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Enduring Poverty and the Conditions of Childhood: Lifecourse and Intergenerational
Poverty Transmissions

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UNICEF estimates that 600 million children worldwide grow up in poverty. Tackling childhood poverty is considered a priority area of action in tackling chronic poverty overall. This is because children who have a good start in life are less likely to be poor as adults, and thus less likely to pass on poverty to their own children.

In this paper, Harper *et al* explore the childhood conditions that can lead to poverty throughout one's life and affect the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next. Taking into account a largely inconclusive evidence base on lifecourse and intergenerational poverty transmission, the authors discuss the key social processes and contexts that impact on childhood¹, lifecourse² and intergenerational³ poverty. Drawing on UNICEF's basic framework of child survival, protection, development and participation, the authors explore high priority issues (nutrition, childcare and guidance, education, child work, and aspirations and attitudes) and conclude by setting this discussion within an analysis of wider enabling environments – namely, the opportunities presented by PRSPs and PRSP processes.

A wide range of economic, political, environmental and social factors contribute to and affect lifecourse and intergenerational poverty transmission. This paper highlights the vital importance of *individual agency and the social context* in maintaining or breaking poverty cycles, as well as the need for a *macro-environment* that is conducive to child development and anti-poverty action. The interplay between such micro and macro level factors is crucial to determining if and how poverty is reduced. For instance, a girl child in South Asia who is denied access to education would need to overcome cultural, family and financial constraints in order to attend school; *in addition*, the financial, legal and physical provision of education (usually by the state) must be available for her to do so. In the same way, an individual or group's health-seeking behaviour must be met with accessible, affordable healthcare provision.

Overall, the wide-ranging evidence⁴ on poverty transfers that this paper draws on suggests that individuals *can* break out of intergenerational poverty cycles, though fewer people do so than is commonly believed. The evidence is also highly context-dependent and focuses more on correlations between indicators of parental and child

¹ Childhood poverty means children and young people growing up without access to economic, social, cultural, physical, environmental and political resources – resources that are vital for their wellbeing and for enabling them to fulfil their potential.

² Lifecourse poverty is poverty experienced through the course of one's life.

³ Intergenerational poverty is poverty that is transferred from one generation of family or household members to another, eg from mother to daughter.

⁴ Though wide-ranging, the evidence that is available on poverty transfers is mostly from the North and Latin America.

wellbeing and on overall levels of social mobility than on breaking poverty cycles *per se*.

Social relations

The paper goes into some detail on the ways in which social relations affect poverty transfers. Social relations, the interface between the individual and the wider community, can facilitate or hinder a person's route out of poverty. This paper discusses three key areas relevant for the understanding of lifecourse and intergenerational poverty: family, kin or household structure; social norms and practices; social connectedness.

Family, kin or household structure may affect the material resources available to children, as well as adults' ability and/or desire to invest time in nurturing and guiding a child. Though it is commonly assumed that the patriarchal nuclear family is the norm that is best for child welfare, research indicates that children of female-headed or polygynous households are not necessarily disadvantaged because of deviation from this 'norm'. The crucial factor is whether social inequalities and discrimination limit access to resources for single mothers, widows or people belonging to minority groups, for example. In the same way, while foster care could disadvantage a child, it could just as well be advantageous to the child if it provides better access to education, food and other developmental resources. In other words, *it is not household structure alone that determines poverty outcomes, but the combination of household structure with social inequalities and/or discrimination*. The extent to which parents' or carers' have access to material and social resources and their ability to deploy these resources to promote child wellbeing is crucial.

A wide range of social norms and practices, including inequality and discrimination as mentioned above, are relevant to children and to poverty transfers. Of key importance are norms concerning access to and distribution of assets within families and between generations – for example, prioritising particular children (e.g. boys over girls, youngest or oldest) for the provision of nutritious food, or education, or healthcare. In many cases, legal entitlements (or lack thereof) and social norms and practices are clearly linked to the deprivation of social, political and economic opportunities experienced by individuals or certain groups (e.g. girl children, widows, minority groups), making them particularly vulnerable to poverty. As these opportunities can be vital routes out of poverty, it is essential that such deprivation is tackled through legal and educational means and by enhancing an individual's social connectedness beyond the family unit.

