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Child Rights, Poverty, and Well-being: Measurement Debates and Empirical Advances

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Abstract

Children experience poverty differently from adults. This is the fundamental premise of the work to design specific, child-focused policies to eliminate child poverty. Devising, planning, and monitoring the impact of these policies without a proper measure of child poverty is almost impossible. However, most attempts to measure and analyze child poverty are challenged by the steps needed to measure it properly. In this article a solution is offered in this regard. In the context of global efforts, including by governments, to eliminate child poverty, UNICEF has developed a position on how to measure child poverty, based on a few simple and clear principles. These principles are meant to guide the measurement of child poverty. The main objective of this article is to explain and provide a rationale for this position as well as its relationship to related debates on child poverty measurement. Child poverty should be measured at the level of the individual child, not just as a disaggregation by age of household-level or adult-centered measurement. The measurement should be based on constitutive rights of poverty (i.e., those crucially and directly determined by access to material resources) and not on all possible problems children may face. As all rights are equally important, all dimensions should be equally weighted. The measurement should provide the prevalence as well as the depth/breadth/severity of child poverty. There are various groups of children who require different or special goods and services to fulfill the same rights constitutive of poverty as all other children. These needs ought to be incorporated into the measurement (e.g., children with disabilities may require assistive devices or indigenous children may require culturally appropriate learning materials). Implications and opportunities for flexibility and adjustment of such measures at the country level (while applying the principles) are also addressed in this article as well as a description of the most recent estimates of child poverty across developing countries using the same dimensions, indicators and thresholds.

Keywords

Child poverty, children, poverty, child rights, material deprivation, multidimensional poverty

Introduction

Children experience poverty differently from adults. This is the fundamental premise of the work to design specific, child-focused policies to eliminate child poverty. Clearly, absent a proper understanding and measurement of child poverty, designing policies to tackle it is like flying in the fog without maps and flight instruments. However, unfortunately, most attempts to measure and analyze child poverty struggle with its definition and the steps needed to measure it properly. In this article a solution is offered to fill this gap.

In the context of global efforts, including by governments, to eliminate child poverty, UNICEF has developed a position on how to measure child poverty, based on a few simple and clear principles. These principles should guide the measurement of child poverty – for analytical purposes, monitoring its evolution, assessing impact of policies, among others. They should also help to establish and institutionalize coherent national-level child poverty estimates, such as routine estimates of child poverty by the statistical authorities of the country (e.g., National Statistical Offices).

The main objective of the present article is to explain and provide a rationale for this position as well as its relationship to related debates in child poverty measurement. Concomitantly, implications and opportunities for flexibility and adjustment of such measures at the country level are also addressed. It is important for governments to adapt and adopt the principles to their own national contexts.¹ These principles and criteria do provide opportunity for including context-specific elements (e.g., pre-primary schooling may or may not be compulsory, mosquito nets may be required in tropical climates, while heating should be counted in cold ones) and combining them with other poverty measures that may exist in the country. Given that these criteria are seldom addressed explicitly in the literature, it is hoped that the article will provide a contribution in this regard.²

These principles were developed partly based on work accumulated through the years at country, regional, and global levels, which are summarized in the next section. This is followed by a description of the UNICEF position, including its rationale and practical implications as well as a very brief review of the debates around the concept of poverty. In the third part of the article, further considerations and challenges are tackled. Before concluding, a fourth section addresses normative aspects related to child rights and child participation, and a fifth one presents recent estimates of child poverty in developing countries.

Before closing this introduction, it is worthwhile to articulate two sets of hypotheses/issues that permeate the discussion and which provide a motivation for the article. One of them refers to the question of why policymakers, researchers and national statistical offices personnel should be concerned about measuring

¹ This flexibility is in accordance with Sustainable Development Goal 1.2.2 which says: “Proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions”. Thus, the recommendations are not an imposition ‘from above’ nor a curtailment of national sovereignty but rather explanations on why some choices are better than other ones when estimating child poverty. This is akin to global recommendations on the best way to measure GDP, unemployment, mortality, nutrition, access to water, or any other social or economic indicator.

² In order to focus on measurement issues, however, this article does not deal with practical policy recommendations about how to reduce/eliminate child poverty, which should combine social protection, equitable and efficient investment in social services, full employment in well-paying and satisfying jobs (aligned with the ILO Decent Work agenda) for parents and caregivers, progressive taxation, and policies/legislation against all forms of discrimination.

child poverty. At a very intuitive and simple level, everyone should be worried about children (although children have agency, they do depend in various ways on adults in the family). Children whose circumstances are such that they have to live and grow up in poverty, not only suffer a violation of their rights, but also their lives lack dignity and enjoyment. This dire situation should not be as the world has the resources to prevent these outcomes. Moreover, children living in poverty have very few aspirations and prospects of a better life – that is, their poverty today determines a very high probability of poverty in their future and their children’s future (which also affects the overall economic prognosis of the economies in which they reside). Another important issue in the measurement of child poverty is the relationship between individual children and household poverty (combined with whether children live with both parents, only one, or neither of them). There are children suffering poverty and deprivation who are not living in poor households, and there are households (independently of whether they are poor or not) where children are suffering poverty. Distinguishing among all these various constellations is important. One of the most significant points presented in this article is that none of them can be analyzed without a proper measure of (individual child-based) child poverty.

The second issue is based on the first one and refers to the type of errors that could be made in the absence of such measurement. It has implications for policies attempting to eliminate child poverty. For simplicity, let us assume a situation in which there are materially deprived children in poor households as well as materially deprived children in non-poor households. Also, there are children who are not materially deprived in poor households (these combinations are easy to visualize in a two-by-two cross-tabulation of children in/out of poverty and in/out of poor households). If policies were to be focused only on poor households, some children (those suffering poverty but outside poor households) would be left behind. In addition, the policy may assist the adults (hopefully) to get out of poverty but not help children. In this case, measuring poverty only at the household level, policymakers may believe (erroneously) that children are better off when they are not (they may even be worse off). Furthermore, the opportunity to address child poverty in the context of their families (i.e., designing policies geared to households with materially deprived children) would be completely preempted. Similarly, the possibility of exploring intra-household differentials among different children, such as gender (Pandolfelli and others, 2019; UNSD, 2020), would also be stifled. Most importantly, without estimates based on the individual child none of these issues would even be known.³

Historical background on child poverty measurement

At the beginning of the century, a report entitled *Poverty reduction begins with children* was published by UNICEF (2000). It presented the first global estimate of children living in monetary poor households in developing countries. This was estimated by relying on the well-established correlation between family income and family size (i.e., the higher fertility of monetary poor households compared with non-poor households). Clearly, then, as a result of this correlation, children are over-represented among the monetary poor. Also, the various limitations of the monetary approach to properly assess child poverty were highlighted. In order to address these shortcomings, the concept of multidimensionality of unmet needs based on child rights was introduced.

