

Is children well-being a broken promise?

Child poverty and the Convention on the Rights of the Child

1 November 2014



Children who fail to meet the minimum acceptable standard of living for the nation where they live are said to be poor. According to UNICEF, “children living in poverty are those who experience deprivation of the material, spiritual and emotional resources needed to survive, develop and thrive, leaving them unable to enjoy their rights, achieve their full potential or participate as full and equal members of society”. This and other definitions suggest child poverty is multidimensional, relative to their changing living conditions. Complex interactions of the body, mind and emotions are involved.

Child poverty is a global issue and not just one for the developing world. In a review of child well-being across 35 industrialized countries, UNICEF found that approximately 30 million children — one child out of every eight across the OECD — are growing up poor. Despite this, child poverty has been largely absent from the post-2015 development debate.

And there is an alarming consistency to the global problem: poverty rates are usually highest among children, no matter which region or poverty measure is used.

25 years after the Convention on the Rights of the Child came to force, the world is still falling short in its promise and commitment to ensure the right to a safe childhood. Child poverty is affecting the lives of millions of children worldwide and conventional strategies are inadequate, as they do not recognize that children experience poverty differently from adults and that they have specific and different needs. What is it about, is there a social cost for it and what recommendations should governments consider to overcome this problem?

*Sources: Save the Children, The Child Development Index 2012; UNICEF, Child Poverty in the Post-2015 Agenda; UNICEF - Innocenti Research Centre, Report Card 12 - Children of the recession; UNICEF - Innocenti Research Centre, Report Card 10 - Measuring child poverty; UNICEF, The State of the World's Children 2005; Office for National Statistics (UK), Exploring the Well-being of Children in the UK 2014; National Center for Homeless Education (US), Education for Homeless Children and Youth 2014; Dominic Richardson (OECD), Poverty and policy for families in Europe.
Photo: SOS Children's Villages Canada.*

Absolute and relative poverty

Absolute poverty refers to a set standard which is the same in all countries and which does not change over time. Certain organisations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, use the absolute poverty threshold of US \$1.25 a day per person to measure poverty in developing countries.

Relative poverty refers to a standard which is defined in terms of the society in which an individual lives and which therefore differs between countries and over time. Europe and many other developed countries use a relative poverty threshold, typically 50% of the countries' median income. Relative poverty does not necessarily mean the child is lacking anything, but is more a reflection of inequality in society.

Absolute poverty and relative poverty are both valid concepts. The concept of absolute poverty is that there are minimum standards below which no one anywhere in the world should ever fall. The concept of relative poverty is that, in a rich country such as the UK, there are higher minimum standards below which no one should fall, and that these standards should rise if and as the country becomes richer. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has in recent years asked focus groups drawn from different kinds of households in UK to define a minimum acceptable standard of living – based on need not wants. Advised by experts in health and nutrition, the focus groups came up with a 'Minimum Income Standard' which translates into approximately 60% of today's UK median income.

It is sometimes argued that the public at large thinks of poverty in an absolute sense and that the concept of 'relative poverty' is properly understood only by economists and social scientists. But it is clear from these examples that the popular definition of poverty is in fact a relative one.

