

# Understanding Children's Experience of Poverty: An Introduction to the DEV Framework

## Children & Poverty Working Paper 1

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## Working Paper 1

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*This working paper is the first in a  
series dealing with Children & Poverty.*

**Other working papers in this series include:**

**Working Paper 2:**

Improving Children's Chances:  
Linking Developmental Theory and Practice

**Working Paper 3:**

Child-Context Relationships and Developmental  
Outcomes: Some Perspectives on Poverty and Culture

**Working Paper 4:**

Promoting the Agency of Young People

**Working Paper 5:**

Children's Rights, Development and  
Rights-Based Approaches: The Way Forward

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## Glossary of Terms

<b>ASB</b>	Antisocial Behavior
<b>CCF</b>	Christian Children's Fund
<b>CRC</b>	Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>DDR</b>	Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
<b>DEV</b>	Deprivation, exclusion, and vulnerability
<b>IGS</b>	Income Generating Scheme
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>PRSP</b>	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
<b>RBA</b>	Rights-based Approach
<b>SAP</b>	Structural Adjustment Program
<b>SES</b>	Sex and Socioeconomic Status
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UNHCR</b>	U. N. High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNRISD</b>	U. N. Research Institute for Social Development

## Foreword

In 2002, Christian Children's Fund (CCF) commissioned a comprehensive study on the experience and the impact of poverty on children. The resulting three-part series, *Children and Poverty*, provides a fascinating and thought-provoking summary of major issues from the perspective of children, youth and parents. CCF offered this study to community and colleagues as a contribution to our common field of endeavors – breaking the cycle of multigenerational poverty.

The findings of the Poverty Study provided CCF with the opportunity to reflect on and debate the implications for our programs – how we develop them, work with communities, and evaluate our effectiveness. Key issues emerged from the Study that have been discussed in a set of Working Papers, which are now circulated for your review, consideration and discussion. The first of the working papers defines and discusses the proposed Poverty Framework for our work with children and is of critical importance to our future programming efforts. This Paper and the other four are summarized below:

### **Working Paper 1**

#### **Understanding Children's Experience of Poverty: An Introduction to the DEV Framework**

In light of the findings from CCF's poverty research, this paper argues that children experience poverty in three domains: Deprivation, Exclusion and Vulnerability. Each of these domains is examined individually, although it is shown that the complexity of poverty for children emerges from the interplay of all three, rather than from any one alone. In this way, it is hoped that the DEV Framework will assist staff in deepening their understanding of child poverty and consequently designing and supporting more relevant and effective programs.

### **Working Paper 2**

#### **Improving Children's Chances: Linking Developmental Theory and Practice**

The paper explores the importance of linking research to practice in designing effective and appropriate interventions that aim to improve the developmental chances of children living in difficult circumstances. Interventions should be informed by a knowledge of developmental epochs and pathways, as well as sources of influence at different points in development. Further, it is noted in the paper that the developmental level of the target children, the risks they face and local child rearing practices must be understood before an intervention is planned.

### **Working Paper 3**

#### **Child-Context Relationships and Developmental Outcomes: Some Perspectives on Poverty and Culture**

The paper points out that programs must be sensitive to the several contexts that simultaneously influence the child's development – the ecology that surrounds the child, the developmental period he or she is in, and the developmental domain (social, emotional, cognitive, physical). It also seeks to provide a more thorough discussion of some of the complexities of child-context interactions in poverty contexts. Cultural practices form a central component of the child's context. The second half of the paper explores the ways in which cultures structure the experience of childhood.

**Working Paper 4****Promoting the Agency of Young People**

As a child-focused organization, CCF places the well-being of children and youth at the heart of its work, and the measure of success has always been the benefits accrued and the results achieved. In the past, however, this has not necessarily meant that programs directly engage and work with young people, or expect them to take a leading role in program development and implementation. In this paper, we describe how CCF has come to place children and youth at the center of its attention, how the concept of agency is changing our program practices, and why this evolution advances our goal of broadening and deepening CCF's impact on children's well-being.

**Working Paper 5****Children's Rights, Development and Rights-Based Approaches: The Way Forward**

The purpose of this paper is to analyze whether CCF should adopt a rights-based approach to programming. After providing a brief overview of the international human rights movement, the paper examines the strengths and limits of rights-based approaches. It concludes that although a strict rights-based approach is too narrow operationally for CCF, children's rights should be integrated more fully into all aspects of CCF's work. CCF can make its most significant contributions through a distinctive combination of child-focused, strategic programming that addresses urgent needs, integrates child protection into all programs, and reduces the underlying sources of poverty, particularly deprivation, exclusion and vulnerability.

We look forward to continued debate and reflection through dialogue with CCF staff and partners, children, youth, parents, partnering organizations, and colleague agencies in our collective efforts to decrease children's vulnerability, strengthen their resilience, and reduce poverty.



