

# The global economic crisis: Implications for child rights

History has shown that children and women are particularly vulnerable to economic turmoil. Financial and economic shocks in developing countries prior to the 2008–2009 global economic crisis have led to higher under-five mortality rates, lower school enrolment, rising insecurity and children forced to work in dangerous environments. Reductions in public expenditure on health and education have driven children and their families into poverty traps that are not easily escaped once the crisis has passed.

There have been growing concerns that the 2008–2009 global economic crisis, compounded by recent food and fuel price instability, could result in rising poverty and undernutrition in developing countries. As this report goes to press in August 2009, the global economic outlook remains exceptionally uncertain, despite signs of improving forward-looking economic indicators in recent months.

The full impact of the crisis on child rights will not be evident for some time, and will only become apparent as new international estimates of global poverty, child development and nutrition emerge. Appropriate policy responses are required to protect child and families from the consequences economic crises.

**Ensure adequate nutrition for families.** Although international food prices have declined since peaking in 2008, they remain high relative to their long-term trends. In many developing countries, domestic food prices remain far above historical levels. Measures to safeguard the nutritional status of families in times of economic crisis include direct supplementation measures – such as therapeutic foods for young children – and supporting measures to ensure access to essential micronutrients, improved environmental health facilities, quality healthcare, and

promote best practices for hygiene, food preparation and storage. Nutrition monitoring should also include appraisal of the direct and underlying factors determining child growth and nutrition.

**Protect budgets for essential services.** Safeguarding, and even increasing, social budgets should be an integral component of countries' responses to shocks. Missing the window of opportunity to invest in children has clear adverse implications for children's survival and development prospects. It can also limit a nation's future growth potential. Analysis of data from 120 developing countries for the period 1975–2000 indicates that increasing education spending as share of gross domestic product by 1 per cent over a 15 year period could lead to universal primary school enrolment, while reducing the poverty headcount by around 17 per cent.

**Invest in child-sensitive social protection.** Effective and comprehensive social protection programmes can ameliorate the negative impact of economic crises on poor families. In response to the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which followed a severe drought in the region, the governments of Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand implemented or strengthened nutrition programmes for children and bolstered access to education by providing scholarships and funding allocations and undertaking community awareness campaigns. During its 2002 debt crisis, Argentina sought to protect poor households from the worst effects by providing income support to unemployed heads of household; this initiative is estimate to have prevented an additional 10 per cent of participating families from falling below the food poverty line and lowered the incidence of extreme poverty across the nation. Renowned and ongoing social protection

initiatives in Mexico (Oportunidades) and Brazil (Programa Saude da Family) have resulted in falling infant mortality rates and lower rates of poverty.

Despite the well-documented merits of social protection programmes, many developing countries do not have such systems in place. According to recent research surveying 144 developing countries, 19 of 49 low-income countries and 49 of 95 middle-income countries have no social safety net programmes, and only one third of all countries surveyed had some form of cash transfers.

**Limit the additional demands on women and girls.** Empowering women to become key household decision-makers and ensuring that girls and young women have access to quality education and healthcare is pivotal to making social protection effective. Declining government spending on education and health associated with economic crises can transfer the burden of service provision on households and communities, adding to the already high demands on women and girls. Women and girls also bear the brunt of coping mechanisms, including reduced spending on such essential services and commodities as food, fuel, education and health care, and increased time spent on activities that either save or generate additional income.

Ensuring the rights of children in the current economic crisis and the recovery period that follows requires making difficult but decisive choices. For the crisis not to leave a legacy of deprivation for generations, the choice has to be to safeguard, support, and if possible, expand, the essential services, protection and participation that are the right of all children at all times.

*See References, pages 90–92.*