³ These points are similar to what, in a different context (arguing in favor of universal policies), was described as the E and F errors of inclusion and exclusion (Cornia and Stewart, 1993).

This led UNICEF to commission the London School of Economics and Bristol University to carry out the first ever, scientific measurement of child poverty in developing countries. This report covered over 70 countries, capturing around 90 percent of the child population in developing countries (Gordon and others, 2003).

In 2005, the topic of the *State of the World's Children* was “Childhood under threat”. Estimates of child poverty were included here as well as an all-encompassing ‘working definition’ of child poverty that combined material shortcomings with emotional poverty (UNICEF, 2004). Subsequently, the General Assembly adopted a definition of child poverty based on child rights in 2006, which explicitly states that monetary poverty is not sufficient to understand child poverty (United Nations General Assembly, 2006).

Following up on these developments, during the 2005-2010 period, global conferences on child poverty were convened, gathering scholars from around the world working on child poverty (Minujin and others, 2005; Minujin and others, 2006). In addition, the Global Study on Child Poverty and Disparities was launched and carried out in over 50 developing countries (Engilbertsdóttir and Kurukulasuriya, 2011; Fajth and others, 2012).

The Global Study led to regional collaboration in Latin America and East Asia. As a result, studies in each of these two regions were carried out in the early 2010s (CEPAL-UNICEF, 2010; UNICEF, 2011). Simultaneously, in 2012, at the UNICEF Office of Research, child poverty in rich countries was estimated (De Neubourg, Chzhen and others, 2012). Also, the first papers on Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis (MODA) were published (De Neubourg, Chai and others, 2012). This type of work was continued with a regional study in the Middle East and North Africa (ESCWA, UNICEF and OPHI, 2017).

An important further step was taken in 2015 with the introduction of the explicit recognition of child poverty as separate from adults within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework. Target 1.2.2, unlike most of the other ones, mentions children specifically (not just a disaggregation by age), recognizing the different nature of child poverty compared to adult poverty.

In 2016, in a collaboration between World Bank and UNICEF, the estimates of global monetary poverty (measured at Purchasing Power Parity U\$ 1.90 and PPP U\$ 3.10⁴) were disaggregated by age (UNICEF and World Bank, 2016). Not surprisingly, given the high fertility among monetary poor households, children seem to suffer higher rates of poverty than adults. Two caveats are important here. This is a context-specific (including data sources, countries, and range of parameters used for the estimates) result. It should not be taken as a conclusion to be generalized as other studies show the elderly are the worst off in some circumstances (Deaton and Paxson, 1997). Moreover, the important point is not that children suffer higher levels of poverty than adults – it is not a competition across generations. The point is that child and adult poverty are unconscionably high and a violation of human rights that policymakers should address urgently.

In 2018, the European Union approved its own measurement of child poverty based on material deprivation and using the consensual approach among other techniques to select indicators. The analysis underpinning

⁴ See, also, Batana and others (2013). Callen (2012) explains the PPP estimations and some problems with it. Deaton (2010), Freeman (2009), Reddy and Minoiu (2007), and Vandemoortele (2002) address further problems, in particular for measuring poverty.

this decision also addressed the reliability, suitability and validity of indicators (among others) and the overall child poverty measure (Kaczmarek-Firth and Dupré, 2018; Guio and others, 2018).

Outside of these estimates led by government or multilateral institutions, in recent years there has also been a burgeoning academic literature which is too wide and long to be summarized here. The literature has:

- Focused on richer and poorer countries (Guio and others, 2018; Chzhen and Ferrone, 2017; Kim and Nandy, 2018; Pomati and others, 2020) both individually or in cross-country comparisons (Gordon and Nandy, 2016; El Sayed and Zahran, 2016; Lyytikäinen and others, 2006);
- Cross-tabulated monetary/wealth⁵ poverty;
- Compared individual and household level measures of poverty (Pinilla and others, 2019), adapting them to fragile and emergency contexts (Ferrone, 2018; Gregr, 2020);
- Explored how to choose and handle domains and dimensions (Biggeri and Mehrotra, 2011; Nanivazo, 2015), assessing all possible combinations of overlapping deprivations and estimating depth and severity (Cid Martinez, 2020);
- Investigated poverty and gender (Ekbrand and Halleröd, 2018), going beyond measurement to address policy issues (Cuesta and others, 2018; Guio and others, 2020; Halleröd and others, 2013);
- Combined child poverty with subjective/non-material deprivations (Cid Martinez, 2019).

Most of these efforts were explicitly or implicitly attempting to measure child poverty “at a point in time” (Cid Martinez, 2020, being an exception). Clearly, however, poverty (and in particular child poverty) has a fundamental dynamic aspect, but in order to properly estimate this dynamic aspect panel data are needed. Unfortunately, there are very limited cross-country panel data sets available to measure child poverty. One outstanding exception is the Young Lives project (Boyden and others, 2012). Another example is Nandy (2012) who studies trends in child poverty in Africa and Asia. There have been other attempts at linking child poverty and derivation to non-material aspects of child well-being (a topic that is covered below) but that are not clear about the measurement of child poverty (e.g., Vu and others, 2015; Ngutuku, 2020).

The UNICEF position and some of its practical implications

Based on all this experience – and through an internal consultation process reaching out to its country and regional offices – UNICEF arrived at a position on how to measure child poverty (UNICEF, 2019). This position also benefitted from comments from external experts. The position establishes clear criteria for child poverty measurement, while allowing for its flexible implementation (with ‘boundaries’, as discussed below) at the country level to adjust for peculiar context issues.

While this is not the place and there is no space for a review of the literature on poverty, it behooves to say a few words about it to better put into context the following discussion on child poverty. Poverty is an imbalance between needs and means. This does not mean that poverty should only be measured in terms of insufficient income/consumption/financial wealth. For over half a century there have been authors writing about and estimating poverty and well-being in a multidimensional perspective (Drewnowski and Scott,

⁵ In ECLAC-UNICEF (2010a) there is also a cross-tabulation between the two types of poverty for children. It is only available in Spanish but a summary can be found in ECLAC-UNICEF (2010b). The cross-tabulation of monetary and multidimensional poverty (in its unsatisfied basic needs variant) is not new and it spawned a whole range of integrated approaches to poverty measurement which is too extensive to report here. Boltvinik (1998) provides an excellent summary.