Social connectedness has long been recognised by anthropologists as crucial to both child and adult wellbeing. It can enable individual or groups to take advantage of opportunities to escape poverty or at least prevent its transfer. However, a range of factors may inhibit social connectedness for poor people, and thus contribute to poverty transmission or entrenchment. These may include material poverty, which can mean that individuals striving for survival have little or no time for developing social connections, and/or little or no money to engage in reciprocal relations with an attached cost. Structural power relations are also a key determinant in people being socially connected or disconnected, and these are inextricably linked to social norms and practices, with social discrimination being an important factor in inhibiting the

development of an individual's social connectedness – for example, migrant labourers may be discriminated against by a more settled community as 'undesirable outsiders', thus preventing them from forming mutually supportive relationships that can mitigate against the effects of poverty, and eventually overcome it.

Critical aspects of child welfare for poverty transfers

Considering the UNICEF framework of survival, protection, development and participation in combination with common, generalizable themes emerging from a wide range of relevant literature, it is possible to identify the following as prioritised issues of importance:

- Survival and protection, incorporating (a) nutrition and (b) childcare, support and guidance
- Participation and development, incorporating (a) education, (b) child work and (c) attitudes and aspirations

Survival and protection

Survival is the most basic of children's needs, and child mortality is very often poverty-related, making it a common form of poverty transfer. After survival comes the child's need for good physical development, dependent largely on nutrition, physical care and good nurturance. These, in turn, depend on the child's family having enough assets to provide both tangible necessities (e.g. nutritious food, safe drinking water) as well as time and energy for care-giving, nurturing and emotional support. The emotional and physical protection of children also depends greatly upon the ability of parents or carers to give time to adequately caring for their children; conflict is also a major factor, as children witnessing or experiencing violence may suffer from it physically, emotionally or psychologically in the long term.

Nutrition is one of the most essential elements for children's survival and development, and there is substantial evidence that malnutrition in childhood can result in some of the most significant damage to a person's well-being and that of her/his children. Malnutrition in early life can significantly limit brain and cognitive development; this impairment may be irreversible even if the child's nutrition improves in later life. In turn, this can impact negatively on a child's learning ability and educational achievement, making it more difficult to take advantage of learning opportunities. Girls who experience stunted growth, or are anaemic, are at higher risk of maternal and child mortality, and are also more likely to have under-weight, stunted children. Malnutrition is a problem for both adults and children on a massive scale – if current trends continue, it is estimated that about 1 billion children will be growing up by 2020 with impaired mental development due to malnutrition – and has to be an absolute priority for action. Where necessary, it must also be linked to action promoting greater food security, in order to maximise its impact. The specific types of action needed to tackle malnutrition will differ from context to context, but it is clear from the evidence base that measures need to be taken to promote adequate consumption of protein-calories and micro-nutrients, and to prevent the intergenerational transmission of poor nutritional and health status. Such measures, in order to have the desired impact, would have to be taken in an enabling social context and in a wider enabling environment for public action.

Childcare, support and guidance are also critical to a child's survival and development, making time a key resource for caregivers. One of the key trends to

emerge over the last 20 years is that women (generally, the primary child carers), due to economic stress, have less time for childcare and nurturance. This responsibility is often delegated to older siblings, who may not be able to give adequate care; these older siblings will often be deprived of educational and other developmental opportunities for themselves due to their childcare responsibilities. Participating in their social environment – contributing to family well-being, having a say in decisions in the home or community, or wider political and social processes once they become young adults – promotes children’s development as it makes them feel valued and builds their skills, social connections and self-confidence. Such participation, however, is unlikely to come about without the support and guidance of adults. Yet many parents and carers find that they are so caught up in trying to provide adequate material resources for their children that they do not have enough time to spend *with* their children, supporting and guiding them. Thus, the lack of affordable childcare alternatives tends to compound the negative effects of economic and livelihood stress. Community-based childcare centres and early childhood development programmes could provide good solutions, but are unlikely to be useful for the poorest families unless there is appropriate external financial support.