Michelle Poulton, Ph.D.

*Vice President, International Program Group*

## Part One: Background

### Introduction

Christian Children's Fund (CCF) believes in the intrinsic worth and dignity of each human being, and strives to create an environment of hope and respect for children of all cultures and beliefs, in which they have opportunities to realize their full potential.

Building on a 63-year legacy of achievement, in 2001 the organization embarked on a ten-year process of strategic development, with the overall aim of becoming a "Leader for Children."

A key part of this effort has been the development of a more comprehensive understanding of poverty and its impact on children, because CCF believes that a broader, deeper, and longer-lasting impact on child poverty can be achieved only when the organization bases programs on an understanding of child poverty and of how children experience poverty.

Rather than build on normative ideas and assumptions, CCF chose to develop a framework for child poverty based on a combination of recent theoretical understandings in social science and the actual experiences of children in the communities in which CCF operates. To this end, a multi-country study of child poverty was carried out in 2003 canvassing the views of CCF stakeholders (mostly young people aged 8-20), their families and communities, CCF staff and the staff of partner organizations on the nature, causes and consequences of child poverty. To ensure a geographical spread and capture a range of cultures and contexts, five countries were selected: Belarus, Bolivia, India, Kenya and Sierra Leone. Key findings of this research, the "CCF Poverty Study," are summarized in the box on page 9.

In light of these findings from the CCF Poverty Study, this paper will argue that children experience poverty in three "dimensions": **D**eprivation, **E**xclusion, and **V**ulnerability. Each of these dimensions is examined individually in the course of this paper, although it will be shown that the complexity of poverty for children lies in the interplay of all three, rather than in any one alone. In this way, it is hoped that the DEV framework will assist CCF staff in deepening their understanding of child poverty and consequently designing and supporting more relevant and effective programs. As such, the DEV framework is a key foundation for the "Bright Futures" program approach<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The Bright Futures approach represents a refined methodology for program practice that is currently being piloted within CCF.

## Key Findings of the CCF Poverty Study <sup>2</sup>

**Childhood is not a uniform life phase.** Depending on individual and group differences and on environmental influences, the circumstances, experiences and vulnerabilities of children are highly variable.

**Children understand poverty as a deeply physical, emotional and social experience.** In fact, many children prioritize the psychological and social experience of poverty (e.g., humiliation, shame and stigma) as being more significant than any material deprivation.

**Children are far more sensitive to and indeed affected by poverty than is generally appreciated by adults.** They are acutely aware of its divisive nature and feel its effects particularly in terms of changing and constraining their relationships with family/friends.

**Children experience poverty not as a static state but as a continuously changing condition.** This is due to the interaction of several processes at the personal, familial, communal and structural level. For example, during times of conflict, distinctions such as those based on gender and ethnicity often grow, sometimes with very serious consequences for children, who are the least valued.

**Children are not passive recipients of experience but active contributors to their own well-being.** In all but the most severe circumstances, children have options and make choices (depending on their age and social context) that impact their situation.

**The range of experiences felt by impoverished children may be broadly classified into three interrelated dimensions:** Deprivation (lack of essential material conditions and services), Exclusion (on the basis of age, gender, class, caste, etc.), and Vulnerability (with regard to the changing array of threats in their environments).

## Conceptualizing Poverty

“Poverty reduction” has for decades been at the forefront of the international development agenda, and today remains a driving principle in the work of aid agencies and governments all around the world. For example, the central objective of the Millennium Development Goals is the halving of global poverty by 2015, and country-specific strategies are now in place around the world in the hope of achieving this goal. The support for poverty reduction is therefore evident, but what is less obvious is the underlying variation in how poverty is understood, and how it can be targeted most effectively.

The word “poverty” has different meanings, for different people, in different places, at different times. This has been reflected in the numerous poverty paradigms and analytical frameworks that have come and gone over the years in line with changing understandings of society and individual well-being. Some have been more influential and persistent than others, and the material and physiological approaches that view poverty as a lack of income, expenditure or

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, quotations from children and youth interviewed during the CCF Poverty Study are used to illustrate the DEV framework. However, this paper does not attempt to summarize the full range of findings presented in the CCF Poverty Study. Readers are therefore advised to refer to the original three-part document for a more comprehensive analysis.

consumption deserve special emphasis in this respect. These economic perspectives on poverty evolved from a perception of income as the primary means through which people achieve well-being. In other words, the inability of the poor to meet their basic needs of food, water, shelter and clothing was equated primarily with a simple lack of money. As a consequence, most development agencies (multilaterals, bilaterals, NGOs, etc.) have emphasized income-oriented programs and approaches such as Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) and Income Generating Schemes (IGSs) at local, national and international levels.

