

# Putting children first:

A policy agenda to end child poverty



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# Contents

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<b>Tackling child poverty is an urgent priority for sustainable development</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>An agenda to end child poverty</b>	<b>4</b>
Build national support by ensuring that reducing child poverty is an explicit national priority	6
Expand child-sensitive social protection systems and programmes	9
Improve access to quality public services, especially for the poorest children	12
Promote a decent work and inclusive growth agenda to reach families and children in poverty	15
<b>Conclusion: who can make a difference?</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Notes</b>	<b>18</b>

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*Special thanks to Paul Dornan of Young Lives, who led the development of this paper on behalf of the Coalition.*

Cover photo:  
Four year old Sajita plays around her shelter in Nepal  
Credit: Sandy Maroun/Save the Children

# Tackling child poverty is an urgent priority for sustainable development

There is a clear imperative for action to eradicate child poverty. To tackle child poverty is to invest to fulfil human potential. It is to promote child rights and wellbeing and to address the needs of fast changing societies. It is to intervene to prevent the intergenerational disadvantages that cost societies dearly. The Sustainable Development Goals make global and national commitments to eradicate extreme poverty. The agreement to disaggregate poverty by age will highlight the scale of child poverty. And since many disparities in human development arise early in life, to 'leave no one behind', as envisaged in the SDGs, requires action in childhood.

Goal 1, End poverty in all its forms, is the heart of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. For the first time, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include an explicit commitment to address child poverty. By 2030 the SDG Target 1.1 is to eradicate extreme poverty and target 1.2 aims to reduce by at least half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions. The scale and depth are different, but the impacts of child poverty are alike across the globe. Children living in income and multidimensional poverty experience a range of deprivations including in nutrition, learning and health. Poverty in childhood can lead to greater exposure to violence and exploitation, and is often accompanied by bullying and stigma. It undermines education and so later life chances.

*This briefing draws on evidence and the experience of over 20 organisations working together in the Global Coalition to End Child Poverty. A Joint Statement<sup>1</sup> from these organisations shows why addressing child poverty is critical. This briefing outlines key building blocks for how countries can address child poverty. These building blocks represent key domains that shape the life chances of children living in poverty, from early childhood through adolescence. They are discussed here as an entry point to identify the types of policies that can help overcome child poverty and its impacts. A separate report under preparation identifies milestones towards implementing greater action. Strategies to eradicate child poverty need to be nationally designed and owned. The aim of this brief is to offer evidence and experience to support national discussion on the best policy options for children.*

# An agenda to end child poverty

## Key messages

- Child poverty is now explicitly included in the globally agreed Sustainable Development Goals. This requires routine monitoring and action by every country in the world, richer and poorer.
- While contexts vary, experience shows that a core agenda for action to address child poverty includes:
  - National support, including routine measurement and including child poverty as appropriate in national budgets, policies and laws.
  - Improving access to quality public services, particularly for children living in poverty.
  - Expanding child-sensitive social protection systems.
  - Promoting a decent work and inclusive growth agenda.

Poverty has damaging impacts on the lives of children today as well as for their chances later in life. Fast changing societies need to make the best use of all the available potential which requires investing in children. The news so far from the Global Goals is good. Goal 1, End poverty in all its forms, sets a target to ‘eradicate extreme poverty’ and to ‘reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions’<sup>2</sup>. Goal 1 therefore requires a child poverty focus. And since reductions in child poverty support better child development, these also contribute to accelerating progress towards SDG targets on health, nutrition and learning.

Child poverty is measured in different ways across countries. Measures of extreme low income, such as living in households with incomes below a ‘dollar a day’, are used to indicate access to bare necessities. Relative income measures typically count children as poor where they live in households with incomes below 50 or 60% of the median. Such relative measures help identify whether children and households are likely to be able to take part in activities common within society. The growing emphasis on multidimensional measures recognises the span of impacts that poverty can have. Multidimensional measures show that income poverty alone does not always predict deprivations such as access to quality housing, healthcare or safe water.

