Child Poverty, Policy and Evidence: Mainstreaming Children in International Development

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In your recent book you focus on mainstreaming child poverty in development research and policy. Why is it important to have a special focus on that?
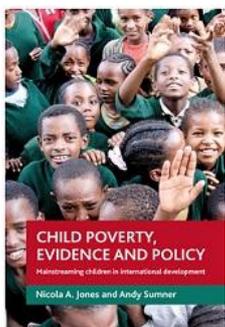
This book is about child poverty, evidence, and policy. It is about how children's visibility, voice, and vision in ideas, networks, and political institutions can be mainstreamed in development research and policy. Children account for, on average, 37% of the population in developing countries and 49% in the least-developed countries. Not only are a large proportion of these children poor, but the impacts of poverty suffered during childhood are often enduring and irreversible. We use the lens of **3D well-being** to convey a holistic understanding of child poverty and wellbeing, whereby research and policy are approached from multiple angles, with multiple understandings of power and policy change.
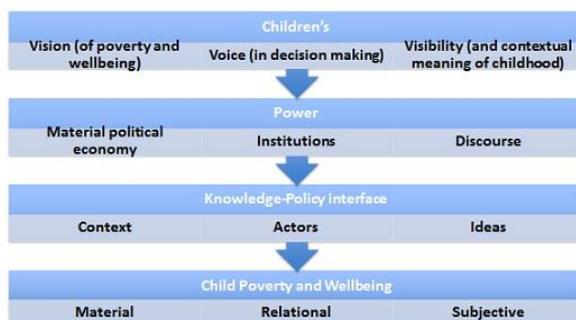
There is, of course, already a wealth of literature on child poverty. An important development has been a child-centred approach based on children as active agents in terms of *voice* (in decision making in communities and societies), *vision* (of deprivation and wellbeing), and *visibility* (in terms of the local meaning ascribed to or social construction of childhood). We build on this literature and attempt to move the debate forward by exploring several pressing and interconnecting themes, including: how understandings and the realities of child poverty, well-being, and knowledge generation processes vary across different country contexts; linkages between knowledge generation, policy, and power; and the use of evidence in catalysing change to support children's visibility, voice, and vision.

Why another way of conceptualising child poverty and well-being?

Child poverty and well-being are distinct from adult experiences of poverty and wellbeing. The long-term impacts of poverty experienced during childhood are well documented. It is therefore critical that policy design, implementation and evaluation processes are informed accordingly. Yet, important dimensions of children's experiences of poverty are often missed by many mainstream approaches to international development.

Rights-based approaches—based on the notion that poverty is a violation of human rights—have become dominant in international policy discourses and have emerged as the primary instrument for

Child Poverty, Evidence and Policy

Children's		
Vision (of poverty and wellbeing)	Voice (in decision making)	Visibility (and contextual meaning of childhood)
Power		
Material political economy	Institutions	Discourse
Knowledge-Policy interface		
Context	Actors	Ideas
Child Poverty and Wellbeing		
Material	Relational	Subjective

thinking about childhood poverty at UNICEF and amongst international NGOs. Similarly, the Human Development approach has also influenced much of the international debate. Yet, there is still a need for an approach that can more comprehensively account for the different experiences of children. A 3D child well-being approach examines what a child has, what a child can do with what he/she has, and how a child thinks about what he/she has and can do. This emerging 3D well-being approach can contribute to understanding child poverty in three ways. First, it puts children and their agency (what they *can* do and be) at the centre of analysis. It is thus a means in itself of achieving a child-centred analysis by bringing together understandings based on children as active agents. Second, it encourages a positive perspective on children in development by avoiding labelling certain children as 'poor' and thus applying the stigma that accompanies labels of inferiority. Third, it explicitly integrates relational and subjective perspectives into the material dimension of wellbeing and recognises that the material, relational, and subjective dimensions of children's lives are co-evolving, interdependent, and dynamically interactive.

What types of knowledge are being generated about the nature, extent and trends in child poverty and well-being in developing country contexts?

There are now numerous sets of child indicators, such as the Bristol child deprivation indicators (used for UNICEF's Global Study on Child Poverty and Disparities), the Child Friendliness of Policy Indices, the Child and Youth Network Indicators, the Child Well-being Index, OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index, among others (see Resources below). Indeed, 'child indicators' is a major area of research, with its own association, the International Society for Child Indicators.

