



PARLIAMENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



INCLUSIVE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT:

PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION AND REDUCING INEQUALITY

12 JUNE 2025

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**PARLIAMENTARY
RESEARCH UNIT (PRU)**

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Executive summary

South Africa's youth face pressing issues such as unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion, necessitating significant intervention from the Social Development sector, which is comprised of the Department of Social Development (DSD), the National Development Agency (NDA), and the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA), through targeted policies and programmes. These initiatives aim to address youth inequality and foster social inclusion, employing a mix of legislative frameworks and social assistance programs, including the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) Grant and Child Support Grant. The effectiveness of these measures is scrutinised using data on youth unemployment and socio-economic conditions, reflecting the positive impact on poverty alleviation and social inclusion albeit limited in curbing inequality comprehensively.

Efforts encompass programmes like the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) and contributions from the National Development Agency (NDA), which provide temporary work, skills training, and entrepreneurial support. Despite these advancements, challenges persist, such as resource constraints, limited technology access, and under-spending at provincial levels. Recommendations include boosting social welfare services capacity, enhancing recruitment of social service professionals, and amplifying awareness campaigns, especially in rural areas.

The ongoing integration of innovative policies and collaborative efforts between public and private sectors is essential to tackle youth unemployment and promote social equity.

1. Introduction

Despite its classification as a middle-income country,¹ South Africa remains beset by deep-seated inequality and unemployment, especially among its youth.² The Constitution of South Africa³ and the National Development Plan⁴ 2030 delineate poverty, inequality, and social exclusion as pivotal elements within the framework of national policy directives. Furthermore, numerous government sectors have embarked on initiatives designed to address issues confronting the youth of South Africa. Nonetheless, the youth in South Africa continue to face significant challenges, including elevated rates of unemployment, poverty, educational inequities, and social exclusion.⁵

The Department of Social Development (DSD) assumes a pivotal role in addressing these challenges by implementing a variety of policies, programmes, and collaborations, particularly with civil society organisations (CSOs),⁶ all of which can foster social inclusion and mitigate inequality among youth. This position enables the DSD to play a crucial role in promoting social cohesion, increasing economic engagement, and elevating the general welfare of young people.

This paper explores social development sector initiatives designed to enhance social inclusion and address inequality among the youth in South Africa. It will elucidate significant issues and challenges, accompanied by recommendations for their resolution. The objective is to assist Members of Parliament in preparation for the forthcoming P20 Youth Parliament set to take place on 13 June 2025.

2. Social Development Key issues and challenges

This section provides a concise examination of initiatives by the social development sector to tackle inequality and promote social inclusion among youth. However, it is essential to begin with a brief overview that connects the social development sector to the concepts of social inclusion and inequality.

¹ Jobarteh, M. (2024).

² Stats SA. (2025)

³ The right to equality is guaranteed under Section 9 (2) and (3) of the Constitution, which provide: (2) *Equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms. To promote the achievement of equality, legislative and other measures designed to protect or advance persons, or categories of persons, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination may be taken; and (3) The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.*

⁴ The NDP 2030 envisions a South Africa where social inclusion and inequality are significantly reduced by 2030. It aims to eliminate poverty and reduce the Gini coefficient, which measures inequality, to 0.6 by 2030, from 0.69 in the past. This vision is achieved through a combination of economic growth, social policies, and state capacity building.

⁵ Plagerson, S. (2021)

⁶ South African Government. (n.d.). Social Development. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.za/about-sa/social-development>. (accessed on 08 June 2025).

2.1 Linking Social Development sector with social inclusion and inequality

Social inclusion is defined as a process that enhances engagement in society for disadvantaged individuals by improving opportunity, access to resources, representation, and respect for rights.⁷ Inequality includes gaps in income; access to resources (education, healthcare, and social services); and opportunities, frequently exacerbated by structural factors such as race, gender, and geography.⁸ South African youth encounter substantial obstacles with respect to social inclusion and inequality, characterised by elevated unemployment rates, restricted access to quality education and opportunities, and the enduring legacy of apartheid.⁹ These concerns disproportionately affect young people, particularly those from historically disadvantaged households, prolonging intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality.¹⁰