Across high, middle and low income contexts it is becoming clear that children face a particularly high risk of being poor. The World Bank identify half of those living on under \$1.90 per day in low and middle income countries as children, much higher than the percentage of children in the total population. Using different definitions (a relative low income measure) the same pattern is seen in the European Union, where 21% of children are poor, compared with a 16% poverty rate among adults.<sup>3</sup> This greater risk compounds the vulnerability children face to the impacts of poverty. Actions to tackle child poverty are national responsibilities, but the global community can contribute to support national efforts.

In market economies, money is central to access to basic goods and services. But the experience of poverty goes beyond income alone. For marginalised social or ethnic groups, and often for girls and women, and for children with disabilities, poverty can go hand in hand with discrimination and exclusion from services or jobs. Poverty can leave children exposed to rights violations such as child marriage and harmful labour. Countries keen to tackle poverty cannot ignore barriers to the realisation of equal rights, and tackling poverty can also often make an important contribution to reducing rights violations by improving people’s opportunities.

The SDGs have explicitly highlighted inequality as a major global concern. This recognition is important and extreme poverty often goes hand in hand with inequality. Across economies high inequality is wasteful for efforts to reduce poverty since resources are concentrated on a few. Inequality

fuels differential access to power – to networks, opportunities and basic services – all of which can undermine the life chances of the poorest children. Addressing child poverty is a key way to intervene to help mitigate wider inequalities in human development.

**What works to End Child Poverty? Key national building blocks**



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## Build national support by ensuring that reducing child poverty is an explicit national priority

### Key messages

- Official recognition by governments that child poverty is a major concern is a first crucial step. This should include routine monitoring and reporting of child poverty.
- It is important for governments to set a direction for how child poverty will be reduced and to track progress in national, regional and local plans.
- Public awareness and support matters to help governments prioritise and sustain action on child poverty. Politicians need to make the case, but advocates, journalists, unions, civil society, concerned citizens and voters can contribute to the challenge and develop this support.
- Enabling children and families to participate in the design and evaluation of policy promotes rights, extends accountability and improves the knowledge of policy makers.

The starting point for tackling child poverty is national circumstances and policy. While parents have the primary responsibility for children, States have a duty to support those responsible for children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>12</sup> and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child<sup>13</sup> underpin these responsibilities. Irrespective of the level of economic development, there are actions governments can take. As the 2013 Report on child wellbeing in Africa puts it *“Is child- friendliness necessarily dependent on the wealth of a country? The answer is simply no”*.<sup>14</sup> Child outcomes vary widely among countries at similar income levels, often due to policy impact or its absence.<sup>15</sup> Put more simply, policy choices matter for children.

A forthcoming publication produced by UNICEF and the Coalition to End Child Poverty will identify milestones as a guide to how countries can make progress on child poverty. The guide identifies the importance of:

1. Building national support for addressing child poverty. National support requires not only Government leadership but campaigners and opinion formers, coming together.
2. Measuring child poverty. Adequate measurement of child poverty identifies which children are at greatest risk.
3. Putting child poverty on the map. The greater understanding that measurement brings can be used by policy makers and advocates to identify better policy and programmes.
4. Influencing specific policies and programmes to reduce child poverty. The paper articulates policy areas known to have important potential to reduce child poverty. It is up to national discussion to identify the best policy options.
5. An integrated approach to ending extreme child poverty and at least halving child poverty by national definitions, as part of a funded, implemented and evaluated national plan. Measuring child poverty enables countries to set a clear target. Central Government has a key role to set a direction, but regional and local tiers can contribute to delivering progress.

Building national support for tackling child poverty may well require challenging myths about why poverty persists. To be poor in many countries is often to experience shaming, stigma and exclusion. Poverty is frequently argued to arise from individual failings of not working hard enough, investing insufficiently in education or having low aspirations. Judgements are often made of how families in poverty bring up children, with assumptions made that parents who are poor do not parent well. The reality is often starkly different with parents

working hard and sacrificing their own needs to support their children, but with poverty still constraining the opportunities children face. Challenging myths may be an important part of building public support for policies that tackle the barriers facing those who are poor.

