CHILDREN'S AGENCY IN REDUCING POVERTY AND ENVIRONMENTAL RISK: CASE STUDY OF DROP-IN-CENTRE, CARE-NET DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT ORGANISATION

BY

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ABSTRACT

CHILDREN'S AGENCY IN REDUCING POVERTY AND ENVIRONMENTAL RISK: CASE STUDY OF DROP-IN-CENTRE, CARE-NET DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT ORGANISATION

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In terms of Section 10 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996), children who are at an age, maturity and stage of development where they are able to participate in decisions concerning their future, have the right to do so and for their views to be duly considered.

The goal of the research study was to explore and describe how children's agency was recognised and respected in programmes / interventions aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risks in the case study of a Drop-In-Centre at the Care-Net Development and Support Organisation (Gauteng, SA).

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, and the type of research was applied. Instrumental case study design was utilised to conduct the study, and a purposive sampling of seven child participants (CPs) and three key informant participants (KIs) from the Drop-In-Centre. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were used to collect data, guided by an interview schedule. A six-step thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Quality of data was ensured through the strategies of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

The findings indicated that child participants were aware of the impact of land and air pollution on their health and well-being. Children report minimal roles in the planning and implementation phases of the programmes they participated in, while the majority of the planning, implementation and evaluation processes were dictated by the adults in the programme. Although participants acknowledged the need of adult's support in

making critical choices, they also want to make decisions of their own and want adults to recognise their ability to do so.

The study concluded that child participants have the agency and autonomy to make decisions in their own best interest when they have the necessary information and opportunities to do so. The minimal level of children's participation in the programmes' phases could be attributed to adults' stereotypes about how children are generally perceived in society distorts the nature of the relationship between children and adults and how adults perceive children's agency. The study recommends that a purposive platform for child participation be established such as a children's committee, nominated and run by the children, to serve as a link between the children, adults and programme managers. The study sheds light on the agency and ability that children have to participate meaningfully in the design and implementation of programmes aimed at them.

KEY WORDS

Child

Child agency

Child participation

Poverty

Environmental risks

Care-Net Development and Support Organisation

Drop-In-Centre

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CHAPTER 1: GENERAL INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

South Africa (SA) has a population of roughly 60 million people of which 21.9 million (37%) are children (Statistics South Africa [StatsSA], 2021). In 2019, it was reported that 56% of children lived below the "upper bound poverty line (with a per capita income below R1, 227 per month)" and the reduction of the child poverty headcount from 65% in 2017 was attributed to massive expansion of Child Support Grants (hereafter CSG) (Hall, 2021). According to the Department of Social Development (2022:16), the CSG and Foster Child Grants, which was received by more than 13 million children in 2021, made some impact on their poverty level, but only to alleviation it somewhat.

The poor educational foundation of many children from early childhood and "weak social structures and associated problems of violence and abuse" keep many children trapped in poverty, and socially and physically exclude them from mainstream society (South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) & United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2014:6). Furthermore, the most vulnerable people, which include children, are more likely to live in the most degraded environments (Hawkins, 2010:68) where they are further exposed to other environmental risks such as poor sanitation, pollution, and lack of clean water.

The National Plan of Action for Children (hereafter, NPAC) in South Africa (hereafter, SA) 2012-2017 (RSA, 2012:47) expresses commitment to protecting and enhancing natural resources and assets for the benefit of children in SA. To ensure a better quality of life for children affected by poverty, the NPAC stipulates that they should receive social grants and other social services, have access to early childhood development (ECD) programmes, basic education, and health care (NPAC, 2012:89).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (hereafter 2030 Agenda) seeks to realise human rights for all through the attainment of its seventeen sustainable development goals (SDGs) and 169 associated targets (United Nations (hereafter UN), 2015). Children are the stakeholders inheriting and shaping future societies and as Eurochild (2017:3) rightfully claims, "We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children."

This statement emphasises the importance of children, inter-generational equity and justice, and a continued focus on development that ensures child development. However, equity and justice for children are threatened by many external circumstances like environmental risks, poverty, and violations of their rights. Children have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives and future. By involving children in the discourses and decision-making processes around poverty reduction and sustainable livelihoods, broadens their human capital through their contributions, while also developing new skills, responsibilities, acceptable ways of living, and tolerating and working with people who are holding views that differs from theirs (Katunga & Lombard, 2016: 200,201). It further expands their social capital by introducing them to diverse socio-economic, political, environmental and cultural networks, systems and resources that they might not have been privy to if they had not participated in such poverty reduction and sustainable livelihood programmes (Katunga & Lombard, 2016:200,201).

Children have the right to participate in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of programmes that affect their current and future lives, so as not to be passive bystanders. Children have agency and should be recognised for the contribution they can make in reducing poverty, creating sustainable livelihoods and mitigating environmental risks for sustainable development in their communities.

This study investigated how children's agency is recognised in reducing poverty and environmental risks in the Drop-In-Centre (D-I-C) at Care-Net Development and Support Organisation (Mabopane, Gauteng, SA)[1].

The concepts relevant to the study are as follows:

- **Child**

  A child is a person under the age of 18 years (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996).

- **Agency**

  Agency refers to a human being's capacity to make meaningful choices and decisions about events that influence her or his life today and in the future

[1] Here after referred to only as Care-Net

(irrespective of age). To exert agency, people must be presented with opportunities to express their views and experience, being capable and valued as human beings, and citizens of their communities (Lady Gowrie Child Centre Inc, 2015). In this study, unless otherwise indicated, agency refers to the agency of children.

- **Poverty**

  In the context of this study, poverty is comprised of more than simply low income. It is inclusive of social and physical exclusion, a sense of powerlessness, exclusion from decision-making, and lack of access to education, health care, and clean and safe environments (Green, 2012:6). **Poverty reduction** is about giving people opportunities to access education, health care, water, and sanitation "to cope with the shocks of everyday life" (Green, 2012:10). These opportunities are embedded in basic human rights and recognition that children have agency to influence the outcomes for a sustainable future.

- **Environmental risks**

  In a sustainable development and human rights framework where Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and human rights are intertwined (UN, 2015), environmental risks are regarded as an environmental justice issue, in line with "the human right to live in a clean, safe, and healthy environment" (Hawkins, 2010:68). Environmental risks can include the physical or social environment, and for purposes of this study will focus on poverty, the lack of access to clean water, poor sanitation, pollution, and violence.

- **Care-Net Development and Support Organisation (Care-Net)**

  The research site was the Drop-In-Centre (hereafter, D-I-C) of Care-Net (NPO: 057-337) located at 1707 Block A in Mabopane. It is a child protection organisation which provides services such as statutory and non-statutory social work interventions, Early Childhood Centre (hereafter, ECD), prevention of Gender Based Violence (hereafter, GBV), Bridge the Gap (D-I-C) as well as training and development with specific focus on poverty eradication and disaster management (Care-Net Development and Support Organisation, 2021:2).

1.2. Theoretical framework

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 “enshrines a duty to alleviate poverty” (Republic of South Africa, 2013:12). Poverty and environmental risks violate human rights and therefore a Human Rights-Based approach (HRBA) was a suitable theoretical framework for the study. UNICEF (2014:13) consolidates the 44 child-related indicators that are integrated across the 17 SDGs into 5 dimensions of children’s rights, namely: (a) the right to survive, (b) the right to learn, (c) the right to be protected from violence, (d) the right to live in a safe and clean environment, and (e) the right to have an equal opportunity to succeed.

Promoting such a holistic approach to children’s rights means that children are not only seen as part of vulnerable groups, but first and foremost, as individuals who have agency and whose participation is fundamental to any poverty reduction initiative. UNICEF’s (2014:13) framework of the organisation of rights provides an integrated analysis of the interrelationship between the rights of children and how it affects the construct of children’s agency as rights-holders. It carries a particular focus on children’s right to participate in decisions that influence their current and future development.

1.3. Research methodology

The study used a qualitative research approach to gain the participants’ in-depth view and personal experience about the research question (Fouché & Delport, 2011:64). This study was both exploratory and descriptive in nature as descriptive data was gathered through spoken words (Fouché & Delport, 2011:65) and asking the “what” question in order to achieve better insight about the research question. The study used applied research which means that the researcher searched for a solution to a practical problem (Fouché & De Vos, 2011:95) semi-structure interviews and a thematic analysis of participants’ feedback regarding how children’s agency is recognised and respected at a D-I-C which is a programme aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risks were used.

The research study was a case study in order for the researcher to be familiar with the social world of a small number of people while identifying patterns and themes within their words (Fouché & De Vos, 2011:320).

In particular, instrumental case study as it allowed for the development of an understanding of a phenomenon with the goal of increasing the ability to generalise the findings to other cases (Mertens, 2010:324).

Purposive sampling was used to select 7 child-participants between the ages of 10 to 17 years, and 5 adult key-informants who were involved at the Drop-In-Centre either as service users or staff members (Strydom, 2013:232). A semi structured interview was used to collect data, guided by an interview schedule (Greeff, 2013:352). Data was analysed by following the six-step process of thematic analysis as described by Clarke, Braun and Hayfield (2015:231). A more detailed discussion of the research methodology as well as the ethical considerations and limitations of the study will be discussed in Chapter 3.

1.4. Rationale and problem statement

Ending poverty in all forms is the highest priority of the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015). Elimination of child poverty is crucial for sustainable economic and social development (UNICEF 2014:12). The progress that SA has made in the past two decades in reducing the extent of poverty and social exclusion and their effect on children (SAHRC & UNICEF, 2014:4), especially through social grants, is significant but not sufficient in escaping the trap of poverty. For children living in poverty, inadequate healthcare, poor nutrition, poor quality education, social and physical exclusion and environmental risks restrict their 'aspirations and hopefulness' to 'creat[e] a more prosperous future' (SAHRC & UNICEF, 2014:7).

The 2030 Agenda includes global poverty goals that are specific to children. Therefore, poverty reduction measures have to be in place to report on in national progress reports on the SDGs. Increased household income through social grants is one measure to provide for children's rights to social security and curbing child poverty (SAHRC & UNICEF, 2016:6). In addition, children have the right to access social services and programmes on education and health care and protection against environmental risks such as pollution, poor sanitation, lack of access to clean water and violent environments to ensure that they are not left behind (UNICEF, 2018). Childhood constitutes both vulnerabilities and evolving capacities, which require a balance between children's protection rights and their participation rights.

It is thus important to recognise that being a child does not render an individual helpless and/or passive in their environment. Children should be regarded as individuals with agency that can and want to participate in creating a sustainable future for themselves and others by giving input into the conceptualisation, design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of programmes to achieve the intended outcomes.

The presented literature review (Chapter 2) indicates that there is limited research to shed light on the extent that children are included in the conceptualisation, design, implementing, and monitoring and evaluating of poverty reduction initiatives towards attainment of the SDGs. Subsequently, the study aimed to explore how, and to what extent, children were involved in the above-mentioned processes intended to reduce the impact of poverty and environmental risks on the livelihoods and well-being of children in SA. The outcomes of the study can inform policies and practices on how the recognition of, and respect for children's agency can be incorporated in programme conceptualisation, design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of outcomes that reduce poverty and environmental risks.

The primary research question for the study was therefore framed as followed:

How are children's agency recognised and respected in programmes/interventions aimed to reduce poverty and environmental risks in the D-I-C at Care-Net?

The primary research question was informed by the following secondary research questions:

- What were the goals and intended outcomes of the programmes/interventions towards reducing children's poverty and environment risks?
- How were children involved in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of those programmes/interventions?
- What factors influenced the recognition and respect, or non-recognition and disrespect of children's agency in these programmes/interventions?
- What must change in order for the programmes/interventions to recognise and respect children's agency and input?

1.5. Goal and objectives

The goal of the study was to explore and describe how children's agency was recognised and respected in programmes/interventions aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risks at the D-I-C at Care-Net.

The primary objectives of the study were as follows:

- To conceptualise and contextualise poverty and environmental risks of children within a human rights-based framework (Objective 1).
- To explore and describe the goal and intended outcomes of programmes/interventions that were aimed at reducing children's poverty and environment risks (Objective 2).
- To explore and describe how children were involved in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of such programmes/interventions (Objective 3).
- To explore and describe the factors that influenced the recognition and respect / non-recognition and disrespect of children's agency in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes/intervention (Objective 4).
- To make recommendations on how children's agency can be recognised and respected in future programmes/interviews directed towards poverty and risk reduction (Objective 5).

1.6. Chapter division and outline

The presented research report is outlined in the section below. Each chapter is presented together with a brief overview of its content.

Chapter 1 provided a general introduction to the research study. It defined the concepts relevant to the study, presents the rationale and problem statement, the research questions, and the goals and objectives of the study. Furthermore, it presented a brief overview of the theoretical framework and an outline of the chapters of the research report.

Chapter 2 focuses on the literature review. It includes a discussion on children's agency in reducing poverty and environmental risks, the policy and legislative framework for children, along with the adolescent developmental stages, factors and mechanisms that enable and/or hinder children from exercising their agency. Also, the nature of childhood poverty and its impact on children's development as well as the role of quality education in enabling or disabling childhood poverty is discussed. The chapter also explores the health and development challenges due to polluted natural environments, how community violence can violate children's sense of agency, as well as how children's agency can be a push back measure against poverty and environmental risks.

Chapter 3 presents the research methodology of the study, including the research approach, research type and design, the population and sampling method, and methods of data collection and data analysis. In addition, the chapter focuses on the trustworthiness of the data, the pilot study, the ethical considerations of the study, and its limitations.

Chapter 4 presents the empirical results and findings of the research undertaking.

Chapter 5 reports on how the objectives of the study were met, discusses the key findings of the study, together with the study's conclusion and recommendations.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

According to UNICEF (2015), children have rights to give their opinion freely on issues that affect them, and therefore adults should pay attention and take them seriously. Children should also be able to share freely with others what they think and feel by talking, drawing, writing or freely expressing their views in any other way that does not harm others. Listening to children, taking them and their views seriously, and enabling them to freely and safely share their views reflects a humane and dignified approach of engaging with children that shows them that they matter.

Children's ability to freely share and express their views in matters affecting their wellbeing compliments the views of Jerome and Starkey (2022:2) around free expression and agency. The authors point out that once children have the right to express themselves and influence decisions that concerns them directly, they can develop a sense that they can engage with the structures and society around them and exercise control and ownership over their lives. Recognising and respecting children and their views can create a culture of constructive dialogue, as well as peaceful and sustainable platforms for children to participate in socio-economic and environmental decision-making that directly impacts their interest and circumstances.

Creating nurturing and empowering spaces within families, communities and institutions that respect and recognises children's (based on their stage of development) views and abilities will allow children to equally, freely, and fully participate in matters affecting them can put them in the centre of their development. By involving children centrally in their own development, recognises that they know their situation best and they are able to utilise their inherent or acquired knowledge, talents and experiences to come up with innovative, practical and sustainable ideas and solutions to reduce childhood poverty and environmental risks. This in turn boosts confidence in themselves, their abilities, and the community around them. Additionally, children's knowledge, talents and experiences can be viewed as a strength or vast reservoir of potential that can be explored to solve such pervasive and debilitating social-economic challenges (Weyers, 2011:23).

Acknowledging children's right to express themselves and creating a nurturing environment where they themselves, their needs and their views are respected and recognised ensures that matters pertaining to their best interest are being looked at from a HRBA.

According to the UN (2018:1), the HRBA is a conceptual framework for facilitating sustainable human development outcomes embedded in international human rights standards and is intended to promote and protect human rights accordingly. This approach anchors programmes, policies, plans and processes of development in a system of rights, which promote sustainable development outcomes and people empowerment.

The HRBA (UN, 1986:1) recognises:

> That development is a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting there from.

The relevance of the HRBA is further emphasised by Broberg and Sano (2018:672) who state that the HRBA is more appropriate in ensuring that the weakest and marginalised citizens have access to essential services such as health care, water, sanitation and education. It further aims to ensure that these individuals are empowered with knowledge of what they are entitled to and the channels through which they can assert their rights. This notion of marginalised people being able to assert their rights, to be empowered, and to access their basic rights is further highlighted by the Policy, Ethics and Human Right Committee (2015:7). According to this committee, the HRBA is based on the premise of giving people better opportunities to participate in shaping of decisions that influence their human rights. However, it requires analysis of the structural causes of discrimination and poverty, not just its symptoms, and of the impact of governmental action (or inaction) on communities experiencing poverty.

The HRBA is also based on principles such as:

- **Universality and Inalienability** – everyone is entitled to human rights. The person in whom they are inherent, cannot give them up nor can others take them away from them.
- **Indivisibility** – human rights are inherent to the dignity of every human person.
- **Inter-dependence and Inter relatedness** – realisation of the right to health may depend on the realisation of the right to education or of the right to information.
- **Equality and Non-discrimination** – all human beings are equal as human beings and virtue of the inherent dignity of each human person, and they are also entitled to their human rights without discrimination of any kind.
- **Participation and inclusion** – Every person is entitled to active, free and meaningful participation in, contribution to, and enjoyment of civil, economic, social, cultural and political development in which human rights and fundamental freedoms can be realised.
- **Accountability and the Rule of Law** – States and other duty bearers are answerable for the observance of human rights and have to comply with the legal norms and standards enshrined in the human rights instruments.

In addition to the above principles, the HRBA is also instrumental in guiding the phases of support and development programmes and projects such as planning, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG), 2003). The present literature review was done through the lens of the HRBA which guided the implementation and analysis of the study's research findings.

This chapter is divided into seven sections which are presented and integrated with the above principles of human rights which was selected as the theoretical framework for this study, starting with a brief overview of the policy and legislative framework relevant for child protection and participation (Section 2.2). Thereafter, the conceptualisation of the adolescent stage of child development is explored (Section 2.3), followed by an depiction of the importance of child agency, including socio-economic factors that play a role in children exercising their sense of agency and the degree to which they can do so (Section 2.4).

The fourth section (Section 2.5) includes a presentation on child participation as a mechanism to exercise agency, before the firth section (Section 2.6) of this chapter focuses on the nature of poverty in SA. This section makes reference to the impact of childhood poverty on children's development and wellbeing, along with the role and quality of education in enabling or disabling childhood poverty. In Section 2.7, the influence of the natural environment on children's sense of agency and wellbeing is explored, how community violence impacts agency, and how children's agency can act as a mitigating measure against environmental risks, before. The chapter ends in Section 2.8 with a summary of the review.

2.2. Policy and legislative framework for children

As per The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, Section 28 (3) and the Children's Act 38 of 2005, a child is a person under the age of 18 years and, like everyone in the country, has basic human rights that must be preserved, promoted and protected. In addition to these rights, Section 28 of The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, stipulates that a child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter that concerns them, including:

- The right to family care or parental care, or to appropriate alternative care when removed from the family environment
- The right to basic nutrition, shelter, basic health care services and social services
- The right to be protected from maltreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation.

These SA legal instruments are aligned with the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Organisation of African Union, 1990) and the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). All these acts and charters are meant to protect the child's basic rights, ensuring equal accesses to social justice, resources and opportunities, and to advocate on their behalf.

Furthermore, the UNCRC (1989) makes provision for a thematic organisational model, where the rights of children are categorised into four main themes: survival, protection, development and participation. It also makes provision for general principles around non-discrimination, children's best interest, right to life, survival and development, and respect for the views of children (UNCRC, 1989). This framework of organising of

rights provides for an integrated understanding of the interrelationship between the rights of children and how it affects the construct of children's agency as rights-holders, with a particular focus on children's right to participate in decisions that influence their current and future development.

Understanding the definition of a child within the context of the legal instruments and international or continental organisations' guidelines, means all matters concerning children should be viewed through a human rights lens. It ensures that children are recognised as equal members of society whose basic human rights are protected, promoted and respected in order for them to participate or influence policies and decisions around matters that affect their socio-economic development. For the purpose of this study, participants included children (girls and boys) between the ages of 10–17 which falls into the age group of adolescent and youth.

2.3. Adolescent development stage

The World Health Organisation (WHO, s.a.) views adolescents as individuals falling within the age group of 10 to 19 years. Understanding the age range and developmental stage of adolescents can ensure that they are not left behind from socio-economic, cultural and environmental activities that might be considered above or below their level of psychosocial functioning and understanding (WHO, s.a.).

Authors such as Louw and Louw (2007:278), and Coovadia, Jugnundan and Ramkisson (2017:659), view adolescence as a transitional period between childhood and adulthood, characterised by physical; cognitive; social; moral and personality developmental changes. These changes include a series of developmental tasks and challenges that should be completed and resolved to ensure normal transition into adulthood. The development stages of adolescents are depicted below:

- **Physical development stage** –

  A biological process characterised by increased bodily changes due to the secretion of somatotropin (hormone), which results in changes in physical competencies, as well as the secretion of sex hormones which are responsible for the development of both primary and secondary sex characteristics (Louw & Louw, 2007:283-285).

Understanding adolescents' physical and sexual maturation is important because adolescents begin to understand and learn more about their own bodies during this stage – exploring cultural ideas around body images and their own sexual identity, and expected to participate in other socio-cultural activities (McGoldrick, Carter & Garcia – Preto, 2011:33).

Young girls might be subjected to "ukuthwalwa" cultural practices where they are abducted and married off to an older man without their consent. Such socio-cultural practices may compromise a child's agency because societal perceptions and pressure subject them to pre-determined gender roles and expectations which they may not be ready for mentally or spiritually. Such forces may also exacerbate poverty and environmental risks for young girls being subjected to them due to their physical development while ignoring the fact that their personalities and brain functions are still developing.

