

## EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PRIORITISED

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Equipped for learning....ECD centres opened in Mohokare to accommodate children from poor households

The MEC for social development, Sisi Ntombela handed an early childhood development (ECD) centre over to the Rouxville community, this week, in line with her department's plans to open several more ECD's in the many under-privileged communities throughout the province.

Children constitute 30 percent of the Free State's population and, earlier this year, Ntombela outlined her department's plans to renovate, build and fund ECD centres in the province to cater for vulnerable children.

"We promised that we will achieve a brighter future for the children of South Africa and that is what social development is all about. We heard and we also know that our children learn under terrible conditions and we wanted to improve that.

"We have to date built eight ECD centres across the province and now only one will be completed before the end of this year. So far we have invested over a million rand in these centres and we will continue doing more," said Ntombela. Ntombela was addressing residents of Rouxville's Role lea Thunya township, in the Mohokare Local Municipality, after handing over Empilweni Educare Centre to this community.

This crèche started in 1997 as a child and youth care programme. This was an initiative by the local unemployed women who requested accommodation for the children from the municipality. The executive mayor of the Mohokare Local Municipality, Mando Shasha, was amongst these women. The women's plan was to provide love and care to the children of the impoverished community.

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“When I started this crèche, I asked the ANCWL at that time for help. It was not easy, the challenges we encountered taught us that if you are not stubborn you will not realise your dreams. Now children will have a decent place to learn,” said Shasha.

Ntombela and her delegation also paid a visit to the Thusanong Creative Learning Centre. It was established in 2002 as a disability programme, where parents organised themselves and asked the Association for People with Disability (APD) and social workers to help them.

“This place was initially a school for coloureds and the building was later used for Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET). But, after a while, social development approached us and told us about the need for a child care centre. We then agreed to use this place as a day care centre and separated ABET and the crèche with a fence. There is still enough space for a garden and a youth centre,” said Xhariep District Municipality director, Mokuena Woodyatt.

This whole exercise was part of celebrations to mark social development month. The theme for this year’s annual celebrations was: Working together to enhance community capacity to fight poverty, unemployment and inequality.

The annual 2012 South African Child Gauge was released last month, revealing the status of children in the country. Though there have been achievements in terms of advancing children’s rights, it painted a bleak picture. In foreword of the report, the minister in the presidency and the head in the national planning omission (NPC), Trevor Manuel, said there is a need “to think hard on how to bring up children”. Manuel said this is because the foundations laid in childhood will stay with them throughout their lives.

“Studies estimate that cognitive development of over 200 million children under the age of five worldwide was held back by poverty, ill health and under-nutrition, and identified early childhood as the most effective and cost efficient time to ensure all children develop their potential.”

Child Gauge also found that the majority of poor children live in rural areas, while 80 percent of rich children live in urban areas.

The report also established that over 11 million children receive child support grants and almost 600 000 are on the foster care grants. Some 117 246 children receive the care dependency grant. In the poorest 20 percent of South African households, almost 70 percent of the income is derived from grants.

Mohokare is one of the smallest and poorest municipalities in the country. Over 98 percent of the residents are considered indigents, meaning they are unemployed and unable to pay for services. This in turn puts a strain on the municipality to generate revenue and hinders service delivery to a certain extent.

“The funding from government departments into community projects in this area will help a lot. This means more jobs for young people and improved life for children. This will also help in dealing with challenges of alcohol abuse and teenage pregnancy,” said a young man from Rouxville, Molefi Soqaka.

However, not all is lost as Shasha said the municipality has been able to pay a large part of their debts.

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She said the provincial government intervention has also helped the municipality. All the ECD projects were funded by social development in partnership with National Development Agency and department of education.

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