Child poverty is a multidimensional problem where various dimensions can be mutually reinforcing. Significant progress is unlikely to be delivered by one policy or sector area only. Joint planning across Government will be important. Options include establishing joint units across sectoral Ministries or involving the Ministry of Finance to drive joined up action. Integration of services is important, though particularly challenging where service delivery is weak. Partnerships between national or local government and civil society organisations may also contribute. There may be pragmatic options within existing delivery mechanisms. In particular rising school enrolment creates an opportunity for schools to act as a platform for interventions to improve nutrition, health, or access to information.

There is an increasing link between state fragility and absolute income poverty.<sup>16</sup> One in five people (20%) on the planet live in a fragile country, but

two in five (43%) of people in extreme poverty live in such countries.<sup>17</sup> The risks – environmental, violence or stress – of growing up in a fragile country are great.

Responding to environmental disasters, the Government of the Philippines, for example, has passed the ground breaking ‘Children’s Emergency Relief and Protection Act’ (2016) identifying important ways to put children’s needs first during environmental emergencies.

Some countries, however, lack the capacity or the will to address the problems children living in poverty face. Ensuring stable state capacity and effective institutions is the fundamental solution, but childhood does not wait for the long term. Humanitarian agencies, supported by donors, alongside state institutions can help protect children in crisis. Interventions can include child-sensitive social protection, school feeding, as well as ensuring children have access to schooling and health care. Early intervention is important for children’s development, alongside later investments to remediate early under-nutrition<sup>18</sup> and support to help children back into schooling.



Children playing in Mahama Refugee Camp in Rwanda



Credit: Nour Wahid/Save the Children

As soon as the sun comes up, Syrian children leave their tents in the refugee camp in the Bekaa valley, Lebanon, to play together

## Which children are at greatest risk of being poor?

The profile of which children are most at risk of poverty varies between countries. Surveys such as the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster survey, and household income or expenditure surveys identify national and sub-national patterns. Analysis is important to improve social policies and programme delivery. Across countries common patterns emerge of children often in most need:

**Children from marginalised ethnic, language or other social groups.** Marginalized groups, such as the Roma in Europe or low caste groups in India, often experience discrimination and high child poverty and deprivation rates. Disadvantage can be compounded where children grow up in rural areas with weaker services, or within highly disadvantaged urban environments.

**By family structure.** Some disadvantages affecting children relate to the structure of families. Children in larger families or with fewer earners, including lone parent and child- or female headed families, are often at a high risk of growing up poor. A focus on child poverty requires pro-actively identifying and supporting families with high needs, not all of which are met by the labour market.

**Children affected by disabilities and ill health.** Poverty is a cause and consequence of disability and illness. Children experiencing both disability

and poverty are at a much raised risk of exclusion from education or other services, often with severe consequences for them and their siblings.<sup>19</sup> A greater awareness of such risks helps identify where health services, inclusive service provision and poverty reduction policies can support each other.

**Gender.** In many societies poverty increases the vulnerability of girls to rights violations such as sexual exploitation, violence and child marriage. Cultural norms are reinforced by poverty where families with limited means seek to 'protect' girls through the perceived economic security of marriage.<sup>20</sup> Where family illness results in additional care needs, it is often girls who fill this gap sacrificing their education to do so. And though often poorer girls are particularly disadvantaged, poor boys may leave school early to work and to help support families financially.

**Children growing up outside households.** Surveys usually sample households at fixed addresses. Such surveys then miss out those living in severely-deprived and vulnerable situations including children living on the streets, those migrating, or growing up in institutional care. Evidence based policy requires the insights that surveys provide, but should recognize and make efforts to obtain qualitative and additional information on children without family care.

## Expand child-sensitive social protection systems and programmes

### Key messages

- Social protection and cash transfer programmes have been proven to have significant and lasting impacts on the lives of children living in poverty.
- The effective coverage of social protection for children, however, remains far too low and we must work towards progressive realization of universal social protection for children.
- Make child sensitivity central to social protection design and delivery. Evaluate the design of policies to maximize their benefits for children by considering the specific needs by age and likely consequences for both girls and boys. Assess impacts on children on an ongoing basis to improve impact and avoid unintended harms.