1966; Drewnowski, 1977) precisely to assess that imbalance. Sen's Capabilities Approach,⁶ which currently provides an expansive and relativistic interpretation of the nature of poverty, has been influential in buttressing multidimensional poverty measurement. This is the case in spite of an early foray into an absolutist understanding of poverty (Sen, 1983; Townsend, 1985), in particular vis-à-vis the perspective that the needs (and the perception/assimilation of needs) are relative and socially constructed⁷ (Townsend, 1979). The Capabilities Approach is quite close and compatible with the human rights approach to development (Human Development Report Office, 2000; Dixon and Nussbaum, 2012). The latter, however, is more precise in conceptualizing which elements ought to be included in the measurement of poverty (Hunt and others, 2002; OHCHR, 2004). This is not to say that, even when acknowledging that poverty is, in essence, about lack of material resources (which is different from just measuring income shortfall given that social and publicly provided resources should be included too), social elements do not play a role. They determine the limitation of resources suffered by some families or individuals – as, for example, when they are the result of discrimination and social exclusion (Petmesidou and Papatheodorou, 2006; Levitas and others, 2007; Redmond, 2014; Spicker 2020a and 2020b; Delamonica, 2020).⁸

Moreover, any dictionary defines poverty as lacking material (or monetary) resources. Other issues such as happiness, love, feeling of inclusion, identity and freedom, among others, are not part of the every-day, common understanding of the word 'poverty'. In the same vein, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2020) stated: "Deprivation measures need to be based upon a clear and explicit theory or normative definition of poverty in order to ensure that each indicator is a valid measure, i.e., that it measures poverty and not some other related (or unrelated) concept such as wellbeing or happiness."

Nor should poverty be confused with vulnerability, as the former is about material deprivation or want while the latter is about defenselessness, exposure to risk and coping capacity (Chambers, 1989). Several authors have explored and explained the conceptual difference between these two terms (Cannon and others, 2003; Fineman, 2008; Mackenzie and others, 2014). Some of them have stressed the (mis) use of 'vulnerability' in various contexts (Alston, 20018; Vladeck, 2007; Wisner and others, 2004; Wolf and others, 2013), and other authors have tried to measure it (appropriately) independently of poverty (Akwarra and others, 2010; Morrow, 1999).

Thus, the conceptual definition supporting child poverty measurement states that children are in poverty when they lack public and/or private material resources to realize their rights constitutive of poverty. Rights constitutive of poverty are those rights that require, directly and fundamentally, material resources for their continued realization (OHCHR, 2004). Moreover, the UNICEF position on child poverty measurement is

⁶ Interesting perspectives on Sen's writings can be found in Taylor (1984) and Mansour (2018).

⁷ This is different from saying that poverty is subjective as there are objective determinants of poverty (and its characteristics), including socially determined constraints and objective elements to describe (and measure) the experience of poverty. Subjective poverty, on the other hand, is different and may be classified along two branches. One of them refers to feeling poor (associated with the happiness and well-being literature (see Ben-Arieh and others, 2001; Casas, 2011). The other one is the approach to elicit information about objective (even monetary incidence and depth of) poverty without engaging in large-scale expenditure and income surveys but relying on simple questions about the subjective perception of the level of poverty (Mangahas, 2001).

⁸ For authors proposing wider vistas, see for example, the definition by Vranken (2001a): "Poverty has to do with non-participation or a very limited participation in various social commodities such as income, labour, education, housing, health, justice, public services, and culture.." See also (Vranken, 2001b). These definitions of poverty, however, seem to stretch the definition too much and are closer to Quality of Life, as discussed below.

in line with common multidimensional poverty estimation practices. These practices can be described in two steps (Calderon and Kovacevic, 2014; World Bank, UNDP and UNICEF, 2021): identification of deprivation in each dimension (using indicator-specific thresholds of deprivation), aggregation across dimensions (using a specific cutoff to determine who is or is not poor). Within this methodology, there are debates about weighting different dimensions, whether to apply ‘union or intersection’ criteria (for aggregation or among indicators within each dimensions), how many dimensions (and which ones) to include, among others. For all of these practical issues (which refer to applied decisions and not fundamental methodological differences), the position of UNICEF is guided by two simple criteria. Almost all countries in the world have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and children experience (suffer) poverty differently than adults.⁹ Thus, the UNICEF position can be summarized in four simple principles:

1) Child poverty ought to be measured at the level of the individual child (i.e., it is not just an age disaggregation of a household-level estimate of poverty based on criteria and indicators which apply to adults).

2) The dimensions to be included should be child rights constitutive of poverty. The concept of constitutive rights originates in the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights approach to poverty and human rights (Hunt and others, 2002). Constitutive rights are those whose fulfillment is mainly determined by material resources (publicly provided or privately secured). Two examples illustrate this distinction. The right to food requires material objects such as vegetables or fruits, whereas the right to *habeas corpus* does not require an object or material resources. In other words, constitutive rights of poverty are associated to not having an object, a ‘thing’ (or ‘goods and services’, as economists call them) to satisfy the right. The UNICEF position acknowledges that girls have additional needs compared to boys. This does not mean they have different or additional rights. It means that in order to satisfy some rights, girls need material resources that boys do not need. For example, in terms of health, adolescent girls require menstrual hygiene management which entails objects (material resources). Thus, additional indicators are needed to assess deprivation in this dimension. If, under the guise of ‘measuring the same indicator’ for boys and girls, indicators for menstrual hygiene management were not included, aspects of girls’ deprivation and poverty would be missed.

3) Within the human rights framework, all rights have equal importance, and they cannot be ranked. Differential weighting of rights (dimensions) implicitly determines a ranking of rights. Thus, only equal weighting across rights should be implemented.¹⁰

⁹ Issues and challenges (and how to deal with them) regarding human rights measurement and monitoring are addressed in OCHRH (2012) and Merry and Wood (2015).

