

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article:

Crivello, Gina, Laura Camfield and Catherine Porter (2010) "[Editorial: Researching Children's Understandings of Poverty and Risk in Diverse Contexts](#)", *Children and Society* 24: 255-260.

DOI:10.1111/j.1099-0860.2010.00309.x. Available online at:

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2010.00309.x/pdf>

This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.

## **Children and Society Special Issue 2010**

### **Children, Poverty and Risk: Global Perspectives**

#### **Editorial: Researching children's understandings of poverty and risk in diverse contexts**

Guest editors:

Gina Crivello, Young Lives, University of Oxford

Laura Camfield, Young Lives, University of Oxford

Catherine Porter, Young Lives, University of Oxford

Throughout the world, children experience and manage risk as a part of their everyday lives. But growing up poor may be a particular source of vulnerability and disadvantage for children, especially where they are confronted with gross inequalities. The global challenge is huge. By 2015, it is estimated that nearly one third of the world's population will be under the age of fourteen. At the same time, children are disproportionately represented among the world's poor. More than 30 per cent of children in developing countries – about 600 million – live on less than US \$1 a day (UNICEF, 2008). In this special issue of *Children & Society*, we present eight papers focusing on children's everyday experiences of poverty and risk in developing country contexts.

The impact of poverty on child wellbeing has been one of the main concerns of the international development community. In 2010, we are two thirds through the fifteen year timeframe set by the UN for meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which have placed a greater focus on children's outcomes in development cooperation. But the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has also witnessed a global financial, food and fuel crisis, which

has exacerbated the poverty experienced by hundreds of millions of people. At the same time, there have been several calls to turn the current crisis into an opportunity, including for children (for example, the ‘Recovery with a human face’ e-discussion network launched by Unicef). The crisis can be seen as a catalyst for advocacy around children’s rights, including advocacy for children’s participation in ensuring appropriate policy responses, as well as a spur to scholars to increase knowledge about how children experience poverty and how it affects their life trajectories.

Research into the impact of poverty on children’s wellbeing takes many forms, from large-scale monitoring and evaluation studies through to detailed ethnographies. As a rule, international development efforts to counter child poverty continue to depend on crude indicators and league tables of child wellbeing which may or may not reflect the priorities and views of children. This may relate to the sheer scale of poverty in developing countries which appears to demand an equivalent response in research terms, notably through large-scale survey approaches that favour quantification and measurement, aggregates and averages, and with a strong disciplinary bias towards economics and social policy. Although it is now widely recognized that poverty is multi-dimensional, much poverty discourse remains fixed on income measures and material poverty, for example, as in Gordon et al.’s (2003) definition of poverty as ‘severe deprivation of basic human need’ (see also Bartlett and Minujin, 2009:3).

By contrast, the papers in this Special Issue highlight the importance of research and participatory activities involving children themselves, which adds specificity and depth to understandings based on large-scale surveys and longitudinal studies, as well as complementing data from the perspectives of caregivers, professionals or advocates. We offer a series of grounded explorations into the relationships between child poverty, risk and wellbeing. Carrying out research *with* rather than *on* children remains relatively rare within

poverty research, despite the growth in development studies of ‘participatory’ research with adults. While initiatives such as the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (see <http://www.childinfo.org/mics.html>) or the State of the World reports (e.g. UNICEF, 2008) have increased our understanding of the scale of child poverty, participatory approaches can offer nuanced understandings, with a particular emphasis on children's own experiences, perspectives and agency.

Our main focus is on the daily lives of individual children experiencing economic and other forms of disadvantage, within the context of resource-poor families, communities and countries that have experienced the risks of greater integration into the global economy without the benefits. In particular, we explore the way poverty interacts with what are often constructed as other sources of vulnerability in children’s lives. For example, how does poverty shape the experience of being a young refugee, an orphan, or a working child trying to balance the demands of school and family, or of belonging to a poor ethnic minority group or living in a community prone to natural disaster?

The papers that follow are based on research carried out in a variety of settings, with young people living in households and in institutional care, in cities, villages, and peri-urban environments. Three papers (Camfield; Truong; and Morrow and Vennam) are based on one major project, Young Lives. This fifteen-year study of child poverty began in 2001 and is following the lives of 12,000 children growing up in poverty in Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam ([www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk)). Longitudinal research of this kind is extremely rare in developing country contexts, especially when combined with longitudinal qualitative research with the same sample.

While most authors in the Special Issue report on experiences of young people aged around 12 to 15, we also include research involving children as young as three (Tanner) and five

years old (Camfield). For very young children, deprivations can have physiological and neurological effects that last into adulthood (Grantham-McGregor and others, 2007), whereas for older children, the psychosocial impacts of poverty are especially important, as the sense of stigma and shame and resulting social exclusion become more acute (Bartlett and Minujin, 2009; Ridge, 2002). The social costs of poverty for children have been highlighted in several recent reviews of qualitative research on children's views on and experiences of living in situations of economic disadvantage (see Attree, 2006; Redmond, 2008). While these cover mostly European studies, the damaging effects of stigma and shame emerge strongly in the papers by Camfield, by Mann and by Truong, which highlight the corrosive effect of rising inequalities and the importance to children's identities of having sufficient resources to support social participation.

