

Progress towards a conceptual framework and data systems for measuring child vulnerability in South Africa

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Currently the data available on the situation of children in South Africa is insufficient for effective policy and programme design, budgeting and service delivery. Building a generally accepted framework for analysing and measuring child vulnerability and data systems to support it is a critical task confronting protection and fulfilment of child rights.

This *Child Poverty Monitor* is aimed at raising awareness about, and encouraging support for a recently developed and promising model for conceptualising and measuring child poverty in South Africa. The model has been developed by Michael Nobel, Gemma Wright and Lucy Cluver from the Centre for the Analysis of South African Social Policy at Oxford University under the leadership of Professor Andy Dawes, Director of the Child, Youth and Family Development (CYFD) Programme at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). The model offers for the first time, a child centred, multidimensional consensual and evidence based model for conceptualising and measuring child vulnerability and wellbeing in South Africa. The various domains of deprivation in the model and process proposed for developing the indicators for measurement are also informed by the prevailing child rights framework.

The model is still being fine-tuned. This process includes consultation with children as well as various experts on child vulnerability in South Africa to verify the deprivation domains, decide upon poverty definitions and develop practical child centred indicators. Many challenges still have to be overcome before the model can realise its potential to provide policy makers and programme implementers working on service delivery to vulnerable children with the data they need. In light of the critical role of more accurate and comprehensive data for providing children in need with the services they require and to which they are entitled, it is imperative that the fine tuning of the model proceeds quickly. Moreover that wide-spread support is forthcoming for piloting of the model and building the definitional and data systems required for wide spread implementation of the model.

The *Child Poverty Monitor* has four sections. Section 1 describes the context in which the model is put forward. Section 2 provides an overview of the model. Section 3 highlights the merits of the model which imply that if further developed, generally supported and implemented it has the potential to provide an organising framework for gathering data on and measuring child vulnerability and well being in South Africa. Section four flags the challenges confronting effective implementation of the model.

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1. The context

A large proportion of South Africa's approximately 18 million children are known to be living in extremely difficult circumstances which threaten their survival, undermine their development and prevent meaningful participation in society. This is due to the interplay of a range of factors. These include too slow progress in reducing structural unemployment², widespread and deep poverty, the spread and impact of HIV/AIDS, violence against women and children, disability and substance abuse. Whilst the experience of each child is unique and our knowledge of childhood vulnerability is still far too limited, research and information from non governmental agencies providing services to children has clarified that the following difficulties are currently being experienced by children on a mass scale (Haarmann, 1999; ACCESS 2002; Bray 2002; Giese et al, 2003; Streak 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2005; Briede & Loffell 2005; and Children's Institute Workshop 2005):

- Hunger and malnutrition;
- Sickness and ill-health;
- Insufficient access to and poor schooling (including early childhood care);
- Inability to find employment and reap the rewards of education;
- Discrimination in school and communities due to HIV/AIDS and economic status;
- Feeling insecure and experiencing violence and/or abuse within the community and/or home;
- Orphan-hood and having to live without the love and support of a parent either in foster families (which are mostly affected by poverty), on the street, in a child-headed household, in a children's home, or a hospital ward.

Morality calls for the development and implementation of an effective package of measures to bring relief to children living in difficult circumstances. There is also a *legal obligation* on the state, imposed by the child rights and associated obligations in the Constitution and human rights instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)³ - to absolutely prioritise the development and implementation of a strategy to provide vulnerable children with necessary care, income and services.

The data and research currently available on the situation of children in South Africa, including on their economic situation (traditionally focused on in poverty measurement) and access to services (economic and psycho-social) is insufficient to support adequate programming and budgeting for children living in difficult circumstances.⁴ The information gap is explained partly by the fact that in spite of

² The pace of employment growth between 1994 and 2005 was insufficient to reduce the unemployment rate. Though employment grew, labour force growth was faster, with the implication that the unemployment rate rose. The data base for the result is probably poor, but Altman (2003:5) cites an expanded unemployment rate of 28.6% (Altman 2003:5) at the time of transition to democracy. The March 2005 Labour Force Survey conducted by Statistics South Africa estimates a 26.5% unemployment using the official definition and 40.5% using the unofficial rate. (Shezi, 2005).