¹⁰ Moreover, as rights are either satisfied or not (e.g., the right to life), the deprivation constitutes a violation of a right and, consequently, there is poverty. This, however, does not preclude assessing ‘how poor’ are the poor. The same way that, in the monetary poverty context, a person’s income/consumption can be far or near the poverty line, a person could be near or far the threshold to determine deprivation. For example, let us assume there are two children without access to drinking water because there is no source of water nearby. Then their right to water is not satisfied. However, the situation for them is not the same if one has a water source an hour away and the other has a water source three and a half hours away. While they are both deprived, their material circumstances are different. Something similar applies even in the case of civil rights. A person could have a partial right to vote if, due to age or residency status, the person is only allowed to vote in local but not in national elections. In other words, the person can vote (so the right is not violated), but the right is not as fully satisfied as

4) As important as it is to measure the prevalence of child poverty, it is also important to measure the average number of deprivations suffered by children (i.e., the breadth or depth of poverty) and its severity (the situation of the poorest children). Thus, a profile of the distribution of the percentage of children suffering from exactly one, exactly two, exactly three, and so on, deprivations in child rights constitutive of poverty is needed. In other words, the UNICEF position is flexible in establishing that countries may decide whether to establish a cut-off of one or two rights/dimensions (but not more than two) in order to measure the child poverty headcount. It is, however, crucial to go beyond the headcount and illustrate the whole profile which captures not only the prevalence of child poverty (headcount) but also the breadth/depth and severity.¹¹

There are at least three important implications of these principles. The first one is that not all rights in the Convention of the Rights of the Child should be included in the estimate of child poverty. This does not mean those rights are not important; rather, it means that they are not constitutive of poverty. For instance, the right to be free from physical abuse is very important (Article 19 of the CRC). So is the right forbidding capital punishment of children (Article 37 of the CRC). However, their fulfillment does not depend on ‘having an object’. Thus, safety from violence may be very important to measure children’s Quality of Life¹² (which could also include subjective poverty, safety, time poverty and life satisfaction, among others) but not for poverty understood as material shortcoming, deprivation or disadvantage.

In other words, poverty is contained within Quality of Life – a concept present in Classical Greek philosophy as well as in the “Living Well” approach emanating from ancient Latin American cultures and the ideas informing the Gross National Happiness Index from Bhutan (Guendel, 2012; Michalos, 2014). Quality of Life, however, encapsulates a myriad of topics covering a mix of material and subjective conditions which are well beyond poverty (Helliwell, 2008; Sirgy and others, 2006). The latter comprise issues such as individual happiness and aspirations as well as social elements such as relationships with friends and family, community participation, or feeling of safety/security (Hagerty and others, 2001).

Second, another important right is the one to a minimum standard of living. This is not, however, associated with ‘an object’ but material resources writ large. In other words, it is more akin to the capacity to afford

for other members of society either. These distinctions could be used to determine severe and moderate deprivation within a dimension (see below).

¹¹ While breadth (sometimes also referred to as depth or intensity although they are not the same) is relatively easy to measure (e.g., in terms of the average number of deprivations suffered by children), severity is more complicated. Severity could be related to the excessive number of simultaneous deprivations, to how far the accomplishment is in terms of the threshold to consider a right is fulfilled (which is difficult the way most of them are measured in most household surveys which only provide binary or cardinal variables), or to how strict the thresholds to assess deprivations is established (e.g., two or three standard deviations from the international norm to measure stunting). The UNICEF position suggests all of them should be measured.

¹² Among other resources, the following ones could be used to delve into broader well-being and quality of life of children in developing and developed countries (including for early childhood and for adolescents):

<https://data.unicef.org/resources/adolescent-country-tracker/>

<https://data.unicef.org/resources/countdown-to-2030-ecd-country-profiles/>

<https://childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Child-Well-Being-Report.pdf>

Hagerty and others, (2001); UNICEF (2007); Hoeschler and others, (2012); UNICEF (2013); Trani and Biggeri (2013), and Gromada and others, (2020). Walther (2020) proposes a multidisciplinary framework (labelled POZE) that places these elements in a four-layered model encapsulating humans’ purpose, emotions, thoughts and behavior. These four layers interact with each other and, when properly aligned, lead to life satisfaction and inner peace.

all the elements needed for minimally acceptable living conditions (in a particular geographic and cultural context), that is, with monetary poverty. Monetary poverty is, however, an indirect measurement of poverty. It measures the hypothetical capacity to purchase a set of goods and services. The UNICEF measurement of child poverty measures it directly (through the estimation of deprivation in the various dimensions of constitutive rights). Thus, monetary poverty is separate from this measurement. In addition, children are not supposed to earn a living (which is different from earning a little bit of pocket money engaging in age-appropriate activities under certain conditions to ensure safety and well-being). Consequently, monetary poverty (or, better yet, the proportion of children in monetary poor households)¹³ should be measured separately and cross-tabulated with (multidimensional, rights-based) child poverty – as it was done in CONEVAL (2009), CEPAL and UNICEF (2010), and mentioned in UNICEF and End Child Poverty Global Coalition (2017).

Third, the emphasis on an individual-based measurement should not distract from the fact that children live in families and households.¹⁴ Thus, it is important to measure the proportion of households which have materially deprived children (and how materially deprived they are). In other words, three distinctive measures are being discussed:

- The percentage of children identified as poor based on their own deprivation/non-deprivation condition (regardless of the parents' income or other non-child related issues) – the proper measurement of child poverty.
- The share of children in poor households (identified as poor based on adult-centered criteria).
- The proportion of households in which children identified as poor (based on individual child circumstances) live.

Within the latter group, households should also be distinguished in terms of how many (or which proportion) of their children are considered poor as well as whether they suffer 'just' one, or a few, or many deprivations simultaneously (and how many). These measures of prevalence, breadth/depth and severity may differ among the various children in the household, a point that needs to be measured and analyzed.

Moreover, focusing on the household through the individual based estimates allows for an analysis of correlation of child poverty among siblings and the structural conditions of the household (bi-parental, single parents, multigenerational, among others). In addition, it is important to be able to analyze gender inequalities (e.g., between brothers and sisters).

Further considerations and challenges to measure child poverty

Based on the principles, criteria and analysis mentioned above, the child rights constitutive of poverty have been identified as:

- Clothing
- Education
- Health

¹³ It is worth repeating that a monetary poverty estimate would be adult-centered and not appropriate for understanding how children suffer poverty.

¹⁴ Rodrigo Martinez contributed this point through personal communication. Also, the pathbreaking study by Gordon and others (2003) provides data about the prevalence of child poverty among children and in households with children.

- Housing
- Information
- Nutrition
- Play/Recreation
- Sanitation
- Water

Some or all of them have been used in the studies and reports mentioned in the introduction (both in developing and developed countries). A word may be needed about these rights and some rights usually considered as candidates for this list which are not included.

Few household surveys in developing countries inquire about clothing and play/recreation issues, at least in surveys that can also be used to gather information about the other rights (although Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) have been including toys and playthings in recent modules for children under age 5 (see, for example, UNICEF, 2020). Nevertheless, their fulfilment is clearly based on access to goods and services. In contrast, most household surveys provide data on housing, sanitation and water. Even censi provide information¹⁵ for these dimensions. Nutrition is a canonical indicator of child well-being, which depends crucially on material consumption. Similarly, education and health are most often used to assess children's well-being. It is interesting to note that they not only necessitate goods but also services (i.e., nurses, doctors and teachers). Goods and services are, precisely, the type of commodities for which lack of command implies being poor. Information is often contested, partly on the basis that it does not require goods and services. In order to access information – which is important for children (in particular adolescents) to be able to participate in society, learn about politics and civil duties, follow up on sports and cultural activities, do homework, and connect with friends and peers, among others) – objects, such as newspapers, radios and phones are needed.