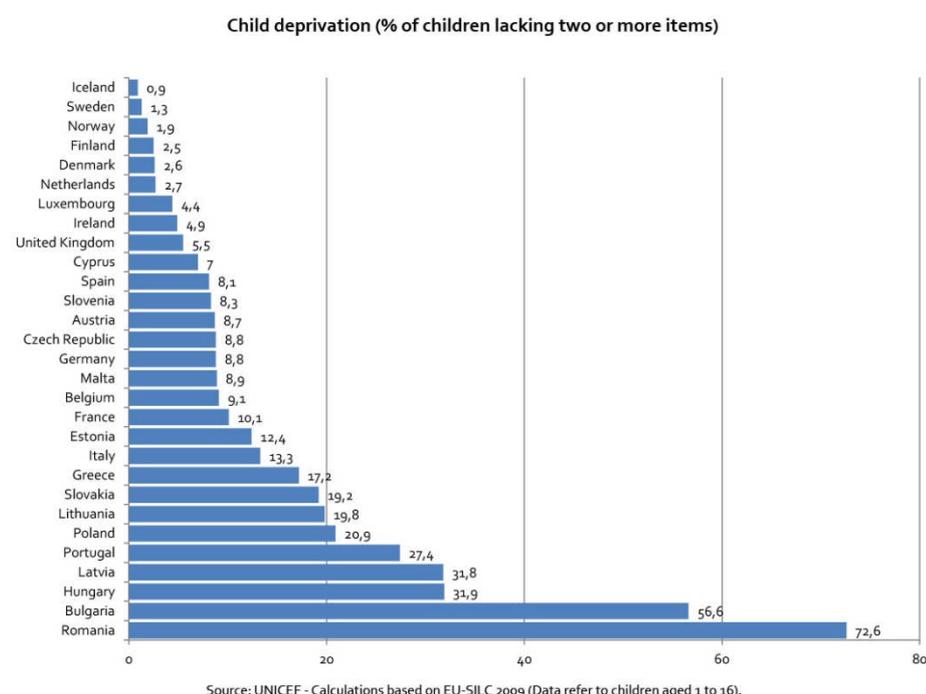
Children deprivation

UNICEF researchers have estimated the degree to which deprivation is experienced by children in 29 European countries, using a child-specific scale. Their paper highlights the considerable differences between countries, suggesting that specific policy measures can be effective in combating child deprivation. The researchers argue that studying deprivation – alongside the overlapping situation of children living in families poor in monetary terms – is imperative for understanding the scope and nature of poverty among children. Deprivation analyses are especially useful when studying the situation of children because children do not have equal access to the household's income, and are more dependent on social goods and services (especially education and health).

It represents a significant new development in the international monitoring of child poverty. For the first time, the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions, sampling more than 125,000 households in 29 European countries, has included a section on the lives of children aged 1 to 16. Using this data, the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre has constructed the 14-item Child Deprivation Index. Approximately 85% of the almost 85 million children aged 1 to 16 in 29 European countries have at least 13 of the 14 items in the deprivation index and are therefore 'not deprived'. The second most obvious feature is that the highest rates of deprivation are to be found in some of the newest and poorest member countries of the European Union. Over 30% are seen to be deprived in Hungary and Latvia, over 50% in Bulgaria and over 70% in Romania.

Child Development Index

Save the Children, another British initiative, has also developed a measurement of child poverty based on



This Child Deprivation Index is constructed with the following 14 items:

1. Three meals a day.
2. At least one meal a day with meat, chicken or fish (or a vegetarian equivalent).
3. Fresh fruit and vegetables every day.
4. Books suitable for the child's age and knowledge level (not including schoolbooks).
5. Outdoor leisure equipment (bicycle, roller-skates, etc.).
6. Regular leisure activities (swimming, playing an instrument, participating in youth organizations etc.).
7. Indoor games (at least one per child, including educational baby toys, building blocks, board games, computer games etc.).
8. Money to participate in school trips and events.
9. A quiet place with enough room and light to do homework.
10. An Internet connection.
11. Some new clothes (i.e. not all second-hand).
12. Two pairs of properly fitting shoes (including at least one pair of all-weather shoes).
13. The opportunity, from time to time, to invite friends home to play and eat.
14. The opportunity to celebrate special occasions such as birthdays, name days, religious events, etc.

measures of capability, called the Child Development Index (CDI). CDI is an index that combines performance measures specific to children –primary education, child health, and child nutrition– to produce a score on a scale of 0 to 100, with zero being the best with higher scores indicating worse performances. According to Save the Children, each of the indicators was chosen because it was easily accessible, universally understood, and clearly indicative of child wellbeing. Health measures under-five mortality rate; nutrition measures the percentage of children under five who are moderately or severely underweight (which is two standard deviations below the median weight for age of the reference population); and education measures the percentage of primary school-age children that are not enrolled in school. In terms of opportunities and capabilities, CDI is the most appropriate measurement of child poverty.

