

# Years of social grants fail to uplift stunted children

TANYA FARBER

SOCIAL grants, the most important source of income in millions of poor households, have not improved the nutritional status of children since their introduction in 1998.

A survey of children's weight and height — key indicators of nutritional health — by the Centre of Excellence in Food Security at the University of the Western Cape says "there has been very little improvement in the 20 years since the transition to democracy".

One in four children is stunted, and the rate of chronic malnutrition remains stubbornly high, at 20% or above.

Lead researcher Stephen Devereux said: "I was very shocked to find that malnutrition would be so high, especially in a middle-income country. The grants should cover children's basic needs, but clearly don't."

The fact that malnutrition had not improved in 20 years was doubly shocking. "The grants are a social response to an economic problem. They are vital and are keeping people

alive," he said. "But it is now clear we need a much more concentrated effort for better nourished children."

Gugulethu mother Zukiswa Khetshe said she was grateful for the R380-a-month child-support grant.

"Half a loaf is better than nothing. It upsets me when peo-

**For children to eat healthily, it has to be everybody's business**

ple say it is for the children but that the parents take it. Nobody wants to see a child go hungry. To make it last we buy things like pap and maize."

Because of other basic needs in poor households, not all the money goes on food, and food high in nutrition is not always easy to come by.

For JAM South Africa, an organisation working to reduce child hunger, this was a red flag to come up with a scientific formula.

Founder Peter Pretorius said:

"If we do not feed the flames of change today, we're headed towards a state of disaster. People didn't think we could feed a child for less than R2 a day, but we did it. We produced our own formula."

JAM's formulated porridge contains 75% of a child's daily requirements of macro- and micro-nutrients, and is served to more than 85 000 children in signature bright red bowls.

For Phindi Mkhuma, who works for the Tshepang Educare Trust in the rural eastern Free State's Bohlakong region, five food gardens at childcare centres show a way forward.

"We planted pumpkins, beetroot, carrots, spinach and tomatoes. The children also get involved in watering the plants as we wanted to add life skills," she said.

They are now planning to get families to grow their own vegetables in tyres at their houses. "For the children of South Africa to eat healthily, it has to be everybody's business," she said.

The Department of Social Development did not respond to requests for comment.



**NOT ENOUGH:** A malnourished girl is carried by Limakatso Selisa, with Vivian Mthijoa in tow. This child cannot access the grant because her mother has no ID  
Picture: TSHEPANG EDUCARE TRUST IN BETHLEHEM, EASTERN FREE STATE

## Amount is too small to guarantee healthy kids

● THE amount is too small: food price inflation has been high, and child-support grants have not kept up. The increase on April 1, for example, was 5.55%, but food inflation reached 12% in 2016 and is now at 8.7%. Adults' attempts to cope — by borrowing money, eating less so children can eat more,

reducing the number of meals — aren't working;  
● Dilution and deductions: the impact of a social grant is diluted when shared across a family and used for other basic, non-food needs. Also, unauthorised deductions are made from grants before recipients are paid out each month; and

● It takes more than food: child malnutrition isn't just caused by a lack of healthy food. It has underlying causes, such as inadequate care for children and women, insufficient health services, and unhealthy environments.  
— Tanya Farber (taken from the Centre of Excellence in Food Security report)

