



Child Poverty. A Critical Perspective.

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1 Introduction

The issue of child poverty is currently high on the policy agenda of the European Union and its member states and has featured as a political priority in many national action plans on poverty and social exclusion over the past decade. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child often serves as a framework for taking into account the comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach of poverty, hence also stating the importance of social work as an important actor in fighting a diversity of poverty related problems. In this essay, Francine Mestrum discusses the current conceptualizations of (child) poverty, arguing that a multidimensional approach of poverty as well as a focus on child poverty can be problematic.

2 Child poverty. A critical perspective.

There are serious problems with the conceptualization of 'poverty'. There are no clear definitions and monetary and multidimensional poverty approaches continue to amalgamate causes and consequences of poverty. In this contribution, I want to focus on the comparison of income and multidimensional approaches and question the relevance of measuring child poverty. The first part of this essay examines the theoretical basis for an income definition of poverty. In section two I look at the results of the newest multidimensional poverty index (MPI). The third section looks at the arguments for a multidimensional approach to child poverty. In the final part I examine the ideology of poverty and propose some alternatives for eradicating poverty and promoting development.

2.1 What is poverty?

It seems that every one knows what 'poverty' is, except social scientists. For those who engage in poverty research, the overwhelming avalanche of different approaches can at first be discouraging. Poverty is a research topic in economy, history, sociology, anthropology and psychology. Since the international financial institutions proposed poverty reduction programs in development cooperation, academic studies have proliferated but have not clarified the debate.

According to Paugam¹, poverty is what Durkheim calls a 'prénotion', a self-evident and self-explaining phenomenon that nevertheless is wrong and has to carefully be researched. In our wealthy market economies, this 'prénotion' says that poverty means that people lack the resources to live a life in dignity. This phenomenon is then linked to a series of consequences and causes of 'lack of resources': access to health care, education, employment, family, lack of autonomy and empowerment, lack of participation and 'voice', to name just a few. Almost

¹ Paugam, S., *La disqualification sociale. Essai sur la nouvelle pauvreté*, Paris, PUF, 4ème éd., 1997.

spontaneously, this 'poverty' will also be linked to some specific groups in society: female heads of household, the elderly, migrants and asylum seekers, etc.

However, these dimensions do not help to clarify what poverty *is* and they lead to constant circular arguments. Furthermore, in most cases it is not possible to operationalize these concepts and the empirical approaches have to fall back on the traditional measurements of income and consumption and/or to arbitrary cut-offs in the non-income dimensions.

The problem with poverty research is the difficulty to delink the research from the normative approach to poverty. All definitions point to some 'deficit' and even researchers are clearly influenced by what they think is economically sustainable, socially desirable or psychologically feasible. It means that there is a dire lack of 'objective' poverty definitions, since the perceived 'deficit' can only be defined in relation to an arbitrary 'enough'.

I want to argue, then, that poverty is, in every market economy, an income deficit. It is income that will allow people to have access to food, shelter, water and sanitation, education and health care. Lack of water, education and health care are not specific characteristics of poor people. We all know wealthy people who refuse health care or who lack education. After all, this was the 'American dream', the shoeshine boy able to become a millionaire. Neither is social exclusion a specific characteristic of the poor. Social groups can – willingly or unwillingly – be 'excluded' without having to be poor. What poor people do have in common is a lack of income.

What we should never forget is that the definitions of poverty, the way poverty is perceived and the policies put into place to fight it, are always the result of the actions taken by the non poor. According to Georg Simmel, the father of the sociology of poverty, 'poverty' is a teleological concept that never is in line with the needs of the poor but always with the needs of society. 'Caring for the poor' is very often a moral obligation that the wealthy accept and put on the forefront, forgetting about the rights of poor people. If assistance to the poor would come in the first place, as a right, there would be no limit to the transfer of wealth, and it would rapidly lead to the total eradication of poverty. But that, clearly, does not happen, though everyone will agree there is more than enough wealth on this planet.²

If wealthy people 'care for the poor', what they want to make clear is that their wealth is 'legitimate' and their own social role is useful. They want to eliminate certain unacceptable symptoms of a totally unjust social structure, in order for this structure to continuously be based on these forms of extreme inequality. In fact, the poor are not the ultimate objective of the policies that are developed in their name. They are 'collateral beneficiaries' of the conscious and unconscious guilt of the wealthy.

This reasoning can explain why it is so difficult to define poverty. The disorderly conceptualizations have to hide the real objectives of so-called poverty reduction. Poverty definitions always have to be in line with the social and ideological needs of the non-poor and the wealthy. This also explains why the poverty definitions of the international organizations focus on an ever-changing list of 'poverty dimensions' and mostly totally forget income.