However, with the advent of participatory research methodologies in the early 1990s, it became clear that in the experience of impoverished populations, poverty entailed far more than monetary deficit, and included considerations of education, health, political participation, security and dignity, to name but a few. This was a significant conceptual transition within the poverty discourse, and one which gave rise to more recent multidimensional approaches that seek to capture a more holistic understanding of the deprivations constituting poverty (e.g., the United Nations Human Development Index and Sen's "Capabilities Approach").

Yet despite this important evolution, the experiences and understanding of children with regard to poverty continue to be largely ignored. Until relatively recently, they have simply been subsumed within frameworks centered on the larger, ill-defined units of "family" and "household" that in many cases have worked to obscure rather than clarify child impoverishment. The global introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990 had a considerable impact in this respect, as it promoted recognition of children as a distinct social group with their own particular entitlements and experiences. The impoverishment of children in particular then became a separate and important issue in its own right on the development agenda, such that hundreds of aid agencies, civil society groups and government ministries around the world now dedicate their efforts to the welfare of this group.

It should not be construed from this division that the multiple dimensions of poverty affecting adults do not also affect children, or that adult-oriented poverty approaches are no longer applicable to the analysis of child impoverishment, for their influence in the construction of the CCF DEV framework will become clear later in this paper. Rather, it is to simply recognize that the individual (and often unique) characteristics of child poverty require a separate policy framework if they are to be tackled in an effective manner. Acknowledging that children are profoundly affected by poverty and understanding precisely *how* and *why* they are affected are two very different things, which is why developing a poverty framework that can accurately capture the reality of children's lives is critical to ensuring that responses are based on real evidence.

## The Importance of Prioritizing Children's Experiences

Poverty, however desperate, is but one way of thinking about the life of an impoverished child. Though it may have considerable influence over the condition of children's health, education and material well-being, this does not mean that it is omnipresent in their lives. Childhood is a period of intense and varied emotions, interests and experiences, and not all of these may be connected to poverty. However, understanding how children conceptualize and manage the experiences of deprivation, exclusion and vulnerability within their wider lives is critical to successfully minimizing the negative impact of these on their development.

It has become clear through recent anthropological and sociological research that poverty is more than a purely material condition, and that wealth and well-being are not necessarily synonymous. Both adults and children experience poverty not simply through a lack of goods and resources, but also through the interplay of social, cultural and political factors such as stigmatization, humiliation and insecurity. Yet this complexity is still largely ignored in contemporary analyses

of child poverty, which prioritize and often limit themselves to “objective” physical measurements such as mortality and malnutrition. This is in part due to the widespread assumption that children are simply unable to understand or sense poverty as deeply as adults do – a belief that has for many years hindered the search for any deeper experiences within children. The result is that information on children’s social *condition* gained through the use of physical indicators is still interpreted today as sufficient indication of their *experience*, when in reality the two may be considerably different.

The CCF Poverty Study found children to be far more sensitive to and affected by poverty than was generally appreciated by adults. They are acutely aware of its divisive nature and feel its effects not merely in terms of a lack of basic goods and services but in the associated stigma and humiliation. At the same time, though they may be conscious of the larger macro-level causes and consequences of poverty, children commonly express greater concern about its more immediate effects on friendships, schooling, family relationships and the like. Examples include being shunned by other children because of their appearance, increased insecurity and fear of the future, or experiencing estrangement from a father who has turned to alcoholism in the face of continued unemployment. Testimonies of this nature are widespread in the CCF Poverty Study and reveal that children’s experience of poverty is powerfully *relational*.

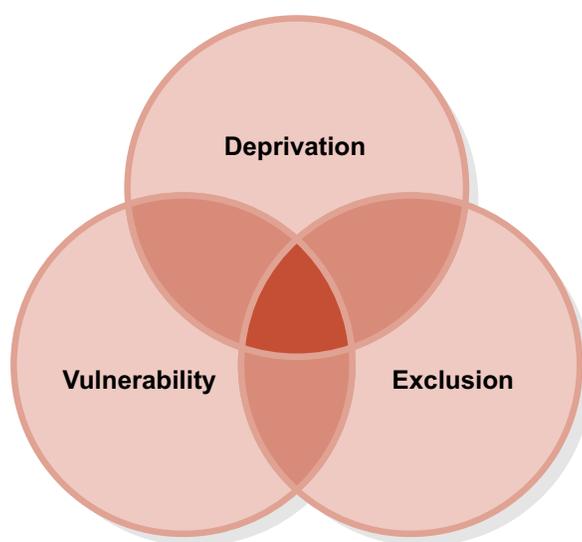
Of course, the idea that children’s development is closely tied to the quality and quantity of supportive relationships around them is not particularly new. For many decades, the importance of parental guidance, extended family and peer support networks for children’s well-being has been emphasized in countless anthropological, sociological and psychological studies. Yet this complexity is so far not reflected in contemporary responses and interventions, which are focused on “survival” indicators such as health and nutrition. Though it cannot be disputed that children feel the detrimental effects of these physical symptoms (particularly those suffering chronic and severe impoverishment), it must also be recognized that this aspect is rarely the *only* – and often not even the most *significant* – form through which they experience and make sense of their poverty. Children interpret a large part of their own well-being (and indeed that of others) through a qualitative assessment of their social relationships, and this means that interventions targeted to address the purely physical characteristics of impoverishment may not necessarily improve a child’s well-being or quality of life, nor resonate with what children are actually seeing or feeling.