The United Nations (UN) defines youth as individuals aged 15 to 27 years,¹¹ while permitting variations in definitions across different countries and regions. In the South African context, 'youth' refers to those between the ages of 15 and 34 years.¹² This age group is especially susceptible to social ills, with elevated rates of unemployment, poverty, educational inequities, and social marginalisation.¹³ Comprising around 33.1% of the nation's population, nearly half of the South African youth are devoid of employment, educational, or training opportunities, despite the increasing working-age demographic.¹⁴ It is contended that youth inequality is influenced by income levels, access to effective early learning programmes, and child outcomes for some individuals.¹⁵ Children experiencing low nutrition, substandard living conditions, and insufficient security encounter inequitable educational chances, resulting in adverse health and developmental results.¹⁶ In the absence of support, such conditions may adversely affect their achievement and future economic and social engagement, thereby exacerbating inequality.¹⁷

In this regard, the DSD, like other South African government departments, bears the obligation of addressing the socioeconomic difficulties faced by South African societies, notably the youth.

⁷ United Nations. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/rwss/2016/chapter1.pdf>. (accessed on 08 June 2025).

⁸ StatsSA (2025). Retrieved from <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-19-09/Report-03-19-09.pdf>. (accessed on 09 June 2025]. See also, IMF. (2015). Causes and Consequences of Income Inequality: A Global Perspective. Retrieved from <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/sdn/2015/sdn1513.pdf>. (accessed 09 June 2025)

⁹ Plagerson, S. (2021)

¹⁰ StatsSA (2025). Retrieved from <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-19-09/Report-03-19-09.pdf>. (accessed on 09 June 2025].

¹¹ United Nations. (n.d.). Global Issues: Youth. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth>. (accessed on 08 June 2025).

¹² Inclusive Society Institute. (2023). Retrieved from <https://www.inclusivesociety.org.za/post/understanding-youth-inequality>. (accessed on 08 June 2025].

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ StatsSA (2025). Retrieved from <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-19-09/Report-03-19-09.pdf>. (accessed on 09 June 2025].

¹⁵ Plagerson, S. (2021)

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Inclusive Society Institute. (2023). Retrieved from <https://www.inclusivesociety.org.za/post/understanding-youth-inequality>. (accessed on 08 June 2025].

2.2 Policies and legislative framework relevant to the social development sector

The Department of Social Development (DSD) fosters youth inclusion and addresses inequality through its interdisciplinary policy and legislative frameworks. These include:

- the National Youth Development Policy (2020-2030), the White Paper on Social Development (1997, amended),
- the Integrated Social Development Programme, and
- the National Drug Master Plan (NDMP) 2019-2024 and the National Strategic Plan for Gender-Based Violence and Femicide.

The social development sector plays an integral part in the implementation of these national frameworks relevant to youth services in South Africa. The National Youth Development Policy (2020-2030) in South Africa focuses on achieving desirable youth development outcomes at local, provincial, and national levels. It focuses on education, work, health, and engagement for young people. The social development sector is integral to executing National Youth Policy 2020 - 2030 by ensuring access to social protection and welfare services.

The White Paper on Social Development (1997, amended) emphasises the holistic development of individuals, especially youth, within a developmental social welfare framework.

The Integrated Social Development Program aims to augment the capacities of marginalised populations, including youth, to reduce poverty and rebuild families and communities.

The National Drug Master Plan (NDMP) 2019-2024 is a blueprint for combating alcohol and substance abuse in South Africa. The National Strategic Plan for Gender-Based Violence and Femicide is a comprehensive approach aimed at addressing gender-based violence and femicide in South Africa. The DSD is responsible for providing psychosocial support services and fulfilling Pillar 4 of the Plan.

2.3 Key interventions

The social development sector has a number of programs that can contribute to social inclusion and address inequalities among young people. These include social assistance in the form of grants, youth programs, social sector EPWP, and other outreach activities.

The Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant and the Child Support Grant (CSG) are two key social assistance programs in South Africa that aim to alleviate poverty and promote social inclusion for young people. These grants provide financial assistance to youth without income or alternative government assistance, while the CSG assists carers, predominantly youth-led households or young parents, to ensure the well-being of children.¹⁸ Research studies generally agree that social assistance programs in South Africa significantly contribute to poverty alleviation and social inclusion among youth,¹⁹ but the impact of various programs may differ.