One positive trend in researching children's wellbeing in the context of their everyday lives is the inclusion of more balanced accounts, with much greater focus on what poor children have, including their competencies, resourcefulness and their relationships, as well as what they materially lack or 'need' (see Camfield and others, 2009). Elaborating these complexities is an important way to strengthen theory and research and it is equally important for the realisation of children's rights in ways that respect their unique circumstances and their potential to contribute to improving policies and practices. So, while measurement across distinct domains is important for tracking the progress of poverty alleviation strategies, focusing on specific outcomes of poverty and other risk factors fragments children's lives and distributes the responsibility for improving these across sectors (e.g. education, health or social protection), ignoring the way that these dimensions are closely inter-connected (Frost and Stein, 2009). This fragmentation may also obscure the social, cultural and political-economic processes that explain differences between groups of children. In differing ways,

each of the papers in this Special Issue shares this holistic view of child risk and wellbeing in contexts of poverty.

The first paper, by **Gillian Mann**, is an example of the ways in which, even in the context of extreme poverty, material lack is overshadowed by children's everyday concerns around social exclusion, discrimination and harassment. Based on several years of ethnographic research with Congolese refugee children without official documents living in Dar es Salaam, Mann's paper describes their strategies to 'find a life' in a situation where they are denied social status and belonging. Central to this is the way they try to 'imagine a future' for themselves that is not defined by refugee status. Mann argues that despite their limited opportunities, the children's focus on the future is a strategy for sustaining hope and for asserting their human value.

The next paper also has a strong focus on the social costs of poverty for children and is the first paper in this Special Issue to be based on the Young Lives study (see above). **Laura Camfield** draws on local concepts of 'living well' and 'living badly' to explore poverty with younger and older children across five Ethiopian communities. Even though reports for Ethiopia typically concentrate on conditions of 'absolute poverty', children's accounts in Camfield's paper reflect a greater concern for 'relative poverty', or the ways in which material deprivation impacts on their social relationships, and can lead to social exclusion. This finding is especially salient given the broad trends being identified by Young Lives which indicate that, while economic growth during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has benefited many Young Lives children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam, some children, families and communities are still being left behind (e.g., Escobal and others, 2008; Galab and others, 2008). In particular, fewer improvements have been reported for rural children, for children living in the poorest households, and for those in socially marginalized groups.

Camfield's paper provides further evidence supporting the need for greater political-economic analysis of child poverty trends.

This Special Issue highlights the difficulties experienced by children growing up poor, but the emergent image of children is not of passive vulnerability, and several of the papers elaborate on children's strategies for coping with their daily realities. One of the reasons often cited for children's constrained agency is their marginal social position and relative powerlessness in relation to adults. The study reported on by **Shaziah Wasiuzzaman and Karen Wells** shows how children are social and economic actors, even within the constraints of their marginality. Their research on Muslim child domestic workers in an Indian city focuses on the social ties between (lower class) young female workers and their (middle class) adult employers. These girls act as 'bridges' between social networks, in this case between middle class and working class households. The authors argue that it is only because of their status as children that the girls are able to secure these jobs, providing a degree of security to their vulnerable households, by creating a relationship of social obligation with their adult employers.

Like child domestic workers, orphans are another category of children often constructed in dominant discourse as a homogenous and inevitably vulnerable group, highlighted by the global acronym 'OVC' for 'orphans and vulnerable children'. **Andrea Freidus'** paper draws on her research in three different orphanages in Malawi that were established and funded by North American organizations. She argues that these institutions act as surrogate parents imparting particular ideals of childhood reflecting the Western cultural frameworks of the funders. Being designated an orphan may bring greater material advantages (e.g., in terms of food, shelter and education) compared to other children in the community, including those who have not been orphaned. However, there are also social costs, as children's social connections to their villages of origin and to their extended families are often weakened.

The paper by **Virginia Morrow** and **Uma Vennam** is the second that draws on Young Lives data. The authors are interested in the ways children make sense of their working lives and their roles and responsibilities within their families. The context is a rural agricultural and cotton producing community in Andhra Pradesh state, India, where many children work part of the year pollinating cotton seeds. This paper reports on the difficulties for children who combine school and work, contextualizing these difficulties within the context of their social and familial expectations, children's own aspirations and changes in their community. Children's working patterns were shown to be sensitive to changing circumstances, for example food price rises, fluctuating demand for cotton, availability of school grants, and family health status.

The theme of children's work is also central to **Truong Huyen Chi's** paper, the third Young Lives paper in this Special Issue. Truong's work was carried out in highland and mountainous areas of Vietnam among Kinh, Hmong and Cham H'Roi children; they represent respectively the ethnic majority and two ethnic minority groups, with correspondingly different experiences. The paper explores what it means for children to be members of a minority ethnic group in the context of poverty and the role of language in children's social interaction and their resilience. Hmong and Cham H'Roi children conceptualize their work and their roles in mitigating family hardship as a collective response to poverty, distinguishing them from their wealthier Kinh contemporaries, and giving them value in a context where they have very little materially.

