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Op-ed

Born free, but not fair: Understanding youth inequality

Youth inequality accumulates over a life course, but there are critical moments where policy and programming *can* intervene to alleviate inequality and safeguard more just futures for young people.

By Beth Vale and Daryl Swanepoel

Policy discourse in South Africa is preoccupied with the vexing ‘triple threat’ of poverty, unemployment and inequality. What remains comparatively muted in these discussions is the reality that many South Africans have the odds stacked against them, well before their second birthday.

Despite expanded access to health, education and social security in democratic South Africa, the livelihood prospects of children often remain tied to those of their parents. This is because the inequality is intergenerational. Any meaningful shift in the stark, and long-entrenched inequality will demand that we unlock the social and economic mobility of these youth.

In a soon to be released Inclusive Society Institute report called “*Understanding Youth Inequality*”, attention is drawn to the important relationship between early influences and later outcomes in young people’s lives, while exploring their life trajectories in social, political, economic and cultural context, because youth are not a homogenous category.

The analysis draws on transdisciplinary evidence to show not only how youth inequality accumulates over the life course, but also critical moments where policy and programming might intervene to advance equity and safeguard more equal futures for young people.

Young South Africans (aged 15-34) make up over a third of the country’s total population. They should be the engine of the economy, society, and democracy. But instead, nearly half of these young people are without work, education or training opportunities. While the working-age population is growing, the South African economy has struggled to keep pace.

But it’s not just about the country’s slow economic growth. Young people’s vulnerabilities rarely emerge out of a single crisis. More often, they reflect the cumulative effects of multiple events and pressures, which unfold in young people’s homes, institutions and communities, as well as in wider society. What happens to a child at each developmental stage is influenced by what happened at earlier stages, which means that for young people to reach their potential, we need enabling environments across the life course.

A key driver of youth inequality arises at the intersection of household income, access to quality early learning programmes, and child outcomes. Children from contexts characterised by poor access to nutrition, inadequate living and infrastructural environments, and a lack of security and social protection have few opportunities for quality early learning and stimulation. They therefore enter

school on a significantly uneven footing, vulnerable to worse health and developmental outcomes. Without the right support and intervention, this can impact their success in school, their future economic and social participation, and ultimately contributes to deepening inequality.

Let's imagine the journey of the average South African child...

While pregnant, this child's mother will almost certainly access antenatal care at her local clinic. But she will also have a nearly three-in-10 chance of antenatal depression. At birth, important aspects of the child's emotional, social, and cognitive development, as well as her future health, will already start to coalesce. The stimulation, nourishment, and care they receive will lay the foundations for their future learning, school performance, health, and wellbeing. This, in turn, will affect their ability to participate meaningfully in social and economic life as a young adult.

The average South African child has a six-in-10-chance of benefiting from the Child Support Grant in their first year of life. This type of support is critical, since, as toddlers, South African children have a three-in-five chance of growing up in poverty, and a two-in-five chance of living below the food poverty line. Income support through a child support grant can reduce their chances of nutritional stunting, which is estimated to affect up to 27% of the country's children, with ramifications for their future health, learning, and earning prospects.

As children grow, and become more independent, and their caregivers need to find, create or return to work, 32% of children (under age 4) will attend an Early Learning Programme (ELP). These critical early learning services are delivered by a women-led, non-state, and largely informal sector, including sole-proprietors, microenterprises and non-profit organisations (NPOs). Since the average South African child has a less-than-30% chance of their fees being subsidised by government, early learning will likely be expensive for their caregivers.

By the time the average South African child turns five, they have a less-than-50% chance of being developmentally ready to start primary education. This setback will make it harder for them to stay, and succeed, in school – with knock-on effects for their ability to enter the labour market and build a secure livelihood.

This may sound like a deterministic outcome: how can we possibly curb inequality if it has been set in motion from the womb? But, in fact, life course research in the ISI report tells us that intervening at critical points in a young person's life course – from perinatal, childhood and adolescence, through to early adulthood and the young workforce – can radically alter not only their own trajectory, but also the trajectory of future generations.

The report recommendations – which include ideas like advancing the Maternal Support Grant and accessing quality ECD opportunities; as well as opening access to psychosocial support for teenagers and incentivising business to employ young people based on potential, rather than previous experience – are by no means exhaustive. But they do suggest critical interventions at key moments of the life course that can help alleviate structural inequality and ignite young people's potential.

Over the next four weeks, we'll unpack the report's findings on how the inequities play out at each life stage for young people, and what strategies we might take to interrupt them, both to improve their chances of social and economic mobility, and to disrupt structural patterns of inequality.

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Inclusive Society Institute. This article draws on the content of the soon to be published Inclusive Society Institute report on youth inequality titled 'Understanding Youth Inequality'.