

Focusing on Children's Rights to Fight Poverty

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Focusing on children's rights in investment decisions is essential to combatting poverty.

Investment decisions, whether local, national, or global in scope, impact children's rights to survival, development, and protection from harm. Denied their right to living standards adequate for physical, emotional, and intellectual growth, children encounter challenges that exact severe social and financial costs, perpetuating poverty and weakening overall economic growth.



Childhood Challenges

Child abuse and neglect, which disproportionately affect children of low socioeconomic status, generate per-survivor lifetime costs of \$210,000 in the United States, rivaling stroke and Type 2 diabetes. Accounting for new cases of abuse and neglect in 2008 alone, lifetime costs totaled \$124 billion.¹ With school-age children who have asthma, the economic impact is estimated at nearly \$2 billion annually.² And obesity, aggravated by poor nutrition and lack of opportunities to play in neighborhoods, increased children's annual medical costs by \$14.1 billion in a 2009 study.³

Direct costs and opportunity costs attributable to childhood poverty (lost earnings and productivity, high crime rates, and poor health) amount to \$500 billion per year.⁴ No wonder Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen highlighted resources for children as essential to reversing the country's widening income and wealth gaps.⁵ Similarly, Minneapolis Fed researchers have noted evidence of high public and private returns for public investment in early childhood education.⁶

Recognizing the barrier that childhood poverty poses to economic development, the World Bank has recommended that child- and youth-development resources form part of every nation's investment strategy.⁷ It has also collaborated with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to design poverty and social-impact assessment guidelines laying out children's rights and needs.⁸ Likewise, multinational corporations have worked with UNICEF to form comprehensive business-investment policies and processes focusing on children's rights.⁹

Tackling the Issue

The UNICEF collaborations relate to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). To construct their business-impact assessment guidelines, corporate leaders and UNICEF cross-referenced the CRC articles with various business activities. Those insights were then used to inform child-impact assessment guidelines for an array of business decisions. Governments around the world use similar approaches to conduct their child-rights impact assessments (CRIAs), called child-impact statements in the United States.

In Northern Ireland, a CRIA drew attention to potential harm from the 2011 National Welfare Reform Bill, which was then modified.¹⁰ In Scotland, a CRIA stopped legislation that would have compromised the medical privacy and identities of thousands of children and youth.¹¹ And in western Tennessee in 2010, a CRIA helped prevent state budget cuts that would have closed the Regional Medical Center. The hospital was a critical safety-net, treating the nation's largest number of high-risk pregnancies, dealing with the worst infant-mortality epidemic, and providing the region's most comprehensive HIV/AIDS care.¹²

Economic, social, and human rights imperatives instigated the adoption of CRIAs in Flanders, Sweden, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Efforts to integrate them in national legislative action are afoot in Finland, England, Wales, and New Zealand. Canadian officials have stepped up efforts to use CRIAs at provincial and municipal levels.

Elements of a Child-Rights Impact Assessment

- A description of the proposed policy.
- A description of how it is likely to impact children.
- An indication of whether it is consistent with the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Identification of any disagreements over the likely impact on children.
- Where adverse impacts are predicted, how they might be avoided or mitigated.
- An indication of the report's limitations.
- Parents' and children's views.
- A description of what the measure could have done instead and what needs to be monitored and evaluated after the decision has been implemented.
- Explanations of conflicts (that is, where the interests of children conflict with the interests of others)
- An analysis of the proposed legislation or policy that weighs the costs and benefits associated with children's well-being.

Source: Kirsten Hanna, Ian Hassall, and Emma Davies, "Child Impact Reporting," *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand* 29 (2006), and L. Sylwander, *Child Impact Assessments: Swedish Experience of Child Impact Analyses as a Tool for Implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Stockholm: Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2001).

In the United States, the Environmental Protection Agency integrated additional safeguards for children's environmental health and safety in 1996, soon after the nation signed the CRC. Unfortunately, CRC ratification by Congress is still pending. In the meantime, it is influencing state and local governments, which are moving on awareness campaigns, children's bills of rights, analysis of child-specific legislation, state legislation explicitly calling for child-impact statements, and more.

