DONORS AND CHILDHOOD POVERTY: MAKING AID WORK

Making aid more effective for tackling childhood poverty means…

• **Donors should take a more strategic approach to tackling childhood poverty.** Tackling childhood poverty is a fundamental part of achieving long-term poverty reduction: aid must contribute more to breaking poverty cycles that pass poverty on from childhood to adulthood, and from one generation to the next. Childhood poverty must become a mainstream poverty issue; children are not just one of the ‘special groups’ to be reached through special projects, their problems are not just solved through one or two particular sectors alone such as health and education. Advocates for ending childhood poverty, within and outside donor agencies, must be clear about the types of policies and importantly, policy combinations required to achieve this and give practical guidelines - not blue-prints - to governments, donor technical advisors and managers and others.

• **Ensuring aid supports sustainable improvements to the lives of poor children, including the most marginalised.** Aid should be used to support policies, sectors, programmes and activities that tackle both the manifestations and the causes of childhood poverty, as defined by local and national actors. Where aid is earmarked, donors should prioritise social sectors critical for child wellbeing but also make sure that the economic policy reforms supported benefit poor children and their families. Donors must play their role in ensuring aid makes a difference for the poorest and most marginalised children, their families and communities, rather than assuming a ‘trickle down’ of benefits.

• **Ensuring the way aid is given supports, rather than undermines, recipient countries’ capacity for poverty reduction.** Donors are starting to change but rhetoric needs to turn into reality. Aid must still better respond to local priorities for tackling childhood poverty. It must, as far as possible, not work through parallel decision making and resource allocation systems and the burden of aid management and reporting on recipient countries in particular must be reduced. Aid must be more predictable to enable governments to plan effectively and it must be better at covering recurrent costs (eg salaries) as well as activities like construction and training. And the wellbeing of future generations must not be jeopardised through high debt burdens that are the result of past and current lending.

Achieving these aspects together is not easy: over-targeting of aid towards poor children, for example, can risk undermining the national decision-making systems vital for ensuring changes are implemented and sustained. At the least, donor portfolios of assistance to a country should be informed by comprehensive nationally-owned analyses of the situation of children living in poverty and the impact aid is having on them.

I. **INTRODUCTION: AID MATTERS FOR CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY**

In many developing countries, aid allocations make up a significant proportion of the government budget. Multi- and bi-lateral donors still have significant influence over the policy agenda, despite their increasing emphasis on responding to nationally-led policy choices, particularly through PRSPs. Even those donors who promote ‘responsiveness’ still support sectors and programmes they perceive to be priorities. Therefore, it is vitally important that donor agencies recognise the urgent and strategic need to tackle childhood poverty. Action to address poverty affecting children and young people has the potential to break poverty cycles: without it the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and broader poverty reduction objectives will not be reached and children’s rights will not be realised.

