Putting Children First: Identifying Solutions and Taking Action to Tackle Child Poverty and Inequality in Africa

International Conference
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Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

- Concept Note –

Overview

Poverty among children is devastating in its effects and presents one of the most urgent challenges for any society. Poverty in all its dimensions leads to often-unreversed damage for the lives of girls and boys, for the future prosperity and success of their wider societies; and is transmitted remorselessly to their children and future generations in turn. Confronting child poverty is an ethical and practical necessity. Fulfilling the promise and the rights of Africa's children, including adolescents, by lifting the deprivations of poverty and through expanding opportunities can unlock vast economic and social dividends.

Despite important strides in the fight against poverty over the past two decades, child poverty remains widespread and persistent. Worldwide and throughout Africa, children are much more likely to be poor than adults are. Poverty rates are highest among children in Africa, other than North Africa; one in five children grow up in extreme monetary poverty[1], while two-thirds of children live in multidimensional poverty[2], including: high rates of mortality and malnutrition; poor living conditions and educational outcomes; and often high risks of exposure to various forms of violence. One in four children in the Arab States – which include Northern Africa – experience multidimensional poverty. Estimates suggest that by 2030, nine out of 10 children suffering from extreme monetary poverty will be living in Africa, other than North Africa[3].

A fast-changing world means that the face of child poverty and its drivers are ever-evolving. While the majority of poor children can still be found in rural areas, the world is growing increasingly urban, posing new challenges to children and their families in terms of navigating their lives and livelihoods. High unemployment and scant provision of high-quality public services challenges the ability of families to provide an enabling environment for their children, and for adolescents to move safely and successfully from childhood into adulthood. The intensification of climate change, environmental shocks and ongoing conflicts have led into an 'age of displacement' across the region, presenting a huge challenge to fighting poverty for those most affected.

In 2015, the world explicitly committed itself to the eradication of child poverty. Target 1.2 in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) One on the eradication of poverty calls for the eradication of poverty in all its forms for individuals of all ages, making the elimination of child poverty "a universal commitment as well as an urgent global priority"[4]. This Conference aims to build on the momentum generated by the SDGs, to ensure that children remain at the centre of the agenda, and to identify practical solutions for improving children's lives.

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Conference objectives

This three-day international Conference will engage policy makers, practitioners and researchers in identifying solutions for fighting child poverty and inequality in Africa, and inspiring action towards change. The Conference offers a platform for bridging divides across sectors, disciplines and policy, practice and research, from which we can:

- identify, debate and advocate proven solutions to end child poverty in Africa;
- share and discuss new research on who and where poor children are, why they are poor and what tailored approaches to address their situation may look like;
- discuss particular policy and programming challenges and how they can be addressed;
- build links and networks between researchers, policy makers and practitioners;
- stimulate learning on particular skills that may help to move research to action.

The three-day Conference will be hosted by a unique partnership of the Comparative Research Programme on Poverty (CROP), Ethiopian Centre for Child Research (ECCR) at Ethiopian Development Research Institute (EDRI), ESRC-DFID Impact Initiative for International Development Research, Ethiopia Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA), United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and the Global Coalition to End Child Poverty, including African Child Poverty Forum (ACPF), Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Partnership for Economic Policy (PEP), Save the Children, UNICEF and Young Lives.

The Conference is framed around four overarching themes:

1. Setting the Scene: Who and Where are the Poor Children?
2. Child Sensitive Social Protection: Making Social Protection Work for Children
3. Ensuring Access to Basic Services for All: Reaching and Linking the Poorest and most Marginalised
4. Supporting Secure Transitions to Adulthood

This note provides an overview of these four themes in the light of current debates and knowledge gaps that the Conference will seek to address in greater detail. It also highlights the Conference outputs and intended contributions to ongoing work on poverty among children in Africa.

1. Setting the Scene: Who and Where are the Poor Children?

An important first step towards achieving SDG1 and the eradication of child poverty involves the identification of poor children and understanding their needs and vulnerabilities. The **availability of data and efforts to measure and map child poverty have led to a rapid expansion in the evidence base** on children's living conditions as well as causes of and trajectories out of poverty. It is now widely accepted that different measures lead to differential poverty rates and identify different groups of children being poor[5], as exemplified by the recent estimates published by the World Bank and UNICEF and OPHI. It is therefore crucial that different measures are used in complementary ways and that advances are made to further improve them. Important strides forward include: UNICEF's Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis (MODA)[6]; the extension of OPHI's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) to children[7]; and recent global estimates of monetary child poverty by the World Bank and UNICEF[8] - all of which are providing crucial impetus to policy efforts for the reduction of child poverty[9].