The Child Development Index follows in the footsteps of the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index (HDI). This index established the importance of measuring human well-being beyond simple national income measures. The two indices each have three components with broadly common aims.

The CDI monitors child well-being in 141 countries, aggregating data on child mortality, underweight and primary-school enrolment and. Some recent findings include overall improvement rates in child well-being almost doubled in the first decade of the 21st century; developing countries experienced faster rates of progress than developed countries in the same period; undernutrition remains one of the main factors holding back progress on children's well-being ; the proportion of children suffering from wasting – or acute weight loss – actually rose in the second half of the 2000s.

The children of the recession

After the latest data provided by UNICEF last month, we can say there has been a strong and multifaceted relationship between the impact of the Great Recession on national economies and a decline in children's well-being since 2008. The recession has hit young people extremely hard, with the NEET (not in education, employment or training) rate rising dramatically in many countries. Children feel anxious and stressed when parents endure unemployment or income loss, and they suffer family downturns in subtle and painfully evident ways.

The poorest and most vulnerable children have suffered disproportionately. Inequality has increased in some countries where overall child poverty has decreased, suggesting that tax changes and social transfers intended to help the poorest children have been relatively ineffective. Moreover, children in particularly vulnerable situations – such as those in jobless, migrant, lone-parent and large households – are overrepresented in the most severe ranges of poverty statistics.

The intergenerational cycle of poverty

The majority of poverty-stricken children are born to poor parents. Therefore the causes such as adult poverty, government policies, lack of education, unemployment, social services, disabilities and discrimination significantly affect the presence of child poverty. Lack of parental economic resources such as disposable income restricts children's opportunities. Economic and demographic factors such as deindustrialization, globalization, residential segregation, labor market segmentation, and migration of middle-class residents from inner cities, constrain economic opportunities and choices across generation, isolating inner city poor children.

The loss of 'family values' is also cited as a major cause of poverty and welfare dependency for women and their children. Families raised by a single parent are generally poorer than those raised by couples. In the United States, 6 of 10 long term poor children have spent time in single parent families and in 2007, children living in households headed by single mothers were five times as likely as children living in households headed by married parents to be living in poverty. Child poverty is an ongoing national concern, but few are aware that its principal cause is the absence of married fathers in the home. Marriage remains America's strongest anti-poverty weapon, yet it continues to decline. As husbands disappear from the home, poverty and welfare dependence will increase, and children and parents will suffer as a result.

Many of the apparent negative associations between growing up poor and children's attainments reflect unmeasured parental advantages that positively affect both parents' incomes and children's attainments, like parental depression.

No government was prepared for the extent or depth of the recession and none reacted in the same way. Many countries with higher levels of child vulnerability would have been wise to strengthen their safety nets during the pre-recession period of dynamic economic growth, which was marked by rising disparity and a growing concentration of wealth. Governments that bolstered existing public institutions and programmes helped to buffer countless children from the crisis – a strategy that others may consider adopting.

The problems have not ended for children and their families, and it may well take years for many of them to return to pre-crisis levels of well-being. Failing to respond boldly could pose long-term risks –for example, there has been a break in the upwards trend in fertility rates. In no region are these risks more problematic than in Europe, where inequality is rising within and between Member States, threatening to

