Raising the game: mainstreaming children's rights

Children still 'invisible' in development debates

Progress on child wellbeing is not automatic or inevitable, even with economic growth. Some global trends are positive, such as the falling numbers of children dying each year, thanks to improved nutrition and health interventions such as immunisation – down from 93 deaths before the age of five for every 1,000 live births in 1990, to 68 per 1,000 in 2007 (UNICEF 2008). But progress in some developing countries is slow, stagnating, or even reversing. Progress on all child-related indicators is slowest in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, and especially in West and Central Africa.

Without dramatic change, most developing countries will miss the child-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including MDG5 – halving the maternal mortality rate – which has a direct impact on children. But child deprivation is not only a developing world phenomenon. Child poverty rates, for example, remain high in many developed countries, despite economic prosperity. In the USA, the percentage of children in poverty was 16.2% in 1979, reached a peak of 22% in 1993, and stood at 18% in 2007 (NCCP, 2000).

There is near universal commitment by nation states to child rights. All but two countries, the USA and Somalia, have ratified the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) – more than any other international convention. But what does this consensus signify, given the number of children dying, or living in poverty? We contend that the swift ratification of the UNCRC – with most countries ratifying within five years of its adoption by the UN – shows that childhood is not a serious political concern. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women sparked heated debates, but child wellbeing is seen as a benign or 'soft' issue, with children politically invisible and discussion of their interests confined to sector-specific and welfare-oriented debates.

Twenty years on from the adoption of the UNCRC, the time has come for more strategic action. Gender mainstreaming, which has been

Despite some progress, child poverty remains a global phenomenon.

more visible at the 'macro' policy table, involves a 'deliberate, planned, intended strategy to transform the gender order throughout society' (Walby, 2005). It is time for child advocates to raise their game and develop a similar strategy for children. Just as gender mainstreaming looks beyond a narrow focus on women's interests, child rights mainstreaming must look beyond the impacts of specific services for children, such as education and child health, important as they are.

How do we integrate children's interests into mainstream policy agendas? By extending the reach of dominant development debates to include children's rights, until these rights become mainstreamed. The aim is to modify the dominant mindset, to incorporate a broader perspective.

Including children in development debates
Mainstreaming requires a child-sensitive lens to tease out causal linkages and the likely impact of policies on children. Because child poverty, as compared to adult poverty, is multi-dimensional, evolves over the course of childhood, depends on the care of others, and is subject to a particular depth of voicelessness, exceptional clarity is needed to make such links apparent and address the particular characteristics of childhood deprivation. This applies whether the debate is on

Key points
- Twenty years on from the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children's rights are still not seen as a serious political issue
- Children's rights should be mainstreamed into broader development policy debates, which requires an understanding of topics beyond a narrow focus on 'children's issues'
- Mechanisms are needed to increase the visibility of children in development policy dialogue, including a high-level international commission on the impacts on children of the 3-F crisis (food, financial and fuel)

the economic crisis, aid, poverty reduction, social protection or any other development policy area that affects children. The following examples show how a child-sensitive lens can be employed effectively.

Mainstreaming children in economic crisis recovery
Low-income groups have been recognised in fiscal stimulus packages and other policy responses to the global financial crisis. But there has been less recognition of the impact of the crisis on children, and limited policy responses for their wellbeing. Proven impacts of previous comparable crises on children include increased malnutrition, mortality and morbidity, child labour, youth unemployment, child exploitation, violence and other forms of abuse, falling school attendance, reduced use of health services and a decline in the quality of education, care, nurture and emotional wellbeing (Harper et al., 2009). With signs that this crisis will be no different, the future ability of children from poor households to escape poverty is in jeopardy, contributing to a lifetime of poverty and, potentially, its transmission to future generations.

The impact on children stems from falling investments in public services, household incomes and purchasing power, increased parental unemployment and migration. Children are also affected by increased domestic tension and violence, heavier workloads for women and reduced capacity for nurture, care and protection. With the World Bank estimating far more people in poverty than might have been expected without the crisis, and an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 additional infant deaths in sub-Saharan Africa in 2009 alone (Friedman and Schady, 2009) children should be mainstreamed in policy approaches.

Research from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) confirms that this is possible (Harper et al., 2009). An understanding of the effects of the economic crisis on children, for example, could be enhanced by ensuring that crisis monitoring initiatives integrate timely and systematic collection of data that is disaggregated by age and gender and includes political economy dimensions. Such data could inform policy debates and the strategic use of aid, especially alongside a better understanding of how civil society, including children's advocates, can shape policy dialogues and hold governments accountable for their crisis management. This could lead, in turn, to effective policy strategies that are pro-poor and sensitive to both age and gender.

It is also critical to foster synergies between formal social protection approaches and informal mechanisms that come under strain during a crisis, including a focus on the gendered effects of unemployment and underemployment and measures to support women and address their time poverty. These could include subsidised childcare services; services to counter rising rates of mental illness and drug and substance abuse; and counter-cyclical policies that protect investments in basic and social services, and allow scaling up of social protection interventions for the most vulnerable. Such responses, though frag-

mentary, have protected children in the past (e.g. Jones and Marsden, 2009).

