

remain very similar to what they were at the beginning of the last decade.

High unemployment

The second reason for child poverty is the very high level of unemployment in the country. South Africa emerged from sanctions and a protected economy into the rush of globalisation in the early 1990s. It sought to make itself attractive to foreign investment and to expand trade by opening markets and reducing trade barriers. These approaches deepened the already high levels of unemployment as the country lost jobs in sectors that struggled to compete in the global market – such as the agricultural and manufacturing sectors.

HIV/AIDS

There is a third element at play here – the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Poor communities and households are most heavily affected by the spread of HIV/AIDS. Families living with this disease are likely to lose wage and/or self-employment income if an income-earner gets sick, while having to spend large proportions of income on health care and funeral expenses. This situation, in turn, deepens poverty.

Families in communities heavily burdened by HIV/AIDS are also likely to take in children and adults affected by the pandemic, which increases dependency on the limited income and assets of such households. Children in households affected by HIV/AIDS risk missing school either to care for sick household members or to try and earn money to supplement the household income – thereby increasing the likelihood that poverty is perpetuated into their generation.

To get a clear picture of the extent and nature of child poverty in the country, it is first necessary to clarify what is meant by child poverty and how it can be monitored.

What is child poverty and how can it be measured?

Almost everyone has an intuitive understanding of what child poverty is – a situation where children do not have enough resources to grow healthy and strong, to get an education, to live in a good and safe environment, and to fulfil their potential. Where children are deprived of the resources needed to grow and develop, they are living in poverty.

In order to work out where resources should be allocated and to see how the poverty situation is changing over time,

it is necessary to create some definition that will clearly distinguish between children who are poor and those who are not. Once poverty is defined, it needs to be measured regularly to quantify how many children are living in poverty, how deep the poverty is, and what areas of their lives are impoverished.

Noble, Wright and Cluver outline the different ways in which child poverty can be thought about, measured and enumerated. They consider child poverty and its consequences as having both an intrinsic and instrumental value. Intrinsically, the experiences of children are important. Allowing children to live in poverty is not right. The instrumental value of child poverty is linked to the fact that children will grow up to be the adults of tomorrow. For this reason, a long-term investment of resources and care in the lives of children is essential for the future.

When we think about poverty in this way, it is obvious that children and their caregivers need more than just money. A definition of child poverty should therefore include what children need. Yet, many definitions of poverty are based on income and expenditure in households because, in the society we live in, money gives power to purchase many of the things that are needed. Some of the ways in which poverty can be defined are discussed below.

Absolute poverty

The idea of absolute poverty is that there are basic goods (and experiences) needed by everyone for survival, no matter where or when they live. These basics are usually measured by calculating how much it would cost to buy or get what is needed for subsistence or survival. The resulting measure of child poverty counts how many children have access to less than the calculated amount, and this is expressed as the number of poor children, or the proportion of children, living in such circumstances.

This is an absolute measure of poverty. As Noble and his co-authors note, most research into child poverty in South Africa has used this approach. The problem with absolute definitions of poverty is that, whilst they identify issues relating to subsistence, they do not address the wider inequalities in society, where poverty is one extreme on the spectrum of relative wealth.

Relative poverty

A relative approach to conceptualising and measuring poverty takes the broader context in which children live seriously. Relative poverty measures do not only consider the absolute

deprivation of resources necessary for survival, but also take into account inequality in a society.

Some forms of relative income measures that are used in South Africa are problematic as they define people as being poor when they are located in the bottom 20% or 40% of income distribution. As some people will always be poorer than others, using a measure like this would mean that poverty could never be eliminated. In the international context, relative income poverty is more usually expressed as those living in households below half of average income – by using this measure, it is technically possible to eliminate poverty. However, there may be a danger with this approach if half of the average income is below subsistence level.

Poverty has many dimensions

Poverty can be measured narrowly, through income alone, or in broader terms. A relative definition of poverty is most useful when it is considered in a multi-dimensional way. This means the focus moves to considering relative poverty as lacking the resources to participate fully in society across a number of dimensions. For example, it would be possible to take into account the extent of health deprivation, education deprivation, housing deprivation, employment deprivation, access to services deprivation, as well as income deprivation.

It is possible to develop an absolute core concept of poverty in many areas of a child's life, not only for family or household income. Abuse, a lack of access to education or health care, the use of unsafe water, a bucket toilet system – all of these are impoverishments. Many forms of social exclusion can also be included in a relative definition. Going on school outings, having a school uniform, and being able to celebrate birthdays can all be considered necessary for a child's full inclusion into society.

Who should define poverty?

Is poverty something that should be defined by researchers and governments or by people who live in poverty? Noble and his colleagues suggest that poverty definitions should include both consensus and expert elements.

The basic requirements for full participation in society are implied in a consensual definition of poverty, and should include aspirations and a common understanding of necessities. The views of many people can be captured through research using opinion surveys and focus groups, and Noble and colleagues from the University of Oxford are involved in a project in South Africa that has such an approach.

Other more participatory activities can also take place, such as the Poverty Hearings held in the late 1990s by the South African National Non-Governmental Organisations Coalition, the South African Council of Churches, the South African Human Rights Commission and the Commission on Gender Equality. More recently, research conducted by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) and the Children's Institute asked children for their views on poverty and what is necessary to be safe and protected and to grow up well. Community or popular definitions of poverty are also indicated by political activity or community mobilisation around specific issues, such as the provision of housing or municipal services.

