Summary

Recent Approaches to Understanding Policy and Action for Eradicating Childhood Poverty

This is a summary of a Journal of International Development Policy Arena editorial, which highlights key features of recent approaches to understanding policy and action for eradicating childhood poverty.

Perspectives on alleviating childhood poverty have been wide ranging including anthropological and social concerns through to political inclusion and workforce issues. However, although the case for reducing childhood poverty seems to be widely accepted, it seems that there is considerable uncertainty within the development community about how to conceptualise childhood, leading to an impasse on how best to improve children’s wellbeing.

Emphasis on the concept of children’s participation has sometimes resulted in an excessive focus on participation per se rather than ensuring that all of children’s economic and social rights are upheld. In addition Governments and policy makers have tended to equate policy for realising children’s economic and social rights with policy on basic services, and often just health and education. So, how do we address problems of poverty and childhood more effectively?

In this Policy Arena, it is suggested that we must acknowledge children’s embeddedness within wider social, economic and political structures in order to understand and alleviate childhood poverty. It is more helpful to adopt a person-centred rather than category-centred approach to avoid, for example, stereotyping perceived problematic groups (such as child workers) and thus enforcing blanket solutions (such as abolition). A person-centered approach considers the problem in context and leads to more lasting solutions based on structural change. In short, policy aimed at tackling childhood poverty must take full account of relevant social, economic and political contexts and, thus, be integrated within broader poverty policy. However, this does not mean that policy that works for adults will necessarily be appropriate and effective for children. Children's participation can reveal a different agenda but that agenda needs to be taken up with adults, be sensitive to local contexts, recognise the importance of a strong social fabric, and be prioritised by mainstream development actors.

However, measures to promote children’s wellbeing tend to be equated with social policy, which usually has a relatively low status and is generally not as well funded as the poverty reduction strategies, which now enjoy priority funding as well as a high profile. Policies for children can be marginalised, and in general it is thought that improvements to children’s wellbeing can be achieved via ‘add-ons’ to mainstream policy. Conversely, the possibility that mainstream policy could be detrimental to children’s wellbeing tends to be ignored.

In some cases, the importance of policy for children has been recognised; however, research shows that it has not been prioritised. This is reflected by inadequate government spending on basic services – key to children’s wellbeing – as well as a failure to design and implement integrated development policy that promotes the wellbeing of the poorest groups and recognises that policy areas such as basic services and structural adjustment are inter-related and inter-dependent. For example, children can only access basic services if their family income is sufficient to allow them to do so, or if their parents allow them enough free time (away from income-generating activity) to make use of them.

If we are serious about making progressive policy for eradicating childhood poverty, then we must take the following into account:

- Children have distinct needs
• Adults and children are not two fixed categories – it is more helpful to adopt a person-centred rather than category-centred approach.
• Children are socially, politically and economically embedded
• A strong social fabric is critical to children’s wellbeing
• Early action on childhood is vital
• Evidence demonstrates that poverty in childhood can have enduring negative effects

What is needed is for policy aimed at improving children’s wellbeing to be carefully embedded within broader, integrated development policy.