The current aid agenda does offer hope. Poverty reduction is the overarching objective of most donors’ activities, political spaces are opening up to bring the voices and experiences of poor children and their communities to the policy table, and donors are re-examining donor-recipient relationships. But much progress is required before aid really works for children. This briefing considers the approaches of a selection of donor agencies and draws on documentation and interviews with representatives from donor headquarters, plus studies of donor approaches to childhood poverty in Ghana and Tanzania and Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia.
### TABLE 1: SOME ILLUMINATING DONOR POLICY COMMITMENTS TO TACKLING CHILDHOOD POVERTY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Donor agency</th>
<th>Focus*</th>
<th>International headquarters policy</th>
<th>National level donor policy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian Development Bank</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>‘Vulnerable groups are always assessed in our country strategies, including children’</td>
<td>Kyrgyzstan: ‘Investment in early childhood care not only achieves short-term health benefits but is a long-term investment for the people of Kyrgyz Republic</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Benefits of development will have to reach all key groups that make up the poor in the region…in particular women and children’</td>
<td>Mongolia: ‘Poverty reduction through pro-poor interventions that foster private sector-led economic growth and good governance’, though ADB has strong social sector investment and links made between unemployment and children’s lives</td>
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<tr>
<td>DANIDA (Denmark)</td>
<td>CR</td>
<td>‘Children and young people are a ‘special priority area’ within the broader poverty reduction agenda’</td>
<td>Ghana and Tanzania: Addressing the situation of children is not mentioned as a priority in assistance strategies, even though children are recognised to be more likely to be poor in Tanzania.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>‘Investing in children is…an effective means for poverty reduction as [they] comprise a resource [for future development of society]’</td>
<td>Tanzania: The rationale for investment in health is not for improved child health but for economically productive adults to be healthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DFID (UK)</td>
<td>CP</td>
<td>‘Child poverty is linked to a vicious cycle where deprivation and lack of opportunity is passed from one generation to the next’</td>
<td>Ghana and Tanzania: Tackling child poverty is not mentioned as a priority. Representatives stress their responsiveness to the PRSP</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>‘Making poverty reduction work for children will be an important priority for DFID…’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Commission**</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>Ghana: ‘singing out child poverty may not be practical. All forms of EC interventions benefit different parts of the community in Ghana.’</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Tanzania: ‘We don’t do childhood poverty’…’we do large roads’  but we believe that our programme overall will reduce poverty experienced by children and their families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JICA (Japan)</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>‘In the Japanese ODA charter, poverty reduction is one of the four priority issues. Currently JICA has few approaches specifically to tackling child poverty…vulnerable people who should be targeted are not only children…’</td>
<td>Mongolia: ‘we are more likely to consider gender and environment than children’</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tanzania: In 2002, it did ‘not consider children and other vulnerable groups in [its] approach to poverty reduction’</td>
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<tr>
<td>SIDA (Sweden)</td>
<td>CR</td>
<td>‘Children and young people[…]rights and interests must be taken into consideration in all decision making. Accordingly, the best interests of the child must be taken into account in issues concerning the economy, the environment and social planning’</td>
<td>Tanzania: Consideration is given as to how ‘the interests of children and young people can be addressed’ throughout the Country Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>CR/CP</td>
<td>‘Poverty reduction starts with children…’ ‘Investing in children is morally the right thing to do. It is also a sound economic investment with high rates of return’ ‘But some officers say they are not working on child poverty…like others, we need to debate our conceptualisation of it’</td>
<td>Mongolia: ‘given the large numbers of the population in 5-20 year old age range, in the medium term, investment in adolescents and youth will have a decisive impact on Mongolia’s future’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USAID (US)</td>
<td>CH</td>
<td>Poverty is ‘implicitly woven into our strategic thinking’ though goals are economic growth and democracy… ‘Our work on children largely relates to child health’ ‘In some countries our levels of resources are not going to reduce poverty - they will , hopefully mitigate the worst aspects of poverty and crises’</td>
<td>Mongolia: ‘We don’t have projects related to children…NGOs do more on social welfare’. Assistance focuses on private-sector led growth and democratic governance</td>
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* Focus in terms of approach to childhood poverty: CR = Child rights approach, CP = Child poverty policy, PR = poverty reduction policy more broadly, CH = child health
** Documentation only.
2. DONORS AND CHILDHOOD
POVERTY: RHETORIC OR REALITY?

Donors can address the causes and manifestations of childhood poverty without deliberately setting this as their objective. However, a comprehensive consideration of poverty affecting children and young people is more likely to ensure their support for a holistic set of actions to prevent, mitigate and eradicate it. Although they take different approaches, some donor agencies do quite comprehensively consider childhood poverty at an international level (as seen in table 1).

- World Bank, DFID and UNICEF, all have explicit strategies that outline the importance of reaching children with aid. DFID talks about ‘breaking the cycle of child poverty’; the World Bank emphasises the need to invest in different stages of childhood.

- DANIDA and SIDA, like UNICEF, outline their rights based approach to development assistance for children and young people. SIDA outlines what a child rights approach to development co-operation focused on poverty reduction means. DANIDA’s new policy outlines their assistance to children within the framework of the MDGs.

- Neither ADB nor JICA has child-poverty-focused policy. They both consider children as a group particularly vulnerable to poverty within their broader policies on poverty reduction, ADB more explicitly than JICA.