- **Cognitive development stage** –

  According to Louw and Louw (2007:300), during this stage, adolescents use formal operational thinking abilities to think abstractly and engage in meaningful debates about justice or humanitarian issues, and even hypothesise about situations, choices and consequences, especially when it comes to decision making processes. They begin to explore alternative principles and questions the long-standing status-quo, values, and expectations, deciding so that they can decide whether they want to incorporate societal values into their self-concepts or to devise alternative values.

  Louw and Louw (2007:303-304) further assert that the questioning nature of adolescents searching for plausible explanation may often be interpreted as being argumentative or idealistic, and if the explanations or solutions provided to them are not satisfactory or their views are ignored, conflict often ensues between them and adults or authoritarian figures. Hence, adolescence is also known as a stormy or difficult phase. Despite their idealistic views, adolescents are able to acknowledge other people's views and in the process realise that their social perceptions, and those of others, are not one dimensional, but influenced by continuous interactions with their social environment and standards (Louw & Louw, 2007:281, 303; Newman & Newman, 1997:645).

Therefore, adolescents are able to make significant and sustainable contributions towards the reduction of poverty and environmental issues, simply because of the advancement of their cognitive development, their inquisitive nature and challenging of societal normal and expectations.

- **Personality development stage –**

  Adolescents develop an increased sense of awareness about their surroundings and social values, and begin to ask themselves questions around their own identity. Amongst other things, they seek opportunities to develop their talents and strengths so that they can enhance their quality of life and contribute to the realisation of their dreams and aspirations (Louw & Louw, 2007:310). This stage is further linked with adolescents developing their own life philosophies, including moral and spiritual identity, and an ability to voice their own opinions in relation to their conformation of societal expectations (McGoldrick et al., 2011:33).

  Valuing and mastering this developmental task can significantly boost their self-concept and sense of confidence (McGoldrick et al., 2011:33). However, in instances where adolescents are unable to complete some of the developmental tasks due to impeding factors to their full and free expression, many are coerced to adopt existing norms and roles that may contradict their self-concept (McGoldrick et al., 2011:33). This can affect their sense of confidence when they have to make informed decision about matters affecting their wellbeing and they may experience forms of identity confusion (Louw & Louw, 2007:310).

- **Moral development stage** –

  This stage is based on the principles of doing what seems right or wrong and is instrumental in building adolescents' personal value systems that guide their thoughts and feelings, as well as helping them to practice acceptable and responsible behaviours (Louw & Louw, 2007:340).

  Morality is embedded within the adolescents' social contexts and is mostly informed by the quality and nature of interactions they have with their parents and peers. Louw and Louw (2007:330,340) assert that adolescents start to spend more time with their peers whom they share common interest with, and who also provide them with more interpersonal interaction opportunities that satisfy their emotional

needs and sense of belonging. However, according to Steinberg and Cauffman (1996:253), parental influence is still crucial when it comes to fundamental issues such as religion, education and occupational choices, while peer influence relates to more day-to-day affairs such as taste in music, clothes or gadgets.

In addition, this phase influenced by adolescents' questioning attitudes, and the use of formal operating thinking abilities. Their quest to develop personal value systems allows them to make use of their moral agency or autonomy to decide which values they will adopt and use as their moral compasses (Louw & Louw, 2007:327).

These developmental stages and the tasks attached to them demonstrate that adolescents continually develop themselves and their understandings and interactions with their environments and society. Their ability or inability to complete these developmental stages or tasks due to socio-economic, political or cultural limitations, might influence their confidence to make informed decisions and exercise their sense of moral agency or self-determination in matters that affect their current and future life circumstances. Given the significance of moral agency or self-determination in adolescents' development and wellbeing, it is important to also understand children's sense of agency.

2.4. Understanding child agency

Chen (2015:79) views human agency as the innate human potential and capability of self-regulation in relation to the environment within which human beings exist. At the same time, it is also the innate quality of intention and action to make things happen; to make things better towards more ideal, desirable, and optimal outcomes for oneself, others and the living world. Chen's description of agency, in particular the innate quality of taking action to make things happen, speaks to Piaget's theory of cognitive development which states that children are naturally trying to make sense of their physical and social worlds by creating concepts or designs that leads to expectations (Louw & Louw, 2007:23).

Aligning the concept of agency with Piaget's theory of cognitive development shows that children can actively contribute to matters pertaining to their growth and development, especially when they have the opportunities and resources to do so.

This is further enabled when it can be expressed freely and fully through self-determination, respect and an audience with adults or those in position of authority. The importance of agency in adolescents' growth and development, the socio-economic factors that qualifies children to exercise their sense of agency, and the degree to which SA children can exercise their agency are discussed in the following sub-sections.

2.4.1. Agency in adolescents' growth and development

According to the Human Development Report (2016), freedom of agency which is represented by voice and autonomy, is fundamental for children to participate in matters affecting their wellbeing. Having a voice and freedom of expression can be considered a form of a bottom-up approach because it allows children to communicate their needs, desires and emotions as it relates to their socio-economic challenges and unique frame of reference and experiences (Isidiho & Sabran, 2016:270). Furthermore, freedom to freely express needs and emotions can give them a sense of emotional stability and security as they know that they can or will be listened to, and their views be taken seriously, fostering harmonious interpersonal relationships (Ullenhag, 2018).

Agency and empowerment are intertwined because they can give children a sense of command in their lives whereby they can freely choose their own course of actions, make plans, and take self-serving decisions. Agentic and empowered children are also able to advocate or speak against socio-economic injustices such as discriminative policies, poverty, inequality and unsafe and unhealthy environments which are adversely affecting their development (Obhi, 2013:2). According to the researcher, the children's ability to advocate against injustices, demonstrate their socio-economic awareness or foresight, and apply their advancing cognitive and moral development, makes it possible and likely to devise practical solutions that can change the status-quo. Especially in persistence towards an intended outcomes such as a just cause or if their lives are endangered.

Their persistent nature in the quest for justice supports Hitlin, Erickson and Brown's (2015:164) statement that a person with a strong sense of agency is more likely to take risks that may increase their life causes.

Additionally, agency is based on the perception that children can influence their actions and life circumstances which can give them a sense of ownership and control in their lives. In turn, being in control of their lives can instil a sense of belief in themselves and significantly boost their self-confidence. A sense of belief in oneself is strongly linked with self-efficacy and human agency because people are likely to attempt to make things happen if and when they feel that they have the power to produce the intended or desired results (Smith, Kohn, Savage-Stevens, Finch, Ingate & Lim, 2000:466).

The power and ability to produce intended results can also be linked to motivation and self-determination attitude which compliments Code's (2020:3) assertions that self-efficacy beliefs can contribute to sustained interest, motivation and performance and once motivated to act, people are likely to regulate their behaviour to achieve their set goals. The notion of sustained interest and motivation to act and achieve intended goals is further supported by Horwarth and Platt (2019:303) who are of the opinion that children's ability to find and do things they are passionate about, which give them purpose and contribute to society, can be instrumental for their overall development. However, according to Hitlin et al., (2015:167), lack of control in their lives can result in mental health challenges such as depression, stress and anxiety and this can compromise their sense of agency and negatively affect their self-esteem, academic performance and abilities to form meaningful intra and interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, other children might doubt their capabilities to be innovative or take safe and calculated risks while others might adopt negative coping mechanisms to have a sense of control in their lives such as bullying other children or engaging in risky behaviours e.g., abusing drugs and alcohol. Such children might never be free enough to express themselves fully.

Although autonomy means that children are seeking independence and can hold idealistic and differing views from those held by authority figures, Smith et al., (2000:467) mention that social support is a critical contributor to feelings of personal autonomy and control. Smit et al.'s view about personal support in agency or autonomy compliments Hoangh's (2015:275) views that children's ability to exercise their autonomy is different from being physically, mentally and emotionally separated from social support structures such as parents, welfare organisations or the state

institutions. This can hinder their socio-economic development and functioning and induce feelings of insecurity or vulnerability. Therefore, for children to exercise their freedom of agency they should be empowered, have a degree of personal control over their life's course of actions and engage in supportive, respectful and egalitarian relationships with adults and institutions or socio-economic activities that give them a sense of purpose.

These engagements should allow them to equally express their views and in this instance, their ability to exercise a sense of agency can be a seen as a measure to foster trustworthy relationships and social cohesion. Exercising a sense of agency requires the understanding of factors such as legislation and political consciousness which qualify children to exercise their agency is explored further in the next section.

2.4.2. Socio-economic factors related to children's agency

As stated by Louw and Louw (2007:343), adolescents possess a sense of agency in their lives or environment, however, the degree to which this agency is exercised can be determined by their level of socio-economic functioning and circumstances. According to the researcher, children's abilities to exercise their sense of agency is not a unilateral process as it can be influenced by many external factors such as interactions with their unique environments. These environments can either be peaceful, safe and economically flourishing, or they can be plagued with poverty, violence, health pandemics, people and institutions holding oppressive ideologies, and voluntary or involuntary socio-economic roles which they are expected to perform.

SA children can legally exercise their individual agency by participating in legitimate socio-economic and political activities without parental consent. According to Mahery and Proudlock (2011:20, 21, 24), among other legitimate activities, they can open a bank account or apply for an identity document (at age 16) and even register to vote (but vote once they turn 18 years). Sixteen year old boys and girls can respectively consent to male circumcision or female virginity testing, while children as young as 12 years can consent to an HIV test, disclose their HIV positive status, and seek their own medical treatment.

Given their increased capacity for moral understanding and recognition of injustice, children such as Zulaikha Patel, who at the age of 13 years, together with her Black schoolmates, acted out of their own accord and marched against the Pretoria High School for Girls' anti-Black hair policy in 2016. This policy encouraged Black African learners to chemically straighten their hair, and the march was aimed at empowering them to embrace their natural hair types. This action demonstrated how children can exercise their sense of collective agency and act with intentionality to achieve their planned goals and objectives (Chen, 2015:79; Mogoathle, 2020). Zulaikha and her schoolmates' protest against discriminative policies not only proves their level of socio-political consciousness, but compliments their moral maturity as they acted according to the principles of justice, equality and respect of other people's basic human rights and dignity (Louw & Louw, 2007:343). It can therefore be reasoned that children's growing physical, mental and moral maturity, together with their political awareness and the SA progressive laws and policies which recognise their right of self-determination, qualifies them to exercise their individual or collective sense of agency. They could use this sense of determination and agency to act and speak against injustices and change the status quo.

Although policies, political awareness and children's agency can enable them to enjoy the freedom of having a voice and to act independently, the unequal nature of SA society restricts many children from actualising their basic human rights to equally express their voice, ideas and sense of agency.

2.4.3. A South African perspective on child agency

SA is a deeply polarised society due to the previous apartheid regime and policies which favoured white South Africans while socio-economically and politically excluding black South Africans from labour market opportunities and forcefully moving them to under resourced townships. Life in those townships subjected black South Africans to poor infrastructure, inferior education, health care, shelter, and welfare services, and exposed them to poverty and uninhabitable living conditions (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2014:84).

Despite the post-apartheid government's introduction of democratic and non-racial socio-economic policies and programmes post 1994, aimed at addressing and redressing past inequalities, create sustainable employment and reduce poverty, 62% of SA children are still facing devastating poverty, inequality, discrimination, isolation and extreme hardship (Du Plessis & Conley, 2007:50). Even though the percentage of poor children living in SA had reduced from 66% in 2007 to 62% in 2020, a significant portion of children between the ages of 0 – 17 are still experiencing multiple deprivations simultaneously (StatsSA, 2020).

To demonstrate how these socio-economic challenges affect the degree at which children can exercise their agency, Delvigne-Jean (2012) and Hall (2019) state that half of the children living in SA are based in Eastern Cape, Limpopo and rural Kwa-Zulu Natal. Provinces where they lack or have very limited access to social services and economic opportunities. The authors assert that these children are less likely to be living with either or any parents, compared to their wealthier counterparts living in urban or sub-urban areas. While those living in the informal settlement areas around urban areas are exposed to overcrowded living circumstances, high levels of crime, lack of appropriate and affordable health care, educational services or well-functioning and safe childcare or recreational amenities. These challenging socio-economic factors not only violates children's rights, but they severely limit these children's chances of starting on equal footing when it comes to experiencing or exercising their agency.

The researcher supports the views of Du Plessis (2007:50) and Conley, Delvigne-Jean (2012) and Hall's (2019) that children experiencing such socio-economic challenges might not acquire sustainable livelihoods assets such as regular social security grants, mentoring or youth clubs that can empower them with necessary educational life skills lessons, job opportunities, information or help to embrace and explore their talents. In addition, the absence of empowering and life enabling assets that can serve as stepping-stones to escape poverty and help children to be more resilient, violates their rights to "child participation" as per Children's Act Section 10. Furthermore, it compromises their chances of learning, denies them opportunities of having meaningful lives and diminishes their chances of equally and freely exercising their sense of agency.

As a result, such children might be left behind if there are no interventions that recognise, accommodate and respect their views in matters pertaining to their wellbeing.

The next section will focus on child participation as a mechanism that can create a socio-economic inclusive, nurturing and sustainable space for children to be equal and free to exercise their agency.

2.5. Child participation as a mechanism of agency

UNICEF (2017 a: 2) defines child participation as "children individually or collectively engaging in opportunities to form and express their views and to influence matters that concern them directly". This definition reiterates Article 12 of the UNCRC on child participation by proclaiming that state parties should ensure that a child who is capable of forming her or his own views, has the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them, and that their views be given due weight in accordance with age and maturity of the child (UNCRC, 2009:3).

Additionally, recognising the significance of child participation and aligning its related socio-economic and legal provisions to the proclamations of the UNCRC and UNICEF is the Children's Act 38 of 2005 Section 10. According to this Act, every child that is of such an age, maturity, and stage of development has to be able to participate appropriately in any matter concerning them and their views expressed must be given due consideration. It can be deduced that child participation is a recognised and legally enforceable provision which every child is entitled to. This Act is further intended to protect and promote children's wellbeing by ensuring that their voices are respected, and they are consciously considered in decision making processes on matters pertaining to their wellbeing.

Furthermore, understanding children's participation from UNICEF (2017a:2), UNCRC (2009:3) and Children's Act 38 0f 2005 perspective warrants a change in thinking from expert, discriminatory and autocratic views which can deprive vulnerable groups' rights, voice or opportunity for socio-economic participation. This means children's right to participate should be viewed from a social developmental approach which is rooted in universal respect and promotion of human rights and democratic principles of inclusion, active citizenship through civil society participation, advocating for equal

access to social justice, and using life enabling resources and information (Patel, 2013:204).

By adopting the social developmental approach when addressing child related matters requires a “children’s rights lens perspective” and their unique frame of reference. It can be inferred that, recognising children and their rights means putting them, their views, experiences, and interests at the centre stage when developing or planning programmes aimed at addressing social and environmental issues pertaining to the same children. Such issues can be socio-economic and environmental challenges such as poverty, food insecurity, contracting life threating illnesses, consequences of climate change; drugs and alcohol abuse, and GBV, which are direct or indirect barriers to their growth and development.

The issue of including children in the developmental or planning phase of addressing challenges that they are facing is also highlighted by Manyena, Fordham and Collins (2008:319). These authors assert that when children are involved in the planning or initial phase of decision-making processes for mitigating severe challenges within families or communities, they can provide useful information about where food, water or wood can be found because they spend a lot of time outside their homesteads. In addition, soliciting their views can give them a sense of purpose because children are often willing to use or contribute the money they got from fishing or basket making towards buying food for their families (Manyena et al., 2008:319).

The inclusive and empowering nature of participation as a mechanism to capacitate children to function and flourish through exercising their agency, especially when developing, planning and implementing poverty and environmental risks reduction programmes, marks participation as a critical component of the third-generation rights. These rights according to Androff (2016:33) focuses on social development *(strengthening social cohesion*), political development (*decision making and power structures*), environmental development (*sustainability*) and personal development (*personal growth and fulfilment*).

Access and ability to use these third-generation rights can be linked to access to social justice for children who Lombard (2014:46, 49) explains, have the same rights, protection, opportunities and socio-economic benefits like the rest of citizens.

Androff, (2016:34) mentions further, that participation as one of the key human rights principles, along with human dignity, non-discrimination, transparency and accountability, links to empowerment. According to the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) (2021:8), empowerment recognises and builds on the children's strengths, improves their sense of confidence, gives them a voice and control over their lives, and teaches them to know and understand their rights so that they can confidently act out when necessary.

The researcher concurs with the CCYP's assertion of viewing child participation as an integral part of their empowerment. She is of the opinion that, in an ideal situation when children are empowered through participation, they not only gain a sense of belonging, but they also learn communication skills, develop leadership and constructive conflict resolution skills, exposure to multiple views through disseminating and acquiring information and resources. These resources and interpersonal skills can improve their thinking abilities, sense of self-confidence, and general outlook on life.

By engaging with appropriate and caring people or child friendly institutions on an egalitarian level, children learn to develop nurturing and trusting relationships. They also develop a sense that there is someone or an organisation that can listen without judgement, and with whom they feel safe. Especially when there is no one at home or at school that can offer them an opportunity to freely express themselves, or to listen to and support them. Furthermore, the combination of participation and empowerment can also create awareness of socio-economic circumstances that can either be detrimental or beneficial to their development. Empowered children become less vulnerable to preventable environmental risks and given their exposure to resources and information, can aid and assist others exposed to threatening situations, sharing knowledge or seeking help in times of adversities. As a result, participation and empowerment can be instrumental in enhancing children's social and human capital, which are resources that can provide children a platform to exercise their agency, and the platforms will be focused on in the next section.

2.5.1. Enabling platforms and models for child participation

According to the then Department of Women, Children and People with Disability (hereafter, DWPD) (2012:95), children should participate in an authentic and ethical

manner in the governance of schools, child and youth clubs, and programmes serving their interests. The participation of children in governance structures is also highlighted by UNICEF (2017a:3) who calls on State parties to ensure that adolescents are involved in the development, implementation and monitoring of all relevant legislation, services and programmes affecting their lives. UNICEF (2017a:3) further views child participation in local governance as a means by which adolescents can negotiate and advocate for the realisation of their rights; to hold government accountable, and to act as a mechanism of furthering children's socio-cognitive development. By engaging with other children and adults in senior positions from community organisations or government institutions, children can get a chance to influence decisions and policy making processes. Children can also evaluate or give opinions in terms of whether child-related programmes or services are yielding the intended outcomes and assist in finding appropriate and inclusive solutions to bring about socio-economic development and transformation in their communities, schools or clubs.

Exposing children to active citizenry through participation compliments the Department of Social Department's (hereafter, DSD) (213:14) assertion which recognises participation and democracy as critical elements of the developmental approach. It indicates that everyone should be afforded the opportunity to play an active role in promoting their own wellbeing as well as contributing to the society's growth and development. A classic example of child participation in governance is the SA Parliament's Members Interface which gives young people opportunities to engage with Members of Parliament, discuss issues affecting them, and to have their voices heard through oral and written submissions (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, s.a.). Another example is through the Youth Parliament, where children get to participate in discussions regarding appropriate matters concerning their survival, protection and development while these proceedings are solely dedicated to them.

Parliament's initiatives of involving the public in its activities and process can be seen as a way of empowering and enriching children with information and knowledge about how the country is governed in terms of processes, procedures and policies.

Through this exposure and participation the children will have sufficient information to hold government accountable for service delivery (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, s.a.).

But for children to participate in local governance structures in order to influence decision and policy making, or hold authorities accountable requires further skills development. Androff (2016:41) asserts that for participation to be meaningful, people must be capacitated with the necessary skills, resources and responsibilities for effective action. However, for children to participate on an equal basis with other stakeholders in governance structures, they should among other things have mentors and access to appropriate, credible and sufficient information and resources that will ensure that they have sufficient insight about the subject matter.

To ensure that children's participation is not exploited, manipulated and tokenised models of non-participation should be avoided as they can limit children's opportunities of engaging in socio-economic matters that affect that development. According to Hart (1992:9), such models consist of:

- **Manipulation -** where children are consulted but not given feedback about their participation.
- **Decoration -** where children are given incentives to participate at events but have little idea of what it is all about and no say in the organising of the occasion.
- **Tokenism -** where children are given a voice while they actually have little or no choice about the subject, as well as little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions.

To counter act the limiting impact of non-participatory models and to maximise opportunities for child participation, Hart (1992:11) further asserts that programmes should be designed to enable children to choose to participate at the highest level of their abilities and models of genuine participation. Such models of genuine participation include:

- **Assigned but informed** – where children understand the intentions of the project, knowing who made the decisions, having meaningful roles and volunteering for the project after the project was made clear to them.
- **Consulted and informed** – where young people work as consultants for adults in a manner that has integrity. Although the adults design the project, the children understand the process and their opinions are taken seriously.

- **Adult initiate, share decision with children** – where the projects are initiated by the adults and the decision making is shared with young people.
- **Child initiated and directed** – where children are pursuing their own creativity such as play and can conceive and execute complex projects.
- **Child initiated, shared decision with adults** – where children design a project based on what they had observed and adults support their initiative and provide advice in terms of improving their project.