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While providing powerful information for influencing policy and practice, improvements in child poverty measurement and expansion of the knowledge base have also shed light on existing gaps. Complementary measurement of child poverty calls for **a greater understanding of simultaneous deprivations in terms of what they look like, who suffers them and why**[10]. This is particularly important for major areas of deprivation that are less easy to observe, such as child protection[11] and psychosocial wellbeing[12]. It follows **that the inclusion of children's voices, their experience of their own lives and how they can be improved is paramount** to gaining insights into challenges and how they may be addressed[13]. Equally, understandings of child poverty need to **acknowledge children's differing types and levels of vulnerability -** with girls, children with disabilities and children belonging to minority groups often facing higher risks of marginalisation.

Considerable numbers of children in Africa, as in other regions, continue to be **excluded from routine data that is based on household sample surveys and institutional data**[14]. These "invisible" children are also disproportionately likely to be among those who are extremely poor. They include girls and boys of different ages who are living without family or parental care[15], who live or work on streets, who have been displaced due to conflicts or natural disasters, or who are unaccompanied workers. These children tend to be not only very poor, but also highly vulnerable and less likely to benefit from health, education and protection services.

Knowledge gaps also persist with respect to malnutrition and hunger, arguably one of the most pressing issues facing children. Malnutrition, especially in the first 1,000 days post conception, poses a serious threat to children's physical and cognitive development with often-irreversible and cumulative damaging effects that persist during their life-cycle.[16] Adverse consequences extend to economies at large with the Cost of Hunger in Africa (COHA) studies[17] highlighting that countries incur annual losses ranging from 1.9% to 16.5% of GDP as a result of neglecting child under-nutrition. However, **reducing poverty does not necessarily lead directly to lower levels of malnutrition**. South Africa, for example, has seen major reductions in child poverty[18] in conjunction with a rapid expansion of cash transfers for children but malnutrition remains widespread[19]. This disjuncture between poverty reduction and improvements in child nutrition has strong ramifications for policies aiming to reduce malnutrition, not in the least for social protection programmes.

Any **assessment of poverty, including child poverty, need to acknowledge its dynamic nature**. A recognition of the non-static nature of poverty has long been a key argument for adopting more longitudinal approaches to the study of poverty[20]. The need for understanding movements in and out of poverty is compounded by African children increasingly facing multiple shocks in an age of climate change[21], urbanisation[22] and conflict. These new realities change the experiences of poverty, the nature of children's vulnerabilities and most crucially the appropriate responses to prevent falls into and promote moves out of poverty.

Migration also features importantly in dynamic understandings of children's lives in Africa. Sub-Saharan African countries consistently experience some of the highest rates of migration in the world[23]. This holds ramifications for children 'left behind' and to what extent the economic benefits of parents' migration may outweigh negative consequences of being left without parental care[24], as well as for children and youth migrating themselves and the need for better understanding of the motivations and aspirations that influence migration decisions[25].

Conference presentations and discussions will reflect on these concerns in more detail, aiming to contribute to more nuanced understandings of child poverty and vulnerability as well as furthering ways for advancing our knowledge. Key issues include: better equipping measures of child poverty to reflect children's voices, differential experiences and changes over time; gaining more profound insights into the poverty-nutrition puzzle and how it may be addressed; and understanding how migration and other shocks manifest themselves in children's lives both positive and negatively.

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2. Child-Sensitive Social Protection: Making Social Protection Work for Children

In the last decade, social protection has become part and parcel of the development agenda[26] and **social protection is now widely recognised as one of the foremost interventions within the policy package for fighting child poverty**[27]. Child-sensitive social protection (CSSP) encompasses programmes that aim to maximise positive impacts on children and to minimise potential unintended side effects[28]. This includes both direct interventions (i.e. child-focused or targeted) and indirect interventions[29]. Its role in advancing child wellbeing and rights in Africa is widely recognized, such as during the sixth International Policy Conference on the African Child held in Addis Ababa in 2014[30].

An expanding evidence base provides testimony that social protection – and cash transfers in particular – improve living conditions, increase school enrolment, reduce child labour and improve access to health services[31]. However, far **less is known about the impact of interventions on less easily observable and measurable outcomes**, including household dynamics, social relationships[32], children's aspirations and psychosocial wellbeing[33]. With respect to the latter, it has long been asserted that shame lies at the 'irreducible, absolutist core' of poverty[34] (Sen, 1983: 159) and has been shown to be a cross-cultural experience[35] also affecting children[36]. Programmes that are 'shame-blind' by either not engaging with negative psychosocial effects or reinforcing them through design and implementation can lead to further marginalisation and deprivation[37]. 'Shame-proofing' policies and programmes may work to counteract these negative effects.