- USAID stand out as the only agency not orienting their development assistance around poverty reduction goals, instead taking a more indirect approach – an approach that includes a prioritisation of child health as well as economic growth.

Even where donor policy does commit to tackling childhood poverty, translating these commitments into organisation-wide practices, even at an international level, was weak. For example, no agency had internal reporting structures in place to ensure impact assessments routinely considered whether their aid was reaching children and young people, unless it was particularly targeted at them through particular projects. Only UNICEF emphasises the need to support the development of national data collection systems that include an assessment of changes in children’s lives. Furthermore, as table 1 suggests, these international policies are not often reflected in country assistance strategies as commitments or as comprehensive portfolios of action.

Why the policies don’t always translate into practice

Donor representatives agreed there are both conceptual and practical reasons as to why head office policies do not translate into practice.

- Donors’ belief that their role nationally is to work at a ‘macro’ level… With the shift away from project support towards general budget support, donors are increasingly shifting investment to macro policy areas such as governance and support for national systems. Many now see their work as being less linked with children’s wellbeing. Donors need to be better at linking macro policy with micro-level impacts on children’s lives.

- …and UNICEF ‘do’ children anyway. Many feel that they are ‘not children’s organisations’ and that UNICEF and NGOs are ‘better placed’ to tackle poverty affecting children. For example, DFID in Tanzania stated: ‘UNICEF has the mandate for childhood poverty. Our priority is pro-poor growth and we will invest where we feel we are going to have the biggest impact for all people, young and old in Tanzania’, quoting the examples of economic and public sector reform programmes. Children are predominantly seen as either dealt with by key social sectors or as a special group requiring largely micro-level projects. Donors need to take collective responsibility and not reinforce the ‘silo’ approach to childhood that limits children to particular sectors or special departments.

- Decentralisation and responsiveness to national agendas.

  Being too directive on any issue is against the principles of decentralisation of decision-making to donor national offices and/or responding to the policy choices of national governments through the PRS, according to most donor head office representatives. This is important for national ownership. It has two implications. First, it increases the significance of donor technical capacity within national offices who engage in national policy dialogue. For example, at least in part due to differences in staff prioritisation of child poverty, ADB in Kyrgyzstan has an early childhood development programme and ADB in Mongolia doesn’t, despite a similar need. Second, the national policy context, processes and prioritisation of tackling poverty affecting children becomes critical - and rightly so. Box 1 outlines some of the constraints preventing children getting onto the macro-agenda nationally that must be recognised.

- The sectoral way of working of donor agencies - and national governments. The World Bank’s Children and Youth Advisor highlighted that: ‘the cross sectoral reality of tackling childhood poverty is not so easily accepted by donor and government officials who work sectorally.’ UNICEF representatives, agree, feeling that a history of sector-specific interventions means many agencies (including their own) have more limited knowledge and experience to engage in broader socio-economic analysis.

- There are too many issues to mainstream. The SIDA representative, for example, felt that it was not so much an issue of resistance to the concepts but an overload of ‘priority’ or ‘cross-cutting’ issues, including gender, environment, HIV/AIDS, disability, children and young people and human rights. DFID also
recognises this and are currently developing a social exclusion strategy to encompass the range of marginalised groups. It is the responsibility of all those working to tackle childhood poverty to work with other excluded groups where policy choices are similar, rather than simply push an exclusively children’s agenda that reinforces the ‘specialist group’ approach.

• The difficulties of putting a (child) rights-based approach into practice. Non rights specialists find it difficult to relate the core principles of the approach, such as non-discrimination and acting in the best interests of the child, to all aspects of development co-operation, particularly economic policy. The result is often what happened in DANIDA’s strategy for Tanzania where raising awareness of children’s rights appears to be an ‘add-on’ set of specific activities rather than a mainstream consideration.

• Lack of understanding or guidance. World Bank representatives feel that there is a lack of evidence of what works and what doesn’t work - particularly economic evidence to persuade the more sceptical economists in donor agencies and governments. Importantly, evidence is required of actions that can be scaled up: the Bank in particular ‘deals with big projects’. Others felt the need is more for short, snappy reference material of what programming to tackle childhood poverty could look like.