According to the researcher, using such models of genuine participation and having access to information ensures that children's contribution in decisions and policy making processes is meaningful, that they are not set up for failure, and that their presence, voices, and views are not perceived as tokens or merely as a mechanism of complying with the legal quotas of demographic representation at meetings.

Children's participation and views in matters affecting their psychosocial wellbeing requires on principal that their worth and dignity should be duly considered, and they must be treated with respect. Such egalitarian engagements with government structures or other stakeholders that put children at the centre of socio-economic development can be considered as a respectful gesture towards their views, needs and experiences, sharing insight from their own frame of reference.

Sethusa (2015) highlights the importance of having dialogues with young people that speak truth to people in positions of power and participating in civil societies can be an essential and sustainable mechanism of resolving socio-economic challenges that face young people such as poverty, inequality and unemployment. This is also reiterated by Patel (2013:106) who states that through participation and active involvement in social and community life, the culture of acting as a responsible citizen can be fostered.

Providing young people with positive role models in civil society or conscientising them about their social responsibilities while exercising their agency, can be a sustainable platform of empowering them to avert future risks (Sethusa, 2015). And by motivating and empowering children as the current generation and future adults, to be responsible citizens will enable them to meet and address the developmental and

environmental needs of their future generations by learning to respect, safeguard and preserve the current resources.

From the above literature, it is apparent that platforms that give children spaces to be heard, to feel included, and provide the autonomy to participate in matters that affect their circumstances, gives children a sense of purpose, teaches them to be responsible citizens, and how to hold those in authority accountable. Such platforms also affirm their critical position in society and conscientise the society around them that children have skills, intelligence and strengths that can be used in addressing socio-economic, cultural and environmental issues. However, given how polarised the SA society is, children are still subjected to pervasive poverty and environmental risks which are denying them the resources or opportunities to exercise their agency and thus many of them are left behind. The next section will explore how poverty and its associated risks are negatively influencing children's human rights, current and future circumstances as well as the ability to exercise their sense of agency.

2.6. The nature of childhood poverty in South Africa

Mothata and Lemmer (2002:106) describe a minority as a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from others in the society in which they live for differential or unequal treatment. O'Quigley (2000:23) adds that adults often view children as others, less important and less powerful due to their dependence on adults. In SA, children between the ages of 0-18 are likely to be classified as a minority group and this is despite the fact that they represent almost 36% of the entire population (StatsSA, 2020:11). According to the researcher, children's minority status can be attributed to the fact that they possess or can acquire some if not most of the socially constructed characteristics such as age, gender, sex, race, disability, nationality, ethnicity, culture, family's socio-economic status and level of education which might be different from those of the powerful groups. As a result, they tend to be exposed or vulnerable to oppression and discrimination, or even poverty, and are therefore classified as a vulnerable group (DSD, 2013:30).

Sarlo (2019:4) describes poverty as a condition where an individual has insufficient means or resources to acquire the basic needs which are essential for long term physical wellbeing. Although Sarlo's description of poverty captures the essence of

what poverty is or can be, the understanding and description of poverty is a multifaceted phenomenon that goes beyond just meeting the basic needs of physical wellbeing. According to the findings of a report regarding Child Poverty in South Africa released by StatsSA in 2019, more than 6 out of 10 (62.1%) of South African children are identified as multidimensionally poor, this means that such children are suffering from multiple and concurrent depravations (StatsSA, 2020:5; UNICEF, 2017 a:7) such as:

- **Abuse**: emotional, financial, mental, physical, sexual and verbal abuse.
- **Adequate care depravation**: poor access to regular fresh, good quality and nutritious food, clean and fresh running water.
- **Health depravation**: malnutrition, chronic, lifestyle or communicable diseases, disabilities, emotional and mental health problems as well as lack of access to good quality and affordable health care facilities.
- **Human capital depravation**: lack of knowledges, abilities, education and training as well as limited or lack of participation opportunities in decision making process.
- **Living environment depravation**: lack of access to safe and sustainable shelter and functioning recreational facilities, poor sanitation, overcrowding as well as air, land and water pollution.
- **Material depravation**: insufficient household income to afford food, clothing, toys and school fees.
- **Physical safety depravation**: communities characterised violence and drugs and alcohol abuse or families that lack affection towards children.
- **Social capital depravation** lack of access to networks, limited or no opportunities to build trusting relationships, inability to secure life enabling resources as well as social exclusion.

Therefore, given the multidimensional nature of poverty, the researcher adopted the UNs' definition of poverty (UN, 2019) which states absolute poverty as characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs such as food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. Based on this definition, poverty does not only depend on income, but on access to services too.

Poverty is also linked with socio-economic discrimination, exclusion, as well as lack of participation in decision-making processes, and Callahan (2022) points out that 385 million children around the world currently live in poverty, causing them permanent damage, both physically and mentally, in both the short and long term. These multiple depravations can restrict children's access to essential resources and freedoms, to avoid hunger, diseases and illiteracy, and proves that poverty in its essence is a violation of fundamental human rights which can compromise children's sense of dignity and exclude them in matters that affects their wellbeing and development.

As much as poverty and its associated deprivations can affect people similarly, it is more often children that are impacted more significantly due to their dependence on adults and institutions for material and non-material support, care and protection. Hence it is important to understand how childhood poverty can limit children's chances of enjoying their human rights and sense of agency.

2.6.1. Childhood poverty, development and wellbeing

Childhood poverty and deprivation hinder children's physical, psychological and social development because they are unable to access health care and educational services which could help them to develop and reach their full potential (StatsSA, 2018). The hindering nature of poverty on children's development is also noted by Shung-King, Lake, Sanders and Hendricks (2019:58) who assert that family poverty can harm children's health, nutritional status, access to life enabling services, while weakening their cognitive development, academic performance and employment prospects.

Gupta, de Wit and McKeown (2007:669) reiterate this point by illustrating how children living in low-income families tend to experience worse health outcomes. Such declined health outcomes may cause:

- Asthma due to poor quality living conditions and air pollution
- Obesity and Type 2 diabetes due to food insecurity, nutritional deficiency or life style conditions related to unsafe playgrounds or lack of sports participation
- Mental and emotional disorders such as anxiety, hyperactivity and conduct disorder (aggression).

The negative health outcomes linked to poverty, especially mental and emotional developments, are highlighted by Blair and Raver (2016:3) who explain that poverty is characterised by the presence of chronic stressors, overabundance of environmental noise, chaotic or unstable households and family conflicts that can negatively affect a child's brain development. Blair and Raver (2016:3) add that such chronic stressors may alter children's physiological responses to stress, leading to teratogenic effects of stress hormones on their brain development. This may also include negative cognitive, emotional and behavioural challenges which can have adverse impact on their learning and functioning abilities.

The views of the studies mentioned above about the impact of poverty on children's holistic development are further supported by Henderson, Corney, Humin, and Karmas (2015:1) who attributed mental health conditions, such as depression and bipolar mood disorder, to cognitive impairment that negatively affect the child's abilities to pay and sustain attention, remember and recall information, think critically and solve problems. As a result, children with mental and emotional challenges are prone to engage in risky behaviours and present with poor school performance which often leads to them dropping out of school with no practical skills that can help to empower them, which in turn perpetuates the poverty, unemployment and inequality cycles.

Again, the destructive nature of multiple childhood developmental and health challenges induced by poverty does not only leave many children behind, reducing their access to opportunities or participation in socio-economic, political and environmental issues, but violates their fundamental human rights. The continued prevalence of childhood poverty can derail the SA government's efforts of achieving SDG 3 - Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for children *of all ages* (UN, 2015), and their own 2030 National Development Plan of ensuring children should enjoy services and benefits aimed at facilitating access to nutrition, health care, education, and social care and safety - addressing problems such as hunger, malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies that affect physical growth and cognitive development among children (National Planning Commission 2012:62).

Despite the many child directed poverty eradiation policies and programmes such as provision of social security grants, National School Nutrition and Health Promotion Programmes (Department of Basic Education, 2019), the National Adolescent and

Youth Health Policy (Department of Health, 2017) and the Ke Moja, "I am fine without drugs" awareness campaign (Western Cape Government, 2020), implementation strategies of these programmes remain poorly executed. Lombard (2008:122) shares the view that the government's rigorous attempts at providing the poor and vulnerable with income through social grants and other social assistance programmes, was not designed with appropriate and sustainable exit strategies for beneficiaries, and demonstrates a lack of proactive planning that can link social grant beneficiaries to sustainable opportunities for economic development.

The lack of proactive and sustainable strategies can subject children to a life of dependency on the state as they are not empowered to use their energies, networks and talents to create socio-economic and technological solutions to pull themselves from the grip of childhood poverty. It can be further concluded that the continued prevalence of childhood poverty, and developmental and health challenges can have long term socio-economic consequences for the country too as children do not successfully transition into adulthood or participate meaningfully in the programmes aimed at supporting them. As a result, they might lack the emotional, physical and cognitive abilities to solve their own socio-economic problems, leading to an endless circle of poverty, unemployment and inequality.

Education plays a critically important role in preventing childhood poverty and inequality by empowering children with the skills and knowledge to express their sense of agency but this will depend on the nature and quality of the education they are exposed to.

2.6.2. The role of education in enabling or disabling childhood poverty

The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (hereafter Schools Act) makes school compulsory for all children until they reach the age of 15 or the end of Grade 9. This compulsory school attendance is designed to ensure that children receive adequate basic education which is also part of their human rights as per the Bill of Rights 29, Section (1). According to this bill, every person has the right to basic education which the State, through reasonable measures, must make available and accessible (RSA, 1996).

The proclamation of education to be a basic need and compulsory to attend, can be attributed to its sustainable socio-economic benefits for the children and the broader society. These benefits are articulated by Karekar (2021) who states that education lays a solid ground for a child's future as it enhances their knowledge, improve their behaviour, and boosts their self-confidence, cognitive abilities and language skills. This has been echoed by Muedini (2015:8) and UNICEF (2007:7) who respectively assert that education contributes to increasing awareness of human rights and the reduction of poverty and other environmental risks, while also promoting personal development, respect for freedom, and effective participation in a free society.

Access to quality education as a mechanism for poverty reduction should not only include basic or academic literacy, but should include financial literacy. As Englebrecht (2014:252) states, financial literacy has increasing importance for successful functioning in modern society, as financially illiterate people are more often financially vulnerable and excluded from the mainstream economy. To highlight the significant of financial literacy, Englebrecht (2008:5, 11) adds that financial literacy can empower individuals with knowledge and skills such as financial values, basic banking, financial planning and budgeting, relevance and options for saving, credit and debt management, as well as asset management and home ownership.

These skills will not only improve individuals' human and social assets/capital, but can enhance their capabilities to function and succeed in life and move out of poverty. De Beer (2022) also emphasises the importance of financial literacy as a mechanism for empowering SA's youth when explaining that financial literacy must be woven into the schooling and training spheres. By doing so, its concepts are embedded into learning content, and young people can be equipped with the tools needed to cultivate financial success, afford education, property, or accommodation, and medical care. Financial education will directly drive and benefit the SA economy too.

The researcher concurs with both Englebrecht and De Beer's views above regarding the importance of financial education as an empowerment mechanism to ward off the devastating effects of poverty. According to the researcher, the empowering nature of financial literacy links with developmental social work approach's tenets of strengthening people and focusing on what people can do by tapping on their assets, strengths and also within their environments.

Given the significance of education in the life of children, it should be seen as a powerful change agent that can improve their livelihoods and assist the country in achieving SDG 4 (UNICEF, 2017c):

> Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all through the elimination of gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all level of education and vocational training including children in vulnerable situations as well as ensuring that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development.

Furthermore, by educating its children, SA can also meet Aspiration 6: Goal 2 of the Africa We Want Agenda 2063 (AU, 2015:9) which:

> …hopes for engaged and empowered youth and children and creation of opportunities for self-realisation, access to health, education and jobs as well as ensuring safety and security for African children and provision of early childhood development…

Access to education is a human right issue that must be afforded to all members of society in order to reduce or eradicate poverty, bridge the gender and socio-economic inequality gaps and create sustainable employment or promote self-employment opportunities in order to improve the livelihoods of society. However, according to Amnesty International (2020:07), SA also has one of the most unequal schooling systems in the world. This inequality is based on the dilapidated state of school buildings, lack of basic infrastructure and facilities such as laboratories, libraries and internet services, sport facilities, safe spaces and sanitation facilities. Majola (2020) adds that a lack of fundamental amenities along with other socio-economic challenges at public schools e.g., families' inability to pay school fees, lack of books, teaching materials and qualified teachers, overcrowded classes, walking distances to schools when no safe and reliable transport is available, are all enabling an unequal education system.

These challenges facing the SA education system and children are unpacked in the results of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PRILS) of 2016, which showed that 80% of the SA Grade 4 learners fell below the lowest international recognised level of reading (Howie, Combrinck, Tshele, Roux, McLeod Palane & Mokoena, 2017). This means that the majority of learners in primary school cannot read well enough to succeed in the subjects across the Grade 4 and higher curricula

and are therefore likely fail or perform poorly at school considering that reading is a basic skill linked to current and future academic and other life's success.

Substandard levels of education can therefore perpetuate childhood poverty as children are not equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills for higher or tertiary education or the working environment. This drastically reduces their opportunities and capacity to actively, and equally, participate in the country's sustainable economic development. These challenges and systemic infrastructure problems do not serve the best interests of children's physical, intellectual, emotional and social development, and reduces their sense of dignity and worth; sometimes even claiming their lives. A reported case of the tragic death of Michael Komape, who fell into a pit latrine at Mahlodumela Primary School in Seshego, Limpopo Province in 2014 (Ndebele, Heywood & Pierce, 2019) illustrates this point clearly.

The dire state in which the SA education system finds itself, infringes their constitutional responsibility to provide quality and affordable education to children. It can be said that access to comprehensive and good quality education is a fundamental empowering tool to give children a voice and a chance to improve their current and future circumstances, however educational access and quality challenges greatly inhibits children's ability to transcend poverty and inequality, and to fully contribute to the development of the country and society. To contribute meaningfully to a better South African society requires of them to be learned and physically; emotionally and mentally healthy. The ability to be healthy and participate in matters affecting their wellbeing is depended on the children's interactions with their immediate natural and living environments. The next section provides insight into how socio-economic and environmental risks factors negatively affect children's sense of agency and participation.

2.7. The environmental impact on children's sense of agency and wellbeing

Section 24 of The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, claims that everyone has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or wellbeing, and this stated right is reiterated by the Department of Environmental Affairs (hereafter DEA) (2016:12).

The DEA states that people need a clean and healthy environment to thrive through access to clean air, water, safe living spaces, and having sufficient and healthy food. The DEA elaborates that factors such as economic development, social justice, and healthy and sustainable environments are essential for children to have better opportunities and to live happier lives. The significance of a healthy environment in children's lives are particularly supported by the WHO (2019) and the research of Jamieson and Richter (2017:34) who add that clean air, safe surroundings, and outlets for physical activities are necessary conditions for children to survive and thrive. Conditions such as good health, good food, safety, responsive caregivers, and opportunities to learn through exploring, observing and participating, can protect children from environmental stressors and help them to develop their potential. These nurturing care elements can facilitate health and a sustainable environment, enabling children to exercise and enjoy their environmental rights. However, environmental risk factors such as pollution, food insecurity, crime and substance abuse can greatly compromise children's health and wellbeing as can be seen in the following section.

2.7.1. The impact of pollution on child wellbeing

According to Ustohalova (2011), environmental risks present probabilities and consequences of unwanted accidents due to pollutants in the environment that can seriously threaten or harm human health through contamination of natural resources such as air, water and soil. The harmful nature of contaminated natural resources are also explored by Landrigan and Fuller (2015:761) who state that contaminated natural resources negatively impact the health and development of children and are recognised as a major contributor of their illnesses, disability and death - particularly those living in low- and middle-income countries. To illustrate a practical example of how air pollution can impact children's health and wellbeing, Anhäuser, Chinyavanhu, Farrow and Sibisi (2020:13) details how Kriel, a small town in Mpumalanga Province, is the largest hotspot of sulphur dioxide in SA due to the 3000MW coal power station in its surrounding area. Sulphur dioxide is a reactive and invisible chemical which is hazardous to human health, and because children's lungs and immune system are still developing, they are more vulnerable to such airborne chemicals.

This puts them at higher risk of contracting respiratory or heart conditions, reduced cognitive abilities, or suffering from lung cancer and untimely deaths (Anhäuser et al.,

2020:13). Although industries are most often responsible for such large scale pollution and emissions into the atmosphere, private households are also complicit in air pollution as children get exposed to secondary smoking, household pesticides fumes, non-renewable energy sources such as burning coal or illuminating paraffin to make fires for cooking and keeping warm Lake, Shung-King, Hendricks, Heywood, Nannan, Laubscher, Bradshaw, Mathews, Goga, Ramraj and Chirindavi (2019:164). Sasol (2021, 2) reports that the toxic fumes secreted by these energy sources and chemicals may even cause skin irritation and drowsiness in children.

Domestic and industrial contributions to air pollution points to the fact that extreme poverty and wealth both contribute to environmental degradation (Austin, 2019), whether such pollution is caused by industries trying to maximise profits or due to the survival of impoverished households. Both have dreadful consequences to children's ability to live, learn, play and grow into healthy members of society. However, it also emphasises the structural injustices associated with people in poverty and their exposure to environmental risks as they are more likely to live in air polluted industrial areas (Hawkins, 2010:68).

Beyond air pollution, children are also often exposed to water and land pollution. According to Rand Water (s.a.), water pollution is caused and exacerbated by industrialisation, rapid urbanisation, mining, agricultural activities, inadequate sewage collection, and treatment, which causes sewage to spill into the water plants. This results in high levels of iron in the water, causing water to smell and taste bad, and turning it unsuitable for human consumption. In addition, the high level of heavy metals and chemicals deposited into the water streams compromises its quality and the quantity of fresh and clean water supply which can expose children to numerous water borne diseases.

The consequences of water pollution and its impact on children's growth and development compliments the Hammanskraal Community Water Inquiry report (2021:7) which indicates that, due to sewage spillage in water plants, the quality of water in the area is below the permissible standards and therefore adversely compromises children's calcium levels which might result in weak bones or stained teeth. Furthermore, the faecal coliform that is discharged from the untreated sewage plants, trickles into and pollute water, making it unfit for human consumption as it can

cause cholera, hepatitis A, typhoid fever or gastroenteritis. However, it also threatens food security because the water is unsuitable for irrigation of crops and raw eaten vegetables (Evans, 2021).

The study above aligns to that of Molle's (2018:199), who purports that the impact of prolonged interruption to children's daily nutrition due to food insecurity can result in lasting damage to their cognitive and socio-emotional maturation. They are more anxious about the quality, quantity and frequency of their next meal, are exposed to stunting, wasting and malnutrition, and they might also develop learning impairments as consequence. These psychological, physical and cognitive health complications resulting from polluted natural resources can further obstruct children from opportunities to be productive and responsible members of society, to move up the socio-economic ladder and have the freedom to exercise their agency.

Water and soil or land pollution are also intrinsically linked according to the DEA (2000:22). Land pollution is caused by the accumulation of solid and liquid waste materials which contaminate water and soil and deteriorates the earth's land surface. Land is further polluted by inadequate management of waste disposal which may also be located close to residential areas. The ineffective or non-existence of waste collection or street cleaning systems which result in the erection of illegal waste disposal or dumping sites further exacerbates this issue. The proximity of poor households to waste disposal sites supports Hawkins (2010:68) assertion that the world's most poor and vulnerable people live in the most degraded environments which has great potential to harm their physical and cognitive development.

The scourge of pollution and its violation of children rights to live in and experience a clean, safe and sustainable environments can significantly slow down progress towards SDG 6 ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all (UN, 2015). The magnitude of this violation can be perceived as a form of environmental racism and injustice because it is felt more by poor and vulnerable children living in the most polluted communities and who may not even be responsible for the greenhouse gas emission and chemical or sewage spillage in the natural resources available to them (Besthorn, 2011:248).

Natural environment pollution together with social environmental risk factors significantly influence children's wellbeing and safety in communities.

2.7.2. The impact of community violence on children's safety and wellbeing

Children's development, sense of safety, and ability to exercise their agency does not exist in a vacuum. It is deeply dependent on their constant interactions with their social and physical environment such as their families and peers, communities and institutions which influence their holistic functioning and forms part of their ecological system.

The significance of the social environment and in particular the role of the community in children's lives, speaks to the African adage that "it takes a village to raise a child." This notion is supported by Livingstone (2019) who asserts that the community promotes and provides children with a sense of belonging and identity, and can motivate them to actively participate in the world and connect them and their families to supportive resources networks. This affirming role of the community can enable children to survive and thrive, however, it is has been greatly ruined and corrupted by acts of violence which directly threatens children's sense of safety and security. Artz, Burton, Ward, Leoschut, Phyfer, Lloyd, Kassanjee and Le Mottee (2016:87) estimate that almost 784 967 SA children have experienced some form of sexual abuse in their lifetime. Gerber (2021) indicates that the murder of children had increased by 31.7% in the second quarter of 2021, rising from 218 children murdered between July and September 2020, to 287 murder cases in July to September 2021. These incidents of child murder and sexual abuse which are most often perpetrated in social settings such as homes, playgrounds, schools and their communities, violate children's right to security of persons, to be free from all forms of violence from either public or private source, as well as their right to be protected from maltreatment, neglect and degradation (RSA, 1996).

