

CHILDREN AND POVERTY: SOME QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Childhood poverty is...

Childhood poverty is the **poverty experienced during childhood** by children and young people.

Childhood poverty means children and young people growing up without access to different types of resources that are vital for their wellbeing and for them to fulfil their potential. By resources we mean economic, social, cultural, physical, environmental and political resources.

Childhood poverty is not simply poverty as described by children though their views should inform understanding of childhood poverty and action to tackle it.

Everyone in the world either is a child or has been through childhood. Poverty experienced in childhood is poverty suffered during a stage of life crucial for development. While childhood poverty shares causes and manifestations with poverty experienced by adults, there are some important different causes and effects. **Crucially, childhood poverty may have lifelong consequences.**

By highlighting childhood poverty, we are not placing the needs of children higher than other groups who may be poor or marginalised. We are promoting consideration of diversity in strategies for poverty reduction and eradication. We are highlighting the importance of different groups and stages of life in breaking poverty cycles.

What is childhood poverty?

Childhood poverty means a child:

- **Growing up without an adequate livelihood** - without access to the financial and nutritional resources needed for survival and development (*economic, physical and environmental resources*).
- **Growing up without opportunities for human development** – opportunities to develop as a healthy person who will fulfil their potential in life. Opportunities include access to quality education and life skills, health and water/sanitation (*social, cultural and physical resources*).
- **Growing up without family and community structures that nurture and protect them** - without having parents/guardians with time (or ability/desire) to care for them; without an extended family/community that can cope if parents and guardians are not able (or not there); or without a community that cares for and protects its younger generation (*social and cultural resources*). Children consulted in a Ugandan study, for example, also stressed that this involves their **emotional, personal and spiritual** development needs not being addressed.
- **Growing up without opportunities for voice.** For both adults and children, powerlessness and lack of voice (political resources) often underpins other aspects of poverty.

These aspects of poverty experienced by children are interrelated.

How does childhood poverty differ from poverty experienced by adults, other types of social group, or by families and households?

Poverty is about a lack of economic, social, physical, environmental, cultural and political resources that prevents people of all ages from fulfilling their potential. As Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) often clearly acknowledge, the more traditional concept of 'income poverty' has been replaced by this multi-dimensional definition. This multi-dimensional poverty can affect all social groups: young, old, men, women, different ethnic groups, different religious groups etc. Childhood poverty as defined here is very clearly multi-dimensional. For children's wellbeing, adequate care and protection may be as important as a household's financial resources.

Much of children and young people's experience of poverty is clearly similar to and shared with that of their families, communities and countries. For example, for a farming family, a failed harvest may mean hunger, selling key assets, such as livestock, getting into debt and enormous stress. For children, there may be additional important consequences, such as having to drop out of school, missing out on critical health care, or being stigmatised by their peers for wearing old or torn clothing.

Why does poverty in childhood matter?

- **Childhood is a critical period of development in life.** Poverty experienced in childhood can deny a person opportunities that will affect the rest of their life. This may condemn them to a life as well as a childhood in poverty and mean they pass on their poverty to their children. For example poor nutrition as a child can prevent a child's development into a healthy adult.
- During this critical stage of life, **children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse and have particular developmental needs and rights** that differ from those of adults. This is in part because they are still growing physically and are dependent on adults for their wellbeing and security and because they are often powerless. See Figure 1.
- **Individuals within households do not necessarily have equal access** to that family's or household's resources. In many societies children, or particular children within the family/household (eg adopted children, child domestic workers, girls in some cultures) are denied access to resources and opportunities, even in households that might be thought of as well-off or 'rich'.

- **Children can and do actively contribute** to household, community and even wider development from an early age. They are not simply a vulnerable group of powerless individuals who suddenly come of age at 18. Understanding how poverty affects children is important for helping them, their families and their communities escape poverty.

Despite these compelling reasons, the importance of childhood poverty is not always recognised by policy makers. Assumptions are often made that policies that are good for adults and households will be good for girls and boys of all ages. Whilst that is often the case, it is not always. Sometimes children (and different children) need more targeted policies that recognise their needs and rights to survival, protection, development and participation. They may need a policy that addresses the shorter-term situation whilst policies aimed at longer-term change are implemented.

It is therefore not good enough to say that a policy will be beneficial in the long term (eg in 10 years) but possibly have negative effects in the shorter term. The children who are growing up during that shorter-term period of lack of investment in primary health care or primary education, for example, will lose opportunities that they may not be able to regain in later life. Thus a generation may be condemned to poverty.