² Simmel, G., *Les Pauvres*, Paris, PUF, 1988 [1908].

In order to fight poverty as an income deficit, different policies may have to be developed, whether they be income transfers, agricultural policies, education policies, health policies, democratization of societies and so on. Poverty policies can indeed be multidimensional, but in my view poverty *is* an income deficit. The ultimate objective of these policies should be to provide people with an adequate income and living standard in order to live a life in dignity.

2.2 The Multidimensional Poverty Index

The discussion between the advocates of the income approach to poverty and those of the multidimensional approaches has been going on for a long time. Most 'multidimensionalists' however do not make statistics with their findings, and certainly do not make comparisons between their results and those of the 'monetarists'. We do have a couple of 'composite' indexes, like the IDH (Human Development Index), combining income with life expectancy and literacy, and the IPH (Index of human poverty), with five different 'dimensions'.³ UNDP (United Nations Development Program) did publish comparisons between the rankings of countries according to these two indicators, but not with monetary measurements.

The recently published MPI (Multidimensional Poverty Index) of Alkire and Santos is different⁴. It is an index of 'acute multidimensional poverty', which reflects deprivations in very rudimentary services and core human functionings for people in 104 countries. Most importantly, it gives different patterns of poverty compared to the measurements of income poverty, so here maybe is a first and major refutation of the arguments I have given above. If 'multidimensional poverty' is very different from 'income poverty', than clearly we need at least both indicators in order to know what we are talking about. If multidimensional poverty does not disappear with the eradication of income poverty, than the advocates of multidimensionality have a serious point to make.

The MPI has three dimensions: health, education and standard of living. These are measured using ten different indicators.

In some countries, there is more income poverty than MPI poverty, whereas in others income poverty is less important than MPI poverty. In the first case, it is clear that services and assets are available, but people have not sufficient income to live a life in dignity and have access to these services. Only in the second case is there an indication that the major problem is indeed the availability of services and of a decent standard of living.

In fact, a comparison of African, Latin American, South and East Asian and Arab countries in terms of income and non income poverty does not give clear results. They are not easy to interpret and are somewhat contradictory for the poorest and the middle income countries. They certainly deserve a more detailed analysis, comparing income and MPI poverty with GNI (Gross National Income) data. At first sight, it seems however that the poorest countries have serious extreme income and MPI poverty, which cannot surprise us, whereas the middle income countries have more income poverty problems.

³ Both proposed by UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) in their 'Human Development Report', 1990 and 1997. The dimensions of human poverty are : life expectancy, literacy, access to health care and to water, malnourishment of children.

⁴ Alkire, S. and Santos, M.E., Acute Multidimensional Poverty: A new Index for Developing Countries, OPHI Working Paper n° 38, July 2010.

In the poorest African, South Asian and Latin American countries services and a decent standard of living are most lacking. However, measured at the 2.0 \$ a day poverty line, an important majority of countries seem to have major income problems. At this level, it is indeed income which is most lacking. Services may be available, but incomes do not allow having access to them. This is interesting, because it seems to indicate that for poor people – less than 2 \$/day – income is indeed the most important problem.

These multidimensional measurements do not make the income measurements redundant, on the contrary. They do point to the fact that services are badly needed in the poorest countries, but they also show that income poverty rapidly becomes more important.

Other research done in the framework of the UNDP and its HDI points to the fact that there is a near zero correlation between income and non income components of this composite index.⁵ The income per capita is highly correlated with the HDI ranking, but the rates of change of HDI and GNI/capita have a very low level of correlation. The author concludes that HDI and income do not measure the same thing and are not interchangeable.

2.3 Child poverty

What does this all mean for children? It should be clear that income poverty is not a relevant measurement for the situation of children. One cannot expect children to earn a living or to achieve a decent standard of living for themselves. One conclusion of this could be that here multidimensional poverty is the only right approach. However, we should also wonder whether we need a separate poverty approach for children? Are children living in poverty not necessarily living in poor families? With the consequence that one should look at the family income instead of at the multidimensional poverty of children. Can one imagine non income poor families with poor children? Or income poor families with non poor children? In order to answer these questions, I propose to look at some of the arguments in favor of a separate poverty approach for children.

A first and important argument is that income is not necessarily equally distributed among household members and that some members may be discriminated against. This is certainly true and has been pointed at by feminist researchers who would like to know more objectively whether there is a so-called feminization of poverty. Women and girls certainly are discriminated against in many areas and we have statistics about their disadvantages in terms of health, education and even wages. But that is no reason to say they are more 'poor' in terms of income. We simply don't know, there are no disaggregated poverty statistics.

