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## EDITORIAL

# SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN A CHANGING WORLD

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**Abstract:** The editorial describes how the papers in the special issue engage with the views and experiences of children, as well as adults, to analyse the impact of social protection and social mobility through education and employment on their well-being. It takes a slightly critical approach to concepts such as well-being and agency—acknowledging that these frequently embrace their opposites—and highlights the value of mixed methods in exploring themes such as ‘voice and visibility’, schooling and work, and child poverty and outcomes. Finally, it draws out common conclusions and discusses their implications for policy and programme design. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

**Keywords:** children; poverty; mixed methods; agency; well-being; education; social protection

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The papers in this special issue are drawn primarily from a panel organised by Young Lives, a longitudinal study of child poverty in four developing countries, at the 2009 Development Studies Association conference. The panel was entitled ‘Supporting Children and Young People in a Changing World’ and built on an increasing recognition of the role of children’s agency in mitigating the intergenerational transfer of poverty (Moncrieffe, 2009). It engaged with the views and experiences of children as well as adults to analyse the impact of social protection and social mobility through education and employment on children and young people’s well-being. It also acknowledged that concepts such as well-being and agency, perhaps as a result of their ubiquity, are complex and multivalent constructs that frequently embrace their opposites (for example, agency can be ‘passive’ as well as active and is not always constructive). The papers presented used qualitative, quantitative and

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longitudinal data collected in settings as diverse as Indonesia, Ethiopia and the United Kingdom to address two policy questions:

- Firstly, how can different types of child-sensitive social protection programmes—multi-dimensional, employment-related, and conditional cash transfer—arrest the intergenerational transfer of poverty?
- Secondly, does increased access to education and employment facilitate young people's transitions out of poverty?

They also highlight the immediate consequences of poverty for children and young people, as well as the life-course and intergenerational effects. Taken as a whole, the papers explore differing aspects of well-being in relation to changing values in the communities studied. They also link well-being to broader economic processes, including previous financial crises. Although the papers use well-being in different ways and some do not explicitly problematise the term, they share an understanding of poverty and well-being as multidimensional and primarily relational, and of children as social agents in their own lives, in their communities and in research that is about them. The editorial briefly describes the papers, which are grouped under three linked headings of 'voice and visibility', schooling and work, and child poverty and outcomes. It then draws out common conclusions and highlights their implications for policy and programme design.

## 2 VOICE AND VISIBILITY

The first paper in the special issue by Sumner argues that childhood poverty is different from adult poverty. For this reason, childhood poverty is captured best by taking a holistic approach to the conceptualisation and measurement of poverty, which he describes as 'Three-dimensional [3D] Human Well-being' (see also McGregor and Sumner, 2009). He reviews the limitations of income and 'narrow' human development indicators, such as life expectancy, and describes a recent shift to more dynamic understandings of adult well-being in terms of interactions between material, relational and subjective dimensions (e.g. McGregor, 2007; White, 2010). Essentially, this asks what can people do and be, and how they feel about this. He argues that the proposed approach could support a timely shift in the focus of policy and interventions to enable them to take into account, for example, the quality of people's relationships, not just the quality of their daily food.

Sumner asserts that relational dimensions are particularly important to children given that at certain ages they have a greater reliance on others for care and nurture and increased physical and psychological vulnerability. They also experience reduced autonomy and power in relation to adults and older children, but an equally great need for respect and recognition (Camfield, 2010). He discusses the progress that has been made within international development in acknowledging children's 'voice', 'visibility', and their own 'vision' of, for example, poverty. However, he recognises that these visions and voices are not singular but reflect particular life stages and cultural contexts, including the social construction of childhood itself. Sumner also highlights the way an enhanced focus on what people *can* do could reduce the stigmatisation of people living in poverty by moving away from a deficit view of their lives and capabilities. In relation to children, this increases the attention paid to their current experiences as well as their future prospects. While well-being approaches are often accused of neglecting political economy, he argues that 'well-being's focus on the perceptual and relational is inherently political, as it is about agency'.

This means looking at ‘who commands resources, who is able to achieve their needs and goals with those resources, and who constructs meanings in terms of goals to be achieved and processes to achieve those goals’ (ibid). The focus on agency makes power more explicit rather than less, and enables exploration of the effects of both structures and discourses.

