

# Towards the End of Child Poverty

A JOINT STATEMENT BY PARTNERS UNITED IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CHILD POVERTY

*“The face of poverty might change from one place to the next, but how poverty is felt is the same.”*

YOUTH GROUP, NEW YORK, CONTRIBUTION TO THE STATE OF WORLD'S CHILDREN, CHILDREN IN AN URBAN WORLD, P.43



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## Eradicating child poverty is one of the world's most important and urgent tasks

In 1990, the world made a commitment to its children: that we would do everything in our power to protect and promote their rights and ensure they have the means to survive, develop and thrive – as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Since the turn of the Millennium when world leaders adopted the Millennium Development Goals, there has been unprecedented progress in alleviating poverty and improving the living conditions of millions of children and families. Yet despite this progress, many of the world's poorest and most disadvantaged children have been left behind.

Child poverty is a challenge which should bind us globally. In almost every country in the world children are more likely to be living in poverty than adults, and compounding this, their particular life stage makes them more vulnerable to its devastating

effects with potential lifelong consequences for their physical, cognitive and social development. While children themselves suffer the impacts of their poverty most severely and immediately, the harmful consequences for societies, economies and future generations can be felt nationally, regionally and even globally.

Despite the urgency, children have generally received relatively little attention in poverty reduction efforts. However, in the new Sustainable Development Goals, world leaders have now recognized the central importance of child poverty, with Goal 1 aiming to eradicate extreme poverty and halve the proportion of men, women and children living in poverty in all its dimensions. As the world starts the preparations for the implementation of this ambitious agenda, this joint statement aims to articulate the shared understanding of partners on the importance of child poverty, and some of the key responses that can help lift children and future generations out of poverty.

## What does poverty mean for children?

The most revealing way of understanding children's experience of poverty is to talk to children themselves. While much more work needs to be done on listening to children and young people on their experiences and the responses that could make a difference in their lives, in engaging with children some common threads emerge:

### ■ Child poverty is multidimensional

For children, poverty is about more than money. Children experience poverty as being deprived in the immediate aspects of their lives, areas including nutrition, health, water, education, protection and shelter.

### ■ Monetary poverty plays a crucial role

While these multiple dimensions of poverty and deprivation are of vital importance to children, monetary poverty also matters. A family's standard of living is one of the crucial determinants of the deprivations children experience. Children living in severe monetary poverty lack the necessary resources for optimal physical and cognitive growth and development, and routinely experience insufficient levels of access to quality services such as healthcare and education.

*“Poverty has an impact on how people look at you; if nobody cared about whether you are poor or not, if people stopped thinking that because you are poor you don't know anything, things will change. Poverty is not about money; lack of money is in addition to poverty.”*

KATHLEEN, 15 YEARS OLD NORTH AMERICA

### ■ Living in relative poverty also matters to children

Living in relative poverty impacts children's opportunities – and this may be particularly relevant in richer countries. Even when not clearly deprived in absolute terms, having much poorer opportunities in education, health or nutrition compared to their peers limits their future life chances, disproportionately affecting vulnerable and excluded groups. Children define their perceptions of themselves and their aspirations by how they see themselves relative to others, which shape their actions and decisions with major impacts on their capacities, self-esteem and life opportunities.

While no simple definition of child poverty can cover these experiences, moving towards a common understanding of child poverty is vital as we work together to understand problems and implement solutions. We understand child poverty as multidimensional, encompassing both monetary poverty and a range of further deprivations that seriously affect children. Viewing child poverty across this spectrum of children's realities allows for a deeper understanding of the overlapping deprivations that children may experience, and the relationships between them. As such, this holistic view of children's lives can form the basis for designing and implementing solutions that can make the difference.

This commitment to children living in poverty and the importance of multidimensional approaches have been recognized by global and regional frameworks, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, as well as EU 2020 Strategy and the Agenda 2063 for Africa. In 2007, the UN General Assembly stated that ‘children living in poverty are deprived of nutrition, water and sanitation facilities, access to basic health-care services, shelter, education, participation and protection, and that while a severe lack of goods and services hurts every human being, it is most threatening and harmful to children, leaving them unable to enjoy their rights, to reach their full potential and to participate as full members of society’<sup>1</sup>.



*“The worst thing, in my opinion is to be poor or underprivileged and not be able to achieve the goals you have in life.”*

YOUNG PERSON FROM BULGARIA

## Child poverty does long-term damage to children and societies

Poverty is different for children than for adults. Poverty in childhood, both monetary and multidimensional, can have especially devastating effects, often distorting and undermining children’s physical, cognitive and social development. Childhood and adolescence is a critical stage in the formation of individual capacities, and deprivations during these stages can send children into a lifelong trajectory of low education levels, marginalization and reduced productivity, leaving them unable to realize their full potential and contribute fully to their communities and societies.

The devastating life-long effects are especially acute for children with the overlapping deprivations of poverty and discrimination, which can affect some vulnerable groups disproportionately: girls, children belonging to indigenous or minority ethnic groups; children with disabilities; and children living outside of households are among those for whom the risks of poverty and its consequences can be particularly severe.

