

12. POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

State Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 27,1



A person in a state of poverty lacks “an adequate standard of living” such as adequate housing and clothing, nutritious food and clean drinking water, sufficient income, employment and access to health care, education and social services. Poverty may result from particular events, such as war or natural disaster, or be chronic among whole populations, but whatever its cause, poverty is a human rights violation. When people lack the basic requirements for survival, their other human rights are in jeopardy too, even the right to life. The World Bank reports that while in rich countries only one child in a hundred fails to reach its fifth birthday, in poor countries as many as ten in a hundred do not survive.¹ However, living in a prosperous country does not guarantee freedom from poverty. A Unicef report on child poverty shows that from three to over twenty-five percent of children in the world's wealthiest nations live in poverty. The same report states that 47 million children from the 29 members of the Organization for Economic Development (OECD), or one in six, live below the national poverty line, defined as half the average national income.²

All societies strive to achieve social cohesion, reinforcing the things that bind people together and fighting the disruptive forces that drive them apart. One of the principal factors of division in any society is an excessive gap between the rich and the poor. Thus, addressing poverty not only enhances the lives of the poor people, but also contributes to a culture of human rights and improves social cohesion for the whole society.⁴

Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises children's right to a standard of living adequate to meet their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development and exhorts governments to assist families who cannot provide these basic needs of their children, especially with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing. Article 26 of the CRC further highlights the right of the child to benefit from social security benefits that helps the child develop and live in good conditions. However, many governments lack the financial means or the political will to meet the needs

Children experience poverty in a different way from adults. Poverty compromises children's daily lives and has a cumulative and negative impact on their future.³

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of its children. Even in wealthy countries large numbers of children live in poverty. In the UK, for example, one child in five lives in poverty.⁵

In the European Union child poverty varies from rates above 15% in three Southern European countries (Portugal, Spain and Italy) to under 5% in the four Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden). Nine countries in northern Europe have brought child poverty rates below 10%.⁶ However, there is no obvious relationship between levels of child well-being and GDP per capita. The Czech Republic, for example, achieves a higher overall rank for child well-being than several much wealthier countries, including France and Austria. Norway is the only European country where child poverty can be described as very low and continuing to fall.⁷

Significant economic, political, environmental and social changes in the EU directly affect children. The young people in an EU country are more likely to face poverty than the population as a whole (20% for children aged 0-15 and 21% for those aged 16-24, compared to 16% for adults).⁸ Children living with poor parents or who cannot live with their parents, as well as children from some ethnic minorities, are particularly exposed to poverty, exclusion and discrimination.⁹

The situation is more serious in Eastern and Southern Europe. Although the absolute number of children living in poverty has declined in the last ten years, one child in four, or approximately 18 million children, are still living in extreme poverty in the countries of south-eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States. Even though the region's economic recovery has improved conditions for most adults, the *Innocenti Social Monitor 2006*¹⁰ reports that many children are not seeing similar benefits. The report concludes that although there are large disparities among the countries in the region, most governments are not spending enough money on children.

QUESTION: *What do you think are the most significant, long term effects of poverty on children?*

Evidence from many countries persistently shows that children who grow up in poverty are generally more vulnerable: they are more likely to be in poor health, to have learning and behavioural difficulties, to underachieve at school, to become pregnant early, to have lower skills and aspirations, to be low-paid, unemployed and dependent on welfare.

People who find themselves in a position of extreme poverty through an accumulation of disadvantages or who suffer from degrading situations can be said to suffer 'social exclusion'.¹¹ The children of poor parents are especially subject to social exclusion and limited opportunities in education, employment and development. In addition to the right to an adequate standard of living, poverty directly contributes to a denial of poor children's other human rights: it can deprive a child of the right to education, to association, to rest and leisure, to participate in the community, and to other civil and political rights.

The economic, political and social processes that create poverty generally reinforce each other, exacerbating their effects on the lives of poor people. For this reason, a poor child from a minority group may be subject to the combined disadvantages of racial discrimination and the deprivations of poverty. Many immigrants, refugees, and Roma children are subject to poor education, insufficient health services and child labour in addition to social exclusion.

Governments need to address child poverty by ensuring access to social services (education, health, welfare) and providing public services (water, electricity, transportation). Community organizations also play a role in poverty alleviation by providing immediate assistance such as food, clothing, health-care and education services. Both governments and organizations within civil society can offer income-generating projects, support small business ventures and provide employment opportunities, remedial education and skill-building trainings to poor communities.

Providing poor people with food and shelter is an essential but short term response. However, alleviating poverty in the long run requires strengthening the participation of poor people in decision making



processes, ensuring community based development and removing discrimination based on gender, ethnicity and social status. A key tactic to reducing poverty is stimulating economic growth, making markets work better for poor people, and building up their skills. All these are roles that both individuals and institutions, both governmental and civil society must unite to play.

Because child poverty and growing social exclusion are such endangering processes, in recent years several European countries have formulated government strategies to combat them. These integrated strategies aim not only to improve support measures, such as welfare services, healthcare and early childcare for all, but also to support empowerment and capacity building for families and children as well, such as access to quality education for all children, parent education and the promotion of children's participation in various decision making activities concerning the design of local policies. Combating racism and different forms of discrimination is a key part of such poverty-reduction policies.