**Child poverty results from inadequate access to the financial and other resources that can support good child development. Inadequate access to resources goes hand in hand with an increased exposure to economic and other risks that compound poverty. Social protection policies and programmes are a well-tested way to improve the resources available to people living in poverty, addressing SDG goal 1 directly. Such policies can protect vulnerable families and children against risk and promote opportunities. Social protection can also support the impact of other public services, for example enabling children to stay in school, promoting opportunities for adolescents and parents to use health facilities. The progressive realisation of universal coverage of social protection for those who are worst-off in society is a key step towards reducing child poverty.**

Social protection interventions include child and family grants and conditional cash transfers, pensions, unemployment and disability insurance policies, health insurances and labour market protections. As such, social protection includes instruments targeting children directly, and those which target other groups but which can have positive benefits for children. There is also growing recognition that providing cash during emergencies can increase resilience<sup>21</sup> and recovery, and social protection can support humanitarian strategies in fragile and conflict affected circumstances.

While interest in such measures has risen in recent years, in many countries coverage remains low. The World Bank estimate that in low and middle income countries, social safety nets cover only one

in four of the poorest people, with coverage gaps especially wide in Sub Saharan Africa and South Asia.<sup>22</sup> The ILO identify that on average Western Europe spends 2.2 per cent of GDP on child and family benefits, while Africa and Asia/Pacific spends just 0.2%.<sup>23</sup> In many countries for social protection to fulfil its role as a key tool to reduce child poverty, coverage and budgets need to rise.

Social protection is critical because there is powerful evidence of its potential to advance the rights and development of children, for example for reduced poverty, increased enrolment in school, as well as better learning, health and nutrition outcomes.<sup>24</sup> However, there is also evidence from some programmes of unintended negative consequences resulting from some forms of social protection, including of greater child work<sup>25</sup>, and so design and delivery matter for children. Child sensitive social protection<sup>26</sup> maximizes the positive impacts on both girls and boys and minimizes potential harms. Principles of child sensitive social protection include intervention early in the life course to prevent later disadvantages. Such policies protect families with children from key risks and so strengthen resilience. Child sensitivity requires the consideration of intra-household dynamics, with transfers often paid to the principle carer of the child. This approach also identifies the need to avoid adverse impacts, which arise where the receipt of social protection triggers a response, such as harmful child work or changes in child care, that may not be in the best interests of children. Administrators should also listen to the voices of children and families as they put policies in place.

## Principles of child-sensitive social protection

1. “Avoid adverse impacts on children, and reduce or mitigate social and economic risks that directly affect children’s lives.
2. Intervene as early as possible where children are at risk, in order to prevent irreversible impairment or harm.
3. Consider the age-and gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities of children throughout the life-cycle.
4. Mitigate the effects of shocks, exclusion and poverty on families, recognizing that families raising children need support to ensure equal opportunity.
5. Make special provision to reach children who are particularly vulnerable and excluded, including children without parental care, and those who are marginalized within their families or communities due to their gender, disability, ethnicity, HIV and AIDS or other factors.
6. Consider the mechanisms and intra-household dynamics that may affect how children are reached, with particular attention paid to the balance of power between men and women within the household and broader community.
7. Include the voices and opinions of children, their caregivers and youth in the understanding and design of social protection systems and programmes”

Taken from *Advancing child-sensitive social protection*<sup>27</sup> a joint statement from DFID, UNICEF, Save the Children, ODI, IDS, World Bank and other organisations

A key design choice is how resources will be targeted. Narrow targeting is intuitively appealing, given limited resources, but such an approach requires very careful and difficult design choices about how to allocate resources. Such choices can be costly to administer, potentially divisive between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries and can create ‘exclusion errors’ where families in need miss out. Widening the groups who benefit from social protection increases costs but it may also avoid creating exclusion, stigma and barriers

to access. And ensuring wider gain from interventions can also help to build public support for spending. Area based programmes provide a way to focus resources on specific geographic areas, such as poorer rural sites. Such approaches can be simpler, since they do not require individual choices over eligibility, but by definition do not benefit poorer children growing up in non-targeted areas (such as in poor urban environments). The scope of instruments will need to reflect national circumstances and priorities.



