

STARVATION SILENTLY KILLS OUR KIDS

Malnourished **children are dying** as families living below poverty line go hungry and caregivers skip immunisation

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Free State Health MEC Montseng Tsiu has raised concerns about the province experiencing an increase in the deaths of children under the age of five due to acute malnutrition.

Tsiu noted the alarming statistic when delivering her budget speech early this week.

In response, her department plans to establish three paediatric hubs and increase access to specialised child health services.

“The expanded programme on immunisation is one of our child survival strategies. Community education has been maintained to improve our performance in this regard,” Tsiu said, and advised that there were plans in place to address the death of children because of acute malnutrition, which had increased from 3.1% in 2020/21 to 9.6% in 2021/22.

“There is a need for community engagement and education of the communities on maternal and child health services.

“A collaboration with the University of the Free State and schools of nursing has been established to improve the skills of healthcare providers on maternal and child health.

“There is also a need to conduct immunisation and vitamin A supplementation drives to decrease morbidity and mortality of children due to vaccine-preventable diseases.”

According to a report released by Stats SA last week, the Covid-19 pandemic has had serious implications for food security and nutrition in South Africa.

It says that 23.6% of South Africans were affected by moderate to severe food insecurity in 2020, while 14.9% experienced severe food insecurity.

The report also says that the proportion of those affected by severe food insecurity increased between 2019 and 2020.

While all provinces have been affected, the Northern Cape (17.6%) and Eastern Cape (16.6%) fared slightly better than the rest, as their food insecurity prevalence rates were below the national average (23.6%) in 2020.

“The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic denied many South Africans their right to adequate food, as enshrined in the South

African Constitution, and undermined the efforts that have been made to meet the National Development Plan’s goals and the UN Sustainable Development Goals of zero hunger by 2030,” the report says.

Dr Rolene Wagner, the superintendent-general of the Eastern Cape health department, said Covid-19 had affected households and people had not been able to access services.

There have been 14 malnutrition-related deaths reported in the Eastern Cape in the past 15 months.

“Malnutrition is a global problem and it

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particularly affects rural communities. As the province, we have identified that the contributing factors include children diagnosed with HIV but who have defaulted on treatment and missed immunisations.

“One of the children who died had missed nine immunisations. Many of the children are in households headed by grandmothers. We have young mothers who, after delivering their babies, then leave them in the care of grannies who do not necessarily have access to childcare grants,” Wagner said.

She also said there was an emerging trend of children younger than six months presenting with malnutrition.

“Children who are under six months of age should be breastfed, but most of them are left with grandmothers.

“To fight the death of children because of

malnutrition, we don’t have to wait for children to lose weight. We should intervene and put those children on supplements so that we prevent them getting to a stage of contracting illnesses and getting diarrhoea,” she said.

According to the SA Child Gauge - a publication that provides annual snapshots of the status of South African children, which is published by the Children’s Institute at the University of Cape Town - the nutritional status of South Africa’s children is deteriorating.

The publication reveals that 30% of South Africa’s children live below the food poverty line in households with a per capita income of less than R571 a month.

These households do not have enough money to meet the nutritional needs of children.

“Frequent infections caused by overcrowding and poor access to water, sanitation and healthcare services further compromise children’s nutritional status.

“It is therefore not surprising that, according to the national department of health’s ministerial committee for the morbidity and mortality of children under five years, severe acute malnutrition is one of three leading causes of child deaths in South Africa,” reads a report in the publication.

Professor Julian May, the director of the Centre of Excellence in Food Security at the University of the Western Cape, says child malnutrition is a slow form of violence that lingers largely unseen until the child’s health is seriously compromised.

“It slowly eats away at children’s potential, eroding their physical health and cognitive development, and undermining their education and economic prospects.

“It also drives an intergenerational cycle of poverty, malnutrition and ill-health that comes at a huge cost for individual children, their families and the South African economy,” May says.

University of Cape Town vice-chancellor Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng says children who manage to survive malnutrition will carry the harm done in their bodies, minds and spirits for the rest of their lives.

“And it doesn’t stop there. By attacking our children, malnutrition erodes our national development. The nation that starves its children is also starving itself.”