



The Global Coalition to End Child Poverty

CHILD POVERTY: A CALL TO TACKLE ITS PERSISTENCE

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Executive Summary

Before the Covid-19 pandemic hit in 2019, 689 million people across the world were living in extreme poverty¹ and 1.3 billion in multidimensional poverty². Children are disproportionately impacted by poverty; they are twice as likely as adults to be living in extreme³ and multidimensional poverty⁴. People living in extreme poverty are often among the chronically poor and their children struggle to escape poverty. Children growing up in extreme poverty are more likely to experience extreme poverty in adulthood compared to their peers who experience moderate or no poverty (Bird, 2010⁵, Bird and Higgins, 2011⁶). Children in chronically poor households are also more likely to experience malnutrition and stunting and wasting⁷, which will affect their cognitive and physical development and their life-long earnings. They are far less likely to complete primary school, let alone gain the secondary school education that is necessary for them to obtain decent work in the formal sector. They have less access to good quality health care, meaning that they are more likely to experience illness or even die prematurely. Social and institutional maltreatment (stigma and discrimination; family separation) towards children and families living in extreme poverty create additional obstacles to break the vicious cycle of exclusion and poverty.

Money invested early in childhood and during adolescence means that less needs to be spent later in the life course to keep people out of poverty. Since poverty affects boys and girls differently (for instance, early marriage and pregnancies or caregiving responsibility for girls), special attention needs to be given to the gendered impact of poverty. Equally important are investments in social protection systems providing children and their caregivers with income support and links to other services which can be critical in meeting children's basic needs and allowing families in poverty to stay together and lead a life of dignity. In addition, strong emotional support systems for children are needed as well as policies combating stigmatization, fostering social cohesion and integration.

Why we need to tackle persistent poverty

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 calls for ending poverty in all its forms by 2030. The UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, has called on governments, as they plan for a post-pandemic world, to seize the opportunity to “build back better” by creating more sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies. These objectives can only be achieved by tackling the intergenerational persistence of extreme poverty. This requires a focus on both individuals and structural and institutional barriers.

Why extreme poverty persists

Multiple factors explain why extreme poverty persists today, now all the more aggravated with the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic:

- Fewer opportunities for parents for decent employment to earn enough to accumulate assets, save and move out of poverty.
- Child stunting and wasting levels potentially stagnating or increasing - creating 'irreversibilities' in cognition and physical development that persist into adulthood and limit economic opportunities.
- School dropout due to poverty, school fees, small charges, and sometimes the need for children to earn money and thus falling into child labour. Children from poor homes are often at a real disadvantage and rarely complete their education, limiting life-long earnings and making it much more likely that they will live in poverty during adulthood. This is especially true for girls dropping out of secondary school⁸.
- Early marriage, with rates increased in many countries, as families look for a way to survive and school closures result in higher numbers of teenage pregnancies.
- Poor access to health care and low-quality diagnostic and curative care leading to high levels of mortality and morbidity and high levels of acquired disability.
- Ongoing protracted crises in Fragile and Conflict Affected States directly affecting children's socio-emotional development and physical wellbeing and leading to starvation, famine and poverty.
- Natural disasters and climate change causing recurrent shocks, making it hard for families, especially those dependent on natural resources and agriculture, to improve their livelihoods in marginal land.

Additionally, there is a need to strengthen policies explicitly addressing child poverty with evidence-based approaches such as child benefits, that are sufficiently funded through tax reforms. In low-income countries lacking fiscal space, support from international financial organizations would be needed.

Persistent poverty as a vicious cycle of disempowerment, stigmatization, discrimination

People in poverty face constraints beyond their control and this is particularly true for people living in extreme poverty. As recognized by the Human Rights Council in the Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights adopted in 2012, persons living in extreme poverty suffer from such levels of marginalization, exclusion and stigmatization that they are often not reached

effectively by public policies and services. The Guiding Principles conclude that “Persons experiencing extreme poverty live in a vicious cycle of powerlessness, stigmatization, discrimination, exclusion and material deprivation, which all mutually reinforce one another⁹”. Such accumulations of hardship can cause extreme poverty to persist from one generation to the next.

The international participatory research project ‘The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty’ by ATD Fourth World and Oxford University¹⁰ further shows how the policy context can put up barriers and actively marginalize and exclude people in poverty. Institutional and social mistreatment were identified as two of the nine dimensions of poverty. Institutional maltreatment is the failure of national or international institutions, through action or inaction, to respond appropriately and respectfully to the needs of people living in poverty, leading to their being ignored, humiliated or harmed. The inability of authorities to listen to people experiencing poverty, inequitable distribution of resources and services, lack of access to justice and persistent corruption are all aspects of institutional mistreatment. Social maltreatment describes the way in which people experiencing poverty are negatively perceived and mistreated by other people and groups around them. In all countries, individuals and families in poverty are stigmatized and discriminated against.

One of the results is that children growing up in conditions of extreme poverty often fail to benefit from the emotional security that is necessary for a child to have the self-confidence that comes from feeling valued and loved. Instead, too often, parents are separated from their children because of poverty¹¹ - a cause of great suffering on the part of both parents and children.

In some developed countries such as the USA, families in poverty are occasionally separated as a result of institutional interventions, because child welfare systems often question the ability of parents living in poverty to raise their children properly and do not provide them with the necessary forms of support. Poverty should not be the reason for family separation¹². Even more unfortunately, alternative care arrangements may fail to offer children from poor families the conditions they need to thrive. When they come of age, some youth leaving their foster families or institutions can face severe food insecurity¹³, and plunge back into poverty or homelessness¹⁴.