• And still some resistance… Whilst no-one would deny the need to tackle child poverty, there is still evident resistance to putting this into practice, particularly when it involves difficult decisions about resource allocation and policy choice.

Box 1: National-level constraints to effective policy for tackling childhood poverty

• National PRSP processes. A range of well-documented factors, related to the IFI-led PRSP framework itself and its implementation in different national contexts, constrain the extent to which PRSPs analyse and reflect the situation of children living in poverty and adequate long-term strategies to address the problems.xxiv These include the degree to which participation of a range of stakeholders is meaningful and national ownership is genuine.

• Cultural perceptions of children and childhood (also evident within donor agencies). Issues include seeing children as adults-in-waiting (and not a priority concern until they become economically productive), as the responsibility of women (therefore any intervention for women will automatically support children), and as passive beneficiaries (largely of social services but also of all policies that are aimed at households and communities). Within poverty reduction debates, different national actors focus on the bigger issues, sometimes including gender, rather than prioritising children and youth.

• Marginalised ministries. For a range of reasons, ministries with responsibilities for children are commonly under-resourced, some effectively act as implementation units for donor projects, and most lack the capacity to engage in the ‘big’ policy issues. Bringing together the various sector ministries with direct and indirect links to children’s wellbeing is not an easy one. Unfortunately, National Plans of Action for children are rarely linked with core government policy and experience from Tanzania and Ghana shows these ministries have been marginalised in PRSP and budgeting processes.

• Civil society. Civil society organisations working with and for children are also not often well-placed to lobby for macro, even sector-wide, policy changes. Some are effectively contractors for donor projects; some have little experience in policy engagement often faced with a lack of funding sources for policy work. Others are more focused on particular groups of marginalised children, often failing to engage with the bigger picture or link up with broader coalitions working against, for example, social exclusion. Strengthening civil society organisations with potential to keep these issues on the policy agenda and to hold governments and donors to account on them is important.
3. IMPROVEMENTS THAT COULD BE MADE TO AID PORTFOLIOS TO TACKLE CHILDHOOD POVERTY

Aid does make a difference to the lives of poor children. Most donors finance activities that aim to support children directly or indirectly and some, like ADB in Kyrgyzstan, have substantial portfolios of assistance. The focus on poverty reduction and increasing efforts to understand poverty and vulnerability has focused attention on the poor, including the most disadvantaged. Significant investment is channelled into key social sectors by most donors: in 2004, the World Bank concessional lending portfolio to Tanzania, for example, included $285 million for primary education, health and HIV/AIDS. Investment in such social sectors is crucial if resource-poor governments are to ensure that children of all ages have access to preventative and curative health care, a basic education and good nutrition - denial of these in childhood can lead to irreversible damage. Few donors make connections between improving governance and childhood poverty but if effective, efforts could have strong positive impacts on children through better management of public services and greater scope for young people to voice their priorities.

But the potential for aid to make a much bigger difference is great. Areas for improvement include:

• Improved analysis and monitoring. All donor agencies could do more to support analysis and monitoring of the impact of policies and programmes on children’s wellbeing, taking a long-term perspective as investments in childhood pay off over generations. Monitoring should, whenever possible, be carried out by a national monitoring system that informs national planning, rather than simply donor reporting, needs. Through policy dialogue and support for national analysis, donors could play an important role in ensuring that the likely impact of proposed policies on children is routinely considered. Poverty and Social Impact Analyses - that should be country-led, consider a range of policy solutions and involve a range of stakeholders - could contribute to this.

• Reaching children of all ages - the example of youth as the missing generation. Young people (from age 14 or 15) are generally neglected by donors. In Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan, for example, young people were the focus of a few relatively small-scale projects on mainly HIV prevention and the promotion of youth employment. Youth unemployment in most low-income countries remains disproportionately high, youth dissatisfaction with their economic, political and social situations should be cause for concern and young people are, or will soon become, the parents of young children. As the World Bank’s Children and Youth Team recognises, tackling poverty affecting youth is a strategic priority.

