

The Everyday Environments of Children's Poverty

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This special issue of *Children, Youth and Environments* is made up primarily of papers that were originally presented at a 2008 conference entitled "Rethinking Poverty: Making Policies that Work for Children." This was one of a series of international conferences focused on poverty, children and policies sponsored by UNICEF and the Graduate Program in International Affairs at The New School in New York City, which brought together experts from more than 50 countries. The goal of the 2008 conference was to promote the recognition, within the larger poverty discourse, of child poverty as a priority for policy and as a phenomenon in its own right with distinct characteristics. The presentations covered a range of angles but shared the view that child poverty has multiple dimensions, and provided insights for the debate at both conceptual and practical levels.

This special issue has been something of an experiment, in the sense that it focuses attention on a critical dimension of child poverty that has been relatively neglected in the past. The CYE journal revolves around the understanding that material and spatial realities are a potent dimension in children's lives—that the physical environment is not just the setting where things happen, but a force in its own right. These papers, on the other hand, were not conceived with any particular reference to the physical environment. Yet it was clear on first reading these papers that the physical environment emerged repeatedly as an implicit theme. In many cases it was an integral dimension of the discussion of child poverty. It seemed worth trying to make this link more explicit and we found contributors to the conference—demographers, economists, sociologists, practitioners in poverty reduction—who were willing to take part in this effort.

Drawing out this link was not always easy, however. For some of our authors, highlighting environmental factors was a relatively simple task, involving perhaps some restructuring or checking national data on environmental factors. For others it meant going back to their findings and re-analyzing data from this new perspective. For still others, accustomed to communicating with their peers through the language of economic formulae, translating their work into terms that would be accessible to a more generalist audience required time-consuming revisions, generously undertaken as part of an effort to reach a wider audience and create bridges between disciplines.

The bridging has been multi-directional. One of the contributions, the only one not from the original conference, is by Gary Evans, a familiar name to most people in environmental psychology. While the work of some of our economist contributors had been a real challenge for one of us editors—who comes from a background in child development, for the other editor—whose training is in economics—Gary's work was baffling. We both became more aware of just how impenetrable our familiar worlds could be. Habitual terms offer precision and clarity to those who are initiates within a particular world, but can shut others out. Insights that could add depth to our own work end up remaining unexplored. Roger Hart, familiar to many readers of this journal, has always claimed that he tries to write in language his mother would understand. While we have not achieved that level of accessibility with all these papers, for all of us involved, it has been an interesting challenge to try to straddle the gaps. We believe that the range of backgrounds and expertise represented here, along with a shared conceptual and ideological vision, contribute to making this a rich issue. We would like to thank all our authors for their kind patience and commitment, the reviewers for their wisdom and support, and the editors of CYE for having faith that this would be a worthwhile experiment.

The reasons for this experiment? Responding to poverty remains a major challenge of our times, and there is growing realization that children's poverty has some distinct qualities that should be more seriously considered within the policy debates. We need to bring as much shared expertise to this challenge as possible. As Egyptian Ambassador Moushira Khattab stressed in her opening address at the New School conference, "Child poverty, which is a fundamental denial of children's rights...must be the subject of a much broader range of practices than are often associated with discussions of 'the rights of the child'." But it is not just a matter of taking the broad perspective. Solutions must also be effectively targeted. Ambassador Khattab adds that, "in order to provide clear guidance for policy, we need to move away from an approach that gives all rights equal weight, to a strategy of choosing clear implementation priorities." The papers in this issue, along with considerable evidence from other quarters, make it clear that explicitly including living conditions among these priorities is central to addressing child poverty and the associated reproduction of chronic poverty from generation to generation. Poverty has a profound effect on the places where people live, but the quality of physical surroundings also shapes and defines the experience of poverty, perhaps most clearly for children. It is fair to say that most of the violations of children's rights worldwide are related to deprivations in their living conditions.

These papers look at aspects of child poverty in a number of countries. The greatest number of papers, not surprisingly, focus on sub-Saharan Africa. Notten looks at the links between monetary poverty and physical deprivation in the Republic of Congo, Delamonica and Minujin at similar trends in Tanzania. Wasswa-Matovu reports on primary education in Uganda. Mitik and Decaluwé model the likely impacts of trade liberalization in South Africa for children's household work and time in school; Boyden takes a somewhat different approach to children's household work, reporting on the Ethiopian data from the international Young Lives study.