The U.S. effort with perhaps the widest scope—child-impact statements for all resolutions and ordinances pertaining to safety, health, education, and land use—is in Shelby County, Tennessee, under the division of community services. Using a CRIA mechanism designed by this author and Julie Coffey, more than 200 child-

Guiding Questions for Process Implementation

- Which person/body has overall responsibility for ensuring high-quality reporting is carried out and results in positive action?
- Which decisions should be subject to child-impact assessments? Who decides when one is necessary?
- When should the assessments be done?
- Who should undertake the assessments (policy analysts, academics, nongovernmental and community-based organizations, a cross-sector team)?
- To what degree, when, and how should parents, children, and children's representatives be consulted?
- What happens to the final assessment, and will decision makers be required to act on them?

impact statements have been drafted since 2009. They address positive and negative consequences of zoning variances; tax abatements; health, early education, and safety program budgets; and state and federal grant dollars for social and behavioral interventions.¹³

As yet, there is no standard format for such statements. The depth of analysis often depends on how much a proposal is likely to impact children. (See "Elements of a Child-Rights Impact Assessment.")

Important decisions need to be made about when, where, how, and with whom to execute the reporting process in each new implementation context. (See "Guiding Questions for Process Implementation.")

Although varied in topics of concern and approach, all CRIA applications examine consequences of decisions for children, ideally before those decisions are final. In Tennessee, cutting Medicaid reimbursements while reducing direct hospital funding might have spared the state immediate expense but would have increased rates of infant mortality, chronic disease complications, and infectious diseases. The consequent price would have far exceeded the cost of continued investment.

Regardless of the specific issue at hand, decisions that result in deleterious social, health, and economic consequences disproportionately affect families and communities of low socioeconomic status. And disproportionately affected within those families and communities are children. Their developing bodies and brains are more sensitive to physical deprivations and psychological stressors, and the more stressed the parents, the more likely children will suffer abuse and neglect. The effects are lifelong and often multigenerational.

Banks, businesses, and governments are increasingly recognizing the need for child-focused decisions. Ensuring children's rights helps create pathways out of poverty. It is to be hoped that Congress will lead the United States out of the small club of three U.N. member nations yet to ratify the CRC—before Somalia and South Sudan complete the process.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Xiangming Fang et al., "The Economic Burden of Child Maltreatment in the United States and Implications for Prevention," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 36 (2012): 163.
- ² Li Yan Wang, Yuna Zhong, and Lani Wheeler, "Direct and Indirect Costs of Asthma in School-Age Children," *Preventing Chronic Disease: Public Health Research, Practice, and Policy* 2, no. 1 (2005): 1.
- ³ Leonardo Trasande and Samprit Chatterjee, "The Impact of Obesity on Health Service Utilization and Costs in Childhood," *Obesity* 17 (2009): 1750.
- ⁴ Harry J. Holzer, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Greg J. Duncan, "The Economic Costs of Poverty in the United States: Subsequent Effects of Children Growing Up Poor" (report, National Poverty Center Working Paper Series, no. 07-04, 2007): 23.
- ⁵ Janet L. Yellen, "Perspectives on Inequality and Opportunity from the Survey of Consumer Finances" (paper presented at the Conference on Economic Opportunity and Inequality, Boston, October 2014): 9.
- ⁶ Arthur J. Rolnick and Rob Grunewald, "Early Education's Big Dividends," *Communities & Banking* 19, no. 2 (spring 2008): http://www.bostonfed.org/commdev/c&b/2008/spring/sp08_C&B_final_021908.pdf.
- ⁷ Kevin Hempel and Wendy Cunningham, "Investing in Your Country's Children and Youth Today: Good Policy, Smart Economics," *Child and Youth Development Note* 4, no. 1 (August 2010): 1.
- ⁸ See "Integrating a Child Focus into Poverty and Social Impact Analysis," <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTPSIA/Resources/490129-1322765725723/PSIA-Guidance-Note-2011.pdf>.
- ⁹ See "Children's Rights in Impact Assessments: A Guide for Integrating Children's Rights into Impact Assessments and Taking Action for Children," http://www.unicef.org/csr/css/Children_s_Rights_in_Impact_Assessments_Web_161213.pdf.
- ¹⁰ Goretti Horgan, "Making Children Visible in Policy Making in Northern Ireland" (paper presented at the Symposium on Child Rights Impact Assessment, UNICEF Canada and the University of Ottawa, Ottawa, May 2013): 10.
- ¹¹ Laura Patton, e-mail correspondence with the author's staff, September 7, 2009.
- ¹² Hospital data were retrieved by the author in 2010 from the Memphis Regional Medical Center website, now offline. Print copies of the web pages are available from the author.
- ¹³ A recently filed bill in Massachusetts would create a child abuse and neglect task force of agencies whose services address parental substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence, and family homelessness—risk factors that drive families into the child welfare system. When service cuts are proposed, task force agencies would assess potential impacts on child maltreatment incidence rates and Department of Children and Families caseloads and would complete child impact statements to inform legislators.

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