It will be clear however, that gender discrimination is not a matter of 'poverty' but of cultural traditions and attitudes that will not change with anti-poverty policies. Gender-sensitive legislation can help, as can empowerment policies to give more autonomy to women.

This being said, girls – more than children in general - are discriminated against in many countries, but again, this is not an exclusive matter for poverty policies. Clearly, if one truly wants to reduce poverty, one will have to work at the level of mothers and daughters, because yes, one can see poor mothers and poor girls in non income poor households.

⁵ Gray Molina, G. and Purser, M., Human Development Trends since 1970. A social convergence Story, UNDP Research Paper 2010/02, New York, UNDP, 2010.

A more general argument can be that multidimensional poverty is more important than income poverty and this poverty has to be revealed at the level of children. However, as referred to by Alkire and Santos, the reason for multidimensional poverty being more important can be the inadequacy of the poverty line for some countries where national poverty lines are much higher than the international ones. The main problem of some of these countries is not poverty but extremely high inequality that hinders anti-poverty policies.

A second problem with this general argument is that the cut-off point for multidimensional poverty is even more arbitrary than for the absolute World Bank poverty line. Why 30 % as in the MPI-case? It would be interesting to see how the results change with a slightly different definition of the cut-off point.

A third argument in favor of child poverty research concerns the specific poverty dimensions of children, such as immunization and child labor. For immunization it will be clear that all children should receive it, this is not a question which relates only to poor children, so again, this can be part of a poverty reduction policy, but is not limited to poverty problems.

Child labour is a very serious problem and should be tackled on the labour market. Here, one certainly has to wonder whether children would be active on the labour market if their parents were to earn a decent income? Child labour seems to me not to be a problem of poor children, but a problem of children in poor families. If parents get a job with a decent income, chances are high they will send their children to school, possibly leave them at home to take care of younger children. Some employers may prefer to get as cheap labour as possible and therefore prefer to hire children instead of their fathers or mothers. Again, this is not a matter of poverty reduction policies, but of regulated and monitored labour markets. Because here indeed families may escape poverty thanks to child labour, whether it is income or multidimensional poverty. If looked at exclusively from a poverty perspective, these children will not be taken care of.

All other dimensions of a multidimensional poverty approach for children are not different from those for adults: food, shelter, clothes, health, water and sanitation. They can all be tackled in a poverty reduction policy at the level of households since it is difficult to see a difference between adults and children in terms of access to them. Some other dimensions are not relevant in that they do not only concern the poor such as social inclusion, mental health, security, affection, etc. These 'intangible' dimensions of poverty are in fact not poverty related but concern all adults and children. 'Affection poverty' certainly is not absent from wealthy families.

Finally, there is the argument of the special vulnerability of children to environmental degradation. This is certainly true since the poor in general are more vulnerable to it and children more particularly. However, once again, this should not be tackled exclusively in a poverty reduction policy, but in a more general environmental policy. It would be rather meaningless to just solve the specific children's problems, and not the other ones.

Does this help to answer the questions we put? Is it possible to have poor children in non poor households? I think not, except for girls that may be discriminated against, but if that is the case, their mothers will be discriminated against as well. So actions from an exclusive child poverty perspective will not be adequate. Is it possible to have non poor children in poor households? Theoretically yes, if poverty reduction policies focus exclusively on children,

providing food, shelter, water and sanitation, education and health services. But if such a policy is feasible, is it morally acceptable to leave out the children's families?

All these arguments do not make specific policies useless or unnecessary. Specific actions against child labor, in favor of immunization and in favor of good education may be most welcome. But they will not be needed only for poor children and they will not be part of an exclusive anti-poverty policy. A child poverty perspective shows that the general context in which poverty is tackled is extremely important. Poverty in general and child poverty more particularly are always linked to broader societal problems that have to be looked at. Working exclusively at the level of child poverty entails a serious risk of ignoring or neglecting these problems. Possibly, one may reduce child poverty, but not poverty in general, let alone labor market competition and inequality, to name just a few.

2.4 The ideology of poverty

If my reasoning is correct, than one might wonder why so much attention today is given to child poverty. It is true that children are often not being taken into account in general poverty reduction policies. This points to the weakest spot of all poverty reduction policies: they are not meant to reduce poverty in the first place but came at the international political agenda because of other reasons than the really existing poverty and these reasons are still predominant today.