The next paper, by **Renata Maria Libório** and **Michael Ungar**, also focuses on the potential positive outcomes of children's work, drawing especially on the concept of resilience. The authors report an extensive review of over 40 papers that included children's own views on their economic activity. While the main focus of international attention is on the harmful effects of child work in contexts of poverty, Libório and Ungar maintain on the basis of their



review that children's work can have contextually specific benefits and consequences, and that these have implications for policy and intervention. They argue that efforts aimed at protecting children from harm need to be balanced to ensure children's access to work-related resources that support their resilience.

All of the papers described thus far are examples of research with children. The final paper, by **Thomas Tanner**, extends the paradigm to a consideration of the role of children in action research and in development processes. Tanner provides evidence that children across a wide range of age groups have an important role to play in identifying and mitigating the risks associated with climate change and natural disasters. He reports on children's participation in community-based groups across 20 communities in El Salvador and the Philippines.

Children's perceptions of risks differed from adults' perceptions; similarly their capacity to act and their ways of communicating information about risks among their social networks were also different. Tanner argues that while narratives emphasizing children's vulnerability may be useful for advocacy purposes, effective policies need to be informed by grounded understandings of children's cultural and livelihood practices and their roles as communicators, which may not support the view of children as vulnerable.

In conclusion, one recurring theme in all these papers is the potential mismatch between the dominant discourses of children/childhood and child poverty and children's perceived realities. The ideal of childhood as a period of dependency and innocence, free from labour and defined by schooling, has been a major export of Euro-American thinking across the globe, which may be in tension with the realities of poor communities (Boyden, 1997; Cunningham, 1995; Zelizer, 1985). Representations of children are crucial because these influence the ways in which policies and programmes are designed and frame the nature and potential of children's participation in development processes. Thus, greater reflection is needed on the underlying assumptions regarding children and childhood that inform policy,

programming and research agendas. Woodhead (2006:6), referring specifically to early childhood, warns against “the perennial temptation to inflate the significance of a particular theory or evidence where it serves advocacy, which is ostensibly on behalf of young children’s rights and well-being, but frequently is also linked to particular visions for early childhood, specific stakeholders or sets of political priorities”.

This critique has wider relevance for older children and young people, as well. Many well-intentioned efforts aim to protect children living in poverty against abuse and other risks, to improve their life chances and to support their rights. But these efforts need to be aligned with the priorities that children and local communities set for themselves (Reynolds and others, 2006), as well as acknowledge that there is not a singular, universal model of ‘good’ childhood. Involving children in research and taking their views seriously is an important part of this process, as is their involvement in the development of policy and practice.

## **References**

Attree P. 2006. The social costs of child poverty: a systematic review of the qualitative evidence. *Children and Society* 20: 54-66.

Bartlett S, Minujin A. 2009. The everyday environments of children’s poverty. *Children, Youth and Environments* 19(2): 1-11.

Boyden J. 1997. Childhood and the policy makers: a comparative perspective on the globalization of childhood. In *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. James A, Prout A (eds). Falmer Press: London; 216-238.

Camfield L, Streuli N, Woodhead M. 2009. What's the use of “well-being” in contexts of child poverty? Approaches to research, monitoring and children's participation. *International Journal of Children's Rights* 17(1): 65-109.

Cunningham H. 1995. Children and childhood in Western society since 1500. Pearson Education: Harlow.

Escobal J, Ames P, Cueto S, Penny M, Flores E. 2008. Young Lives: Peru Round 2 Survey. Young Lives Country Report.

Frost N, Stein M. 2009. Editorial: Outcomes of Integrated Working with Children and Young People. *Children and Society* 23: 315-319.

Galab S, Prudhvikar Reddy P, Himaz R. 2008. Young Lives Round 2 Survey Report. Initial Findings: Andhra Pradesh, India. Young Lives Country Report.

Gordon D, Nandy S, Pantazis C, Pemberton S, Townsend P. 2003. Child Poverty in the Developing World. The Policy Press: Bristol.

Grantham-McGregor S, Cheung YB, Cueto S, Glewwe P, Richter L, Strupp B. 2007. Developmental Potential in the First 5 Years for Children in Developing Countries. *Lancet* 369: 60–70.

Redmond G. 2008. Children's perspectives on economic adversity: a review of the literature. UNICEF Innocenti Discussion Paper.

Reynolds P, Nieuwenhuys O, Hanson K. 2006. Refractions of children's rights in development practice. A view from anthropology – Introduction *Childhood* 13(3): 291-302.

Ridge T. 2002. Childhood poverty and social exclusion from a child's perspective. Policy Press: Bristol.

UNICEF. 2008. State of the World's Children 2008: Child Survival. United Nations Children's Fund: Geneva.

Woodhead M. 2006. Changing perspectives on early childhood: theory, research and policy. Background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2007. UNESCO: Paris.

Zelizer V. 1985. Pricing the priceless child: the changing social value of children. Basic Books: New York.