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Report Card 11 – Child well-being in rich countries: a comparative overview

Key Messages

Overview

1. The Report's international comparison shows that child poverty is not inevitable, but policy susceptible – and that some countries are doing much better than others at protecting their most vulnerable children.

2. The heaviest costs of not safeguarding the well-being of children are paid by the individual child. But there is also a significant cost to society in the form of: increased strain on health and hospital services, remedial schooling, welfare and social protection programmes, and on the police and the courts.
   There is also a significant cost to business and economies because of the lower skill levels and reduced productivity resulting from a large number of children failing to develop to their full potential.
3. The earlier the intervention, the greater the leverage. Children who 'fall behind' do so at the earliest stages of their lives with lifelong consequences. Attempting to compensate for disadvantage later in life is more difficult, more costly and is less likely to be successful. Interventions in early childhood, however, need to be sustained by measures at school age in order not to lose the gains made earlier.

4. UNICEF believes that relative child poverty is a valid measure because it reflects a family's position vis-à-vis society's current norms and standards, and thus enables the performance of individual governments to be compared on an equal footing, allowing for differences in overall income levels. Considering child poverty alone, however, it is not enough, and for this reason this eleventh Report Card analyses multidimensional aspects of children's lives so as to understand all aspects of child-wellbeing.

5. There does not appear to be a strong relationship between per capita GDP and overall child well-being. A country being rich does not automatically mean that there is higher child well-being in that country.

Improvements during the 2000s – 2010

1. The first decade of the 2000s saw a steady improvement in most measures of children's well-being. Most of these data track long-term trends and reflect the results of long-term investments in children's lives.

2. However, the report states that the three years of economic hardship since then do not bode well for the present or near future.

3. In addition, it is crucial to continue to closely monitor the state of children in the industrialized world, so as to prevent the heaviest burden of economic recession from falling on those least able to sustain it, and to avoid a slide from the achievements of the past decade, in the long-term.

Data

1. Measuring progress in protecting and promoting the well-being of children is essential to policy-making, to advocacy, to the cost-effective allocation of limited resources, and to the processes of transparency and accountability. Without such a measure, policy risks being blinded, expenditure difficult to justify, goals impossible to set, and progress remains incapable of being monitored.

2. More data is needed about children's developmental well-being in their earliest months and years. Advances in both neuro-science and social science have repeatedly confirmed that it is at this time that both the foundations and the scaffolding for later development take place.

3. The measurement and comparison of child well-being requires better and more child-oriented data on important economic indicators, but also on children's mental and emotional health, their exposure to violence in the home, child abuse and neglect in addition to those used in the *Report Card 11*.

Policy Messages:

1. Whether in today's time of economic crisis, or in better financial periods, UNICEF urges governments and social partners to place children and young people at the heart of their decision-making processes.

2. That is, for every new policy measure considered or introduced (particularly at this time of economic crisis), governments explicitly have to explore the impact and effects on children, families with children, adolescents and young adults.

3. If they have not already done so, governments need to introduce measurable child poverty reduction targets and monitor the progress in achieving them. Child poverty targets have to be separate from those for the overall population because children tend to be at a higher risk from poverty than adults.

4. In times of crisis, there has been a temptation to avoid shifting debt burdens to the next generation. However, this cannot be done by reducing the investments made for today's generation. Failing to protect children and adolescents now will influence their living conditions throughout childhood, adversely impacting their lifetime resilience. That is, they risk paying for the burden after all.

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