The impacts of child poverty can be understood in the following ways:

- **Poverty is a violation of a child’s rights.** Most fundamentally, as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>2</sup>, children have a right to an adequate standard of living, and to be free from deprivations across crucial aspects of their lives including their health, education, nutrition, care and protection. Growing up in poverty is in direct violation of these rights.
- **For children, poverty can last a lifetime.** Not only do children experience poverty differently, but they are more vulnerable to its effects because of their particular life stage. Poverty has especially devastating effects on children’s development, often resulting in deficits that cannot be overcome later. Put another way: for a child, poverty can last a lifetime. Where a child lacks nutrition early in life, misses out on health care or education, or experiences violence and neglect, it results in diminished opportunities which can have life time consequences.

- **Child poverty is transmitted across generations, first becoming adult poverty and then being passed on to the next generation of children.**

Studies of intergenerational poverty in the UK for example confirm that individuals who are poor in childhood are nearly twice as likely to be poor as adults.<sup>3</sup> The sustainable eradication of extreme poverty requires breaking intergenerational poverty cycles and increasing human capital – which can only be achieved through giving priority attention to poor children.

- **Child poverty has broader impacts on societies and economies.** The costs of child poverty are felt not only individually, but in implications ranging from social cohesion and a less productive labour force. Evidence has consistently shown that failure to protect children is one of the most costly mistakes that a society can make. Child poverty results in lower skills and productivity, lower levels of health and educational achievement, increased likelihood of unemployment, and lower social cohesion.

## Despite global progress in reducing poverty, children remain more likely to live in poverty

The last three decades have seen unprecedented progress when it comes to reducing poverty and alleviating the worst forms of deprivations among children. Between 1990 and 2012, the number of people living in extreme poverty – defined internationally as living on less than \$1.90 a day – declined by more than a billion people.<sup>4</sup> The first Millennium Development Goal of halving the share of people living in extreme poverty was reached in 2010, five years ahead of time.

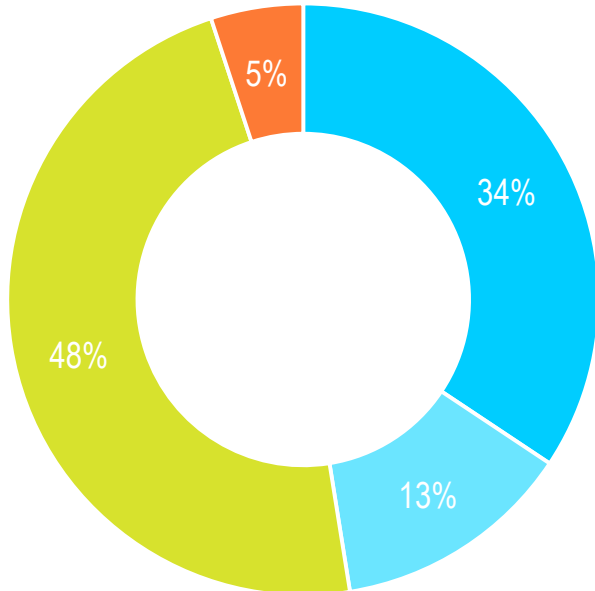
Behind this global progress, however, lie huge inequities with the poorest and most vulnerable children often left behind.<sup>5</sup> Vast numbers of children worldwide continue to suffer from disproportionate levels of poverty in both richer and poorer countries. In the developing world the figures are staggering: 47% – or around 569 million – of those struggling to survive in extreme poverty (using the \$1.25 a day poverty line)<sup>6,7</sup> are 18 years old or younger (see Figure 1). However, these measures of extreme poverty understate the problem. Large numbers of children living in households with incomes above \$1.25 a day remain poor and vulnerable, and deprived in crucial dimensions of their lives – limiting their opportunities to survive, develop and thrive.



**FIGURE 1**

**Children make up nearly half of the people living in extreme poverty**

Percentage of people living on less than \$1.25 per day by age, 2010



- Children 12 years old or younger
- Children 13 to 18 years old
- 19 to 60 years old
- 61 years old or older

Source: World Bank staff estimates based on I2D2. Olinto, Pedro, et al., 'The State of the Poor: Where are the poor, where is extreme poverty harder to end, and what is the current profile of the world's poor?', World Bank – Economic Premise, issue no. 125, October 2013, pp. 1– 8.