What could a model to measure and monitor child poverty look like?

After outlining the range of possible definitions of child poverty, the research team at the University of Oxford suggest a model for South Africa of multi-dimensional indicators with both absolute and relative measures. In their article, they write:

Given the fact that a significant number of children do not have their basic needs of food, housing, education, safety and health provision met, there is no doubt that an absolute and multidimensional measurement of child poverty is essential for South Africa. However, there is also a pressing need for a carefully thought out relative concept of poverty to address the extreme inequalities and exclusion experienced by children beyond the failure to meet their basic needs.

They also argue for a model that starts from the perspective of children rather than families or households – particularly because some elements of poverty are child-specific, such as schooling, infant mortality or child development. There are many overlaps in the domains and indicators that they propose to measure poverty for the general population and for children specifically. However, the child poverty measurements are designed to take into account child-specific experiences or outcomes. Thus, while children may be living in households that are well-resourced materially, they may be deprived of adequate care. In other words, the model makes it possible to define 'poor children' as well as the more usual measures of 'children living in poor households'.

Figure 1: A multi-dimensional model of child poverty for South Africa



Source: Noble M, Wright G & Cluver L (2006) Developing a child-focused and multidimensional model of child poverty for South Africa. *Journal of Children and Poverty*, 12 (1): 39-53.

The model developed by the Oxford team uses child-centred indicators of deprivation as measures of poverty. It is illustrated in the figure above.

Noble and colleagues suggest this range of dimensions or domains as a starting point for defining child poverty in South Africa. The model is multi-dimensional and includes elements of assets and income, services, care and abuse. "Material deprivation" includes household income, food and clothing. The "human capital" domain covers education and human capabilities. This area could include indicators of school attendance and the quality of education, as well as the availability of early childhood development facilities and programmes. "Living environment deprivation" would include access to housing, water and sanitation and the availability of public spaces for children where they could play or socialise.

The proposed model has a core component – an absolute concept of poverty, defined normatively within each domain. It also has relative components in the same domains, which address a child's ability to participate fully in society. In addition there is a measure of access to good quality services.

Child poverty and socio-economic rights

The model that Noble, Wright and Cluver propose is very useful in the South African context. The core part of the model is normative. They suggest that the norm be defined through consensus and research. In the South African context, this normative component can also be defined quite powerfully through the idea of children's rights. In other words, the South African Constitution, international law and the Courts can be used to define a central absolute core entitlement for children. The concept of a 'core of a right' can also be found in government policies and in the country's laws. Defining core rights and using them in poverty definitions is one way in which this model can be developed further. There is also room for further development of the domains, and whether others should be included.

There is still a long way to go before a minimum (or absolute) core definition is developed by consensus or by the Courts, which still need to interpret many of the rights enshrined in the Constitution. However, at this point, the

model provides a useful conceptualisation of child poverty, while it still needs to be used to define measures of poverty through indicators. Many of these indicators will be impossible to generate without improved data collection on the situation of children through government departments' administrative records and through national surveys. The Human Sciences Research Council¹ and the Children's Institute² are working to make this model usable by designing indicators and data collection options, as well as by analysing currently available national survey data to develop child-centred statistics.

While much work remains in this regard, the model does provide a framework for future research and advocacy to improve children's lives. The government has not developed an approved or agreed-upon poverty measure – relative or absolute, uni-dimensional or multi-dimensional, for children or for adults – which could be used to monitor the poverty situation. The development of this model and the increasing attention to levels of child poverty therefore provides an important opportunity for government and civil society alike.

The *South African Child Gauge 2006* outlines some thoughts on what is known about child poverty in the context of children's socio-economic rights, including the rights to social assistance, education, health services, housing and water. The *Children Count – Abantwana Babalulekile* section starting on page 63 onwards presents indicators of some of the dimensions of child poverty discussed here. These show that child poverty in South Africa is extensive on a range of dimensions.

For example, on the dimension of health, it transpires that in 2005 only 30% of children who should be accessing anti-retroviral treatment did in fact do so. On the dimension of living environment, 2005 data indicates that 35% of South Africa's children live in informal housing or traditional dwellings, and that 42% do not have access to water on site at their homes. In the next essay, the extent of material deprivation for South Africa's children is discussed at length.

What are the conclusions?

This essay highlighted the fact that there is no standard measure of poverty in South Africa, and this makes it difficult to monitor progress and to decide where best to direct the country's resources. It outlined a model for defining and measuring child poverty, which was recently proposed by researchers at the University of Oxford. This model uses the best of various kinds of measures: it includes both absolute and relative poverty definitions, is multi-dimensional, and child-focused.

The model is open to debate and development, and will be very useful if its absolute component is interpreted in terms of the rights framework in South Africa. There is a lot of work still to be done in collecting and analysing the data necessary to make this model work. But what is apparent from this and other sections in the *South African Child Gauge 2006* is that child poverty is widespread, and that it has many dimensions.

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¹ See: www.hsrc.ac.za/research/programmes/CYFD/projects/20030331_6.html.

² See: www.childrencount.ci.org.za.