¹⁸ The World Bank (2021)

¹⁹ Mthombeni, T. (2023).

The Social Development sector, the DDS and South African Social Security Agency (SASSA), has been administering social assistance through social grants, particularly for youth services. The SRD grant offers provisional financial assistance to youth without an income or alternative government assistance, while the CSG assists carers, predominantly youth-led households or young parents, to guarantee the well-being of children.²⁰ Research studies generally agree that social assistance programs in South Africa significantly contribute to poverty alleviation and social inclusion among youth, but the impact of various programs may differ.²¹ Social assistance serves as an essential safety net, especially for vulnerable homes; it facilitates the fulfilment of fundamental requirements and enhances health and educational outcomes for children.²²

The Social Development sector is working to improve the social inclusion of youth through various programs, including Youth Development Centres (YDCs), which provide safe spaces for counselling, mentorship, and youth development.²³ Child and youth care workers play a crucial role in the country's child protection system, promoting the wellbeing of orphaned, vulnerable children.²⁴ The DSD also provides social welfare services through social service practitioners in partnership with community structures, including non-profit organisations (NPOs).²⁵ These services include safe adoption and foster care, child and youth care centres, social behaviour change programs, and psychosocial services, such as support for victims of gender-based violence and femicide.²⁶

The social development sector has implemented prevention and early intervention measures to curb social ills [Victim Empowerment Programme (VEP), GBV, and substance abuse] among children and youth through awareness campaigns across 54 campuses in tertiary institutions.²⁷ Targeted programs aim to prevent and treat youth addiction, a major barrier to social inclusion, through substance abuse prevention and rehabilitation.

The Social Development sector has engaged in discussions with youth nationwide throughout the formulation of the DSD's Youth Policy (2021-2030), covering topics such as active citizenry, social cohesion, mental health, well-being, job creation, and youth entrepreneurship.²⁸ Moreover, the sector has monitored the implementation of its Youth Development Policy in nine provinces,²⁹ supported Ministerial outreach programmes, which launched multimedia centres, and initiated outreach programmes to promote youth engagement in skills development and forge collaborations with diverse youth initiatives across several provinces.³⁰

The DSD is a lead department in the implementation of the Expanded Public Works Program (EPWP) within the Social sector. The Social sector EPWP provides temporary work and skills training to unemployed young people in community-based roles within health,

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ DSD (2024)

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ DSD (2024).

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

education, and social development, namely as Child and Adolescent Care Workers.³¹ This program aims to enhance youth's employability and social engagement.

The National Development Agency (NDA), an entity of the DSD, plays a vital role in youth employment by supporting civil society organisations (CSOs) and facilitating partnerships between the government, the private sector, and the CSOs to combat youth unemployment and poverty.³² As part of the Social Development sector, the NDA collaborates closely with the DSD and other government entities to provide youth-focused services, including youth skills development and empowerment programmes, youth microfinance and grant programmes, and job preparation and placement support.³³

Despite the significant progress made in delivering services for young people in South Africa, there are systemic and structural challenges that hinder effective implementation within the Social Development sector.

2.4 Challenges in the social development sector hinder effective implementation

Despite its efforts, the social development sector faces systemic and structural challenges that hinder effective implementation. These challenges include limited resource availability, shortage of social service professionals, limited reach in rural/remote communities, underfunding and implementation capacity issues, the digital divide in South Africa, and lack of access to social assistance. These are discussed below:

- The social development sector in South Africa faces numerous challenges, including limited resources and capacity at local levels, inadequate financing for non-profit groups and community-based projects, and significant under-spending in provincial departments.³⁴
- The National Development Plan estimates that South Africa needs 55,000 social service professionals by 2030, but the government currently employs 23,561 professionals,³⁵ indicating that many vulnerable children, families, and youth lack access to essential help.
- Access to rural and isolated regions is also a challenge due to geographical obstacles, scattered populations, and inadequate infrastructure. The social development sector faces significant challenges in implementing its programs due to underfunding and implementation capacity issues, which hinder its ability to effectively address poverty and social needs.
- The gap between those with and without access to technology and the internet disproportionately affects youth, particularly in accessing social development services. This limited access hampers their participation in education, job training, and social support programs, perpetuating cycles of inequality.
- South African youth face significant obstacles in obtaining social assistance due to structural flaws in application procedures, constrained resources, and prevailing attitudes of social welfare. Issues include digital and linguistic obstacles in grant applications, inadequate basic infrastructure in certain regions, and a shortage of social workers, especially in rural areas.

