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The role of non-governmental organisations as change agents : the case of NGOs providing child protection services in Ehlanzeni District, Mpumalanga.

Siziba, Sikholiwe

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Abstract

Child protection refers to the systems put in place to prevent child abuse and maltreatment and to promote and enhance the well-being of children. Child protection has been basically a constitutional issue for the state to protect children. Existing civil society organisations emerged as community collective organisations that were meant to voice out the concerns and demands of the public to their governments with regards to some problematic issues in their communities. Gradually, NGOs shifted their focus from reactive approaches to be more proactive in the manner they addressed the community issues and hence they incorporated child protection activities in their programmes. However, they are faced with criticism in focusing more on preventative and early intervention measures in child protection. The aim of the study was to investigate the role of NGOs as change agents in child protection. The study was qualitative in nature and used a multi-case study design. The study population consisted of 4 Directors /Managers from the 4 NGOs for the study as well as 6 Social Workers from the 4 NGOs, 3 councillors and 1 chief from the district and 2 key informants from the Department of Social Development and the South African Police Services. Semi-structured interview schedules were used to get the information from the respondents through face to face interviews.

The findings from the study are: NGOs contribute to the social protection of children by preventing child abuse, promoting the wellbeing of children and protecting their rights, building of resilience in children and their families and creating partnerships with other role players to provide holistic child protection services. The findings also revealed that revealed that communities perceive NGOs as the immediate service providers in their communities and promoters of child well-being and better social functioning of children. The findings from the study also revealed that NGOs are seen as change agents in terms of socio-economic development of communities. However, the study showed that communities perceived that NGOs render poor service and also that their programmes had a negative impact on children and their families. The findings of the study identified the following challenges faced by NGOs in their work of child protection which are role confusion, lack of cooperation, malfunctioning child protection systems and lack of resources.

The study recommends that child protection policy and processes around prevention, early intervention, statutory services and continuum of care be relooked and be improved and that programmes of child protection be child centred and yet be inclusive of parents as well. The study suggests that the child protection role players need to be capacitated and funded more to improve service delivery in child protection.