• Promoting economic policies that improve the situation of poor children and their families. Donors are far more comfortable with the concept of ‘investing in children’, through health and education or through projects aimed at particular groups, than with maximising the positive impact of broader policy reforms and investment, such as macro or structural economic reforms, on children. Where broader reforms have had mixed results for poor families, there is a danger that portfolios of assistance effectively give with one hand and take away with another. USAID, for example, promote their work on child health but maintain unfaltering support for free trade and private sector-led economic growth as an overriding priority with explicit self interest: “We will support US firms as they trade and invest abroad by pressing governments to open markets.”

ADB, for example, does not discourage increased private sector involvement in education provision despite their own research raising concerns about this ‘fostering inequalities’ and not solving the problems of improving education at low cost to the state. Donor influence on economic policy, through policy dialogue, technical assistance and the use of conditionality on loans, grants and debt relief should not push governments to adopt economic policies that have not been subject to public scrutiny or assessed for their impact on marginalised children and adults.

• Supporting social protection that reaches the poorest children. Better analysis of likely impact of reforms on the poor would allow governments to prevent, or at least mitigate any negative impacts. Donor assistance, at least in the medium term, is critical in many countries if social protection measures, such as cash transfers and school feeding programmes, are to be scaled up and be maintained over time. Some countries, such as Tanzania, are increasingly prioritising social protection in their PRSPs. There is still resistance from donors: one representative said: ‘we are not the Department for Social Affairs in Tanzania, handing out support’. Agencies are often still happier with conditional, targeted measures such as food aid or support direct to orphans than with long-term support for a social pension or child-oriented allowance, despite the growing body of evidence of the benefits of such transfers for tackling childhood poverty for vast numbers of children.
4. MAKING AID MORE EFFECTIVE FOR TACKLING CHILDHOOD POVERTY: CHANGING THE AID ARCHITECTURE

Aid is only as effective as the policies and programmes it supports, yet the architecture of aid - how it is delivered - also has implications for tackling childhood poverty. Much more action is required by donors to make aid more effective at reaching the poorest children in a way that:

• Supports, rather than undermines, national capacity for poverty reduction. Of particular interest to children and young people is national capacity for sustained delivery of good quality public services for all, such as health, water and education. This includes responding to local and national priorities for appropriate policy choice and programme design. National ownership is achieved not when governments agree with donor policy lines but when recipient countries - governments, civil society actors and others - have genuine control over decision-making.

• Addresses the situation of today’s children but not at the expense of future generations.

Many processes are underway to make aid more effective for poverty reduction, reforming donor-recipient relationships. Different donor agencies are at different stages of reform. As with commitments to tackling childhood poverty, generally, all donors need to make the rhetoric a reality. Some core changes required are outlined here.

Enabling aid to reach the poorest children

• Particularly poor and vulnerable children live in countries that are not good performers. Increased use of selectivity - channelling more aid to countries whose policy frameworks are more acceptable to donors, like Tanzania and Ghana - means less aid is likely to reach poor (often some of the poorest children) in those countries that are not good performers. Whilst not negating the reasons behind selectivity to increase aid effectiveness, more progress must be made more rapidly on aid to more difficult partners/fragile states. The principles of building the foundations for a future solid state infrastructure at the same time as ensuring resources reach poor families today must be maintained.

• A mix of aid mechanisms and approaches are required to ensure that aid reaches poorest children. Donors should take a staged, poverty focused, approach to their choice of aid modality. Working to the principle of general budget support is important. However, harmonised and aligned aid should be used flexibly to strengthen sectors and programmes with particular impact on poverty reduction. This includes strategic support for social development/welfare/protection ministries that have been either ignored or recipients of largely project aid over the years. This is likely to be vital for co-ordinating efforts for effective and sustainable social protection that reaches vulnerable children. Support to civil society which can reach the poorest and bring alternative policy choices to the policy table should be prioritised. Enabling all children to benefit from public service provision

• Where necessary, aid must support systems and fund teachers, doctors and running costs as well as infrastructure provision. Good quality health care and education that are free and accessible to all requires support in many, though not all, countries. Increased use of budget support by many donors in countries with records of ‘good performance’ is a positive step forward to enable resource-poor governments to both decide allocations and to fund more recurrent as well as development costs. Some bilateral donors, particularly the US and to a certain extent Japan, find it difficult to work through programme aid and have much progress to make in improving the harmonisation and co-ordination of their projects for sector development. Others like the World Bank, are vocal and influential in the use of general and sector budget support but the proportion of their assistance being disbursed through these mechanisms is still relatively limited.