Programmes seeking to promote **economic empowerment can also have important repercussions for child wellbeing, both positive and negative**[38]. Economic strengthening is vital for families to be able to provide adequate care for children, and experiences across Africa have found that it reduces parental stress, improves intra-household relationships and may prevent loss of parental care and support the de-institutionalisation of children[39]. By the same token, programmes relying heavily on beneficiaries participating in public works or setting up income generating activities can substantially add to household labour demands, women's time burdens and undermine the quality of care provided to children[40].

Evidence is also increasingly indicating that the provision of cash alone is not a 'magic bullet'. More nuanced understandings of the impact of social protection on children have led to debates on the most effective and appropriate social protection instruments for improving child outcomes, including in the area of nutrition[41]. **The need for more integrated approaches that combine cash with other types of social services is widely recognised and increasingly tested**, sometimes referred to as **'cash plus'** programmes[42]. Such interventions also often incorporate communication and information to empower parents and caregivers and promote practices which are likely to be positive for children. Exactly how different modalities can be brought together into more comprehensive packages of support in a cost-effective way requires more learning and debate.

Conference presentations and discussions within this theme will focus on gaining more nuanced understandings of social protection's impacts on children, particularly zooming in on effects on social dynamics and psychosocial wellbeing and on interventions with strong economic strengthening components. Debates will also be policy-oriented, tacking questions around integrated approaches, 'cash plus' programming and strengthening the positive linkages between social protection and child protection.

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3.   Ensuring Access to Basic Services for All: Reaching and Linking the Poorest and Most Marginalised Children

Despite great improvements in making basic services accessible to all children, **many children in Africa remain deprived of clean water, safe sanitation, education and basic healthcare**. In 2016, only half of all children in Africa with pneumonia were taken to an appropriate health provider and one in four children did not complete primary education[43] The number of out-of-school children of primary school age in Sub-Saharan Africa dropped by 27 percent from 1996 to 2014 but still stands at an estimated 34 million[44].

It is important to recognise that those lacking access to basic services are far from homogenous and that **there are substantial ongoing concerns over equity both with respect to access and the quality of services.** Children from poor households, girls, children with disabilities, children in illegal dwellings and children without parental care are often among the most excluded and marginalised. Socio-political shocks can further reinforce their vulnerability[45]. Other vulnerable groups include pastoralist children[46], albino populations[47], orphaned children[48] and LGBT children.[49] The mantra of 'leave no one behind' will be gauged by its ability or inability to reach and equitably include these groups.

Ensuring access to services does not necessarily mean that outcomes for children will automatically improve: quality also matters. In terms of schooling, UNESCO has estimated that 250 million children worldwide do not meet minimum standards for reading and writing [50]. While poor quality affects all children, it is very likely to be the poorest and the most marginalised who experience the lowest quality services. Gaps in learning are evident even as children start school, meaning that disadvantage needs to be tackled from the early grades and even before children enter the classroom.[51] Investment in early childhood development is key to levelling the playing field and getting all children off to the best possible start.

The need to improve the protection of children from violence, abuse and exploitation is a rising concern across Africa.[52] **There are growing calls and efforts to improve child protection systems** in many countries to tackle problems such as physical and sexual violence, child marriage and female genital mutilation[53] - rights violations which disproportionally affect girls. Poverty increases the risks of violations such as child marriage which are sometimes seen by parents as protective, given the high levels of other risks that children and families face.[54]

Conflict and crisis poses great challenges for ensuring access to basic services. Climate change models additionally warn of additional stresses on water supplies in some regions[55]. Estimates suggest that conflict alone is responsible for half of the world's out-of-school primary-aged children[56]. Lack of education coupled with aggregate shocks associated with conflict can have damaging and irreversible consequences for children[57]. The promotion of learning may counteract negative effects and promote human development, but **many lessons are still to be learned regarding effective teaching in conflicted- and crisis-affected areas**. Finally, with over half of urban African citizens living in slums[58] and the continent continuing to urbanise[59], the role of urban planning in securing access to basic services is crucial. This demographic shift presents a challenge for the continent and its children in terms of infrastructure[60] and sustainability[61]. **The ability to provide essential services in complex urban contexts will be central in support of children's rights and their transitions into adolescence and adulthood**.

Conference presentations and discussions within this theme will primarily focus on education and health, seeking to understand how to ensure affordable access to and good quality of services for the most vulnerable and marginalised. This includes lesson-learning regarding improvements in maternal and newborn health and education outcomes in rural areas, conflict-affected areas and for children with disabilities. We also pay special attention to children living in cities and children affected by migration or displacement.

