

## **Introduction**

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The overall study consisting of 15 chapters posted on this web site reviews first changes in child well-being during the latest wave of globalization (1980-2000), a period characterized by growing commitment to child well-being on the one side and extensive policy and technological change on the other, and - second - proposes a number of policy and program options to harness globalisation for children over the next two decades.

Why focus on children in particular when there are several excellent studies on the nexus between globalisation and social change? There are several reasons for this. While globalization affects everybody, its impact is particularly pronounced for children. Children are especially vulnerable, have distinctive needs and have moral claims on society. They feel the failures or successes of globalization more intensely than any other group. Second, the impact of globalization on child well-being is likely to be particularly complex – certainly more complex of the already complicated relation between globalisation and economic change - and to be mediated by differences in family conditions and social policies, the evolution of global markets and the international rules of the game that control global exchange. The final reason is that, to the best of my knowledge, no report has explicitly addressed this specific issue.

The last 20 years have seen a continuation of the long term aggregate improvements in most indicators of child well-being. Yet these trends appear to have become less stable and egalitarian while progress in key areas – such as child nutrition and poverty – appears to have broadly stopped in many regions. Progress towards the achievement of international child-welfare targets has therefore been unsatisfactory and, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, several of them seem out or reach.

What are the linkages between these only partially satisfactory trends and globalization? The evidence seems to indicate that growth of manufacturing exports and a gradual opening to the world economy generated improvements in household incomes and child well-being – but only in countries with a good human and physical infrastructure, adequate social policies, judicious home-grown macroeconomic policies and access to global markets. Where domestic conditions and access to international markets remained poor, as in the Middle East, the former Soviet Bloc, parts of Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, premature and unselective opening up to the world economy seem to have adversely affected both economic growth and child well-being. For most of the countries in these regions, opening up led to stagnation and greater marginalization, rather than to deeper integration into the world market.

What policy stance and which concrete measures can facilitate a child-friendly-globalization over the next two decades? A variety of options have been proposed in the current debate. Indeed, attitudes to globalization run to both extremes. On one side, an ‘unfettered globalization’ is promoted, oblivious of the problems emerged in the last two decades. On the other side globalization is seen as the cause of economic stagnation, loss of national identity, mounting poverty, and low levels of child well-being, and a

development approach inspired by ‘economic and cultural localism’ is seen as preferable. This view is also problematic, as it would likely condemn most small, low-income countries to prolonged stagnation in child welfare. Thus, both autarky and ‘laissez faire globalisation’ are likely to be dead ends. In contrast, children can gain from globalization if basic domestic conditions are improved, if distortions in international markets are corrected and if representative institutions of local and global governance are created. In the absence of these changes, globalization will continue to benefit mainly the children of a few social groups and countries while pressures to adopt inward-looking policies will mount in intensity and possibly help disrupting the present global economic arrangements.

Sustained progress in child well-being in the years ahead thus requires action on a broad policy front as well as on specific child-focused programmes. While essential, the latter policy changes may take time to be introduced and might be held up by vested interests. Thus, the harnessing of globalization for children needs to be accompanied by specific initiatives that have the advantage of benefiting children directly, of being less controversial from a political perspective and, possibly, of bearing fruit within only a few years. The main areas of intervention are highlighted hereafter:

First, overall domestic and international policy change is of paramount importance for the future of child well-being in a globalizing world. At the domestic level, an equitable development pattern and the creation of good human and physical infrastructure are the first prerequisite if a country is to succeed in the global economy. Domestic markets need to be rendered non-exclusionary, while regulatory institutions have to be strengthened, not least to ensure broad-based access to water, electricity and other basic services. Countries ought also to adopt a prudent macroeconomic policy characterized by an explicit child-friendly perspective that is age-sensitive and inter-generationally equitable. Finally, social insurance, childcare and family support policies need to be strengthened to sustain child well-being in a period of mounting instability. In many of these areas, there is considerable agreement among several of the key policy actors, yet progress has been slow in several of these areas.

Second, in a rapidly evolving world economy, a child-friendly globalization will increasingly depend on international conditions being favourable. Global markets must become broadly symmetrical, allowing explicitly for non-discriminatory access for agricultural and low-tech exports from developing countries, while granting ‘most favored nation’ treatment to poor economies still unable to compete on the world market. Global insurance arrangements also need to be strengthened, as in an integrated world economy a national crisis can damage child well-being in ‘innocent by-standing countries’ linked to them through trade and finance. Global markets could be used to tackle extreme forms of child suffering. For instance, they could be used to ‘cut the oxygen of war’ in countries affected by civil conflicts financed through the export of primary commodities or to promote ‘fair trade’ through the certification provided by large firms interested in sustaining their international reputation, NGOs or independent monitors.

A major challenge to future domestic and international economic policy development will be to ensure its consistency with the Convention on the Rights

of the Child. Economic policies and agreements are driven by commercial goals, a fact that at times impedes the realization of children's rights. Despite its near-universal approval, the Convention on the Rights of the Child remains only partially implemented. Greater policy consistency might thus be pursued through the establishment of a tripartite commission bringing together the government and civil society of countries that have signed up to the Convention of the Rights of the Child; IMF, World Bank and WTO (agencies which exert strong influence on economic policy); and UN social agencies. Work in this area could begin with the establishment of a permanent observatory on the impact of economic policies on child rights.

Third, much can be done to rapidly improve the well-being of children in key areas through child-specific initiatives. Considerable gains could be obtained by promoting international research that focuses on the needs of children. While recent technological progress has been considerable, this has rarely addressed the needs of the poor and of children. Its benefits therefore have to be channeled specifically towards these groups by means of appropriate agreements and programs. Likewise, the regulation of 'international public bads' affecting child well-being needs to be strengthened, extended and systematized. International regulation ought to deal with the 'general public bads' – such as destabilizing short-term financial flows, climate change and others. But much can be done for children of poor countries by effectively regulating the import and marketing of breast milk substitutes, tobacco, alcohol and other harmful products. While international public action in some of these areas remains controversial and only limited progress has been achieved so far, innovative solutions are likely to generate huge benefits for children. In areas where no agreed global standards exist, the main task is to negotiate new agreements and set up monitoring mechanisms.

Finally, a key issue of the blueprint illustrated in this overall study concerns the governance process that should ensure the application of the policy and program suggestions made above. Such blueprint can succeed in fact if, and only if, domestic governance is improved and if representative and accountable global institutions are entrusted with a broader mandate. In the view of many, the present global institutions lack the incentives to deliver policy changes of this kind and growing demands for new or renewed global institutions are emanating from international public opinion which perceives an imbalance in the present course of globalization, in its governance and in its free-market agenda. So, a child-friendly globalization requires a broadening of the mandate of global institutions, but it will also entail a gradual enlargement of the voting rights, responsibilities and financial contributions of developing countries to the same institutions. In addition, it will require also the NGOs and faith-based organizations being given a role in the framing and administration of global measures.