Child labor is usually considered a cause and consequence of (mainly monetary) poverty.¹⁶ This is, however, not a reason to be included in the multidimensional measurement of child poverty as a measurement of poverty is not about measuring its causes or consequences; rather, the objective is to measure 'it' (i.e., child poverty). A simple rule to think about whether a right (or a problem faced by children) should be included is to ask what goods or services are not consumed (on a regular basis or through time) that prevents the right from being fulfilled. In the case of child labor, it could be not going to school

¹⁵ Typically, censi cannot be used to estimate child poverty as they lack several of the dimensions that constitute poverty. They can, however, be used (because they often have information on housing, sanitation and water) to calculate Small Area Estimates in combination with household survey data (Falowo, 2017).

¹⁶ Child labor is a complex phenomenon. First of all, it needs to be distinguished from children working or doing chores at home. Second, depending on the circumstances (type of labor, location, activity, length of hours, age of the child, among others) it can (and often is) outlawed, discouraged or considered complementary to education. None of these considerations (and many more, as there are long-standing debates about these topics in the literature, which is too extensive to be summarized in this article), however, deviate from the main point being made here: only those rights which primarily and directly require material elements for their satisfaction constitute child poverty, and bad things that derive from poverty (regardless of how obnoxious or detrimental in the short or long term for children) should not be considered for inclusion in the metric of child poverty. For some of the measurement issues and not the whole range of topics and debates around child labor, see Dayioğlu M. (2012) and Alsamawi and others (2019).

(but that is covered in the education dimension¹⁷), it could be insufficient monetary income (but it is not part of multidimensional poverty), or it could be lack of time to study or engage in leisure activities (but those are already included in the education and play/recreation dimensions, and time-poverty is not about material shortcoming¹⁸). Thus, child labor should not be included as a dimension of child poverty.

Another dimension that is often mentioned as a candidate to be included in the measurement of child poverty is violence against children. Disciplinary violence at home, however, is not correlated with income or wealth or multidimensional child poverty (UNICEF, 2010 and 2017; and Nébié and others, 2020). Also, as with the case of child labor, it is worth asking what is the material object that these children are missing. Clearly, being subjected to violence is not about suffering a material deprivation that would prevent violence. Thus, it should not be included in the measurement of child poverty.

In addition, while it is the case that all state activities require some resources, such as providing security, controlling borders and civil registration systems, among others, the focus of the notion of poverty (as it was mentioned above, both in every-day language and in the socio-economic literature) is about material shortcomings of goods and services to be consumed (such as clothes, food and health services, among others). State action always requires some resources as the state not only has to respect (that is, the state itself should not violate these rights) but also protect them (i.e., ensure that everybody, individuals and corporations, respects them). This is not, however, sufficient to include these activities as part of child poverty measurement. Indeed, these activities involve setting up and maintaining a civil registration system, a judicial system, a police department and regulatory bodies, among others. This does not, however, entail that individuals (or families) require material possessions to enjoy these rights in the same way that they consume goods and services such as food, water or lodging.

A counter-criticism regarding issues such as birth registration, violence against children and child labor is that they are important, so they should be included in the measurement of child poverty. They would, however, receive way more salience if they were treated separately. In other words, once (material-based, multidimensional) child poverty is measured, it can be compared and cross-tabulated to these or other rights and topics (e.g., child marriage, participation, or subjective well-being) important for child well-being and their Quality of Life. Moreover, if these indicators were included in the measurement of poverty, it would be impossible to perform interesting and valuable (from a policy perspective) analysis correlating them to child poverty.

It is recognized that there are a few challenges when attempting to measure child poverty, and the UNICEF position offers guidance on them. These are not theoretical or conceptual, but practical. One of them is the availability of data. In order to assess if a child is experiencing poverty, information about deprivation in each of the dimensions is needed for the same child. Thus, the information must come from the same survey.¹⁹ Unfortunately, not all household surveys provide information about all of these dimensions. In such cases, it is better to underestimate child poverty and assume that what is not measured cannot be

¹⁷ Gibbons and others (2005) and several other studies show that often children both work and attend school

¹⁸ Antonopoulos and Emel (2010) apply a measurement of time poverty in developing countries based on the ideas presented by Vickery (1977).

¹⁹ This does not preclude the construction of time trends as different surveys, such as Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), that provide the same information can be used. For a description of the opportunities, as well as potential pitfalls, of these comparisons see Hancioglu and Arnold (2013).

categorically established as a deprivation, rather than modelling or imputing deprivation for children (or dimensions) for which data are not available.

Another constraint is that for many of these dimensions there are clearly established and internationally agreed criteria to establish deprivation (in most cases there is even a gradient), but for a few of them there is not. This gives countries more options to explore alternatives to find the best way to assess fulfillment of these rights in their own national context. For example, the WHO-UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme establishes a ladder from improved facilities through unimproved ones to no facilities at all (WHO and UNICEF, 2017, and UNICEF and WHO, 2019) to assess safe drinking water and for sanitation services. No such criteria, however, exist for the right to play/recreation (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013b) or for clothing.

The right to play and recreation poses interesting additional intellectual challenges (besides the advocacy and policy/programmatic ones, given it is usually not considered an ‘important issue’). These are related to at least two challenges: measurement quandaries and links to other issues. Cid Martinez (2020) attempted a classification based on the variety of types of toys used by children in order to avoid assuming a market-based or materialistic conception of play or play objects (e.g., that the right to play could only be fulfilled by purchasing toys). Nevertheless, there is a need to assess material things (i.e., toys) because poverty is relational in the sense that there are standards considered minimally acceptable by society. According to Cid Martinez (2020, p. 136): “...in most countries across the globe, children are expected to play with toys or objects. If they do not have them, of course they would still be able to play (sing, run, jump, etc.). However, they will be perceived (and they will feel, when they see other children) deprived.” In addition to these theoretical, conceptual, and measurement issues, it is important to ensure that toys (or games) are culturally appropriate for children of minorities or indigenous groups, do not reproduce gender biases, are accessible for children living with disabilities, are not toxic or environmentally harmful, e.g., in terms of paint or other elements that may harm children (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013b).