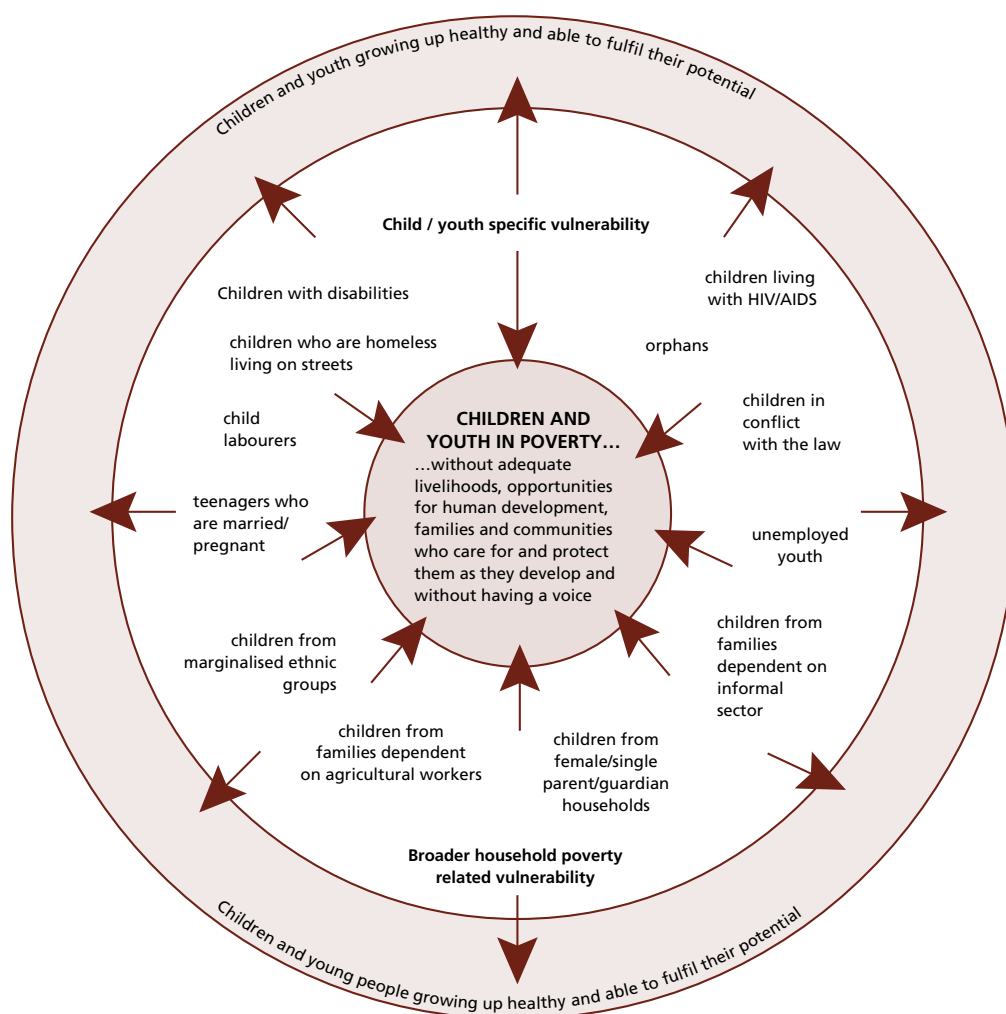


Figure 1: Conceptualising children as a "vulnerable group" - vulnerable to falling into extreme poverty

The centre circle represents children living in poverty and the space outside both circles represents an absence of childhood poverty. The ring in-between represents characteristics of individual children, groups of children, or families with children that are often more vulnerable to falling into poverty. Arrows show possible movement from one circle to another.

So child poverty, childhood poverty or children in poverty?

The terms are often used inter-changeably but do differ:

- **Child poverty** can be understood as suggesting that children's experience of poverty is unique and different from adults' experience. In practice there are many similarities as well as some differences. It can appear to be segregating children as a special group and could lead to them being ignored by some policy makers who feel resources are too limited to support 'special' groups. It can promote misconceptions of children being a homogeneous group, who experience poverty similarly. However, a 1 year old and a fifteen year old for example, have vastly different requirements and abilities; boys and girls, rural and urban children, and children in Northern and Southern countries may all have different experiences and specific concerns.
- **Childhood poverty** stresses the importance of childhood in life and in the cycle of poverty being transferred from generation to generation (poor child growing into poor adult...poor adult as parent and/or carer passing poverty to child, that poor child growing into poor adult....). It avoids talking about children as a special group as this can encourage their further marginalisation and the resistance of people who feel this is a plea for a 'special group'. However, it is not a term that people understand immediately.
- **Poverty experienced in childhood and youth** is perhaps a clearer way of defining what we are talking about and recognises that 'children' are not a homogeneous group. But it is not as snappy as childhood poverty!

The best term to use will be the one that is clearest to you and your audience.

What are the causes of childhood poverty?

Usually a number of factors together cause a child to grow up in poverty. See figure 2. The **fundamental causes** of childhood poverty are those underpinning broader community and household poverty, including **economic trends and policies**, **conflict**, **environmental stresses** (such as drought, flooding or earthquakes), **epidemics or endemic diseases**, such as HIV/AIDs or malaria and **poor governance**.

