



From comparative to global social policy: Lessons for development practitioners from UNICEF's Global Study on Child Poverty and Disparities[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 14 October 2011

Keywords:

Child poverty
Multidimensional child poverty
Social policy
Comparative social policy
UNICEF
Equity

ABSTRACT

How can one assess whether social policies in one context can be effective in another? What standardized framework of inputs, outputs, results and outcomes allows one to make such global comparisons? There is resistance to creating such a standardized mechanism; in order to ensure national specificities – cultural, socio-economic and political contexts – are considered. This paper attempts to look at the responsiveness of global social policy to addressing multidimensional child poverty, through the experience of UNICEF's Global Study on Child Poverty and Disparities. The Global study spans 50+ countries in Africa, Asia, CEE/CIS, Latin America and the Middle East. The purpose of this initiative is to highlight the notion of child poverty as a distinct problem and to sensitize policymakers as to how to most effectively address it. This paper looks at why UNICEF launched this effort; what concerns, considerations and principles have shaped it; and analyses the challenges of operationalizing the child poverty concepts, measures and responses across five continents. Finally, it examines what lessons the first phase of this global effort can offer to the international development community and laborers in comparative social policy.

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1. Introduction

Few practices resist pressure for international standardization today more effectively than social policy. A taxi driver can order a pizza margherita with a Coke in Bangkok, New York, Beijing, Budapest, La Paz or Nairobi; but the public health insurance or childcare benefits on offer in these places are radically different. There is increasing global convergence on the key ingredients of sound macro-economic policy and good governance; but the notion of good social policy resists both globalization and homogenisation. The wisdom that, besides political and socioeconomic contexts, culture, value and social network systems will retain a powerful role in shaping social policy gave birth to the study of comparative social policy decades ago. Today, related and 'soft' approaches to standard setting and lessons sharing across national borders continue; for example, through the 'open coordination method' of the European Union or through hearings by the US Congress and Senate.

This paper highlights an effort to employ essentially the same standards to assess the responsiveness of social policy in different contexts: UNICEF's Global Study on Child Poverty and Disparities. It looks at why UNICEF has launched this effort; what concerns, considerations and principles have shaped it; and how it has responded to recent changes in the international context. It considers in what sense the Global Study is similar to well-established comparative studies in child and family policy; and discusses the success (or lack thereof) of the effort to employ standardized templates and concepts across five continents. Finally, it examines what lessons the first three and a half years of the program can offer to the international development community and laborers in comparative social policy. A debate around these issues could be particularly timely as UNICEF has recently started work on the second phase of the program, possibly leading to updated country guidance as well as a global report on child poverty.

The Global Study analyzed here currently covers 52 countries. The program began with 39 countries in Africa, Asia, CEE/CIS, Latin America and the Middle East in late 2007. Since then, 13 additional countries, including Indonesia, Myanmar and Pakistan joined; most recently, Kazakhstan joined. These 52 countries represent over 1.5

[☆] The views in this paper are entirely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies or positions of UNICEF. Editorial suggestions and assistance from Julie Lawson-McDowall and Nicholas Rees are gratefully acknowledged. Responsibility for any errors remains with the authors.

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¹ See, for example, Kamerman (2001) Early Childhood Education and Care: International Perspectives. Testimony Prepared for the United States Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.

² The countries participating in the Global Study on Child Poverty and Disparities are the following: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Bolivia, Brazil, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, China, Congo Brazzaville, Congo DR, Djibouti, Egypt, Ghana, Indonesia, India, Indonesia, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Lao PDR, Lesotho, Madagascar and Indian Ocean Islands (Comoros, Mauritius, La Reunion, Seychelles), Malawi, Maldives, Mali, Mexico, Mongolia, Morocco, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, Indonesia, OPT, Pakistan, Philippines, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, Togo, Uganda, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu, Viet Nam, Yemen, Zimbabwe.

billion children, approximately 60% of the 0–17 year old population in the developing world. As of April 2011, 25 national and regional analyses have been published.³ Study impacts thus far include adjustments in national development plans and Poverty Reduction Strategies to better address child poverty and disparities (as in Cameroon, China, Laos, Ukraine and Senegal), overhauled national poverty monitoring systems (as in Morocco, Nepal, Thailand) and initiatives to review, reform and enlarge social protection systems for children (as in Mali, Nigeria, Kosovo, and Bolivia).

The paper is organized as follows. Section 1 looks at how the Study was conceived in the period prior to the recent food, fuel and financial crisis as response to structural child poverty. Section 2 discusses the core tenets of the Study in two parts. First it offers an assessment on the effort to focus on multidimensionality and equity; subsequently, it highlights how UNICEF has tried to ensure that the Study benefits from local insights and ownership as well as from international knowledge and promotion. Section 3 looks at impact in the countries covered; Section 4 discusses limitations and lessons learnt. The concluding Section makes an attempt to highlight signposts for development practitioners, academics and other stakeholders, whose closer collaboration will be essential for the future of the Global Study, as well as for other evidence-based advocacy and programming efforts around global child wellbeing.