Consequently, countries are encouraged to set up their own criteria when they do not exist (and as appropriate for their context). However, following the Limburg Principles and the concept of non-retrogression (UN, 1987 and Committee on Economic, Social, & Cultural Rights, 1990) they cannot establish thresholds for indicators which are below the internationally recognized ones.

This may raise a challenge for international comparability. At the country level, however, the importance of the measurement depends on its relevance for policy design and monitoring/assessment. Thus, the UNICEF position, while establishing criteria to obtain the best possible measurement of child poverty, acknowledges that there will be and should be (slight) variations in its application across countries. For instance, when assessing the right to housing in cold climates, availability of heating should be included (but it is not necessary in tropical countries).²⁰

Normative convergence, child rights, and participation

²⁰ One way to look at this is to say that heating is included in the conceptual framework of child poverty in tropical countries, but no children are deprived of it (because it is not needed). Similarly, in the European Union measurement, water and sanitation are not explicitly measured. However, this is not because European children do not have a right to water but because they all have access to it (as we know from other, not necessarily household surveys, sources of information).

As mentioned above, the UNICEF position builds on almost two decades of applied work by governments, UNICEF offices and academics, as well as consultations with experts. In this section, some reflections which are not explicit in the position but that have indirectly informed it are briefly described. This is not an attempt to compare the UNICEF position with other approaches for which there is no space or need.²¹

There is normative convergence from a wide array of disciplines in order to arrive at ‘the list’ of dimensions. Since the 1970s, starting with the work of ILO (1976) and Morris (1978), and the subsequent one by Streeten and others (1981), and Gough and Doyal (1991), elements such as education, health, housing and sanitation, among others, have been present in the various attempts to measure multidimensional poverty or unsatisfied basic needs. These same dimensions also come up in the Capability Approach (Fukuda-Parr and Cid Martinez, 2019; Nussbaum, 2001). In addition, several inter-governmental agreements, such as the one from the World Summit for Social Development, also define multidimensional poverty using basically the same dimensions (United Nations, 1995). Thus, the UNICEF position is applicable throughout the world and not just for developing countries. In particular, it is compatible with the recently approved EU measure of child poverty, which includes basically the same dimensions as in the UNICEF position (Eurostat Task Force on Material Deprivation, 2011; Kaczmarek-Firth and Dupré, 2018; Guio and others, 2018).

Both the list and the approach are consistent with various ways to determine most accurately deprivation in each dimension. In particular, when two or more indicators are used within a right/dimension, they can be combined in many ways. For instance, severe deprivation could be established by being simultaneously deprived of all of them and moderate deprivation could be established by being deprived in at least one (or a subset) of them. More complicated lexicographical or statistical approaches could also be used.²² Countries are encouraged to use different indicators to assess fulfilment of rights at different ages (following the life course approach).

Another issue pertains to establishing thresholds of deprivation. While these could be done using expert advice, there are at least two better options. One of them is the Consensual Approach (Mack and Lansley, 1985²³) that establishes both the elements to be included in the dimension/right and the levels of satisfaction, which in a particular cultural/national context are considered minima to avoid poverty. This has been

²¹ As mentioned above, they are all based on the same basic double-counting methodology. Various formulae exist to calculate multidimensional poverty (e.g., Bourguignon and Chakravarty, 2003; Alkire and Foster, 2011; Rippin, 2012; Datt, 2017). Although they are different – some are very well equipped to analyze disparities among the poor and the severity of poverty, e.g., Rippin (2012) or Datt (2017) – their differences are minimal when applied to real world data (and they often disappear when parameters are fixed based on conceptual definitions as it is the case with no weights across dimensions/rights following the human rights-based approach). This is specially the case for estimating prevalence and the average number of deprivations (depth/breadth of poverty). Other issues related to these measures are discussed by Dotter and Klasen (2014) and Silber (2011) and an excellent review of dimensions and indicators used, as well as other issues, in child poverty estimates throughout the world is provided by Espindola and others (2017).

²² Indicators within a dimension could be weighted as long as the final aggregation is done across unweighted dimensions/rights. Decancq and Lugo (2013) and Greco and others (2019) provide very good reviews of weighting options with an analysis of their advantages and disadvantages.

²³ For examples, for either monetary or multidimensional poverty, see Gordon and Townsend (2000) for the UK, Guio and others (2017) for Europe; Noble and others (2004) for South Africa; Valadez-Martínez and others (2018) for Mexico; Nandy and Pomati (2015) for Benin; and Pomati and Nandy (2020a) for Western Africa, and specifically for multidimensional child poverty Pomati and Nandy (2020b). The Consensual Approach has recently been used by governments to estimate child poverty in Tonga (Statistics Department Tonga, 2018) and Uganda (Government of Uganda and UNICEF, 2019).

applied in several countries. As the Consensual Approach entails asking a large sample of representative citizens, it avoids the limitations of small-scale consultations and cannot be subsumed under the criticisms stemming from the ‘tyranny of participation’ literature (e.g., Cooke and Kothari, 2001).²⁴ Another approach is the utilization of internationally agreed parameters (such as the classification of the WHO-UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme mentioned above). Moreover, the two can be and ought to be combined. It must be remembered that rights are inalienable. Thus, even if people do not mention them in an open question survey, it does not mean the right is not important or its level of implementation could fall behind what has been achieved already (as per the Limburg Principles and the concept of non-retrogression mentioned above). For child poverty measurement purposes, it is important to ensure that measurements of fulfillment of all the rights that constitute poverty exist (with indicators and thresholds that are consensually agreed upon but do not fall below the international established minima²⁵).

A third issue refers to adding indicators within a dimension. Through the Consensual Approach, for instance, it could be found out that the availability of proper (and healthy and safe) heating is an important element to assess the satisfaction of the right to housing in countries with a cold climate.²⁶ This flexibility in incorporating indicators is important for two reasons. First, according to the SDGs, countries have the prerogative to establish their own standards for measuring multidimensional poverty. Second, geography and climate vary across countries (and often within countries), which means adjustments in the minima to ensure full satisfaction of the rights constitutive of poverty will vary. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, however, it can only vary upward – that is, to include elements that improve life and not take away elements (to artificially lower the estimate of poverty).

Fourth, it is important to highlight the compatibility and correspondence of the UNICEF position based on the CRC and a rights-based approach to poverty with the rights of people with disability (Convention on the Rights of People with Disability, CRPD) and indigenous peoples (Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, DRIP). Following these conventions – particularly CRC, Articles 23 and 30, and General Comments of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, Numbers 9 (2006) and 11 (2009) – it is important to explicitly assess if the constitutive rights of poverty of these children (which are the same as for other children) are satisfied. In some circumstances, the way to satisfy them may be different (for example, through the provision of assistive devices to children who are physically impaired²⁷ or culturally appropriate learning materials for indigenous and minority children). Similarly, some children may need special material resources in terms of nutrition, health (including mental health²⁸ services) and education,

²⁴ Hart (1992 and 2008) provides a proper model for child participation that also avoids these criticisms (see below).