Education, in its broadest sense, is widely recognised as one of the main routes out of poverty, with the connection between education and increased income and better labour market opportunities being well established. The evidence also shows that educated parents are often more committed to securing a good education for their children. It has also been widely demonstrated that there is a strong association between educated parents, particularly mothers, and improved child health and nutrition. However, research in different parts of the world shows that the benefits of education are not necessarily as significant nor as widespread as they are often believed to be. For instance, formal education is often more useful in urban areas than in rural ones; the returns to education for men and women can differ substantially; education is not necessarily an automatic equaliser where the legacy of systematised discrimination is strong (Brazil, South Africa). Nonetheless, the weight of evidence leans heavily towards confirming the importance of education in breaking poverty cycles. Thus a priority for action should be to equalise opportunities for both adult and children’s education as well as skilled employment opportunities. An enabling wider environment, which facilitates the significant investment necessary for such action, would be a major requirement.

Overall, research shows that work in childhood has a negative effect on educational attendance and achievement, but there is limited evidence on informal education and the long-term health implications of work in childhood. Though the weight of evidence points to child labour as detrimental to child wellbeing, this is a very context-dependent issue. For instance, it is well-documented that some children might depend on their income in order to pay user fees for accessing education. Therefore, blanket policies regarding child work need to be treated with caution, as child work can actually be a way out of poverty for some children, so for instance, a ban on working for all children could have adverse effects. Again, context is crucial, and long-term goals such as full-time education for all children should be moderated (at least in the short to medium term) according to current realities.

Finally, a child’s own attitudes and aspirations can be essential in breaking poverty transfers and entrenchment. There is limited research on poor young people’s

aspirations, but the available evidence indicates that attitudes and aspirations vary from person to person, often being related closely to parental attitudes, household and community context, educational opportunities, and personality. Some may aspire simply to survive, while others have clear ideas about securing better futures. Attitudes and aspirations alone do not determine poverty outcomes; progress on routes out of poverty is determined by the child or young person's personality *in combination with self-belief, the support of family members and access to wider opportunities*.

Wider enabling environments

Individual participation in society through positive economic and social relations and socio-political structures is one of two key requirements for achieving child well-being and for preventing poverty transfers. The second is the existence of a wider enabling environment – typically, this presents opportunities for development. The wider enabling environment incorporates a vast range of features – for example, land distribution, adequate labour markets, social safety nets – and is well researched and documented in development literature. With regard to tackling childhood poverty, the importance of which is increasingly recognised in high-level development rhetoric, a prioritisation of key areas is required. This needs to be accompanied by policy integration so that certain policies and programmes do not cancel out the benefits of others. The last decade has seen many initiatives to promote policy integration, the latest of which is the move towards national poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs).

PRSPs present opportunities for both participatory processes and developing more integrated – and thus more effective – policy to reduce poverty at the national level. However, recent research on PRSP processes demonstrates that, on the whole, the opportunity for integrated policy to reduce childhood poverty is being missed. Although children are targeted in PRSPs as a vulnerable group of the population, policies to reduce child poverty are usually fragmented and often de-linked from the broader set of national level policy choices, which may undermine the livelihoods and well-being of the poorest groups. While most PRSPs emphasise economic liberalisation policies, it is notable that very few explicitly mention socio-economic equity or redistribution measures that would facilitate poverty reduction through broad-based growth. It is questionable whether PRSPs currently represent comprehensive strategies to reduce poverty, including childhood poverty, and prevent poverty transfers. In principle, though, they do offer good opportunities for making more holistic, locally determined and context-sensitive policy that will prove effective for tackling chronic poverty.

Poverty transfers and their prevention are determined by certain mechanisms within both macro and micro-level contexts. It is only through attempting to understand which mechanisms are enablers and which ones are inhibitors of poverty transfers, and *in which context*, that prioritisation of relevant policy and action areas, leading to the halt of poverty transfers, is possible.