Credit: Caroline Trutmann/Save the Children

School girl at a school in Jocotan, Guatemala, receiving supplementary food after a severe drought destroyed her families crops in Eastern Guatemala

Whether or not to ‘condition’ receipt of cash transfers with requirements, such as the use of education or health services, is a question facing many social protection policy makers. A key mode of cash transfers, the conditional cash transfer has become popular throughout South America, and has spread to other countries. In this model, payments are made to families with children conditional on the use of services such as education, health clinics or child nutrition. Other instruments, such as family allowances and benefits in OECD countries, and the Child Support Grant in South Africa tend to be less conditional on specific behaviour. The World Bank has argued the conditional cash transfer model reduces current poverty and encourages human capital development through the use of services.<sup>28</sup> Sceptics argue that imposing such conditions are paternalistic, assuming families do not use services because of ignorance rather than other barriers and in doing so reinforces the myth of the ‘undeserving poor.’<sup>29</sup> Conditionality also requires record keeping and also that adequate services will exist for families to access. Importantly there is positive impact evaluation evidence both from schemes that include behavioural conditionality<sup>30</sup> and those that do not.<sup>31</sup> Extending access to social protection per se, and the level and the regularity of the payment, will be particularly important for impacts on children’s wellbeing, not conditionality alone.

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## Improve access to quality public services, especially for the poorest children

### Key messages

- To maximise the impact of public services in tackling child poverty requires attention to coverage, equity and quality. The capacities and scope of public services in different countries will vary but universal access and coverage to key services requires delivery free at the point of use.
- Child poverty is multidimensional, and many public services are relevant for children's development – education, health, protection and others. Joint planning of services can help identify synergies and gaps between service areas.
- Proactive measures are often needed to identify the children and families who are excluded from or have the most difficulty in accessing existing services, whether through neglect or discrimination or financial hardship, and to reach out via specific programmes and administrative efforts to ensure their inclusion.
- Identifying ways of making such services accountable to poorest families and taking into account the views and feedback on service provision of caregivers and children can provide mechanisms to improve service quality.

**Rights to essential public services such as education, health and protection are central to all children's life chances. Services such as schooling should promote social mobility for poorer children but the reality is often different. Children from income poor households may have less access to services where coverage is low, and frequently experience lower quality services or different treatment. Background disadvantages, such as the need to work, may undermine children's ability to benefit from services. Addressing concerns of coverage, equity and quality is important to improving the action of public services for poor children and to reducing multidimensional poverty.**

The capacity, financing and quality of public services is different across and within low, middle and high income countries. In many countries, extending the coverage of social policies remains important. At its most concerning, many children aged under-5 continue to die from preventable causes, with better access to sanitation, safe water, nutrition and health care key elements of what would help more children survive.<sup>38</sup> There are a number of key weaknesses in social policies for children.

- Preschool interventions have important impacts in helping children in low,<sup>39</sup> middle<sup>40</sup> and high income countries<sup>41</sup> and can help prepare children for later schooling. Benefits are likely to be high for the poorest children if they receive quality services but the poorest children generally have least access.<sup>42</sup>
- Schools are a dominant feature of children's lives, but one experienced inequitably with variations in learning outcomes<sup>43</sup> and with 121 million children of primary or lower secondary school age still out of school in 2012<sup>44</sup> UNESCO call for action to increase enrolment particularly for those with disabilities; from ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities; and children affected by armed conflict.<sup>45</sup> Maximising the learning gains for poorer children drives up wider standards and promotes equality of opportunity.
- Poor health presents serious risks for children – to their own survival and health, and due to the costs of illness on their households. A lack of access to safe sanitation and drinking water remains a major health risk for many children, especially in low income countries.<sup>46</sup> WHO estimates 100 million people<sup>47</sup> fall below

the poverty line each year as a result of user fees for health care.