²⁵ “International established minima” could be interpreted two ways. One is in terms of the thresholds established by international consensus as mentioned above. The other one is in terms of actual practice and achievement, which could surpass these “international minima” (and from which there should be no retrogression).

²⁶ It is also included in the UN Habitat analysis and recommendation to measure adequate housing (<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/files/Metadata-11-01-01.pdf>) and General Comment Number 4 (on the right to housing) by the Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (1991) under the concept of “habitability”.

²⁷ This does not at all mean that all children who face physical challenges are poor. They would be poor if the material resources they need to realize the rights constitutive of poverty (i.e., Braille books or other special learning materials, or distinct elements to play and practice sports, among others) were not available to them. This is aligned with the shift from the medical to the social perspective on disability, as established in the CRPD.

²⁸ It must be remembered that all children enjoy the right to mental health (CRC, 2013a).

among others, in order to fulfil the right to rehabilitation and reintegration after having suffered from violent acts (Article 39 of the CRC). Again, it is important to highlight that these are not additional dimensions/rights, just that care needs to be taken to ensure that the special needs of these children in terms of the material resources required to fulfill their rights constitutive of poverty are properly taken into account.²⁹

Finally, in determining these indicators and thresholds, it is also important to consider the voices of children and adolescents, as they are the subjects of the concepts being measured (Ben-Arieh, 2005). This is not, however, as simple as it sounds, in particular if, as mentioned above, the tyranny of participation ought to be avoided. In this, case, several additional challenges and ethical issues arise.³⁰

Fortunately, several methodologies (besides properly tailoring the above-mentioned Consensual-Approach to focus it on children) have been developed and applied to include the voices of different groups of children. For understanding child and adolescent experiences of poverty (and perception of poverty in other children), their participation can be carried out verbally, visually or in written form. It is, however, important to highlight that (a) children should be allowed to choose not to be participate, and (b) their involvement should be tailored to their level of competence, maturity, understanding and abilities (Iltus and Hart, 1994). In particular, adults need to understand what to expect (and not) from the participation of children and adolescents and not to underestimate the abilities and contributions of children. Most importantly, it is paramount to avoid the manipulation of children, using them as decoration, or engage in tokenistic participation. On the contrary, children should be consulted and informed and allowed to participate in adult-initiated activities with children's participation. Higher levels of child participation occur when children themselves are the initiators and then other children (and then adults) participate (Hart 1992 and 2008).

Moreover, when planning and organizing child and adolescent participation, the topic of representativeness and selection of children is a top consideration. As child participation includes interaction and discussion (besides drawing, model building and theater, among others), usually it can only be carried out in small groups and settings. This limitation raises the question of which children participate and how they are chosen. The issues of agency and children being dependent on adults mentioned in the introduction come to the fore. Regarding who selects them to participate and how participation is organized, they are salient. Even if they are democratically chosen by their peers (e.g., in elections in a school setting³¹), it is likely the most articulate or friendly will be chosen, which means they will not necessarily represent properly the views of all children. Clearly, it would be much more problematic if children are chosen by adults (whether

²⁹ Unfortunately, not many surveys cover these issues. Neither do they usually cover children in refugee camps or in other non-household situation (e.g., street children or in institutions). This is not a criticism of household surveys or a call to replace them with other data sources. Household surveys have been invaluable during the last 20-30 years to increase knowledge about the situation of children worldwide. It is just acknowledging that while they are irreplaceable, they were not developed to measure child poverty, and they could be expanded to include additional data needed to measure child poverty. Another under-measured topic is the realization of the rights to play, nutrition, etc. of children of working parents (including formal and informal ones, even in the streets) who cannot access temporary childcare services.

³⁰ For good introduction, guidance and practical examples concerning these ethical issues, see Alderson and Morrow (2020), Graham and others (2013), Morrow and Boyden (2014), and Truscott and others (2019). An important application for the times of COVID-19 (and similar emergencies) is found in Berman and others (2020).

³¹ Obviously, this begs the question of how to choose among out-of-school children.

due to family ties or because they fit the image adults have about the children who should participate). In addition, as with all other groups of people, there is diversity among children. Thus, there may be a need, depending on the circumstances, to have separate meetings with various groups of children with different characteristics, lest one or two groups (or their representatives) become the dominant voice (Iltus and Hart, 1994).

It is interesting to dwell briefly on some results from exercises involving children in conceptualizing child poverty. For instance, the recommendations by Iltus and Hart were applied in Nigeria (Ozoemenam and others, 2021). Additionally, the Christian Children's Fund (Feeny and Boyden, 2003; Boyden and others, 2003) consulted with children and their families to learn directly from them about their experience of poverty in five countries from four continents. As in Nigeria, children talk about poverty as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. They stress the lack of access to adequate basic social services and satisfactory material conditions for a life of dignity. They also, however, comment on being discriminated and feeling excluded due to their age, gender, class and caste, among others. They also mention different types of vulnerabilities, from natural disasters and conflicts to economic shocks and family related crises.³²

As another example, Barnes and Wright (2012) highlight the divergent views of children and adults in South Africa about children's needs and deprivation. One of their main conclusions is the relatively small importance given by adults to toys and leisure equipment (a dimensions considered in the UNICEF position) while children consider them a necessity. In addition, they point out that while there are some elements which both adults and children agree to be of utmost importance (e.g., food), there are several that appear as highly important in the listing made by children, such as school equipment, health care and (warm/dry) clothes but which adults consider important yet not as essential as children regard them. In addition, Barnes and Wright acknowledge children might interpret the question about needs in a literal way (need to survive). Some of their answers could have been affected by a variation of the adaptive preferences issue (Halleröd, 2006) whereby items that are out of reach (and thus less familiar) are not considered to be required by poorer respondents.

Recent estimates

Following the guidelines set out in the UNICEF position, child poverty has been estimated across developing countries in a strictly comparable way (as mentioned above, a similar measurement exists for European countries which, although compatible with the position was elaborated prior to it). The two-step methodology for calculating multidimensional poverty mentioned above was used.