DSD (2018:10) asserts that empowered children can actively and effectively advocate for the realisation of their own rights and that participation makes them aware of these needs. However, according to the WHO (2020) these multifaceted factors of childhood violence such as poverty, the high prevalence and harmful use and abuse of drugs and alcohol, dysfunctional families, as well as health, economic and educational

systems or policies that perpetuate socio-economic and gender inequalities, can significantly increase children's vulnerability to abuse or violence. Such children might be passive and lack the self-confidence or intellectual abilities to stand up for their own rights and safety, and violence might further deny them access to information or resources that can be used to challenge the prevalence of violence and abuse in their communities (DSD, 2018:11). This means that these multifaceted social environmental risk factors are not only disempowering but they are reducing children's abilities to participate and have a voice in matters that affects their safety and development.

As in the case of adversities such as poverty, poor quality and lack of access to education and health care facilities, violence and its atrocities have a severely negative impact on the development of children, the fostering of a peaceful, just and inclusive society, and the impedance of sustainable development (UN, 2015). According to the WHO (2020), children that are exposed to violence are more likely to drop out of school, making it more difficult for them to be employed, and therefore placing them at a higher risk of being further victimised or perpetrating interpersonal or self-directed violence. In addition, childhood violence not only places children at a higher risk of mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression and suicide, but make them more susceptible to further adopting risky behaviour patterns as coping mechanisms. These children are more likely to use and abuse drugs and alcohol, commit crimes or engage in unprotected and transactional sex which further exposes them to sexual transmitted infections such as HIV and AIDS or unplanned pregnancy.

Cannon (2008:13) points out that it is within the same communities that risks, and vulnerabilities are unequally distributed, and that environmental risks and vulnerabilities can deny children their basic right to exercise their sense of agency freely and fully. Despite the socio-environmental risk factors that children are exposed to, however, they do not have to be victims of these circumstances. Given their advancing cognitive and moral development, they have the ability to use their voices, agency and resources to speak and act against such environmental risks.

2.7.3. Children's agency as a push back measure against environmental risks

Despite the large number of environmental risks that vulnerable and impoverished children are constantly exposed to, they have not been passive bystanders, and should exercise their freedom of expression and sense of agency to advocate for their rights of living in a safer and cleaner natural environment. Children climate activists such as Melithafa are part of the Project 90 by 2030 which is aimed at reducing SA's carbon emission by 90% by the end of the decade, mobilising young people to help clean up litter and pollution in low-income communities (Mlaba, 2021). Other examples include that of Nirghin who spoke at the UN's International Women's Day Commemoration and invented a super absorbent polymer which can hold enough water to keep crops hydrated during extended periods of drought (Mlaba, 2021). In 2013, many children participated in the Third South African Conference on Orphans and Vulnerable Children and Youth, where countries' progress were evaluated in relation to children's rights and children spoke up against poverty, abuse and crime in their families and communities (Sibisi, 2013).

These children's actions not only refute the stereotypes that children are simply dependent beings who lack the resources and life experience to influence power, but shows their sense of self and how social consciousness has enabled them to stand and speak against socio-economic and environmental injustices. When given an equal space and opportunity, they can influence policy and decision-making processes.

Through their interventions, innovative minds and voices, children can contribute towards the achievement of SDG 6 and 16 (UN, 2015), which state respectively the goals towards:

> bringing about sustainable socio–economic and environmental justice and also help to restore the harmonious relationship between human and other living organisms; and
>
> promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and build effective accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

SDG 16 can be achieved through the reduction of all forms of childhood related violence and deaths rates as well as ending abuse, exploitation and trafficking and

which are violating children's right of being protected from maltreatment, neglect, abuse and degradation which further takes away their sense of agency (UN, 2015).

It can therefore be stated that children's efforts and abilities to contribute towards the restoration of the environment demonstrates their creativity and courageousness, their ability to act with conscientious foresight in response to the natural and social environmental crisis, and their abilities to use their knowledge of technology, resources and influence to push-back and help to solve the negative impact of pollution, right infringement, and socio-economic and environmental challenges (Alston, 2015:355; Cannon, 2008:1). Furthermore, their initiatives to protect and preserve current natural resources for the benefit of the future generation supports Lombard and Viviers' (2014:81) views about children's comprehensive understanding of the interaction between climate change and the environment, as well as the environmental changes that affect the availability of food and water and leading to poverty and its associated environmental risks. Hence, it is imperative that their life experiences, knowledges, strengths, views, and voices be recognised and children should be duly consulted, involved and motivated to participate in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, strategies and programmes that are meant to reduce poverty and environmental risks that affect them.

2.8. Summary

The sustainable wellbeing and development of children require that, in all the matters that affects them, they are duly consulted and involved to protect and contribute to their basic human rights as enshrined in The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, and Children's Act 38 of 2005. Adolescents are still transitioning into adulthood, but, given their advanced physical, cognitive, personal, and moral development, have an understanding of themselves and the world around them that should not be overlooked or underestimated.

Children's sense of agency, if fostered and allowed to be expressed, can allow them to define and express their needs, desires and emotions so that their challenges can be advocated and dealt with in a manner that helps and benefits them. Children's and adolescents agency gives them a sense of control in their lives, enabling them to direct their life's course and attempt to find and contribute to the solutions to socio-economic

and environmental challenges or risks that hinder their development. It allows them to enjoy their freedoms and right to share their opinions and to be taken seriously and helps them to mitigate the consequences and implications of their circumstances. On the other side, a lack of control and agency in their lives can expose adolescents to many challenges and risk that can have a significantly impact on their mental, physical and social development.

Although they are in a quest for independence, adolescents still need support from adults and institutions. The progressive SA laws such as The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, and Children Act 38 of 2005 enable children to demonstrate and exercise their sense of agency, however poverty, community violence, polluted environments and the lack of access to life enabling, support and health services deny them the opportunities for free and equal expression and exercise of their agency, control and participation in society and the economy. These factors further hinder children's development and access to opportunities to participate in, benefit from, and contribute towards decision-making and policy-making processes.

Child participation is rooted in the principles of human rights and social development which both advocate for universal respect of human rights, inclusion, active citizenship, transparency, empowerment and accountability. Through these principles children learn communication and leaderships skills and how to engage in respectful and egalitarian dialogues with authority figures. They also acquire information, knowledges and resources that they can use to improve their lives, hold authorities accountable, influence policy and decision-making processes, and evaluate the effectiveness of child related programmes. Effective participation requires that children be supported to participate, with sufficient knowledge and exposure to positive mentors or role models who can conscientise them about being responsible and active citizens.

However, children continue to experience multiple deprivations that affect their abilities to access essential and empowering resources to avoid hunger, diseases and illiteracy. This lack of access can exclude them from socio-economic opportunities and activities that can improve their circumstances. Family poverty is also linked with poor health outcomes in children such as respiratory disorders, metabolic syndromes and

mental health challenges which further adversely affecting their current and later wellbeing and development in life. Childhood poverty persists despite government's anti-poverty policies and programmes due to a lack of proactive and sustainable strategies. Education is a crucial empowering tool that can provide children with knowledge and skills to make them more employable and conscientious about their rights, agency, environment and opportunities. However, the unequal and sub-standard living and schooling environment that the children are exposed to due to poverty and other environmental risks cheats them of such opportunities to improve, learn and develop. Despite the pervasive and destructive nature of poverty and environmental risks children have shown their creativity, bravery and consciousness to respond to such crisis. They are able to use their knowledge of technology, ability to access information and resources, as well as their power to influence, to mitigate the negative effects of pollution, unsafe communities and poverty and the infringement of their basic human rights.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

The following chapter describes the research methodology for the study. Patel and Patel (2019:48) describe the research methodology as the scientific and systematic way to solve the research problem (see Chapter 1:4) through logical adaptation of various steps. Accordingly, this chapter focuses on the key elements of the research methodology which are the research approach, type of research, research design, and the research methods, including the population and sampling, data collection methods, data analysis, data quality, and related pilot study. The ethical considerations of the study are also discussed and the limitations of the study.

3.2. Research approach

A qualitative research approach was used for the study, allowing the researcher to understand the phenomena of children's agency in programmes/interventions aimed at reducing poverty from the participants' point of views (Fouché & Delport, 2011:64). The researcher received quality information based on the meaning and experiences of participants (Rubin & Babbie, 2014:471) which in the case of this study, were children and key informants (KI) that were assigned to various poverty and environmental risks reduction programmes.

The study was both exploratory and descriptive in nature, through which, according to Fouché & De Vos, 2011:96, the exploratory purpose answers the "what" question, while an exploratory approach enables the researcher to gain insight into a situation, programme, or community (Babbie 2017:92). The study attempted to answer the question, 'How are children's agency recognised and respected in programmes/interventions aimed to reduce poverty and environmental risks?'

Descriptive data was gathered through participants' spoken or written word (Fouché & Delport, 2011:65) in the form of semi-structured interviews with key role players and child-participants involved in relevant support programmes at a local support and development organisation - explaining the degree and nature of children's agency in reducing poverty and environmental risks present in service delivery.

3.3. Type of research

The study was applied research and was aimed at solving specific practical problems, developing new knowledge on resolving a practical situation, and influence policy (Fouché & De Vos, 2011:95), which in the case of this study, was how to recognise and respect children's agency in reducing poverty and environmental risks. The applied research findings generated through the study could be used by the involved organisation to solve problems related to children's rights and to be of value to policy makers in addressing policy challenges concerning children's participation in interventions that affect their well-being.

3.4. Research design

A case study design was used to conduct the study. According to Nieuwenhuis, (2016:82), a case study is a preferred strategy to answer the "how" and "why" questions posed to participants, so that they can share their stories due to close collaboration between the researcher and themselves. Furthermore, the use of a case study design, allowed for the attainment of familiarity with the social world of a small number of participants, while identifying patterns and themes within the participants' worlds to gain new knowledge about a particular social issue (Fouché & De Vos, 2011:320; Fouché & Schurink, 2011:321).

More specifically, the researcher utilised an instrumental case study design to conduct the research, which according to Mertens, (2010:324), allows for greater understanding of a phenomenon, and an increasing ability to generalise the findings to other cases. By using such a case study design the researcher was able to learn more about a little known or poorly understood situation (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013:141) around children's agency at a local Development and Support Organization's D-I-C.

3.5. Research methods

Research methods are tools that researchers use to gather data about social realities from individuals and groups (Maree, 2017:51) and are influenced by the research question, aim and theoretical framework (Maree, 2016:74). The study population, sampling, data collection and data analysis are discussed below.

3.5.1. Study population

According to Strydom (2013:223), population refers to individuals in the universe who poses specific characteristics. The population of Care-Net was 1700 child beneficiaries and the staff component was 18 staff members (Care-Net Development and Support Organisation, 2021). Maree (2017:36) states that a researcher should select a suitable and feasible site to conduct research. For the purpose of this study, the researcher obtained permission from the Director of the Care-Net to conduct research with the beneficiaries (child participants) and staff members (key informants) (see Appendix A). The semi-structured face to face interviews were conducted either at the organisation's premises or participants' places of residence. The choice of interview date and time depended on the participants' availability and convenience. Data was collected over a period of four months during 2021 and 2022.

3.5.2.Sampling

Strydom (2013:223) described sampling as taking a smaller number of units of population as representative or having particular characteristics of that total population. The sampled population for the study were child participants between the ages of 10 and 17 years and key informants (adults) involved either as service users or staff members in the poverty and environmental risks reduction programmes at (D-I-C) Care-Net.

Purposive sampling was used for this study. According to Strydom (2011:232), this kind of sampling is based entirely on the judgment of the researcher as the sample is composed of the elements that contain the most characteristics of the population that serve the purpose of the study best. An auxiliary social worker and a social worker from Care-Net who were part of the D-I-C provided the researcher with a list of service users' names and contact details. The children and their parents or guardians were initially contacted by the employees of Care-Net for permission of their details to be given to the researcher for the purpose of research as per the stipulation of the Protection of Personal Information Act. The Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013, Section 11 (1) (a) and (f) respectively state that personal information may only be processed if the data subject or a competent person where the data subject is a child consent to the processing and that processing is necessary for pursuing the legitimate interest of the responsible party or of a third party to whom the information

is supplied. The researcher scanned through the list, selected and contacted the children that met the sampling criteria to participate in the study.

Given that the researcher used her discretion to select the participants, she observed due diligence to reduce researcher biasness as well as exploitation of participants. The purposive sampling was repeated until when either all 12 participants were interviewed or data saturation was reached (Strydom, 2011:232). 7 children and 3 adults participated in the study. All 7 child participants were interviewed and however data saturation was reached after the third key informant was interviewed. In total, the researcher successfully interviewed 10 participants to ensure rich data and their data was used for data analysis. The data collected from the pilot participants was not included in the study.

The CPs who were willing to participate in the study had to meet the following criteria:

- Participation in the D-I-C programme for at least one year.
- Preferably male and female.
- Age 10 - 17 years.
- Conversant in English.
- Able to share their views and experiences of the programme.

The KIs who were willing to participate in the study were expected to meet the following criteria:

- Should have been or be involved in the development and / or implementation of the D-I-C programme for at least 2 years.
- Preferably male and female.
- Familiar with the involvement of children in the programme.
- Conversant in English.

3.5.3. Data collection

Fouché and Delport (2013:64) assert that a qualitative researcher should collect data in the field at the site where participants are experiencing the issue under study and that this requires selection of the relevant data collection methods and measuring instruments to obtain the desired data for the study.

The following sub-sections discuss the procedure for collecting data, and the data collection method and instrument for the study.

3.5.3.1. Data collection procedure

Prior to commencing with the participant's interviews, the researcher provided the participants with a copy of an official letter from the Director of Care-Net (see Appendix A) granting permission to conduct the interviews. Also, she explained (a), receiving ethical clearance from the ethics committee of the University of Pretoria to conduct the research study (see Appendix B), (b) the goal of the study (c), the ethical considerations; (d) the data collection method and semi structure interview schedule; (e), duration of the interview and (f), the assent and consent forms and gave them an opportunity to ask questions where they did not understand. The CPs' legal guardians signed informed consent forms (see Appendix C) permitting the children to participate in the study, and the children signed a child-friendly assent form (see Appendix D). Adult KIs also signed a consent form (see Appendix E) in agreement to participate in the study.

3.5.3.2. Data collection methods and instruments

Semi-structured interviews were utilised in the study. According to Greeff (2013:352), a semi-structured interview is suitable when a researcher is particularly interested in an issue that is personal to the participants, when they are perceived as experts on the subject matter, and when they are afforded the maximum opportunity to tell their story.

An interview schedule with a pre-determined set of 13 questions was used as a data collection instrument to guide the flow of the interview (see Appendices F and G). In order to encourage maximum participation during the interview, the researcher read the interview schedule together with the participants (Greeff, 2013:353), and also explained that the interview would be conducted in English, but in instances when the participants were unable to express themselves in English, opportunity was afforded for them to answer or ask questions in Sepedi and isiZulu languages, which both the researcher and participants were conversant in and understood.

Various communication skills such as active listening, probing techniques, seeking clarification, paraphrasing, reflection, encouragement, giving minimal verbal responses, linking, and contradicting were used by the researcher (Greeff, 2013:345).

Throughout the data collection procedure, the researcher ensured that the participants were clearly informed about the process that would be followed and participants were also given an opportunity to ask questions where they did not understand. The use of the interview schedule combined with various communication skills and the one-on-one, semi-structured format guided the flow of the interviews but also enabled the participants to sufficiently share their stories and experiences.

3.5.4. Data analysis

The researcher followed the six-step process of thematically analysing interview data as described by Clark, Braun and Hayfield (2015:231). The thematic analysis allowed the researcher to allocate codes and themes to the collected information, and due to the flexibility of the technique, the researcher could respond to data as she engaged with it (Clarke et al., 2015:224).

3.5.4.1. Step 1: Familiarisation

All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants to capture their verbatim expressions and were thereafter transcribed. The researcher familiarised herself with the transcribed information by reading through it twice and engaged the information from both a curiosity and critical perspective to understand participant's responses more clearly (Clarke et al., 2015:231).

3.5.4.2. Step 2: Coding

Coding is done by closely reading through the data and identifying short phrases or themes which can be semantic or latent in nature and related to each other (Clarke et al., 2015:235). The researcher systematically identified and labelled the features from the data that were corresponsive and relevant to the study and research question, and latent and semantics coding were respectively used to search for meaning from the data (Clarke et al., 2015:230). The researcher used different coloured highlighters in the transcripts to code the data related to the research questions.

3.5.4.3. Step 3: Searching for themes

According to Clarke et al., (2015:236), searching for themes does not mean that the researcher finds themes that already exist in the data, but rather, they should aim to create a plausible and coherent thematic mapping of their data.

The researcher developed themes comprehensible from the data, relevant to the research question and the coded phrases and information identified in the steps above so that they could be allocated to two theme levels, namely the main themes, and sub-themes that arose from the data (Clarke et al., 2015:236).

3.5.4.4. Step 4: Reviewing themes

The researcher proceeded to determine whether the identified themes complimented the meanings in the coded data. Throughout the process of generating themes, the researcher constantly checked where there was an appropriate fit between the themes and codes and that each had a clear feature or central organising concept (Clarke et al., 2015:230).

3.5.4.5. Step 5: Defining and naming themes

The researcher wrote up a short description for each theme, which explained the core, the coverage, the scope, and the limitations of each theme. Furthermore, she named the themes to capture their essence and to develop a creative 'spirit' within the process of analysing the data (Clarke et al., 2015:240).

3.5.4.6. Step 6: Writing the report

According to Clarke et al., (2015:241), the process of report writing happens simultaneously with analysing and defining the themes within the data and assists the researcher in identifying the main points in the themes presented. The researcher included quotes from her key observations and the more expressive participants as evidence in the result section (Chapter 4). This provides a clearer understanding of participants' views and experiences regarding how the children's agency was or was not recognised and respected within the poverty and environmental risk reduction programme.

The process of following the six steps of thematic analysis enabled the researcher to become familiar with the transcribed data, coding data as well as identifying, formulating, and revising the themes and sub-themes so that they could be linked well with the research questions.

3.5.5. Data quality

Data quality was ensured by means of establishing trustworthiness through the four concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Lietz & Zayas, 2012:191).

3.5.5.1. Credibility

To establish credibility, the researcher verified compatibility between the views of the participants and how they were reconstructed, represented, and reflected in the study findings (De Vos, Strydom, Schulze & Patel, 2011:420, Lietz & Zayas, 2010:191). She was guided by the research's ethical considerations to guard against the possibility of being biased and to not influence the credibility of the data (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:192). Furthermore, the researcher checked with four children and two KIs to clarify whether their views were presented truly and in accordance with their perspectives (Lietz & Zayas, 2012:194).

Through this process, one CP clarified the number of years she has been involved at the D-I-C while other participants were satisfied with how their views were represented and captured in the transcripts. Credibility of findings was also enhanced by data triangulation as it enabled the researcher to reach a '"completeness" or an exhaustive response to the research question. Data triangulation was done by keeping an audit trail of the research process, research observations as well as debriefing and discussing the research process, field experiences and the findings with peer and colleagues who undertook similar research projects and methodologies at other research sites (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:192).

3.5.5.2. Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency of the findings if the study was to be repeated and it was evaluated with auditability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher ensured dependability and auditability by being in regular contact with her study supervisor who guided and provided constructive critique of the research process as other masters' students who undertook a similar research project at other research sites (Leitz & Zayas, 2010:191-192).

3.5.5.3. Transferability

Transferability ensures that the research findings can be applied to other similar populations, settings, theories, practice, and future research (Maree, 2016:125). The researcher used comprehensive descriptions to increase the transferability of the findings to similar organisations by giving in-depth accounts of the phenomenon of child participation as well as how children's agency was recognised and respected in conceptualising, designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating of the programme. Also, the researcher intends to publish the research report and present it at conferences focusing on children's right to participation (Lietz & Zayas, 2012:194).

3.5.5.4. Conformability

According to Maree, (2016:125), research findings should reflect participants' true contributions and cautions that researchers should guard against being biased by allowing their interest in the study to influence the research findings. To counteract possible bias, the researcher used reflexivity to analyse possible self-interest and influence in the research study and gave the participants the autonomy to answer the questions the best way they understood, and by responding accordingly when they asked the questions to be repeated or rephrased (Drisko, 2012:192). To remain aware of the research process and observations, the researcher used data triangulation and audit trails together with diarized notes indicating and tracking the research process from start to finish (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.5.6. Pilot study

According to Strydom (2011:237), the pilot study serves as a feasibility study before the research study is conducted to determine and test the adequacy and appropriateness of the research methodology, sampling method, data collection instruments, and the data analysis methods that will be used in the main study. Strydom and Delport (2011:394) add that a pilot study conducted for the purposes of qualitative research is usually informal and the participants possess the same characteristics as those in the main study. In addition, a pilot study can enable the researcher to determine his/her own level of interviewing skills (Greeff, 2011:350).

For the present research, a first interview with one KI and one CP was conducted separately and served as a pilot engagement to assess the research approach and methodology. The results of the pilot interaction were not included in the main study and there were no changes made to the interview schedule or approach.