Relevant human rights instruments

Council of Europe

The European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees civil and political human rights, is complemented by the European Social Charter (ESC), adopted in 1961 and revised in 1996, which guarantees social and economic human rights. As with most human rights instruments, the European Convention on Human Rights contains a strong statement against discrimination. Although it does not specifically name poverty as a reason for social exclusion, it mentions "property...or other status." Addressing the daily lives of individuals, the European Social Charter covers many of the key components of poverty:

- **Housing:** access to adequate and affordable housing; reduction of homelessness.
- **Health:** accessible, effective health care facilities for the entire population, including preventive illness.
- **Education:** free primary and secondary education and vocational guidance; access to vocational and continuing training.
- **Employment:** an economic and social policy designed to ensure full employment.
- **Legal and social protection:** the right to social security, social welfare and social services; the right to be protected against poverty and social exclusion.

Key among these provisions of the Charter is Article 30, The right to protection against poverty and social exclusion:

With a view to ensuring the effective exercise of the right to protection against poverty and social exclusion, the Parties undertake:

- to take measures within the framework of an overall and coordinated approach to promote the effective access of persons who live or risk living in a situation of social exclusion or poverty, as well as their families, to, in particular, employment, housing, training, education, culture and social and medical assistance;
- to review these measures with a view to their adaptation if necessary.

United Nations

There are several articles of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** which oblige states to provide appropriate services and support its citizens for appropriate living conditions:

- Rights to social security, Article 22
- Right to equal pay for equal work, Article 23
- Right to rest and leisure, Article 24
- Right to education, Article 26



- Right to participate in cultural life, Article 27.

Most directly related to poverty and social exclusion is Article 25:

(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

(2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Not every state has the means to support all the unemployed, sick, disabled, elderly and others unable to obtain an adequate standard living, but states are obliged to give as much support as they are able. Human rights are a direct reflection of human need. Food, clothing, shelter and healthcare are not just necessary for survival; they are also essential to human dignity.

The **Convention on the Rights of the Child** makes extensive provision for the economic well-being of children. While parents are given the principal responsibility for the care, development and support of their child, the state is enjoined to assist parents and guardians if they are unable to adequately care for the child (Article 18). The Convention also entitles all children to:

- the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health (Article 24)
- a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development (Article 27)
- the right to benefit from social security, including social insurance (Article 26).

If every state had the means and the political will to fully implement the Children's Convention, there would be no homeless or hungry children.

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Useful Resources

- Bradshaw, Jonathan and Benette, Fran, *Fifth Report on United Kingdom National Action Plan On Social Inclusion 2003-2005*: Social Policy Research Unit, University of York, Heslington, York, 2004: http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_inclusion/docs/3uk_en.pdf
- *Child Poverty in Perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries*: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2007: www.unicef-icdc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf
- *Ending Child Poverty within the EU? A review of the 2006-08 national reports on strategies for social protection and social inclusion*: Eurochild, 2007: www.nabukeuropa.de/fileadmin/user_upload/downloads/Handlungsuund_Themenfelder/Jugendsozialarbeit/Final_NAPs_report_January_2007.pdf
- Huster, Ernst U., Benz, Benjamin, and Boeckh, Jurgen, *Implementation of the National Action Plan of Germany against Poverty and Social Exclusion (NAPincl) on the Regional and Local Level: Second report 2004 of the non-governmental experts*: Bochum, 2004: http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_inclusion/docs/3de_en.pdf
- *Innocenti Social Monitor 2006: Understanding Child Poverty in South-eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States*: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2006: www.unicef.org/ceecis/SocialMonitor-20061018.pdf
- *Malta National Action Plan on Poverty and Social Exclusion 2004-2006*: http://mfss.gov.mt/documents/msp/nap_incl_mt_20040703.pdf
- Minoff, Elisa, *The UK Commitment: Ending Child Poverty by 2020*: Center for Law and Social Policy, Washington DC, 2006: www.clasp.org/publications/uk_childpoverty.pdf



- *A League Table of Child Poverty in Rich Nations*: UNICEF, 2000:
www.unicef-icdc.org/publications/pdf/repcard1e.pdf
- *Strategy for Social Cohesion*, Council of Europe Document (CDCS (2000) 43):
www.coe.int/t/dg3/socialpolicies/socialcohesiondev/source/strategy_fr.doc
- *Towards a EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child*: Communication from the Commission COM (2006) 367 final, Brussels, 2006:
http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2006/com2006_0367en01.pdf
- *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking poverty*, World Bank, 2000:
<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPOVERTY/Resources/WDR/English-Full-Text-Report/ch3.pdf>

Useful website

- European Social Charter: <http://conventions.coe.int/treaty/en/Reports/HTML/163.htmv>

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References

- 1 *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking poverty*, World Bank, 2000.
- 2 *A League Table of Child Poverty in Rich Nations*: UNICEF, 2000, p. 4.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. iii.
- 4 *Strategy for Social Cohesion*, Document (CDCS (2000) 43): Council of Europe, 2000, pp. 7-10.
- 5 *A League Table of Child Poverty in Rich Nations*: UNICEF, 2000.
- 6 *Child Poverty in Perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries*: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2007, p. 5.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.6.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child*: Communication from the Commission COM (2006) 367 final, Brussels, 2006.
- 10 *Innocenti Social Monitor 2006: Understanding Child Poverty in South-eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States*: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2006.
- 11 See European Social Charter: <http://conventions.coe.int/treaty/en/Reports/HTML/163.htm>