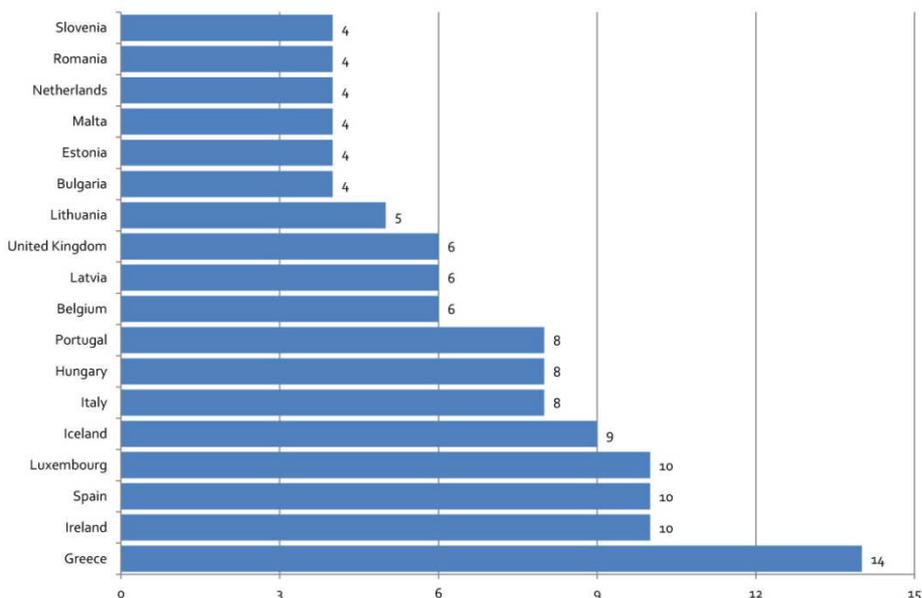
According to UNICEF's report on the effects of the recession for children, millions of them were immediately and directly affected (more than other vulnerable groups, such as the elderly), and many will suffer the consequences for life. And the impact certainly has not been spread evenly across all children in all countries.

This figure charts decreases in household income from 2008 to 2012. It shows that years of potential progress have been lost in the recession.

The larger cost of this lost potential may be seen in increased social alienation and reduced population growth. Upward trends in fertility rates have slowed for the first time in a decade, a phenomenon at least partially linked to young adults delaying family formation due to economic conditions.

Those worst affected are countries that were most exposed to the recession and young age groups (15–19 and 20–24). Such impacts magnify the disadvantages of persistent poverty and reduce educational and professional achievement potential. Failure to respond boldly may have long-term negative implications for societies.

Years of progress lost for families with children during the recession



Source: UNICEF - Eurostat. Estimates based on median equivalized incomes for households with children in national currency at 2007 prices.

undermine the ambitious targets of Europe's 2020 agenda.

The economic argument, in anything but the shortest term, is therefore heavily on the side of protecting children from poverty. Even more important is the argument in principle. Because children have only one opportunity to develop normally in mind and body, the commitment to protection from poverty must be upheld in good times and in bad. A society that fails to maintain that commitment, even in difficult economic times, is a society that is failing its most vulnerable citizens and storing up intractable social and economic problems for the years immediately ahead.

Commitment of governments

It is possible to examine the commitment of governments to the protection of children by looking at the overall level of resources they are prepared to devote to the task. How the money is spent can be as important as how much is spent, but the data nonetheless show a strong relationship between resources expended and results achieved. In all of these countries the lack of priority for children in national budgets

shows through in the correspondingly small reductions in relative child poverty that each achieves.

Recommendations to policymakers should include the following:

- Investment should start during the early childhood years and continue throughout childhood.
- Continuum of support without gaps in income or care replacements.
- Family benefits and in-kind services should be seen as investment for the future.
- Progressive universalism/cascaded service delivery to improve efficiency without leaving families or children behind.
- Government policy should help reduce childcare cost where necessary.
- Encourage employers to offer workers part-time employment opportunities as well as flexible working hours.
- Maximizing child support coverage helps to reduce child poverty in sole-parent families.
- At least some part of the payment by the non-resident parents should directly go the child.
- Child support systems should have simple payment formulae and procedures.