3.6. Ethical considerations

Strydom, (2013:114) states that ethical guidelines serve as a standard, and a basis upon which each researcher ought to evaluate their own conduct. Ethical considerations should be intenalised in the personality of the researcher to guide decision making as well as the humane and sensitive treatment of participants. For this study, the following ethical considerations were considered:

3.6.1. Avoidance of harm

The researcher informed the participants through the informed consent and assent letters about the possible risks involved when participating in the research study (Babbie, 2017:65). She explained that the only possibility was attributed to the fact that the study touched on potentially sensitive issues regarding poverty and environmental risks, as well as the recognition of children's agency which might be personal and disturbing to them.

3.6.2. Debriefing of participants

According to Strydom (2013:122), debriefing presents an opportunity to clarify any matters or concerns about the research study and is best to administer directly after the session. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher explained to the participants that although she was a practicing social worker, she was conducting the interview in her capacity as a researcher. However, she further indicated that she was cognisant that some of the questions might be sensitive and requested participants to make her aware if they felt emotionally or mentally upset so that she could provide debriefing at the end of the session. In the case of the CPs, the research would also refer them to a social worker at Care-Net, while the KIs could also be referred to the Director or social worker within the organisation that they felt comfortable with for further intervention and support. However, there was no need to refer any participant.

3.6.3. Anonymity and confidentiality

The researcher explained and assured all the participants that the information shared during the interview would not be discussed or accessed by any person other than the primary investigator and supervisor who had access to the interview transcripts. However, all names were replaced with pseudo-names, and all contents of the interview and any personal information were kept confidential. Furthermore, that research findings would not be presented in a manner that could identify any participant (Babbie, 2017:67; Padgett, 2017:83). The upholding of confidentiality was indicated in the informed consent and assent forms that the participants signed when they agreed to participate in the study.

3.6.4. Deception

Deception entails the misleading of participants, purposeful misrepresentation of facts or keeping information from participants (Strydom, 2013:118). Over and above explaining the content of the informed consent or assent letter before the participants gave consent (signed) to participate in the study, the researcher ensured that they all understood what the study was about, and no information was withheld from any participants. She further explained that participation in the study was voluntary, that participants would not get paid, and had the choice to withdraw from the study at any time with no effect to the services they were receiving from Care-Net in any way.

3.6.5. Informed consent or assent

The researcher explained the study to all participants to establish a platform for informed consent and assent, and to get permission to participate in the study from each participant and/or their parents/guardians (Babbie, 2017:65; Strydom, 2013:118). The letters of informed consent or assent also included permissions for the interviews to be audio-recorded and transcribed and that all information would be treated with confidentiality. Participants were also informed that the research data will be stored at the University of Pretoria for a period of 10 years following completion of the study.

3.6.6. Dissemination of findings

Dissemination of research findings indicates what the researcher plans to do with the findings once the research project is completed and how the findings will be made available to the public via publication (Bak, 2004:35). The researcher intends to submit the findings to the University of Pretoria through this research report which will also be shared with both the participants and the participating organisation. The researcher further intends to submit such research findings to a scientific journal for possible publication, presentation as conference papers and presentation.

3.7. Study limitations

The researcher experienced various limitations in the study which are discussed below.

3.7.1. Language barrier

During the recruitment phase, participants indicated good understanding and ability to speak English, however during the actual interviews most of them had difficulties expressing themselves in English. Henceforth, they were given an opportunity to answer or ask questions in Sepedi or isiZulu which both the researcher and participants understood and were comfortable with. Although the participants were able to fully express themselves, transcribing the interviews and responses were challenging as the researcher had to translate many Sepedi/isiZulu responses into English which was also a time-consuming exercise.

3.7.2. COVID-19 lockdown restrictions

The data collection took longer than anticipated due to the nationwide COVID-19 infections and associated restrictions during the period. Since interviews were conducted at the participants' places of residence and in person, the researcher was forced to halt data collection during periods of peak infections and hard lockdowns until the positive cases of COVID-19 had subsided and it was safe to do so. In addition, the researcher herself tested positive for COVID-19 during the data collection phase and had to isolate to protect participants and their household members from infection.

Some of the CPs were living with older or sick parents or legal guardians and some of the KIs were older people who were more vulnerable to contracting COVID-19.

3.7.3. Researcher's bias

Upon entering and commuting to different interview venues within Mabopane and Winterveld, the researcher was cautioned by community members about the high crime rates in their communities and she was also taken aback by the sight of visible and large numbers of illegal dumping sites. Accordingly, she assumed that most of the participants were desensitised to the environmental risks within their communities and would not have anything positive to contribute to the study. The researcher reflected about her biased views, read newspaper articles, and engaged informally and randomly with community members about the strengths and weaknesses of the two communities and the information improved her perspective about the community and its challenges. She gave the participants the latitude to participate in the interview the best way they can and was fascinated by the nature and degree of participants' awareness about the state of affairs and the challenges within their communities as well as their mindful, practical, and sustainable ideas of making their communities safer and cleaner places especially for the more vulnerable groups.

3.8. Summary

This chapter discussed the key elements of the research methodology which included the qualitative research approach which was both exploratory and descriptive in nature; applied research type as well as a case study design and in particular instrumental case study. Furthermore, the research methods included the population which consisted of Care-Net's service users and staff members. The sampling method was purposive sampling which included 7 CPs and 3 KIs.

Semi-structured interviews were used to conduct one-on-on interviews, guided by an interview schedule. Data was analysed thematically, and trustworthiness strategies were outlined. The pilot study enabled the researcher to apply the research process and test her interview skills. The ethical considerations that guided the researcher in conducting the study were outlined. Finally, the limitations of the study explained the challenges that affected the research process. The findings of the study will be presented and discussed in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: EMPIRICAL STUDY AND FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

The following chapter presents the empirical study and its associated findings. The research question that guided the study was stated as follows:

How are children's agency recognised and respected in programmes/interventions aimed to reduce poverty and environmental risks in the D-I-C at Care-Net?

The following sub-questions informed the research question:

- What were the goals and intended outcomes of the programmes/interventions towards reducing children's poverty and environment risks?
- How were children involved in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of those programmes/interventions?
- What factors influenced the recognition and respect, or non-recognition and disrespect of children's agency in these programmes/interventions?
- What must change in order for the programmes/interventions to recognise and respect children's agency and input?

The chapter starts by presenting the participants' biographical information, followed by the main and sub-themes that emerged from the collected data, and concludes with a summary.

4.2. Biographical information of participants

The research participants comprised of three KIs and seven CP from the Care-Net. To protect the identity of the participants, pseudo names and numbers were allocated to all participants.

4.2.1. Profile of key informants

The biographical information of the KIs include their age, gender, length of service within the organisation, duration of involvement in the programme, as well as the specific phase(s) of involvement in the programme. The profile of the KIs is summarised in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1: Profile of KIs

Key Informants	Age group (years)	Gender	Years in organisation	Program Involvement (years)	Phases of involvement
KI1	36-40	Female	9 years	3 years	Implementation Monitoring Evaluation
KI2	46-50	Female	14 years	5 years	Design Implementation
KI3	56+	Female	3 years	3 years	Implementation

As indicated in Table 4.1, the age group of the KIs ranged from 36 to 56+ years. Although the researcher recruited both female and males for the study, only three female participants were available to participate in the study. The KIs' length of involvement in the organisation ranged between 3 to 14 years (average time at the organisation = 8.7 years). KIs had one, three and nine years of experience with the organisation, respectively. Their duration of involvement in the programme ranged from 3 to 5 years (average programme involvement = 3.7 years). Lastly, participants were involved in various phases of the programme. One participant was solely involved in the implementation phase, one was involved in the design and implementation phases, while the other one was engaged in the implementation, as well as the monitoring and evaluation phases of the programme.

4.2.2. Profile of child participants

CPs' biographical information included their age, gender, school grade, and duration of involvement in the programme as outlined in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2: Profile of CPs

Child Participants	Age	Gender	School Grade	Involvement in programme
CP1	14	Male	8	5
CP2	17	Male	11	12
CP3	17	Female	11	2
CP4	16	Female	10	11
CP5	13	Male	6	2
CP6	16	Male	Level 3	2
CP7	16	Male	9	2

As indicated in Table 4.2, the CPs' age ranged between 13 to 17 years (average age = 15.6 years). The two youngest participants were 13 and 14 years old, respectively, while three were 16 years old, and the other two 17 years of age. Of the seven participants, only two were females (29%) and the other five were males (71%). All CPs were attending school - six were in mainstream schools (86%) and one was at a school for children with special educational needs. The number of years that the participants were involved in the programme ranged from 2 to 12 years (average participation = 5.1 years). Most of the participants (four) were involved in the programme for two years, while one was involved for 5 years, and two CPs for 11 and 12 years, respectively.

4.3. Presentation of themes and sub-themes

From the thematic analysis of the semi-structure interviews that were conducted with both KIs and CPs, five themes and fourteen sub-themes emerged from the data and are discussed in the section below. The findings are supported with verbatim responses (quotes) from the participants and verified by literature. In general, similar themes emerged from the KIs and the CPs. Where applicable, differing views between

the two category participants are indicated. The themes and sub-themes are outlined in Table 4.3 and discussed in greater details thereafter.

Table 4.3: Themes and sub-themes

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
1. Reasons for being involved in the programme	1.1 Children's personal reasons
	1.2 Parental or guardians' initiative or support
	1.3 Personal decision after being consulted by social workers
2. Improved quality of life	2.1 Improved academic performance through academic support
	2.2 Access to health information and services
	2.3 Access to social security grants
3. Factors influencing child wellbeing	3.1 Land and air pollution affects health wellbeing
	3.2 Child protection in an unsafe living environment
	3.3 Children have agency to speak out on protecting themselves and others from harm
4. Child participation in the programme	4.1 CPs roles in the programme
	4.2 Adults' perception about child participation in the programme
	4.3 Phases in the programme wherein children participate
5. Children's abilities to make decisions	5.1 CPs' quest for self-assertiveness
	5.2 Adults' role in children's decision-making processes

THEME 1: Child participant's decisions to be involved in the programme

Findings indicate that CPs joined the programme based on personal reasons, parental or guardians' initiative or support, and a personal decision after being consulted by

social workers. The reasons for joining the programme are unpacked in the following sub-themes.

Sub-theme 1.1: Children's personal reasons

CPs who made the decision to join the programme on their own initiative did so because they knew that they needed support with their homework and that they could benefit from studying at a dedicated venue. The participants articulated their need for academic support and a place to study as follows:

CP2: *"I decided for myself, and I said that I would not be able to do my homework alone, like at home they could not understand most of it."*

CP7: *"I was studying, so I heard that there is a place, so I asked my mother that there is a place to study, and I want to attend."*

Children's own initiative to find resources that provided them with academic support or assistance shows the sense of agency they have in their own lives, in particular relating to their schoolwork. Chen's (2015:79) describe agency as the innate human potential and capability of self-regulation in relation to the environment within which human beings exist. Additionally, agency is viewed as an innate quality of intention and action to make things happen, and to make things better towards the more ideal, desirable and optimal outcomes for themselves, others and their living world.

Chen's description of agency, in particular the innate quality of taking action to make things happen, links with Piaget's theory of cognitive development which states that children are naturally trying to make sense of their physical and social worlds by creating concepts or designs that will lead them to expect things to happen (Louw & Louw, 2007:23). Adolescents or CPs' abilities to make things happen and to make sense of their physical and social world can be attributed to their formal operational thinking, according to Louw and Louw (2007:302). They state that adolescents' ability to produce efficient forms of thinking are due to their increased speed of information processing combined with their greater awareness and increased knowledge base.

Sub-theme 1.2: Parental or guardians' initiative or support

The findings indicate that some children got involved in the programme after they were enrolled by their parents or guardians after they needed help with their homework that was not available to them at home.

Also, the parents or guardians supported and encouraged them in going to the D-I-C. The participants' responses are captured below:

CP2: *"…my Grandfather, he is the one who put me in, like as an orphan. He is the one who put us in so that we can participate cause, there was no [one] who could help us, so that they (Care-Net) can help us..."*

CP6: *"…it was my mother, she said they [adults at the D-I-C] will help you with the homework that is hard for you and with Maths, they will help you..."*

KI2: *"...I think most kids want to stay in the Drop-In-Centre because of the time we are giving to them and with the support from the parents..."*

The grandfather's initiative to enrol his grandson in the programme supports Plaatjies' (2013:26) views about the role of grandparents in their grandchildren's education and wellbeing. Plaatjies mentions that grandparents might be unaware about the importance of their involvement in the educational needs of the children they are entrusted with. Interestingly, their involvement is greatly attributed to socio-economic factors such as their lack of education, age, health challenges, as well as the financial responsibilities (e.g., providing them with clothing, shelter, school fees and medical cost). The grandparents' initiative to get their grandchildren educational support links well with the insights of Plaatjies (2016:27) that grandparents have also taken on the responsibility of seeking professional help, from qualified social workers, social auxiliary workers, educators and trained care workers from the D-I-C for their grandchildren who might be orphaned, abuse or neglected.

The parental involvement and support of their children's involvement in the programme echoes the Department of Basic Education's (2016:7) sentiment about the important role that parents can and are playing in their children's education. Furthermore, parents, regardless of their level of education, income, race, ethnicity or religion have the responsibility to be involved in their children's education. Children whose parents are involved in their education tend to perform better at school, are better behaved and can grow up to be more successful in life (Department of Basic Education, 2016:7).

Sub-theme 1.3: Personal decision after being consulted by a social worker

Some participants indicated that they voluntary decided to join the programme after the social worker informed them about the programme and how they could be benefitting by joining. The following voices of the children indicate that they decided to join based on information that the social workers provided to them:

CP1: "*...Aus Xoliswa was calling us and telling us that we can come to the Care-Net and we decided to go...*"

CP4: "*…the social worker called us, they sat down with us, they asked us if you want to get in the group or not because they are told us that is not a force, if you do not want to, they will not force you. So, I decided to go and listen to what they were going to teach us, what they are going to talk about, but really it helps me a lot…"*

CP3: *"…we had to decide whether you wanted to be part of Care-Net or you don't want. So, they asked us, like I said, Aus Xoliswa decided that she will create this group…"*

The social worker's decision to provide information on the D-I-C and to allow the CPs to decide whether or not be involved in the programme is consistent with the Children's Act 38 of 2005. According to Section 6 ((2), (b) & (c)) all the proceedings, actions or decisions in a matter concerning a child, must respect the child's inherent dignity, and treat the child fairly and equitably. Furthermore, Section 10 of the Act states that every child that is of such an age, maturity and stage of development to be able to participate in any manner concerning him/her, has the right to participate in an appropriate way and the views expressed by the child must be given due consideration. Given that the CPs were adolescents between the ages of 10 to 17 years, according to McGoldrick et al., (2011:33), they have increased emotional competency and ability to handle complex social situations. Therefore, by contacting children and informing them about the programme as well as respecting their rights to either participate or not in matters affecting them, demonstrate that the adults in the programme recognise children's sense of agency and also trust their decision-making abilities. Also, regarding recognising children's decision-making abilities, Gladwin (2004:2) adds that consulting children teaches them skills such as decision making, listening to other viewpoints, assertiveness, and negotiation.

THEME 2: Improved quality of life

The findings indicate that access socio-economic services such as education, health, and social security grants improved children's sense of agency and quality of life. Three sub-themes emerged from the data and are discussed below.

Sub-theme 2.1: Improved academic performance through academic support

Participants indicated that the D-I-C provided them with homework assistance in order to improve their academic performance. Children often reported underperforming due to poor time management, struggling with literacy and numeracy, and not having academic assistance at home. One participant reported failing a grade as consequence, and some participants' experiences regarding academic improvements through academic support are presented in the quotes below:

KI3: "…*so, these children they are orphans, some stay with their grannies who doesn't know how to read or write, who can't even help them with their homework. So, when a child has got homework and she doesn't know how to do this homework and most of these children are performing below their abilities, so we help them with homework…"*

CP6: "…*they [adults at the D-I-C] help me to deal with Mathematics, and to do my marks grow up, they make me happy and they teach me slow, slow by slow…"*

CP5: "…*I could not do some spelling, they [adults at the D-I-C] taught us to read, they taught us to write and they helped us with our homework. We did athletics, my talent, I saw it at Care-Net, the day I ran…"*

CP2: "…*eish at school, I was dropping, I once repeated a Grade, Grade 8, so I had no choice, because I wanted to pass. Like before, time for me to go out was a lot but now I saw that ey! When I go out, my studies will end up going down, So Care-Net helped me to divide my time, to study, time to play, to do whatever. So my studies increased a bit…*"

CP4: "…*I could not do Maths, like every time I started doing Maths it was hard for me and then every month at Care-Net they wanted our reports…so they saw that no man, Keamogetswe is struggling with something like this and they decided to call this other man who lives*

at Slovo, he came and helped us with Maths so that is when I could see that I can do Maths…"

Despite the participants' academic challenges, their positive responses about accessing and using the academic support provided by the D-I-C and how it has improved their overall approach to school performance and self-image aligns to the views of Karekar's (2021). They ascertain that education not only enhances children's knowledge, but improves their behaviour, self-confidence, cognitive and language skills. The significance of education for children are also echoed by Muedini (2015:8) and UNICEF (2007:7) who respectively explain that education contributes to increasing awareness and respect of human rights and poverty reduction, while also promoting personal development and enabling individuals to participate effectively in a free society. Furthermore, CP6 highlighted a link between the socio-economic benefits of accessing education with future aspirations when he states:

CP6: *"…I want to do engineering and fire fighter, I want to help my family and support my little brothers, and I want to finish my school first…"*

The participant showed his understanding and planning abilities about how finishing school can help him to achieve his professional and personal goals, and such planning ability can be linked with intentionality, another core principle of agency. According to Louw and Louw (2011:307), adolescents are able to plan what to do first and what to do next - monitoring progress towards a goal and redirecting actions that prove unsuccessful - a process that demonstrates cognitive ability. According to the researcher, this participant's (P6) views reinforce the notion that education can help to improve children's standard of living as it can capacitate them with sustainable, applicable and practical skills, as well as resources that can enable them to participate meaningfully in reducing or eradicating poverty, unemployment, and inequalities.

Sub-theme 2.2: Access to health information and services

CPs indicated that the D-I-C provided them with health information about the dangers of smoking, the benefits of eating healthy, accessing food, personal hygiene, and referrals to health facilities when they were ill.

CP1: *"…they [adults at the D-I-C] gave me advice to stay away from drugs, I was smoking cigarettes and weed, and now I think I can change my life like I can play with my brothers. They taught us when you smoke*

your lungs are going to be black but when you don't smoke your colour will stay bright…"

CP5: *"…isn't it I was sick at Care-Net, they [adults at the D-I-C] called the doctor to give me pills to drink, after uhm 2 weeks I was fine. Oh yeah, when you go to the toilet, when you come back you have to wash your hands before you eat [what would happen if you did not wash your hands when you are from the toilet], the germs, you will get sick, you will get infection…mhmm your lungs will be bad…"*

CP7: *"...they [adults at the D-I-C] said you must eat healthy food like apples, oranges and bananas…"*

CP6: *"...they [adults at the D-I-C] gave you some fruits….food is important for the stomach and for when they teach you, you can understand something…"*

The CPs' views about personal hygiene and receiving meals were reiterated by one of the KIs.

KI3: *"…we show them [the children] where the toilet is, how they must take care of the toilet and they must flush the loo. Most of them come from homes where they are using pit toilets. So, if we do not teach them about cleanliness, they will get sick, most diseases are from germs. They [D-I-C] gave them food because when they are coming from school, they are hungry, we cannot teach them while they are starving. We must give them something to eat so that they can listen, if a child is starving she cannot listen attentively. Their attention span is very short when she is hungry…"*

The D-I-C's provision of health information to the children is in line with Section 13 (a) of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 which asserts that every child has the right to have access to information on health promotion, the prevention and treatment of ill health and diseases, sexuality and reproduction.

The findings about the importance of washing hands after using the toilet are also reiterated by UNICEF (2017b) which assert that handwashing with soap is a cost-effective intervention that can easily prevent many diarrhoea-related illnesses and deaths.

By ensuring handwashing at critical times up to 40 per cent of diarrhoea-related death, 47 of all childhood diarrhoea cases, and 25% of respiratory infections can be prevented. Furthermore, good health is underpinned by access to constant, sufficient and fresh food. Chirwa (2009:15) asserts that the right to food is a general human right that everyone is entitled to as it guarantees individuals food security and adequate nutrition. Chirwa further notes that, for children especially, the nutritional aspect of the right to food is essential for their optimal physical, psychological and mental development. Further evidence that children focus better in class because of the meals that they receive at the D-I-C, demonstrate an important link between access to food, health and education, which confirms Chirwa's (2009:15) views about the role that food plays in children's development and wellbeing.