• Aid must be more predictable. To plan for effective public service delivery, and poverty reduction more broadly, governments need to know how much aid will be disbursed, and when. Aid that is only committed over the short term and that is committed but not disbursed undermines planning processes. Donors should commit over a 3-5 year, following the principle of national medium-term expenditure frameworks. Some aid, such as DFID’s use of the general budget support and the World Bank’s Poverty Reduction and Support Credits in Ghana and Tanzania, do make these commitments; other donors have far to go. Even where longer-term commitments are made, predictability within each cycle, even within each financial year, must be improved. Decisions to withhold aid in response to problems of, for example, poor governance or human rights abuses, should only be taken in extreme circumstances and having explored alternatives. Efforts must be made to try to ensure continued flows to support critical recurrent costs that keep teachers in schools and drug supplies in clinics.

• Aid must be better aligned with national priorities. Aid needs to support general poverty reduction and sector priorities agreed through national debate and policy-making processes that are as inclusive as possible. Whilst sector wide approaches, for example, are important developments, donor behaviour still prevents SWAPs from reducing the burden of aid on recipients: experience with sector ‘basket funds’ in Ghana and Tanzania suggest attempts at donor co-ordination and harmonisation turn into mega-projects with each donor coming to their table with their own conditionality and demands. A desire for results funded by high priority global multi-donor funds that target, for example, particular health indicators has skewed nationally-agreed sector budget priorities.
Poverty reduction for current and future generations

- Preventing the burden of debt being passed on. A combination of more rapid and greater debt relief to relieve long-standing indebtedness and more grant aid to prevent increasing new debt levels are both vital for ensuring future generations of children do not fall back or deeper into poverty. Kyrgyzstan, for example, has had high levels of multi-lateral, rather than bilateral, aid and has high levels of external debt: debt management strategies that reduce investment are likely to negatively impact on social sectors that are heavily supported by the multi-lateral banks. Increased grant aid, particularly that targeted at activities addressing basic social needs, is important. But overall, enhancing the pace and scale of debt cancellation – in addition to increasing aid budgets rather than instead of - for all poor countries is critical for the ending of childhood poverty.

Key Resources


Websites

- Aid Harmonisation and Alignment (linked to World Bank’s Development Gateway): http://www.aidharmonization.org/

All CHIP briefing papers and reports can be downloaded from www.childhoodpoverty.org

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- Some of these are the same as those to address poverty and deprivation more generally - childhood poverty is closely related in many ways to household, community and broader poverty. However, some different programmes and different prioritisation combinations of policies and investments are required (See CHIP Briefings 1 & 8).
- See CHIP Briefing 8.
- The same is clearly also true for national and local governments, civil society and the private sector.
CHIP Policy Briefing 9: Donors and Childhood Poverty: Making Aid Work


vii  Verner Kristiansen, interviewed 6 July 2004; DANIDA, 2000, Partnership 2000, Copenhagen: DANIDA; DANIDA, 2004, Children and Young People in Danish Development Co-operation, Guidelines - Draft; Copenhagen: DANIDA.


xiii  Tomoko Enoki, Social Development Advisor/Specialist (Gender and Poverty Alleviation), JICA, Dar es Salaam, June 10th 2002.


xvii  UN, 2002, United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks for Mongolia 2002-2006 (p7)

xviii  Emmy Simmons, interviewed by telephone, July 2004.

xix  Addleton, USAID Mission Director, interviewed 18 August 2003


xxi  Ms Eunice Dapaah, Education Specialist, World Bank Office Accra, interviewed August 28th 2002.


xxvii  See CHIP Briefing 2