

CHILD POVERTY: THE URGENCY OF A SENSE OF URGENCY – WHY AND HOW TO PRIORITISE CHILD POVERTY

GAELE BUYSSCHAERT

Child rights Officer UNICEF Belgium

1. INTRODUCTION

This article sheds a light on the extent of child poverty in Belgium and on the importance of defeating this vicious circle that damages childhood and life chances, putting the long term well-being of our society at stake.

UNICEF Belgium urges decision makers to speed-up and reinforce their commitment to fight child poverty, mainstreaming it in comprehensive strategies and policies that support a parent's access to good quality employment and adequate income, access to high quality public services (especially childcare, education, health, housing, and leisure activities) as well as through strengthening the participation of children and their families in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies.

The case for children bears repeating: the recent increase in political attention for child poverty has not yet delivered for children and their families, who are disproportionately hit by poverty and the recession. The 6th State Reform, and the new governments aligning their priorities at the same time, is momentum we must seize upon in order to change the trends. Not doing would be one of the most costly mistakes we could make, storing up social and economic problems for the years ahead, and – as one example – puts the sustainability of national pensions plans at risk.

2. CONTEXT AND IMPORTANCE OF THE PROBLEM

2.1. POVERTY HITS CHILDREN THE HARDEST

There is an alarming consistency to the global problem of poverty: poverty rates are usually highest among children. Over 569 million children aged 18 or less are living on less than USD 1.25 a day. While children make up about a third of the world's population, they represent a stunning 47% of those in extreme poverty. The same pattern shows in Belgium: the average poverty rate for the entire population in Bel-

gium is 15.3% (almost one in seven), while the poverty rate for children is almost 18.5% (almost one in five, with strong regional differences: one in ten in Flanders, one in four in Wallonia, and four in ten in Brussels). Recent figures¹ also show that in richer countries children are suffering the effect of the economic recession disproportionately – underlining that child poverty is a truly global issue, and one that needs urgent attention.

2.2. LASTING DAMAGES

Children not only disproportionately suffer the effects of poverty disproportionately, they are also more vulnerable to its damage because of their particular life stage. Poverty in early childhood and adolescence has especially devastating effects, often distorting children's physical, cognitive and social development. Such effects are difficult to overcome later. Poverty can also set children on a lifelong trajectory of low education levels and reduced productivity and economic growth, and it undermines their physical and mental health. Children living in poverty are more likely to become impoverished adults and have poor children, creating and sustaining intergenerational cycles of poverty.

While the largest costs of child poverty are borne directly by children themselves, society also pays a high price through reduced productivity, untapped potential and the costs of responding to chronic poverty: lower levels of health and educational achievement, increased likelihood of unemployment and welfare dependence, higher costs of judicial and social protection systems, and the loss of social cohesion. There is also a significant cost to business and economies due to lower skill levels and reduced productivity resulting from a large number of children failing to develop to their full potential.

Child poverty damages childhood and life chances and harms us all.

2.3. THERE'S NOTHING UNAVOIDABLE ABOUT IT

International comparisons show that both child poverty and the impact of the economic crisis on children are not inevitable, but policy-sensitive. The series of UNICEF's Report Cards, for instance, shows that some countries are doing much better than others at protecting their most vulnerable children.

(1) Report Card 12, *Children of the Recession: The impact of the economic crisis on child well-being in rich countries*, <http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/series/16/>.

2.4. POVERTY REDUCTION BEGINS WITH CHILDREN. IT IS RIGHT IN PRINCIPLE AND PRACTICE

Extensive research has proven that failure to protect children from poverty is one of the most costly mistakes a society can make.

Children who ‘fall behind’ do so at the earliest stages of their lives with lifelong consequences. Attempting to compensate for disadvantage later in life is more difficult, more costly and is less likely to be successful. Interventions in early childhood, however, need to be sustained by measures at school age in order not to lose the gains made earlier.

The economic argument, in anything but the shortest term, is therefore heavily on the side of protecting children from poverty.

But even more important is the argument in principle. Child poverty is a denial of human rights, fighting it is a moral obligation. Because children have only one opportunity to develop normally in mind and body, the commitment to protection from poverty must be upheld in good times and in bad. A society that fails to maintain that commitment, even in difficult economic times, is a society that is failing its most vulnerable citizens and storing up intractable social and economic problems for the years immediately ahead.

2.5. SIGNS OF HOPE?

Globally, 2014 has been an important year in the fight against child poverty, and one that may make a difference for years to come. Global commitment to fight child poverty looks to be growing, with an emerging global commitment to make defeating child poverty part of the Sustainable Development Goals (to build from the expiring MDGs), including global and national measurement and expanding social protection systems that can make such a difference to the poorest children. UNICEF has put ending child poverty at the heart of its Agenda for #Everychild 2015.² The year ahead will be a vital one to turn this agenda into reality.