At the same time, acknowledging the emotional and relational side of children’s experiences of poverty does not mean we should downplay the issue of *severity*, for it is a fact that there are many groups of children around the world who suffer absolute poverty for most, if not all of their childhood. The point is rather to show the critical importance of *both* to healthy child development, and to promote their incorporation within more holistic paradigms such as the DEV framework.

## Part Two: The Dev Framework for Child Poverty

### Introduction to the DEV Framework for Child Poverty

The DEV Child Poverty framework is composed of three *dimensions*: **Deprivation**, **Exclusion** and **Vulnerability**, which together capture the broad spectrum of experience of child poverty as evidenced in the CCF Poverty Study. Many people who are familiar with the poverty discourse will already know these terms, and are likely to have their own particular interpretations of what each of them means. However, it can be difficult to grasp exactly what differentiates these concepts, or how they relate to “poverty” and “child poverty” in particular. For clarity, each dimension will be defined and discussed in detail in Part Three of this paper.



**The DEV Framework**

As already suggested, the central aim of the DEV framework is to demonstrate how each of these dimensions can be used to capture the complexity of children's experience of poverty. The visual representation in the above is designed to illustrate not only the areas of conceptual overlap and interrelation among the three, but also to emphasize the importance of incorporating all three dimensions for a more holistic appreciation of children's experiences. However, the diagram is not intended to illustrate impact, so while many children will undoubtedly fall into the darker central area this does not necessarily mean that they are ultimately any “more” impoverished than those outside – rather, that they are simply experiencing elements from each dimension simultaneously.

A further reason the different experiences have been represented in this way is to avoid falling into simplistic cause/effect progressions, whereby a clear pathway is offered in which Deprivation leads to Exclusion, which leads to Vulnerability, and so on. Though the three dimensions are undoubtedly strongly interrelated and may act to mutually reinforce each other, the data collected in the CCF Poverty Study suggest that a cause/effect approach does not accurately reflect the complexity of children's experiences. This is also why Deprivation, Exclusion and Vulnerability are broadly referred to here as *dimensions* rather than “causes,” “impacts” or “manifestations” of poverty, for all three often act simultaneously, depending on the context and the individual child.

## Part Three: The DEV Dimensions

### Deprivation

*This dimension looks at the **severity, intensity and contextualized** nature of children's experiences of impoverishment with regard to their material conditions and access to basic services.*

The "Deprivation" dimension should be understood as denoting the lack of material conditions and services generally held to be essential to the development of children's well-being. These may include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Food
- Safe drinking water
- Sanitation facilities
- Health
- Shelter
- Education

As discussed earlier, an assessment of basic physical needs such as these is an important component to understanding deprivation, and is applicable to humans of all ages, cultures and backgrounds. However, its importance with regard to children cannot be underestimated, as they are often far more gravely affected by deprivation in these areas than adults, due to the very nature of child development. Childhood is a once-and-for-all window of opportunity for physical, cognitive, psychological, emotional and social development. Though adults may be able to overcome a period of deprivation, children without adequate food, water or shelter may suffer from stunting and/or illness that can potentially affect their entire life. Research has shown that the relationship between the cognitive, emotional and social domains of child development is highly synergistic, and the stresses associated with deprivation can have multiple and interacting effects. For example, malnutrition adversely affects the growth and development of the brain and energy levels, and this in turn may have detrimental cognitive and social consequences (such as an inability to "keep up" intellectually and physically with other children).

Clearly, therefore, basic physical needs such as food, water, sanitation and shelter are essential to survival and growth in all children, and must be given due weight and consideration when developing targeting methodologies and interventions. Yet the CCF Poverty Study shows that there are other important aspects to children's experience of deprivation that also require further elaboration:

- (a) **Severity** – When their experience of deprivation is to such a degree that it either threatens children's lives or seriously threatens their physical/psychological well-being and quality of life.
- (b) **Intensity** – When their experience of deprivation is multidimensional, that is, experienced across a range of "needs" at one time.
- (c) **Context** – When their experience of deprivation is primarily a consequence of locally-determined social values/markers.

All three of these elements are important in understanding the impact of deprivation on a child's life, and are described in more detail in the next pages.

