

Statement from Christina Nomdo relating to the Western Cape Commissioner for Children

Thank you, Premier Alan Winde and the Western Cape Provincial Parliament for entrusting me to lead the Office of the Commissioner for Children in the province. Much appreciation to the Premier for acknowledging the value of the particular skills and experience I bring to this role. I look forward to serve the children of the Western Cape and support families and communities to care for them.

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has become the primary new challenge for governments across the world. No less so in the Western Cape and South Africa where bold steps have been taken by government to arrest the spread of the virus. The national lockdown hopes to flatten the curve to avoid overwhelming our healthcare system. However, this lockdown — a necessary measure to keep us all safe — can also be a dangerous time for children.

Police Minister Bheki Cele noted that the South African Police Service received numerous gender-based violence distress calls in the first week of lockdown. Any reports of gender-based violence in homes are significant and concerning. In addition to the trauma of witnessing violence, children may also be direct victims of violence in these domestic spaces. Unlike adults, they may not be able to report this during the lockdown. Whilst they are cut off from their support networks. **It does not mean children are not crying out, it just means they are crying alone.**

During the COVID-19 crisis, I have noted with appreciation the Western Cape government's application of information systems to record and understand the rate and location of Coronavirus infections. It would be equally vital to record how many children have been infected with the virus, note the means of infection, and track their health outcomes. Global evidence suggests children have better health outcomes after being infected with the virus. We need to make visible how children are affected by this pandemic and put in place measures to protect them. These strategic information management capabilities are also very useful to make informed decisions to benefit children.

Coordinated responses from the social sector in the Western Cape government includes: collaborating to develop a food distribution strategy and solving difficult related service delivery challenges. But we must ensure their safety on route to the feeding schemes. This collaboration bodes well for a systems, rather than a siloed, approach to governance. Children benefit from holistic approaches to optimise their wellbeing and development.

At this time, my approach as the Commissioner for Children would be to fully understand the workings of government, especially the strategies deployed to address the pandemic. I would like to build respectful relationships in the departments implicated in the Commissioner for Children Act: Education, Health, Social development as well as Cultural affairs and Sports.

As the Commissioner for Children, in order to contribute child rights insights to the responses to the pandemic, I will need to engage with children. Children need to know that they can share their experiences and raise their concerns with decision-makers especially during this pandemic and lockdown. I am already engaged in processes to reach out to children by telephone, radio and other virtual platforms — #littlevoicescount, in my role as a National Planning Commissioner. The children's inputs received will be shared with government. I am very committed to child participation in governance.

A more nuanced, long-term plan for the Office of the Commissioner for Children would be developed in cooperation with children, government and civil society when the crisis ends and we are once again able to move around freely.

ENDS

Christina Nomdo

18 May 2020