2.6. WILL BELGIUM FOLLOW AND DELIVER FOR THE CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES?

Both financial³ and non-financial⁴ measures indicate Belgium has a relatively high rate of child poverty, with impressive regional differences.

(2) http://www.unicef.org/media/files/2pager_everychild_FINAL_webFINAL.pdf.

(3) Based on income, measure of relative poverty.

(4) Based on a measure of absolute deprivation. The 14-item Child Deprivation Index draws on data from the European Union's Statistics on Incomes and Living Conditions survey of 125,000 households in 31 European countries, which has included a section on children for the first time in 2009. Children were considered ‘deprived’ if they lacked two or more of the items, which ranged from three meals a day to an Internet connection. See <http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/660>.

Approximately 420,000 children live below the poverty line. Obviously, the regional differences require specific analyses and responses, but the challenges have that in common that they require urgent, consistent and structural action at all policy levels in the fields of employment, education, social transfers, fiscality, early childhood care and education, social inclusion, housing, health etc.

Belgium's specific situation has been analysed and discussed during a recent colloquium organised by the King Baudouin Foundation in collaboration with the Hermn Deleeck Centre for Social Policy (University of Antwerp), the Brussels-Capital Health and Social Observatory and IWEPS. Vandenbroucke, Vinck and Guio brought together the latest analyses on child poverty and formulated concrete policy recommendations.⁵ Extensive research has also been realised by Schepers and Nicaise, in the Study of National Policies in the framework of the EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion – Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage.⁶

Some key issues and challenges:

- The trends in child poverty rates are not showing hopeful changes. The latest data draw a worrying image on how the recession impacts children: children have been severely hit, more than other vulnerable groups, such as the elderly. The recession also pushed poorer families further below the poverty line. Together with demographic prognoses that foresee an increase of births, mainly in the poorer parts of cities and municipalities, this has to be read as a serious “leading indicator” (in stock exchange terms, a leading indicator is a measurable economic factor that predicts the pattern in the economy) forecasting storms ahead.
- Some children are more at risk of poverty than others: household work intensity is an important explainer of child poverty in Belgium. But children in single-parent families or with a migration background too are more at risk than others. These groups consistently appear in the most severe range of poverty statistics. Their needs call more than ever for specific types of attention and services, which are often first to disappear in a financial crisis.
- Child poverty is not a residual issue that can be solved by economic growth on its own. It needs targeted measures and structural investments to be defeated.
- Belgium is focusing on employment as an important lever in the fight against poverty. It is critical to provide vulnerable families with decent job opportunities that pay off and are not at the expense of the children. Indeed, before the crisis, growth in employment was shown to benefit mainly families that already worked, furthering the gap between families with low and those with a high work intensity.

(5) <http://www.kbs-frb.be/event.aspx?id=311068&langtype=2067&src=true>.

(6) <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=11634&langId=en>.

- The current measures to stimulate employment, on the one hand, and the more stringent conditions for social benefits on the other, might have as a potential consequence that the income level of those persons who are unable to find work could be further eroded. The Belgian Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion is therefore urging the government to conduct a poverty impact analysis on these measures without delay.
- The labour market for adolescents and young adults was already a problem before 2008, but the recession has magnified it for a whole generation. The relevance of this trend should not be underestimated, as this represents the parents of tomorrow and today. With such a large percentage of young people absent from the labour market and education, or discouraged and disengaged, Belgium is facing extraordinary challenges, such as the sustainability of national pension plans.
- In the income pillar, depending on the type of household, revenues barely allow families to keep their head above water. The current child benefit is proving to be not as effective in the fight against child poverty, and requires improvements while reforming the system.
- In Belgium, like many other OECD countries, children growing up in poor families have less access to quality services. The structural shortage of affordable, high-quality childcare for instance, or in social housing often leaves poor families out. Belgian communities urgently need to increase the capacity of the education system, both quantitatively as qualitatively. Belgium is known to be one of the OECD countries that leaves children far behind at school, leading to very different prospects for the future. Education seems to reinforce social inequalities instead of overcoming them. For many children in poverty (and their parents), school hurts and excludes instead of functioning as a lever to develop talents, gain self-confidence, and obtain degrees.
- In recent years, Belgium is increasingly paying attention on child poverty, with the adoption of plans in that field, which are relatively comprehensive. Yet, it is unclear what margin is available for investing in children as the pension expenses risk swallowing all of the resources available to policy – resources we need to invest in children and their families.

2.7. CHILD POVERTY NEEDS A HIGHER PLACE ON THE AGENDA. THE MOMENT IS NOW

With new governments at the federal, community and regional level at the start⁷, an important moment presents itself to invest in the fight against child poverty and for child well-being.

(7) In the State Reform large components of labour market policy, healthcare, housing and the child benefit allowance are transferred to the federated entities.