Mainstreaming children into aid effectiveness
The words 'aid' and 'children' rarely feature in the same fora, and never in high-level debates on aid effectiveness. There is an assumption that funding to realise children's rights flows naturally through aid systems, given the increasingly coordinated focus around poverty reduction and the MDGs, and that correcting any flaws in the system itself will result, automatically, in improved child wellbeing.

The 2005 Paris Declaration was a landmark agreement on improving the quality of aid, and aid is now shifting away from projects towards sector and direct budget support, although this shift has not been as great as the commitments implied. ODI research (Harper and Jones, 2009) shows, however, that this shift could affect the realisation of child rights and that donors should do more in this area. There is a prevalent view that the Paris agenda 'only affects the ways in which donors deliver aid, not the content of that aid' (DAC personnel interview, 2008), but this is simply not the case. New and linked processes for aid delivery demand new and linked negotiations among donors, groups of donors and governments, in fora where child wellbeing may fall off the agenda through lack of common agreement and support. Viewed as a 'crosscutting' or, more often, 'special interest' issue, child rights could suffer from the policy evaporation that has plagued attempts to mainstream other human rights issues.

Our assessment of the consistency of donor efforts to promote child rights shows that these have relatively high visibility in donor cooperation (support for children is popular with the electorate), but little space or strategic consideration within core donor strategies, and only modest attention in monitoring and evaluation or records of investment. Those working on child rights portfolios feel marginalised and linkages with other governmental, non-governmental and multilateral agencies are reported to be quite limited. While some aspects of child rights are integrated into research and knowledge management, sometimes with significant funding, there is no overall child rights strategy behind this.

Donors need to safeguard the attention children receive in the new international aid architecture by establishing a cross-donor working group on child rights, in line with the Paris Declaration principles of alignment and harmonisation. The Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) GENDERNET provides a model and one of the first acts of this group could be to promote a light-touch monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system in each donor agency in the name of transparency and accountability. Incentives would be enhanced by the establishment of a child rights peer review mechanism under the umbrella of the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR). All donors should embed an understanding of child rights, including rights to protection and

participation, in core policy documents, aided by the development of internal child rights strategies with senior management support. Finally, given the constraints faced by many development cooperation agencies in expanding staff numbers and spreading existing staff over many issues, donors could out-source child rights expertise, following the Swedish model of gender and environmental helpdesks.

Raising the visibility of children in PRSPs

In response to disillusionment with Structural Adjustment Policies and aid conditionalities, country ownership and effective aid coordination climbed the policy agenda in the late 1990s. Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) emerged as key policy instruments, with an emphasis on partnership, participation and results-oriented approaches. Given the importance of the PRSP process, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child called in 2003 for children to be mainstreamed into the process.

Evaluations suggest, however, that while child-related policies such as basic child health and education are well addressed in PRSPs, comprehensive child rights approaches receive low visibility. There is little consideration of the specificity of children's experiences of poverty or the way these evolve during childhood in situational analyses, and MDG-related indicators are rarely reflected in monitoring and evaluation progress targets to which governments are held to account (Harper et al., 2009).

There have been attempts to involve children and youth in PRSPs. A UNICEF-supported initiative in Liberia, for example, led to more focus on girls' personal safety in the 2007 PRSP, and grassroots consultations with young people in El Salvador led to more attention for domestic violence as part of a multi-dimensional approach to poverty reduction (ADAP, 2009). But such initiatives have been small-scale, with limited influence on policy content.

More coordination from national governments, child rights advocates and donors is needed urgently to ensure that child rights are integrated into PRSPs. There is compelling evidence that childhood poverty is greater than that for adults and that it is analytically distinct (Jones and Sumner, 2007). This should be reflected in national poverty situational assessments and translated into measurable, actionable targets and indicators to strengthen accountability mechanisms that track progress on child wellbeing. This means strengthening the capacity of social welfare ministries that often face resource and capacity constraints. Similarly, more thought is needed on how child and youth facilitators can more effectively translate the views of children and young people into mainstream policy dialogues, triangulating their knowledge with conventional and 'acceptable' research-based knowledge on child poverty and rights. Finally, the bottom line cannot be ignored: child-sensitive budgeting tools exist and should be integrated into broader PRSP monitoring and evaluation efforts.

Ensuring social protection for children

Social protection is seen increasingly as a vital part of poverty reduction strategies and efforts to reduce vulnerability. Children can be direct targets of social protection interventions, which focus on the uptake of child health, nutrition and education services, and indirectly through measures that increase household income and consumption, reducing the demand for child labour. Commitment to social protection, however, varies. Some developing countries, including Ghana and Senegal, have mainstreamed social protection into their national development plans, or developed specific national social protection plans. Others have scaled up child-focused programmes, such as Brazil's Bolsa Familia initiative, which reaches 12 million households, and South Africa's Child Grant, which reaches 7 million. But elsewhere, the small scale and ad hoc nature of programmes is a constraint to addressing the depth and severity of poverty and vulnerability (see Box 1). Social protection institutions and policies are very scarce in low-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and will have to be created anew if coordinated and effective national social protection systems are to be established.