Johnson’s paper provides a concrete example of the link between agency and well-being alluded to by Sumner by revisiting two communities who engaged in participatory planning processes 10 years ago and asking participants, researchers and agency heads to reflect on their experiences of using these methods to initiate change. She describes how children’s participation in a rights-based evaluation of livestock and water programmes in Nepal translated into improved outcomes for themselves and their communities, both at the time and 10 years later. The improved outcomes ranged from the practical benefits of having water taps at the right height and reducing the competition between income-generation through livestock tending and schooling, to gains in confidence and self-esteem from participating in children’s clubs and youth journalism. Johnson situates the evaluation against a backdrop of political, social and economic change, for example, road and dam building enabling greater internal migration and increasing people’s ‘exposure’ to different ways of living. These cultural shifts are clearly pivotal in increasing children’s voice, vision and visibility, and include changing understandings of human rights and ideas about what children can be and do. Complementary changes in discourse and structures, for example, one respondent describes how ‘the word *Adhikar* [rights] is now in common use’, meant that children were more likely to be seen as forces for social change and to influence decision-making, at least at the local level.

Despite her emphasis on children’s agency, Johnson acknowledges that children need ‘champions’—receptive people in positions of power who act as ‘supporters and extenders’ (White and Choudhury, 2007). The champions ensure that children have not only (marginal) spaces where they can speak, but also spaces where they can be heard. For this reason, one of her informants, the former Director of HICODEF, suggests that rights-based approaches need to go beyond conscientisation and service delivery to change the ‘rules of the game’—what White and Choudhury (2007: 48) describe as ‘the structure and culture within the ‘development industry’, the challenges and confirmation of different power relations and the political commitment and resources to support change in response to children’. Changing the rules of the game also extends to acknowledging power relationships between adults and children, and between children themselves. Johnson concludes by observing that inclusive processes of research and decision-making, whether with children or adults, inevitably take time and resources. Nonetheless, the sense of ownership, empowerment and well-being generated through these processes cannot be created in any other way.

### 3 SCHOOLING AND WORK

The second section on schooling and work opens with a paper by Porter *et al.* presenting a case study of young people’s schooling and work in Eastern Cape, South Africa. This draws on data from a three year study of 12 villages in Ghana, Malawi and South Africa, using ethnographic and activity-based methods to illustrate the significance of mobility in the trajectories of rural young people aged 9–18 (<http://www.dur.ac.uk/child.mobility/>). The foci of the study were selected by a group of child researchers aged between 9 and 18

years who worked in rural Eastern Cape, and the qualitative data reported in this paper was triangulated with a questionnaire survey conducted with 125 children per site.

The authors highlight the limited opportunities for secondary education and skilled employment, particularly for young women, and the constraining role played by inadequate provision of basic education and labour needs within the household. They argue that 'young people's lives in Sub-Saharan Africa are commonly shaped by both economic and political exclusions: poverty and lack of voice'. This means that conventional mechanisms for gaining greater autonomy such as work and education are not successful. The lack of success is due in part to the low quality of primary education, but also to limited opportunities for further study, or to convert education into enhanced employment opportunities.

Porter *et al.* recommend greater access to regular, affordable transport since for many physical mobility is inseparable from social mobility: 'migration to a distant (urban) place is perceived to offer the ultimate escape from rural poverty'. Improved transport would reduce the 'time poverty' of young women who, unlike young men, are often required to carry heavy loads. It would also enable them to take advantage of work or training opportunities in nearby towns, without incurring the risks associated locally with migration (for example, sexual assault or pregnancy). The authors highlight the irony that while rural young people are 'perceived by elders to be strong, resilient and a prime source of parental wealth and security, [they] are commonly among the village's poorest occupants'. Young people also experience frustration due to 'heavy workloads, surveillance, youth exclusions and immobility'. Orkin, who addresses children's work more directly, draws on a mixed-methods case study of an Ethiopian village juxtaposing Young Lives quantitative data with interviews with a sub-sample of working children. The case study demonstrates important differences in what parents, NGOs, commercial vegetable farmers and children see as harmful child work that are not resolved by existing international conventions on children's work such as the International Labour Organization's Convention 182. This is an important concern since the majority of Ethiopian children aged under 14 are working (2001 Ethiopian Child Force Labour Survey); in the case of Young Lives older cohort for up to 13 or 14 hours per day (data from 2006,  $n = 583$  rural children aged 12–13). After a brief review of legislation addressing child work in Ethiopia, Orkin argues that the confusion over appropriate definitions of harmful work leads to the worst possible outcome for children in Ethiopia. They are allowed to do work that harms their education, such as work with commercial farmers that is only available during term time and cannot be divided into small chunks of time to fit around school. However, they are not allowed to do work that is relatively benign (for example, paid work with other families), which often ensures their continuation in education by enabling them to meet their school expenses.