Failing to protect children from the devastating effects of poverty, and from the impact of the crisis, could pose long-term risks. UNICEF, straightforwardly, states that too often, children have been neglected by the global response to the crisis. If this neglect persists, the crisis among children will continue well after any economic recovery, putting the long-term well-being of our society at stake.

3. TIME TO DELIVER: INCREASED ATTENTION ON CHILD POVERTY HAS NOT PAID OFF FOR FAMILIES

The fight against child poverty has increasingly and undeniably become a point of attention for Belgian policy in recent years. We welcome that. Belgium and its entities are paying attention to the issue in federal, regional and community plans and at the local level.

This has been crystallised in the adoption of a first national plan to combat child poverty (June 2013). For the first time in Belgium, a plan that transcends the barriers of the country's complex structures was created to specifically address child poverty and promote child well-being. Positive, too, is that in order to realise the multi-dimensional approach reflected in the EU Recommendation, a fourth objective was adopted regarding the horizontal and vertical collaborations needed between policy levels and domains. However, "if one wishes to efficiently and effectively reduce child poverty, the sheer existence of these plans will not be enough".⁸ Plans must indeed be implemented, carried out and evaluated. But very little time was left for that, as the plan was adopted less than twelve months before the federal and regional elections.

The attention on child poverty remains as such a incomplete phenomenon when considering its impact, the resources allocated to it and the effectiveness of the actions. The repeated commitment did not seem to stand the test of the recession, which has led to spending cuts in services for families and seems to reinforce the lack of strong political cohesion to fight child poverty in a structural way, that is, embedded in a larger and coherent social policy.

4. KEY TASKS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In a time when employment remains scarce and new budget cuts seem to impact the families and services for children disproportionately, it is crucial to fight child poverty in a comprehensive and structural way. With continued investments and consistent and structural commitments, policy can make a real difference.

(8) Schepers, W. and Nicaise, I., *Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage. A study of national policies. Country Report Belgium*, EU Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion, p. 9, 2014.

UNICEF Belgium is calling for an acceleration and reinforcement of efforts in the fight against child poverty.

- **Make an explicit and coherent commitment to end child poverty**
 - Combatting child poverty should be mainstreamed in comprehensive strategies to promote child well-being and overcome child poverty through policies to support parents' access to good quality employment and adequate income; access to high quality public services (especially childcare, education, health, housing, child protection, and sport and recreation). These strategies must also strengthening the participation of organisations working with children and of children themselves in the development, implementation and monitoring of policies to promote child well-being and combat child poverty.
 - At all levels, decision makers should prioritise maintaining support for children and there should be, ex ante and ex post child impact assessments of all financial consolidation and austerity measures.
 - Annual reporting should continue in the National Reform Programmes and the National Social Reports on the progress made in implementing the Commission's 2013 Recommendation and the extent to which comprehensive, multi-dimensional and rights-based approaches are developed covering the three pillars of the European Commission's Recommendation. We urge the State Secretary to develop new national action plan on child poverty in this framework.
 - The reporting process to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (due in 2017) is another process where the fight against child poverty should be at the heart of the debates.

- **Break the cycles of child poverty by fighting its root causes**
 - Children in the most vulnerable situations suffered most during the recession. Priority attention should be given to tackle the root causes leading to these forms of exclusion (e.g. children from migrant/ethnic minority backgrounds, children with a disability, children in households with a low work intensity, children living in single-parent or large families, children in or leaving institutions).
 - Important reforms in the education systems are needed in order for the schools to be a lever for equality of chances in life.
 - Mobilise EU structural funds in an optimal way for the implementation of the three pillars of the Recommendation

- **Produce better data for informed public debate**
 - Availability, timeliness and relevance of information about the well-being of children should be improved so as to have regular reporting on the situation of children allowing policy monitoring and evaluation.

- Although a new round of the EU-SILC is released approximately every year, the 2009 wave is currently the only source of measures of deprivation specific to children. Fortunately, many of the child specific items are to be integrated in the core EU-SILC survey from 2014 onwards, but the data will not be publicly available until 2016.
 - The EU-MODA⁹ is a policy tool that can be used to identify and quantify child deprivation, and identify those suffering multiple and overlapping deprivations. But, EU-MODA is based on the EU-SILC and, as such, is subject to all the limitations with regards to data quality that the survey suffers from. In particular, the regional differences across Belgium are a cause for concern.
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(9) As part of UNICEF's continued efforts to generate quality evidence on child poverty and disparities, the Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis (MODA) is a tool to enhance the equity focus of child poverty and deprivation analyses around the world.

MODA adopts a holistic definition of child well-being, concentrating on the access to various goods and services which are crucial for their survival and development. It recognizes that a child's experience of deprivations is multi-faceted and interrelated, and that such multiple, overlapping deprivations are more likely to occur, and with greater adverse effects, in more socio-economically disadvantaged groups, <http://www.unicef-irc.org/MODA/>.

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