All these destroy lives and livelihoods, wellbeing and social support systems, putting additional pressure on already scarce development resources. Many of these factors can be both causes and outcomes of poverty – for example, by destroying livelihoods, services and social relationships, conflict plunges people into poverty. At the same time, conflict over access to resources is often a result of poverty and inequality. Action on all these fundamental causes can help break poverty cycles.

Some of the most important causes of childhood poverty are economic. These relate to uneven distribution of resources between and within countries and the disadvantageous terms of poor countries' involvement in the world economy. Current international economic policy focuses largely on liberalising economies to make them 'effective players' in global markets. Reform measures include:

- Privatisation (concerns are greatest where this is unregulated – by either communities or state)
- Opening up of markets to foreign competitors
- Promoting foreign investment
- Liberalising financial systems
- Emergency reforms, eg currency devaluation

- Promotion of export-led economic growth
- Restrictions on public expenditure due to debt management, stabilisation etc

The impacts of these policies are complex. Liberalisation policies have played an important role in poverty reduction over the last decade. But such policies often include measures that can have a negative effect on many people's lives, especially the poorest whose asset bases (human and physical) are most limited. Children in such households may be particularly at risk. It is important to assess who is benefiting and who is losing, particularly as conditions attached to aid often reinforces these policies.

For young children, most effects are indirect and come through the immediate family. So, for example, a poor woman may have to stop breastfeeding when a baby is very young in order to go back to work, potentially increasing that child's risk of malnutrition. As children get older, they are increasingly directly affected. For example, a shock, such as conflict, death of a breadwinner or natural disaster may mean a child has to work or is sold to pay back a debt. Or national cuts in public expenditure may mean they have to attend an overcrowded school with underpaid teachers.

Supportive families and communities can often shelter children from the worst effects of poverty, as can dedicated public action to protect children and families. In some cases, changing public attitudes to promote equality of, and investment in, particular children, such as girls or children of marginalised ethnic groups, is critical. Nonetheless, the absolute lack of resources facing many families and governments means that action on these fundamental causes cannot be ignored in favour of cheaper and easier 'awareness raising' measures.

What is good policy for tackling childhood poverty?

Clearly, this is quite context specific. As the definition of poverty becomes more multi-dimensional, the number of different children experiencing poverty in different ways grows. The responses required by governments and others to tackle it become more complex, and require prioritising activities. Sometimes this can be based on the intensity and duration of poverty experienced, prioritising children and their families living in or at risk of chronic poverty (poverty that lasts for years or generations). Some broad principles for policy to reduce childhood poverty include:

Economic growth and equity

Economic growth does not necessarily reduce poverty. To reduce poverty it should be 'pro-poor', equitably distributed rather than maintaining or creating wealth gaps between rich and poor. Equitable distribution should be between different socio-economic groups or classes as well between disadvantaged groups and geographical areas. This involves investment that will have a positive impact on poor areas and on economic activities that many poor people engage in. It also means ensuring that other policies or investments do not have a negative impact on poor families' access to productive assets, employment, food security etc. Social impact assessments which examine potential implications of policies for poor families and children can play a crucial role here.

Social sector investment

Access to good quality, accessible and affordable (preferably free) primary health care, primary education and early childhood development programmes are vital for eradicating childhood poverty. This includes maternal and child health care, preventative and curative health services, child and mother nutrition, access to clean and safe water and sanitation

facilities, service provision for children with disabilities or in more disadvantaged circumstances (eg orphans). It also includes adult education.

Social protection

Well-designed and implemented programmes directly aimed at improving the wellbeing of poorest in society and those people who are vulnerable to poverty and its effects are important. These could be state transfers (monetary or other) aimed at families with children or children directly; income generation and micro-credit; tax or user fee exemption schemes etc.

Broadly, more integrated policies that emphasise the importance of a poverty-free childhood are vital. This requires pro-poor, supportive action in policy areas not often perceived as having an impact on childhood poverty. These include macro-economics, agriculture, labour, trade/industry, energy as well as those more clearly related to children: such as education, health, social welfare and women's wellbeing.

Finally... is childhood poverty the same as a denial of children's rights?

As the definitions of poverty get broader and more complex, many people find it difficult to explain the difference – for example, is a disabled child experiencing discrimination automatically poor? If a child does not have a voice in society are they automatically poor?

We would say no – **to be called childhood poverty, the poverty status has to be in some way related to material disadvantage and deprivation.** Poverty is a major obstacle to children realising their rights. But not every violation of children's rights constitutes childhood poverty.

Figure 2: Understanding childhood poverty

Items in the outer circle are causes. Items in the second and third circles are both effects and causes. Items in the centre are outcomes. These outcomes are not exhaustive.

