



Commissioner for Children

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IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Children are eager to have a say in government budget decisions.

The Child Government Monitors (CGMs) in the office of the Western Cape Commissioner for Children have learned about government budgets and how they affect children's rights since 2022. The Commissioner has developed a child-centered approach, using games and experiential learning, to help children understand how the government and its budget work.

Initially, the CGMs found it difficult to understand the Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS) 2021. However, they have since become empowered to participate in public budget processes. This year, they have decided to be actively involved in budget processes. The Commissioner convened a WhatsApp group chat to inform their submission on the 2023 Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement. 17 CGMs provided their views. These included;

- developing a child-friendly governance system,
- considering the debt burden on children,
- stopping a VAT increase,
- avoiding cuts to social sector spending,
- stopping the decrease of child welfare and child protection budgets, and
- reconfiguring the state from a rights perspective.

The children felt that the word "child" was not mentioned in the MTBPS speech, which made them think that the Minister of Finance Enoch Godongwana and the country were not prioritising children. Child government monitors, Tara Hendricks (14) and John-Lee Plaatjies (16) emphasised the importance of involving children in budget decisions and making budget processes and documents child-friendly during their presentations in the National Parliament. The Commissioner will follow up on the National Treasury's commitment to effect child-centered governance. At the provincial level, the CGMs decided to get involved in the Division of Revenue Amendment (DORA) Bill. The DORA

Bill determines how much of the national revenue will be allocated to the three spheres of government: national, provincial, and local. It also specifies how the money will be divided horizontally among the provinces and municipalities respectively. The DORA Bill also explains national conditional grant funding.

When Vimbai Watambwa (17) reviewed the DORA Bill, she was initially delighted to see the word "child" mentioned 105 times. However, she then realised that it was mostly mentioned in relation to budget cuts to children's services. For example, many conditional grants affecting children directly in education and health will be cut. R58 million will be cut from the early childhood development (ECD) grant, R1.6 billion from the education infrastructure grant, and R1 billion from the district health programmes grant. Vimbai found this very upsetting because children in poor districts who depend on the money from the district health programmes to receive services will be at risk when the budget is cut.

"If the children are not given safe proper buildings for school there will be a safety risk and if the buildings break down then it will take a long time to rebuild, which may cause an education backlog," she says.

The Commissioner and Vimbai asked the National Treasury officials to explain especially the cuts to the school infrastructure grant and the early childhood education grants. They answered that in-year cuts to the school infrastructure grant will mean no new construction projects can commence in this financial year. On ECD, they answered that cuts would affect maintenance of centres but would not affect the subsidies. They also reassured us that the school nutrition programme was protected.

The Commissioner notes that the budget cuts of the social sector grants send a clear message that the country is not prioritising children's rights. Our budget planning is not outcomes or futures oriented. We are not focusing on the quality of service delivery, and the results that we hope to achieve for our society in the future — by investing in our children now.

"The government needs to live up to its constitutional mandate to protect children's rights as a priority, we are not putting children first" she says.

Ends.

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About the Western Cape Commissioner for Children:

The Western Cape Commissioner for Children is an independent governance institution in the Western Cape. The Commissioner is mandated to protect and promote the rights, needs and interests of children in the province by working with the departments of Education, Health, and Social Development as well as Cultural Affairs and Sport. The Commissioner for Children reports to Provincial Parliament on activities, functions and progress on objectives.