## The severity of children's experiences

*"Of course I want more money, because ultimately food is the thing you want in life. You know there's lots of problems, we don't have enough money to get food for ourselves...we have only two goats and two cows and little land..."*

*– 12-year-old boy, Bihar, India*

For most children, the experience of deprivation is highly dynamic and varied, characterized by moving in and out of critical periods during which they are less able to meet one or more of their basic needs. These periods are often linked to seasonal fluctuations, and may relate to failed harvests, or the prevalence and spread of disease through monsoon and winter climates. However, for a significant number of children, the experience of deprivation is one of unchanging and grinding want. They form part of populations that are variously referred to as the "poorest of the poor," the "ultra-poor" or the "destitute," and struggle with the weight of hunger, illness, weakness and desperation on a daily basis.

Children in these circumstances are evidently likely to suffer serious adverse consequences with regard to their health, well-being and general development. However, because of the severity of their deprivation, it is likely that multiple and sustained interventions (e.g., targeting health, shelter, access to water, etc.) will be required before a positive change in their lives appears. It is also likely that these interventions will need to be undertaken more or less simultaneously, given the relatively short timeframe of a child's developmental growth and the nature of different aspects of poverty in reinforcing each other.

## The intensity of children's experiences

*"I have two disabled children. One of them is 7 – she is not able to talk, can't eat, can't walk. She needs expensive medicine...Education is very expensive...I am unemployed and rely on casual labor all the time...The nearest hospital is far and I have to pay for transport there...In the process the other children have to be neglected."*

*– Woman, Nairobi, Kenya*

Children commonly experience deprivation in several ways at once. For example, a girl born into a rural village may be deprived simultaneously of (1) adequate food because of a poor harvest, (2) healthcare because of difficult terrain/distance, and (3) education simply because of her gender. As discussed above, these multiple deprivations will often act to reinforce one another and compound their negative consequences, and the resultant "intensity of deprivation" may make positive change in *any one* dimension more difficult, given the interdependent nature of the different elements. This cumulative intensity of deprivation also makes it extremely difficult for the child and the family to emerge from poverty *by themselves*, for coping strategies can go only so far in the face of continually limited resources and external support. Many families are simply overwhelmed when faced with a combination of multiple and severe impoverishment, and aid agencies may similarly struggle with a perceived lack of positive change despite intervention. In these situations, successive generations of families and their children often find themselves experiencing a chain of similar socioeconomic and psychological consequences, commonly referred to as the "cycle of poverty" or the "intergenerational transmission of poverty."

## The contextualized nature of children's experiences

*"Look at me – I am wearing these clothes because I have come out with the cows and the goats. When I wear good clothes, then I feel all energetic and good. But when I am not wearing good clothes I feel tired and I start smelling."*

– 12-year-old boy, Bangalore, India

*"Children want to be the same as all the others and they can't be because they don't have the same clothes. Some people think they are better than others because they are richer. They think things like 'You look bad. Where did you find these clothes from? You look like a person from the street.' Just looking you up and down is enough to make you feel bad."*

– 17-year-old girl, Minsk, Belarus

Though an analysis of children's severity and intensity of deprivation may provide a portrait of their *individual* condition, it does not always sufficiently capture the social or contextual aspect of their deprivation. The CCF Poverty Study shows that children experience poverty in a deeply relational way, but to understand how this is expressed within the Deprivation dimension it is necessary to ask the question not only *what* are children being deprived of, but *why, how, where* and *by whom*? How has the children's consciousness of their deprivation arisen, and to what extent is this feeling specific to their social context? How has the status of being deprived impacted upon the children physically and emotionally, and what effect has it had on their external relationships with friends and family members?

It has long been argued that there is no direct causal relationship between economic status and human happiness, and that wealth is not necessarily synonymous with well-being. The CCF Poverty Study confirms this, and reveals that children and adults share an understanding that material possessions are as important for their *symbolic* value (as judged by the wider community) as for any intrinsic worth the possession may itself have. Children appear especially sensitive to the pressures of conforming with their peers, and to the fluctuating and unpredictable forces of popularity and exclusion. Physical appearance is an extremely potent symbol in this regard, with clothing, footwear and cosmetics generally held to be the most important and immediate indicators of difference and well-being among children. This is not simply a matter of not being able to keep up with the latest fashion, but relates instead to issues of general social acceptance, participation in community activities/decisions, and self-esteem. It may even affect the transition to perceived adulthood, as with teenage boys in some parts of Kenya whose material deprivation obstructs them from being able to fulfill traditional rites of passage.

Of course, the social value of these symbolic markers changes over time, and so too does the children's experience and perception of themselves as "poor." What may once have been considered a key indicator of well-being may quickly become redundant or replaced by something else. The point is that sufficiently fulfilling children's basic needs is no guarantee that they will not be seen by others (or by themselves) as "poor", or that their social quality of life will improve. It may turn out that facilitating children's access to a social club will impact their lives in a way that is as important to them as improving access to other forms of social services. The key to capturing the fluidity of deprivation as a social experience therefore lies in discovering where children and their peers draw the symbolic boundaries of poverty, and in developing appropriate responses that utilize this perspective to maximize the positive impact on children's lives.