From Asia, Cockburn and colleagues discuss the allocation of calories within poor households in Bangladesh, and Köhler and colleagues describe a cash transfer program in Nepal. Dercon and Krishnan, also reporting on Young Lives data, consider the psychosocial implications of deprivation in all four study countries: India, Vietnam, Ethiopia and Peru. The Americas are represented by the discussion of this Peruvian component of Young Lives, and by the research of Evans and colleagues with rural adolescents in the United States. Krieger and Ribar look at the impacts of electricity prices on children in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Salazar at the efforts of civil society in Iran, and Ambassador Khattab's introduction focuses on advances in Egypt. Nandy and Gordon take a global perspective on children living in squalor.

The authors discuss children's poverty from a range of perspectives, which can be summed up in three categories: 1) the identification and measurement of poverty/child poverty; 2) the impacts of poverty on children, and especially of material deprivations and inadequacies in living conditions; and 3) implications for policy and for interventions at various levels. Many of the papers contribute to more than one of these categories.

The Identification and Measurement of Poverty

Despite a general recognition of the multidimensional nature of poverty, the policy discourse still tends to revolve around monetary poverty lines. Those who are poor in monetary terms are also more likely to be deprived in other areas. However, there are many aspects of deprivation that are not fully responsive to income. Discussion of children's poverty focuses attention on the multidimensional aspect of poverty, and on the range of deficits that can undermine well-being and long-term potential. Many of these are aspects of children's living conditions.

Several papers in this volume make it clear that monetary poverty lines are inadequate in identifying children's deprivation. Nandy and Gordon, revisiting data from their groundbreaking 2003 Bristol study on child poverty (Gordon et al. 2003), remind us that absolute poverty is defined internationally to include deprivation in basic human needs, and that it depends not only on income but on access to services. According to the Bristol study, the most severe deprivations for children globally are in the areas of shelter, sanitation and water. Notten, focusing on the Republic of Congo, indicates that using monetary data correctly identifies deprived children only 58 percent of the time. Many of the Congolese children who qualify as

severely deprived in terms of physical environment dimensions (water and sanitation, housing, transportation and communication) would not qualify as poor in monetary terms. For instance, based on her data, nearly 73 percent qualify as deprived in terms of water and sanitation, but "only" 42 percent are simultaneously monetarily poor and deprived in water and sanitation. Having money above the poverty line does not guarantee access to the services that are critical for health and well-being, and that are vital to optimal developmental outcomes over the long term.

Although monetary measures may not be adequate as an indicator of child well-being, Dercon and Krishnan defend the use of a monetary consumption measure for defining poverty in the context of the Young Lives research. They point out that when large-scale assessments are made, an absence of rich and easily comparable data means a reliance on a small number of proxy indicators such as housing materials or access to water, while other critical aspects remain unmeasured. While use of a monetary measure is often criticized, they argue

its key advantage in our context is that it offers a comprehensive measure of spending power, beyond just dimensions related to housing and utilities. A further advantage over other possible measures, such as an asset index based on a number of durables owned, is that it is using more detailed data, leading to an overall continuous measure, rather than one based on a small number of categorical data.

But identifying children in poverty is not just a matter of the measure used. It is also a question of whether or not children are in fact the unit of observation. Whatever the measure used to determine poverty, there seems to be little question that if you are a child, you are more likely to be poor. Yet children frequently remain hidden in efforts to measure poverty, since statistics on deprivation of various kinds are seldom broken down by age. In their 2003 study, Nandy and Gordon made the important point that household poverty is not necessarily an accurate proxy for the poverty of children within that household, and that the number of children in poverty globally is far greater than might be assumed from household-level data.

Cockburn and colleagues' paper anchors this reality in hard data from Bangladesh on caloric consumption, determining the actual calories consumed by every member of the sample households relative to their activity and caloric needs, and using this as a poverty line proxy. The findings indicate that when household averages are used rather than individual consumption, the poverty status of about 30 percent of children is misidentified. Cockburn finds that the poorer the household (in terms of total calories available for all members) the greater the chance that adults will be given priority over children in the distribution of calories. When the household has more calories than it needs, children are more likely to get the surplus. Children, then, are the primary means through which adjustments are made within the household on this basic need, and in very poor households, children are even more deprived than their elders.

Mitik and Decaluwé's account of parental decisions around children's time use in South Africa also makes it clear that assessments of household well-being do not often take account of the realities for individual children. Household stability, for instance, may actually be related to children working more hours. While the household holds its own in terms of income, individual children may bear the brunt.