Orkin observes that while there are structures such as the local administration that regulate children's work, these also lack a common understanding of what types of work should be limited, which reduces their ability to make appropriate interventions. Nonetheless, there is a great potential for a representative community forum to provide more specific and usable definitions of harm, which 'are based on empirical knowledge of local experience rather than on stereotypes'. She concludes that firstly, economic development and availability of education do not necessarily reduce the number of children in work, quite the reverse in her case study, and secondly, that parents and children do not see reductions in children's work as an essential component or indicator of development. Orkin proposes that legislation should focus on harmful work rather than work *per se*, and that the definition of harm needs to be based on local understandings for regulation to be

effective. She notes, however, that there may be tensions between meeting children's short- and long-term needs (for example, contributing to household food consumption vs. continuing in education) or asking over-burdened local administrations to run a community forum. It may also be difficult to involve NGOs, although this approach has been successful in other contexts, e.g. Brazil, as these are currently regarded with great suspicion by the Ethiopian government.

Finally, Ha and Mendoza explore the complex effects on schooling of the Indonesian Social Safety Net Programme, *Jaring Pengaman Sosial* or JPS in a broad-based analysis of quantitative data using econometric methods. JPS is a notably well-run social protection programme, which was established in response to the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis and offers lessons for holistic social protection initiatives in the current economic climate. It has components addressing food security, employment creation, education (the JPS scholarship programme, described in this paper), health, and community empowerment, with a total budget of US \$1140 million. Ha and Mendoza draw on a vast dataset comprising 63 000 villages, each containing approximately 3000 people, who were surveyed in 1994 and 2000. This enables them to evaluate the effects of the scholarship programme and identify an unexpected consequence, namely that in villages where there was also a JPS employment creation component, enrolment at lower secondary levels (ages 14–15) tended to fall. The reason for this is likely to be that young people preferred to help their families by working rather than studying (Woldehanna, 2009 uses Young Lives data to demonstrate a similar effect on children's work from the Productive Safety Net Scheme in Ethiopia). This conclusion merits investigation using qualitative methods, given its importance to the planning of social protection programmes. The differential effects on children as a whole, and those aged 14–15 are concealed by overall figures that show reductions in drop-out at all levels ranging from 13 to 38% (Sparrow, 2007; Cameron, 2009). However, Ha and Mendoza are able to demonstrate that while the scholarships benefit children in primary school and those in lower secondary schools in communities where there are no opportunities to participate in public work, this protective effect is removed where there are employment opportunities (Orkin, this issue, advances a similar argument in relation to cash-cropping in rural Ethiopia).

#### 4 CHILDHOOD POVERTY AND OUTCOMES

The third and final section begins with Porter's investigation of the medium-term effects of child malnourishment in rural Ethiopia. Porter uses anthropometric data (children's height and weight) collected from households in 15 villages by the Ethiopian Rural Household Survey in 1994, when the participants were less than five years old, and 2004. She finds that children who were malnourished in the early years are twice as likely to be stunted 10 years later and the potential for catch-up growth is limited. This is a worrying finding if stunting is taken as an indicator of related deficits in cognitive and psychosocial skills (Cunha *et al.*, 2006). Perhaps counterintuitively, Porter does not find differences in outcomes between boys and girls, children in male and female-headed households, or children in larger and smaller families. Stunted children are more likely to be from poor households, i.e. those with little livestock, and to be in receipt of food aid, which suggests that the food aid programme which preceded the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) was successfully targeting the poorest households. She highlights the value of food aid in reducing malnourishment; this is encouraging since it is still an important component of

PSNP which since 2005 has distributed free food to households without able-bodied adults and provided food-for-work for the remainder. Nonetheless, food aid appears to have limited impact on children's future growth, suggesting that it is unlikely to be effective without a package of other social protection measures, such as those provided in Indonesia.