Deprivation is perhaps the easiest dimension to address programmatically, as an array of intervention strategies have been developed over the years to tackle material aspects of poverty. Nevertheless, as argued in this paper, it is unlikely that addressing the Deprivation dimension alone, as is common in most poverty programs, will have a comprehensive impact on the actual experience of impoverished children.

## Exclusion

*This dimension looks at the **processes** through which individuals or groups of children are wholly or partially marginalized from full participation in the society in which they live.*

*"I feel bad. I feel like the odd one out...You lack self-esteem; you feel like you shouldn't talk wherever you are, like you shouldn't be expressing ideas. You feel lonely, you feel ashamed."*

*– 16-year-old girl, Rusinga, Kenya*

Exclusion differs from deprivation in that while the latter focuses on a lack of basic necessities, exclusion focuses on the broader *processes* that contribute to this lack. It is also strongly relational in nature, and is one of the most immediate ways in which children experience poverty as shown in the CCF Poverty Study.

### How are children excluded?

Children can be excluded for many different reasons, by many different kinds of people (including other children) and in many different ways. It may be the direct result of who a child is (e.g., racial/ethnic discrimination) or the indirect consequence of the child's association with others (e.g., social stigma against the child of a parent with HIV/AIDS). Moreover, it can take place in both formal (e.g., school) and informal (e.g., family) environments, from the moment a child is born through childhood, adolescence and sometimes the entire adult life.

The frequently intangible nature of social stigma in particular can also make it very difficult for outsiders to perceive, let alone target. However, the findings of the CCF Poverty Study suggest that there are four main types of exclusion that affect children, all of which can act as both causes and/or consequences of their impoverishment:

#### (1) **Social Status** (e.g., stigma)

*"Poverty means unequal relationships with others. If you are poor, you suffer from stigma. Others look at you in a certain way like you're worthless. Feeling unimportant: No one will listen to me, no one cares for me...I'm poor, I don't count, I'm a piece of dirt."*

*– 17-year-old girl, Minsk, Belarus*

This is the most common and often the most deeply felt form of exclusion experienced by impoverished children, who are particularly sensitive to how their appearance or social status affects their immediate relationships with family and friends. The pressure on children to conform with peers and feel "normal" rather than "different" has been found in almost all cultures around the world, and is critical to a child's sense of identity and social well-being. It is especially important during early childhood, when children begin to formulate concepts of trust and attachment, and during adolescence, when social divisions often become more marked and intrusive.

#### (2) **Group Membership** (e.g., ethnic/religious/racial/caste discrimination)

*"It does not look good when Patlia children say on our face that 'you are Harijan and we do not eat the food served to you.' I do not feel good when they do not eat in the school. It hurts me."*

*–Nine-year-old girl, Madhya Pradesh, India*

For large numbers of children, social isolation and/or abuse are not random or chance experiences, but a consequence of who they are. It most often works to intensify their impoverishment by preventing certain children and their families from participating in social activities on an equal basis. This form of exclusion can be particularly traumatic for children, who may not understand why they are being shunned and who look to themselves for blame.

(3) **Economic Status** (e.g., exclusion from the “formal sector”)

*“There’s no justice. For them [urban population] there’s justice, there’s law, while here there’s nothing, we die and that’s it. Quietly we disappear...that’s how it is.”*

– 30-year-old woman, Opoqueri Village, Bolivia

The CCF Poverty Study shows that children are often more attuned to the macro-economic processes that divide their social worlds than adults think, not least because many actively contribute to the household income from an early age. However, impoverished children are often excluded from accessing anything other than exploitative or hazardous labor in the informal sector, and can very rarely enroll in regulated training or apprenticeship activities.

(4) **Cultural Biases** (e.g., gender discrimination)

*“My sister got married and I had to take over her household work, so I had to leave school. My father told me, ‘Now that your sister is married, how can you go to school? Graze the cattle during daytime and at night you can study at home.’”*

– Adolescent girl, Oruro, Bolivia

Different cultures, families and individuals have different ideas as to appropriate roles and behavior of children, and gender discrimination against girls is particularly widespread in this respect. Although it may start from the moment they are born, girls tend to experience it more from early adolescence in terms of restricted freedoms and heavier workloads than their male siblings.

As with the “intensity of deprivation” described earlier, exclusion will often affect children in multiple and simultaneous forms, making it similarly difficult to target and achieve positive change.

### **What are children excluded from?**

Exclusion is a difficult dimension to tackle programmatically, for it is not always clear exactly what a child is being excluded from, or who/what may be responsible. Although the ideals of “social integration” or “full participation” are often presented as the goals in mitigating exclusion, it is not always understood what these mean or how they relate to measurable impacts or programmatic outcomes.

