

“Poverty from a Child’s Perspective”

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to

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Distinguished Members of the Faculty of the University of Bristol and the LSE, Students and Staff, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It gives me great pleasure to join you for the launch of the study on child poverty conducted jointly by the Townsend Centre for International Poverty Research at the University of Bristol and the London School of Economics. This is a project that has accomplished what all substantive research does: It has enriched what we know, and raised challenges and questions for the future. Importantly, for children and families, it has helped define their world with more nuance and insight, so that our solutions for poverty can begin with a child’s experience of it.

Both universities have a history of leading intellectual thought. Your contributions to the social sciences have been long honoured. You have pushed forward the frontiers of disciplines by asking questions that are intellectually complex, empirically difficult and socially conscious. The present study is no exception. As a new approach to a long-standing question in development studies – the measurement of poverty - it is most interesting in its premise and methodology.

The study serves its mission in developing a measure of child poverty

In defining child poverty, this study refers to deprivations that a child faces and not to a level of household income. It shows us the world that poor children occupy and how this world is deficient, that is, the ways in which it fails children - fails to realize their rights. Certainly, household income levels determine how far a family will suffer the indignities of poverty. Economic insecurity affects a household’s capacity to move out of poverty, and its vulnerability to fall into it. But children experience poverty not in terms of income or expenditure, they experience it in terms of an environment that is not conducive – and often permanently damaging - to their mental, physical, emotional, overall development, because it does not meet their basic needs, or fulfil their basic rights.

By taking a scientific and multidisciplinary approach, this study furthers both the theory and practice of development. It questions what we know and do not know, and how we decide to conceptualize issues in development. Most importantly, it speaks directly to children, because the inclusion of multiple disciplines reflects the way in which children experience poverty.

We see children as occupying a world that implicates them in untenable circumstances. Typical measures of poverty take a different tack: Income poverty is said to be transmitted

intergenerationally. Poor children are said to carry it with them as a burden through childhood. But the notion of deprivation focuses our attention on the circumstances that surround children. It casts poverty as an attribute of the environment they live and grow in, not a burden that they carry. And it brings into focus a fundamental tenet of human rights: That universally, what children carry are their rights, their dreams. However, as the study shows, over a billion children are born into a world that restricts their potential.

It enriches our perception of the concept and our understanding of the issues

The methodology of the study suggests that we look at poverty not as a malaise that “deepens” and “spreads” within and across societies, but as a characteristic of the physical, social, political and economic environment of a child. Escaping poverty then implies changing this environment so that it becomes a healthy, adequate space that nourishes children, in which they are able to actively participate in realizing their rights. If children are poor because they are variously deprived, then we are led to look for solutions that begin by unbundling their environment, and which make children and their families active participants in changing that environment. We tackle head-on the relationships between social, political, cultural and economic systems that affect a child’s experience of the world, and constrain his or her engagement with it. The deprivation model is thus a device to see poverty from the perspective of a child, not a child as objectified as poor, but rather one being denied his or her potential or rights.

UNICEF advocates that poverty reduction begins with children. The methodology of the study gives this message particular poignancy, as it brings into view the conditions that constitute poverty. The study’s findings reinforce the urgency of reducing poverty, and yet gives us pause to consider the strategies we employ in our understanding of the problem, and in our resolution of it.

Measuring poverty by conventional means underrepresents its extent, because doing so neglects to capture the deprivation of basic needs, which results from a more intricate web of failures than the dysfunction of an economic system. The study gives us a more nuanced perspective, and also practicable direction. It improves our capacity to respond. It also confirms what has guided UNICEF’s work so far. It tells us scientifically what is known to be a core principle of human rights law – that rights are interdependent and indivisible. UNICEF pursues a human rights approach to poverty reduction, one that implicitly accounts for the interconnectedness of needs and the mechanisms for fulfilling them.

The violation of one right diminishes the realization of another. It is easy to see how a girl severely deprived of shelter, living in an overcrowded home and underserved neighbourhood, may not be able to absorb an education even if there is a school nearby. Or that for a boy who has been severely deprived of an education in his rural community, access to information via the written word is of no consequence.

