

Review of *Global Child Poverty and Well-Being: Measurement, Concepts, Policy and Action*

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Global Child Poverty and Well-Being: Measurement, Concepts, Policy and Action.

Edited by Alberto Minujin and Shailen Nandy

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Child poverty—in both absolute and relative forms—is omnipresent. There are 3.6 million children living in poverty in the United Kingdom (Department for Work and Pensions, 2012), one of the richest countries in the world, and worldwide at least 25 per cent of children live below the international poverty line of US\$1.25 per day (UNICEF, 2012). Yet despite this little attention is paid to child poverty within mainstream international development policy and practice (Jones and Sumner, 2011). This substantial volume—23 chapters—brings together most of the key authors in the field of global childhood poverty research and multidimensional measurement. Its aim is to use national and regional level case studies to show how work on the measurement and alleviation of child poverty has developed over the past two decades in relation to how child poverty is conceptualized and the availability of data to monitor its effects. After a brief introduction, the second chapter by Pemberton et al examines the potential of international human rights frameworks and conventions as a means to hold “duty bearers” such as governments to account if children’s needs are not met. The importance of having a universal architecture underpinning the design of anti-poverty policies is returned to by Levitas (chapter 18) and Townsend (chapter 20) in relation to the provision of universal child benefit and a guaranteed basic income. In the third chapter Vandermoortele addresses the failings of growth-focused approaches to development and the potential of child-

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focused policies to increase attention to equity. The equivocal impacts of rapid economic growth can be seen in the case study of Vietnam (Roelen and Gassman, chapter 13) and the overview of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia by Nandy in chapter 17. The fourth chapter by Gordon and Nandy outlines the 'Bristol approach' to poverty measurement which, as I discuss below, underpins the majority of the chapters in this book, including the chapter that follows it (chapter 5). Chapter 4 also provides a useful critique of poverty measures, including problems inherent in the United Nations Development Programme's celebrated Multidimensional Poverty Index (UNDP MPI, pp.75-78). The limitations of existing data are returned to in chapter 10, which critically reviews the types of data available to policy makers on child-related policies and outcomes. Chapters five to seventeen present examples of poverty measurement in South Africa, United States of America, Europe, Tanzania, Congo Brazzaville, Vietnam, Iran, Haiti, Latin America, Caribbean, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. The remaining five chapters address conceptual and methodological issues, for example, the implications of different measures for the prevalence of child poverty in Morocco. These chapters are discussed below, following a brief account of the volume's history.

The volume was initiated at an international event in New York in 2007 to launch the United Nations Children's Fund's (UNICEF) Global Study on Child Poverty and Disparities. The Global Study ran from 2007-2009 in over 50 countries (chapter 21). It aimed to produce comparable data on child poverty and methodological reflections on the challenges of engaging with a range of stakeholders¹. While the Global Study was an interesting initiative and its data collection fortuitously spanned the Global Food and Financial crises², the implicit linkage of the global study and UNICEF with the volume has shaped its focus in particular ways. Due to the time lag between inception and publication almost all of the chapters have been published elsewhere, and some are slightly out of date (e.g. *Young Lives*, chapter 20, is now planning its fourth round of data collection). However, this enables the book to act as an authoritative reader and would be particularly beneficial for independent practitioners/ researchers who do not have institutional access to journals.

The book starts from the United Nations General Assembly definition of child poverty in 2006 which notes particular absences in children's lives such as nutrition and sanitation and outlines their impact both now and in the future. Specifically, the majority of children worldwide are unable to enjoy their rights, reach their full potential, or participate as full members of their societies. The definition has moral and methodological implications—in terms of measurement, which is the main focus of this volume, children's experiences should be separated from those of their households and the focus of poverty assessment should extend beyond income. The editors observe that there were no global estimates of child poverty prior to the development of the Bristol approach by Peter Townsend and David Gordon in 2003. There were also few social indicators collected in developing countries that could capture the impact of systemic shocks such as structural adjustment. The volume

exemplifies the changes in discourse and practice over the past twenty years, albeit that these are not yet reflected in improvements in children's lives.

Although the title of the volume refers to measurement, concepts, policy and action, more than half of the chapters relate to measurement. They present a range of measurement models, the most popular of which are the Alkire and Foster method, which underpins the UNDP MPI (chapters 5 and 13), the Child Wellbeing Index used in the UNICEF Innocenti Report Card (chapter 8 and 9), and, of course, the Bristol approach which is used by UNICEF (chapters 4, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17). Chapters 14, 16 and 17 make good use of national household survey data to provide snapshots of child poverty in Iran, Latin America and the Caribbean, and South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Other chapters draw on the UNICEF-sponsored Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (www.unicef.org/statistics/index_24302.html), often in sophisticated and rigorous ways (e.g. chapter 13 on multidimensional child poverty in Vietnam). The *concepts* in the title are less well-served and *action* is barely touched upon, due to the predominance of academics and consultants in the author list. Notably, two of the four conceptual chapters (chapters 2, 3, 18 and 21), addressing respectively rights, equity, the history of child poverty eradication, and universal child benefits, use theoretical frameworks from UK social policy analyses. This suggests there could be useful cross-fertilisation between social policy, international development, and development economics, and between Northern and Southern researchers. One example of this is Barnes and Wright's use of Townsend's "socially perceived necessities" approach to capture what children and adults in South Africa regard as an acceptable standard of living (chapter 6).

The optimal conditions for child development is a theme implicit in every chapter, however, the volume does not provide a summary of current thinking in this area in the style of, e.g. the Lancet Early Childhood Development series (2007, 2011). It is also relatively silent on recent child-focused interventions such as Conditional Cash Transfer Schemes in Latin America, Child Support Grants in South Africa, promotion of Universal Primary Education, Early Childhood Development interventions (e.g. Integrated Child Development Services in India), etc. All of these have affected child poverty to some degree, albeit that their impacts are complex and not always positive (e.g. the effect of increases in access to schooling on its quality). While the volume's focus on measurement reflects the preoccupations of mainstream poverty research, even here there are critical voices (Ansell, Barker, & Smith, 2007; du Toit, 2009). There are also calls for more nuanced understandings of the relational dimensions of poverty (Harriss, 2009; Mosse, 2010; Sumner, 2010). These sophisticated understandings of how people become and remain poor cannot be captured solely through measures (no matter how accurate!) and so are not reflected here. Finally, although all chapters acknowledge the importance of children as the main stakeholders in child poverty research and action, only chapter 6 uses data generated by children themselves.

Notes

- ¹ Half of the participating countries have produced reports, accompanied by policy analyses and advocacy materials, which are available on <https://sites.google.com/site/finalreportsglobalstudy/>
- ² See also a recent special issue in *Development Policy Review* 29(5), 2011.

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