One common feature of discussion about the identification of poverty has to do with rural-urban disparities. Urban children have long been considered less poor in almost all dimensions than rural children and better off in terms of most indicators of well-being. A number of papers in this collection highlight this disparity, drawing for instance on Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data to point to higher levels of poverty in rural areas from both monetary and asset perspectives. Nandy and Gordon make this case globally; Delamonica and Minujin for Tanzania. Boyden, drawing from the Ethiopian dataset in the Young Lives research, also points to an urban advantage, a situation also apparent in the samples within the project's other countries. Preliminary findings have shown better outcomes for the urban sample children in school achievement, as well as in access to services and infrastructure.

However, it is important not to contribute here to common misperceptions about the severity of urban poverty. Some of the authors in this volume point to the pitfalls inherent in a discussion of rural-urban disparities. The "urban advantage" so often referred to in discussions of poverty and deprivation is generally based on aggregated urban data that mask what can be far larger disparities within cities. As Delamonica and Minujin point out, the standard deviation for urban averages in Tanzania is far larger than that for rural areas, pointing to a greater depth of poverty in urban areas than is at first apparent from the numbers. Nandy and Gordon also point to the under-representation of those in urban poverty—"slums, shanty towns and favelas are rarely covered sufficiently by household surveys" (220).

There is also the argument that urban children benefit from a range of services and facilities that are not available to children in rural poverty. This may be true for some parts of the population, but when urban data are disaggregated, disparities in services as well as income become more obvious. Mitik and Decaluwé, focusing on South Africa, note for example that while 94 percent of children living in formal urban areas had a water tap inside the dwelling or on the site where they lived, this was true for only 42 percent of those in informal urban settlements.

The sheer density in urban slums can also make it difficult to use the same material assets and services as a basis for comparison. Notten points out that although urban households may appear to be better off in terms of various indicators, in fact the challenges inherent in certain levels of deprivation may be more severe in urban areas. Latrines are a good example: provision that might keep a child from being defined as deprived may in fact be overcrowded or unusable public or community latrines; both threats to health and levels of hardship can be much higher than for an equivalent level of provision in rural areas. A growing body of literature is beginning to indicate that failure to reach many of the Millennium Development Goals may be related to declining conditions in poor urban areas. In

many countries, urban poor children actually face higher rates of stunting and mortality than those in rural areas (Van den Poel, O'Donnell, and van Doorslaer 2007); and in a growing number of countries, urban children are falling behind their rural counterparts in terms of school enrollment (UNESCO 2008). A substantial body of research at this point indicates that if household wealth is controlled for, the rural/urban gap in mortality and malnutrition disappears (Fotso 2007).

The Impacts of Poverty on Children

Using children as the unit of observation can lead to different measures for poverty, but also to a different understanding of the impacts of various manifestations of poverty both within the household and externally. This is far from being a simple exercise, however. Jo Boyden discusses the complexity of relating exposure to the various risks associated with poverty to outcomes for children: "In situations of severe hardship such as apply in many parts of Ethiopia, it becomes extremely difficult to distinguish between risk and protection, resilience and endurance, agency and obligation, in the lives of children." Many variables come into play, and they relate to one another in complex ways. However, there is little doubt that insufficient income, exclusion in various spheres, limited access to resources and inadequate provision for basic needs can have critical impacts. These impacts can vary in important ways depending on such factors as age, gender and location.

For the youngest children especially, the deprivations of poverty can affect life on the most basic level, as is reflected in the disproportionately high mortality and morbidity rates for children under five in poverty. These rates are closely tied, as Nandy and Gordon emphasize, to inadequacies in living conditions. Governments and local authorities, when making decisions about allocating scarce resources often penalize their youngest citizens, who are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of inadequate housing and poor provision for water and sanitation. As Cockburn and colleagues make so clear, however, decisions that penalize children also take place within households.

The disproportionate health impacts for the under-five age group can mean that less attention is given to how poverty affects older children. Several papers in this collection address this gap, indicating that as children get older, certain aspects of poverty become more burdensome. Work loads increase, for instance, and the sense of stigma can become more debilitating. The psychosocial impacts begin to take precedence. Dercon and Krishnan, looking at a cohort of 12-year-olds, point to the effects that material circumstances can have for children's self esteem, efficacy and aspirations, as well as their feelings of inclusion. Evans and colleagues find that adolescents living in poverty experience significantly more "hassles" in their daily lives than middle-income youth, especially within the family context, where chaotic living conditions and a lack of privacy contribute to their sense of stress.