- Key interventions, such as education and training, alongside improved access to sexual and reproductive health services and rights,<sup>48</sup> are of particular importance to adolescent girls and boys. Intervening during adolescence builds on earlier investments and, by improving conditions as children become adults, is also key to reducing the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Equity is a vital concern in how children access services. While important moves have been made toward free at the point of use primary schooling, not all services are free. Across low, middle and high income countries there are often indirect costs such as transport or uniforms<sup>49</sup> that create a barrier for poorer families – even where schooling is nominally free at the point of use. There may also be ‘under-the-counter’ fees or informal contributions required to access services that present real barriers for poorer families. While financial costs are the most direct, there may also be non-financial costs such as of travel or time which count against those who are poor or who are working long hours. The impact of privatisation within education or health services is a further consideration in some countries. In some low and middle income countries so-called ‘low fee private

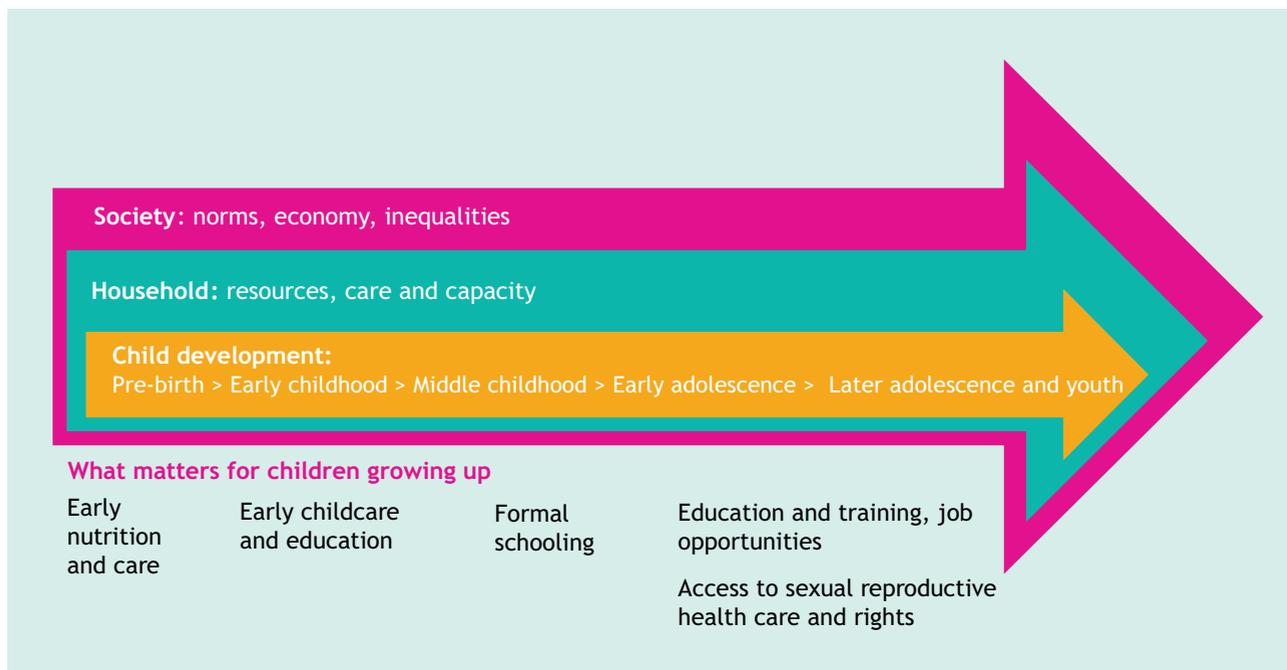
schooling’ is increasing,<sup>50</sup> reflecting, partly the actual or perceived failure of the state to provide needed services. Without great care, this creates a further driver of inequality.

The Millennium Development Goals promoted better access to key basic services. The Sustainable Development Goals go beyond this with a greater focus on outcomes such as learning. UNESCO argue that despite increasing enrolment in many low and middle income countries, there is a ‘Global learning crisis’<sup>51</sup> of 250 million children unable to read, write or count. In higher income countries it also remains the poorest children who are learning the least, though some countries do much better than others.<sup>52</sup> Poorer children are often behind other children in their learning even before they start school, highlighting the need to invest in the early years. Improving the quality of public services requires a focus where quality is worse, usually experienced by the poorest children and families. Interventions to improve classroom learning—including whether teachers attend, are well trained or classrooms are equipped to support learning – is particularly important for poorer children. Rising enrolment in low and middle income countries also presents opportunities to consider the role of school for children’s wider development with important opportunities such as school meals to support children’s development as well as their attendance at school.<sup>53</sup>



Credit: Susan Warner/Save the Children

A three year old girl with her classmates and teacher in the US



***Across the life course: social protection; employment protections; quality and equitable basic services, housing and public services***