Sub-theme 2.3: Access to social security grants

Further findings show that access to social security, such as childcare and foster care grants, can be beneficial in assisting and sustaining families during difficult socio-economic times. According to CPs, the foster care grants have become a dependable source of income to buy basic necessities such as food due large numbers of unemployed family member in the household. They indicated that they received financial advice from the D-I-C in terms of how to utilise their grant, and that this has enabled them to make more sound financial decisions, like saving a portion of their grant to finance university studies later in life. CPs observed that children often engage in risky behaviours such as stealing if the parents cannot meet their needs, and they would be willing to donate a portion of their grant to help such children and their families. Child participants' views about accessing social security grants are captured below:

CP2: *"…like as an orphan, what will I eat when I get home, no one is working…uhm, and we were helped by my grandfather's money and the money we get from social grant…"*

CP1: *"…our grant money, every month we receive money. They [adults at the D-I-C] say maybe, the money you are saving for when you have 18, you must go with to school or to university with that money, do not drop out, go to university and be successful…"*

CP3: "…*in the homes of the children who are not orphans, maybe their mother and father are not working. Maybe, because here [at her home] it helps us in other ways because we get our grant [foster care grant] money, we could do the things we do with that money. So, there are some who just get what they earn that is small and the parents are not able to do everything at home and you find the child has problems, so other children end up doing wrong things, they end up robbing and stealing from people. Maybe we can contribute, we can take out those R2 and give them or we buy food. We all discuss that we buying eggs, bread so that they can be fine, at least at they will get food…*"

According to section 27 (1(c)) of The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, everyone has the right to access social security, including, appropriate social assistance if they are unable to support themselves and their dependents. Section 27 (1(c)) can be read with Section 28 (1 (b) and (c)) of The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, which state respectively, that every child has the right to family care or parental care, or to appropriate alternative care when removed from the family environment, as well as basic nutrition, shelter, basic health care services and social services. The participants' views on how foster care grants have helped or can help to improve the quality of life speaks to Neves, Samson, Van Niekerk, Hlatshwayo and du Toit (2009) statement about the benefit of a foster care grant:

> Social grants including the foster care grant create potential economic benefits, for instance, it increases beneficiaries' abilities to cope with potential risks and insecurities and lessens recipients' exposure to shocks. The provision of social grants has generally resulted in positive outcomes concerning improving the lives of vulnerable and poor people (Neves et al., 2009).

Currently the standard foster care grant in SA is R1 070 per month, while the CSG is R460 per month (DSD, 2022). Kanyane (2015:31) mentions an important challenge regarding the disparity between the two grants by asserting that the disparity in monetary value between the CSG and foster care grant renders the system unfair to poor children whose primary care givers do not qualify as foster parents.

THEME 3: Factors influencing child wellbeing

Participants highlighted the risks from their natural, living and social environments that influence and impact their well-being. Land and air pollution have health implications which affect children's physical development, while participants' dangerous living environments pose various risks to them, including being bullied, sexually harassed, and exposed to violence and crime. Children have the agency to express their views on such matters that affect and concern them and to make suggestions on how to protect themselves and others from harm. They are aware of violence and crime in the community and understand the importance of protecting themselves and others against harm by speaking out. Three sub-themes emerged from this theme and are discussed below.

Sub-theme 3.1: Land and air pollution affects children's health

Findings indicate that most participants had experienced or were aware of health complications such as skin irritation, respiratory difficulties, and headaches due to land and air pollution. Participants indicated how young children are likely to get sick or injured due to land pollution, and how they are unable to attend school or participate in sport due to such illness. Participants expressed their views on pollution and health implications as stated below:

CP4: *"…If you do not stay in a clean environment, we just going to get sick and gain some bacteria, they [community members] like dumping, they throwing bad smelling things, so sometimes isn't it some of us are sensitive when you see something you are not okay, like I will get mixed up, like maybe there is something that touches me a bit, on my skin, I get a rash you see and I will not be able to go to school. So, you have to clean our environment…"*

CP5: *"…they [adults at the D-I-C] said, when you are in the yard, you must clean or there will be bad smell in the air, I will get sick, I will get sinuses, I will not be able to breath properly, I will not be able to play soccer and maybe, I can die…"*

CP7: "…*people can throw child's dirty nappy in other people's yards; they can throw it down on the road. The smell (what do you call it?)…carbon dioxide, it is dirty air, you can get sick because of those*

things, you get headaches and when you try to walk you can fall on the road..."

Participants showed specific concern around the negative impact of environment pollution on the wellbeing and development of much younger children. They expressed that young children are ignorant about the health implications of playing in the waste around them and the danger of surrounding polluted areas. Some of the participants' views about how the health of younger children is compromised by dirty environment are presented as follows:

CP3: "…*dirty environment is not ok when there are children, children play with those things and others you find there is pads [used sanitary towels] and all that and the children do not understand these things, so you find them playing with them and they will get sick, that is why people need to make sure the environment is clean…"*

CP2: *"…we have children, young children, in the township there are holes somewhere, there is water, the children can fall and drown, it is not safe because of the pollution around. You see they dug up now, they have not put tar road, the children are playing, when it rains, the water floods, the children come, and they drown. Where is the problem, in our community, that we are not looking after the children…?"*

These statements on health problems and other inconveniences due to land and air pollution support Landrigan and Fuller's (2015:761) views on the harmful nature of pollution. They state that contaminated natural resources negatively impact the health and development of children and is a major contributor to illnesses, disability and death, particularly to those living in low- and middle-income countries. Furthermore, the implications of poor health and the inability to play or go to school due to environmental stressors is a violation of children's right to enjoy an environment that is not harmful to their health or wellbeing (RSA, 1996). It denies them the opportunity to develop to their full potential, and the links between health, pollution and living environment deprivation are evident of the multi-dimensional nature of poverty (StatsSA, 2020:5).

The findings and statements regarding participants' concerns about how the wellbeing of younger children is compromised by land pollution and environment degradation in their communities speak to McGoldrick et al., (2011:39) who remarks that children begin to observe beyond their own needs during adolescence. The authors state that adolescents should be involved in community service programmes that cater for young children, as their sense of empathy strengthens their moral conviction which centres on wanting to alleviate misfortune and injustice. Therefore, it can be said that children are capable of autonomously and constructively using their consciousness to create awareness of the plight that younger children face when exposed to land pollution.

Sub-theme 3.2: Child protection in an unsafe living environment

Most participants indicated that children need to be protected by the D-I-C from people who want to fight and talk angrily to them. Child participants mentioned exposure to many serious issues such as being physically and verbally attacked, receiving unwarranted love proposals and sexual exploitation from older men, cyberbullying and fear of being abducted. Participants' views about the need for protection and the negative impact of crime are presented below.

CP7: *"...they [adults in the D-I-C] must protect me from someone who wants to fight with me and when someone talks with me with anger…"*

CP4: *"…because like in our community, uhm like people who are older than us they just came to us, then they tell us how they love us. Like you see, our fathers' age mates, our uncles. Uhm, I don't feel happy, because like, this person I take them as a father, then if there is something that happens to me, like now, we find something happened to me on the road, I meet with someone I rejected, like they said they wanted to date me, I refused and said no. When I run into him and ask for help he would want something in return. I refused, so then I have to pay…"*

CP3: *"…in social media, like it was more like a catfish in Facebook. So, like that person was pretending to be me, she was posting, so I did not know who that person was. So, one day, I was going home late around 17:30 – 18:00, and that car it was following so, it was always with me slowly and then when it got here, I saw man, these people it seems*

like they want me, you see so I ran and came home. So, like at Care-Net I explained to them [adult at the D-I-C] that you know, I saw a fake account on Facebook, I do not know who that person is, and something happened where there is a car following me and I don't know what is going on. You see, so like at Care-Net they saw that I need to be protected…"

KIs attested to the criminal acts and other unsafe living or physical environments that children are constantly being exposed to in their communities such as murder, housebreaking, domestic violence, rape and abduction. A breakdown in communication and overcrowding in communities plays a further role in creating unsafe and threatening conditions, and children are often not even safe in their own homes. Some of the threats to children's safety were articulated by KIs as follows:

KI1: *"...I was working in Winterveld, Winterveld itself is the most dangerous area you would not want to see a child being raised within that community, there is too much crime, yeah crime is bad. Generally, housebreaking, the killings, the population is high also, there is like more than 12 people in that house. There is uncles, there's aunts, the grandmother, their mothers, their siblings. So, anything can trigger anything, they fight, violence sometimes no communication between the siblings..."*

KI3: *"…we sometimes worry about their safety when they go back to their homes, some stay a little bit far from the centre. These children are facing a lot of things, where they are not safe, there is the rape, and there is the abduction of children. So, we must make sure that the children get safe, they get home safely..."*

The findings regarding crime within the children's community and how it affects their development and sense of safety corroborates Cannon's (2008:13) views about communities being unsafe spaces where risks and vulnerabilities are unequally distributed. The unsafe nature of communities is further reiterated by the WHO (2020) when stating that violence against children is a multifaceted problem and risk factors such as poverty, high population density, easy access to drugs, alcohol and firearms that often occur at a community level have lifelong impacts on the health and wellbeing

of children. Children can experience impaired brain and nervous development, adopt negative coping and risk behaviours, sustain server injuries and be victim to untimely death.

Sub-theme 3.3: Children have agency to speak out on protecting themselves and others

Findings indicate that participants were consciousness about the considerable degree of decision making, problem solving and cognitive abilities that they possess within themselves to protect themselves from harm. This included moving away from peers that negatively influence them to commit crime, warning fellow peers about the results and impact of GBV, as well as reporting issues of sexual exploitation to authorities. Participants' opinions regarding how they can use their agency to suggest solutions to protect themselves and others from engaging in crime, and speaking out about GBV and sexual harassment are provided in the quotes below:

CP2: *"…like when I am in my neighbourhood so many things are happening, like maybe your friends steal whatever, like when we are bored and you are chilling with your guys, like say you are gambling, you want money, so you are playing dice. When you get there [gambling spot] they talk, guys I saw this and such at a place if we steal we will make money. So, Care-Net helped me, they protected me like eish, when they talk about such things move, because you can see that bad things will happen, I used to play dice but now even the thought of going there does not interest me..."*

CP7: *"…when I see some boy hitting a girl, I tell him to do not beat the girl and you will end up in the jail…"*

CP4: *"…like uhm, maybe like and adult older than you comes to you [for love proposal], you should tell a family member so they know that if they approach you then you will tell your family and they [family] will go and talk to this person, if they don't understand then maybe you can go to the police and let them know that person is bothering you…"*

The participants' abilities to come up with solutions for various forms of harm and violence they are exposed to in their communities confirms Cannon's (2008:25) assertion that poor people are not passive and should be perceived as agents with

capability to cope and demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness. In addition, the children's advanced thinking abilities around such complex social issues speaks of their cognitive autonomy, which Louw and Louw (2011:327) describe as being able to make decisions and assume responsibility for one's own choices and identifying the consequences as a result. The participants' improved decision-making and problem-solving abilities can further be linked with the second property of human agency which is that of forethought. They are able to make plans, set goals and anticipate the outcomes of their prospective actions so as to bring about desired outcomes (Code, 2020:2).

THEME 4: Child participation in the programme

The findings indicate that children participate in the programme but the level of participation in programmes and their roles within it are influenced by how adults in the programme perceive their agency to contribute to it. The children primarily participate as beneficiaries, but they voluntarily do peer mentoring, helping other children to fully participate and benefit from the programme. Here, belief in themselves and self-image is an important feature. CPs stated that when adults recognise their ideas or inputs, the adults' perceptions of children can change how they view the constructive engagements between children and adults. Most of the programmes' planning, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes are primarily done by adults, while children have minimal roles such as managing food, ushering beneficiaries or guests, and making ribbons. A more detailed account of the findings are presented in three sub themes.

Sub-theme 4.1: Child participants' roles in the programme

CPs indicated that their primary role in the programme is that of a beneficiary – being a learner in a homework, after-school programme where they receive academic assistance; being a member of life skills and support groups; or participating in extra mural activities such as sports, music and art. Their views are captured in the following quotes:

CP1: *"…to become a student and to learn more…"*

CP3: *"…we just sit as a group; we talked about saving money. So, they [adults at the D-I-C] would ask you how can you save on the money*

that you have. Are you able to save and then if you are unable to save then they tell you that if you have money and it has change on it, put it at the bank, at the end of the day you can know that the money grows, and you can buy anything that you want…"

CP5: *"…I do Maths, sports and English, I was just running…"*

CP6: *"…I learn more from participating for the drawings, paintings, soccer and the songs…"*

The KIs confirmed that the CPs' primary roles at the D-I-C are to either receive academic assistance or participate in life skills groups and programmes such as needle work, gardening, or going on educational excursions, their views are captured as follows:

KI2: *"…we teach them [children at the D-I-C] sewing, how to plant, Mathematics and give them dictionary to underline the words they do not understand. They also participate and it is helping the programme to be visible to the community…"*

KI3: *"…we try to help them [children at the D-I-C] with content and later on we help that specific child with the homework. Other programmes they help them with skills like sewing, crocheting and we take them to the farms…"*

The findings support the views of Volmik and van der Elst (2017:13-14) that non-government organisations can provide important services and support for human and social development. They can also focus on niche learning groups of children that have poor access to education such as special-needs learners, orphans and learners in child-headed households. Furthermore, according to UNICEF (2017), educating children afford the next generation the necessary tools to fight poverty, prevent diseases, and build a more resilient and peaceful society. Achieving the SGD4 means all girls and boys should gain access to and participate in education that leads to learning and development of the relevant skills for greater participation in society.

CPs stated that, over and above receiving academic assistance and being part of the life skills and support groups, they also voluntarily perform secondary roles such as encouraging other children to speak about their personal problems by sharing their own experiences.

Other roles include mentoring peers to pursue their music talents and helping them to overcome their fears to perform on stage. In other instances, when the CPs' teachers did not show up for their lessons, they assisted younger children with basic reading, writing and painting skills. These roles are articulated in the following quotes:

CP3: *"…so, if anyone would have a problem that I knew I experienced, I would help them, I went through that and if you want to pass that and be fine that you need to do this and this to be fine…"*

CP2: *"…I just become a child when I arrive there, but at some point uhm, others I teach them. There were kids that were scared of people or stage fright, but you can see that they have talent. I help them that if they love to sing, do not be scared of people because in the future, you will sing here and they will love it, and if you move on you will get a heart attack if you are scared. So isn't it they [adults at the D-I-C] helped me, now I help others when I go to Care-Net, those younger than me…"*

CP5: *"…isn't it if the teachers that teach us don't come, me and the other boy, we helped the Grade R, one went to B and one went to A. We taught them [children at the D-I-C] to read, we taught them to paint, I taught them to write, and I taught them A, E, I, O, U…"*

The findings supplement DSDs (2013:14) views about participation and democracy being critical elements of the development approach of social service delivery. DSD (2013:14) further adds that, everyone should be afforded the opportunity to play an active role in promoting their own wellbeing as well as contributing to the wellbeing of the broader society. Patel (2013:106) asserts that through participation and active involvement in social and community life, the culture of acting as a responsible citizen can be fostered.

Sub-theme 4.2: Adults' perceptions about child participation in the programme

CPs and KIs presented mixed opinions and views ranging from less favourable to favourable. CP2 indicated that the adults at the D-I-C did not know him well because he does not share much of his serious personal matters or discuss socio-economic issues such as poverty with them.

Likewise, when CP5 was asked if the adults in the programme see him as helpless or being unable to do things for himself and hence he must be protected, he further indicated that the adults in the programme saw him as someone who does not know anything. The CPs' perceptions about how the adults saw them were also affirmed by KI2 who indicated that children do not know wrong from right and are not responsible to make choices, and the participants' views are presented below:

CP2: *"… they [adults at the D-I-C] see me as a just a forward child because most of the time I never share much that is serious with them, like how I am, things like deep deep, I have never. So, they do not know me well. I never talked to them like this at Care Net, to talk about poverty…"*

CP5: *"… they [adults at the D-I-C] see me like I do not know anything…"*

KI2: *"…the child is innocent, and she needs to be protected because, I think the child does not know the wrong and the right. Children are minors and not responsible according to my experience, and can't be able to make choices… the thinking of the children is not the same as the thinking of the adults…"*

Despite the less favourable assertions in terms of how children are perceived by the adults in the programme, some participants had more favourable experiences about how children are perceived and recognised by the adults in the programme. Favourable responses included CPs being able to speak up for herself, and one KI also stated that children were seen to have their own enquiring minds.

CP3: *"…they [adults at the D-I-C] see me as an open person because whenever something at Care Net might not be ok with me, I could speak that you did something not ok with me…"*

KI1: *"…but they [children at the D-I-C] also have their own minds and thinking. They will give you these questions but if I do this or if I do this and they question you and giving you examples, I have seen this on TV, or my teacher is doing this…"*

One child participant (CP2) indicated that he was empowered to have meaningful engagements and disagreements with grown-ups, and to change the social norm that children should not disagree with their elders.

CP5 indicated that, when their ideas are encouraged or requested, those ideas can help other children. The CPs' comments regarding the meaning and impact of sharing and recognition of their ideas were as follows:

CP2: *"…they [adults at the D-I-C] want to see like as children can we participate and ask grown-ups questions. Isn't it we grew up in community where you should not disagree with an elder, they teach us that you can disagree with an elder and you can be right..."*

CP5: *"…yes, so that we can maybe come up with good ideas that can help other children…"*

Huchet's (2018) asserts that young people are often viewed as too young or too immature by society to meaningfully participate in democratic life or processes, thus limiting their abilities to influence decisions that might directly affect them. These adults' different views of children in the programme by can be linked to child construct which can cause children to feel or be excluded from socio-economic processes and decisions, overlooking the possible strength and development that they can contribute to their communities' and own development can be overlooked. Wilson (2015) highlights the significance of recognising young people and states that young people need and deserve to be recognised as powerful agents of social transformation. The author further states that society has a responsibility to develop children's academic, emotional and social capacity so that the transformative power they hold can be realised. Louw and Louw (2007:304) add that adolescents have a "questioning attitude" and expect their parents to explain to them reasons in terms of what is expected from them. Adolescents' capacity for effective argumentation and criticism not only open doors for more intellectual stimulating debates regarding moral, ethical and political concerns, but it also demonstrates higher levels of understanding (Louw & Louw, 2007:304).

Sub-theme 4.3: Phases in the programme wherein children participate

According to the KIs, older children above the ages of 15 or 16 are included more in the planning phases and are given minimal roles during implementation phases of programmes such as ushering guest, being responsible for meal preparations, or making ribbons.

They further indicated that the design, monitoring and evaluation phases of the programme are mostly performed by adults in the programme, their views are presented as follows:

KI1: *"…at around 15, 16 [they are much informed compared to the young ones and they can think out of the box] that is when we would involve them when we do the planning of the event…who will be responsible for meals, who will be ushering, who will be doing the ribbons. The design was just the adults, the facilitators and Mme Matsatsi, she is the one who comes up with most of things…"*

KI2: *"…we have never asked children [their views], I am the one who is planning them with the colleagues, I am also implementing them as the facilitator of the programme and my supervisor is monitoring them…"*

According to the Department of International Development (2005:3), people are socio-economically excluded by institutions and behaviours that reflect, enforce and produce attitudes and values of powerful social groups. This exclusionary practice not only deprives people of their choices and opportunities to escape from poverty, but they are also denied, or have little voice to claim or exercise, their right to participation. Wessels (2018) asserts that non-profit organisations using a top-down approach due to having more decision-making power and resources are self-silencing and limiting community members' voices and participation. Subsequently, such organisations can leave community members feeling subjugated and disempowered.

This approach not only relegates community members to the backseat but it also creates an element of dependency as the organisations' experts are the ones analysing the community situation, prescribing interventions, and taking decisions, which can have a negative impact on the sustainability of the project. Furthermore, some roles of children in the programme can be linked to what Hart (1992:9) describes as tokenism, whereby children are sometimes given a voice but have little or no choices about the subject or the medium of communicating it or might have little or no opportunities to formulate their own opinions.

Reflecting on what would happen if children had an opportunity to express their views regarding the programme roll-out or make up, one KI (KI2) indicated that asking children's views might cause them to opt out of the programme and then they miss out on learning new skills. The KI's interpretation of child participation is reflected in the following statement:

> KI2: *"…I think most of them [children in the D-I-C] if we give them the input they will never do it according to the experience. So, you can see that they do not like sewing most of them, so I think if we give them the input they would not do it. They enjoy coming here to play, they think they are here to play…"*

The KI2's approach shows a limited view of child participation and their ability to make choices and decisions if they are presented with options that match their interest. According to Veale (2010:148), leadership traits such as controlling, being coercive and closed minded are synonymous with authoritative/autocratic leaders. Veale states that although such leaders can produce structure and compliance, they tend to depend on their official rank to regulate the behaviour of their subordinates by controlling their performance and making decisions that are imposed on others rather than collaborative.

THEME 5: Children's abilities to make decisions

CPs indicated that they feel capable of making decisions in matters that affect their wellbeing, and that they have the need or quest to assert themselves. However, that does not mean that they do not require adults' guidance or support to make such decisions. Their views were complimented by the KIs who added that adults (parents, adults and leaders in the programme) should provide the children with direction and to not discourage them in their attempts to consider their options when making decisions. Participants' views are discussed in the two sub-themes that emerged from this theme.

Sub-theme 5.1: Child participants' quest for self-assertiveness

The findings indicate different views among child and adult participants on children's abilities to make decisions on matters affecting their wellbeing. CPs indicated the need to make their own decisions and to be heard and recognised by adults.