Children's work loads, both within and outside the home, are a focus of discussion in several of these papers. Not surprisingly, work loads go up when household resources are more limited. For the most part it is assumed that this is a negative consequence of poverty, since higher work loads cut into children's time for school and leisure. Boyden makes the case, however, that children's contributions to the

family through work can be a protective factor, contributing to their pride, resilience and competence. It can also, however, be a source of shame when it conflicts, for example, with traditional gender roles. She argues that a more nuanced view is necessary of a range of adversities associated with poverty.

There is mixed evidence in this volume regarding gender disparities. Many assumptions are made about girls being worse off than boys, and some of these papers offer evidence supporting these assumptions. Krieger and Ribar find that electricity price increases are likely to increase girls' workloads far more than those of boys; Mitik and Decaluwé find the same thing in South Africa, with girls providing twice the household labor of boys, and with their workloads more likely to increase in the context of trade liberalization. Wasswa-Matovu finds that, while figures show much-improved gender equity in schooling in Uganda, in fact girls still face many disadvantages. Enrollment may show near parity, but there is a widening gap in absenteeism, drop out and completion rates beyond fourth grade.

Other papers, however, find unexpectedly little evidence of serious gender differences. In Bangladesh, the study on household calorie allocations finds that girls are in only slightly worse shape than boys in this regard. The Young Lives research, while finding few gender effects, points to some advantages for girls. In Peru and India girls were found to have more sense of inclusion in society, and in Vietnam they had higher educational aspirations than boys. (The reverse is true in India). Boyden finds that in Ethiopia, exposure to risk is less related to gender than to other factors such as place of residence. It is worth considering that gender stereotyping may in some places be leading to a relative neglect of the problems faced by boys.

Adversity can affect all families and individuals. However, it is well-accepted that in poor families the sheer accumulation of adversity challenges resilience, and can mean permanent damage for children. These long-term implications, in turn, are critical to breaking the cycle of poverty. Investing in children, not only through health and education, but also through a recognition of the importance of their psychological strength and well-being, is critical to reducing the transmission of poverty from generation to generation. As noted in a growing body of research (see for instance *IDS Bulletin* 40(1), 2009) the transmission of poverty is not just about the lack of material goods or disparities in their distribution, but is also related to specific deprivations in one generation that tend to affect the subsequent generation. Maternal education, for instance, appears in much of the research to be a critical factor associated with child nutrition and poor educational outcomes. Although the Young Lives research team has not yet written up all their findings, they note that a mother's sense of her own personal agency appears to be a most significant determinant in children's self-esteem, self-efficacy, agency and sense of inclusion, and is certainly more important than the degree of poverty a child experiences or the number of adversities. This sense of personal agency can be strongly linked to physical living conditions, and to women's capacity to have some sense of control over the circumstances of their lives.

Implications for Policy and Intervention at Different Levels

Identifying children in poverty and understanding the impacts of their poverty are important steps in addressing the issues—but the knowledge has to be acted upon. The evidence has to find its way into the policy agenda and program design and development. The papers in this issue make it clear that for policy to be effective—or even to keep it from being damaging—the implications of child poverty have to be recognized in very concrete ways. In the world of economic policy, the dynamic is too often from the economy to the household, with a particular focus on consumption at the receiving end. These papers make it clear that there has to be a pipeline from the household, and from children's lives, to the economy, and that economic and social policies must be linked. Policy decisions for children tend to happen within a fairly narrow domain, and are most often focused on services related to health and education—and in wealthier countries, to protective social services. As Krieger and Ribar point out, there is still “little explicit recognition in standard economic policy making of the impacts for children's well-being, much less an explicit objective of reaching children.”

Two papers in this collection use models to determine the potential outcomes of different policy decisions, and find profound impacts on children's everyday lives. Krieger and Ribar discuss the implications of the increase in the electricity tariff that would certainly accompany privatization of electricity provision in Bosnia and Herzegovina, describing the potentially large effects for children's health and nutrition, their workloads and their access to information. Mitik and Decaluwé illustrate how trade liberalization can influence children, in this case through their parents' decisions about their schooling, household work and leisure.

Understanding the impacts for children of economic policies often requires unique methods and approaches. So-called non-market activities, for instance, performed mainly by women and girls, are rarely included in economic analyses, but clearly need to be for a more comprehensive understanding of the implications of policy. This involves different approaches to data collection. Mitik and Decaluwé, by incorporating non-market activities in an expanded approach to National Accounts, makes it possible to discuss the household-level tradeoffs implicit in larger economic policies. Krieger and Ribar also point to the value of Child Impact Assessments for these purposes. A particular value of these impact assessments is that they can open a way to children's involvement in policy formulation, drawing on their experience rather than just the opinions of other experts and stakeholders.