Two main data limitations were confronted. Most household surveys that can be used to estimate child poverty – because they have a wealth of information to assess realization of child rights for individual children – do not have the full ideal set of indicators. Thus, one limitation is that some elements could be missing (e.g., information about clothing) to properly ascertain if all rights constitutive of poverty are

³² Thus, they recommend looking at a tripod (material deprivation, social exclusion, vulnerabilities), with separate assessments for each and estimating their overlap. This is similar to the point of measuring separately material and non-material deprivations as mentioned above when discussing the relationship between poverty and Quality of Life. See also United Nations (1954) which makes the double point of the significance of measuring both aspects as well as the importance of avoiding their conflation in one single index. Cid Martinez and others (2021) explore how to combine and overlap a distinct measure of child poverty with one of non-material deprivations.

realized. The other limitation is that even if the indicator is included in the survey, it is not asked of all children (e.g., nutrition is not usually measured for adolescents).

Consequently, in order to maximize the number of countries included in the estimation but constrained to provide an assessment based on as many dimensions as possible, six dimensions were used for these global estimates. This approach allowed to estimate child poverty using the same dimensions, precisely the same indicators, and exactly the same thresholds in more than 80 countries representing almost a third of the child population in developing countries. No estimates of multidimensional poverty covering so many countries in such a strict internationally comparable way have been produced since Gordon and others (2003).

An important consideration regarding data limitations is that no imputations are made in the absence of knowledge. For example, in a household with two school-aged children who are out of school and a child just below the age of mandatory schooling, the younger child is not considered poor, even if it is very likely that child will not attend school in a few weeks or months (once the mandatory age of schooling is surpassed). This avoidance of imputation clearly leads to underestimation of child poverty. Nevertheless, it is better to 'err on the side of caution' and do not overestimate child poverty. Furthermore, for simplicity and in order to avoid imbalance across dimensions, only one indicator per dimension was used.

Other criteria to choose indicators include validity (i.e., the indicators measure what they are supposed to measure), reliability (i.e., the indicators capture accurately what they are supposed to measure), and the possibility to construct a gradient to separate severe and moderate deprivation. Additionally, this gradient had to be based on internationally agreed criteria for deprivation.

As a result, for the most recent estimate of child poverty in developing countries, the following indicators and thresholds were used to establish deprivation in each of the six dimensions:

Education: Children (5-14 years of age) who have never been to school (severe deprivation) and children who are not currently attending school (moderate deprivation).

Adolescents (15-17 years of age) who have not completed primary school (severe) and children who are not currently attending secondary school (moderate).

Health: Children (12-35 months of age) who neither received immunization against measles nor any dose of the diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis (DPT) vaccine (severe), and children who received less than four vaccines out of measles and three rounds of DPT (moderate).

Children (36-59 months of age) with fever and severe difficulty to breath who received no treatment of any kind (severe), and children with those symptoms who did not receive professional medical treatment.

Adolescents (15-17 years of age) without access to reproductive health, i.e., no means to avoid unwanted pregnancies (severe) and adolescents using traditional methods to meet contraception needs (moderate).

Nutrition: Children whose height for age is below three (severe) and two (moderate) standard deviations from the international reference population.

Sanitation: Children and adolescents engaging in open defecation or using unimproved or limited facilities (severe) and basic facilities (moderate) as defined by the WHO-UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme.

Shelter: Children and adolescents living in a dwelling with five or more persons per room (severe) and children living in a dwelling with three or more persons per room (moderate).

Water: Children and adolescents using surface water or unimproved water sources or limited facilities (severe) and basic facilities (moderate) as defined by the WHO-UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme.

Besides national estimates for both severe and moderate thresholds, disaggregation by residence (urban/rural), sex, their intersectionality (i.e., rural boys, rural girls, urban boys, and urban girls) and geographic location (political-administrative units one level down from national level) were estimated as well as according to the level of education of the parents and whether both, only one, or none are present in the household.

Using a cut-off of one deprivation to be considered poor, the child poverty rate was estimated at between 43-48 percent of children (severe thresholds) and at about 68-73 percent (moderate thresholds). An average of 0.7 deprivations per child were estimated using severe thresholds and of 1.4 deprivations per child when using moderate ones. When severe thresholds are applied, the prevalence of child poverty is almost double (1.8 times) in rural areas compared to urban ones. Comparing subnational units (i.e., one level below the country-wide estimates), the prevalence in the worst provinces/states is about 3.5 times worse than in the provinces/states with the lowest levels.

Conclusion

The goal, for governments and the international community, is to reduce and eliminate child poverty. An important step on this road is to properly measure child poverty (both to design and to monitor the impact of policies). The UNICEF position on child poverty measurement establishes criteria – based on the social and economic literature about poverty, the child and human rights framework, and the commonplace understanding of poverty – to carry out this task.

There are four basic criteria. Child poverty should be measured at the level of the individual child, not just as a disaggregation by age of household-level or adult-centered measurement. The measurement should be based on constitutive rights of poverty, i.e., those crucially and directly determined by access to material resources, and not on all possible problems children may face. Based on these criteria, the list of dimensions/rights to be included in the measurement of child poverty are: Clothing, Education, Health (including special needs of girls, in particular adolescent girls), Housing, Information, Nutrition, Play/Recreation, Sanitation, and Water. In the absence of data in any of these dimensions, there should be no imputation or addition of other dimensions.

As all rights are equally important, all dimensions should be equally weighted. The measurement should not focus just on prevalence but also address the profile of distribution of deprivations (i.e., the percentage of children suffering exactly one, exactly two, exactly three, and so on, deprivations) as well as a measure of the depth/breadth and the severity of child poverty.

Moreover, as children live in households and with families, the percentage of households with materially deprived children should also be estimated. The analysis should include how many (and what proportion of) children live in these households and how poor (depth/breadth and severity) they are.

In addition, it has to be recognized there are various groups of children who require different or special goods and services to fulfill the same rights constitutive of poverty as all other children. For instance,

children with disabilities may require assistive devices, and indigenous children may require culturally appropriate learning materials, among others.

While countries have flexibility in terms of assessing deprivation in each right/dimension (and are encouraged to use different ones for different age groups along the life course), there are international standards and agreements to measure them. These should be respected. Countries cannot lower standards of achievements (principle of non-retrogression).

In sum, there is now a set of standards and criteria that allow for coherent estimates of child poverty globally and at country level. These standards and criteria have actually been applied to estimate child poverty in developing countries (and Europe-wide estimates are also consistent with them). The measurement is theoretically and conceptually grounded. It provides rigor as well as flexibility to accommodate contextual issues across countries.

Nevertheless, there are still areas which require further work. For some dimensions more data are needed. In terms of the rights to play, information, and clothing additional consultations and analyses are needed to arrive at internationally acceptable and consensual criteria for establishing deprivation. Correlation with other rights (birth registration, violence, among others) is a wide-open field of research. Finally, as child poverty is not supposed to cover all the areas of children's quality of life and well-being, it is important to explore their connections and interlinkages.

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