The various Rights Conventions, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, have provided a very useful framework for understanding what children are excluded from, and act as a valuable measure of global aspirations as to the lives people and children should be able to lead. They are also useful in enabling people to lobby a clearly accountable group (usually government) regarding tangible discriminatory policies. Though this kind of high-level advocacy is undoubtedly necessary and important for both safeguarding children’s political/economic entitlements and stimulating accountability mechanisms for meeting children’s rights, the CCF Poverty Study suggests that children themselves experience exclusion in a far more proximal, relational way: e.g., in the favoritism of a parent toward

another sibling; in the name-calling and ostracism of schoolyard students; or in the struggle of a physically disabled child to “keep up” with others. Children do not naturally conceive of their social well-being in terms of rights, but value themselves more through the quality and quantity of their relationships with others. In other words, their self-respect, confidence and security hinge more on their opportunities for *attachment* rather than on any perception of their own *entitlements*. Poor quality and infrequent social interaction during children's most formative years are also likely to have a negative impact on their developmental learning and socialization processes, and this is perhaps why impoverished children – who tend to experience multiple forms of exclusion and social stigma – are so profoundly affected.

## Vulnerability

*This dimension looks at the **dynamic** nature of children's experience of poverty in terms of how they are affected by, or resilient to, the array of changing threats in their environment.*

*“There are some children here who killed themselves. They have tried everything, but there is no hope of life. They see that there is no future.”*

*– Adolescent boy, Nairobi, Kenya*

*“Both my husband and father were killed by the rebels. I am completely on my own in trying to care for my children. We in this village really suffered in the war. Houses were burnt down. People were beaten to death...they cleared off everything from us. They would strip the women naked to look if they were hiding money.”*

*– Woman, village near Makeni, Sierra Leone*

Most people familiar with the term “vulnerability” associate it with the idea of weakness, and within the poverty discourse articulate it broadly as an inability to defend oneself against social, economic or political shocks. Using this logic, those who have the least resources or support networks to fall back on in the face of adversity (e.g., street children, HIV/AIDS orphans) are categorized as “especially vulnerable” and often given priority in interventions.

Yet for children in the CCF Poverty Study, vulnerability is less about the comparative weaknesses of particular groups than about the *longevity* and *insecurity* of impoverishment as a dynamic and unpredictable condition. They tend to correlate feelings of vulnerability not with the relative severity of their deprivation, but with the precariousness of their current condition, the dynamic nature of their impoverishment over time and the impact of this insecurity on the way they live their lives. The CCF Poverty Study reveals the fragility of many children's experiences, which may be expressed by one child as frustration in being unable to plan for the future; by another as fear at increasing violence within an impoverished family unit; or by a third as shame at the sudden loss of the family's social status. More often than not, children's experiences of vulnerability are captured through simply “not knowing what will happen tomorrow.”

Understanding vulnerability is therefore a question of tracking the dynamics of poverty over time, and examining how this relates to the factors that lift children in and out of impoverishment. The concept has a dual aspect, incorporating (a) external threats to well-being, and (b) internal risk management and coping capability. External threats may include large forces such as HIV/AIDS, conflict, market collapse and natural disasters, as well as more localized threats such as domestic violence, crime, job loss, sickness or the death of a parent. Internal risk management and coping capability is also dependent on a number of factors, including access to services/assets, the sociopolitical context and, most importantly, the resilience of the individuals themselves.

## Tracking Vulnerability and Resilience

*"My father is alive but he is sick, he's had TB for the last two years. He doesn't work because if he does any heavy work he starts vomiting blood, so he just sits there and doesn't have any work. We cannot afford to go to the doctor. When he was vomiting blood we went in for an x-ray, and the x-ray showed he had TB. He's never had any medication. All my sisters work, even my elder sister's son (he is two), he also goes over there and works. Look at his scars [on the little boy's inside ankles]."*

*– 14-year-old girl, India*

For all but the very poorest of the poor, who suffer relatively constant (if very severe) levels of deprivation and exclusion, the experience of poverty is continually changing. For these children, it entails only temporary periods of deprivation brought on by seasonal or random shocks such as the death of a breadwinner, a bad harvest or an environmental disaster. This dynamic is known as *transient* poverty. For a smaller number, poverty is experienced as a more general condition stretching over a greater period of time – in some cases, the entire life of the child or the family. This is commonly termed *chronic* poverty.

According to contemporary research, populations generally exhibit a small core of chronically poor coexisting with movement into and out of poverty by the larger population. Chronic poverty is especially common among children in countries where population density and growth, inequitable distribution of resources, entrenched social hierarchy, discrimination and poor governance overwhelm the possibility of economic advancement of the poor. Children exposed to these kinds of structural forces often become caught up in long and apparently entrenched cycles of poverty, and this can lead to the false impression that their poverty is a static and unchanging state with few "entry points" for intervention.