Valadez tackles a similar theme in the context of Mexico, using data from the well-known social protection programme PROGRESA-Oportunidades. She examines the medium-term effects of material poverty and parental care in the early years (the latter is proxied by breastfeeding and vaccinations) on child well-being aged 4–6. One of the contributions of the paper is the use of structural equation modelling to empirically verify a model of child well-being, which is conceptualised as comprising physical health, cognitive abilities, motor coordination, and emotional competence. Her analysis highlights the influence of maternal education on cognitive outcomes and the strength of ethnicity as a predictor of child well-being (the child's gender and household poverty were not significant). The importance of ethnicity is due primarily to the long-term systemic deprivation associated with having an indigenous background in rural Mexico. However, the author acknowledges that it could also be due to the cultural specificity of the 'universal' measures applied by the survey enumerators such as the Achenbach Child Behaviour Checklist (Achenbach, 1991). Their cultural specificity may also explain why the measures of emotional competence fail to correlate with the other well-being domains. Valadez argues that these findings should be a basis for initiatives tackling the challenges faced by indigenous children (for example, on entry to the schooling system). Further research could also use different proxies for parental care, perhaps selected through qualitative research in the participating communities, and outline how specific indicators of household poverty affect children's outcomes.

Tomlinson and Walker focus on the effects of poverty experienced later in the life course (age 14–15), drawing on data from the British Household and Youth Panel surveys. They show the impact of both poverty and relational and subjective factors, such as parental guidance and self-esteem, on the level of educational attainment and type of employment held by respondents when they are in their late twenties. The paper illustrates the benefits of structural equation modelling over conventional regression models whose treatment of young people's outcomes as 'the function of a set of 'independent' linear variables derived from childhood experiences' can obscure the complex pathways and relationships between different aspects of their lives. Tomlinson and Walker identify a range of influences on outcomes, which highlight the importance of agency and resilience in moderating and mediating the 'scarring' effects of poverty. For example, parents intervening to pre-empt educational failure and children demonstrating an impressive capacity for recovery from earlier deprivation. They emphasise that children can experience well-being in conditions of poverty and that this experience is important not only for their current lives, but also for their future outcomes. Tomlinson and Walker challenge deterministic models of human capital accumulation, which emphasise intervention in the early years at the expense of attention to equally significant periods in late childhood and early adolescence (ages 11–15). They conclude that children's attitude towards education and their performance are affected by parental education and guidance, indicators of youth delinquency and household finances, but that it is not clear which is the most important. For this reason interventions should supplement material poverty alleviation with strategies such as educational assistance and support and guidance for parents, which have the dual benefit of raising children's self esteem. Tackling low income in isolation will not be sufficient to improve educational outcomes in the UK.



Finally Bird *et al.* explore the relationship between conflict, education and the intergenerational transfer of poverty in Northern Uganda using a 'Q-Squared approach' (Kanbur, 2001). This draws on data from the Northern Uganda Baseline Survey (2004) and participatory and life-history methods used in five communities. They argue that conflict has a devastating impact on young people's lives, especially during early childhood and adolescence. Conflict increases the likelihood of future poverty through its direct impact on their lives and indirect impact on their household and communities' ability to provide support and future opportunities. It also leads to a profound sense of dislocation as social networks fragment, cultural norms disintegrate and customary means of making a livelihood are no longer accessible. Despite this, however, the authors note that some individuals and households recover more quickly and completely from experiences of conflict. The focus of the paper is why this is, and how policies or programmes can support this resilience. Bird *et al.* identify a central role for education in shaping the course of the relationship between conflict and the intergenerational transfer of poverty (for example, ensuring that people's circumstances do not decline so quickly or that they recover more rapidly). The ways in which education supports resilience include increased mobility, often culminating in migration (secondary education in particular is characterised as 'a 'portable' asset of great value') expanded social networks, ability to plan and innovate as a farmer, and enhanced access to non-farm activities which in the villages studied are the key to social mobility. The authors argue that because education has a positive influence on so many domains, it should be given equal priority in emergency programming alongside food, health and shelter.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The aim of the special issue and the panel that preceded it was to analyse the impact of social protection and social mobility through education and employment on children's well-being by looking at the views and experiences of adults and children. The papers address this using survey, ethnographic, life history and participatory methods, often in creative combination. The methods enable a deeper and more reflective understanding of key concepts such as well-being and agency in different settings. They also highlight the complexity of the relationship between short-term deficit and long-term deprivation and highlight interventions that may ameliorate this, for example, increased access to secondary education.