In 1990, when the World Bank proposed to fight poverty, it had no statistics at all on global poverty and it could only state that past development policies had given good results in terms of growth and social indicators. All the same, it stated that other policies were needed. Why? Previous research⁶ has shown that the poverty reduction policies as proposed by the World Bank were not meant to tackle existing poverty, but to dismantle existing social protection and replace it with poverty reduction policies. According to the neoliberal policy prescriptions of the 'Washington Consensus', universal social protection is not to be provided for by states. Governments only have to take care of 'those who really need it' and leave other forms of protection to the private market. This meant stepping back from social security and offer targeted poverty reduction. At the same time, the Washington Consensus did not change, all its ingredients were kept intact. The analysis of the poverty discourse allowed to conclude that 'poverty' was nothing more than the label put on to neoliberal policy prescriptions and present them as 'the human face of globalization'. In fact, it was a new social paradigm that also allowed to forget poverty's income dimension and to focus on budget constraints, the liberalisation of trade, fighting inflation, deregulation of the labour markets and privatisations of public companies, all in the name of the poor. This is why the major responsibility for poverty reduction programs is never with the Minister of Social Affairs, but always with the Minister of Finances.

The same goes, unfortunately, for the UN part of poverty reduction, the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals). Limited to halving extreme poverty during a 25-year period, they can hardly be qualified as being 'ambitious'. They totally ignore the three chapters of the 'Copenhagen program' of the Social Summit of 1995: poverty, employment and social integration. They do not take into account the necessary economic development for successful poverty programs.

⁶ Mestrum, F., *Globalisering en armoede. Over het nut van armoede in de nieuwe wereldorde*, Berchem, EPO, 2002.

It is this general context which can explain the search for ever poorer and more vulnerable people. The UN and UNDP put the focus on women, the 'poorest of the poor', the 'human face of poverty' ... It explains the focus on extreme poverty instead of on poverty... It explains the focus on 'chronic poverty' instead of current poverty. And it explains, I am afraid, the current focus on children. As Gilbert Rist would explain: women and children are the ones that have to be saved first when the ship is sinking ...⁷

All this is evidence of the lowered level of ambition of donor countries and of governments in developing countries. While 'development cooperation' started in the 1960s with 'economic development' and was later coupled to 'social development', now both have been abandoned and poverty eradication became poverty reduction and in practice the reduction of extreme poverty.

Focusing on women and child poverty has a major advantage. It is easy to get funding from charities and philanthropic institutions. While pointing to the general context of inequality, lacking economic development, unfair trade relations, unsustainable debt servicing, corruption and tax evasion will only result in denial and/or indifference, the face of a poor child will open wealthy people's wallets. Poverty reduction, especially when it is focused on women and children, allows for unfair economic and social structures to be maintained and even strengthened. It even gives these structures a moral legitimacy.

3 Conclusion

Alternatives will have to be looked for that will allow children, and all other people, all over the world, to live a life in dignity.

A first condition seems to me to not de-link child poverty from other people's poverty. Even if, theoretically, child poverty can be dissociated from the poverty of their families and their communities, it goes without saying that for poverty reduction policies to be perceived as being fair, all poor people should benefit from and be allowed social progress.

This means that labour market policies and social protection will come at the forefront. A very positive development of these last years has been seen in the work of the ILO (International Labour Organization) and the UN who now plead for 'decent work' and 'universal social protection'.

Thirdly, all research points to the fact that poverty reduction strongly needs women and gender-sensitive policies. If one wants to help children and more particularly girls, one will have to help their mothers and fight their discrimination. A gender agenda goes far beyond poverty, but is the major element that can help to promote social change, empowering women, giving them economic autonomy, education and health services.

Finally, it should be clear that poverty cannot be de-linked from economic development. Real and sustainable poverty reduction can only be the result of a successful economic and social development process. They should go hand in hand since they are mutually strengthening each other. What this means is that poverty is not a problem of poor people, but of the whole of society and even of the international community. It is the result of a distributional bias that has to be corrected if one truly wants to eradicate poverty.

⁷ Rist, G., *Le développement. Histoire d'une croyance occidentale*, Paris, Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1996.

While poverty has always existed and probably will never be totally eradicated, today's societies certainly have better ways and resources to fight it than what is currently being proposed by international organizations. Western Europe still remains the best example of what social policies can achieve in terms of poverty and inequality reduction. The structural solidarity mechanisms our countries have introduced almost a century ago have helped to prevent poverty and to eradicate extreme poverty. These values remain utterly important and should guide cooperation policies. Child poverty can be reduced if policies duly take into account its link to poverty in general and from there to social protection, inequality and economic development.

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