However, the CCF Poverty Study shows that impoverishment is in reality a highly volatile process influenced by numerous forces and trends. A particularly close correlation could be discerned between structural, seasonal and personal factors in children's experiences and well-being. For example, in Belarus, poverty has far graver impacts on children in the winter than the summer, because during the cold weather children without proper means for keeping warm cannot venture outside their homes. This restricts their ability to contribute to the household, and renders them more vulnerable to domestic discord and abuse. In India, hundreds of thousands of families and their children experience regular and severe periods of impoverishment every year through seasonal flooding and cyclones, and it is during these periods that children are at their most vulnerable with regard to other forms of adversity, such as disease and exploitation.

There is also a clear link between conflict and impoverishment in many countries, and for a large number of families, poverty may even be traced back to a single instance of fighting during which they suffered significant material, financial or personal losses. For example, in many parts of Sierra Leone affected by conflict, it was not uncommon for whole villages to be erased at a time, severely weakening social networks of support and the ability of friends, relatives and neighbors to offer assistance to the poor. Other forms of violence, particularly rape and sexual abuse, have also been shown to constitute critical factors affecting an individual's vulnerability and resilience, often with lengthy and serious impacts that may be both physical and psychological.

Yet just as their vulnerability fluctuates in accordance with the changing nature of their impoverishment, so too does a child's *resilience*, understood as the ability to adapt and remain strong in the face of adversity. Poverty is seldom something that happens to people against which they have absolutely no defense, and children are no exception. Some will, of course, be more mentally and physically powerful than others in responding to impoverishment, but *all* children do at

least engage with and interpret their situations in ways that need to be acknowledged. It is now increasingly accepted that childhood in most parts of the world is a period of considerable social and economic capacity, and that without children's contributions many families simply would not survive. The CCF Poverty Study confirms this in revealing that children make many direct and often very positive contributions in the struggle to overcome poverty, from fortifying the emotional and psychological resilience of other family members to taking the future into their own hands. In fact, many of those children with social and economic responsibilities do not regard themselves as dependent on adults so much as *interdependent* with adults, playing their own part in household maintenance and survival.

Several processes and elements (including poverty) at the individual, family and wider environmental levels have a significant influence on the resilience of children. For example, when a child is feeling healthy and strong he or she is likely to be more resilient emotionally and psychologically than one who is physically weak or sick. Similarly, children who have been raised with encouragement, praise and appreciation are far more likely to be resilient than those who are subject to humiliation, rejection, or failure. Given the critical influence poverty plays on a child's upbringing, it may therefore be possible to track the dimensions and dynamics of children's impoverishment and correlate these with other significant events and people in their wider lives to give a more holistic picture of how children experience and manage their poverty over time. Tracking when and why children feel vulnerable and/or resilient can help aid agencies assist them in a more timely and appropriate manner, and hopefully reduce the number of children who feel overwhelmed by their circumstances, lose hope and give up.

## Conclusion: Responding to Child Poverty

This paper, outlining the DEV framework for the analysis of child poverty, is the first in a series of papers exploring key concepts arising from the CCF Poverty Study.<sup>3</sup> It was designed through a collaborative process involving field practitioners, policymakers and academic researchers to bring all those who work in the field of children's welfare closer to understanding poverty as it is actually experienced by children. The overall intention of this and the accompanying papers is to encourage the creation of more effective and appropriate interventions with impoverished children, and to maximize the impact these have on their quality of life.

However, there is a tendency in frameworks of this nature to present the lives of poor populations as far more dominated by poverty than they may actually be. This is particularly true for children, who are often depicted as effectively paralyzed by the weight of their impoverishment (be it material, spiritual or physical). The CCF Poverty Study data do not conform to this assumption, as children speak of the numerous pleasurable activities they were able to enjoy in spite of their difficult circumstances. The point is therefore that children usually have a much larger life outside of their poverty, which must be recognized in order to properly contextualize institutional responses. Poverty does not stop children from hoping, nor does it prevent them from enjoying certain other aspects of their lives. As discussed above, risk and resilience can coexist, and children can cope with huge adversity over the long term while at the same time being able to find pleasure in some activities on a day-to-day basis. As one child from a village in Madhya Pradesh, India, put it:

**“We are poor, but life in the village is good because we are friends.”**

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<sup>3</sup> This paper necessarily summarizes a great deal of the information collected in the CCF Poverty Study, and it is recommended that audiences of all backgrounds also refer to the original three-part document for more detailed analysis and discussion.

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*Christian Children's Fund (CCF) is an international child development organization which works in 33 countries, assisting approximately 10.5 million children and families regardless of race, creed religion or gender. CCF works for the well-being of children by supporting locally led initiatives that strengthen families and communities, helping them overcome poverty and protect the rights of their children. CCF works in any environment where poverty, conflict and disaster threaten the well-being of children.*

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