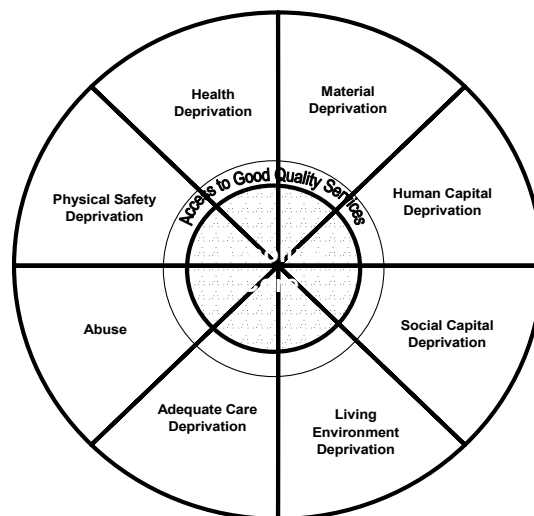
³ Children's constitutional rights include the rights to: family care, or appropriate alternative care when removed from the family environment; basic nutrition, shelter, basic health care services and social services; protection from neglect, abuse or degradation; and protection from exploitative labour practices. The rights afforded children in the CRC span survival, protection participation and development rights.

⁴ See Bray 2002 and 2004 for a general overview of the insufficiency of information on the situation of children. Streak & Poggenpoel 2005 and Dithlage 2004 highlight the insufficiency of information in relation to provision of social welfare services to children. Government officials, for example in National Department of Social Development are very aware of the information shortage. Currently there are tenders out for research that can provide more

many conferences being convened around the subject⁵ and research being conducted to shed light on the situation of children (see references above), there is as yet no general well-conceived, comprehensive, widely accepted and evidence-based framework for guiding measurement of child vulnerability and well-being. This is a real problem for the struggle to protect and advance child rights. Good information on the situation and distribution of vulnerable children is required to enable more effective identification of service delivery gaps in relation to different types of vulnerability, quantification of the resource gaps that need to be filled in relation to each service delivery area, advocacy for resources to flow to fill the service delivery gaps and design of the right service delivery models.

2. Overview of the model being proposed

The conceptualisation of poverty in the model is broad and multi-dimensional. Poverty is defined to include many different forms of deprivation. The domains of deprivation are still being verified. The figure below provides a visual representation of the model. It illustrates that eight deprivation categories are currently being proposed in the poverty concept. They include: health deprivation; material deprivation; human capital deprivation; social capital deprivation; living environment deprivation; adequate care deprivation; abuse; and physical safety deprivation. The concept of poverty which the measurement of the model is built around blends the relative⁶ and absolute⁷ poverty concepts. At the core of the model is a multi-dimensional conceptualisation of absolute child poverty. This is complemented by a relative multi-dimensional concept of poverty and social exclusion based on the ability of South African children to participate fully in South African society.



information the service delivery gaps in relation to at least two areas – social welfare services broadly and child protection services.

⁵ For example, the conference convened by the CBU at Idasa and Children's Institute of the University of Cape Town in February 2003 and that convened by Prof. Rose September of the University of the Western Cape on 19-20 October 2004.

⁶ The concept of relative poverty specifically links poverty to the living standards of a reference group. (Noble *e.t al.* 2005).

⁷ The concept of absolute poverty refers to impoverishment which is defined independently of any reference group. It is frequently defined in terms of basic subsistence. (Noble *et.al.* 2005).

The model proposes that a wide range of indicators, linked to the eight different categories of deprivation be used for measurement. Critically, it advocates for these being child centred indicators. For example the level of household income in a house in which a child resides is seen as unsuitable as an indicator to measure material deprivation of children. Instead, an indicator that can shed light on the child's access to income within the household is sought.

The list of indicators to use for measurement is still being developed. The idea is to include a number of different sets or tiers of indicators. Two of the sets proposed are an access to services set and a quality of services set. It is proposed by the authors that the indicators be stratified for different age brackets, to reflect the different developmental needs of children as they grow. There will be indicators to monitor extreme child poverty/vulnerability (informed by the core absolute concept of poverty) and child poverty/vulnerability (informed by the relative concept of poverty).

Critically, the definition of a poor child in relation to each of the deprivation categories is yet to be determined. It is proposed that the absolute core of child poverty be defined normatively, using the best available research on absolute necessities for children, and with reference to the Copenhagen Declaration. The definition of the relative part of the child poverty concept it is argued, should be based on both normative judgements informed by professionals' research and consensual or democratic procedures (including consultation with children and their care givers).

3. Merits of the model

Why should this model be supported? What are its merits? The first argument in favour of the model is simply that it is the only multi-dimensional model of child poverty that exists and has the potential to lead concerted nation wide measurement of child vulnerability and well being. However, there are also particular strengths (process and content) of the model that warrant it being further developed, supported and implemented. These strengths are listed below.