In contrast, one key informant was of the view that children are too immature to make decisions and denied their right to participate. These views are reflected in the following quotes:

CP3: *"… isn't it you choose for yourself. Actually, you tell them, I have two options and I did not decide what is it I want to do…but they [adults at the D-I-C] are not supposed to choose, you do anything that you feel you can, then you do it. What if they choose for you and you do not like that thing, I am not going to be happy about the decision they take for me…"*

CP5: *"… because isn't it they [adults at the D-I-C] didn't listen to me when I spoke, they listened to the other boy, so, after he started smoking, I told him not to smoke, so now they started listening to me…"*

KI2 presented a different perspective indicating that children's social status of being minors means they do not have right to make decisions, the responsibility of decision making should reside with the parents (and adults):

KI2: *"…I do not think they [children at the D-I-C] have the right to make decisions because they are still children. The parents are the one should be responsible, have the right to make decisions for them…they are still minors, their thinking it's not matured…"*

The KI's views are consistent with O'Quigley's (2000:23) assertions about how adults view children's dependence, and they also echo McCue's (2018) sentiments about adolescents' psychosocial immaturity. The author states that adolescents' frontal lobe, (which is responsible for decision making, impulse control, emotional responses and consequential thinking) only finishes developing in their early-to-mid 20s and this makes them psychosocially immature. As a result, youth aged 12 to 17 years, may fail to anticipate the consequences of their choices, make more impulsive decisions, or engage in risk-taking behaviour. Therefore, to counteract adolescents' immaturity and impulsiveness, parents can provide them with a decision-making compass to teach or encourage them to stop, think and temporarily remove themselves from a situation to make more objective decisions away from direct pressures.

However, Thompson (2006:6) challenges McCue's view, stating that during adolescence, the development of healthy self-governance or autonomy of behaviour; cognitive and emotional autonomy is critical to children. The ability to employ cognitive autonomy can enable children to avoid adverse risk-taking behaviours such as drugs and alcohol abuse or teenage pregnancy. Children should also develop abilities to negotiate and positively resolve conflict; voice their opinions, and appreciate other people's perspectives.

The development of self-governing behaviours during adolescence can also be linked to the self-regulation which is one of the principles of agency whereby adolescents can set their own goals and then attempt to monitor and regulate their cognition, motivation and behaviours accordingly (Code 2020:2).

Finally, the CPs' need to be listened to or to be able to choose and speak for themselves is consistent with Louw and Louw's (2007:304) views of adolescents' quest for independence. The authors state that adolescents often want to be independent and make their own decisions without the help or guidance of their parents. The findings that children want to be listened to by their adult counterparts in the programme connects with Article 12 of the CRC (2009) which states that children have the right to have their views taken seriously. In this regard, Lansdown (2005:2) asserts that although young children express themselves differently from adults, it does not justify that they should be dismissed. Instead, they are entitled to an explanation of what consideration was given to their views and why it might not have been implemented.

Sub-theme 5.2: Adults' role in children's decision-making processes

Findings indicated that children want adults' involvement in their decision-making processes, particularly when it comes to guiding law abiding citizens, providing career and financial advice, and assisting them academically. KIs agreed that parents and adults can support children to understand the consequences of their decisions and to influence them to make decisions that would be in their best interest of their capacity development. The participants' views about adults' role in children decision making processes were as follows:

CP1: *"…yes, I think so, decisions that cannot make me a dangerous person [like someone who steal from other people]…"*

CP2: *"…they [adults at the D-I-C] can take decision for me, like career. They told me that if you want to do maybe firefighter, do subjects like this. They told me that money they put aside it is for school, it's not for playing around. They took that decision for me that I must use that money wisely….Isn't it parent know more, I am still young as I grow, I need to be taught…"*

CP7: *"…yes, because they [adults at the D-I-C] know I am the slow learner, I am slow learning from reading they take me to the school of hands…"*

KI1: *"…they [children at the D-I-C] can make decisions but still as parents or guardians or whoever is working with them, make sure that whatever the decision they are making is it correct or wrong. Making them see that if you choose this it goes this and if you choose this it also goes this way…"*

KI3: *"…they [children at the D-I-C] have right to participate, to choose, to make decision. I think it is our responsibility to influence them so that they can make the right decision…the main important thing here is the child to know how to sew and he can choose something, but he is sewing. I won't discourage him to do that. We have the most important thing, the child must know how to sew, but what he wants to sew, he can make a decision, I can sew dolls dress, I want to sew a cushion so that I can give it to my grand mom…"*

Participants' views regarding the role and involvement of adults in children's decision-making processes emphasise the influential role that adults play or should play in children's development. Steinberg and Cauffman (1996:253) are of the view that parental influence in children's development is crucial when it comes to fundamental issues such as religion, education and occupational choices. Hoangh (2015:275) adds that children's ability to exercise their autonomy is also different from being physically, mentally and emotionally separated from social support structures such as parents, welfare organisations or state institutions, as this can hinder their socio-economic development and functioning and induce feelings and circumstances of insecurity or vulnerability.

4.4 Summary

The present chapter discussed the empirical findings of the study, guided by the research questions informed by four sub questions and discussed the different themes and sub-themes that arose from the collected data. Biographical information and profiles for both KIs and child participants in the study was also provided. Five main themes emerged from the study, including (a) the reasons for being involved in the D-I-C programme; (b) improved quality of life; (c) factors influencing child wellbeing; (d) child participation in the programme and children's abilities to make decisions. These themes along with their fourteen associated sub-themes were discussed and supported by participants' verbatim responses, as well as relevant literatures. The key findings, conclusion and recommendations from the study, including for further research are provided and discussed in Chapter 5 below.

CHAPTER 5: KEY FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Introduction

In this final chapter a discussion on how the goal and objectives of the study were achieved is presented. The key findings and conclusions drawn from each of the presented themes and the study as a whole are presented and discussed. Finally, recommendations for further research are offered based on the findings of the study.

5.2. Goal and objectives of the study

The primary goal of the study was to explore and describe how children's agency is recognised and respected in programmes/interventions aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risk at a D-I-C at Care-Net.

The goal was achieved through the following objectives, and each is discussed in more detail below:

Objective 1

- To conceptualise and contextualise poverty and environmental risks of children within a human rights-based framework.

This objective was achieved through the literature review presented in Chapter 2 and confirmed in the findings of Chapter 4. Absolute poverty was described as more than a lack of income, as it is characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs such as food, safe drinking water, sanitation, health, shelter, education and information (UN, 2019). These multiple deprivations restrict children's access to essential resources and freedoms to avoid hunger, diseases and illiteracy which makes poverty a direct violation of fundamental human rights. It was shown in sub-section 2.6.1 that children living in low-income families can experience numerous health issues such as asthma due to living in poorly constructed houses and industrial areas with severe air pollution (Gupta et al., 2007:669). The link between poverty and the presence of chronic stressors, environmental noise and safety concerns, unstable households and family conflicts or community violence was pointed out, and how it that can negatively affect children's brain and social development (Blair & Raver, 2016:3).

The intrinsic link between poverty, environmental risks and human rights violations were highlighted in sub-section 2.1.7. It was discussed how contaminated natural resources can critically impact the health and development of children, and contribute towards illness, disability and death, particularly for those living in low-and-middle income countries (Landrigan & Fuller, 2015:761). Furthermore, it was indicated in sub-section 2.7.1 that children's exposure to violence was shown to lead to a higher prevalence of drop outs from school, which in turn impacts children and adolescents' future prospects for employment, and increases the likelihood of either being victimised or perpetuating interpersonal or self-directed violence (WHO, 2020).

The finding of the present study confirmed the above-mentioned factors, as most participants indicated that they experienced or were aware of health complications caused by air and land pollution. This study confirmed the findings of the literature review in Chapter Three (see theme 3.1) where participants indicated that they had experienced or were aware of health complications due to air and land pollution.

Furthermore, the study adopted a HRBA as a theoretical framework to explore children's freedom to actively, safely and freely participating in matters that affect their wellbeing. According to Broberg and Sano (2018:672), the human rights-based approach ensures that the most vulnerable and marginalised citizens have access to essential services such as health care, water, sanitation and education; that they are empowered with knowledge of what they are entitled to, and can demand strengthening of the channels through which they can assert their rights.

Objective 2

- To explore and describe the goal and intended outcomes of programmes/interventions that were aimed at reducing children's poverty and environment risks.

This objective was realised in Chapters 1, 2 and 4. In subsection 1.1 the description of the D-I-C was discussed as part of the service provided by Care-Net. This included the initiation of a life skills programme and support group that empower children around financial skills. The presented literature review in Chapter 2 (see sub-section 2.6.2) emphasised the empowering nature of financial literacy towards improving children's human and social assets and capital, and how it can enhance their

functioning capabilities to succeed in escaping poverty. In Chapter Four (see sub-section 2.3), CPs indicated that they received financial advice from adults in the D-I-C on how to make sound financial decisions through saving a portion of their foster care grants towards further studies.

Additionally, Chapter Two (see sub-section 2.6.2) provided insight on the role that quality education plays in enabling or disabling childhood poverty. Muedini (2015:8) and UNICEF (2007:7) were cited on how education contributes to increasing awareness of human rights, poverty and environmental risk factors and their reduction, while also promoting personal development, respect for freedom and enabling individuals to participate effectively in a free society. In Chapter 4 (see sub-section 2.1) CPs' gave accounts of how their academic performance improved due to the homework assistance programme and academic support provided at the D-I-C. CPs were performing below their abilities due to poor time management, struggles with literacy and numeracy, and not having academic assistance or support at their homes which often lead to failing grades.

The Bill of Rights specifies that every person has the right to basic education which the State must make progressively available and accessible through reasonable measures (RSA, 1996). The role of non-government organisations in providing services and support for human and social development was also elaborated through Volmik and van der Elst (2017:13-14), and how they can assist special-needs learners, orphans and learners in child-headed households to access educational resources and support.

Objective 3

- To explore and describe how children were involved in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of such programmes/interventions.

This objective was achieved in Chapters Two and Four. The concept of child participation was defined in Chapter 2 (see sub-section 2.5) as applicable to every child who is of such an age, maturity, and stage of development to participate appropriately in matters that concern him/her and having their expressed views duly considered (RSA, 2005; UNCRC, 2009:3).

In addition, children's right to participate was described from a social developmental approach, which emphasises the inclusive and empowering nature of participation as a mechanism to capacitate children to function and flourish through the exercising of their agency. Both child agency and participation were shown to be critical components of third generation rights and social justice which Lombard (2014:46, 49) explains, give children the same rights to protection and opportunities to benefit from socio-economic development like any other citizen.

In Chapter Four (see theme 4), participants indicated that children's level of participation and their roles in the programme were often influenced by how adults perceived their agency to contribute. Chapter Four (see sub-section 4.3) presented the various phases in the programme where children participated, demonstrating the minimal roles that children often perform in the programme as most of the programmes' planning, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation primarily resided with the adults. The limited involvement of children in the programmes' processes was identified as a type of tokenism and non-participation according to the participation model of Hart (1992:9). The model, which describes a situation where children have a voice, but no actual choice about the topic, content or given an opportunity to formulate their own opinions on programme matters, was supported by the findings in Chapter Two (see sub-section 2.5.1).

Despite the children's minimal participation in the programmes, Chapter Four (see sub-section 4.1), revealed that the CPs, besides being primarily involved as programmes' beneficiaries, they provided peer mentoring and helped other children to fully participate and benefit from the programmes. Chapter Two (see sub-section 2.4) children's agency and in particular their innate quality of taking action to make things happen (Chen, 2015:79), was linked with Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Children are naturally trying to make sense of their physical and social worlds by creating concepts or designs that will lead them to expect certain things to happen (Louw & Louw, 2007:23). This sense of agency and advance cognitive thinking describe the CPs' voluntary involvement and initiative in the programme. As Horwarth and Platt (2019:303) explain, children's ability to find and do things they are passionate about is what gives them purpose and value to contribute to society and their own overall development.

Objective 4

- To explore and describe the factors that influenced the recognition and respect / non-recognition and disrespect of children's agency in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes/intervention

This objective was realised in the literature review Chapter Two along with the findings discussed in Chapter Four. The policy and legislative frameworks that advocate for the respect, promotion and protection of children's rights was presented in Chapter Two (see sub-section 2.2), while sub-section 2.3 also pointed out that adolescent's advanced developmental stages play a crucial factor in influencing the recognition and respect of their agency. The study findings showed that this was evident only in the planning and implementation phases of the programme (see sub-section 4.3). Factors such as increased capacity for moral understanding, individually or collectively acting with intentionality to address injustice (Chen, 2015:79), and participating in legitimate socio-economic activities without parental consent (Mahery & Proudlock, 2011:20, 21 & 24) were discussed in recognition of children's agency to participate (see Chapter 2, sub-section 2.4.2).

Findings in Chapter Four indicated the level of child participants' agency. In sub section 3.3 children's agency was linked to decision making, problem solving and cognitive abilities as well as speaking out when it came to protecting themselves and others from harm. Chapter Four (see sub-section 5.1) highlighted children's quest for self-assertiveness so that they can make their own decisions, and to be heard and recognised by adults. Child participants acknowledged their yearning to develop their agency in expressing their need and for adults to be involved in some of their decision-making processes. This was confirmed by the KIs' awareness of the parents and adults' role in supporting, guiding and influencing children's decision-making processes that would be in their best interest (see Chapter Four, sub-section 5.2).

In Chapter Two (see sub-section 2.7) the researcher elaborated on the relatedness of the environment and children's sense of agency and wellbeing. As indicated in section 24 of The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, and the DEA (2016:12), people have the right to a clean, sustainable and healthy environment which is essential for children's well-being.

Pollution of natural resources such as air, water and soil compromise children's health and development, particularly those living in low- and middle-income countries. (see sub-section 2.7.1). Community violence and high incidents of child murder and sexual abuse, diminish children's sense of safety as well as violates their right to security, to be free from all forms of violence and neglect, and degradation of their natural environment (RSA, 1996).

In Chapter Four (see sub-section 3.1) CPs shared their experiences and awareness about how land and air pollution around them affect their own, and other younger children's health or wellbeing. Participants indicated the critical need for children to be protected from various forms of social crimes or unsafe living environments which they were exposed to daily and caused them direct discomfort (sub-section 3.2).

Objective 5

- To make recommendations on how children's agency can be recognised and respected in future programmes/interviews directed towards poverty and risk reduction

Objective 5 has been achieved in this chapter in section 5.4.

5.3. Key findings of the study and conclusions

This section will discuss the key findings and conclusions that were drawn from the findings.

- Findings indicated that children joined the D-I-C programmes for various reasons and considerations. One such reason was that they believed that they could benefit from getting academic support with their homework as they were struggling academically. CPs registered themselves voluntarily or by informing their parents or guardians about their interest to join the programmes. Their parents or guardians also embarked on exploring how the D-I-C could assist their children due to their own inability to help them at home. They then undertook to support their children in whichever way they could to in joining in the activities and benefit from them. Another reason for participating at the D-I-C was in response to the outreach of social workers who invited them to join the support group, providing them with additional psychosocial support. In this

case the children exercised their own autonomy to decide whether to participate in a support group or not.

- It could be concluded that the participants knew and understood their needs and how they wanted to be supported, be it with their schoolwork or personal and family lives. Children showed that they can make decisions in their own best interest when they have the necessary information and opportunities to make those choices. The choices that they made showed that they understand the roles of family, peers, and other role players such as social workers in promoting their well-being.

- Findings indicated the D-I-C provides participants with services and information that empower them to have a better quality of life. Services and information provided within the D-I-C programmes included drug awareness, personal hygiene, healthy eating habits, referrals to medical facilities and financial advice. This information assists participants to adopt more positive and healthy lifestyles and choices that promote their overall well-being, health and autonomy.
- From the findings it can be deduced that relevant information and services are key to assist child participants to develop their capabilities and agency towards participating in programmes directed at them. Having access to such crucial, enabling information and services help to ensure that children stay healthy and make conscious, educated decisions towards actively participating in matters that affect their wellbeing, and in doing so, enables them to mitigate poverty and environmental risks that they are exposed to.

- Another key finding from the study indicated that participants were well aware of air and land pollutions around them, and how such unsafe living environments impacted their health and well-being. Additionally, participants' expressed their needs to be protected from such environmental risks and unsafe communities and that while at the D-I-C, they never discuss societal issues such as poverty and crime and how to solve them. Findings showed how CPs were able to think critically about constructive and sustainable ways and solutions to address the harms that they were being exposed to.

- It can therefore be concluded that children's sense of awareness about the impact of pollution and crime, along with their ability to come up with constructive solutions demonstrate their moral and cognitive autonomy and creativity. The CPs showed that they have advanced thinking abilities to participate in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes/interventions that could help to fight poverty and environmental risks.
- In the realm of conflict, O'Connor (2016:7) supports the insight that adolescent are not only victims, but should be regarded as an integral part of efforts to solve conflict, help communities to recover from violence and to initiate creative solutions to longstanding problems. The conditions that promote peace and security are more likely to be attained if those that are affected are given an opportunity to play a part, as powerful resources that can initiate positive change and build peace from the ground up.

- Findings presented different views around how children perceived themselves in relation to their agency, and how they were perceived by the adults with regards to their participation in matters that concern them. Findings indicated that children were only given minimal roles in the planning and implementation phases of the programmes, while the majority of the planning, implementation and evaluation processes were dictated by the adults in the programme. Therefore, children's level of participation and their roles in the life skills and gardening programmes were mostly determined by the adults in the programmes. However, children recognise their knowledge, skills, and the capacity they have to contribute or performed supporting roles to help other children to benefit more and often do so voluntarily.
- It can therefore be concluded that the minimal level of children's participation in the conceptualisation, design, and implementation, monitoring and evaluation phases of programmes may be attributable to the stereotypes and perceptions that adults have about the value and contributions that children can make. Less favourable perceptions of children are often nested in the judgmental and discriminative attitude held by adults, and may presents a distorted view of children's sense of agency and erode them of their self-esteem.

- An empowering and welcoming atmosphere encourages children to be authentic, ask questions and recognised that they have their own minds and ways of thinking. When children experience or are exposed to an environment where they are valued, it enables them to believe more in themselves, speak up against wrongdoings against them, challenge the social narrative and norms that children should not or cannot disagree with adults, and willingly support and motivate their peers to identify and develop their own strengths and potential. Therefore, favourable perceptions and recognition of children, their views, value and agency can stimulate children's participation in civil society initiatives and help to propel active citizenry as Patel (2013:106) alludes to. The culture of acting as a responsible citizen can be fostered through participation and active involvement in social and community life.

- According to the findings, some CPs indicated that the need to choose for themselves, to be listened to, and to be recognised by the adults was important to them, and they expressed their dissatisfaction when adults would decide for them. However, other CPs also stated that the involvement and their reliance on adults' support when it came to making critical life choices was also important to them. However, the children's need to make their own decisions was refuted by some of the adults, including a key informant participant, on the basis that their thinking and decision-making abilities were too immature as they are still minors.

- Therefore, it can be concluded that the children's need for assertiveness and guidance towards making personal decisions should be recognised and respected so that they can be supported but also have a sense of ownership and control in their own lives. This need speaks to their developmental stage of wanting their own independence, but children have enough insight to be cognisant of the fact that they still need adults' support, guidance and influence when it comes to fundamental decisions in their lives.
- It can also be concluded that in order to accommodate children's need for assertiveness and independence, a reasonable parental influence and mentorship around their decision-making and behaviour is naturally still required, but that ownership and responsibility should be encouraged to build a strong self-esteem, independence and sense of agency in children. According

to McGoldrick et al., (2011:336) an authoritative parenting style encourages autonomy, self-reliance, discussion and belief that children have rights and should stand up for them. It can counteract the negative stereotypes, controlling and rigid attitudes that can hinder children's sense of agency to participate more optimally in matters that affects them and encourage personal decision making.

5.4. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the researcher made the following recommendations regarding how children's agency could be recognised and respected in programmes/interventions aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risks.

5.4.1. Establish a platform for child participation

KIs acknowledged the significance of improving child participation in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes of the programmes. They indicated that their involvement would help to fill in the missing gaps in the planning, enhance the quality of the programme, and assist in growing participation in the programme and aid in reducing dropouts.

Given that Care-Net served over 900 youth, as part of the 4776 total beneficiaries served by the organisation and its 16 employees during the 2021 – 2022 financial year (Care-Net, 2022:4), it is obvious to see that the logistics of ensuring that every young person's views are respected and recognised will be a challenge. The researcher therefore recommends the establishment of a purposive, dedicated platform for child participation and its structures would be decided by the children and the programme organisers. A children's committee is another possibility, nominated by the children, to serve as a link between the children's views and inputs and that of the programme and organisational management. Furthermore, this committee can serve to represent the children's suggestions, views and opinions, and contribute to the organisation of, and participation in local campaigns that advocate for the respect, protection and promotion of children's rights. It will also serve to encourage children's maximum support and participation in the organisation's programmes or initiatives aimed at supporting children in need and also conscientise them about their rights and

responsibilities when it comes to reducing poverty and environmental risks within their communities.

Eventually, participating in such a committee could enhance children's leadership, interpersonal and conflict management skills, and self-esteem. Committee members will be empowered to constructively engage in discussions with adults or those in authority, about the provision of services or programmes that can serve their best interests. Advising and informing organisations' management or programme managers and holding them accountable in terms of delivering on their mandate. The formation of such a committee also supports the views on progressive child participation that stipulate that children should participate in an authentic and ethical manner in the governance of schools, child and youth clubs, and programmes aimed and serving their interests (Department of Women, Children and People with Disability, 2012:95). In the same manner, UNICEF (2017:3) has called on State parties to ensure that adolescents are involved in the development, implementation and monitoring of all the relevant legislation, services and programmes affecting their lives towards the same purpose and intention.

