from where I sit, even the word "boer" has enough complexity on its own. Does it refer to a farmer, an Afrikaaner or, as one interpretation has put it, all white people? And if we make it "Boer" with a capital B, it becomes a reference to an extraordinary group of freedom fighters in another historical context.

In a separate case Judge Leon Halgryn in the Johannesburg High Court has ruled that the song is *prima facie* an incitement to murder. No doubt he is right. *Prima facie* means "at first face or at first look" and, on that basis, it is obviously a very disturbing lyric, but this needs second and third looks, which is precisely why it shouldn't be before the judiciary as a theoretical issue, it should only be concerning them if it's material to the cause of a specific crime. I am not justifying the song, nor doubting the very real fears that it can raise, and I deeply wish that the ANC leadership had the good sense to abandon it but this is a far more nuanced debate than the one we have been exposed to.

Words are complex and layered beasts. Writing them can make my head ache and leave me saying: "I would kill for a cup of coffee". *Prima facie* I am a potential murderer.