Consensual process of development and fine tuning – The first strength of the model is its participatory process of development and fine tuning. Whilst three researchers from Oxford University have led the conceptualisation of the model, they have drawn extensively on input from relevant child vulnerability experts in South Africa. They have also consulted with government officials and non governmental representatives working in the children's sector in South Africa. In addition and critically, children and their care-givers are being consulted to fine tune the indicator domains and indicators in the measurement model. The participatory approach adopted for the development model is critical. It means that the model has the potential to be perceived as a model that if not entirely home-grown, is partly a product based on our own expertise and children's real experiences in South Africa.

Conceived by experts – At the same time, the fact that the model was initially conceived by the trio from Oxford University is a real strength. The three researchers have a great deal of knowledge and experience, gathered in both the United Kingdom and South Africa, on how to conceptualise, define and measure poverty. Moreover, they also have a lot of experience in how to develop and analyse data sets for supporting poverty measurement at the local level⁸.

⁸ See <http://www.casasp.ox.ac.uk/welcome.html> for information about the work and experience of the authors inside and outside South Africa and the United Kingdom in the field

Use of both relative and absolute poverty concepts – The blending of both the relative and absolute concepts of poverty in the model is another strong feature. From a child rights perspective, a model that is based on only the absolute concept, which would place the spotlight on survival, would be insufficient. It would not allow for monitoring of the realization of children's right to development. On the other hand, the inclusion of the absolute concept is useful because for programme implementation and budgeting it is important to be able to separate out children experiencing extreme vulnerability from those experiencing vulnerability.

Multi-dimensional poverty concept – A fourth strength of the model is its multi-dimensional and broad conceptualisation of poverty. This is not only in line with evidence – for example, how participatory research suggests child poverty should be conceptualised. It is also in line with how the child right in the Constitution and international and regional instruments suggest child poverty and well being should be conceptualised and monitored.

Child-centred approach to indicators – Fifth, whilst it will complicate implementation somewhat, the child-centred approach to developing indicators is a significant merit of the model. Currently, the data systems and indicators used to shed light on the distribution and extent of child hood vulnerability in South Africa generate a picture that says too much about the situation of households and communities in which children live and too little about the situation of children. There is a desperate need for building child centred data collection and analysing systems that will allow for better data on the actual experiences of children to be fed into advocacy, policy making, policy development, budgeting and service delivery for children.

4. Moving forward - some of the challenges to be addressed

In order to move forward with the model the first challenge is fine-tuning the poverty r domains and indicators and deciding on suitable definitions of poverty/vulnerability in relation to each indicator domain. The latter will be difficult as there are no pre-existing generally accepted norms and standards for each of the indicator domains that can be used to guide the decision about when a child should be classified as poor or extremely poor child. Two main processes are being used to fine tune the model. First, participatory workshops are being conducted with children and their care-givers to gather their inputs. Second, a series of papers by relevant experts in understanding child hood vulnerability has been commissioned by Prof. Dawes at the CYFD. The papers – one for each indicator domain – have been completed and after a process of consultation with relevant experts on the findings of each paper (including some with particular knowledge on measuring child well-being from a rights based approach) they are to be integrated into the model.

Once the model has been fine tuned the next challenge will be piloting. There are various possibilities in this regard. Presently the one idea of the CYFD research team is to pilot the entire model in a few small areas of the Western Cape. In addition, the entire model or the parts of it that it is perceived to be particularly difficult to monitor, could also be tested in other areas (in the Western Cape or elsewhere). The piloting process is important. It will signal aspects of the model which are particularly difficult (and perhaps impossible) to measure and reveal where modifications are required to chosen poverty indicators and definitions. Moreover, the

of developing and implementing models for measuring poverty amongst children and the population as a whole.

piloting process will also help shed light on what data sources are available to support implementation of the model and the type of data that will need to be gathered, through survey work and building administrative data set in order to facilitate wide-spread implementation of the model.

Securing government and non governmental sector support and assistance for the model to be used and orchestrating effective data gathering strategies to build required data at local, provincial and national levels are two more challenges that still have to be addressed. The process of developing data sets to facilitate comprehensive implementation of the model in different areas will be time consuming. It will include developing appropriate surveys, building administrative systems for recording data in government departments and possibly also participatory work with children and their care-givers.

Only once the model has been finalised, generally accepted, data systems have been built at local, provincial and national levels and expertise has been acquired on its implementation will it bring benefits. However, the return – in the form of providing information to underpin more effective measures to realise the rights of children living in difficult circumstances - will be great.

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