Yet, it is important to understand the debates about the process of generating evidence or knowledge that underpins key policy and practice decisions, and how these play out with regard to childhood poverty and well-being in developing country contexts. Evidence is not a neutral concept, but is embedded within a set of power relations between knowledge producers and knowledge users, particularly in the case of evidence about childhood well-being, as children's perspectives are too often hidden or silenced in mainstream development debates.

While there has been growing recognition of the importance of including children's voices in knowledge generation initiatives, we argue that methodological improvements are needed to adequately reflect linkages between child well-being and intra-household dynamics, community-child relations and macro-micro policy linkages. If knowledge is to play a constructive role in policy processes about child well-being then it is important to adopt an iterative 'knowledge interaction' approach to policy change whereby there is an explicit recognition of the power dynamics which shape which types of knowledge are privileged or overlooked by different policy actors. Such awareness is especially important in the case of efforts to shape policies related to child well-being, given the particular voicelessness of children in many contexts and their exclusion from conventional policy spaces.

How can 3D Wellbeing evidence catalyse change to support children's visibility, voice and vision? How do these questions play out in different contexts?
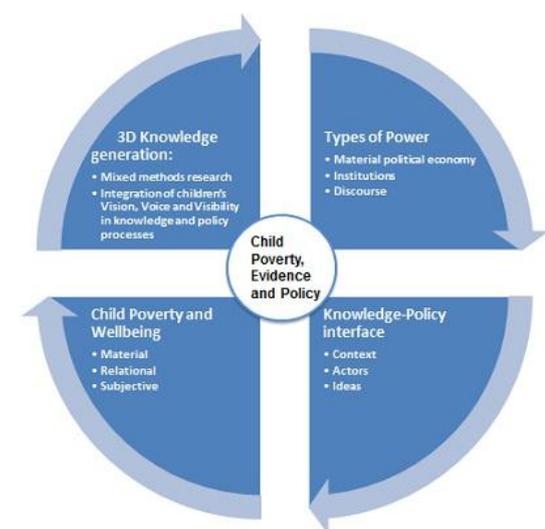
Given the complexities of power relations in the production of knowledge and its use within the policy process, our developing country case studies suggest that **there is no single recipe for child-sensitive evidence-informed policy influencing processes, but that there are certain key 'ingredients' upon which we can agree**. We identify three clusters of factors that support policy change: policy ideas and narratives (including the way in which knowledge is 'repackaged' for different policy, practitioner or lay audiences); policy actors and networks (including the forging of relationships with policy makers or research-policy 'intermediaries'); and policy contexts (including being able to identify specific 'windows of opportunity' for change).

- *Policy ideas and narratives:* The role of knowledge in policy circles and the power that shapes the acceptability of some forms of knowledge but silences others is increasingly acknowledged. Accordingly, *the ways in which new and existing knowledge is synthesised and presented to diverse policy, practitioner and lay audiences requires particular attention if investments in child-focused research are to have maximum value*. We suggest that given limited awareness of children's rights issues by civil society and government actors alike, borrowing from framing techniques in other areas of development ('frame extension') may be effective in promoting quick buy-in

in that the language and its policy implications are already relatively familiar (for instance, drawing on 'mainstreaming' or 'pro-poor budget monitoring' discourses). However, there is also the risk that such an approach may be perceived as 'yet another special interest lobby' so a *careful assessment of existing relations between civil society and the state in a specific context would need to guide such choices*.

Investing in innovative strategies to dismantle dominant paradigms which assume that children will automatically benefit from broader and household-level poverty reduction interventions is also critical. Without an appreciation of the specific and multidimensional nature of childhood poverty, vulnerability and resilience, the fulfilment of children's rights will remain only partial. As such, there is a pressing need to better understand the power dynamics operating to privilege particular narratives about human well-being and the ways in which they serve to subtly obscure new knowledge.

In the same vein, it is also important to promote the triangulation of knowledge about children from a wide variety of sources, ranging from children's testimonies and participatory photo projects to survey data and budget monitoring efforts, from guidelines for journalists and key informant discussions to content analysis of African Union policy statements and international rights conventions.