In developing countries, too often parents in poverty are faced with impossible choices. Seeing their children suffer from all the hardships of poverty, and trying to give them another chance, however slim, to have a little more security, a very small minority of parents are led to place their children in centres such as orphanages, or entrust them to another family member or a simple acquaintance¹⁵. However, too often the conditions imposed on the children do not meet the parent’s expectations, and the children remain trapped in poverty.

Another aspect in the experience of persistent poverty is the invisibility experienced by people living in poverty and the lack of recognition of their contributions, especially when it comes to labor both in the informal and the formal economy. In countries where families cannot rely on social welfare, children, youth and adults find activities in the informal sector to meet the needs of their families. They represent a contribution that is not valued but is instead heavily exploited by the formal economy sector. These include the recycling of waste, the marketing of low-cost factory products - especially plastic - and the selling of basic necessities in small affordable units, such as drinking water in bags or SIM cards for cell phones. Working in the informal sector also entails a lack of workers’ protections and social benefits, which increases precarity and potential for abuse from institutions and individuals¹⁶.

Calling for action: in post-Covid recovery, now is the time to tackle persistent poverty

1. We need a change of language. Many of the documents on intergenerational poverty use the term 'transmission of poverty'. This carries the unfortunate connotation that poverty is a form of social illness that is transmitted from one person to the next - potentially further adding to stigma and mistreatment. The notion of intergenerational transmission suggests that it is the parents who are guilty of transmitting to their children the poverty that they themselves inherited. It ignores the many structural and institutional barriers that trap families in poverty over many generations. Instead, we call for using the term 'persistence of poverty', for it implies many other levels of responsibility, including those of governments, in addition to those of parents.
2. With Covid-19 causing many more to fall into extreme poverty, we call for maintaining a focus on those living in chronic poverty. Covid-19 has given rise to great concern about people who have become the 'new poor'. World Bank projections estimate that the total number of additional people falling into extreme poverty following the pandemic could be as high as 150 million¹⁷, and we know that more than half of those in extreme poverty are children. Looking at multidimensional child poverty, UNICEF and Save the Children project an estimated 1.2 billion children are now multidimensionally poor, deprived in critical areas such as nutrition, health, housing, and education - 15% increase since the crisis took hold¹⁸. Much of the policy attention has shifted to the increase in poverty and ways to stop it, such as through social protection. This is to be welcomed and it is important to have a focus on the new poor, without risking that the focus on the 'new poor' will shift attention (even further) away from the intergenerational persistence of extreme poverty and from patterns of marginalisation, exclusion, stigmatisation and powerlessness that mutually reinforce each other.
3. We need greater acknowledgement that poverty, including child poverty, is a deliberate policy choice. The narrative around 'Leave no one behind' that underpins Agenda 2030 and the SDGs presupposes that policies are inherently good but might fail to include everyone. It overlooks the hidden dimensions of social and institutional maltreatment and ignores the fact that parents in poverty are often actively ignored, humiliated and harmed. Institutional and structural barriers can maintain families in a state of deep and chronic poverty. We argue that tackling extreme poverty requires challenging this status quo.
4. To reverse the current trend and eliminate the persistence of poverty, we need:
 - Investment in Child sensitive Social Protection (CSSP) systems, to help realize the rights of children and help families to cope with chronic poverty, stresses and shocks, enabling them to invest on an adequate and continuing basis in their children's well-being^{19, 20}.
 - Universal Child Benefits, providing cash benefits to families with children regardless of a family's income²¹.
 - Targeted measures to support children from the poorest families or from particularly under-served or discriminated against communities (women and girls, persons with disability, indigenous groups, internally displaced and refugees etc). Some examples include free places at pre-schools to ensure that they are 'education ready' when they start primary; free school meals; homework clubs; teaching and learning in mother tongue.

- Access to quality healthcare that is free for all, non-judgmental, and covers all aspects of physical and mental health. Active efforts to increase trust towards health institutions are also necessary.
- Free quality education and support for all children. Efforts must be made to combat stigmatization and stereotypes which make it harder for children living in poverty to feel safe in schools.
- Support to keep families together. Parents must be considered as the first partners in ensuring a child's psychological and physical development. Child protection services need to work in favor of children and their families in poverty. Further research is necessary to better understand the relationships between poverty and family separation.
- Affordable and quality childcare for all families, especially the most vulnerable ones. Childcare matters for building human capital and relates to a web of diverse issues that include women's employment, family welfare, child development, business productivity, and the overall economy²².
- Lower-cost insurance and financial services to increase the resilience of families dependent on insecure and climate-vulnerable sources of livelihoods to feed and care for their children.
- Important actions also include support to household income diversification and timely, child-sensitive disaster response and livelihood recovery measures.
- Labour market rights and interventions in both formal and informal labour markets to provide a foundation for reducing child poverty. Decent work involves greater access to jobs, labour rights (such as parental leave) and social protection measures. Opportunities to acquire skills for future employment are critical, particularly for deprived adolescents²³.
- Laws against any forms of discriminations for reasons of social or economic status. Combating stigmatization by changing the narrative on families living in persistent poverty is essential, notably through media, participatory research and in public debates.
- Policies that address gender inequalities (equal pay, parental leave, equal access to social services and social protection, education, healthcare, financial empowerment, participation in public life and decision making etc.)



Endnotes

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About the Global Coalition to End Child Poverty

The Coalition is a network of like-minded organizations concerned at the devastating effects of poverty in childhood on children and societies. The Coalition promotes the need for countries and development actors to explicitly focus on child poverty and the solutions to it in national, subnational, regional and global policies, budgets and monitoring systems.

Coalition participants share a vision of a world where all children grow up free from poverty, deprivation and exclusion. Working together through the Coalition, as well as independently, Coalition participants aim to support the recognition of child poverty and the practical actions to alleviate it.