The papers raise two linked questions: firstly, what is the nature of the relationship between interventions such as education and social protection, and social mobility (social mobility can refer to movements either upwards or downwards, in the form of the intergenerational transfer of poverty). For example, Porter *et al.* argue that education cannot support social mobility in rural South Africa because the quality of basic education is low and young people have no voice in political and economic arenas.

The second and more important question, particularly in relation to how governments and donors spend their money, relates to the impacts of education and social protection on children's well-being. For example, children living in communities in post-conflict Uganda where educated adults have out-migrated (Bird *et al.*). In order to minimise adverse impacts, interventions should be sensitive to the differing needs of children at different life stages and in different social contexts—one size does not fit all.

The papers also illustrate the importance of acknowledging differentiation in outcomes, for example, in the performance of the JPS scholarship programme in Indonesia. These

examples highlight the value of looking at children's outcomes and experiences throughout the life course to understand how their lives change and the role of interventions in these changes. Tomlinson and Walker argue that while 'social and behavioural scientists in the USA (primarily economists and psychologists) tend to focus on early childhood (Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 1997; Cavanagh and Huston, 2006; Cunha and Heckman, 2008) and the early school years [. . .] there is also evidence that events in late childhood and adolescence may have particular saliency'. For this reason, approaches to childhood poverty need to be broad in terms of time as well as content. This entails moving beyond a reductive focus on the early years, which derives from a mechanistic understanding of how 'human capital' is formed. In the remainder of the conclusion, we discuss some of the evidence presented in the special issue and its implications for policy and research.

The special issue opens with Sumner's exposition of the benefits of a well-being approach for understanding and tackling childhood poverty. The papers that follow provide evidence to support some of its propositions; for example, Johnson illustrates the value of a concept of well-being in exploring changing values in Nepal, i.e. the subjective and relational aspects of well-being, and the embedding of these changes in discourse and in structures within broader political and economic processes. Other authors, e.g. Tomlinson and Walker, Valadez, emphasise the multidimensionality of well-being. This multidimensionality includes both the complex relationships and pathways between different aspects of children's lives and the unintended impact of legislative and programmatic interventions (see Orkin on employment legislation and Porter on food aid, both drawing on data collected in Ethiopia).

The papers on social protection highlight the need for integrated rather than single component interventions, which applies to contexts as diverse as Ethiopia, Indonesia and the UK. Nonetheless, the authors acknowledge that different components can work differently in different contexts, and in relation to other components of the same programme (e.g. simultaneous provision of support for schooling and opportunities for work in Indonesia).

The general point about the importance of context applies to the complex reciprocal interactions between children's work and education, highlighted by Orkin, Bird *et al.* and Porter *et al.* It also emphasises the importance of exploring how different types of education are affected differently by interventions or changing social and economic conditions and have different effects on people's lives. Porter *et al.*, for example, say that while education can be the key to social mobility, this is only when the basic education the person received was of good quality, they progressed beyond primary level, and there is somewhere to move to. Bird *et al.* also highlight the effects of social mobility in Northern Uganda on the communities left behind. Finally, many authors emphasise that in attempting to increase children's well-being through ever more sophisticated initiatives, policy makers should not lose sight of the importance of basic supports such as good transport infrastructure.

While the evidence presented here has many potential implications for policy makers, one simple lesson relates to the increased impact of integrated social protection packages. This is especially true for programmes that acknowledge the importance of relational and subjective factors in supporting children's well-being, for example, by providing guidance to parents (Tomlinson and Walker). Another lesson is the need to pay attention to the unintended consequences of social protection (Ha and Mendoza) and income generation programmes (Johnson, Orkin), especially in relation to children's work.

Areas for further research highlighted by the special issue include the role of subjective and relational factors in different contexts, and the importance of agency, respect and recognition, which can be stifled by bureaucratic processes. Johnson in particular emphasises the challenges of operationalising Sumner's agenda of 'voice, vision,



visibility' in a rapidly changing social context with limited project resources. For example, what level of support and education is needed to enable people to hear children's voices, acknowledge their differing visions of well-being, and support their political visibility?

The main message of the special issue is that there are significant differences between the expectations, experiences and outcomes of children living in contexts of poverty which are shaped by their background, their location, the nature of the interventions active in that location, and their life stage. This suggests that policy makers need to pay more attention to context and complexity (for example, the multidimensionality of children's well-being and the factors that influence it), and look at children's experiences and outcomes across the life course, ideally using longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data.

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