Measurement of multidimensional poverty, including for children, is also growing significantly. Over 40 countries have already taken steps to define, measure and respond to multidimensional poverty, including child poverty specific studies and reports, in collaboration with national statistical offices. Global numbers on children living in multidimensional poverty are currently less available than for child monetary poverty, but with around 1.6 billion adults estimated to be living in multidimensional poverty,<sup>8</sup> we know the number of children living in multidimensional poverty is likely to be extremely high. Regional numbers for multidimensional poverty in childhood are emerging, and in sub-Saharan Africa for example around two-thirds of children, almost 250 million, experience two or more deprivations of multidimensional poverty.<sup>9</sup>

Child poverty is also a global issue and not just one for the developing world. Too many children lack the

minimum material standards they need in the world's richest countries. In a review of child well-being across 41 industrialized countries from the European Union and the OECD, UNICEF found that more than 75 million children are growing up in relative poverty.<sup>10</sup>

Crucially, not only are large number of children living in poverty, but children are significantly more likely to live in poverty than adults regardless of the measure that is used. Globally children make up about one-third of the global population, and yet almost half – or 47% according to the latest World Bank figures – of those struggling to survive on less than \$1.25 are children. This is true across almost all regions including developed countries, where OECD estimates show that the proportion of children living in poverty has risen in recent years and that children make up the largest proportion of poor people.<sup>11</sup>

It is also important to recognize the limits of current data collection. First, not all countries are calculating monetary and/or multidimensional child poverty rates, and for those that are, child poverty rates are not always widely available or reported. Secondly, to fully understand the situation of child poverty disaggregation is essential to understanding if there are particular groups of children (for example children of ethnic minorities, girls, or children with disabilities) who may be particularly vulnerable to poverty. Finally, with almost all data collection on children in poverty based on household surveys we must not forget the children living outside household and family care.

**What will it take to end child poverty?**

Child poverty is not only an urgent issue, but one that can be effectively tackled. There is extensive evidence policies and programs that have can lift children out of poverty, and these must be prioritised. While specific approaches will vary, and should be tailored to different contexts and specific patterns of deprivation among children, an agenda to address child poverty includes the following:

.....

*“When the students come wearing better clothes, I don’t like to feel inferior to them, so it is a must for me to work hard to change my situation.”*

BEREKET LIVES IN A SLUM AREA IN ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA, AND IS CURRENTLY IN GRADE EIGHT<sup>12</sup>

.....

- 1. Child poverty should be an explicit part of the global development framework and its implementation.** As Member States implement Sustainable Development Goals in the coming years, explicit focus on child poverty and related indicators, alongside appropriate implementation and financing mechanisms, will be essential in ensuring a strong global focus on addressing child poverty in all its dimensions.
- 2. Every country should ensure that reducing child poverty is an explicit priority on their agenda, and included as appropriate in national plans, policies and laws.** This includes national definitions and measurement of multidimensional and monetary poverty, as well as promote the participation of children living in poverty. If child poverty is not expressly considered, it is unlikely to be effectively addressed, even where overall poverty reduction efforts are in place.
- 3. Expand child-sensitive social protection systems and programmes.** Child-sensitive social protection can reduce the depth of poverty and improve child wellbeing. While this can include child and family grants, it also goes well beyond this to effective social protection systems, including child care, parenting support and responses to the impact of shocks and crises on families in poverty and their children.
- 4. Improve access to quality public services for the poorest children.** There are significant inequities in public service provision with the poorest children often lacking effective access to quality services including health, education, water and sanitation, and electricity. More needs to be done to improve and ensure access of the poorest families to quality services, including pre-school programs, reducing barriers that may be rooted in both monetary poverty and deeper discriminations and exclusion. This includes an overall strategy to reach and include the poorest and most excluded, backed by explicit policies, programmes, standards and budgets.
- 5. An inclusive growth agenda to reach the poorest and most deprived.** It is widely accepted that shared prosperity is crucial to eradicate extreme poverty. The poorest children often live in economically-marginalized families without essential productive assets or able to find productive work. Ensuring growth benefits these families and expands their opportunities to find decent work and earn good livelihoods, which will be essential in lifting children, as well as young people, out of poverty.





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## About this Joint Statement

This Joint Statement is issued by the Global Coalition Against Child Poverty together with other global partners concerned at the devastating effects of poverty in childhood on children and societies. Signatories of this statement share a vision of a world where all children grow up free from poverty, deprivation and exclusion. Working together as well as independently, partners aim to support the recognition of child poverty and the practical actions to alleviate it.

For more information about the Coalition, or to add your support to this Joint Statement please contact **Richard Morgan** ([R.Morgan@savethechildren.org.uk](mailto:R.Morgan@savethechildren.org.uk)) or **David Stewart** ([dstewart@unicef.org](mailto:dstewart@unicef.org)).

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7. Note: As this paper went to print the World Bank updated the international extreme poverty line to \$1.90 a day, reducing the global poverty figures. But as yet new numbers for children are not available.
8. Note: For more information visit UNICEF's Global Studies (<http://www.unicef-globalstudy.blogspot.com/>) and MODA (<http://www.unicef-irc.org/MODA/>) sites, and the Multidimensional Poverty Peer Network ([www.mppn.org](http://www.mppn.org)).
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**Note:** The World Bank's support for this Joint Statement extends only to those matters that are within the scope of its development mandate under its Articles of Agreement and is without prejudice to the political prohibitions contained therein.



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