- **Policy actors and networks:** The relative marginalisation of child well-being issues on the development policy stage necessitates *forging alliances among a broad array of governmental and non-governmental actors* to ensure that new ideas have a chance of gaining adequate policy purchase. For instance, given the importance of macro-micro policy linkages in shaping children's experiences of poverty and vulnerability, establishing relationships with actors in government agencies charged with mainstream poverty reduction and economic development issues can be critical to promote child-sensitive policy change.

Different audiences are likely to subscribe explicitly or implicitly to different knowledge hierarchies. We argue that evidence that is expert-led (i.e. based on the work of technically trained persons) and evidence which is derived from citizens' experiences can both be child-sensitive under certain conditions. The choice of advocacy or knowledge interaction approach in part depends on the policy/sector/issue and available entry points for policy influence – some sectors require a high level of technical expertise (e.g. macro-economic and trade policies, budget processes) and are less amenable to participatory forms of knowledge. However, while it is valuable to frame research findings with this in mind, it is equally important to *work with actors to begin to break down conventional knowledge hierarchies given the complexity and diversity of childhood poverty and vulnerability*.

Children's participation in poverty policy processes is still in a fledgling state and the evidence to date suggests that its contribution to tangible policy changes has been limited. However, perhaps just as importantly, our analysis has highlighted ways in which children's participation can contribute to other change objectives. This includes introducing new ideas on to the policy agenda, bringing about procedural shifts (so that children become more routinely involved in citizen consultation processes for example), and gradually transforming the attitudes of those in power towards the potential contribution that children and young people can make to policy debates.

- **Policy contexts:** In light of our growing knowledge base about the impact pathways between macro-level political and economic development shifts, meso-level policy and community responses, and micro-level impacts on children and their care-givers, there is a need for proponents of child-sensitive policy change to embed their policy engagement efforts within a strong understanding of broader policy process dynamics. This could include, for example, trade liberalisation processes, shifting aid modalities, the fallout of economic crises, budget processes or post-conflict reconciliation processes.

Our analysis also highlights that it is critical to invest more in understanding multiple policy levels – international, regional, national and sub-national levels. Indeed the latter appears to be especially important as our case study on Andhra Pradesh shows: not only because of the challenges involved in overcoming extant data constraints, but also because as decentralisation processes gather apace, this is increasingly where the implementation of social policies—which help to mediate the effects of macro-development policy changes on children and their families—take place. In the case of transitional or post-conflict political contexts where trust in political institutions has been eroded or is fragile as is the case with our Peruvian case study, employing a multi-media rather than a conventional research communication approach may be important in order to reach policymakers and citizens alike. In the same vein, as our analysis of efforts to mainstream children into Ethiopia's PRSP underscores, policy engagement strategies need to have in-built flexibility given that windows of opportunity within a specific context can open and close rapidly with little prior

warning. Issues that are seemingly distant from children's lives such as national elections may have a profound impact on the contours of the policy process landscape.

Lastly, evidence-informed policy engagement initiatives need to be cognisant of the existing breadth and depth of communities of practice working on child-related issues, and to have an appreciation of the strengths and limitations of the existing evidence base on child well-being in a given region or country. Our analysis emphasises that child-focused communities of practice and knowledge producers are considerably more plentiful in Latin America, than in Africa or Asia, and that capacity strengthening efforts could be usefully tailored accordingly.

Some General Resources

- Jones, N., & Sumner, A. (2011). *Child poverty, evidence and policy: Mainstreaming children in international development*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- ODI theme page on Childhood and youth
- IDS Vulnerability and Poverty Reduction Team page
- Mainstreaming Marginalised Knowledges into Development Policy Processes – Launch event of "*Child poverty, evidence and policy: Mainstreaming children in international development*." April 18 2011, live webstream.
- Nutley, S., Walter, I., & Davies, H. (2007). *Using Evidence: How Research Can Inform Public Services*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Carden, S. (2009). *Knowledge to Policy: Making the Most of Development Research*. Sage/IDRC.
- African Child Policy Forum's Child Friendliness of Policy Indices
- UNICEF's Global Study on Child Policy and Disparities
- Foundation for Child Well-being's Child Well-being Index
- OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index
- Save the Children's Child Development Index
- International Society for Child Indicators