The study shows us ways in which the world is unfit for children. But let us take this further. How do we begin to relate its conclusions to the social and cultural context, political and economic structures, legal system, state institutions and policies that undergird the provision of basic social services? How do we measure the connection between violations of different kinds of rights? How precisely do we know who these children are: Their aspirations, the constraints and hopes of their families, the efforts they are making? What should be our conceptual roadmap? And how will the world pay for it all?

UNICEF's ongoing work is related to what the study implies

I would like to talk about the ways in which UNICEF's work in social and economic policy analysis and human rights is addressing some of these questions, and some of the challenges that lie ahead.

UNICEF's analytical work straddles the areas of social policy, economics and human rights. One strand explores the relationship between these three areas as they relate to human development, and draws implications for children. The need to examine inter-relatedness is gaining importance. World events illustrate the social impact of economic crisis (e.g. South East Asia, Argentina), the economic impact of political crisis and conflict (e.g. Afghanistan, Cote d'Ivoire), and their human rights dimensions. UNICEF's research aims to examine how one theoretical perspective about the way the world works - or should work - might complement and strengthen the other.

On a practical level, UNICEF's work with child poverty includes helping to forge a compact in 1995 between developing and industrialised countries, when both pledged to allocate funds for basic social services: 20 per cent of government budgets in the former and 20 per cent of official development assistance from the latter.

Since then, global initiatives have committed states to development targets that have direct implications for children's rights, including the Millennium Declaration and the World Fit for Children agenda, the outcome document of the 2002 United Nations Special Session on Children. A pressing question for UNICEF remains that of accurate measurement of the extent and distribution of poverty. This study tells us that more than half the children in the developing world are severely deprived of at least one basic human need, based on a definition of poverty agreed to by the governments of 117 countries at the 1995 World Summit for Social Development. But perhaps more importantly, the study's findings also tell us that the deprivations that children suffer the most are in basic infrastructure and social services, which are the domain of state action and public policy. The study thus reinforces one of UNICEF's main efforts: It places children's needs at the center of policy debates.

As we know, policy decisions are not always guided by concerns of efficiency or equity. They are rife with political interests and conflicting agendas. What happens to children's well-being when social needs are not integrated into economic policy decisions, but instead are added on provisionally or considered expendable? What impact does economic liberalization have on the vulnerability of poor children? The compulsions of globalization may be inconsistent with achieving equitable social outcomes. How do we reconcile the two, and how do we critique and develop alternatives to macroeconomic models that give precedence to economic and fiscal targets at the expense of social objectives?

This imperative is heightened as developing countries undertake Poverty Reduction Strategies and debt relief initiatives, which present opportunities to channel long-term resources for meeting children's needs, and fulfilling their rights.

Without resources, arguments for rights remain only rhetorical. One of UNICEF's emerging priorities is to construct avenues for dialogue with states with regard to national budgets and public expenditure management. Another is finding the best instruments to work with governments and NGOs in advancing the fulfilment of children's and women's rights in the World Bank's operations.

But the primary recourse for claiming rights is the state. State parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child are bound to their commitments: They are required to implement legislative reforms to operationalize children's rights within their own legal framework. Concurrently, they need to mobilize funds in order to respect, protect and fulfil these rights. UNICEF has ongoing projects to elaborate the ways in which the Convention can be transformed into national legislation under four major judicial traditions, and to produce a manual on the content and process of legislative reform for civil society groups, parliamentarians and other stakeholders.

Pushing the topic further will involve continued academic and institutional partnership

With over a third, or 674 million, of the children in the developing world suffering from absolute poverty, i.e. two or more severe deprivations as defined by this study, the challenge is immense. Realizing children's rights and providing for their basic needs will require grappling with legal, economic, political and cultural issues and institutions. As it scans the horizon for emerging trends in these disciplines, UNICEF recognizes that insights from academia, civil society groups and government bodies, among others, are crucial to challenge old ideas, develop a balanced perspective and deepen the state of our knowledge - as this study has done.

In sum, we have moved closer to developing a more pertinent and practicable measure of poverty. This study has enriched our conception of children in poverty. While UNICEF's ongoing work is related to the implications of the study's findings, pushing the topic further will require concerted efforts of academic institutions, development practitioners, advocates of human rights, communities, families and children.

We now seem to have more questions on our plate than we did to begin with. But that is the goal of academic pursuit – to relentlessly explore the questions of our time. As we work towards creating a world fit for children, I look forward to our continued partnership.

Thank you.