Social protection policies and programmes need to reflect children's multi-dimensional experiences of poverty and vulnerability. This vulnerability is not only economic in nature, but intersects with socio-cultural factors, including gender and intra-household rela-

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Box 1: Child-sensitive social protection in low-income countries

Child-sensitive social protection has often been dismissed as a luxury that only wealthier countries can afford. Given fiscal space constraints, the argument goes, advocates should not 'overload' the social protection agenda with child-specific demands. However, thanks to the persistence of child rights champions in NGOs and government agencies, child-sensitive pilot schemes are being launched in low-income countries. In March 2008, Ghana's Livelihood Empowerment against Poverty (LEAP) programme joined the list. LEAP is a cash transfer programme helping families exit from poverty and promoting human capital investments in children, especially among families with Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVCs). By May 2009, LEAP was benefiting about 26,200 households in 74 districts and is expected to reach 165,000 households within five years, at which point it estimated to cost 0.1% of GDP. Expanding to all households under the extreme poverty line (six times more than the 165,000 envisaged) would still cost less than 1% of GDP.

Monthly transfers for participating households with OVCs are conditional on the school enrolment and retention of children, birth registration, attendance at post-natal clinics, immunisation of children under five, and no involvement of children in the 'worst forms of child labour' or trafficking. These conditions are not actively enforced, but beneficiaries are made aware of them on payment days.

The programme is having a positive effect on household consumption, including on food, school uniforms and school supplies. This has been crucial amid the food price crisis, with the programme scaled up to reach districts that were severely food insecure with support from the World Bank. Challenges remain however. A robust monitoring and evaluation system is needed to generate evidence that would convince politicians of the programme's cost-effectiveness and secure the budget for scale-up. Coordination across government agencies requires strengthening to maximise synergies among existing government services and tackle the multi-dimensional nature of childhood poverty.

Source: Jones et al., 2009.

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tions, social exclusion and legal and cultural power imbalances. Recent evidence suggests that protection-related vulnerabilities – such as violence, child labour and trafficking – are among the most pressing challenges facing children globally (UN, 2006). But existing child protection systems are weak, fragmented and under-resourced in much of the developing world. To address child-specific vulnerabilities holistically, the synergies between social protection and child protection systems need recognition, alongside efforts to mainstream these initiatives effectively.

An understanding of social protection as 'transformative' highlights links between social equity measures such as legislation to address children's right to protection, and social protection policy frameworks. It provides entry points to foster synergies between social protection programmes (e.g. cash transfers, social health insurance, public works programmes) and social welfare services (childcare services, family violence counselling, education programmes for out-of-school children) (Jones, 2009).

Context-appropriate mainstreaming responses will, however, need concerted investments in awareness-raising and capacity-strengthening for programme designers and implementers, and efforts to improve coordination and data collection efforts across multiple government sectors, from social development to health to justice and migration.

Conclusions and policy implications

Tackling the marginalisation of child rights in development discourse and practice requires a more sophisticated understanding of child wellbeing that advances, but also looks beyond health, nutrition and education, important as they are. Mainstreaming child rights requires an approach with linkages across sectors and from the micro to macro levels.

Despite some progress, child poverty remains a global phenomenon. State and non-state actors worldwide must prioritise children to break the cycle of life-long and inter-generational poverty.

Twenty years after UNICEF's seminal *Adjustment with a Human Face* report and the birth of the UNCRC, and as we face the end of a 'benign' environment for aid, action is overdue. With estimated losses of up to $500 billion in financial flows to developing countries as a result of the economic crisis, the core business of development – promoting human wellbeing – is at risk. It is vital that the impact of policy choices on children and their carers is internalised in government and aid agency policies, ensuring that child rights are protected through tailored policy responses.

But how? First, mechanisms to give children and young people visibility in donor policies and action are required. Progress has been made in gender markers to promote gender-sensitive policy and programme development. Similar initiatives are needed for children and young people. One important starting point could be more strategic use of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Committee's periodic reports and comments on national government's progress on the UNCRC must inform donor and government policies alike.

While NGOs and donors have well coordinated international networks focusing on gender equality at the level of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and spanning the north-south divide, there are no comparable global networks for the child rights community. UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) are powerful players, as are large child rights-oriented NGOs, such as Save the Children, Plan and World Vision. But coordinated initiatives to address the child-specific impacts of mainstream macro-policy issues have been limited. International agencies should establish a high-level international commission focused on the impacts of the 3-F crisis (food, financial and fuel) on children, which could be a critical platform to launch such dialogue and cooperation.

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