Child poverty is multidimensional in causes and consequences so access to public services is often used to indicate multidimensional poverty. Decent water, sanitation and electricity, pre-school, schooling and training, child protection, health and housing policies are all important. Such policies are usually delivered in sectors but there are interdependencies at any one time, across the life course<sup>54</sup> and between service areas. Poor sanitation increases the chances of illness, leading to

preventable death, illness and malnutrition. Hungry or ill children may not come to school, or learn when they attend. If a parent is ill this increases the needs of children to work or care for other family members. Joint planning of services with children at the centre can help identify ‘roadblocks’ where the weaknesses in one service undermine another and, by extension, improvements in one sector can help overcome barriers in another.

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## Promote a decent work and inclusive growth agenda to reach families and children in poverty

### Key messages

- There is a key jobs challenge, with projections suggesting that low and middle income countries with large youth populations need to generate many millions of new jobs each year. Young people are particularly precarious within jobs markets. Opportunities to acquire skills for future employment are critical, particularly for deprived adolescents.
- It is not only jobs, but decent work that matters. Labour market rights and interventions in both formal and informal labour markets provide a foundation for reducing child poverty. Decent work involves greater access to jobs, labour rights and social protection measures.
- Governments should consider doing more to reduce risks and economic vulnerabilities and to increase the resilience of families who are highly dependent on insecure and climate-vulnerable sources of livelihoods to feed and care for their children. Important actions include lower-cost insurance and financial services, support to household income diversification and timely, child-sensitive disaster response and livelihood recovery measures.

**While important for living standards, economic growth by itself, does not automatically reduce poverty. Growth may widen inequalities if it is not inclusive and the proceeds and opportunities created are not widely shared. Improving access to decent work is a mechanism to harness economic growth to mitigate inequalities and reduce poverty. Economic development that minimizes shocks, helps build skills and resilience and enables poorer people to access to affordable goods and services is also important for reducing poverty.**

Many economies need to produce more jobs. The World Bank estimates the world will need to create an extra 600 million new jobs over the next 15 years, mostly in Asia and Sub-Saharan African countries.<sup>60</sup> Unemployment and underemployment are key problems in many economies and a barrier to reducing child poverty – both for parents and for young people who may then become parents. Across low, middle and high income countries, where unemployment or underemployment are high it is young people, with least experience in the jobs market, who are most at risk. Since poorer young people often have the fewest qualifications, they are at greater risk of unemployment where jobs are few. Many children are engaged in economic work, particularly through the adolescent years. Long hours, dangerous and exploitative work undermine children's

development, but not all work is harmful to children, and work can be an important way in which children contribute to households and learn useful skills which can help them later. Job creation coupled with access to good quality training and apprenticeships provide interventions to support young peoples' access to the labour market.

A job or livelihood does not guarantee a route out of poverty. Global goal 8 is to 'promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all'. The ILO use the term 'decent work' to indicate the importance of 'full and productive employment, rights at work, social protection and the promotion of social dialogue'.<sup>61</sup> Improving the financial returns from work and livelihoods and reducing the precariousness of work support wider anti-poverty objectives. Key labour market regulations and interventions, such as minimum wages, parental leave and childcare policies<sup>62</sup> help ensure an adequate level of return from work, and to support parents in particular to be able to work. Social protection is an established element of labour market policies in many countries, including through social insurance to protect those who experience ill health or disability. And since labour market returns are seldom sensitive to family size, social protection may be particularly important for larger families.

Economic crisis and shocks continues to present a serious risk for children. UNICEF estimates 2.6 million more children in poverty in richer countries since 2008 following the ‘great recession’<sup>63</sup> because of job losses, under-employment and cuts to public services. In low income countries with large agricultural sectors, drought or other environmental disasters present serious risk to livelihoods. Building resilience measures to reduce the incidence and impact of shocks, including social protection and more diversified livelihoods and local economies contributes to protecting children.

