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EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AS AN ECONOMIC STRATEGY FOR GROWTH

One wishes that our country could overgrow the euphoria around the Matric results. It is saddening to witness how we get so misdirected as to use the results as some measure of political performance rather than an indicator of human development. It explains why there is always a lot of political mudslinging and obfuscation around results announcement. All this energy is, in my view, misplaced. A caring nation ought to be more concerned about the educational inputs right from early childhood and the sustainability of the systems that should justify our output expectations at Matric level.

James Heckman, a University of Chicago Economics professor, has done a great deal of work that shows how a country could benefit from early childhood education investments in terms of costs savings in welfare, healthcare and the judicial system. In this approach education is viewed as a strategic investment for human and economic development distinct from the pontification and political naval-gazing associated with Matric results.

Heckman has conducted studies that show the brain of a child has the capacity to develop much rapidly from birth to the age of five. A nation that takes to heart the positive strategy of “prevention is better than cure” would pay attention to this critical time of a child’s development and invest massive resources in the child’s development. All this is done to shape the productivity of the child in the formative stage of their development with the expectation that this will later pay dividends in various aspects of a country’s development. So, a country invests in building appropriate educational infrastructure and ensures the availability of well-trained educators and relevant learner support materials. Access in terms of location and affordability is critical that the children secure a place in these institutions

During the critical first five years of development, early childhood education’s objective is to “build the foundation of cognitive and character skills necessary for success in school, health, career and life”. Heckman insists that the investment must be in the “whole child” by the early childhood education “packaging cognitive skills with character skills such as attentiveness, impulse control, persistence and teamwork”. These “character skills that turn knowledge into know-how and people into productive

citizens" later in life is an important investment in the era of globalization where countries are increasingly adopting the strategy of migrating from a resource-based economy to a knowledge-based one.

These interventions are particularly crucial for "at-risk" children of disadvantaged communities. This is because the disadvantaged families lack the resources to provide for their children. In the South African context these families might be illiterate, unemployed or under-employed. They usually live in the townships and villages in shack dwellings. There is no infrastructure, no social amenities and no recreational facilities. Children like these miss what Heckman calls "parent-coaching" and early childhood education programmes, a condition which condemns them to poverty and miseries of all sorts their entire lives. They soon find solace in alcohol and drugs. Due to lack of education they cannot find decent employment. They resort to survival manoeuvres that channel them to crimes like stealing, burglary and armed robbery. They desert their homes and become street-based.

At this stage these children have become a burden to the country and causing a diversion on its budget. The criminal justice system is strained to the limit as the police have to run after the delinquents arresting them. Then you need more prisons and correctional services personnel to guard and rehabilitate these law offenders. The courts are kept busy trying the accused. The social workers have to come in to deal with the problem of orphans and neglected children. They roam the city centres and negatively affect the businesses whose clients are pushed away by their loitering. Because of their social challenges they become vulnerable to the diseases that could otherwise have been prevented. Then the country has to attend to the social welfare of these children. In South Africa about a quarter of its citizens are receiving social grants or are on some other social safety net at high cost to the fiscus.

The effect of all this is the increase on social spending. To achieve this, the country has to borrow to be able to finance this burden on the fiscus; and this will increase the deficit. This results in increasing inflation in the long run, a condition that may achieve the opposite of what was intended in the first place. The rise in the prices of commodities may cause the demand curve to shift to the left with the result that producers may cut down on production to reduce supply. Falling supply implies increasing unemployment and poverty. This is nothing but an economy whose growth is increasingly slowing down. As a result, the disadvantaged families' plight increases, and this is projected onto their children.

All these challenges would invariably result in "poor health, dropout rates, poverty and crime". Take all this and couple it with the budgetary distortions that happened as a consequence of channeling fiscal resources to remedy social problems arising out of the country's failure to invest in the early childhood education. These intervening challenges resulted in the city failing to prioritise in its spending.

South Africa is a case in point where the apartheid ideology brought about the policy of the inferior Bantu Education for black people and a myriad of other laws that were designed to oppress and push the majority of the population to the margins of the mainstream society. This resulted in lack of infrastructure investments in the townships and the villages, as well as the under-education of the majority. With the ushering in of the democratic dispensation in 1994, the challenge was that the economy could not perform optimally because of the inherited structural problems. High-end skills jobs were available but the bulk of the labour force did not have the appropriate skills to match the job demand. The ramifications of this have been a vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty. Now the town and road plans have to be

redesigned at high costs because they were never meant to cope with the added numbers of the previously disadvantaged people. This holds true for the townships.

At this stage what is needed is a strategy to turn the situation around so as to substantially reduce the costs of these social problems to the taxpayers by investing in developmental opportunities for at-risk children. The most proactive way to achieve this is to consciously and deliberately invest in early childhood education, which Heckman believes "is a cost-effective strategy for promoting economic growth".

Flowing from this discussion it is clear that remedial interventions are not only expensive on the fiscus, but that they are unsustainable in the march of time. It has also been shown that prevention is indeed better than cure. By investing in early childhood education you are developing a cohort of citizens that will add value to the economy and society as a whole, rather than breeding social misfits that may prove to be a menace to society.