2. Background: the pre-crisis 'golden period' brings little relief for poor children

The time when UNICEF conceived and launched its 'Global Study' has influenced its objectives, as well as its focus and content. The Study was conceived and developed between 2005 and 2007. During this time, most developing countries were enjoying strong economic growth rates, and many of them were still writing Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP/PRS) under World Bank guidance; laying out paths to trade liberalization and higher foreign investment. Official development aid was increasing again, after a considerable drop during the 1990s; poor countries were showing improvements in their macroeconomic health and balance sheets; and the IMF was shrinking in staff and importance (despite large and persistent macro imbalances in leading OECD economies). DfID, CIDA, GTZ and other donor agencies were championing a 'new development partnership approach' (the Paris–Accra process) whereby aid-recipient countries that responded to development challenges, showed improving public financial management and greater respect for the rule of law, might count on increasing aid in the form of debt cancellation (linked to the HIPC/PRSP process) and general budget support. The Millennium Development Goals summarized what the international community considered the main development challenges; and the term 'Fragile States' was coined for countries who remained marred in conflict and that could and/or do not want to participate in the PRS process and the response to development challenges.

This also looked to be a promising time for addressing the needs of vulnerable children. Six out of the eight Goals related directly to children and UNICEF's total budget reached a historic peak over 3 billion dollars.⁴ The spike in its budget was partly due to the influx of fresh emergency funds (raised for the 2005 Tsunami and a number of African emergencies). The agency's sectoral focus on child nutrition intervention and maternal and child health was helpful for finding its place on the MDG map, and joining the one-UN banner. However, its broader mission to promote multi-sectoral and rights-based strategies to safeguard the interests of the most disadvantaged children and women gained little traction during this period; many saw the MDGs as a more concrete and viable agenda than human rights. Moreover, UNICEF staff familiar with a project-based approach to development, often struggled to get

a chair at national policy tables where ambitious mid-term expenditure frameworks were laid out and strategies for poverty reduction launched.

Importantly, improvements in the lives of children were not visible in the way the 2000 Millennium Declaration had originally implied. No child protection indicator found its way into any of the eight goals and 18 targets of the MDGs. The gender parity goal in basic education remained unreached by 2005, even though education enrolment improved. Under-five mortality climbed in HIV/AIDS affected countries and/or did not improve among disadvantaged population groups even within those countries which made adequate progress on national averages towards 2015.⁵ This uneven progress can now be better tracked due to the revolution in household survey data availability which took off in the 1990s in the developing world.

Cash transfers appeared on the policy radar as an effective rapid response for the looming orphan crisis in HIV/AIDS affected countries. There was however, little international consensus on whether and how to promote social protection in a more comprehensive fashion in the developing world. The World Bank's risk management framework provided powerful intellectual ammunition for protective measures and raised attention on the growth and asset reducing effects of instability; however, its implementation excluded any major equity mission or a strong labor market promotion role for social protection, including for youths.⁶ Although the 'Washington Consensus' was being replaced by the Poverty Reduction Strategy approach, the view that entering into the emerging tide of global trade would eventually lift all boats still dominated the Washington-based multilateral agencies. Meanwhile the combination of inadequate participatory engagement, fragmented policies, insufficient focus on links between economic conditions and child rights,⁷ together with the limited success of the early PRSPs to advance meaningful social sector reforms,⁸ left much to desire for children benefitting from the poverty planning process.

It was in this milieu that UNICEF's headquarters made two major initiatives to assist its frontline country offices in upstream policy engagements. The first was a set of major internal trainings on economic and social policy which eventually involved over 20% of the approximately 5000 people in UNICEF's international workforce. The goal was to sensitize key staff on the importance of policy engagement while exploring the analytical tools and routine processes of evidence-based policymaking and public budgeting. The second initiative was the Global Study on Child Poverty and Disparities, which was meant to extend far beyond UNICEF to create a momentum and advance work with partners who engage in and shape different aspects of the national policy making process.

3. The core tenets of the Global Study

The Study took the form of a 'franchise' with standardized TORs, methodological templates and guidance provided directly from New York in collaboration with country partners and international researchers: basically a toolkit that UNICEF's Country Offices, national partners and other stakeholders promoting child rights and equity

³ Progress for Children: Achieving the MDGs with Equity. Number 9, September 2010 http://www.devinformo.info/pfc/download/progress_for_children_No9.pdf.

⁴ See a critical analysis of the Bank's strategy in this period in 'Building Resilience and Opportunity: the World Bank's Social Protection and Labor Strategy for 2012–2022. Concept Note <http://siteresources.worldbank.org>.

⁵ See Jessica Espey, Paola Pereznieta, Caroline Harper, Nicola Jones and David Walker Improving the prominence of child rights in poverty reduction strategy processes Background Note. ODI June 2010 <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/4791.pdf>; O'Malley (2004) Children and Young People Participating in PRSP Processes. Lessons from Save the Children's experiences http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/wcaro_07_UNICEF_OPM_briefing_paper_Children_PRSP.pdf and <http://www.eldis.org/fulltext/SCUK-participation-PRSP.pdf> respectively.

⁶ The Poverty Reduction Strategy Initiative: An Independent Evaluation of the World Bank's Support Through 2003 see http://www.worldbank.org/od/prsp/prsp_process.html.

³ See/download these 25 reports from <http://www.unicefglobalstudy.blogspot.com/>.

⁴ UNICEF, 2008 http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/UNICEF_Annual_Report_2008_EN_072709.pdf.

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