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4.   Supporting Secure Transitions to Adulthood

Youth represents the fastest-growing demographic in Africa, accounting for 547 million people in 2015 and estimated to increase to almost one billion by mid-century [62]. This demographic shift gives rise to questions about which actions are needed to convert the 'youth bulge' into a 'demographic dividend'. Many countries have witnessed a generational shift with young people now having enjoyed more schooling than their parents at the same age. New technologies are rapidly changing young people's experiences and aspirations. **Adolescence is a critical turning point** at which pre-existing inequalities can translate into lower life chances that persist into young adulthood. It is also a second critical window of opportunity during which policies aiming to support young people's development may help equalise opportunities and generate high economic and social returns[63]. Interventions for this rising demographic of young people are central to intentions ambitions for inclusive and sustainable growth.

Fostering employment features heavily in debates about youth and transitions into adulthood. **Youth unemployment presents a major challenge in countries across the region**. This challenge raises questions about job creation and about the role of entrepreneurship and self-employment as well as young people's own aspirations[64]. Access to information and markets is crucial, with the use of rising technology such as cell phones facilitating mobility through the expansion of social networks[65]. Rural road construction is important not only for connectivity, but can also offer important employment opportunities for low-skilled youth in some contexts in support of reintegration of ex-combatants and child soldiers[66]. Programmes supporting employment, capabilities and skills training have been crucial in increasing youth's access to the labour market and maintaining positive outcomes in the long run[67]. At the same time youth employment programmes are criticised for being too heavily grounded in individualistic notions of the problem and overly reliant on interventions addressing the supply of labour while ignoring the structural lack of demand[68].

Sexual and reproductive health represents a key concern for adolescents. **Early adolescence is a critical window to lay the foundations for positive reproductive and sexual health outcomes**[69] . Ensuring that adolescents have functional knowledge of their own health and rights, together with access to appropriate services, is an important step in mitigating against various risk factors. The Sustainable Development Goals direct further attention towards ending child, early and forced marriage; in addition to increasing the likelihood of gender-based violence, child marriage is also associated with poorer early childhood development among those born to mothers aged less than 18 years of age[70].

Generally, early childbearing is a key contributor to both fertility and high population growth in the region. It also greatly reduces the likelihood of a girl advancing her education and limits her opportunities for training and employment. Although fertility in this age range has fallen in most countries, Africa has the world's highest level of adolescent fertility at an estimated 98 births per 1,000.[71] **Keeping girls in school delays marriage and childbearing**. Teenaged girls are less likely to become mothers if they attend secondary school. The causality can also run the other way, as teenagers may be less likely to attend secondary school when they become mothers. Further research is required to identify the directions and extent of causality.[72]

Adolescence represents a time of life-changing decisions and a period of growing responsibilities and increasingly pronounced social roles. During this stage in life, **gender norms often become more important and accentuated**. These norms can affect access to schooling, learning outcomes and aspirations, and roles and responsibilities with respect to paid work and unpaid care. They may also relate to experiences of bullying and other forms of violence[73]. Making use of windows of opportunity to support adolescents in their transitions to adulthood is crucial to counteract gender inequalities and promote opportunities for leading

safe and fulfilling lives. Although highly dependent on context, early adolescence (when children move from primary to secondary school) and middle to late adolescence for girls (when girls are under pressure to marry) represent two such windows of opportunity[74].

Conference presentations and discussions will seek to gain insight into this key transitional period in life, zooming in on the role of education, work and social and technological connectedness in facilitating transitions. A key question underpinning all contributions considers how existing inequalities may be reshaped in order for young people, especially those among the poorest and most marginalised, to fulfil their aspirations and live life to its fullest potential.

Conference outputs

This Conference unites participants from across regions, countries, sectors and levels of engagement in a shared commitment to fight child poverty in Africa. It particularly aims to bridge the gaps between policy makers, practitioners, civil society and researchers in recognition of the importance of and opportunity for using knowledge and evidence generated from well-focused research on children in poverty in Africa to inform the design of more effective and policies programmes - and to address the multi-dimensional and complex challenges of poverty.

We aim to 'make evidence matter'[75] for the poorest and most marginalized children, **in order to inspire action and mobilise champions** among policy makers, politicians, civil society and other key decision-makers throughout African societies. This as a means to better ensure the fulfilment of all our obligations to children under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

Conference outputs will include a Plan of Action, an edited book and working papers. For latest information, check the events page: http://www.theimpactinitiative.net/event/event-putting-children-first-identifying-solutions-and-taking-action-tackle-poverty-and

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