5.4.2. Facilitation of community work projects

Based on participants' views about the negative socio-economic impact of pollution and unsafe living environments, the researcher observed the absence of a macro approach or initiative within the organisation to proactively and sustainably tackle such challenges. The recommendation is therefore for the organisation to facilitate bottom-up and inclusive community work projects that will advocate for safer and cleaner communities where children and other vulnerable members of society can be involved and encouraged to act. A community development model will be instrumental in the development of leaderships and problems solving abilities, stimulating interest and participation of community members and children in their community affairs (Weyers, 2011:155). By using social marketing practice and other mediums such as social media, posters, or local and regional newspapers or radio stations, community members can be persuaded and conscientised to accept and act upon such ideas and initiative that promote the benefits of living in cleaner and safer communities (Weyers, 2011:305).

As an example, the organisation can facilitate a child-driven community clean-up campaign where community members and in particular children and youth can collaborate with other community organisations, government departments and the private sector to clean up the open spaces that have been illegally turned into dumping sites. Through these campaigns community members can be empowered with information regarding proper waste disposal, be informed about their rights and responsibilities to maintain the environment around them, the negative impact that air and land pollution has on their children's wellbeing, as well as the socio-economic opportunities of turning trash into cash.

Furthermore, the children committee, supported by the organisation, can hold their local and provincial municipalities accountable by ensuring that households have rubbish bins or sufficient communal waste disposal facilities that are regularly collected and disposed of properly, along with the maintenance of clean open spaces, or its transformation into recreational parks.

5.4.3. Staff training on human agency and child participation

The exclusion of children in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes can be perceived as a violation of Section 10 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 which avers that children have a right to participate and to have a voice in matters concerning their care and well-being. The researcher therefore recommends that all the organisations' staff members and volunteers be continuously and professionally trained on the importance of recognising the human agency and participation of children and adolescents within their programmes. Especially when such programmes are aimed at children.

This training should primarily be guided by the appropriate legal instruments and guidelines such as the following documentations and reports:

- The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996
- The Children's Act 38 of 2005
- The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals
- The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child
- The African Union: Africa We Want Agenda 2063
- The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

- The South African Council for Social Services Professions: Policy guidelines for course of conduct, code of ethics and the rules for social workers.

These legal and guiding instruments are meant to protect the children's basic rights, to ensure equal accesses to social justice, resources and opportunities, and to advocate on their behalf, ensuring that the social service professionals practice within the ambit of the law. Crouse (2020:83) states that executive management must ensure that training opportunities are in place within the organisation and that such training can be provided by either a qualified external service provider in a specialised field, or internal professionals such as social workers or volunteers with specialised skills. Furthermore, a skills development facilitator should develop a Workplace Skills Plan and Annual Training Report to keep record of the trainings that took place, as well as creating automated structures and processes that ensure that staff members are knowledgeable and updated (Crouse, 2020:83).

5.4.4. Expansion of services and programmes

Currently, Care-Net (2022:11) provides youth programmes which include an after school support programme (academic support), life skills activities such as music, dance, beauty pageant, sewing, vegetable gardening, and gender-based violence awareness campaigns. The researcher recognises the value of these programmes, but recommends an expansion to programmes that include income generating activities e.g. children can be taught how to:

- Design and play indigenous music instruments
- Learn how to make and sell pottery items
- Learn beading or embroidery as part of the needlework activities
- Create and sell paper-based art and crafts articles such as photo frames and card making for special days or occasions (made from recycled materials), or jewellery and accessories

These are only a few examples, and the expansion of these programmes should be done in consultation with the children using a bottom-up approach to stimulate their own innovative ideas to bring in more money into the organisation or participant's households.

Such programmes should also be designed in a way that they contribute to the holistic socio-economic development of children and should not discriminate against any child to participate based on socially constructed attributes.

5.4.5. Further research

Further research is recommended as follows:

- Exploratory research on how a collaboration between social workers and child and youth care workers can facilitate and promote children's participation in the Care-Net's programmes, especially those that are meant to reduce poverty and environmental risks.
- Intervention research on launching a child participation platform for the Care-Net and how child participation influences children's well-being, their agency, and the mitigation of poverty and environmental risks through programme activities.

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APPENDIX A: LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR OF CARE-NET

CARE NET
Development and Support Organisation

Head Office
1707 Block A
Mabopane 0190
Tel: 012 725-8006
Cell:0766483561/0603605472

Sub-office
Plot 1615/0061-62
Bushveldt Road
Winterveldt 0198
Cell: 0762293934/0635663849

NPO: 057-337 Email: info@care-netdevelopment.org Website: www.care- netdevelopment.org

08 April 2019

Ditlhare Mokhema
063 615 5854

Dear Ms Mokhema

Re: Acceptance to conduct a research in our Organisation

Thank you for choosing our Organisation as part of your research.

This letter serves to confirm that, the above mentioned Organisation accept your request in conducting your research for your MA degree in our Organisation. We therefore welcome you.

It will be more appreciated if you can give us the feedback at the end of your research on your finding which we believe it will benefit all parties involved.

We hope to have a wonderful working relationship with you.

Kind Regards

Mmatšatši Mokgohloa
(Director)

APPENDIX B: ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL LETTER

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Humanities 100.
1919 - 2019
Research Ethics Committee

19 July 2019

Dear Ms DCM Mokhema

Project Title:	Children's agency in reducing poverty and environmental risk : Case study of Drop-In Center, Care-Net Development and Support Organisation
Researcher:	Ms DCM Mokhema
Supervisor:	Prof A Lombard
Department:	Social Work and Criminology
Reference number:	11066271 (HUM026/0619)
Degree:	Masters

I have pleasure in informing you that the above application was **approved** by the Research Ethics Committee on 19 July 2019. Data collection may therefore commence.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely

Prof Maxi Schoeman
Deputy Dean: Postgraduate and Research Ethics
Faculty of Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
e-mail: PGHumanities@up.ac.za

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotho

Research Ethics Committee Members: Prof MME Schoeman (Deputy Dean); Prof KL Harris; Mr A Bizos; Dr L Blokland; Dr K Bouvens; Dr A-M de Beer; Ms A dos Santos; Dr R Fasselt; Ms KT Govinder Andrew; Dr E Johnson; Dr W Kelleher; Mr A Mohamed; Dr C Puttergill; Dr D Reyburn; Dr M Soer; Prof E Taliard; Prof V Thebe; Ms B Tsebe; Ms D Mokalaca

APPENDIX C: GUARDIAN/PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Humanities 100.
1919 - 2019
Department of Social Work & Criminology

07/06/2019

Researcher: Ditlhare Mokhema
Tel: 063 615 5854
E-mail: ditlhare.mokhema@gmail.com

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Parents/Guardians

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Ditlhare Mokhema. I am a master's student at the University of Pretoria in the programme MSW Social Development and Policy. I am doing a study to determine how children are engaged and participating in programmes that are intended for them to reduce poverty and environmental risk. In this study, I would like to talk to your child to hear how they see their involvement and participation in the programme to ensure that they benefit as intended by the programme. Your child will have the opportunity to say whether he/she wants to participate in the study, and whatever the decision, it will be respected. If they are willing to participate, they will sign an assent form that contain the following information.

Title of the study
Children's agency in reducing poverty and environmental risk: Case study of Drop-In Center, Care-Net Development and Support Organisation

Goal of the study
To explore and describe how children's agency influence reducing poverty and environmental risk in the Drop-In Center, Care-Net Development and Support Organisation.

What will happen in the study?
If you give permission for your child to join the study, I will talk to him/her one-on-one, asking questions in relation to the goal of the study, that is; how they see their involvement and participation recognised in shaping the programme so that they can benefit from it to reduce their poverty and environmental risks. Your child will be one of five children in the programme that I will be interviewing. The discussion should be between 45 and 60 minutes. With the child's permission, I will be voice recording the conversation so that I do not miss any important information that he/she shares. The interview will take place at Care-Net Development and Support Organisation on a date and time agreed with the organisation.

Risks and discomforts
There will be no risks or danger to your child to participate in the study. Your child will know that he/she will have the freedom to not answer any question if they do not wish to respond too. I will be available after the interview to talk to the child on his/her experience of the interview. If needed, I will refer the child to speak to Ms MmatšatŠi Mokgohloa, the manager of the organisation.

Are there any benefits for joining the study?
Your child will not receive any money or gifts for his/her participation. The study is intended to recognise that children's views are important and that they should be listened at to ensure that programmes that are designed and implemented for them, serve their best interests.

Participants' rights
Even if you give permission for your child to participate in the study, he/she will still have the choice to indicate whether he/she wants to participate. If your child agrees to participate, he/she will sign an assent form to indicate that he/she fully understands that participation is voluntary, and what his/her rights are. If your child agrees to participate, but at any time during the interview, decide to withdraw, he/she will be welcome to do so without any consequences.

Confidentiality
The information that your child will share with me, will be treated confidentially. Nobody will be able to see which information was provided by which participant. I will use the information obtained from the study to write a research report for submission to the University of Pretoria and for academic journals. Your child's name, as in the case of all the other participants' names, will not be displayed in any of these documents. I will give participants an imaginary name to protect their identity. When the study is complete, I will submit all my research information to the University of Pretoria for safe keeping for 15 years where after it will be destroyed. If data is used again, it will be for research purposes.

Inquiries
If you have any questions or want to discuss any aspect of the research with me, you are welcome to call me on 063 615 5854 or send me an e-mail at: dilihare.mokhema@gmail.com

CONSENT DECLARATION BY PARENT/GUARDIAN

I, _____, hereby give permission for my child,

_____ (write name of child) to participate in this study.

_____ _____
Signature parent/guardian Date

_____ _____
Signature researcher Date

APPENDIX D: CHILD FRIENDLY ASSENT FORM

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Humanities 100.
1919 - 2019
Department of Social Work & Criminology

ASSENT FORM: CHILDREN

Dear Participant

My name is Ditlhare Mokhema I am a master's student at the University of Pretoria in the programme MSW Social Development and Policy. I am working with other students in a study to determine how children are engaged and participating in programmes that are intended for them to reduce poverty and dangers in the environment. We involve children in the study, and I chose to use your programme for my study. Please read carefully through this form because if you agree to join the study, you will have to say so in writing.

What is a research study? 

A research study is a way to find out new information about something. Nobody can force you to participate in a research study if you do not want to. You therefore have a choice to participate in the study or not and if you choose not to participate, that is OK.

If you join the study what will then happen?

If you agree to participate in the study, I will talk to you for about 45 to 60 minutes at a place where you feel comfortable to sit and talk. I will ask you questions on the programme that you are engaged in. Questions will be about whether you get the opportunity to tell what you like or do not like about the programme, what it means to you to be in the programme; whether joining in the programme has made a difference in your or your family's live or contributed to any changes in the environment. You will also be asked to say how you think children should be engaged to make sure that their views and ideas are included and respected in programmes that are intended to reduce poverty and environmental dangers.

I will make notes when we talk, but it will be hard for me to talk and write at the same time. If you allow me, I would like to voice record the interview. I will then listen to the recording and type everything that you and I said. If you want to, I can play the recording back to you and /or let you read the manuscript (my notes) or read it with you, to make sure that you feel happy about what we have talked about. The voice recording and all my typed notes on the interview will be kept safely at the University of Pretoria for 15 years.

Is there anything to be afraid of? 

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Email: antoinette.lombard@up.ac.za
www.up.ac.za

There is nothing to be afraid of in participating in the study. The researcher does not have any intention to cause harm to you. If you do feel that the researcher asked or say something that may hurt you, you can speak to the coordinator in charge of the programme or anyone else in the programme that you know you can trust. Remember that you can decide at any time to stop participating in the study. If you do, nothing will happen to you.

Are there any benefits in joining the study? 

You will receive no money or gifts if you participate in the study. If you agree to participate in the study, you will help me to understand how children participate in programmes that affect them. That will further help me to find better ways to include children's views and ideas in programmes that is intended to reduce poverty and dangers in the environment.

Do you have rights in this study? 

Yes, you have. Even if your parent or guardian gave permission that you can participate in the study, it is still your choice, and nobody can force you to participate if you do not want to. Even if you agree to participate, you still have the choice to excuse yourself anytime if you do not want to continue. Furthermore, you have the right to not answer any question that make you feel uncomfortable. No one will be upset if you do not want to participate in the study and you will not be punished if you decide not to participate. Children's rights are very important.

Who will know that you participated in the study? 

Your parents or guardian will know that you may join the study because they will give their permission that I may ask you to join the study. However, they will also know that it is still your own choice and that you will have to agree if you want to participate. The coordinator of the programme at the organisation will also know that you may participate in the study as he/she will provide me with the names of children that I could approach as possible participants. If you decide to participate, your parents or the organisation will not know what you have said to me. You can choose an imaginary name, so if I write about the findings of the study, nothing that you said will be linked to your name. Your identity will thus be protected. Only the researcher will know what you have said, and her study supervisor will have access to the voice recordings and notes on the interview.

What if you have any questions? 

You can ask any questions that you may have about the study. You can find me on my mobile phone at: 063 615 5854 or email me at ditlhare.mokhema@gmail.com

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Would you like to participate in this study?

_____ Yes,  I will participate in the study.

_____ No,  I do not want to participate in the study.

_____	_____	_____
Participant	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Researcher	Signature	Date

APPENDIX E: KEY INFORMANT CONSENT FORM

18/04/2019

Researcher: Ditlhare Mokhema
Tel: 063 615 5854 / 081 281 7520
E-mail: ditlhare.mokhema@gmail.com

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Dear Participant,

My name is Ditlhare Mokhema. I am a master's student at the University of Pretoria in the programme MSW Social Development and Policy. I am doing a study to determine how children are engaged and participating in programmes that are intended for them to reduce poverty and environmental risk. Your participation in the study will assist me to better understand the topic and achieve the goal of my study. My study entails the following:

Title of the study: Children's agency in reducing poverty and environmental risk: Case study of Care-Net Development and Support Organisation

Goal of the study: To explore and describe how children's agency influence reducing poverty and environmental risks in Care-Net Development and Support Organisation.

Procedures: The study will use one-on-one interviews to collect data from participants. Each interview is expected to take approximately 1 hour. The interviews will be tape recorded with your permission. The tape recordings will be transcribed for purposes of data analysis. Only the researcher and the study supervisor will have access to the tapes and transcripts which will be stored in a secure place by the University of Pretoria for a period of 15 years. If data is used again, it will be for research purposes.

Risks and discomforts: There are no known risks and discomforts that may be endured by participants in this study. The participants will be debriefed by me after the interview. If needed, they will be referred to the social worker of the organisation to discuss any discomfort that may have developed during the interview.

Benefits: Participants will not receive any incentives for being involved in the study. The study will benefit the participants indirectly in that they will contribute to social work knowledge regarding social work and programmes aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risks among children.

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Email: antoinette.lombard@up.ac.za
www.up.ac.za

Faculty of Humanities
Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotho

Participants' rights: Participation in the study is voluntary and participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants also have the right to refuse to answer any question that they do not wish to respond to without any consequences.

Confidentiality: Information collected in the study will be treated confidentially and the names of participants will not appear in the research report or the scientific journal in which the results will be published. Findings will be presented in a way that would not directly be linked to any information shared by a specific participant.

Person to contact: If participants have any have questions or concerns relating to the study, they may contact the researcher at 063 615 5854 / 081 281 7520 or send an e-mail at ditlhare.mokhema@gmail.com

Declaration

I, ..., understand my rights as a research participant, and I voluntarily consent to participate in this study. I understand what the study is about and how and why it is being conducted.

_____ _____
Signature parent/guardian Date

_____ _____
Signature researcher Date

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Child participants

Goal of the study: The goal of the study is to explore and describe how children's agency is recognised and respected in programmes/interventions aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risk in Drop-In Center, Care-Net Development and Support Organisation. To determine how children are engaged and participating in programmes that are intended for them to reduce poverty and dangers in the environment.]

Participant number: CP …..

Biographical information

Male: ☐ Female: ☐

How old are you? ……..

Are you in school? Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, what grade are you in? ……..

If no, what are you currently doing? ……

How long have you been involved in the programme/intervention? …….years……. months

Questions:

1. Can you tell me what the programme/intervention is all about and what it means to you?
2. How did you get involved in the programme/intervention?
   - ☐ Could you decide for yourself whether you wanted to join and do you have a choice to stay in the programme or not?
3. How does the programme/intervention help you to deal with problems in your life? [If vague, prompt what kind of problems they have in relation to poverty and environment risks such as pollution; no access to clean water, poor sanitation and violence).
4. How does this programme/intervention help you with
   - ☐ Your school work?
   - ☐ Taking better care of your health?
   - ☐ Learning about clean water?
   - ☐ How to have a safe and clean environment?
5. Tell me about your participation in the programme/intervention. How do you participate, and what are the things you do?
6. What children's rights do you think the programme/intervention protect?

- How does the programme/intervention respect your right to participate and have a say in what the programme/intervention should look like and do for you?

7. What is your experience of how adults in the programme/intervention see a child?

   - A child is a person who is helpless and must be protected. Adults know best what a child needs and should take decisions for her/him.

   - A child is a person who have ideas on how to approach and resolve society's problems such as poverty and unsafe and unhealthy environments. A child needs an opportunity to choose and decide what she/he wants and what is best for her-/himself now and in the future. A child wants to be recognised and respected as a person who can speak for her-/himself and make decisions about things that involve them. [We call this agency.]

   - A child is a person who needs protection but who also have opinions that adults should listen to and respect. [Agency]

8. What of the programme/intervention do you think work well for the children, or do not work well for them, and why do you say so?

9. Have you ever been asked to give your ideas on any aspect of the programme/intervention – e.g. what the programme should include and do for you; or what you like or don't like about the programme?

   - If so, in what way did you feel these ideas were heard and taken seriously by adults?

10. Do you have any example(s) where you had the opportunity to share your ideas on any aspect of the programme/intervention and your contribution was heard and considered / or not heard and considered?

    - How does it make you feel if adults listen to your ideas and take them seriously?
    - How does it make you feel if adults do not listen to your ideas or not take them seriously?

11. What are the factors (things) that make it possible or difficult for you to participate in the programme/intervention in a way that you feel you, and your contributions are important and appreciated?

12. What can the organisation do to involve children more in the planning and decisions on the programme/intervention so that it can contribute to a better life for you?

    - What should the programme focus more on to reduce children's poverty and make the environment cleaner and safer for them?

13. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me on how children can contribute to the programme/intervention?

Thank you for participating in the study.

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Key informants

Goal of the study: The goal of the study is to explore and describe how children's agency is recognised and respected in programmes/interventions aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risk in Drop-In Centre, Care-Net Development and Support Organisation.

Participant number: KI .....

Biographical information

Male: ☐ Female: ☐

How long have you been with the organisation? ..... years

How long have you been involved in the programmes/interventions? .....years..... months

In what age category do you fall?

20-25 years	26-30 years	31-35 years	36-40 years	41-45 years	46-50 years	51-55 years	56+ years

In what phase of the programmes/interventions are you involved? (Tick all applicable.)

Planning / conceptualisation	Design of content	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation

Questions:

1. What is the goal and the intended outcomes of the programme/intervention for the children?

2. How do the children get involved in the programme?

   - What choices do the children have with regard to staying or leaving the programme/intervention if they so which?

3. To what extent does the programme/intervention help children to ease the burden of poverty and possible environmental risks (such as pollution; no access to clean water, poor sanitation and violence).

4. In what way does the programme/intervention promote the children's access and rights to
   - Education
   - Health care
   - Clean water,
   - Sanitation, and
   - A safe and clean environment?

5. How would you describe the children's participation in the programme/intervention?

- Do they participate out of their own initiative or only if they are requested, or told to participate?

6. Do you think children have a right to participate and make decisions on the programme/intervention that affect them?

    - If so, are the children aware of their right to participate and influence decisions on the programme/intervention and why do you say so?

7. How do you see and approach the 'child' concept?

    - As a person who is vulnerable and who should be protected.

    - As a person who has the ability to make meaningful choices and decisions about events that influence her or his life today and in the future [agency].

    - As a person who needs protection and who have agency.

8. To what extent would you say the children in your programme/intervention have agency if you look at their participation and involvement in decisions that affect them? The involvement refers to any one or more phases of the programme/intervention that is, planning/ conceptualisation of (new) ideas, the design of the content of the programme, the format and implementation of the programme/intervention, and the monitoring and evaluation of the programme/intervention.

9. Are children asked to give their views on the programme/intervention and if, in what way are these views considered and respected, or not?

10. Could you share any example where children have made inputs to the programme/intervention which were considered and respected, or not, in any of the phases of the programme/intervention [planning/ conceptualisation, the design, the implementation, the monitoring and evaluation].

11. What factors make it possible or difficult to recognise and respect children's contributions and decisions (agency) in relation to the planning/ conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of a programme/intervention intended to reduce their poverty and environmental risks?

12. What in your view must change to recognise and respect children's contributions, decisions (agency) and participation in the respective phases [planning/ conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation] of the programme/intervention to reduce poverty and environmental risks?

13. Do you have any further comments that you would like to share on the topic that may benefit my study?

Thank you for participating in the study.