Finally, alongside employment there are other market reforms which can help families in poverty. Poorer people very often pay the most, or face barriers to accessing financial and other services.<sup>64</sup> Families experiencing poverty typically have to

spend a high proportion of their incomes on food, restricting other spending and creating vulnerabilities to inflation and price shocks. Goods and services can be more expensive for poorer people because of the higher cost of provision (for example in rural areas, or insurance products where poorer people experience more risk) and a related lack of competition. Poorer people may also face higher costs where they need to buy goods in smaller units, over shorter timescales or using more expensive payment methods. Richer households both have more resources and can obtain a better deal in the market.<sup>65</sup> Extending access to affordable goods and services, including credit/financial services for the poorest families, provides a further strategy to support households with children.



Credit: Save the Children

A family in Nepal

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## Conclusion: who can make a difference?

Child poverty is multidimensional in its causes and its consequences for children, families and societies. No one policy will eradicate child poverty. Drawing on the experience of 20 research, advocacy and programmes organisations this paper has identified core building blocks which are important to reduce poverty and its impacts on children and create opportunities for growing out of poverty for children today and future generations. In summary the paper has argued:

1. Good data and measurement frame debates about child poverty. The SDGs require national reporting of child poverty, which supports stronger monitoring of progress and evaluation of policies. The SDG reporting process can also be used to celebrate success and share best practice in how to put children at the centre of national and regional action to eliminate extreme poverty and the deprivations associated with it.
2. National recognition of child poverty is a key step. Political leadership is critical and can be supported and sustained by civil society. Ensuring the voices of children and families in poverty are heard within policy making, programme design and monitoring supports accountability and rights and is a way to help make policies more effective.
3. Expanding child sensitive social protection is a critical underpinning for efforts to reduce poverty directly and supports the effectiveness of other policies and basic service provision for children.
4. Quality and equitable public services, covering rights to education, health and protection, are vital for all children. Ensuring these reach the poorest and most excluded children through pro-active measures is an important strategy to reduce the impacts of poverty for girls and boys and children of all abilities and backgrounds alike.
5. Access to decent work is a critical underpinning for policy to reduce child poverty. There are specific interventions which may be of particular help for families with children and for poor and disadvantaged young people as they enter the labour market. Ensuring that markets work effectively for poorer families is also a way to improve opportunities and living standards.

Across these domains identifying the root causes of child poverty and childhood deprivations in each setting and designing relevant measures – including to influence social norms and attitudes in favour of children and eliminate forms of discrimination –

is essential for policies to be effective in the national context.

Ultimately many of the actions identified in this briefing require state action – supporting parents and other caregivers to support children. While States have a central responsibility as main duty bearers, Governments are not the only actors who should contribute to tackling poverty and deprivations among children: this is a shared challenge, for all of society:

- Opinion leaders such as community and faith leaders, civil society advocates, researchers and journalists can help make the case for greater action on child poverty. Making the challenge of child poverty clear and urgent helps Governments prioritise this issue.
- Alongside civil servants, politicians, researchers, civil society advocates and businesses may also contribute by identifying where existing policies do not serve children well and by suggesting innovative solutions.
- Businesses have a vital role in ensuring employees and suppliers have decent work. They can also help ensure that the poorest people have access to affordable goods and services, including by supporting financial inclusion. Private enterprise exists to generate a return on investments, but sustainability principles adopted by the best businesses recognise a wider responsibility, including to respect the rights of children and to invest in the capabilities of new entrants to the work force.
- Essential services are delivered not only by the state but by faith based, civil society and private sector organisations, sometimes in partnership with national or local Government. Such organisations can contribute by ‘poverty-proofing’ their actions by working to ensure inclusion, equity and impacts for the poorest people. A recurring message from people living in poverty is they often do not feel treated with dignity. Identifying positive ways to empower those affected by poverty and to reduce the psychological as well as physical and economic pressures they are subject to is a central contribution to supporting poorer children.

Ending child poverty will assure healthy and skilled future generations, and evidence shows that it is an investment that not only pays back, but more than pays for itself. Ultimately, however, the case for tackling child poverty is not financial: it is to fulfil the right of every child to achieve her or his potential.

## Notes

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The Global Coalition to End Child Poverty is a global initiative to raise awareness about children living in poverty across the world and support global and national action to alleviate it. Our members work together as part of the Coalition, as well as individually, to achieve a world where all children grow up free from poverty, deprivation and exclusion.