³¹ DSD (2024).

³² NDA (2018).

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Nyathi, L, et al, (2024).

³⁵ Parliamentary Monitoring Group (2024).

- The Social Relief of Distress Grant (SRD) in South Africa has been criticised for exclusion, with 89.7% of exclusions on average each month being erroneous.³⁶ The most affected groups include women carers, rural residents, youth, undocumented individuals, and those without digital or banking access.³⁷

3. Key statistics

- In its 2023/24 annual report, the DSD reported that, through its behavioural change programme, the sector reached 99 359 young people, including 42 741 young adolescents aged 10-14. Programmes such as You Only Leave Once (YOLO) and Dreams Family Strengthening reached over 52 784 adolescents aged 15-17, and over 3 834 adolescent girls and their parents/caregivers through Let's Talk intervention.³⁸
- Of the total learners who wrote the National Senior Certificate (NSC) exam for 2024, about 657 980 were beneficiaries of CSG grants, while 35 200 learners received foster child grants. The data further indicated that 653 290 learners were still receiving grant payments when they sat for their final exams, while the grants of 34 710 learners lapsed on reaching their 18th birthday.³⁹
- Of the 34 710 learners whose grants lapsed, 3 092 matriculants applied for the SRG Grant of R370. In monetary terms, R58.9-billion has been allocated to learners who are social grant beneficiaries.⁴⁰
- By the end of March 2024, the country had a total of 68 792 persons registered to practice as Child and Youth Care Workers, which some are still in the youth cohort.⁴¹
- Reports indicate that by mid-2024, the EPWP Social Sector had created over 200 000 work opportunities.⁴²
- The NDA report (2020) indicate that around 17.4 million households in South Africa in 2020 were headed by youth, comprising 26 % of the total. The report found that youth-headed homes in rural areas typically experience high levels of unemployment and poverty, while 5.9% of urban youth-headed households were recorded as having no income.⁴³

4. Recommendations

To improve the execution of its initiatives focused on promoting youth social inclusion and tackling inequality, the following recommendations for the social development sector are suggested:

- The social development sector should enhance its capacity, especially within its social welfare service programs, which offer support to the most vulnerable groups in society, including youth. The sector should enhance its oversight of the implementation of social welfare services at the provincial level.
- The sector must fast track the recruitment of social workers and community care workers to effectively address the social challenges confronting South Africa's youth and meet the NDP's goals of employing 55,000 social service professionals by 2030.

³⁶ Institute for Economic Justice (2025).

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ DSD (2024)

³⁹ DSDNews (2025).

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ DSD (2024)

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ NYDA (2022).

- The sector should enhance its awareness campaigns, especially in rural areas, to increase the number of beneficiaries reached through behavioural change programs targeting issues such as substance abuse, GBV, femicide, and other social challenges.
- Continued engagement with the National Treasury is crucial for the social development sector concerning the payment model for NGOs and NPOs, which act as essential agents of change in numerous communities.
- Social assistance plays a vital role in alleviating poverty within South African communities. Consequently, the social development sector should consider universal access to social assistance grants for eligible children and youth, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- The high prevalence of substance abuse in South Africa continues to be a major issue. The Substance Abuse sub-programme within the DSD should enhance education and awareness initiatives on substance abuse in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, including higher education institutions and civil society organisations (CSOs).

5. Conclusion

This paper discussed the social development sector programmes aimed at ensuring social inclusion and addressing inequality among the youth of South Africa. The social development sector uses a multi-pronged approach to promote social inclusion and address inequality among youth, and it has made several strides in implementing these programs. These programs are critical to ensuring young people can participate meaningfully in society, access opportunities, and break intergenerational poverty cycles. However, continued investment, interdepartmental collaboration, and youth engagement are essential to maximising impact.

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