The recognition, discussed in a number of these papers, that poverty for children is not always a reflection of poverty levels in their households, has critical implications for policy and practice. As Cockburn and colleagues point out, groups of individuals, rather than groups of households, may need to be targeted for poverty reduction. But since it is easier to target households than individuals, the focus should be on the characteristics of households within which negative discrimination against children is most likely to occur. Nandy and Gordon make a related point. Investment should focus far more intensively on those deprivations that most seriously affect children—shelter, sanitation and water. Not only are more children

affected by deprivation in these areas, but the impacts of these deprivations are likely to have disproportionate effects.

Attention to access to a quality education is of course also a primary area of intervention. Dercon and Krishnan, pointing to how caregivers' education and school participation correlate to psychosocial competencies (as well as to numerous other measures of child well-being), find yet another reason to view education as a mechanism that can overcome the transmission of poverty over time. Even here, however, a number of physical environment factors can come into play. Wasswa-Matovu looks at the Universal Primary Education program in Uganda, which has explicitly aimed to reduce disparities in education over the last decade. The program has been successful on a number of fronts, increasing enrollment and making improvements on a number of quality indicators (like pupil/teacher ratios). Yet many of the most disadvantaged children remain excluded, either unenrolled because of their extreme poverty or residence in isolated areas, or excluded after enrollment by virtue of the many circumstances that push them to drop out or that limit their achievement. These include overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms, homes that make study impossible, household chores that eat into homework time, and poor achievement related to under-nutrition and the conditions that contribute to it. The UPE program, despite its objectives of reaching all children, has had to be supplemented by alternative initiatives that are better able to take the specific environments of a range of marginalized children into account.

Cash transfers, an increasingly common poverty reduction measure that in many cases is undertaken by national government, have been found effective in many countries. The design of these programs involves some critical decisions. Targeting poor households seems intuitively a more effective use of generally limited resources. Yet, there are numerous compelling arguments for a universal benefit, not least of which is the relatively resource-intensive task of identifying those households that should be targeted, and taking into account the many confounding factors that can result in unfair allocations, often missing those that really need help. (Cockburn's paper, looking at the inequities in intrahousehold allocations, pinpoints one potential area where targeting can go badly wrong). Another important choice is whether these transfers should be conditional or unconditional. Should parents, for instance, be required to demonstrate that their children are attending school regularly or receiving necessary health services in order to get the transfer? Köhler and colleagues describe the factors in Nepal that helped to shape family decisions. Their discussion makes it clear that there is no one right answer, but that effective programs are very context-specific. In Nepal's many isolated areas with rugged terrain, for instance, schools can be at a considerable distance, and a program conditional on school attendance would be very unfair.

We speak easily of the need for civil society to play a role in poverty reduction. Salazar-Volkmann's paper on the role of civil society in Iran indicates how complex this role can be. Salazar-Volkmann argues that the current social protection system in the country is limited in its capacity to address the nation's growing economic

and social inequalities. He discusses the role of religious charities and NGOs, considering not only the constraints resulting from excessive government control and forbidden access to foreign support, but also the limited capacity and lack of cooperation among organizations. However, despite limitations, various religious and civil society groups manage to find creative approaches to engagement. Religious foundations and organizations, founded on Islamic beliefs in social justice, religious charity and personal duty, have done a great deal through subsidies, cash transfers and various services to reduce poverty and achieve progress in healthcare, nutrition and education. More independent NGOs have played a greater role in areas government is not eager to address, such as HIV/AIDS, drug abuse and juvenile justice issues.

Conclusion

Many of the papers in this collection focus on making visible what is often hidden at the policy level—the invisibility of children in poverty statistics, the invisibility of certain children even within child-focused programs, the invisibility of children's household work, and the invisibility of the psychological and social side of children's poverty, so often with implications that can entrench poverty from one generation to another. A number of papers also point to the invisibility of children's resilience and of their capacity to be active protagonists in the struggle to reduce poverty.

The particular objective of this volume as a whole, however, has been to draw attention to a factor that also commonly remains invisible—the capacity of material and spatial realities to shape, express and mediate the experience of poverty for children. It would be simplistic to dwell exclusively on any one aspect of the complex phenomenon of poverty. These papers, however, contribute to our understanding of a range of ways that environmental realities underpin and reinforce poverty, and they strengthen the recognition that locally relevant, child-sensitive ways to address environmental deprivations and exclusions are fundamental to long-term poverty reduction.

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